

June 2011: a muster of personal qualities

We hear it often enough. It is not about what you know or what you can do . it is who you are that matters. It is possibly a little overstated, but we get the point nevertheless. And so what are some of the personal qualities that matter with the preacher? Let's mount a muster...

identity

being secure in who I am, both as a person and as a preacher, before God

The preacher does not so much choose to preach as is chosen to preach. It is about a call to obey not so much a talent to display. It is a call which we feel subjectively and then a call which significant others confirm objectively. Just having a gifting does not determine the path of obedience. The call of God does. And when he calls he will energise us, or grace and gift us, to obey that calling. Our sense of identity needs the assurance which comes with such a confirmed and energised calling.

After all, a divinely given call to preach is one of the factors that assist us to bear the burdens associated with the preaching experience (it is) that realised experience of having been chosen by God for the task, that remembered encounter with him which marks out the receiving person's identity and involvement as a preacher. (James Earl Massey, *The Burdensome Joy of Preaching*, 25-26).

With students taking their first steps into preaching I like to see a little reluctance. Like Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah... Over-eagerness smacks of immaturity. The one who waltzes into a class rarely leaves the class with the same skip in the step, while many an initially tentative student has gone away fanning a precious little spark. Preach, if you must.

spirituality

being committed to keeping first things first in my life

The text itself says it well: Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it flow the issues of life (Prov 4:23). Watch your life and doctrine closely (1 Tim 4:16). At Carey Baptist College we used a developmental model featuring knowing, doing, being, and feeling, with spirituality being that place of overlap with these four qualities . right at the core of who we are. I like it like that.

With spirituality we need to be wary of both a vicarious spirituality (warming our spirituality by someone else's fire) and a vestigial spirituality (warming our spirituality by a fire that has gone out) . in favour of a visceral spirituality (an active authentic spirituality that burns at the heart of who we really are). And we need to remember that spirituality is largely a matter of personal taste (McGrath) and not feel intimidated by what others do or don't do. It is merely a means to the end of a greater intimacy with God.

But in there somewhere will be prayer. As a preacher we respond to every impulse to pray (Lloyd-Jones). In there somewhere will be holiness. 'My people's greatest need is my personal holiness' (McCheyne). In there somewhere will be reverence and awe. As John Piper noted, rather wryly, laughter seems to have replaced repentance as the goal of many preachers (we are far more adept at humour than we are tears.) (Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 55-56). In there somewhere will be love for the people. I was trained on a (Don) Carsonian classic: "to love to preach is one thing - to love those to whom you preach is quite another; there are gifted preachers who craft their sermons as artists not as lovers. A congregation will forgive almost anything if they are convinced you love them - they will forgive almost nothing if they think you do not."

humility

keeping myself low before God

Humility is the sweetest grace of all . it just is. And so we plead with God that he will grow it in us. The trouble is that it doesn't grow so well when we sit around watching it grow. It grows in hidden places. It grows in hard places. Humility is not a state to be struggled for and achieved; it is a naturalness that occurs when you achieve spiritual perspective (the first step is to keep your task more central in your own eyes than you yourself are) (humility) is not so much diminishing our self-importance as simply standing next to Jesus (This towering Jesus, by sheer contrast, will always displace our self-

importance. (Calvin Miller, *The Empowered Communicator*, 53-54). After all, as the inimitable GK Chesterton expressed it: "The reason angels can fly is because they take themselves so lightly." For me, near the end of my preparation, I now audit my sermon for its first personal pronouns ("I/me/myself") and do all I can to delete them from my notes. It is not about me. It is about standing next to the towering Jesus.

A Christian communicator has to learn that he (*sic!*) can not present himself as a great preacher and teacher if he also wants to present God as a great God and Christ as a great Saviour. (J.I. Packer, *Hot Tub Religion*, 56). When preachers lose track of God, their sermons get pushier; the quieter God gets, the louder they get. (Calvin Miller, *The Sermon Maker*, 18).

And most transformative of all . for me anyway - is this extended quotation from John Stott:

*"... the pulpit is a perilous place for any child of Adam to occupy... We stand there in solitude, while the eyes of all are upon us. We hold forth in monologue, while all sit still, silent and subdued. Who can endure such public exposure and remain unscathed by vanity? Pride is without doubt the chief occupational hazard of the preacher. It has ruined many, and deprived their ministry of power... The most privileged and moving experience a preacher can have is when, in the middle of a sermon, a strange hush descends upon the congregation. The sleepers have woken up, the coughers have stopped coughing, and the fidgeters are sitting still. No eyes or minds are wandering. Everybody is attending, though not to the preacher. For the preacher is forgotten, and the people are face to face with the living God, listening to his still, small voice ... (then, quoting Billy Graham) ... 'I have often felt like a spectator, standing on the side, watching God at work. I have felt detached from it. I wanted to get out of the way as much as I could, and let the Spirit take over'..." (John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 320, 326)*

integrity

remaining honest in all my dealings with God, the text, listeners, resources, and myself

You desire truth in the inner parts (Psalm 51.6). Save me, O Lord, from lying lips (Psalm 120.2). This reminds us of the character which must exist beneath the charisma. It is about commitment to truth . and to truthfulness in every aspect of the journey to the sermon, knowing that the heart is deceitful and that with much of our preparation, God is our only audience. Telling the truth, but also wanting to be owned by the truth, on the way to making our biography and our theology inseparable. An integration with full integrity until we are like an integer, whole and complete.

This will mean discovering our own preaching voice, like a signature, which does not simply echo or copy someone else. It will mean drawing ourselves into my message, bearing witness to the truth we proclaim from the story of our own lives. With Craig Blomberg, "like to disclose something of my own life in most of my messages" (*Preaching the Parables*, 43). It will mean being honest with the Scriptures. "If you can write a sermon, and then attach it to any one of half a dozen texts indiscriminately, you would do well to be suspicious of that sermon" (James Stewart). It will mean always quoting your sources (although I tend just to say, "as someone expressed it..." rather than continuously name-dropping) and not stealing other people's ideas. Stealing is wrong. It will mean being accurate with illustrations. If they are not from your own experience, do not say that they are. If 'the other day' is actually 'last year', why not say 'last year'?

The internet is a bane and a blessing. It is wrong to preach the sermons of others while allowing your listeners to think that they are yours (Lucy Lind Hogan, *Graceful Speech*, 56-57). I am still bemused by how a person of Rick Warren's conviction . during the height of purpose-driven enthusiasm . could have encouraged, or even allowed, pastors worldwide to preach his sermons. It is a mystery to me. It sends all the wrong signals to both the pastor and the people in a local setting (and to Rick himself, I might add) . and it lacks integrity.

Let's delight in Richard Bewes's guidelines for integrity with our audience (*Speaking in Public Effectively*, 147-153): (a) Did I enrich them, or did I short-change them? (the danger of the old, tired message); (b)

Did I respect them, or did I despise them? (the danger of under-preparing, or switching things at the last minute); (c) Did I upbuild them, or did I exploit them? (the danger of an audience gaining nothing from my message . and even hijacking the event); (d) Did I inform them, or did I confuse them? (the danger of losing a healthy fear of not being a sound teacher); and (e) Did I refresh them, or did I exhaust them? (the danger of scolding and making too many demands).

creativity

discovering this birthright in my life by virtue of being made in the image of a Creator

[NB: I have written specifically on this subject in *Langham-at-large* (May 2011)]

The first thing we learn about the one whose image we bear is that he is a Creator. Being creative is our birthright . and yet many human beings take so long to discover their creativity. I certainly did.

With preaching, so much creativity flows when we create time and space for our preparation. It is about incubation. It is about hovering. It is about simmering. It is about reading widely, particularly those with whom you instinctively disagree. It is about being an independent thinker, a bit of a non-conformist, without becoming unteachable. It is about following the advice of Rod Thompson (Principal, Laidlaw College) on developing the imagination: play with problems; ponder mysteries; embrace profound things; plumb depths; wonder and work; make connections; and live with tensions.

And one day we might become like the Welsh preacher who "pursued the resolve of the prodigal with such persuasive power that when he intoned *I will arise and go to my father* two thousand people arose in their seats. That is what we need.

simplicity

struggling through to the simplicity on the far side of complexity

All I know is that I open my Bible with a view to preach and the passage seems simple enough. Then I study and invariably I get stuck in complexity. I must struggle on . and on and on . until I come through to discover the simplicity on the far side of complexity. Simple . but not simplistic and shallow. Clear without the burden of having to be clever. Oh, how I delight in the person at the door who says to me, *You made that so simple I feel I could have discovered it for myself*. Oh, how I despair with the one who says, *We need to get the tape (or listen to it again on-line)*.

The preacher is about whetting the appetite for the Word. *Excellent preaching makes people confident that biblical truth lies within their reach, not beyond their grasp* (Bryan Chapell, *Christ-centered Preaching*, 106). And in saying this we must not be afraid to preach the familiar . and we must watch the urge . usually self-inflicted . to always be fresh and profound.

authenticity

being real and vulnerable and genuine

In our preaching let's aim to be natural, to be who we really are. Transparency is so compelling. *Those preachers who are most respected are those most able to sound like themselves when they are deeply interested in a subject ... The real challenge of pulpit excellence is not to add something to our delivery that is atypical of us, but to reclaim the naturalness that is most true to us* (Chapell, *Christ-centered Preaching*, 313, 314). And when a hint of vulnerability is mixed in with the naturalness, it becomes so easy for listeners to identify with us. The all important rapport is present. We become connected . and on-line - with our listeners.

Younger people are a huge challenge for preachers today. It used to be a great obstacle for me until my friend Tony Versey said to me in the midst of my paralysis, *Love them like your own children and be who you really are*. It is true. It works. Young people can smell inauthenticity within the first five seconds and if they sniff it out, the preacher will battle for the rest of the sermon. *Let earnestness be your eloquence*. *We don't know of any other profession in which it is quite as easy to fake, as in ours* (Eugene Peterson)

intensity

being passionate

The prophets and the apostles felt owned by the messages they preached. The message held them more than they held the message. *The lion has roared . who can but prophesy?*+(Amos 3:8). We need that old 17th century Baxterian attitude: *Still thinking I had little time to live; my fervent heart to win men's souls did strive. I preached as never sure to preach again, and as dying man to dying men.*+I have said this to students so often ... *as dying man to dying men*+... Stand up to preach with two things on your mind: this could be the last sermon you preach, or this could be the last sermon someone out there hears. Now . how are you going to preach? It is a no-brainer. You will preach with passion, conviction and intensity. This stuff matters.

Oh God, don't make my sermons interesting; make them important.+ Passion is born when the preacher *has something to say and has to say something*+(Calvin Miller). *Let your heart show in your work.* Showing genuine enthusiasm for what you deeply believe is the only unbreakable rule of great delivery+ (Chapell, *Christ-centered Preaching*, 323). But beware - this passion empties us just as it fills us. Not just physically or spiritually or mentally, but emotionally. We end up experiencing depletion . a spent-ness - and become vulnerable to a melancholy. Strategies for re-fuelling become a requirement.

industry

being prepared to sweat

In Colossians, Paul writes about *struggling with all his energy*+(1.29), invoking the hard work of the athlete, the physical beatings he endured . and even the pain of childbirth (a brave man, indeed ☺) . when speaking about his own preaching. It is not an easy calling. This is no time to be mediocre or lazy . and yet laziness and mediocrity can often be what is dished up to the people of God. Such preachers tend to be people who are flippant about God and who do not care much about people. This will not do.

Someone must suffer for the sermon. If it is not the preacher who is willing to pay the price then it will be the congregation. *It takes long hours of hard work to prepare a sermon.* When I started, I struggled to do it in less than twenty hours and even now I couldn't do it in less than ten hours. *Half the bad theology in the world is due to suppressed perspiration* Billy Graham is known to have regretted that "I've preached too much and studied too little."

Over the years I have seen the tragedy of the gifted person so many times. Has a presence. Got the gift of the gab. Oozes charm and charisma. But you know jolly well they are going to surf their talent and not apply themselves to the hard work of their calling. It is very sad. In the end I adopted a policy of putting a bomb under such people, doing all that I could to make them change their ways. I agree with the person who said that *a preacher who cannot prepare good sermons because (s)he is so busy should be honest enough to resign.* The very fact that a preacher has let that happen reveals that (s)he has unequivocally proved to themselves and their congregation that they were not called to preach.+Embrace the hard work . or get out.

Now I am not sure whether identity + spirituality + humility + integrity + creativity + simplicity + authenticity + intensity + industry = unction/anointing. It probably doesn't. After all the Spirit is sovereign and blows where it wills. However one thing I do know is this: if we are growing and deepening in these areas, we will be putting ourselves in that windy place where the Spirit has been known to blow . and the likelihood of being unctionised increases and that has got to be good for the preacher, the sermon, and the people.

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