

EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

When Andrew Neil resigned as the editor of *The Sunday Times* in 1994, he commented, 'I have been a journalist now for the last twenty years, and I have chronicled the decline of a nation.'

An American actor recently spoke of his love of London, 'It's great to be in a city going down the tubes in such style.' Whatever we think of recent legislation, media manipulation, educational emphases and populist trends, we have to ask ourselves how much of the spiritual declension and moral collapse in our land is due to reasons which can be laid at the feet of evangelicals. A root cause of our problems is that in recent years there has been a famine in our land – not of food or drink, but of the word of God. People are left as sheep without a shepherd, and are ignorant of basic Bible truths (cf. Numbers 27:17, 1 Kings 22:17 and Zechariah 10:2). It is time for those of us who love the Lord and His gospel to be fired up, then to fan the flames of evangelistic passion. We need to ensure that everyone is hearing the gospel proclaimed winsomely and faithfully. We are to proclaim in complete dependence upon God to use our words. Before every sermon I preach, I pray, 'Lord, without You I can do nothing, therefore will You please accomplish that which counts for eternity through this message?' Only God can 'give the increase'.

True evangelistic preachers are preachers of the word of God. They are the mouthpiece of the Bible, the word of God, to a lost world, pointing to God's decisive act in sending Jesus into this world for our salvation, which He procured through His death and resurrection. So they are not people just with something to say, nor preachers who have to say something, but proclaimers of the gospel who have something to say, and *have* to say it. In that sense, evangelistic preaching is truly prophetic, because it is preaching God's word to men and women who desperately need to hear it. It will point to God's decisive act in sending Jesus to this world for our salvation, which He procured through His death and

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resurrection. Evangelistic preaching is the natural result of, indeed the overflow of, God's love. The life-giving, altogether loving God desires to give His life and love to all. And it is in preaching that God speaks, acts, produces faith and saves people.

Sermons are the bridges we build bringing the word to the world. Human opinion is not worthy of comparison with the word of God, so all human thinking and religious tradition needs to be brought into line with God's truth. And human need will not be met by human resources or consensus but by the work and word of God. John Stott coined the phrase 'double listening' to encourage us to listen to and be aware of the thoughts and attitudes of those around us, as well as being saturated in God's word. Evangelistic preaching is not about conveying good advice or Christian opinions, but about the good news, which is God's message to humanity. The 17th-century puritan, Thomas Goodwin, had for some time set out to be a 'celebrity preacher' with clever insights of human wisdom. But when taking over from Richard Sibbes at Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge, he was told by Sibbes, 'Young man, if ever you would do good, you must preach the gospel and the free grace of God in Christ Jesus.' And that is what he did, to great effect.

Listening to sermons today?

It has almost become a mantra that today people cannot listen to a monologue, so sermons should be very short and snappy. Such thinking reflects more on the preacher than the hearer. We must not excuse poor, listless preaching about so marvellous a subject. In September 2014, an estimated 100 million people across the globe listened for hours to Judge Thokozile Masipa handing down her verdict on Oscar Pistorius at his murder trial. Her delivery was hardly gripping, but the subject was enthralling. Ours is the most gripping, thrilling message in the world,

plus we are handling the word of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit Himself. People can listen and will where we speak faithfully of Jesus with passion, clarity and love.

Of course, there is a cost to this. Proclamation of the gospel, which will include declaring some unpalatable truths, is both spiritually and emotionally draining. Richard Baxter's famous saying, 'Preach as a dying man to dying men', inevitably involves a giving of oneself that uses human energy and emotion, so we will need to prepare ourselves for this by spending time with the Lord, building up our inner, spiritual resources. We need to look at and linger over the Bible not only to prepare messages but to prepare ourselves as the messengers. Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. In waiting on the Lord, we pray for holiness and power, as well as for the Holy Spirit Himself to use the proclaimed message.

In days of increasing apathy, antagonism and hostility to the gospel, across the whole spectrum of society, it is tempting to hide behind Bible study, books and computer screens, vital though each are. I have a sneaking suspicion that we are spending far less time involved with eyeball-to-eyeball evangelism than we are seated behind our laptops and PCs. Such escapism is not going to move the world and bring men and women to faith in Christ. We need the courage to challenge people compassionately with the claims of Christ. Computers, useful as they are, so far have been unable to communicate emotion. They do not weep over the lost, and they are not the best means of spreading God's gospel, which should be taken and offered by God's people, in person, to every individual.

Phillips Brooks, the 19th-century American preacher, defined preaching as 'truth through personality'.¹ Preaching is more than teaching, though both are vital. Preaching aims not only to instruct the mind but also to move the will so that there is response to the message proclaimed.