

# EVANGELISTIC PREACHING



# Introduction

## *The need for evangelistic preaching*

*‘The quest of man is met by the Word of God. The need of man is met by the activity of God. The sin of man is met by the forgiving love of God. And between man, with his need and his sin, and the Word of God in His mighty activity and His redeeming love stands the Christian preacher.’*

**– F. D. Coggan**

## 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, 1Kings 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'.

## *The need for evangelistic preaching*

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 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

## Evangelistic Preaching

listen to and beware 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

## *The need for evangelistic preaching*

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

## Evangelistic Preaching

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'.<sup>1</sup> 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. Evangelistic preaching includes three elements: teaching, testifying and persuading (see Acts 17:3–4 and 28:23). It means that we teach the basic truths of the word of God and the work of Jesus, we testify to its power in our lives and we seek to persuade (not manipulate!) people to come to Christ. 'Persuade' is a frequently used word in the New Testament, and need not be something to shy away from, as long as the persuader is acting in dependence on God, with respect for the people with whom they are communicating, and not demeaning the gospel or themselves.

The early Christians spread the gospel by word of mouth; we can learn from the commitment and pattern of life of those early believers:

### *The need for evangelistic preaching*

- ‘Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah’ (Acts 5:42).
- ‘Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went’ (Acts 8:4).
- ‘When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper’ (Acts 13:5).
- ‘Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him’ (Acts 8:35).
- ‘Paul... reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead’ (Acts 17:2–3).
- He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus (Acts 28:23).
- ‘Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery...’ (Ephesians 3:8–9).
- ‘Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a



## Evangelistic Preaching

burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you' (1 Thessalonians 2:9).

- '... preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?' (2 Corinthians 11:7).

It is passages like these that form the foundation to C. H. Spurgeon's words, 'If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies; and if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees imploring them to stay... If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for.'<sup>2</sup> It seems that much of our Christianity today is stifling our responsibility to reach the lost with the gospel. Our frequently changing emphases have replaced reaching the unconverted with teaching the saints. It is good to have conferences for believers, but there is a need to prioritise events where the aim is to preach the gospel to those outside of Christ. 'But ... if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them' (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

**Faithful, relevant proclamation**

Genuine believers are concerned that there should be faithful gospel proclamation. We want to earnestly contend for the faith, just as much as an engaged girl protects her engagement ring from theft or loss, because it is so valuable and precious. If evangelism is preaching the gospel to non-Christians who are listening, then without being smug or proud, each gospel preacher will want to become an expert in evangelistic preaching. As we listen to and read what others are preaching, there will be either great joy, or deep concern about what is being proclaimed. And as life throws different experiences at us, we learn to minister to those whose lives have also been roller-coasters of joys and sorrows. God never wastes any pain, or tears, toil or time. Everything that happens to us will be used to communicate this precious message engagingly and effectively.

This is not merely of academic intrigue. It has an impact on all of us who are concerned that the message of the cross would once again spread throughout the land. A century ago, the Student Volunteer Missionary Union defined evangelism as, ‘The presentation of the gospel in such a manner to every soul in this world, so that the responsibility for what is done with it shall no

## Evangelistic Preaching

longer rest upon the Christian church or any individual Christian, but shall rest upon each man's head for himself.' For that to be done there has to be fervent, relevant, prayerful evangelism, which means there must be faithful proclamation. Enthusiasm is sometimes read as evangelism, but evangelism, which undoubtedly should be enthusiastic, has to have in it a particular content. There can be no evangelism without a faithful evangel.

Despite the pressure on the evangelical community to be silent, or to at least modify our message, we have more opportunities than we can take to present the gospel. Let us learn from the apostle Paul to redeem every opportunity to explain the gospel and put the claims of Christ before the listeners. According to the book of Acts, Paul spoke about the Lord:

- In the synagogues (at least 10 times – see 9:20; 13:4–5; 14:1; 17:1–2, 10–17; 18:4 and 19:8)
- In the stately house of the proconsul Sergius Paulus on Paphos (13:7)
- At a prayer meeting by the river in Philippi (16:13ff)
- In a prison cell (16:31)
- In a marketplace (17:17)
- At the Areopagus in Athens (17:22–31)

## *The need for evangelistic preaching*

- In the homes of Titius Justus (18:7) and Priscilla and Aquila (18:26)
- In the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus (19:9)
- To the rioting crowd at Ephesus (22:1–21)
- Before the Sanhedrin at Ephesus (23:1–6)
- In the palace of Felix (24:25)
- In the court before Festus, Agrippa and Bernice (26:1–29)
- On the deck of a sinking ship (27:25)
- Under house arrest in Rome (28:23–31)

Writing in the *Evangelical Times*, William Payne said, ‘It may surely be claimed that the Christian church was born of preaching. The Master Himself early identified preaching as one of the main concerns of His coming: “Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also; for this is what I came for.” (Mark 1:38)’<sup>3</sup>

Preaching is not only a privilege, but also a responsibility. Preachers have been entrusted with good news and have an indebtedness to God, as well as to their hearers. We are ‘servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found

## Evangelistic Preaching

faithful' (1 Corinthians 4:1–2). That picture of the preacher is repeated in Colossians 1:25 and 1 Peter 4:10. We will have to give account to God as to how we have discharged our responsibility. Bishop Gore (1613-91) used to give his final charge to ordinands by saying, "Tomorrow I shall say to you, "Wilt thou? Wilt thou? Wilt thou?" But there will come a day to you when Another will say to you, "Hast thou? Hast thou? Hast thou?"

As we proclaim the gospel, we do so knowing that God's heart is towards men and women. They may be His enemies but His deep love desires them to come to Him: "As I live," says the Lord God, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11). God wants people to be saved; He is 'not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9). Evangelistic preachers will feel, to a much lesser extent than did our Lord, the hurt and emotional pain of seeing people reject the truth. When we know this grievous agony of heart, we are experiencing a little of the 'fellowship of His sufferings' (Philippians 3:10). Jesus looked over His beloved capital and longed for them to be gathered to Him: He wanted to, but they were not willing.

*The need for evangelistic preaching*

The eternal destiny of men and women depends on their response to Jesus, so we will love the lost and point them to the Friend of sinners. In our proclamation of the gospel, we pray that the Holy Spirit will take hold of His holy word and apply it to unholy hearts to make them more like Jesus.