

may 2010 – is it worth all that effort?

It is a fair question. In a busy world with so many demands on the pastor:preacher, it is a very fair question. Is the hard work associated with systematically preaching through the Bible as the primary diet for the people of God really worth the effort?

Drawing on my own observations and experiences, readings and reflections . here is how I respond to this question...

1. Where there is division, biblical preaching helps build harmony

Local churches are a bit like babies. They cry with the cry that disturbs the peace . and divides the community - when they are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. And God's work does grind to a H-A-L-T when there is that kind of division among his people.

But there is another way. Systematic and consecutive biblical preaching feeds *hungry* people. They hear God speaking to them and he speaks to them about their *anger*, giving them voice to express it to God while giving them grace to quieten it as they face others. In systematic and consecutive preaching people hear God and they draw near to him as a result . and then they draw near to others nearby who are drawing near to him as well. They gather around God and near to him. So it builds community and alienates *loneliness*. Furthermore it refreshes and restores *tired* people . like sparkling water in a dry and dusty Israel and like bright sunshine in a wet and cold New Zealand. Seeking to offer hope to a disconsolate Barbara Brown Taylor struggling with this very question, a friend made this observation to her: %the majority of people are sitting in the pews with parched lips.+

It is not just children that become irritable and obese on a diet of lollies and junk food. It is true of the local church as well. Very few may notice the connection between feeding a systematic and consecutive diet of meat and vegies to the people of God and the quiet development of a deep and diverse harmony among that people of God . but the discerning pastor:preacher:leader will see the link and will keep pouring the effort into their preaching.

2. Where there is superficiality, biblical preaching helps develop maturity

On a visit to Sydney to hear John Stott speak on his final visit ~~down-under~~in 2002, I heard someone ask him, %how would you describe the state of the global church?+Stott turned to the whiteboard and wrote three words on it: %growth without depth+ Depth, which builds maturity, sits alongside mission as a mandate for the New Testament church. God's heart is for the world . but it is also turned towards seeing his people become fully mature.

Systematic and consecutive biblical preaching builds depth in those who open their lives to the Spirit at work through the Word. The seminar smorgasbord can help, but can't do it quite so well. Inspirational testimonies and story-telling can help, but can't do it quite so well. People may even be helped by downloading the best preaching from somewhere else on the globe. Even then - there is still nothing quite like the Sunday-in, Sunday-out feeding by a resident and authentic shepherd in the biblical mould.

Sure, such preaching is not the only valid ministry of the Word today. I couldn't agree more. However it would be my observation that these other ministries (personal reading, small groups etc) are best ignited by biblical preaching and not easily enhanced in isolation from it. Good preaching models for people the way they can feed themselves from the Word which is the secret of developing of maturity and which, in turn, is the goal of the Christian life (Colossians 1.28-29).

Our penchant for the pragmatic, the experiential, and the therapeutic does breed a shallowness . even as it might breed full churches at the very same time. We must see this. However an enduring difficulty with such biblical preaching is that it can tend to facilitate a deep and genuine work in a few. In addition to this the maturing work tends to

be a slow one . too slow with too few for those who are impatient for quick results. And so we can give up on biblical preaching too soon...

C. Where things are stagnant, biblical preaching helps initiate ministry and mission

This is the challenge I faced as a young pastor. The little church of 25 adults was stagnating. It was losing hope. I gave myself to loving the people and preaching my little heart out. Slowly, even imperceptibly under God's good hand, I watched an operation motivation and operation mobilization take over the church.

There was a ministry *to* the saints. Systematic and consecutive biblical ministry is integral to the caring ministry in the church. Some of the best pastoral work is done through such preaching. People are transformed and made whole as they open up themselves to God's word week-by-week. So often biblical preaching proves to be counselling done *en masse*. Moreover it is a wonderful way to care for the relatively hassle-free for whom public worship marked by a thoughtful prayer and a careful sermon provides them with all the ministry they need from week to week.

There was the ministry *of* the saints. They hear God speaking to them. They dream dreams. They get up and participate in the mission of God in bold and creative ways. There is the desire to be trained, to plant churches, to become a missionary, to engage secular people, to start new ministries - it all proliferates in an authentic manner when the backdrop of a church's life is systematic and consecutive biblical preaching. In our little church we saw 10% of the adults move into training and/or leadership roles in the mission of God elsewhere.

D. Where things lack direction, biblical preaching helps establish an authority

The church's greatest mistakes occur when the people of God honour what a leader says without examining that instruction in the light of Scripture (B. Chapell, *Christcentered Preaching*, 123). This is one reason why more of our leaders need to be committed to systematic and consecutive biblical preaching so that it is Scripture which is passed on.

The one committed to such preaching loves those prepositions *behind* and *below* and *under*. How did JI Packer express it? "It is not for the preacher to stand, as it were, in front of and above the Bible, setting myself between it and the people and speaking for it, as if it could not speak for itself. Rather, my role is to stand behind it and below it, letting it deliver its own message through me, and putting myself explicitly and transparently under the authority of that message, so that my very style of relaying it models response to it" (Packer, in Bodey (ed), *Inside the Sermon*, 187). The authority in the church and the direction in which it should move becomes clearer to everyone when the pastor:preacher stands explicitly *under* the Word of God *with* their people in this way.

Such a people is less likely to get lost and lose direction and become confused about where the authority lies. So much of the tension and bitterness becomes deflected when everyone, pastor included, transparently sits under the authority of the word of God. "When preachers fail to preach the Scriptures, they abandon their authority."

Such preaching is not a cure-all for all the ills of the local church. It is not that simple. However just as we should not overstate its curative powers, we must not understate the preventative powers of this brand of preaching. A local church which gives priority to a systematic and consecutive biblical preaching ministry is investing in the development of a harmony, a maturity, a ministry and mission, and an authority that will minimise the pain and ineffectiveness caused by division, superficiality, stagnancy and directionlessness.

And so it is still strategic for pastoral leadership to give their best efforts to preaching through the Bible in a systematic and consecutive manner.

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