

interact



christian growth ministries

Being who you are in the pulpit - Part 2

by Kel Willis

Someone asked me recently what I expect when I preach. It made me realise that preaching without expecting God to change people's lives through it is a strange thing to do! Why preach if God is not in the message, and if he is, how can we not expect some impact? I always prepare to that end, expecting the Holy Spirit to take his word and illuminate people's minds and move their hearts.

One of the great church growth passages is Ephesians 4:11-16. In verse 11 Paul expands on the concept of God giving to the church especially gifted people who in a variety of ways proclaim his word. But they proclaim with an expectation that people will respond and as a result be contributors to the church. When one reads sermons in the Bible, one doesn't have to ask the 'So what?' question; there is always an application. Preaching with expectation flows out of clear objectives. How many of us actually prepare and preach with a sense of intentionality about what we anticipate within those we think are listening?

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An important question for us to consistently ask is how much of what we proclaim on Sunday morning people really hear and remember. In other words, is there a gap between our expectations of what they hear and what they actually do hear? I am acutely aware that the average member of the congregation retains only about 7% of my sermon, and that's a bit scary if I've laboured and sweated over preparing it! That being the case, I want to determine *which* 7% they remember! So my habit after doing all my research and before writing up my sermon notes is to write a one sentence summary of what I want people to walk out the door with after the sermon. This not only provides me with clarity and objective, but is enormously helpful in structuring the sermon and also in its presentation. I sometimes test the effectiveness of this summary sentence at morning tea by simply asking those who comment on the sermon what they specifically got from it.

His recorded prayers consistently affirm Paul's desire for the people he is writing to. He always gives thanks for what God has begun in their lives and then affirms his confidence in the ongoing work of God. He declares his constancy in prayer for them that they will 'bring forth the fruits of righteousness', that they will evidence an ongoing love for one another that demonstrates this fruit. Paul uses different phraseology, but his goal is always the same: he wants those to whom he is writing to be true disciples of Jesus, truly evidencing his character as they live out what God has done within them. Sadly, many in our churches are still struggling to really understand what God has done for them and have little idea of how to walk with him in a daily sense. The 'fruits of righteousness' which are the overflow of the character of Jesus are not



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often evident in their lives. Yet, many have a longing to be real and to live out the gospel. Our role is to very clearly proclaim the 'how to' and exhort and encourage people to be single-minded in their responsiveness to what we model and proclaim.

As in the first article in this series, I want to affirm that truly effective preachers make it easier for people to understand their message by living out what they preach from the pulpit. This is the focus of the instruction to the Hebrew church concerning their elders in Hebrews 13:7: 'Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you, and imitate their faith.' I often hear people asking whether the Bible message is still relevant today. My question in response is how it impacts our own lives and our connections with those asking the relevance question. The authenticity of our preaching must be demonstrated by our own response to the word. It is part of good preaching to share our own journey. Are we open with our congregations? I believe that people more readily engage with us in our ministry if we are open and vulnerable about how God is engaging with us in our walk with him, sharing both our struggles and triumphs. This is really about integrity in the pulpit, being willing to give of ourselves. This evidence of God at work in the life of the preacher adds a dimension of authority to our

preaching. People see that the message is not just a sermon, but is real to us and the evident passion that comes from the reality of experiencing the truths we proclaim helps us to connect with those we minister to.

I had a call last week from a very distressed elder whose pastor had on a number of occasions lost his temper with those who disagreed with him on a point of doctrine and accused them of not believing the Bible. And that week, he had preached on godliness! Whatever this pastor says to the congregation now, they hear through the filters of the evident lack of an outworking of his message in his own life.

Sadly, some preachers have the ability to take the most wonderful message in the world, the awesome and living word of God, his special revelation of himself, and somehow make it sound dull and irrelevant. Those who preach without experiencing the reality of what they proclaim can make it as dry as dust, the antitheses of the Biblical concept of the 'living word'. We must keep in mind that we are living epistles, known and read of all men!

So what we preach is important, but how we preach is also crucial. If it is all head and no heart, that is how it will largely be received. One of my great concerns as I move around our churches is the number of people with a significant theological framework, but no evident passion for God or lost people. They are dogmatically doctrinaire, but experientially dry. There is no real love for people and no real heart or desire after God; it is all about 'the truth'. I suspect James was writing to the same group of people when he said not to be deceived into thinking that because you have a knowledge of the word, that you are spiritually okay! I sometimes think that an overemphasis on points of doctrine actually diverts us from the core gospel principles.

So what keeps me preaching?

I do believe that preaching can be relevant: we can engage with an audience and hold them, and people's lives can be transformed through it.

◆ I am commanded to preach.

Matthew wrote, 'Go and make disciples ... teaching them ...' and Mark records the frequently quoted words, 'Go and preach the good news ... whoever believes will be saved...'. Both of these clear commands tell me to proclaim with an expectation of seeing people responding to the gospel.

◆ Preaching brings people to faith.

I came into full-time ministry in 1962 and I have been the most privileged of persons. I really have no clear idea of how many people have come to faith through my preaching, but I do know it is still happening. Whilst I am constantly amazed at the grace of God towards me, I shouldn't be surprised that people are coming to faith and growing in their walk with him when I preach the clear message of the Bible. That is why God gave those especially gifted people listed in Ephesians

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4:11 to the church: to equip the people for life and ministry. Paul affirmed in Romans 10 that people are saved and grow in their faith through hearing the word of God.

◆ **Preaching is one of God's ways to reveal himself.**

Preaching is much more than communication; it has a divine dimension to it. God has revealed himself in three primary ways; through his creation, through his Son Jesus and through the clear and consistent revelation of himself through his written word. His nature and character, his love and purpose for humanity, and his divine plan for redemption, decreed before the foundation of the world, are all revealed in it. Because we confidently believe that God uses the medium of the Bible to reveal himself, our role as preachers and teachers is to expound and explain the nature, purpose and provision of God that allows us not just to know him, but to grow in our relationship with him, seeing these truths lived out in those we seek to lead.

We are not simply putting together a set of religious truths to share with people. Evangelicals believe that when we seek to explain the biblical message, God's Holy Spirit becomes part of the preaching and hearing process. This is the essence of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:17: 'I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened ...'. How wonderful for the preacher to know that as the word of God is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is part of the process, helping the preacher who utterly depends on his enabling and opens up the spiritual eyes of the hearers.

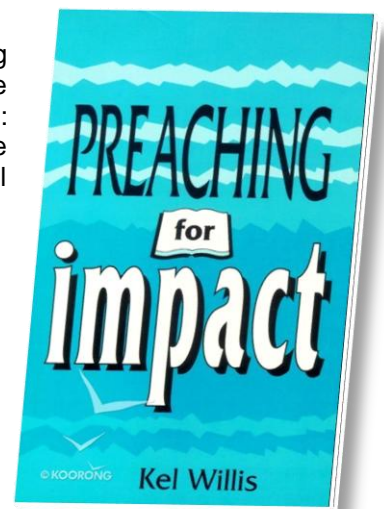
In the business and demands of pastoral ministry, it is so easy to slip into the habit of preaching. Not that we don't take the role seriously, but we can simply lose our edge in the pulpit. I suspect in measure this happens to all of us if we don't consciously and deliberately embrace the role of the Holy Spirit in the whole process. I need to keep reminding myself that I do not simply preach and teach out of the sermon preparation alone. I do so out of the depth of understanding and maturity that comes from my own life experience of God through the gracious work of his Spirit. Paul consistently prayed for those he ministered to, that the Holy Spirit would give them wisdom and revelation: the capacity to both comprehend spiritual truth and understand its application in his personal life.

In our ministry we need to intentionally seek ongoing insights into his word, the ability to explain his truth to people and the enabling to live the truths we proclaim, so that people will see their reality. Then we will see God touch the lives of many.

Want to read a good book on preaching?

Preaching for Impact by Kel Willis is designed to explain some of the basics of preaching and is ideal for anyone wanting to encourage those in their congregation with the potential to be preachers. The book covers some of the essentials in good preaching: gathering resources, the preparation process, making the message clear, the introduction, capturing the audience, how to gather and use illustrations, presenting well and bringing the message to a good conclusion.

The book is \$10.00 (which includes postage).



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