



Saving Eutychus

How to preach God's word
and keep people awake

Gary Millar and
Phil Campbell

FOREWORD BY ALISTAIR BEGG

I have read books on how to make sure your sermon is interesting, and I have read books on how to make sure your sermon is faithful to the text, but this book wants your sermon to be both. If I could, I would make this little book mandatory reading for seminarians everywhere, and then urge them to read it a couple more times during the course of their ministry. It avoids cutesy and manipulative suggestions, and makes its practical points while urging integrity, faithfulness, and imagination. Many books on preaching are published every year; this one is a must.

DA Carson

Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Chicago, Illinois

Some writing so solemnly exalts the task of preaching, or so heavily complicates the method, it depresses and discourages ordinary mortals like me into thinking we can never really do it and should just give up. Since most preachers feel that every Sunday night anyway, such books don't really help the cause! This one does. I like it because it is short, lighthearted (but not lightweight), very human, and very much to the point. I am involved in training preachers, but I still have plenty to learn. I am very grateful for a resource that will both help me, and help me in helping others—with enjoyment, encouragement and some fun along the way!

William JU Philip

Senior Minister, The Tron Church, Glasgow

Let me invite you to eavesdrop on an Irish-Aussie conversation about preaching. This book teems with 'plusses': it is *short* (as a tome that takes Eutychus as its poster boy must be); it is *stretching* (the authors force one to deal with longer texts—and leave one asking, "Why can't I summarize extended passages like that?"); it is *specific* (they include actual sermons with critique); it is *searching* (in case you skip the first chapter, 'pray' occurs eight times in the conclusion); and *stirring* (you still want to preach when you've finished reading). If you don't buy the book, don't cry if Eutychus isn't saved!

Dale Ralph Davis

Author and Bible expositor, Cookeville, Tennessee

The late Klaas Runia entitled his Moore College lectures of 1980 *The Sermon Under Attack*. The only thing new about the current attack on expository preaching is that which it nominates to be its substitute—these days, it's narrative or storytelling. But the people of God know that the Bible preached, explained to the mind, applied to the will, is precisely the nourishment they need, and which alone promotes their maturity.

I am very pleased to recommend this book by Phil and Gary, two faithful expositors. Our old friend Chappo, to whom it is dedicated, would be pleased as well. I can hear him saying, "Get to the text brother! The authority is in the text. Tell them what the text says, and do it in 20 minutes." We are grateful for Chappo's ministry and grateful to our brothers by extending its emphasis through this book.

David Cook

Principal, Sydney Missionary and Bible College, NSW, 1986-2011

I needed to read this book by Campbell and Millar at this point in my life. I've been preaching for over 27 years, and this book has convicted me of fundamentals that have ceased to be central in my preaching.

Every preacher needs to read this book every five years. It is both theologically driven and brimming with wise and practical insights on how to preach.

Ray Galea

Lead Pastor, Fellowship Dubai

Worried your preaching, though of course biblical, may be getting a bit jaded, even boring? This humdinger of a book is just for you: full of marvellous insights from areas as diverse as biblical theology, preaching the Old Testament, and mode of delivery; and written like the sermons it is encouraging us to preach—faithful but fresh. A must-read, a short read, a great read, for preachers at every stage, whether young colt or old nag. Buy, read, apply!

John Samuel

Senior Minister, Duke Street Church, Richmond, Surrey

Millar and Campbell write with much wit and wisdom for the sake of our listeners. At some point every preacher must decide whether to preach for the regard of one's peers or for the welfare of Christ's people. Millar and Campbell have obviously decided for the latter and give much sound advice for the rest of us to do the same.

Bryan Chapell

President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary, St Louis,
Missouri

Two men who would never be deadly, boring or dull are Gary Millar and Phil Campbell, and in this book they use their lively wit to help other preachers keep Eutychus awake. More importantly, they are united in their understanding of and commitment to the task of making God's word known. I pray this book will be of benefit to both preachers and congregations.

Phillip D Jensen

Bible teacher and evangelist, Two Ways Ministries, Sydney, NSW

This book fills a gap in our concern for better preaching because it joins true piety to good theology in a way that few books do. Gary and Phil bring lots of experience, wisdom and practicality to the most privileged job in the universe—handling the word of God. It's a short, sharp and wonderfully honest Irish/Aussie injection.

Simon Manchester

Senior Minister, St Thomas' Anglican Church, North Sydney,
NSW, 1989-2019

This book deserves to be included in the 'must read' category for preachers. It is readable, which always helps! And, as we would expect, it is biblical and practical. But it is also funny and forthright in a way that made me re-evaluate my preaching and resolve with God's help to improve. This is a different book from Lloyd-Jones' *Preaching and Preachers* and *Between Two Worlds* by John Stott, but it may prove to be just as influential.

Alistair Begg

Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio

To Fiona and Louise, who have helped us more
with our preaching than anyone else, and with
grateful thanks to Chappo (1930-2012).

Saving Eutychus

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and keep people awake

Gary Millar and
Phil Campbell

Saving Eutychus

Second edition

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Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight... Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story...

Splattttt.

Acts 20:7, 9 (NIV)

Contents

Foreword	7
An Aussie and an Irishman walk into a pulpit...	11
Saving Eutychus	17
1. Saving Eutychus 101: It's not about you	21
2. Preaching that changes the heart	29
3. Deadly, dull and boring	47
4. So what's the big idea?	67
5. Why preaching the gospel is so hard (especially from the Old Testament)	81
6. Stand and deliver	105
7. Faithful wounds: The importance of critique	115
8. Let's build a sermon: Phil walks through the process of writing last Sunday's sermon	125
Appendix 1: Real-life examples of sermon critique	143
a. Gary critiques Phil's sermon	144
b. A sermon from Gary	150
c. Phil critiques Gary's sermon	163
Appendix 2: Resources	169
a. Sermon feedback form	170
b. Phil's top ten tips checklist	172
c. Dynamic delivery diagram worksheet	173
Afterword	175

Foreword

THE WRITER OF ECCLESIASTES tells us that “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil” (Eccl 4:9). And history provides us with many examples of effective partnerships: Paul and Silas singing in jail; Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon; Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak; Lennon and McCartney; Laurel and Hardy; and, last but by no means least, Miller and Campbell! I am an unashamed fan of this collaboration. Having endorsed an earlier edition of this book, it is now a distinct privilege to be invited to provide this foreword.

Anyone who has set about the task of teaching and preaching will, sooner or later, remark to himself: “Well, here’s another nice mess you’ve gotten me into”. Better for this to be on the lips of the preacher on Saturday evening than to become a refrain running through the congregation on Sunday morning! There is a sense in which no one really knows how

to preach. It is right that the task should humble us but not paralyse us. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, judged by many to be the greatest preacher of the 20th century, told the students at Westminster Seminary: “Any man who has had some glimpse of what it is to preach will inevitably feel that he has never preached. But he will go on trying, hoping that by the grace of God one day he may truly preach.”¹ If our congregations had even an inkling of what’s involved and of the difficulty of the task, they would beseech God for help on our behalf.

Years ago, I was treated to lunch by a Christian businessman. In the course of pleasant conversation he said, “I can do what you do”. “What is it I do?” I enquired. I’ve never forgotten his reply: “You stand behind a box and talk”. Now, years later, having tested his theory while serving as a teaching pastor, he has changed his tune. Today he would affirm JI Packer’s definition: “Preaching is the event of God himself bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction through the words of a spokesperson”.² My friend has discovered that as servants of the word, our task is to let the text talk. God chooses to employ the voices of mere mortals as instruments to communicate eternal life.

Who is sufficient for these things? As a much younger man, I imagined that men of maturity could reach a point of such ability in the pulpit as to think themselves masters of the craft. Perhaps some may have reached the point where they felt that way, but not me. Here I am, 70 years old, with a clear understanding of what Spurgeon is said to have urged his students to do: “Keep your old sermons to weep over!” I

1 DM Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, Zondervan, 1972, p. 99.

2 JI Packer, ‘Some perspectives on preaching’, in D Jackman (ed), *Preaching the Living Word: Addresses from the Evangelical Ministry Assembly*, Christian Focus, 1999, p. 28.

am constantly on the lookout for ways to improve, for good examples to follow, and for tips and help and encouragement.

That's where this book comes in. The writers are not merely theoreticians. They provide ample 'theory', but they do so as practioners, actively involved in the discipline and art of expounding Scripture. They have special gifts, but they do not write as specialists. Just as in medicine, where the work of the local GP is in short supply, we also find an absence in the realm of pastoral care. It is past time for us to rediscover the role of the shepherd who warns and guides, leads and feeds from a deep-seated conviction that (as Mark Ashton used to say) the word of God does the work of God, by the Spirit of God, in the lives of the children of God.

I vividly remember as a small boy sitting in a city-centre church waiting for the commencement of the morning service. At about three minutes to 11, the usher climbed the pulpit stairs to place a large Bible on the lectern, opening it to the passage of Scripture for the sermon. Having disappeared, he later returned to climb the stairs a second time: after the minister had entered the pulpit, to close the door and leave the man to his task. I was left in no doubt at all that we should expect to hear the truth proclaimed from that Bible. I often think of that today when I enter churches where pulpits are moveable but the drum kits are stationary, and when the congregation has grown accustomed to expecting a 'performance' as the minister enters from stage right.

Am I starting to sound old and crusty? After all, there have been many pulpiteers in earlier eras. Lecturing on preaching to the students and faculty of Yale in 1876, RW Dale caught their attention when he said:

I always think of the tricks of those ingenious gentlemen who entertain the public by rubbing a sovereign

between their hands till it becomes a canary, and drawing out of their coat sleeves half-a-dozen brilliant glass globes filled with water, and with four or five gold fish swimming in each of them. For myself, I like to listen to a good preacher, and I have no objection in the world to be[ing] amused by the tricks of a clever conjurer; but I prefer to keep the conjuring and the preaching separate: conjuring on Sunday morning, conjuring in church, conjuring with texts of Scripture, is not quite to my taste.³

The preacher must keep himself in check and must check himself daily. Am I convinced that the word of God is living and authoritative? Am I bowing in reverence before the one to whom it points? Am I clear that preaching involves a personal, passionate plea—“We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20)?

Gary and Phil have really helped us to pay attention to pace, pitch and volume. To that, we can add *tone*. The pastor comes to the pulpit by himself, to be himself and to forget himself. We cannot make much of ourselves and much of the Lord Jesus simultaneously. Our prayer before preaching must set the tone: we must ask God to change and transform us by the power of his holy word, even as we prepare to share that word with others.

Alistair Begg

Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio

3 RW Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching: Delivered at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1877, p. 127.

An Aussie and an Irishman walk into a pulpit...

PREACHING IS HARD WORK. And—we're sorry to break this to you if you're just starting out—it doesn't seem to get much easier. But God in his kindness gives us people to encourage us that we're on the right track, to sharpen us and to help us to keep going. That's how an Aussie and a Northern Irishman ended up writing a book on preaching together.

We have very different backgrounds, personalities and experience. We have very different interests and passions. Our families are at very different stages. And as you will discover in this book, we express ourselves differently and approach preaching from different angles. But those differences are part of what has led to this book. From the moment we met

in 2010, we recognized that we had independently come to many of the same key convictions about teaching the Bible.

While the details of our processes will vary, we are both completely committed to teaching the Bible book by book in a way that is faithful and fresh. And we share the same concern for saving Eutychus—preaching should never bore people to death. We both look for the ‘big idea’ that unifies the passage we’re preaching on, and we both tend to preach on longer ‘chunks’ of text, as defined by the underlying movement of these big ideas. For both of us, preaching begins with God speaking, moving, thrilling, teaching, correcting and wooing us through a passage of the Bible. As God’s truth begins to sink into our own hearts and lives, God enables us to think more clearly and deeply about its application in the lives of those to whom we’re speaking. This is the process, in a nutshell, that we both follow and will be unpacking in the pages ahead: work out the big idea; apply it to ourselves; think through how to preach it.

It’s interesting and stimulating, though, to think about the differences in our preaching as we work together. I (Gary) think Phil’s style is crisper and shorter, and he’s brilliant at reducing an argument to the bare minimum. I tend to take a little longer to get there, and (I think) I spend more time trying to work the text under our skin. These differences reflect, in part, who we are (an Aussie and an Irishman), our theological influences, our personalities (for Phil the glass is usually half-empty, and for me it’s at least three-quarters full) and our personal convictions. But as flawed people and preachers, we are trying to do exactly the same thing. And what we want to do in the pages that follow is to encourage you to work harder on the biblical text, on the content of your sermon and on your delivery, so that you continue to grow as

the preacher that only you can be. Our prayer is that this book will equip and encourage you to preach the word of God in a way that fits your own personality and is faithful and fresh in your own context.

There are key elements of sermon preparation and delivery that all of us need to learn and practise. There are other aspects that are a matter of personal preference and style. We're aware that some of the things we're suggesting here reflect who we are and where we've been. We both have unfortunate quirks that we couldn't unlearn even if we wanted to, as well as many things we're still learning to improve. We're far from being 'perfect preachers'—yet along the way we have grown and changed. We hope that hearing our two voices and learning from our experiences will help you gain confidence in your own 'voice' and see some fresh ways in which you can continue to develop as a preacher too.

In the chapters that follow we are both very open about the way God has worked in us over the years. You will have multiple glimpses into our lives and families, so it may help you to know a little bit about us up front.

I was born in Northern Ireland, am married to Fiona (a Scot born in Peru), and have three daughters—Lucy (11), Sophie (10) and Rebekah (6). We moved to Australia at the start of 2011, where I am the Principal of Queensland Theological College (QTC) in Brisbane. Before that, I was minister of Howth and Malahide Presbyterian Church in Dublin in the Republic of Ireland for 12 years (and was on the staff of a large church in Northern Ireland before that). I studied chemistry in Belfast, and then theology in Aberdeen, before completing a DPhil at Oxford (on Deuteronomy).

Phil and Louise are the parents of four adult children—Nathan, Jo, Maddie and Susie—and they are now learning

the art of grandparenting (even though they insist they're much too young). Nathan's popular blog st-eutychus.com inspired the title of this book.

Phil leads the ministry team at Mitchelton Presbyterian Church on Brisbane's north side and, as past chair of QTC, he helped persuade Gary to move his family halfway around the world. For over a decade, Phil has also loved teaching the introductory preaching course at QTC, and much of the material in this book has been road tested there.

One thing we do have in common is that our respective wives, Fiona and Louise, have taught us more about preaching and been a greater help to us than anyone else. Not only is this book written *for* them, it would probably also have been much better if it had been written *by* them.

A host of people along the way have also helped us a great deal. In addition to those who have graciously listened to us teach the Bible in our churches over the years, various mentors and friends have journeyed with us, sharpening and encouraging us along the way. For me, these people include Bob Lockhart, William Still, Warner Hardie, Dave Mansfield, John Chapman, colleagues at the Irish Preachers Conference and the Dublin Gospel Partnership, Nigel McCullough and, above all, my closest friends Andrew Smith (whose wife Tara has worked miracles in making a book out of our material) and David 'Monty' Montgomery. For Phil, these people include Donald Campbell, Phillip Jensen, David Cook, John Chapman, Bryson Smith (who models all the ideas in this book brilliantly) and the members of the Pearl Beach Preaching Group.

If you read through that list of names, you'll have noticed that we have one influence in common—Canon John Chapman. Until Chappo went to his reward in 2012, he encouraged us and countless others like us to “know and tell the gospel”

with the constant reminder that “the first 50 years are the hardest”. Neither of us has been at it for 50 years yet, but Chappo’s example keeps us going. Our hope is that this book is a fitting thank you to God for his life and ministry.



Gary Millar



Phil Campbell



Saving Eutychus

IT'S CROWDED IN THE upstairs room, and stuffy, so young Eutychus wedges himself onto a windowsill and sucks in the cool outside air. But fresh air isn't enough. The visiting preacher talks on and on. By midnight, Eutychus is asleep on his perch. His weight shifts, he tumbles... and moments later his body lies broken on the pavement three stories below (see Acts 20:7, 9).

The rest, as they say, is history—though happily, thanks to some apostolic first aid, the young man's 'terminal velocity' wasn't as *terminal* as it could have been.

Now, before we unjustly judge the preacher here, let's consider the extenuating circumstances. Paul had arrived in Troas on his whistlestop tour of the Aegean to proclaim the kingdom of God, and time was short. The night Eutychus struggled to stay awake was Paul's last among them, and there was a lot he wanted to teach them. Paul couldn't catch

a later flight and prolong his stay; he had to keep talking. But the humbling point we want to make is that what took Paul many hours of speaking to achieve—near-fatal napping—takes most of us only a few minutes speaking to a well-rested and caffeinated crowd on a Sunday.

So why does Luke include this story in Acts 20? Is it proof that some people would rather die than listen to an overlong sermon? Or maybe it's a warning to preachers—if you lack Paul's apostolic healing gifts, keep people awake at all costs.

How are you doing with that? I try hard to avoid being dull, yet most weeks I find myself losing one or two over the edge. When I met the doctor who was about to sedate me for an endoscopy, I couldn't help joking, "Hi Doc, I see we're both in the business of putting people to sleep! Call me next time you've got a tough case." But it's not all that funny. And the difference between us (apart from a lower hourly rate) is that I *don't want* to be in the business of putting people to sleep.

Gary and I are not approaching this book as experts on preaching that keeps people awake. But we are convinced that when attention wanders and eyes droop, it's more often our fault than our listeners'. It's our job to keep people awake, and we'll take the blame if they fall out the window. But if you've just resolved to learn a new stand-up routine for Sunday, hold on. Our challenge is not just to avoid being deadly dull. Our challenge is also to be faithful, accurate and clear as we cut to the heart of the biblical text and apply what God is *really saying* in a way that cuts to the hearts of people who are *really listening*.

When a well-known American preacher visited Sydney in the early 1990s, Australian evangelist John Chapman ('Chappo') was in the audience. Most of us found the visitor's talk on Matthew the tax collector riveting, and as best as I can

remember it included plenty of practical hospitality tips, given the fact that the tax collector threw a massive Jesus-party and invited all his friends.

When the speaker invited questions, Chappo raised his hand. “Dear brother”, said Chappo, “I’m not meaning to be rude, but I wonder if you could tell us how people are to know when they are hearing God speak through his word, and when they are just hearing good advice from you? Because I couldn’t spot the difference. As you spoke to us, it all seemed to come with the same authority.”

Chappo had a point. Mix a bunch of commonsense suggestions with the text of Luke 5 and deliver them with all the authority of Scripture, and who can tell the difference? Especially if there are jokes. None of it was *wrong*. It was just that none of the preacher’s points were the points Luke was actually making. Sure, Luke *mentioned* the party—but he wasn’t telling us to have one. It wasn’t God speaking; it was the preacher.

This is a common and very nuanced problem. We’re called to be interesting and relevant, and to apply the passage... but we must apply *what the text is actually saying*.

Saving Eutychus doesn’t just mean keeping him awake. It also means doing our best to keep him fresh and alert so he can hear the truth of the gospel and be saved. If we have done our job, we will stand up on Sunday ready to deliver a sermon on a Bible passage that we have wrestled with and that the Holy Spirit has begun to apply to our own hearts and lives. We will know exactly what we want to say and how we’re going to say it in a fresh and engaging way. We will have prayed for God to reach the hearts of our listeners with his word. When that’s happening, snoring is not an option. None of this, however, can happen without prayer.



1

Saving Eutychus 101: It's not about you

WRITING A BOOK ABOUT preaching makes me very uncomfortable. I know there are all kinds of dos and don'ts and useful tips and techniques. As we'll see, there are plenty of helpful things to say about biblical theology, and pace, and illustrations, and approach and so on. But my biggest fear in putting all this down on paper is that it makes it sound as if preaching is all about the preacher—what we say and how we say it. But it isn't.

Everyone who has ever preached regularly knows something about the mystery of the sermon that you thought was brilliantly constructed but fell completely flat. In God's kindness, you may also have listened to yourself giving a really

dud sermon that led someone to become a Christian (I much prefer those days!). Why does that happen? It's because God works through preaching. And we really do need to remember that. That's why this chapter (which doesn't say anything particularly new but, like a good sermon, points us to the truth of which we need to be constantly reminded) may actually be the most important chapter in this entire book.

Praying in our generation

My guess is that people in almost every generation have thought that prayer was going out of fashion. "People are much more self-reliant than they used to be", our grandparents said. Then our parents said the same thing. And now you might be thinking it, too. I suppose it's part of living in a fallen world. But even so, I think that our generation, in the second decade of the 21st century, faces some particular challenges when it comes to encouraging God's people to keep praying.

When I was a student in Aberdeen in northern Scotland in the late 1980s, the main obstacle to getting out of bed in the morning to pray was the fact that it was freezing and the heating didn't work. Although living in Brisbane has greatly reduced the thermal challenges, 25 years later I face a whole new set of temptations every morning.

Now when I wake up in the morning not only would I rather stay in bed, but my phone is right there, calling me. I can check emails and sports scores from the northern hemisphere, read the news and even play Scrabble if the mood takes me. I can read my favourite blog posts, catch up on Zite, check the weather radar, look to see who's on Skype across the world. Or I could get up and pray. But even if I make it out of bed, the millions of potentially distracting details only a touch away continue to clamour for my atten-

tion. Facebook and Twitter are just two of them. But even when I've successfully negotiated all of this, am fully awake, have a cup of coffee in my hand and am ready to concentrate, I've wasted at least 20 minutes and am feeling the pressure to 'get on' for Sunday. So what do I do? I start to read or write (rather than *pray*).

I know that the temptation to skip prayer for other 'more productive' activity is not new. It's just incredibly easy now—distractions are literally at our fingertips. And nowhere is that more obvious than when it comes to praying for (and before) preaching.

Prayer for preachers and preaching

It's strange but true that one of the consequences of having access to great teaching and great resources is a growing self-reliance (which I think is also a particular challenge for our generation).

Those of you under 40 may find it difficult to imagine that when I was a student minister, we had to go to a place called a 'library' to find information in 'books'. Occasionally, we were also able to get things called 'cassettes'. Since cassettes were (a) expensive, and (b) hard to get, they were passed around, used, re-used and abused. (In fact, I would still love to hear the end of the Martyn Lloyd-Jones talk on Romans 11 that someone recorded ABBA's *Greatest Hits* over!) Contrast that with today—a quick glance at the Gospel Coalition website gives instant access to thousands of excellent expository sermons. The issue today isn't lack of resources, but rather how 'ordinary' pastors compete for the listening ears of their congregations with the 'big guns', whose sermons are available live (or at least later on the same day they were preached).

There are, of course, many ways in which this is a good

thing—I mean, seriously, can we ever have too much good teaching? And yet there are dangers. One of these is that teaching the Bible becomes completely detached from loving relationship. Another danger stems from the fact that people place far too much emphasis on the preacher as ‘performer’ (or even ‘personality’). And when that happens, it effectively removes the need for prayer.

In the local church, if we are regularly rubbing shoulders with those who preach, we know that there are weeks when they are under huge pressure to carve out enough time to prepare properly; we know that there are weeks when they just can’t nail their sermon; we know that there are weeks when their kids are playing up, or they are working through marital issues, or they are feeling under the weather. And so we pray. We know that our friends—those who have just received crushing health news, who have recently been bereaved, who are struggling with anger, who are trying to deal with pride, who have sinned sexually—will be listening to this sermon. We know how much we need God. And so we pray (or so we know we should). But if we are sitting in front of a screen watching or listening to an old sermon preached by a guy we don’t know, in a place we’ve never been, to people we’ve never met, it isn’t quite the same. To put it bluntly, it doesn’t really matter to us if God showed up and addressed his people through his word that day. It doesn’t really matter what was going on in that church. So why should we pray? The connection between our prayers and the sermon is broken—and when that happens, it isn’t easily fixed.

Preachers praying

I could be wrong, but I strongly suspect that preachers are praying less today too. They (we) are certainly talking less

about prayer than, say, 20 years ago. And while it's true that there has been a significant resurgence of biblical *preaching*, I'm not sure this has been accompanied by a resurgence in praying—and especially not prayer about preaching.

Gradually, we seem to be losing sight of the fact that God uses weak and sinful people, and that he uses them only by grace. Yes, we may sow, plant and water—but *only God* gives growth. That's true in your local church and mine. It's also true of every podcast and ebook and conference address under the sun. God doesn't use people because they are gifted. He uses people (even preachers) because he is gracious. Do we actually believe that? If we do believe it, then we will pray—we will pray before we speak, and we will pray for others before they speak. It's that simple.

Prayer and preaching in the Bible

In the book of Acts, it's hard to miss the fact that the apostles gave their attention “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). But what does this actually mean? Up to this point in Acts, there hasn't been that much praying (so, for example, it isn't even completely clear whether 2:42 means ‘they prayed’ or ‘they kept going to the temple’). But in Acts 4:24-30 we see that when the church prays, it prays for the preaching of the apostles. And although I can't prove it, I suspect that from this point on in Acts praying for the impact of the apostles' preaching is considered a complete no-brainer.

We can see basically the same concern when Paul writes to the Colossians:

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to

declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. (Col 4:2-4)

Paul clearly expects—and longs for—the prayers of the Christians at Colossae for his *preaching*.

So what should we do?

Let me give you a straightforward double challenge.

First, resolve to make sure that from now on (whatever your habit has been in the past), you will pray for your own preaching. Perhaps you have been totally consistent in this for years. It may be that you would never dream of standing up to speak to anyone without praying that God would help you to believe and live your own sermon. And it may be that you always pray for those on whom you are about to inflict the sermon—if that's you, well and good. However, if you are part of the (large?) number of Bible teachers who would be rather embarrassed (or deeply ashamed?) if the amount of time and energy they had put into praying through and for the sermon were to be announced to the congregation just before they stood up to speak, this may be a great time to hit the reset button and repent.

The second part of the challenge is this: make sure that your church prays *together* for the preaching. I haven't done any exhaustive research (well, actually, I haven't done any research at all on this), but I suspect that the church prayer meeting is in rapid decline. The growth of home groups is, I think, a really good thing, but it doesn't come without a cost. In my experience, the cost is that the 'prayer' part of the home group is *always* weaker than the study part. The net result is that we pray more for my Aunt Nelly's next-door neighbour's

friend's daughter than we do for the proclamation of the message of Jesus. (And it's not that my Aunt Nelly's next-door neighbour's friend's daughter doesn't need prayer—I'm arguing for both/and rather than either/or.) So, again, it's just worth checking—is there a dedicated time during the week when people gather specifically to pray for our core business? If not, please make one.

A final word: What this looks like in practice

I am, like all of us, a child of my past. And when it comes to prayer, I am very definitely a child of a particular part of my past. From 1988-1991 (when I was a theological student), I was part of a remarkable church family. Gilcomston South Church of Scotland in Aberdeen wasn't a huge church. Nor was it a particularly 'happening' church. We met twice on a Sunday, had a midweek central Bible study and a Saturday night prayer meeting—and that was it. There was an organ, and we sang five hymns or psalms (often to Germanic minor tunes). The pastor, William Still, preached steadily through the Bible (this was still relatively novel at the time, even though he had been doing it for 40 years). But what set that church family apart was its very simple commitment to “the ministry of the word nourished by prayer” (as Mr Still would repeatedly say). I have never been part of a church family that had a greater sense of expectancy when we gathered to hear the Bible explained. I have never been part of a church family where prayer was so obviously the heartbeat of everything that went on. And I have never been part of a church family where God was so obviously present week by week as he spoke through his word. And, it seems to me, there might just be a connection.

Of course 'Gilc' was, and is, just like any church family—full of flawed, messed-up people like you and me. But those

of us who had the privilege of ‘passing through’ went on from there with an indelible sense that preaching and praying go together. It was just part of the DNA of the church family. The precious group of 50 or 60 people who met week by week at the Saturday night prayer meeting spent most of the two hours praying for the proclamation of the gospel elsewhere—in other churches in their city, in Scotland, and on every continent around the world, one by one. Eventually, someone would pray, “And Lord, spare a thought for us in our own place tomorrow...” and the others, who had been praying faithfully on their own all through the week for the preaching at Gilc, would murmur a heartfelt “Amen”.