

# Preaching the Word!

## Roger Carswell

I remember hearing Baroness Margaret Thatcher speak for 75 minutes without notes, in Leeds Town Hall. It was an impressive performance. I've spent many a happy time in my youth on Blackpool promenade and Porthcawl beach listening to men with the gift of the gab persuade their listeners to buy watches or china that really they did not need. I love sitting in the public gallery of a High Court enthralled as a barrister, bedecked with gown and wig, presents his summation to the judge and jury. And in my student days I recall being entertained by listening to my Professor speak to hundreds of students as he delivered his lecture on Max Weber and the Protestant work ethic. I delight in hearing good oratory. But it is not the same as preaching.

It is a thrill to hear the Word of God preached by someone who has something to say, and *has* to say it. Paul experienced this in Thessalonica for he later wrote to them, 'And we thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.' Peter expressed this saying, 'If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.'

The preacher speaks for God. He comes with a message *from* God, not just a message *about* God. Preaching appeals to the mind, the heart and the will. There is unction, passion, and feeling in the message because the preacher knows that men and women need to hear what is being said. The sermon, whether in the open air (and I wish that every preacher would do some open air work), or indoors, in a church, an old people's home, a school or a university, is the result of thorough prayer and careful preparation. Richard Baxter captured the sense of urgency in such preaching, "I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men."

The message of the preacher is not crafted to please the listeners, but comes from the heart of God. We know that the first great preacher, Enoch, used the word 'ungodly' four times when speaking to his generation (See Jude 14 & 15). And fruitfulness does not necessarily characterise faithfulness. Noah preached for 120 years using words to proclaim, and wood and nails to portray the coming judgement. Preachers of the Word of God will, like Noah, find loneliness, ridicule and hardship, but they will also find 'grace in the eyes of the Lord.' Christian preaching is to be Christ-centred. I read once that when preaching we are to ask two questions. First, 'Would it have been necessary for God to have given us the Bible for that sermon?' and secondly, 'Would it have been necessary for Jesus Christ to have died in order for this to be true?'

Good preaching does not necessarily come through oratorical ability. Moses was not naturally gifted, but under God developed the skill, so was described by Stephen as 'powerful in speech and action.' It is the message from God relevantly proclaimed to hearers that He blesses. Jonah was a strangely disappointed evangelist, but demonstrates how God uses His word, over-ruling the servant, to bring great results following faithful preaching of an unpopular message.

I love the expression of Amos 'The Lord has spoken – who can but prophesy?' Amos used imagery, irony and even sarcasm to boldly preach against the luxurious, idolatrous living of his fellow citizens. Isaiah had the same attitude preaching Christ-centric messages to kings and commoners. And dear Ezekiel (I look forward to meeting him in heaven – mavericks make the ministry!) came from a priestly background but spent most of his life ministering to the Exiles in Babylon. His own life, as well as visual aids and symbolic acts, drove home his messages. Malachi gave 47 first-person messages from the Lord to the people of Israel. His prophecy is called an oracle or burden for Israel.

The Lord Jesus came not so much to preach the gospel, but that there might be a gospel to preach. Nevertheless, we find him anywhere and everywhere proclaiming to crowds, small groups and individuals. He deliberately chose to concentrate His work in villages and small towns. In contrast, Paul focused on the cities. The Word was in him, as in all true preachers, as a fire, so he sighed, 'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel'. He preached the Word to the unsaved, and sound doctrine to the converted.

George F. Handel used an intriguing verse on which to base part of his famous 'Messiah': The Lord gave the word; great was the company of those who proclaimed it.' (Psalm 68:11). Will you pray with me, and do

everything in your power to ensure that God will raise up a new company of preachers for our generation? Amongst other things, they will need to be:

**Faithful.** Paul was determined to know nothing among the people except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It is the cross of Christ which is to be the theme of our message; from it derive all the blessings which God longs to give to men and women. Preaching is not about telling stories or jokes, though they may be used. It is not following a rigid pattern, believing that there is only one way to preach. John Stott said, "To preach is to open up the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God's voice is heard and God's people obey Him." Preaching is explaining the Word of God to today's hearers. "Truth though personality" is how Phillip Brooks defined it. I describe my preaching as evangelistic exposition; others may have a different style, but all must be preaching God's word with clarity, sincerity (faithfulness in life as well as ministry) and unction, looking for God to be glorified, and people to be saved.

**Flexible.** In Jeremiah 27 we read of the prophet preaching to the people, to the king and then to the priests. A different approach is needed for each. I thank God for the teaching and sensitive training of Young Life, which thrust me into speaking in the open and indoors, to old and young, seekers and disinterested. Jesus used parables, metaphors, similes, questions, even hyperbole to proclaim truth. When Wesley preached at the time of the assizes he spoke from Romans 14:10 on 'The Great Assize.' John Newton said of him, "This man can tell the secrets of my heart."

**Fearless.** We need courage to expose the folly of today's society. Let us ask questions (Jesus asked a total of 168) to get people thinking about life, the Lord, and eternity. Then let us proclaim the good news. In fact, it is hardly good news unless it is told. Let us preach it so that people understand what we are saying and they see Jesus Christ crucified. (Galatians 3:1-3).

But being fearless does not mean being angry. We are to be kind for we do not know what battles people are fighting. The listener is not our enemy: they are as we once were, and we want them to be as we are. D. L. Moody is said to have 'loved people into the kingdom.' John Wesley often simply recorded, after a day of preaching, that he "gave them Christ." I believe being winsome is an essential ingredient of gospel preaching.

Martin Luther gave vital instruction to all preachers: 'When I preach I regard neither the doctors nor magistrates, of whom I have above forty in my congregation; I have all my eyes on the servant maids and on the children. And if the learned are not well pleased with what they hear, the door is open.'

**Filled with Holy Spirit fire.** It is hard to radiate fire if a sermon is read from a script. (I know of Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, but he is definitely a one-off!) May the Lord deliver us from plain sermon delivery! Preachers are not lecturers. I can't imagine listeners to 'read-out-loud' sermons trembling at the power of the Word. Notes may be necessary for the new preacher, a new sermon or momentary lapse, but reading word for word kills good communication and passion. Preachers are more than teachers; for we know that simply teaching can be cerebral and dry. Emotion in preaching is not to be acted... nor to be avoided! We need the Holy Spirit to put live coals on our lips, so that they would speak with a clarion call what our hearts feel, namely the burning in our hearts.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones famously said that preaching is "Logic on fire," but one without the other is either dull or disastrous. He also wrote, "Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire." The purpose of our preaching is not only to educate and inform but also to see people repenting, believing and being transformed by the power of God. Ours is not simply to fill the pulpit or a preaching programme, but to point the unconverted to Jesus. John Flavel said, "A hot iron, though blunt, will pierce sooner than a cold one, though sharper."

John Bunyan said, "I preached what I did feel, what I smartingly did feel." To be like that, we need preachers who have a hunger for God, an appetite for the Word, a heart filled with the Holy Spirit, a passion for the lost, and a fervour that burns within so that we have to declare what we know. I pray to be such a person, and I pray for thousands more too.

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