



## Preaching to people

### Confessions of a preacher

Relatively early in my preaching career, I had the opportunity to preach the opening sermon at a conference. The main conference speaker was a man that I consider to be one of the finest preachers of our times. After hearing me preach, he paid me a compliment that I did not fully appreciate or understand at the time. He said to me something like, “You are one of the few young preachers in the denomination who actually recognizes that he is preaching to people.”

At first, I did not understand what he meant, but then I proceeded to listen to him preach over the subsequent days of the conference and, as my heart was moved by God’s Word preached through him, I began to get it.

Unfortunately, as I matured in my ministry I soon forgot that early lesson and drifted into a practice of “wiki-preaching,” in which I provided people with biblical facts rather than the Word preached. I preached *at* people rather than *to* people. I gave them research papers that proved my knowledge of the original languages and systematic theology, but tended little to their souls. I forgot that I was supposed to be preaching to people. How about you? Are you preaching to people?

### Desperate need

Now, at first blush, this question may seem utterly ridiculous. You are probably saying, “Of course I am preaching to people! They are sitting there in the pews before me and I am speaking directly to them.” But I am not talking about simply making audible noises in the general direction of the congregation. Rather, I am talking about preaching that is consciously directed at the heart of the believer. I am talking about preaching that understands that the pews are filled with pilgrims who are voyaging through a spiritual wilderness, not with students who are trying to earn their certificate in Reformed theological studies.

I believe the Reformed church is in desperate need of preachers who are passionate about preaching to people rather than merely giving a theological lecture or an oral commentary on a biblical text. Now, before I am accused of joining the ranks of the “emergent church,” let me state without equivocation that preaching must be both theologically sound and built upon the foundation of careful biblical exegesis. I am not advocating for fluffy, felt-needs sermons that tickle the ears of post-moderns searching for existential authenticity. I am simply calling for sermons which are delivered with the recognition that preaching, while targeting the intellect, is ultimately aimed at the transformation of the heart and will of actual living and breathing people sitting in the pews.

### Time for caution

The importance of this need has been brought to my attention recently in three ways. First, there was Iain Murray’s excellent article in the February 2010 issue of *Banner of Truth* magazine entitled, “Expository preaching – time for caution.” In this article, Murray admonishes preachers that they need to do more than simply instruct in their sermons:

*“Preaching needs to be much more than an agency of instruction. It needs to strike, awaken, and arouse men and women so that they themselves become bright Christians and daily students of Scripture. If the preacher conceives his work primarily in terms of giving instruction, rather than of giving stimulus, the sermon, in most hands, very easily becomes a sort of weekly ‘class’ – an end in itself.”*

Murray goes on to describe the traditional Scottish distinction between a “lecture” and a “sermon.” The former was an on-going commentary-like address on the content of a passage; the latter was a completed distinct message tailored to move the hearts of people. Murray laments that much of what goes under the title of “sermon” today in the Reformed church is really nothing more than a “lecture.”

Whatever you think about Murray’s criticism of the expository method as presently practiced, his warnings about Reformed preaching turning into Reformed lecturing is one that I have taken to heart.

## **Diagnosis essential**

A second way God brought this need to my attention was through my wife’s devotional reading. She is presently using volume 2 of D. A. Carson’s excellent daily devotional, *For the Love of God* (Crossway, 1999). She brought the reading for April 21 to my attention, in which Carson comments on 2 Timothy 4:2:

*“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”*

I found Carson’s comments on the phrase “reprove, rebuke, exhort” particularly challenging:

*“Preaching the Word means more than the mere conveying of information. There is information, of course, but it is so shaped and applied that it functions in one or more of these transforming ways. Thus the minister of the gospel is necessarily a spiritual diagnostician, discerning the ailment and knowing what remedies to apply. Pity the minister of the Word who applies encouragement when rebuke is called for, or the reverse.”*

Carson reminded me of the importance of doing spiritual diagnostics before I preach. He reminded me to assess the real lives of the people I am preaching to and tailor the application accordingly. He reminded me that the preacher must be a spiritual cardiologist.

The third way this need came to my attention was an article on the power of God’s Word, co-authored by Joel Beeke and Ray Lanning. The article is entitled “The Transforming Power of Scripture” and it appeared in the book *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant position on the Bible* (Reformation Trust, 2009). In it the authors call on preachers to preach “experimentally” as well as doctrinally; that is, they call on preachers to preach to the actual Christian experience of real people trying to live the Christian life.

## **Application essential**

The authors make the following observation regarding what is often lacking in modern preaching:

*“The Word of God is often preached today in a way that will never transform anyone because it never discriminates or applies. Preaching is then reduced to a lecture, a demonstration, a catering to the wishes and comforts of men, or a form of ‘experientialism’ that is cut loose from the foundation of Scripture. Such preaching fails to expound from the Scripture what the Reformers called vital religion: how a sinner is continually stripped of his own righteousness; how he is driven to Christ alone for a full-orbed salvation; how he finds joy in simple reliance upon Christ and strives after obedience to Him; how he encounters the plague of indwelling sin, battles against backsliding, and gradually gains full victory by faith in Christ” (p. 127).*

I can remember having far too little esteem for the “experimental” or “experiential” preaching crowd in my early days in seminary. I was too full of my more “academic” and “high-minded” redemptive-historical approach to indulge in the misguided casuistry of the neo-puritans. Then I attended one of the Banner of Truth ministers’ conferences and realized that I had something to learn from these men and their passion to apply God’s Word to the heart of the believers and to the essence of the Christian experience. Beeke and Lanning have reminded me that I still have much to learn from them.

## **Real people**

After being bombarded by these admonishments, I have vowed to improve my preaching accordingly. Therefore, as I prepare my sermons, I purposely remind myself that I am preaching to real people, not some theoretical, homogenized, and faceless congregation.

I remind myself of the struggling mother, the man with the chronically ill wife, the family with the wayward son, and the guy who has no idea of what grace really is. I remind myself that I am proclaiming God's Word from a pulpit and not a lectern. I remind myself that God's Word is a sharp, two-edged sword and not a dull pocket-knife. I remind myself that I am preaching to people. How about you? Are you preaching to people?

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