

## march 2010 - are we really the weakest?

Over the years in which I have taught preaching in New Zealand I have been known to commence a class by making the claim that we have ~~the~~ the weakest heritage in biblical preaching of any country in the English-speaking world.

*Is this true? Is this fair?*

Before I try and back-up this claim, let me clarify a few things. Firstly, by biblical preaching I am referring to that brand of preaching which opens a biblical passage, allows that passage to shape the sermon, and then remains in that passage for the duration of the sermon. I do not equate, for example, biblical preaching with trampolining around the Bible for 30 minutes! Secondly, I am not saying that there is *nothing* good about our heritage. Quite the contrary! With things like cross-cultural mission, lyrics and music and worship, and advocating for women in leadership roles we ~~box~~ ~~are~~ above our weight in the English-speaking world. Thirdly, I am not saying that there have been no pockets of fine biblical preaching in the church in New Zealand . in the past, or in the present. There have been . and there increasingly are. And finally, in case you don't get to the end, I have never been more full of hope for the future.

*But what about that heritage? Is it true that ours is the weakest?*

*Who knows?!* But here is how I begin to substantiate this claim.

### 1. *The story of our conferences*

Go to the UK or Australia, for example, and well-attended conferences specifically for the purpose of Bible-teaching have a prominent place in the life of the church. Thousands upon thousands attend them each year. I haven't been to the UK ones but I understand there are (at least) *two* huge movements (*Keswick* and *Word Alive*) - each of which have a series of weeklong conferences through the summer in order to cope with numbers.

I know the Australian conferences a bit better. For example, just when Keswick/Katoomba (NSW) was threatening to die, it was re-invented. Now I believe there are upwards of 20 conferences each year with tens of thousands in attendance . and that is just in New South Wales. It is remarkable!

On this one I have had two sobering experiences. The first was when I had a look around the old Keswick site in Ngaruawahia where the conferences used to be big and grand (and I missed my one opportunity to go when I tore ligaments in my ankle playing soccer as a 13yr old. I was devastated . but then I stayed home and my grandma fed me figs all weekend . which helped me with my sorrow). Wiping the dust off the glass I peered into a large, unused hall with old, broken chairs piled on top of each other. And in the distance, above the stage, I could just make out the words of that Keswick theme: *"All One in Christ"*. How sad is that?

The second sobering experience was when I came home after speaking at a Young Adults conference at Katoomba in Australia. Three thousand young people streaming up this hill 4-5 times a day just to hear Bible teaching. Amazing! I came home and was immediately off to Parachute Music Festival. Now I have been a strong supporter of Parachute over the years

. but how I have longed to see a hunger for God's Word among the young that matches the hunger for music that we see at this event each year.

Now I know New Zealand has some Bible Conferences that are happening. To the organisers I say, "Don't lose your nerve . . . and all power be with you!" But I do not think it can be disputed that there is nothing that grabs the imagination of wide chunks of the Christian population in quite the same way as we see happening in places overseas.

## 2. *The story of our theology*

Even among people who honour the Word of God in our churches, I remain unconvinced that the theology of the Word is what it could be. I suspect God still thinks far more highly of words . . . and what they can achieve . . . than we do.

I remember when I commented to a highly-respected Baptist leader with supposedly impeccable evangelical credentials that it was my intention to work away quietly to see the Bible and Biblical Studies move to the heart of the Carey curriculum and training. His first response surprised me: "Oh . . . you don't want to do that." Excuse me?!

I tried to address this concern in 2008 when I was invited by the NZ Baptist Historical Society to share my observations on twenty years in theological education in New Zealand. Here is an extract from that talk:

*"If the Bible is so important to us why do we ever consider calling pastors who have no serious biblical training? If the Bible is so important to us why is the public reading of scripture so uncommon in our worship? If the Bible is so important to us why does so much preaching use the Bible as a springboard to dive off into a sermon of other ideas, rather than as the swimming pool to dive into – thereby constraining the sermon's ideas? If the Bible is so important to us how many first rate, born and bred, biblical scholars has this movement produced in the past generation – alongside some fine historians, theologians, missiologists, and sociologists? If the Bible is so important to us why is it that at our big gatherings – Assembly, for example – it has been so easy over the years to have 30min of singing to start each day and so persistently difficult to articulate the case for 30min of a sustained engagement with the Word of God? If the Bible is so important to us why am I compelled so often, when I cross-over from Baptist to evangelical Presbyterian and Anglican and Open Brethren settings, to thicken and lengthen my sermon such is the appetite and the expectation I sense? If the Bible is so important to us why is there such panic about needing to make the Bible relevant when, as it is opened simply and faithfully, it has the capacity surely to demonstrate its own relevance? If the Bible is so important to us why does that A4 sheet on 'finding intimacy with God' circulating among our youth have 'reading your Bible' listed as an option of equal weight to a walk on the beach or in the bush? If the Bible is so important to us why do we so routinely miss the essence of biblical spirituality being about a God who speaks to whom his people listen and obey? If the Bible is so important to us how is that we can go to our favoured book of the Bible, the Book of Acts, and locate evidence for our favoured reasons for the churches' growth – whatever that may be - and yet miss Luke's own repeated reason that it is as the Word of God grew and spread that the church 'grew and spread'?"*

You can see that I feel deeply about these issues! And I suspect that churches in other countries share this challenge. It seems that even in places where the Bible is supposedly honoured - not just Baptist, I might add . people are playing games with it. Within many Baptist circles I think there is a fear that if we really honour the Bible it will lead inevitably to Southern Baptist-like strife and division. I think there is another way.

### 3. *The story of our colleges*

I enjoy reading biographies of post-War (WW2) evangelicals from the UK and the USA. Something happened in those countries at that time that did not happen in New Zealand...

In the US an evangelicalism began to separate itself from that ugly, strident fundamentalism that we dislike so much. And yet I couldn't tell you how many conversations I have had with people in NZ who seem to think that the separation never occurred and so in this context they still equate evangelicalism with fundamentalism. I once wrote an article entitled, *Mind your Es and Fs...* which kind of sums it up for me! Then in the UK a whole generation of scholars and leaders and preachers emerged at this time . with biblical preaching, university mission, publishing houses, PhDs, and theological education all to the fore.

From what I can see, this change and this generation never really arrived in NZ in any fullness. I am quite sure this is the case because when I look at our *denominational* theological colleges . none of them has an evangelical heritage ... and I think it shows in our churches. Every other English-speaking country has strong roots anchored deep into a tradition of evangelical denominational theological education. We do not. When I started as Principal at Carey Baptist College . arguably, the best of the bunch . the suspicion I greeted as I travelled around the country was palpable. Colleges were a place where either you lost your passion (at best) or you lost your faith (at worst). And there were myriads of stories to support such perceptions. Now I smile as I travel around the Majority World. They equate theological education with leadership training. That is where and how you grow leaders.

And if this is the heritage of denominational theological education, that womb where the convictions of pastors and preachers are shaped, is it any wonder that biblical preaching has struggled to receive any emphasis? It was not until the *early 1990s* that an evangelical theological education (at a non-denominational college, it must be said . Laidlaw College) became possible. There are dozens of Majority World countries that that reached this point before us.

### 4. *The story of our priorities*

Carl Henry used to say that people are placing hopes in evangelism that evangelism alone cannot sustain. That quotation could be extended. Are pastors placing hopes in leadership that leadership alone cannot sustain? Are our people placing hopes in (musical) worship that worship alone cannot sustain? Are we even placing hopes in mission that mission alone cannot sustain?+

We need to remind ourselves of the priority of a transforming gospel at work in and through a maturing people. There is a twin mandate with the church in the New Testament: mission *and maturity*. Our mission is going to be a mess if it is attempted by persistently immature people. And so how do people become mature? Through the various ministries of the Word!

I am entirely comfortable with what we call the Langham Logic:

God wants the church to grow up. The church grows through God's Word. God's word comes *primarily* through preaching. So, the question to ask is how do we raise the standards of preaching?+

The word *primarily* is crucial. It causes tension within me. Something inside me wants to diminish biblical preaching in light of it. After all there are so many other ways in which people receive the Word . not just preaching! But then something inside me wants to magnify preaching because studies show that for so many people the only time they engage the Word is during the sermon-slot . and so the *primarily* takes on an urgency.

#### 5. *The story of our evangelicalism*

No other English-speaking country has struggled as hard as NZ to keep an evangelical alliance/movement alive. Gathering people to throb together with a Lausanne-Covenant-pulse has proved so very difficult in this nation. I know because my father tried hard to resuscitate it during one period in the late 1980s. I take my hat off to Glyn Carpenter who has done a remarkable job in seeing the Vision New Zealand Network (VNNZ) make a contribution to church life. And I was one of those who recommended that *evangelical* be dropped from the name because it would be counter-productive. Such is the state of the E-word in our land... But even Glyn would admit that VNNZ has developed differently than the evangelical movements elsewhere. The priority has been on networking, information-sharing, and unity-building . all worthwhile initiatives. Biblical preaching has not received the focus or encouragement which it has received elsewhere. In fact at the big triennial VNNZ conferences the people selected to give the opening bible expositions have been, more than once, people who are not evangelicals at all . out of a desire to demonstrate the unity of the church. That sort of decision would not be made in these other evangelical movements.

#### *Enuf said...*

When we cast an eye over the stories associated with our conferences, our theology, our colleges, our priorities and our evangelicalism there are reasons here to substantiate the claim for this weak heritage in biblical preaching.

But there is so much that fills me with hope:

- + the growing numbers of gifted home-grown Bible teachers
- + the numbers of people who show up at the grassroots for training in preaching ... 80+ for a weekend in P/North last year ... 20 from the youth group in just one church ... 22 this weekend in a smaller Auckland church ... this has been happening for years!
- + our theological education has never looked better . with Laidlaw, Carey, and Otago, in particular, each making complementary and significant contributions
- + not only were the numbers at the Kiwi-made Preaching forum in April 2009 so encouraging . the average age was stunningly low. Change will take a generation and that generation is on the way.
- + there are some very encouraging pockets developing . for example, the work of Wally Behan and St John's Latimer Square (Christchurch) adds much to the Kiwi landscape; churches like Shore Community and Greenlane Christian are giving priority to having biblical preaching on our TVs; the Anglican *New Wine* conferences have potential...

*Paul Windsor*