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EMPTY HEARTS and EMPTY MINDS

An AJET Editorial

Preaching is the divinely ordained means of declaring the good news of saving grace (I Cor. 1:18-21) and has been characteristic of Christianity from the time of Jesus Christ who "came preaching" (Mk. 1:14). No other religion has made preaching the prominent feature of regular worship by the multitudes of people. Judaism did have prophets but preaching was not part of the temple worship. Greek religions did have philosophical orators, but preaching was not central in their religions. African Traditional Religion did have their prophets and diviners but preaching played no part in the ritual of worship. But in the Christian Church powerful preaching has always accompanied the expansion of the church and has always been associated with periods of revival. So powerful were the sermons of Martin Luther that the German language was shaped and moulded through his preaching as the gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone spread throughout the nation.

But alas, so much *preaching* today falls short of biblical standards. There are two perils of preaching which threaten the effectiveness and power of preaching. *Empty hearts* and *empty minds* cannot declare the riches of God's grace and glorify God. While the message of the cross is foolishness to the unbeliever (I Cor. 1:18), the *empty hearts* and *empty heads* of preachers often make the preachers themselves foolish and their preaching mere folly.

"Preaching is the communication of truth by man to man. It has two essential elements, truth and personality...It must have both elements...It is in the absence of one or the other element that a discourse ceases to be a sermon and a man ceases to be a preacher," according to Phillips Brooks.

Preaching must be *heart centred*. As D.L. Moody said, "That which comes through the heart will reach the heart." Preaching is not a dry lecture on exegetical interpretations of the Bible. Preaching is not a mere academic exercise. God must first speak to a preacher in his own heart before he can preach to the hearts of those who listen. A preacher cannot lead his hearers beyond his own experience with God. Preaching is always from the presence of God. Therefore, before any powerful preaching can take place, the preacher must experience deep communion with God.

The problem with so much preaching today is that it is a dry recitation of old sermons, a telling of funny stories, a speech full of words without engaging

the heart. So much preaching is a formality learned by professional training and experience. Such preaching is a peril to everyone. Only when God through his Word speaks to the heart of a preacher, can he then communicate with the hearts of those listening. Preaching must be through personality.

But preaching must also be the communication of divine truth and this requires the use of the *mind*. Preaching is Bible centred, declaring the good news of God as revealed in the Word of God. Preaching is authoritative, declaring "Thus saith the Lord." Preaching is not mere human interpretation and opinion. Without the experience of the reality of what is preached in the heart, and without the Scriptures, all preaching lacks authority.

A lot of preaching today is not biblical preaching. The use of a Scriptural text is sometimes a mere pretext to take off on some political or social discourse. Some preachers do not make any serious effort to exegete the Scriptures. They only lift the verse out of its context in order to make political or social pronouncements.

Biblical preaching necessitates a prepared mind. An *empty mind* cannot be a vehicle of divine grace any more than an *empty heart*. This requires faithful, diligent study of God's Word. This demands preparation in advance. Limiting sermon preparation to Saturday for a Sunday sermon can only lead to disaster. This is sheer laziness. Other preachers do not prepare their mind before hand because they depend on the Holy Spirit to teach them what to say. Such preachers only delude themselves. Their theology is faulty.

There is simply *no* substitute for powerful preaching of the Word of God which engages both the *heart* and the *mind*. Powerful preaching is not measured by raspy voices shouting into a microphone. Powerful preaching is only made possible by the Holy Spirit as both heart and mind are engaged in the faithful proclamation of the Word of God.

Where are the powerful preachers today? Perhaps the lack is due to *empty hearts* and *empty minds*. Preachers are unwilling to commune with God in prayer and in the meditation of God's Word. They have not gone deep with God. They are not living epistles of the written Word but instead are living hypocrites, saying one thing and doing another. Or perhaps they are just too lazy to fill their minds with God's Word. They do not take enough time to prepare thoughtful and thought provoking sermons. Pastors may be paid sitting allowance for attending committees. But whose salary is based on the time devoted to sermon preparation? Being an instrument of God to proclaim the Word of God is a holy and solemn privilege and responsibility. We are assured that God who sees all and knows all will reward the faithful.