

PREACHING OR SPEAKING EVANGELISTICALLY

By Michael Green

Is preaching important? In a TV age, is it outmoded and should give way to discussion? But preaching is important for at least three reasons. One, God is a communicator, and we are called to be ambassadors for him, 'as though God was making his appeal through us' (2 Cor.5.20). Two, Christ commanded it (Matt.28.18-20) and three, the Holy Spirit empowers it . There is a Trinitarian basis for preaching.

Why is preaching in low water today? For several reasons. There is a collapse in belief in some preachers. There is a revolution in communication. This is an age which rejects authority. The growth of pluralism and relativism is a big disincentive to preaching. And there is an obvious change in the priorities of clergy.

What are the pathways to effective preaching? First, I must believe God will use it. Second I must trust and preach the scriptures. Third, I must keep Jesus in the centre of my sights. Fourth, I must build bridges to reach my hearers, with one foot in the Bible and the other in the contemporary world. I must also be vulnerable, bold and warm.

What attracts people to Jesus? There are many factors. Here are a few in the early part of St. John's Gospel. They all give pointers for us today.

There is the sense of discovery – Andrew dragging Peter to meet Jesus (1.41)

There is the sense of wonder - as when Jesus turned water into wine and his disciples believed in him (2.11).

There is the sense of being loved (3.16). Love attracts as nothing else does.

There is the sense of God's power – the paralyzed man (ch.5) or the blind man(ch.9) were healed, and people were amazed. If you have a healing, use it evangelistically!

There is the sense of need –Nicodemus (ch.3) and the woman at the well (ch.4).

How can we prepare for an evangelistic address? We need to prepare the *congregation*. Unless they are warm, welcoming and determined to invite non-Christians to the event, we will get nowhere. We also need to prepare the *occasion* – earnest prayer, publicity, having a nurture group ready for folk to join. Third, we need to prepare *the service itself* if the event is held in church . Everything needs to be done with the non-member in mind. That is why a Eucharist is not an ideal occasion for evangelism. If you use a book, announce page numbers, explain as much as is needed, think yourself into the mind of the person who has rarely been to church. Especially consider the music and the announcements. Avoid material that is designed only for regular church members. Make sure there are nurture group leaders ready to swing into action afterwards. You may need people to help you talk to interested enquirers after the service is over.

If the venue is a meal, care needs to be given to the preparation of invitations, an attractive title for the talk, the food itself (nice but it must not take too long or there is no time for the talk and reflection) and perhaps response cards and something they can take away to read. The speaker, not necessarily a clergyman, needs to be very relaxed in style, but to combine that with appropriate challenge.

How are we to prepare the address itself? A good evangelistic address is crisp. It wastes no words. It is interesting. It grabs attention from the opening sentence and maintains it throughout. It is biblical: scripture has a power our words do not. It must relate to the needs and concerns of the hearers, and it must challenge people to decide.

I try to bear the following in mind as I prepare:-

1. Start where they are. It is important to have biblical content but not to start with a text. Get the taste buds working first. Start where they are. 'In search of spirituality' 'Do good men need God?' 'Don't all religions lead to God?' would reach a lot of people. A good title, well advertised is very important. For your title.....

You could take an assumption and destroy it ; 'It doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere'.

You could take a modern concern' Can we have peace in an age of terror?

You could use a phrase from a pop song – pop artists know the cries of the heart..

Tailor your title to your audience. For students ' God is dead, Marx is dead and I'm not feeling too good myself.' For business people 'Nobody's fool' and speak on the rich fool. For jaded youngsters ' Baptised too young - agnostic too long'.

It helps to use testimony either before or during your talk. The change of face, voice, style retains rapt attention.

2. Shape your material See what in Scripture relates to your subject. Thus ' Money, sex and power – what more do I need?' relates well to Revelation 3.14-21. When shaping your material keep in mind

*Your aim. You need a single, clear aim which must govern everything

*Your plan. Break up the material so that it is clear and every point subserves the main aim, or they will be confused. Two points may be too few, more than four are probably too many!

*Your structure must be crystal clear. Advertise your points like great freeway signs, and try to ensure that each point leads naturally into the next.

*Your illustrations are very important. They rest the argument as well as shedding welcome light on something that may be obscure. Often draw them, as Jesus did, from the natural world., since the God of redemption is also the God of nature..

*Your start and conclusion are both critical If you fluff the start you have lost them. If you moralise at the end you switch them off. Learn from Jesus' parables. Force them to think furiously about what you have said.

*Your language is important. Detailed verbal preparation enables you to confidently negotiate the difficult parts of the argument . But don't read it! Avoid churchy language. Aim for clear, simple language, passionate language, whose thrust they cannot misunderstand.

*Your manner speaks eloquently.. .Select the right mood for your subject-matter. Get friends to check you out for distracting mannerisms.

3. Be Christ-centered Speak much of him. He promised that if lifted up he would draw all sorts to himself. Lift Jesus high .Like the preachers in Acts we could well bear four things in mind: discern the need, proclaim the person of Jesus, offer the twin gifts of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, and look for a response in faith, baptism and incorporation into the church

4. Bathe it in prayer and get others to do so. Maybe a praying tem as you speak

5. Leave time to conclude Ending an evangelistic sermon is delicate. If you have to rush it, you have lost everything. *You must leave yourself time.*

*I try to ensure that I have said at least something about human need, the cross of Christ, the cost of discipleship and the availability of the Holy Spirit.

*If I am going to call for an explicit response, I explain what I am going to do before doing it.

*I try to be open to pleading with people to come to Christ – that note was in some of Jesus' words (eg Matt.23.37). Warmth, and a sense of the seriousness of the issues, need to mark our speech.

*Kindle the imagination so as to reach the will.

*Watch people's faces, especially nods of disagreement and furrowed brows. Learn to answer some of the questions that may be in their minds. It is not so hard as it might seem. 'Are you wondering what it would cost to follow Christ? Let me explain...' and do so very succinctly before moving on.

*Your attitude should be a mixture of vulnerability and authority. The former comes from admitting your own frailty, the latter comes from the scripture which should be prominent at this point.

* Placard the promises of God and the cross of Christ before your hearers.

*At this point use appropriate illustrations which speak of relationship – marriage, entering into Christ, opening the door to him, receiving the Spirit.

* Be broad in your appeal at the end of the address. You want to be of service to the maximum number of people.

*Be challenging but do not press. That is the Holy Spirit 's job. It is often good to end with a minute of complete silence (silence is powerful) followed perhaps by a suggested prayer of commitment which you pray and encourage those who so wish (but only they) to say after you.

*Avoid playing on the emotions. Make it very practical At the end you may like to invite people who have prayed that prayer to come and tell you .You would do well to have a booklet to give them such as Nicky Gumbell's *Why Jesus? Or my Yes*. You may ask them to put their names down for a Nurture Course. But you do want to get the names, so that you can help them. Find your own best way to do it.

If you are speaking at a meal, response cards are highly appropriate. Unmarked cards and pens are unobtrusively stored on the tables beforehand. At the end you ask people to pass these round, and to give you helpful feed-back by jotting down (anonymously if they wish) what they thought about the evening – the food, the talk, and a topic they would be interested in another time. Then, as they are writing, ask them to add their names and phone numbers if they would like to join a Nurture Course which would be appropriate both for those who have taken a step of faith at the meal itself, and for those who want to consider the matter of Christian discipleship more at their leisure and in company with others, in your home. They can leave the cards on the table, and you can pick them up. You will often be surprised at the fruit which ensues!

Evangelistic preachers need to remember that God is not interested in decisions, but in the making of disciples. Commitment to Jesus is only the launch pad for a life of service to him. And never forget that God is the evangelist. So don't give undue prominence to any human being, yourself included. Make sure that the whole thing is bathed in prayer. And trust God to draw people to himself through you. He will.