

## Chapter 9 – Cutting to the Heart

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Imagine you have just preached on a Sunday morning or perhaps just shared the Word of God with a group of children or ladies or unbelievers. As they walk away some shake your hand and say.... What do they say? What would you want them to say? What effect do you want the Word to have had on them? We come back to the questions we asked at the beginning: Why are we preaching? What is our motivation? What is our aim?

### ANOTHER GREAT COMMISSION

Take a minute to read Acts 20:17-38.

It's a wonderful, stirring, emotional farewell speech isn't it? And it's particularly important for our understanding of true gospel ministry because this is the point at which Paul the Apostle hands over to the Elders of the church. It is the transition from the apostle to the non-apostles. It shows us the things Paul (and the author Luke and the divine author the Holy Spirit) is concerned that continue on into the post-apostolic age – the commission to ordinary shepherds and preachers like us for the rest of the church age until Christ returns. It's interesting that Paul does *not* say, "You know about all the miracles accomplished through me, you remember the handkerchiefs that healed the sick, you remember the young man I raised from the dead, now go and do that, I commit you to healing the sick and raising the dead." No. He doesn't mention any of that. He doesn't pass on those elements of his apostolic ministry. What he reminds them of and what he passes on to the elders is the pattern of suffering for the gospel and preaching the Word of Christ and serving the Church.

## WHAT DO WE REALLY WANT?

Let's be honest. What is the real motive and aim of our preaching and our ministry? What would make us happy about how our ministry is going and what would make us despondent?

- Numbers going up or going down?
- Giving going up or going down?
- Our popularity/reputation going up or going down?

Paul was not worried about offending people with the truth (Acts 20:20). He just wanted to point people to repentance and faith in Jesus (v21). Paul was not concerned about his comfort or even his own life (v23-24a). He just wanted to complete the task Jesus had given him to preach the gospel of the grace of God (v24b). Paul was not interested in getting rich (v33). He just wanted to give (v35).

### OUR PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO PREACHING AS SOLDIERS ON THE FRONT LINE

- ✓ Be prepared and glad to turn your back on 'cheap popularity'
- ✓ Brace yourself up to go against popular trends
- ✓ Aim to have no regrets in losing friends, colleagues, contacts and sometimes family members
- ✓ Aim to have no regrets if people leave your church/ministry on account of sound doctrine (2 Tim 3:1-4:6)
- ✓ Only aim to be faithful to God, to yourself and to those who listen to you (2 Tim 4:6-8)

(Steven Musa-Kormayea)

## WHAT IS OUR JOB?

If we have the responsibility of being pastors (and to some extent if we have the responsibility of being CU leaders or small group leaders or Sunday School teachers) then Acts 20:28 is a very powerful commission:

*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*

Whole books have been written on this one verse but let's just notice three things at this point:

- It's not about us. *It's not our church.* It's God's and it's incredibly precious to him. He has bought it. He has given it shepherds. The flock does not exist for the sake of the shepherd, the shepherd exists for the sake of the sheep.
- We are to *care* for this precious flock – which will mean feeding the sheep (cf. John 21:17), which will mean (as Paul modelled) feeding them with the gospel (v24) from the whole Bible (v27).
- We are to pay *careful attention* to ourselves and the flock – which will in large part mean guarding them from wolves (v29) and watching that we do not become wolves ourselves. Because some will arise from *within* the church, wanting disciples for themselves, who will twist the Scriptures to say what people want to hear (v30 cf. 2 Tim. 4:3). In contrast we must be willing to say what people don't want to hear. We must be vigilantly watching the congregation and ourselves and seeing unbelief and false belief and coldness of heart and worldliness for the cancers they are and addressing them. Martin Luther said, "Preach so that if the people don't hate their sin they will hate you." It is an offensive message. We want to be as loving and winsome as possible and present Christ as the awesomely attractive God that he is, but in exalting Him you must necessarily humble man and show his depravity and inability to save himself and that will be offensive.

## WHAT IS AT STAKE? PREACHING LIKE NOAH

But why so much seriousness? Why is it so important that we watch ourselves and the sheep so carefully? Why is it important to get the teaching right? Why is it so important to challenge people? Do we really need to risk offending people?

Noah is a great model for us. We're told that Noah was a herald of righteousness and that the Spirit of Christ preached through him to his generation (2 Peter 2:5; 1 Peter 1:10-11; 3:19-20). What do you think his message was? Was it, "You can be transformed", "How to be a better you", "How to overcome all your problems and thrive in this life"? No - it must have been, "Quick, get in the Ark!" And surely he didn't try to lure them into the Ark with promises that it was

going to be lovely 5 Star accommodation where they'd have a great time. No – it was going to be a cramp smelly ship where you'll get sea sick and have little to do for a year but feed and muck out animals and wait, wait, wait. Instead Noah's appeal to get in the Ark must have been, "Save yourself from this wicked generation! There is a judgment coming because of your wickedness. Though it might not look like it, God will sweep everything away. But there is salvation right in front of you. Freely given. A way of escape from wrath and a way to the new world God will make."

We are very much in the same situation as Noah (cf. Matt. 24:36-44). And yet so often we can lose that eternal perspective and preach like it's all about this world. Brothers, our job is not to make people comfortable in this world but to be heralds of a new world, heralds of the King of this new world, the one in whom they can hide themselves, the one who will take them to the new world. This world is dying and passing away. We are dying and passing away. The 17th century English preacher Richard Baxter (who wrote a book on Acts 20:28) said: "Preach as a dying man to dying men."

"I stand vigilantly on the precipice of eternity speaking to people who this week could go over the edge whether they are ready to or not. I will be called to account for what I say there." (John Piper)

A very vivid picture of exactly this is given to us in words and paintings by George Gittoes. In 1995 he was travelling with the Australian Army Medical Support Force in Rwanda and he witnessed the terrible trauma of the Kibeho Massacre.

*I came upon a group who were calm. Although machine gunfire surrounded them – the bullets continually getting closer with terrifying inevitability – they remained a solid congregation – bound together not by walls but by prayer. A solitary preacher read to them from a ragged bible – he was a tall man in a yellowish coat sitting exposed on a sack of grain. He spoke in French with a thick dialect, his voice hoarse and broken – but I*

*could recognise the Sermon on the Mount “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God!” – “Heureux les coeurs purs, ils verront Dieu!” Those around him clasped their hands or hugged their children.*



*When I came back everyone there had been killed. Where the Preacher was there are only trampled bodies – I’ve searched for his distinctive yellow coat but now have to concentrate on the survivors. (George Gittoes, ‘The Preacher’ & ‘Rwanda Diary’, 1995)*

What would you preach if you knew that you and your congregation were just about to die? Certainly we need to know how to glorify God in our bodies here and now, how to love one another, how to serve the church, but in the New Testament all this is driven by an enormous focus on eternity, the coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the New Creation. The logic is that the more heavenly minded we are the more earthly good we will be. The more we are looking forward to our future inheritance (Acts 20:32) the more we will serve others (Acts 20:35). The way we glorify God now is in large part by not fearing death and counting our lives of no value in themselves (Acts 20:24).

There is a place for lightness and humour in preaching, especially where that is the tone of the passage you are preaching from. But we must always remember what is at stake, the preciousness of human souls, the enormous realities of the New Creation and the Lake of

Fire. There should be in our preaching a right urgency and seriousness and eternal focus.

## CUTTING

The effect we really need our preaching to have is that of Acts 2:37:

*Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart.*

But there are two aspects of this. First I (the preacher) need to be cut to the heart and then, from this position of humility I need to persuade people of the gospel and plead with people to come to Christ and “save yourselves” (Acts 2:40).

## BEING CUT OURSELVES

Acts 20:28-30: “Pay close attention to yourselves...”

As we said when we were looking at application, we must apply the Word to ourselves first. It must cut us, humble us, bring us to repentance and faith, before we minister that word to others. Like Isaiah and Ezekiel and Daniel and John we need to fall face down before the LORD as if dead and feel our sinfulness before we then feel the hand of grace on our shoulder telling us to get up and take the word to others.

The Apostle Paul knew very well that he was the worst of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15)<sup>21</sup> and so he loved the gospel, loved Jesus (Acts 20:19,21,24), was deeply humbled (Acts 20:19), was crucified to the world (Gal. 6:14; Acts 20:24,33) and loved the church (Acts 20:31). He committed the Elders to “the word of His grace” (Acts 20:32) not only because he knew that was they needed to teach the church but also because they themselves – the elders – needed that word of grace. He committed them – the elders – to the word of grace which

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<sup>21</sup> Notice the present tense – he *is* the chief of sinners.

would keep them humble, cut them down, and then build them up. They were never to get beyond that grace and neither must we.

So let's read and read and read the Scripture passage until it's force hits us, until it soaks into us, until it moves our heart, until it becomes a fire in the bones that we cannot keep in.

## PERSUADING, POINTING, PLEADING

Paul's reminds the elders that he wept as he admonished people night and day (Acts 20:31). Paul's preaching was not only reasoned (explaining, proving, Acts 17:3a) it was also a bold heralding and proclamation of the King and a passionate appeal, seeking to persuade people to be reconciled to that King (Acts 17:3b-4; 28:31). And it was, as we noted before, compassionate. There was a genuine love and fear for those he was seeking to steer from death to life. The elders he served with evidently knew that love and loved him in return (Acts 20:37-38).

In the Old Testament you can imagine the passion with which Noah would have pointed to the Ark and pleaded with people to get inside. Then look at the passion of the preacher of Proverbs: "Please don't go down this path, my son, it leads to death and destruction. Please go down this path. Lay hold of wisdom. Do anything you can to get wisdom."

This is not about emotionalism or performance but genuine *passion for what is being preached and concern for the hearer*. It will look different in different people depending on our personality. Some of us cry more easily than others. Some use their hands and voice more than others. Be yourself. Don't just copy the style of the popular preachers. But there should be a right passion as we speak about such desperately important realities.

## WHERE ELSE HAVE WE TO GO?

As we seek to persuade people of their situation, their need of Christ and their need to go to him, a very effective way of arguing is to *close off all the options till there's only one place to go*. For example I might say, "You can't go here, you can't go there, this is useless, this is sinking sand, you can't trust this or that or the other, the only safe place, the only solid rock, the only way to go is Christ."

## THE JOHN THE BAPTIST MODEL

John the Baptist is another great example for us. His whole ministry is pointing away from himself to Jesus (John 1:7-8,15; 3:28). He cries out, "Behold! The Lamb of God" (John 1:29). He sees himself as a friend of the bridegroom who has the privilege of introducing the bridegroom to the bride. He personally delights to hear the bridegroom's voice and his joy goes off the scale when he sees others (the bride) go to the bridegroom (John 3:29-30). As Richard Sibbes puts it in his advice to preachers that we quoted earlier, we, as John, are to "woo for Christ, and open the riches, beauty, honour, and all that is lovely in him."

## BEGINNING AND ENDING WELL

Just to be very practical, the introduction and conclusion to your message are very important in bringing the Word to bear on the hearer in a cutting way. They also tend to be the most neglected parts of the talk in terms of how much thought we give to them.

The **introduction** serves a social and cultural function – introducing ourselves, greeting people, establishing a connection between us and our hearers – but it also has the crucial function of persuading people not to go to sleep! Let's be realistic and sympathetic. Many people come to the Sunday morning service or an evening fellowship very tired. They have been working hard. The children were up all

night last night. They have many worries on their minds. I need to persuade them that this is going to be relevant to them; that it is going to be worth their time and energy to listen to. *Why should they listen to me?*

This assumes that we have already done the hard work and found how the passage is relevant. It *will* be relevant – the Word of God is living and active and cutting; Christ crucified for sinners is supremely relevant to every man, woman and child on the face of the earth; if we've spent plenty of time reading and reading and wrestling with the text then we will have discovered how massively relevant the message spoken to 'them then' is still today in our context. So assuming that we've found that relevance from the passage, in the introduction we want to start with that – start to show the big connection between the Word of God and the people.

- One very helpful way to do this is by *raising a question which the passage will answer*. For example we might ask, "What happens if God does not answer your prayer?" or "How do you deal with death?" or "Would you still worship God if you were fabulously rich?"
- Another way to introduce the sermon is to *imagine you are a waiter at a restaurant* who is greeting the guests and then listing the specials of the day or giving a starter to whet the appetite for the main course. For example we might say, today I want to show you the power of God in weakness and the presence of God in darkness. You are getting people interested in what is going to follow.
- Say something *unexpected* and surprising. The Bible is endlessly surprising, often outrageous. So instead of starting with something predictable (e.g. "Today we are going to learn about God's salvation") why not start with the radically unexpected point of the passage (e.g. "Today we are going to learn how salvation is impossible" or "Today we are going to see that our religion maybe the most disgustingly offensive thing to God").

Then, most important of all in an introduction, *get us quickly into the text*. The introduction should be as short as possible to answer the 'Why should I listen?' question. As quickly as possible, within a very

few minutes, I want people to have their noses in their Bibles and be hearing the Word of God itself.

The **conclusion** also needs some careful preparation. Imagine you are stopping a taxi or a motorbike with a passenger on board. You hopefully don't crash to an instant stop. You slow down smoothly to a stop. Finishing a talk is a lot like that. We don't want to crash to a stop with no warning. Neither do we want the slowing down to go on for ever until we start to despair that the talk will ever come to a complete stop. We need to relatively quickly but also smoothly bring the talk to a stop at its destination. So this will mean:

- Tie it all together. Answer the question raised at the beginning. Make sure that even if people missed a lot of what you said they go away knowing exactly what the big point was. What was the one thing you were trying to say?
- Don't introduce a new thought at the end. This can be very tempting if you feel you missed something in the main part of the talk but for the hearers it feels a bit like being on public transport that slows down as if to stop and you are just getting ready to get out and then it starts off again.
- As with the introduction don't be predictable. We don't always need to finish with the same words (e.g. "let's be encouraged to serve the Lord" or "let's pray"). We don't need to always have an 'altar call' (hopefully the whole sermon has been a presenting of Christ for us to receive). We don't always need to tie up every loose end (look at the endings to the Book of Jonah or Isaiah or the Sermon on the Mount).

## LET THE WORD DO THE WORK

If you ask a carpenter or a surgeon how to cut they will tell you that the key thing is to have a very sharp blade and then you need to trust the blade and *let the blade do the work*. You don't force it you just gently press and let the blade do the cutting.

Martin Luther, to quote him again, famously wrote of the huge upheavals in the church and in hearts and minds in the early European Reformation, "I did nothing. The Word did it all." Instead of

pushing a political movement or smashing idols he had simply, taught, preached and translated God's Word and the Word had done the work. This is the key point not only of this chapter but of this whole book. When the Word of God is preached as it is, a lion is unleashed, a blazing light is uncovered, a double-edged sword is unsheathed with enormous power to destroy and build up, to cut down and lift up (cf. Jeremiah 1:10).

If it is the Word that has the power to cut to the heart (Heb. 4:12) not our words, then we will want there to be as much of the Word as possible.

- We will certainly make sure that the whole passage is read and read well at the start.
- We will want the Bible passage to provide the *big point*, and the *structure* and the *tone* of our sermon.
- We will want to bring out the pictures and illustrations *in the text itself*.
- We will try to use the language of the passage in our points or sermon title or big point (i.e. don't bring in words like 'redemption' or 'salvation' if they are not in the passage).
- We will finish with the word of the passage. We want to leave the words of Scripture (not the preacher's words) ringing in people's ears.

We do not trust in our oratory or our cleverness as preachers to bring conviction. We do not use emotional manipulation to bring an impact on our hearers. We trust the power of the Word – that as we open it the Spirit will speak and Christ will be present to slay and then to revive, to cut down and then build up, to kill and then give life, to humble men and then lift them up.

AND WE PRAY

As the preacher Spurgeon said,

“We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were mysterious power going with it – the Holy Ghost changing the will of man. O Sirs! We might as well preach to stone walls as preach to

humanity unless the Holy Ghost be with the word, to give it power to convert the soul.” (C.H. Spurgeon, quoted in Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 335)