



The Proclamation Trust

The fundamental conviction underlying the work of The Proclamation Trust is that when the Bible is taught God's voice is heard.

The main aim of the Trust therefore is to teach the Bible to teachers in order that they in turn can teach it to others.

A further aim is to provide a fellowship of like-minded evangelicals across denominational lines for encouragement in an exacting work.

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THE POWER IN PREACHING

DAVID JACKMAN

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Dear Friends,

'Christ sent me to tell the Good News, and to tell it without using the language of human wisdom, in order to make sure that Christ's death on the cross is not robbed of its power' (1 Cor 1:17 TEV). This familiar, but very provocative, verse which opens up the central theme of the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, has really challenged my thinking of late. Paul's plain meaning is that the way in which the gospel is preached can produce a *kenosis* (emptying-same root as Phil 2:7) of its power or value. That is a startling enough thought in itself, but it becomes even more challenging when we see that this destructive methodology is described by the apostle as (literally) the 'wisdom of speech', or 'words of human wisdom' (NIV). Which of us who preaches the Biblical gospel does not believe that in 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' (2:2) is the very locus of the power and wisdom of God (cf 1:24)? But which of us does not also find ourselves searching our minds and hearts to know why that power seems comparatively so muted and that wisdom so ridiculed and ignored at this moment in history? Thousands of people crowding into carol services last month provided the greatest evangelistic opportunity of the year, numerically at least. Thank God for every life touched, and for all the unseen work of the Spirit in convicting, convincing and above all conversion, but why do we see comparatively so little?

the text applies itself, we actually transfer the authority in the preaching from the word of God to ourselves. We undermine God's truth and set up our own cleverness in its place. Like others before us, when that happens, we have our reward. To quote Haddon Robinson, 'Ultimately, people come to believe that anything with a Biblical flavour is what God says. The long-term effect is that we preach a mythology. Myth has an element of truth along with a great deal of puff, and people tend to live in the puff. They live with the implication of implications, and then they discover that what they thought God promised, he didn't promise.' And so the cross of Christ is emptied of its power.

ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER IN THE TASK

We all need to keep one another accountable in this great responsibility, to help one another on and to support one another in this most demanding and serious of tasks. Yet what a privilege it is, and what a joy to know that the message of the cross is the power of God! I do hope you'll be able to join us at one of our conferences this year. The preaching workshops are still one of the most valuable ingredients of our times together, when we can learn so much from one another. If you've only been to EMA in the past, why not try a preaching conference in May, or November, or in March, if you're a lay preacher or reader? And what about getting a group together to work through one of the 'preaching workshops on video' we have produced? Do keep in touch, and be assured of our partnership with you in your work of ministry as you proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Yours warmly, in Christ,

David Jackman, Director

of God to do the work of God? How much are we captive to pulpit journalism? These are some key tests we can and should apply.

- Do I think of my preaching as merely Bible-based, or thoroughly Biblical?
- Do I try to 'do something with the Bible' to benefit the congregation, or do I allow the Bible to do its own unique work, in me first and then in my hearers?
- Does my preaching centre around the issues of the moment (the contemporary agenda), or major on the issues of eternity (God's agenda)?
- Do I take time and care to state and explain clearly the meaning of the passage, within its context, or do I talk about it and around it?
- Is the impression my preaching leaves witty and amusing because of its illustrative content, or powerful and penetrating because of its truth content?
- Do my hearers grow to become preacher-focused ('What a great communicator!'), or Christ-focused ('What a glorious Saviour!')?
- Is my preaching life-shaping, preparing myself and my hearers for heaven, or simply ephemeral, like yesterday's journalism, useful for wrapping up fish and chips?

This is not about stylistic preferences, nor is it a plea for a detached and studied antipathy towards the culture in which we are called to live. But we dare not fall into the cultural traps in which Paul's converts wanted to ensnare him. If we are not teaching the content of Scripture, in our preaching, explaining what the Biblical text actually says and then applying it the way

CLEVER TALK AND THE POWER OF THE CROSS CANNOT CO-EXIST

There are multitudes of answers to such questions—sociological, organisational, communicational, spiritual, etc, with which the Christian press and bookshops are full. The variety of diagnosis and the plethora of quick-fix solutions are overwhelming in their contrariety and complexity; but surely when Scripture speaks directly we must stop and listen, for here is the Lord's own word. And this word says that there is not just a contrast between clever talk and the power of the cross, but a polarity between them. They cannot co-exist. As the paragraph develops, the apostle shows that the power of the cross is demonstrated in this, that 'God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe' (1:21). Salvation, witnessed by the transformed lives of the Corinthian believers, is the demonstration of divine power at work. No other message can save, because there is no other person great enough to accomplish such a task and no other power equivalent to such a massive need. Yet the right message can apparently be evacuated of its saving effects by the wrong methodology.

The root reason for this is that the 'language of human wisdom' is a substitute for faith in God and a resort to the resources and criteria of mere human beings. There is, of course, a specific Corinthian context into which Paul is writing. In his study, 'Paul's Theology of Proclamation' (C.U.P.), Dr Duane Litfin, President of Wheaton College, helps us to identify exactly what it was Paul was rejecting so determinedly. Analysing the first-century art of rhetoric, which was so dominant in Greek culture (especially in large cities like Corinth and Thessalonica), he argues that it was not about prose style or audience manipulation. 'It was about the

discovery and delivery of ideas and arguments that would engender belief in the listeners. Given this audience and this subject matter, how can I achieve the desired result?' Everything depended on the rhetorician's ability to adapt to his audience, understanding their mind-set and so calculating how to produce the desired responses. It is precisely against that methodology that Paul describes and defends his own Corinthian ministry and strategy.

THE POWER IS IN THE MESSAGE, NOT THE MESSENGER

Nor is this the only location or focus of such a Pauline emphasis. In 1 Cor 1:22 'miraculous signs' are similarly rejected as confirmatory evidences of the gospel's power to save. In 2:1, he is rejecting 'eloquence or superior wisdom', and again in 2:4, 'wise and persuasive words'. Yet we know from Luke's account of the Corinthian mission that 'every Sabbath he (Paul) reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks' (Acts 18:4). We are not to read the 1 Corinthian texts, then, as a glorying in ignorance or in verbal incompetence, but as a deliberate rejection of any confidence in human methodology, particularly that which was demanded and conditioned by the secular culture. The all-too-present danger was that their 'faith' might rest on men's wisdom, rather than God's power (2:5) in which case it would not be saving faith.

The same negatives are sprinkled through the opening chapters of the (earlier) first letter to the Thessalonians, the city from which Paul had travelled on to Corinth, via Berea and Athens. Speaking of his preaching in Macedonia, he reminded them that it was 'not simply with words, but also with power, with

the Holy Spirit...' (1 Thess 1:5). 'The appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you...we are not trying to please men, but God...we were not looking for praise from men' (1 Thess 2:3-6). Yet the fruit of these determined negatives is highly impressive. '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' (1 Thess 2:13). For Paul, this was clearly no peripheral matter. He saw it as absolutely critical to the effectiveness of his gospel proclamation, that all his confidence should be in the message and not in the messenger, in God's word and not in his worker.

ARE WE CAPTIVE TO PULPIT JOURNALISM?

So, as we enter another new year of gospel grace, the application to us and our ministries could hardly be more pertinent. From all quarters, preachers are urged to put their confidence in 'the language of human wisdom', to allow themselves to be culturally-driven so as to be culturally relevant. Shorter sermons, mainly composed of contemporary illustrations, often from the media, films and TV, preferably as humorous and entertaining as possible, are the order of the day, just as their equivalents were in Corinth. The pressure is constant and we need both great discernment and deeply-held Biblical convictions to be able to resist it. It is all too easy to capitulate and drift towards what I would characterise as 'journalistic preaching'. The chilling thought is that if that is our equivalent of the 'wisdom of speech', it cannot co-exist with the power of God.

Perhaps we need to undertake a reality check. How much of our preaching is truly expository of the meaning of the Bible, because we are convinced that the Spirit of God takes the word