

The Salvation Army Leadership Letter

Issue 8:



Te Ope Whakāora

Preaching—A Beginner's Guide (2)

Dear Tim

You asked me to write some Letters on preaching.

In the first Letter I majored on preparation; in this Letter we focus on the delivery—or act of preaching. Both are hugely important, because we can prepare well but on the day undo all our hard work by poor delivery. Preparation and delivery are the two sides of the one preaching coin. We cannot have one without the other.

So to set the scene—you're at the service, the singing has died away, and you rise to preach what you've prepared over many hours. What you now do with your sermon will make or break your preaching that day. That is, there are characteristics of delivery that mark preaching off from lecturing, giving a talk, and many other forms of public speaking. Here they are—and they're all closely related to one another.

The Preacher's Personality Must Be Involved

For preaching to be 'preaching', the whole personality of the preacher must be involved. Phillips Brookes, the great 19th century American preacher, said that preaching is 'truth mediated through personality'. Before him, the great Greek orator Demosthenes said that the first principle of oratory is 'Action'; the second is 'Action'; and the third is 'Action'. In preaching, as in all persuasive speaking, the preacher's personality is greatly involved—through gestures, activity and so on.

To put it another way, preaching is live drama—like you see at the theatre. So just standing there and reading something you've prepared, isn't preaching, because preaching involves your whole personality.

A Sense Of Authority And Control

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that a second mark of delivery is 'a sense of authority and control over the congregation and the proceedings' (p. 83; and with his book *Preaching and Preachers* now out of print, I share many of his insights in this Letter—because what he wrote on delivery is so far superior to anything else I've seen, that I want to make it available to you and all our readers).

Then he continues (before gender sensitivity became important to us), 'The preacher must never be apologetic, he should never give the impression that he is speaking by their leave as it were; he should not be tentatively putting forward certain suggestions and ideas. That is not to be his attitude at all. He is a man, who is there to "declare" certain things; he is a man under commission and under authority. He is an ambassador, and he should be aware of his authority' (p.83).

Knowing we're performing one of the holiest tasks on earth, should give us poise and a sense of control as we preach—and this poise and control grows with experience through the

years. As Paul says, 'we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God' (2 Co 5.20 NKJV). What makes preaching 'preaching', is that God is pleading through us, with all the awesomeness His presence brings. So preaching is radically different from giving a talk or a lecture.

Freedom

The third mark of delivery is the element of freedom—which the Dr says is of very great importance. That is, though we've prepared our sermon very carefully, we must be open to the additional inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the moment of delivery. The Dr, who's guiding us through this tricky subject of delivery, says the preacher 'must not be too tied to his preparation and by it. This is a crucial point; this is of the very essence of this act of preaching we have to emphasise this point because the preparation is not finished just when a man has finished the preparation of the sermon. One of the remarkable things about preaching is that often one finds that the best things one says are things that have not been premeditated' (pp.83-84).

What makes preaching 'preaching', is the dynamic interplay of God speaking **by** His Spirit, **through** our preaching, **to** our listeners, **from** His Book. So we can never predict what He will do—marking preaching off from lecturing, which is mainly passing on information.

The Congregation's Contribution

A fourth element of delivery is that the preacher, while speaking, should be deriving something from the congregation. We'd expect this, because some of the people we preach to are full of the Holy Spirit and make their own contribution to the preaching (although it wasn't part of our preparation). This is the mysterious element of 'exchange' in preaching—again in contrast to a lecture or essay on the one hand, and preaching on the other hand.

The Dr says, 'The man who reads his essay gets nothing from his audience, he has it all there before him in what he has written; there is nothing new or creative taking place, no exchange. But the preacher—though he has prepared, and prepared carefully—because of this element of spiritual freedom is still able to receive something from the congregation, and does so. There is an interplay, action and response, and this often makes a very vital difference But the preacher must be open to this; if he is not, he is going to miss one of the most glorious experiences that ever comes to a preacher' (pp.84-85).

Then he adds, 'This element of freedom is all important. Preaching should always be under the Spirit – His power and control—and you do not know what is going to happen. So always be free' (p.85). If we've been preaching for many years, we'll know the Dr is absolutely right—we've seen God do extraordinary things when He's drawn us out far beyond what we've prepared in our office or study. Getting preaching 'lift' from the congregation is part of what the Dr calls 'the romance of preaching'!

Seriousness

The next element of delivery is what he calls 'seriousness', because the preacher deals with the most serious matters men and women ever consider in this life.

Reflecting the strong Pauline and Johannine strands of the robust evangelical heritage that fired a Wesley and a Booth before him, the Dr says that, when the preacher preaches, 'he is speaking to them from God, he is speaking to them about God, he is speaking about their

condition, the state of their souls. He is telling them that they are, by nature, under the wrath of God— 'the children of wrath even as others' [Eph 2.3; cf. Jn 3.36] —that the character of the life they are living is offensive to God and under the judgment of God, and warning them of the dread eternal possibility that lies ahead of them We forget this element at our peril, and at great cost to our listeners' (p.86).

There is of course a place for the discreet use of humour in preaching, but that humour should never detract from the seriousness of what we're speaking about. Our preaching method should be consistent with that of John the Baptist and Jesus in the gospels (Mt 3.1-2 and 4.17,23) —and Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul in Acts. Preaching, because of its divine origin and eternal significance, is perhaps the sublimest and most solemn activity humans ever undertake on earth.

Liveliness

Balancing the extreme seriousness of preaching, is the related element of liveliness— reminding us that the seriousness we've mentioned doesn't mean dourness, sourness, sadness, being boring, or anything remotely like these things. Preachers should never be dull, boring, or worse 'heavy'!

The Dr in his own inimitable way puts it like this. 'I would say that a "dull preacher" is a contradiction in terms; if he is dull he is not a preacher. He may stand in a pulpit and talk, but he is certainly not a preacher. With the grand theme and message of the Bible dullness is impossible. This is the most interesting, the most thrilling, the most absorbing subject in the universe; and the idea that this can be presented in a dull manner makes me seriously doubt whether the men who are guilty of this dullness have ever really understood the doctrine they claim to believe, and which they advocate. We often betray ourselves by our manner' (p.87).

But it's Spurgeon who brings seriousness and liveliness together best, when he says, 'Preach very solemnly, for it is a weighty business, but let your matter be lively and pleasing, for this will prevent solemnity from souring into dreariness. Be so thoroughly solemn that all your faculties are aroused and consecrated, and then a dash of humour will only add intenser gravity to the discourse, even as a flash of lightning makes midnight darkness all the more impressive' (*Lectures To My Students* pp.344-345).

In great preaching, seriousness and liveliness come together in perfect harmony.

Zeal And A Sense Of Concern

The Dr explains, 'When I say zeal I mean that a preacher must always convey the impression that he himself has been gripped by what he is saying. If he has not been gripped nobody else will be. So this is absolutely essential. He must impress the people by the fact that he is taken up and absorbed by what he is doing He is so moved and thrilled by it himself that he wants everybody else to share in this In other words a preacher who seems to be detached from the Truth, and who is just saying a number of things which may be very good and true and excellent in themselves, is not a preacher at all' (pp.87-88).

Then he tells a story from when he was getting over an illness just before he wrote the book. He went to a church in the village where he was staying and discovered the preacher was starting a series on Jeremiah. He started with the great text (20.9) where Jeremiah says he couldn't hold back any longer because God's Word was like fire in his bones. However, as the Dr observed, a strange thing happened.

The good man talked about fire as if he was sitting on an iceberg. He dealt with the theme of fire in a detached and cold manner, and was a living denial of what he was saying—or as the Dr wryly remarked, 'a dead denial!' The sermon itself was a fine sermon as far as construction and preparation were concerned. In fact the man had taken so much care over it that he had written it out in full and was reading it word for word. But the 'one thing that was absent was fire. There was no zeal, no enthusiasm, no apparent concern for us as members of the congregation. His whole attitude seemed to be detached and academic and formal' (p.88).

Zeal, and a sense of concern, were no doubt things Thielecke noticed were missing in the preaching of his day in Europe (see the first Letter on preaching). And as he observed, when preaching died as an art form, churches died all over Europe ... and they've never recovered! The same thing has happened here.

Warmth

Warmth is the next characteristic of good delivery because, as the Dr remarks, 'the preacher must never be "clinical". So often the preacher is. Everything he does is right, is indeed almost perfect; but it is clinical, it is not living; it is cold, it is not moving, because the man has not been moved himself. But that should never be true of the preacher' (p.89).

Then, noting how Whitefield rarely preached without tears streaming down his face, the Dr asks, 'Where is the passion in preaching that has always characterised the great preaching of the past?' (p.90). And he asks, why aren't modern preachers moved and carried away as great preachers of the past often were? There can only be one answer, and it's one I've agonised over—preachers don't now feel the way preachers of the past felt about the great truths of the faith and the people they preach to. If we believe Wesley's and Booth's and Martyn Lloyd-Jones' gospel, we will preach with the warmth they preached with. And this warmth and rapport will come out in our voice, our manner, and our whole demeanour.

Urgency

The ninth feature of good delivery (and it's closely related to warmth) is urgency—and again the Dr hits the nail on the head when he says urgency 'is what makes preaching such an astonishing act and such a responsible and overwhelming matter A man who imagines that because he has a head full of knowledge that he is sufficient for these things had better start learning again You are dealing with matters not only of life and death in this world, but with eternal destiny If the preacher does not suggest this sense of urgency, that he is there between God and men, speaking between time and eternity he has no business to be in a pulpit' (p.91).

And that's of course what Paul said to young Timothy when, setting the scene of the Last Judgment, he commanded him to 'preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching' (2 Ti 4.1-2 RSV).

Urgency is one of the clearest marks of real preaching—so whatever else we do when we preach next Sunday, let's 'be urgent'!

Persuasiveness

With the whole weight of Scripture behind him, the Dr says the next element of delivery is persuasiveness.

Then he says, the preacher 'is not giving a learned disquisition on a text, he is not giving a display of his own knowledge; he is dealing with these living souls and he wants to move them, to take them with him, to lead them to the Truth. That is his whole purpose. So if this element is not present, whatever else it may be, it is not preaching. All these points bring out the difference between delivering a lecture and preaching, or between an essay and a sermon' (p.92).

And of course that was exactly the position of the Apostle Paul. Remember how he said, 'Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men [and women]' (2 Co 5.11a NKJV). Then he says that, because God pleads through us, 'we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God' (v.20b). Great preaching, as a senior Salvation Army leader wrote me, has 'a compelling response demand'.

Pathos And Emotion

As we push towards the finish of this discussion on delivery, we've been sharpening the picture of what it is that marks preaching off from every other form of public speaking. Now, with the words 'pathos' and 'emotion', we capture one of its crowning distinctives.

Pathos (the ability to move people profoundly), as Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes, was a particularly prominent feature of the master preacher George Whitefield's preaching. He notes how David Garrick, the great actor of the 18th century, wished he could utter the word 'Mesopotamia' as Whitefield could – and how he would gladly have given a hundred guineas just to say the word 'Oh!' with the same pathos as Whitefield did. Then he says, 'This element of pathos and of emotion is what has been so seriously lacking in the present [20th] century' (p.93). Its absence goes a long way towards explaining why the crowds left churches all over Europe in the final decades of the 20th century, as Thielecke observed. And it's exactly the same here.

As the Dr says 'this element of pathos and emotion, this element of being moved, should always be very prominent in preaching' (p.95). Pathos is one of the defining things that makes preaching 'preaching'.

Power

The last feature of delivery, power, is the most observable of all, because of its huge impact on both the preacher and the people experiencing the preaching. Paul, for example, knew this power—and in 1 Th 1.5 (NKJV) he summed up his ministry to the Thessalonians in this way, 'For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance'.

But how do we know we have this power when we're preaching? In perhaps some of the last words he ever wrote on preaching, the Dr answers the question in words I'll never forget.

He writes, This power 'gives clarity of thought, clarity of speech, ease of utterance, a great sense of authority and confidence as you are preaching, an awareness of a power not your own thrilling through the whole of your being, and an indescribable sense of joy. You are a man "possessed", you are taken hold of and taken up' (p.324).

Then he makes this statement; 'I like to put it like this—and I know of nothing on earth that is comparable to this feeling—that when this happens you have a feeling that you are not actually doing the preaching, you are looking on. You are looking on at yourself in amazement as this is happening. It is not your effort; you are just the instrument, the channel, the vehicle: and the Spirit is using you, and you are looking on in great enjoyment and astonishment. There is nothing that is in any way comparable to this. This is what the preacher himself is aware of' (p.324). Then he describes the impact on the hearers—which of course is profound!

Suffice to say it is this power, above everything else, that is missing in our preaching today—and it is this power, above everything else, that will sweep the unchurched multitudes into the Church of Jesus Christ. The power of the Holy Spirit, working through ordinary people just like us, is the key to the Church's advance here and in every country on earth.

How Now Shall We Preach?

No doubt our first reaction to this unfolding picture of delivery is to exclaim with Paul, 'who is sufficient for these things?' (2 Co 2.16b NKJV). And the first answer is, 'none of us!' But there's another answer—because in the next chapter Paul says, 'but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant' (2 Co 3.5b-6a NKJV). With God's help we are sufficient!

So, matching the 12 points we've covered, here are some things we can do to speed up our preaching development—if possible, checking our progress by looking at a video of our preaching once a month:

1. **Think** of preaching as theatre or drama, and learn to express your deepest feelings as you speak. Consider taking some lessons with a speech and drama teacher—they were a turning point in my development because they freed me up to express the real 'me'.
2. Every time you rise to speak, **remind** yourself that you're there in God's Name, and you're about to speak on things 'angels long to look into' (1 Pe 1.12).
3. **Remember** that when you finish your formal preparation that is not the end of the Holy Spirit's inspiration; He may give you additional life-changing words as you speak—so build in room for them.
4. At a speed you can manage, **develop** increasing eye contact with the people you preach to—and learn to respond to their body language; that is, work at going beyond your notes when you're speaking.
5. **Remind** yourself, when you prepare and when you preach, that you're engaged in the solemnest task on earth—with eternal consequences for those who listen to you.
6. Given the eternal significance of your preaching, **start** your preparation early and let your message grow inside you till it 'possesses' you—and let it light up your whole being as you preach.
7. **Be** passionate about your preaching, and find ways to express your profound concern for your people—in what you say and how you say it.



8. **Develop** warmth in your speaking, so your hearers know you have their best interests at heart.
9. **Be** urgent, and remember that rarely if ever means shouting—more often than not, it means lowering your voice and pleading with all the tenderness you can muster.
10. **Learn**, like Martin Luther King, to craft your words, particularly your introductions and conclusions, for maximum impact—and remember Rob Harley's comment on this in the March Leadership Letter.
11. **Learn** over time to so feel your message and your concern for your people that you will speak with increasing pathos and emotion – because it's words that flow from pathos, that carry the day, not arguments.
12. Remembering the Creed, **remind** yourself every time you speak, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit'—and above everything else seek His anointing, so you can echo 1 Th 1.5 more and more as you look back on your day's preaching
And **remember**, preaching is a journey, and with God's help and wise people's advice, you'll get better and better—with an ever increasing impact for the Kingdom of God. When it comes to preaching, you can lose the battle on some difficult days, and yet still win the war. But more about that next time.

I believe In Preaching

Tim, we've now covered the two big questions of preparation and delivery, and I think you'll agree that preaching is certainly a big challenge—especially with all the other things you have to do!

But it's a marvellous challenge. And regardless of how inadequate you feel at the moment, you can make steady progress and bless your people more and more.

May God now bless you as you act on the insights in this Letter. And may you find great joy in being His chosen vessel to the people He has placed in your care.

Goodbye.

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For You and Your Leaders

1. **Give** yourself a score out of ten (ten being excellent) for how you think you're doing at present with each of the 12 aspects of delivery I've mentioned; then, noting my concluding suggestions, jot down the areas you'll start working on to improve your delivery. But don't worry about how low some of your scores are, because you'll soon lift them significantly.
2. **Discuss** with your leaders where they see your preaching fitting into the total life of the church—and what steps they may be able to take to create sufficient time for you to do your preparation. And talk with them about choosing one or two people who can give you give friendly and helpful comment each week so you take your preaching to the next level.

Note To All Readers

The Salvation Army Leadership Letter, which till now has been monthly, will now be released five times a year—on the first day of March, May, July, September and November (like the World Vision Leadership Letter before it). Next issue is 1 July 2005.