



Ministry

We believe that we have a message for the world. An unchanging message, that has to be communicated in and to a constantly changing world. Yet, faced as we are with all kinds of modern communication methods, we also need to recover the central place of preaching and of the pulpit ministry within the church. It is still through the 'foolishness of preaching' that God purposes to save his people (1 Corinthians 1:21).

We also believe that Christ equips and furnishes his church for this task. Having risen to the right hand of God, Christ has provided his church with gifted men for leadership and proclamation.

"He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."

(Ephesians 4:11-12)

We dare not lose sight of the centrality of preaching, and of the need to make the assessing and training of our ministers a top priority.

If, therefore, we are to know God's blessing on us as a church, and God's power at work in our land, we need to keep two issues before our minds: our message and our men. As we consider the kind of ministry we need for the twenty-first century, let's look briefly at these two issues.

Our message

What is our message for our modern world? It is the same message that the evangelical church has always been communicating: the fact that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). If our message is not Christ-centred and Christ-oriented, we are wasting our time, and we are grieving the Spirit of God. In his assessment of his preaching among the North American Indians, David Brainerd could say, *"I have oftentimes remarked with admiration, that whatever subject I have been treating upon, after having spent time sufficient to explain and illustrate the truths contained therein, I have been naturally and easily led to Christ as the substance of every subject"*. We too, no matter what our theme, text or subject might be, need to communicate Christ.

Let me just say three things about this.

We need to preach Christ *from the whole Bible*. There is an Immanuel — a 'God-with-us' — principle throughout Scripture: God covenants himself to be the God of his people, and to commit to them. That principle finds its highest expression in the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, who took our nature and lived among men. And he it was who commanded us to 'search the Scriptures' (John 5:39), because they testify of Jesus.

Christ is the meaning of all the covenant promises, of every stage of redemptive history, of every aspect of Israel's worship. He is the I AM of the burning bush, the Holy One of Israel and the God of the Psalms. He is in, around and behind every Old Testament passage. To preach Christ does not mean that we confine our exegesis to the Gospels: it means that we allow the light of the resurrection to cast the shadow of Calvary back into the Old Testament, so that Christ may be found there.

Here I am not advocating a hermeneutic of allegory, but a biblical and theological exegesis that does justice to the unity of God's purposes of grace. The easy option is to allegorise. What is more

difficult is to trace the line of redemptive history throughout the Old Testament and show that Christ is truly present there.

And we should have no embarrassment to root our theology in the doctrines of the apostles. We do not pit Paul against Christ when we preach from the epistles: we hear the voice of the Spirit using Paul to shed further light for us on the meaning of the cross. It was not without reason that Luther called *Romans* the 'clearest of all Gospels'.

Secondly, we need to preach Christ in order *that people will have a living relationship with Him*. Perhaps we need to ask: 'what would I make of my sermon if I were listening to it instead of preaching it?' Do we consider the wide variety of experiences in the congregation before us? The vast range of interests? The varied competence in theology? By all means let us indulge our interest in theology in our preparation for preaching; but let us make sure that our preaching addresses the living Christ to the people whom he came to seek and to save.

I am not here suggesting that our preaching must be experience-based: that has been the curse of the modern evangelical church, and has fuelled the idea that high emotions are the mark of true religion. But I am advocating a recovery of what the Puritans called 'Uses' of texts. Or, as Matthew Henry put it — we must ask of the text 'What is this?' and then 'What is this for me?'

Thirdly, *we are to preach with relevance*. We do not communicate Christ in a cultural, historical or social vacuum. The listeners of Jonathan Edwards might have endured sermons of long duration and close logic; the audience of Lloyd-Jones might have been comfortable with a series of expositional sermons stretching over two years. But the chances are that we find ourselves in rather different circumstances.

My point is not a defence of short sermons or of short series, but simply that we be aware of the audiences to whom we are communicating the unchanging truth of God. We need to preach the ancient Calvinism of man's total depravity, God's majestic and unconditional election, God's drawing, irresistible grace, Christ's effective, particular atonement, and the church's final triumph. And we are to do so in a way that will engage minds. When we have made that intellectual contact, everything else will follow, under God: feelings stirred, hearts moved, wills liberated, and lives transformed.

Our men

So, what kind of men do we need for the twenty-first century pulpit? Perhaps in our cultural context we need to clear the ground here: we need born-again, heterosexual males who have been called by Christ into the Gospel ministry. New hearts, straight lives, non-female, Christ-called. In today's confused church scene, that will make us rather eccentric; we will be described as misogynistic, homophobic Bible-bashers. But it's basic.

So our ministers must, first, be *men who are called*. Is there such a thing as a call to the ministry? I believe there is; and I believe that personal compulsion is indispensable to Gospel proclamation. Further, I believe that where there is such an authentic call, it will be evident to more than the individual, which is why we must continue to scrutinise men at various stages of church oversight.

Someone might argue "If Mr. X says he is called to the ministry, who are we to say he is not?" To which the only adequate response is, "If Mr. X is not called to the ministry, who is he to say that he is?" It is a two-way process, the ultimate authentication of which is a call from a congregation to serve as pastor. God does not necessarily call the equipped, but he does equip the called; and the church is the seed-bed within which the call is planted, nourished and developed.

So we need men who are called: but we also need *men of faith*. Why do I emphasise this? Surely it is only by faith that a man can claim to be called by God in the first place? Well, that is true; but the call to the ministry is discriminatory within the family of faith. And those whom God calls in this way are to continue exercising faith in him.

It seems to me that this is important because of the temptation to move out of the realm of faith when ministry does not appear to be successful. It is quite amazing how easily men of faith can misplace their confidence in order to win souls for Christ, putting their trust in music, or in drama, or in 'praise', or in big events, or in some other such gimmicks, instead of simply believing that God will do his work through the means he has appointed. It is the Word that will not return to God void (Isaiah 55:11). I am not advocating a policy of social inaction; but I am saying that ministry requires the determination that faith gives, to persevere against the odds, and against the apparent lack of success. Our men need to stick with the same message '*in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake*' (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Our men must also be *men of integrity*. I was recently challenged by listening to Ravi Zacharias preach from Paul's defence before Felix, and particularly the application of Acts 24:26, where Felix waited for Paul to offer him a bribe. As Ravi Zacharias put it, a bribe is all it would have taken to have convinced Felix that all Paul had was arguments and words: a bribe would have destroyed Paul's integrity, as well as the force of his ministry.

We do not create supermen when we create ministers: we ordain men who are susceptible to the temptations of sin and open to the subtleties of Satan. No one is more aware than I of the fact that the Lord we commend in public is the Lord we often let down in private. We need to learn the way of repentance and renewal; but we also need to keep before us the fact that the integrity of God's message hinges in many senses on the integrity of his messengers. Our postmodern world of floating ideas and dissatisfaction is crying out for men of integrity. The church needs ministers who live before the face of God as they declare the word of God.

There is nothing new here. My suggestion for radical contemporary ministry is, well, *radical* (from the Latin *radix*, a root). And the root of the matter lies in the New Testament's insistence that preaching is God's highest calling and his most powerful medium. Our church's great need is to use spiritual wisdom and commonsense prudence to identify those whom God has truly called, and who will preach with power and passion as they live for his glory day by day. That, it seems to me, is the biblical model for ministry; and the history of the church has demonstrated the effectiveness of that model time and again.

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