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Reformation
& Revival



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No serious-minded preacher can fail to be concerned at the lack of impact evangelistic preaching is having in our day and age. For all our conferences, fraternal, courses, literature, study and effort, the net result is so much less than we would like. A mountain has labored and brought forth a mouse. Is this not a simple, sobering fact? If you are reading these words as a preacher, seek to give honest answers to these questions: How many people do you know of who were converted under your ministry in the last year? How many others have had their lives radically transformed? And how do these results relate to the amount of time and effort you have put into your preparation and preaching? You would be less than human if you were not concerned at how little there is to show. You might even be inclined to be depressed, especially when you hear of results elsewhere.

But we need to take a cooler look at the situation. If things are not what they ought to be, they are certainly not what they seem to be. There is a great difference between the headline and the bottom line. When Billy Graham held his "Mission England" a few years ago, one of his team said that the results in the West Country alone exceeded anything seen in the days of Wesley and Whitefield. Another spokesman said there had been 100,000 conversions. A year later, when Billy Graham returned for a week's preaching in the city of Sheffield, reports reaching the United States while I was there prompted someone to suggest to me that "England must be on fire from end to end." No right-minded assessment would now give any credence to either of these claims.

By the same token, extraordinary claims are sometimes made in charismatic circles—healings, exorcisms, conversions, fillings or baptisms in, with or by the Holy Spirit, prophecies, miracles, words of wisdom or knowledge, and other exciting exotica. It all sounds very exhilarating, but

where are the lasting results? Nor are arresting claims limited to charismatic circles. I know of other churches in the United States who claim to have added one hundred members a year for the last ten years, yet are no bigger now than they were then. But statistics are addictive, and the machine must be fed. When results were declining in a well-known megachurch letters were sent to 200 key men in the congregation instructing them to make an open response to the invitation on designated Sundays and to make some kind of decision that could be registered in the church records. At a well-known Bible Institute students were told, "Your credibility as a pastor will depend entirely on what you make happen during the invitation." This is the kind of thing that is likely to happen when rampant Arminianism dictates the methodology.

What can be done? What we must not do is lose our nerve. If there is no cause to be complacent, neither is there reason to be neurotic. Then what is the problem? Is it something simple that we are missing? A leading British evangelist, devastated by a total absence of response at one particular rally, came to the conclusion that it was the seating arrangement that prevented the blessing! Is it something to do with the format? Would *user friendly* services turn the key? Is it something theological? Is so-called *power* evangelism the answer? A serious analysis of these would soon disabuse us of any such ideas.

Then what is the problem? Before coming to the main thrust of this article, I am sure it needs to be said that part of the problem lies not in the pulpit but in the pew. The average church member has little heart for evangelism, even for bringing lost friends to hear us preach the gospel. It takes two to tango, and an effective evangelistic ministry needs an evangelistically-minded congregation. When a church was planning to divide its midweek teaching program into house groups, I suggested that once a month

these should be specifically evangelistic, with church members strongly encouraged to bring unsaved friends, but the suggestion never got to first base.

To revert to the pulpit, we need to be aware that the problem is certainly not new. Commenting on a visit to Edinburgh, John Wesley wrote, "I use the most cutting words and apply them in the most pointed manner; still they hear, but feel no more than the seats they sit upon." Even more relevant to our subject are these words by Richard Baxter, taken from his Introduction to *A Call to the Unconverted*:

For long we have preached to many of them as in vain; we study plainness to make them understand, and many of them will not understand; we study serious, piercing words to make them feel, but they will not feel. If the greatest matters would work with them, we should awake them. If the sweetest things would work, we should entice them, and win their hearts. If the most dreadful things would work, we should at least affright them from their wickedness; if truth and sincerity would take with them, we should soon convince them; if the God that made them, and the Saviour that bought them, might be heard, the case would soon be altered with them; if Scripture might be heard, we should soon prevail; if reason, even the best and strongest reason, might be heard, we should not doubt that we should speedily convince them; if experience might be heard, even their own experience, and the experience of all the world, the matter might be mended; yea, if the conscience within them might be heard, the case would be better with them than it is. But if nothing can be heard, what then shall we do for them? If the dreadful God of heaven be slighted, who shall be regarded? If the inestimable love and blood of a Redeemer be made light of, what then shall be valued? If heaven have no desirable glory with them, and everlasting joys be worth nothing; if they can jest at hell, and dance about a bottomless pit, and play with the consuming fire, and that when God and man do warn them of it, *what shall we do for such souls as these?*

The point could hardly be put more plainly—and this by a man who had one of the most fruitful parish ministries in the entire history of the Church of England.

What then is the answer to the dearth of conversions we are seeing through our evangelistic preaching? In one sense, there is no answer; none, at least, that depends on a *change* of technique or approach. It is impossible to hold to a biblical view of election and propose any technique for improving our “strike rate.” To think so is to fall for as fatuous a proposition as the one that suggests that “as long as the Word is faithfully preached the people will come”—something that is demonstrably untrue. What, then, should we do? Baxter’s very next words point us in the right direction: “Once more, in the name of the God of heaven, I shall deliver the message to you which He hath commanded us. . . .” Baxter had no “Plan B.” Instead, He determined to recommit himself to “Plan A”; and in doing so he was following the example of the Apostle Paul, which will form the basis of the remainder of this article:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: the righteous shall live by faith (Rom. 1:16-17).

With those words as a broad basis, we can examine five areas which relate to our subject.

1) Commitment—“I am not ashamed”

It is impossible to read Romans without sensing Paul’s deep personal involvement in what he is doing and saying. This comes across first in terms of *the evangelistic message*. Later in the Epistle he says, “God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares” (Rom. 2:16). It

is more usual to think of phrases such as “the gospel of God” and “the gospel of Christ” (and Paul uses both elsewhere); but here he uses the word “my.” He is saturated with the gospel; it had become part of him. Just as John Bunyan’s blood was said to be “bibline,” so Paul’s was “gospeline.”

His Old Testament counterpart was Jeremiah. At a time when he felt he was getting nowhere (which gives the point added relevance to us here), he said, “But if I say, ‘I will not mention (God) or speak any more in His name, His Word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones’ (Jer. 20:9). It is significant to link this with God’s earlier promise to the prophet that “I will make My words in your mouth a fire” (Jer. 5:14). God’s Word was a fire in Jeremiah’s mouth because it was first a fire in his heart. Jeremiah’s passion was not generated in his epiglottis. Effective evangelistic preaching is the dynamic release of a divine word that has gripped the heart and mind of the preacher.

So Paul could write of “my gospel.” Earlier in his life he had fought against it tooth and nail, but he was eventually overcome by its truth and, as with John Newton more than 1,700 years later, he was “appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.” No wonder Newton could write, “We do not deal in unfelt truths, but we find ourselves that solid consolation which we encourage others to expect from it.” Are we gripped by the gospel? If not, how can we expect to grip others? Do we love the gospel? If not, how can we expect others to do so? No congregation is ever stirred by an unstirred preacher. On the score of his *Missa Solemnis*, Beethoven wrote, “From the heart it came; to the heart may it go.” Every evangelistic preacher needs to have the same spirit.

Second, Paul’s point about not being ashamed is related to the evangelistic mandate. John Calvin said that preaching was “The public exposition of Scripture by a man sent from God, in which God Himself is present in judgment and

grace." His words echo those of the Apostle John about his namesake: "There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John" (John 1:6). Paul frequently uses phrases which make the same point. He says that he is "called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1). In four of his other letters he says that he is "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." Even more specifically, he describes himself as "an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1). He could hardly lift his apostolic pen without affirming his mandate—and without the same assurance no man's ministry will amount to anything.

Jeremiah provides us with a clear illustration of the difference between having a mandate and not having one. In a withering comment on false prophets of that time, God says, "I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied. But if they had stood in My council, they would have proclaimed My words to My people and would have turned them from their evil ways" (Jer. 23:21-22). Jeremiah's case was very different: "The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations'" (Jer. 1:4-5).

There was nothing sensational about Jeremiah's call to the ministry (though later he did receive visions to confirm it). The word translated "came" (1:4) literally means "continued to come." There was a sustained impression of God's call. Jeremiah was the most psychological of the prophets, and one can sense something of his struggle: "'Ah, Sovereign Lord,' I said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am only a child'" (Jer. 1:6). Yet when God enabled him to overcome his diffidence and hesitation, he exercised a powerful ministry for some 40 years, in spite of being misunderstood, maligned, persecuted and imprisoned, sustained by the assur-

ance of his mandate. In his contribution to the excellent book, *Preaching*, Joel Nederland writes, "A minister who is sure of his call is among the most poised, confident, joy-filled and effective of human beings; a minister who is not is among the most faltering and pitiable." Later in the same chapter, while acknowledging the problems and pressures inherent in the ministry, he dares to say, "The work of the ministry is easy—for those whom the Lord calls He also qualifies."

This all has relevance to our evangelistic preaching, even for those of us who are pastors. It was to Timothy, exercising some kind of settled ministry, that Paul wrote, "Do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry" (2 Tim. 4:5). The absence of the article in the original means that what Paul had in mind was the character of the ministry rather than a specific evangelistic office. Timothy was instructed to do the work of evangelizing, to be evangelistic; without this element, he would not be discharging all the duties of his ministry. Incidentally, this means that the pastor's credibility does not depend on what he makes happen during the invitation but on obedience to his mandate.

2) Confidence—"the gospel is the power of God for salvation"

All evangelistic preaching should be influenced in its content and direction by this tremendous statement. Thirty years ago an old preacher gave the following advice to a young friend of mine entering the ministry: "Lift the Savior high; lay the sinner low." Those words have lived with me ever since I first heard them, and they should be metaphorically written at the top of every evangelistic sermon we prepare. Take the two halves of the statement in reverse order; they highlight two important factors.

First, *the plight of man*. Within evangelical circles, there is never any sustained objection to preaching against sins,

things like the crime rate, adultery, violence, child abuse or robbery. There is very little difficulty in persuading people (even unbelievers) that these are violations of God's law. The problem is when we seek to go beyond that, and speak of man's depravity and his inability either to save himself or to make any contribution to his salvation. Preaching a few years ago in what would be thought of as a solid, conservative church in England, I said, "Man has no ability to turn from sin and trust Christ; he has no ability to obey the gospel and to believe." Soon afterwards, I received a letter of complaint from the leadership of the church, telling me that I was undermining the church's ministry and advising me to steer clear of such controversial statements in the future by just "preaching the gospel."

This reflects the kind of thinking Dick Lucas had in mind at the 1979 Islington Conference:

The gospel in a nutshell in our quick-communicating days is characteristically existential. It begins usually with my own felt need, here and now. It continues with a testimony that Jesus is alive, and alive in other people's hearts. And third, it urges people to bring that felt need to that living Christ on whom we may depend. But see how much is left out, in particular the whole historical dimension. There is of course no mention of Adam's sin, a fallen world, and what we inherit through that.

Yet it is impossible to avoid man's total depravity and preach a fully biblical gospel in its true context. The sinner needs to be stripped spiritually naked before a holy God, brought to a position where he realizes that if he is to be saved, he must come to Christ in the spirit of Augustus Toplady's timeless words:

Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling.
Naked come to Thee for dress;

Helpless look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die!

Toplady is using the word "die" here with reference to the second, eternal death, and in so doing is reminding us that evangelistic preaching should have its center of gravity on the other side of the grave. We dare not flinch from this. It is said that when Dr. Knightley Chetwood, one-time dean of Gloucester, was preaching at court on one occasion, he said rather diffidently that unrepentant sinners would be punished "in a place it is not decent to name in so polite a company!" But it is dishonest *not* to. In his *Lectures to My Students*, C.H. Spurgeon wrote:

Shun all views of future punishment which would make it appear less terrible, and so take the edge off your anxiety to save immortals from the quenchless flame. If men are indeed only a nobler kind of ape, and expire as the beasts, you may well enough let them die unpitied; but if their creation in the image of God involves immortality, and there is any fear that through their unbelief they will bring upon themselves endless woe, arouse yourselves to the agonies of the occasion, and be ashamed at the mere suspicion of unconcern.

This issue is particularly relevant today with the resurgence of annihilationism and conditional immortality in evangelical circles. With people like John Stott and Clark Pinnock among their best-known proponents, these ideas are becoming increasingly attractive, and I have certainly never known a time in my own ministry when the doctrine of hell needs to be preached more frequently, faithfully, thoroughly, biblically *and carefully* than at this very moment.

Second, *the power of the gospel*. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul assures them that "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine

power to demolish strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4). The gospel is able to demolish the most powerful opposition and arguments mounted against it. Whether we are faced with the ravages of blatant sin or the turgid depths of indifference, we can preach the gospel in the assurance that we are handling divine dynamite! Matthew Henry used to say, "The gospel exasperates its enemies"—and it should exhilarate us. William Plumer was not exaggerating when he made this assessment of the gospel's power:

The annals of the world tell us of not one instance where a sinner was converted, sanctified, filled with pious hopes, made willing to suffer in the cause of God and enabled mightily to triumph over the world, the flesh and the devil, over fears, temptations and death itself except by the gospel of Christ.

Let us set no limits to the power of the gospel!

3) Content—"the gospel"

James Alexander once wrote, "Of all the defects of utterance I have ever known, the most serious is having nothing to utter!" Whatever other problems he may have, this should not present any difficulty to the preacher of the gospel. John Wesley tells of preaching in Bolton in 1749 when a mob threw stones through the windows and broke into the house. Totally unfazed by the whole thing, Wesley stood on a chair and, in his own words, "My heart was filled with love, my eyes with tears and my mouth with arguments!" His brother Charles had exactly the same spirit when he wrote in one of his hymns, "My heart is full of Christ, and longs its glorious matter to declare."

The point to be made here is not about the length of our sermons. Having said that, we do live in an age of the capsule, the microchip, the transistor, the printed circuit and the sound bite—and the whole miniaturizing philoso-

phy has invaded the ministry. We are constantly being told that this is a non-reading, non-listening age. In many churches, a 30-minute sermon is considered too long, and 20 minutes about right. When discussing a large, traditional and very well-attended church in Northern Ireland recently, I was told that the sermon averaged 14 minutes. Not that there is any inherent virtue in length; to insist on filling 50 minutes is ridiculous. One has sympathy with the suggestion that the person who thinks by the inch and preaches by the yard should be kicked with the foot! But neither is there inherent virtue in brevity. As has often been said, sermonettes tend to produce Christianettes. For some preachers, 30 minutes may well be right; others operate more effectively at around 45 minutes; some may be at their best over a 60-minute span. It should not be too difficult for a preacher to discover his niche. The more important principle at stake here concerns the primacy of preaching. In *I Believe in Evangelism*, the late charismatic British preacher David Watson wrote,

The Word of God is not to be taken as precisely identifiable with Scripture alone.... To restrict Christian communication to the methods of the New Testament is severely to limit the sovereignty of Christ.

He then went on to call for the use of drama, mime, dancing (Hebrew and Balkan style), signs, wonders, prophecy and other elements. The irony in all of this is that Watson was a brilliant preacher who had no need to resort to extra-biblical methods. One is happier in this case to agree with John Stott when he says, "Preaching is indispensable to Christianity. Without preaching a necessary part of its authority has been lost."

If this is the case, it is important to see that our preaching is adequate in its content. It is interesting to notice that Martyn Lloyd-Jones felt much greater care was needed in

preparing evangelistic sermons than in preparing those geared to Christians. In the Introduction to *Evangelistic Sermons* he wrote,

I believe that one should be unusually careful in evangelistic sermons. That is why the idea that a fellow who is merely gifted with a certain amount of glibness of speech and self-confidence, not to say cheek, can make an evangelist is all wrong. The greatest men should always be the evangelists, and generally have been.

This highlights the need for adequate content. Paul reminded the Ephesian elders, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27). Again, this means we must lift the Savior high. The biblical gospel is trinitarian. We must display the glories of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and their indispensability to man's salvation. And we must lay the sinner low. We must preach his sinnership as well as his sins, his depravity as well as his disobedience. We must warn him of the brevity of life, the certainty of death, the inescapability of judgment, and the awful reality of hell. We must be able to say with Paul, "I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you" (Acts 20:20).

4) Context

Paul wrote "to you who are at Rome," and we can be sure that when he himself was there he would have been a master at contextualizing the message. When he was at Athens, he pulled into his famous sermon on Mars Hill the religious ethos of the city, its architecture, the Greeks' pride at being culturally superior, and a quotation from pagan poets. Like David centuries before him, Paul "served God's purpose in his own generation" (Acts 13:36). We must do the same. Whatever our predilections, we live on the brink of the twentyfirst century, not in the seventeenth, the

fifteenth or any other. What is the context in which we live, and move and have our being? So many things could be said about our times; three must suffice.

First, we live in *an iniquitous age*. This could have been said about any previous age, but never (at least, not in my time) has sin been so blatant and vulgar—and never before has it been piped wholesale into people's homes in the guise of entertainment. The evangelistic preacher must be as bold in denouncing sins as men are in committing them. Today's world needs a hefty dose of Romans 1, not least the terrifying truth that "the wrath of God is being revealed against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (v. 18).

Second, we live in *an indifferent age*. This has been called "the age of the shrug." The permissive society has spawned the cult of the casual. But we must expose permissiveness for what it is: ludicrous and hypocritical. We must preach morality in terms that are not relative but absolute. We must show that God's moral laws remain unchanged, and that man is accountable for the stewardship of every part of his life. And we must counter man's indifference by emphasizing judgment, heaven and hell as realities, not flights of religious imagination.

Third, we live in *an informed age*. People may be abysmally ignorant of spiritual truth, but they have never been better informed on virtually every other subject. We live in Marshall McLuhan's global village, awash with information technology; and we must learn to capitalize on the situation. We must keep in touch with the current affairs and social issues that fill so many people's minds. The preacher who knows nothing about politics, ecology, science, sport or the arts is preaching with one hand tied behind his back, and there has never been a time when information on these and a hundred other subjects has been more easily accessible. Nor can we learn all we need, or learn it properly, cooped up

in our studies. Writing in 1864, William Alexander made these perceptive comments:

A life of study has always appeared to me an unnatural life. Is it not better to converse with the living than the dead? . . . To live for others is the dictate of religion. And what to do for others is best done by actual approaches, face to face, eye looking eye and hand pressing hand. . . . Lay aside the cowl and made one of the great company. Every day renew the electric touch with the common mind. . . . It is worth the effort.

In our own day, John Stott has said much the same thing by insisting that preachers must engage in what he calls “double listening”—“both to the Word of God in order to believe and obey it, and to the world in a bid to understand the people to whom they have been sent by God.” Whatever other commitments we may have, we must make sure that we never lose touch with the people we are longing to win for Christ.

5) Concern—“for salvation”

The Australian evangelist Linnet Fletcher once defined evangelism as “Truth demanding a verdict.” He was right—and the preacher must articulate that demand. We must be very focused as to the aim of evangelism from the human point of view (the glory of God in our obedience to His command being the over-arching aim). Paul supplies the clue here: “We received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith” (Rom. 1:5). This “obedience that comes from faith” is the whole object of the exercise. This means that we must apply our preaching, we must engage, embroil our listeners in what we are saying. In his contribution to *Preaching*, Geoff Thomas has a relevant point to make here:

Preaching that lacks application is the bane of the modern

Reformed pulpit. How does the Word relate to those people who sit so patiently before us and hear our message? What should they do as a result? What changes should be effected in thinking, in emotions and in behavior? The most common criticism that is directed at our worship services is that apart from the hymns we sing we ask people simply to be spectators. This is what drives them into charismatic meetings, where they are often hoodwinked into thinking that they have a larger part to play in the worship. The sermon should be the greatest part of participation in the church’s assemblies. . . . A Christian should be moved to inward thankfulness and praise, conviction of sin and repentance, determination to love and obey God, new concern for his fellow believers and his fellow men.

Exactly the same applies to our preaching to unbelievers. We must not just inform them, but engage them, and demand their obedience. John Wesley tells of attending church in Aberdeen, Scotland, on one Sunday in 1779: “This very day I heard some excellent truths delivered in the kirk; but as there was no application it was likely to do as much good as the singing of a lark.” What a contrast that preacher’s method must have been to that of the Scottish Covenanter Richard Cameron, of whom it was said, “The bias of his heart lay to the proposing of Christ and persuading men to close with him.” Spurgeon’s advice cannot be bettered: “Pray the Lord to save your hearers—and then drive at them as though you could save them yourself.”

Let me make two simple, practical points in closing. First, in urging people to get right with God, use the second person, and preferably the second person singular. Franz Rendtorff, of the University of Leipzig, once said, “You aren’t preaching until you say ‘You’.” One of the clearest biblical examples concerns Nathan and David. When the prophet told the king about a rich man stealing a poor man’s lamb to feed a visitor, David was furious, and had no problem in condemning the action out of hand. But when

Nathan countered with “You are the man!” and explained why, David crumbled and acknowledged, “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Sam. 12:13). It was the application that led to conviction.

Second, use questions. A proposition demands nothing; questions demand answers. Baxter’s *A Call to the Unconverted* must contain hundreds of them. At one point he asks 21 questions in fewer than 30 sentences. Questions back a person into a corner and force him to defend himself, to argue with the gospel if he can, to deny the truth if he can. Questions force a man to own up; they tear down his defenses. They are powerful weapons, and we must use them relentlessly. Yet we must always do so with a passionate conviction of the serious issues involved and with a loving concern for the spiritual well-being of our hearers. John Wesley said, “I desire to have both heaven and hell ever in my eye, while I stand on this isthmus of life between these two boundless oceans.” That is where we stand whenever we have the awesome and glorious responsibility of preaching the gospel.

Author

John Blanchard is an evangelist residing in Banstead, Surrey, England. He is a prolific author and an internationally traveled preacher of the gospel. He serves as an advisor to Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc., and is a regular contributor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.