

april 2011: the case for collaboration

If I was ever a pastor/preacher in a settled location again I would embrace a more collaborative approach to sermon preparation. I'd gather together a small and diverse group from within the church to meet bi-monthly with me (or the preaching team) for the purpose of feedback and feedforward on the sermons which they hear. The composition of this group would change each year. Over a period of years the engagement in the sermon by the people would lift considerably and the preacher will uncover fresh insights into both text and context.

So we need a little more ~~wikipedia~~ alongside the more classical ~~encyclopedia~~ approach. Yes . there are those who are set aside by God and his church to give time for study and prayer and sermon preparation. If they do it well and faithfully, they will develop a respected encyclopedic-like authority that commands attention. I would never argue for democratising away this calling and sending it into extinction. But alongside this there is a place for a far greater involvement from, and collaboration with, the people themselves. We need a bit more wiki in the sermon process.

Why not? What is there to lose? Better still, what is there to gain?

Theologically, we will be demonstrating the value of community and the virtue of teamwork. Educationally, we will be recognising that what the learner learns sits critically alongside what the teacher teaches in any evaluation of effective communication. Sociologically, we will be creating space to safeguard preaching against the legitimate postmodern concerns about the suspicion which comes with power and authority and the inevitability, even if limited, about a place for reader-response in understanding.

The vocabulary of preaching in the New Testament is full and diverse and one wonders whether involvement and collaboration might hover around a verb like *dialegomai*. Eight of its ten occurrences are located in the book of Acts . rather remarkably, all in four consecutive chapters, with two occurrences in each (17:2,17; 18:4,19; 19:8,9; 20:7,9). This speaking activity occurs in the synagogues of Thessalonica and Corinth, the marketplace of Athens, the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus, and on the third storey of a home in Troas. Furthermore it is an activity that happens over a period of time . whether it be the daily discussion for two years in that hall of Tyrannus (19:9), or the speaking long into the night so that a Eutychus falls asleep and then falls to his death (20:7, 9). It is about reasoning, arguing, debating and discussing. There seems to be an active involvement from the listener and a higher level of interactivity than with other New Testament verbs . maybe even a little bit of collaboration as well.

This is not a new thought. In the time that I have been reshaping my convictions on collaboration I have noticed variations on the theme pop up in the literature repeatedly:

John McClure writes of the ~~round-table pulpit~~ where an authentic collaborative conversation . beyond mere dialogue . takes places with others on matters related to the text and its application, theology and life.

(The Round-Table Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet, Abingdon, 1995)

Michael Quicke advocates the place of ~~preaching support groups~~+(130), urging preachers ~~to~~ experiment beyond their comfort zones ... (and not) languish within those zones+(119, 121). About younger generations he writes, ~~they~~ are an untapped

reservoir of resourcefulness at this time of cultural change. With their enthusiasm for teamwork, they are new allies for the preachers and they urgently need encouragement as partners in the task of communicating the gospel today+(121).
(*360-degree Preaching*, Paternoster, 2003)

Quicke mentions David Schafler's use of a preaching discernment group+

In the conclusion of his little primer on preaching, David Day reflects on the congregation as co-shapers of the sermon+(130) because communication is not just about the sender, it is also about the receiver. Plus the congregation is diverse . . . diverse enough to hear one sermon in dozens of different ways+(129). Why wouldn't you want to consult with them a bit? At one point he asks about who is the one who finishes the sermon . . . the preacher or the congregation?
(*A Preaching Workbook*, SPCK 1998)

Dennis Cahill writes about the value of an annual sermon roundtable+(76).
(*The Shape of Preaching*, Baker, 2007)

Writing from within the more recent emerging church movement, Doug Pagitt practices the use of a Bible discussion group to help form the sermon . . . as a place to participate in the creation of the sermon+(107). I am less persuaded by Pagitt's approach as it can feel like the encyclopedia might be cast aside completely.

On balance, I reckon it is one of those no-brainers. So many positives...

I am not one who subscribes to the *can't* expect my people to immerse themselves in the community if I as the pastor am not doing it as well+philosophy. If this were to be the case, there would be precious little time set aside for prayer and the Word, particularly on the way to the weekly sermon. I cannot be *out* there+as much as they are . . . nor can they be *in* here+as much as I can. However their *out*-there-ness+sure can help me with my *in*-here-ness+when we incorporate greater levels of collaboration on the way to the sermon.

Paul Windsor
Associate Director (Langham Preaching)
April 2011