

Preaching: The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly

A Letter To Preachers & Hearers

I want to start a hard conversation. It's about love, grace, consumerism, fear, performance, lies and Jesus. We need a to talk about a secret that many preachers do not want revealed. We need to talk about *preaching!* So grab a cuppa (or something stronger) and brace yourself for a proper read.

First, some theology of preaching. I hope we can agree on it...

The Preaching of the Word is a sacred, joyful, painful, exhilarating, fearful, wonderful, and *relational* task. Each week across Australia preachers lock themselves in their cells, are wrestled into submission by the Word, and then attempt to share it personally with those they serve. This is a weekly miracle.

Preaching is a struggle. Some weeks the sermon is champagne and caviar. Other weeks it is baked beans on toast. Sometimes it feels as if the Holy Spirit has given weight to every word. Other weeks the preacher will work all week, waiting to hear, labouring in the sweatshop of ministry, and then stand to speak trembling. Sometimes preachers discover that their stumbling words were anointed by God's Spirit in ways they never expected. Other times they find that what they thought was pure brilliance was too much of themselves and not enough of Jesus. Preaching is not easy.

A key thing about Christian preaching is that it is *relational*. It is not one-way communication. It is not something that should always look good (see 1 Cor 2:3). It is a community-based task with at least three relational aspects...

1. We Listen To God In The Word.

Until I hear from God's Word, until it works on me, I am not able to preach it. Until it has accused, convicted, killed, healed, forgiven, and raised me, I am not yet ready to share it with others. Of course, I am not proposing a kind of *Donatism* (an ancient heresy that says that the truth of the Gospel relies on our own character). Preaching relies on Christ's character and the Gospel which is true no matter who speaks it. But faithful preaching does require us to sit under the Word in order to bring it to others. This takes time. There is no short cut for listening - either to people or God.

2. We Listen To God's People.

Preaching requires not only on reflection on God's Word, but also reflection in a faith-community. It requires the community of *God's people*. Sermons are not essays that are applicable everywhere to everyone. They bring a *particular* Word to *particular* people. Ten different preachers might come to the same Bible passage and yet preach with ten different emphases because they serve ten different communities. The preacher's work of listening and forming relationships matters deeply, because it is a part of preaching too.

3. We Bring A Word In Season And Place.

Preaching involves bringing the universal Gospel to particular people in a particular place and time. It sits within a the ongoing of the people of God with the Word. The Gospel is universal in scope but sermons are not. Get it? Sermons are not usually universally applicable everywhere and in every place - at least, not if they are actual *preaching!* Sermons proclaim the Gospel in a locally *applied* way.

SECRETS AND LIES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY OF PREACHING!

Watch out! In some churches preaching is being eroded and is in danger of disappearing. Preachers are under pressure to look good and sound clever. Punters can listen to the 'best preachers on the planet' anytime anywhere. So local preachers often feel like freckly teenagers being compared to sculpted supermodels. This tempts preachers to forget their simple call to prepare home-cooked meals. Instead they are tempted to do something that appears to be gourmet, but is in danger of hurting the Church deeply...

I want to call out three areas that preachers (including me) wrestle with:

- the mostly ethical,
- the seemingly ethical but probably very wrong,
- the unethical: sinful and deceitful practices that damage the Church.

1. THE MOSTLY ETHICAL

a. Getting Insight From Other Sources

This practice is often wise. We read commentaries which are expert explanation of the Bible. We read good spiritual, inspirational and theological books. We watch movies and read the news. We reflect on modern culture. We notice how it interacts with the Word. Perhaps if we do not get insight from other sources our preaching may be impoverished. Perhaps we do need to read and listen widely. But other sources must never become our real source and they must *never* get in the way of the Word.

b. Using Other People's Ideas

When we quote someone we attribute the source. It is tricky when we use someone's insights or ideas but don't directly quote them. But we still need to openly acknowledge other people's work with humility and joy - this strengthens the Church. A few years ago I preached a sermon which used three points from another preacher. On the screen and on the sermon notes I wrote, '*The three main points of this sermon are from Timothy Keller's beautiful book 'The Art of Self-Forgetfulness'*'. I was not ashamed of using someone else's framework. He had said it better than I could!

c. Preaching Other People's Sermon Ideas.

When I first started out, a mature pastor gave me an outline for an Easter sermon. I used his three main points. It was one of the best Easter sermons I have managed. I still studied the Word, but I used another preacher's insights to give clarity and focus. Pastors have often helped each other with ideas for wedding sermons, baptism sermons, or fun ways to present the message to children or all ages - cool!

The preaching of other people's sermons should be watched with care. It might be true that they've done a better job of communicating than we feel we could. But we need to ensure that what we deliver is still *relational* on all three levels. Does it still arise from listening to the Word and the people? The practice of using other people's sermon should be the *exception* rather than the norm. It's probably ethical, sometimes wise, but needs to be watched carefully.

2. THE SEEMINGLY ETHICAL BUT PROBABLY VERY WRONG

From time to time preachers deliver someone else's series of sermons. Denominational bodies sometimes create sermon series for local congregations to follow. Sermon series are downloaded from places like sermons.com, lifeway.com, creativepastor.com or from mega-church preachers like Craig Groeschel in the USA.

Many mega-churches and website specifically provide sermons for re-use, so it at first it may seem ethical. Preachers may pay a fee to download and license the content, which is legal. Some sermons are provided for free, again legal. Some mega-church pastors openly encourage local preachers to re-preach their sermons! They teach that "the art of creativity is hiding one's sources" (ouch!) and that using "canned" sermon series is good time management and great leadership! So what are we to make of this growing practice?

Sometimes preaching someone else's series (or at least starting with it) might be helpful. It may be that they have provided a framework for hearing the Word clearly. What they provide might be like a little lectionary - a framework for reading and reflecting on the Bible together. They may have spoken something truly prophetic that we feel called to repeat. But without great care this practice is dangerous for spiritual life of both preachers and hearers. Here are some examples of the dangers...

Firstly, can we be confident that preachers are still taking time to *sit under* and *hear* the Word? Are they hearing *the Word* personally and being shaped by it? Or are they being really shaped by sermoncentral.com, Derek Prince, or Pastor Mega-Cool?

Secondly, how long can a preacher do this before they become just another mouthpiece for someone's megachurch? How can we bring 'a word in season' when our sermon content has very little to do with our life and work among the people? How can a sermon series written in the USA truly address Aussie culture?

Thirdly, how long can a preacher engage in this practice before performance anxiety wrecks them? Pre-packaged sermons are quite snazzy. They often come with cool graphics too! Most real pastors cannot normally replicate this standard. So once a pastor starts using professionally pre-packaged stuff (also including graphics, videos, outlines, sermons, etc) they need to keep doing it to maintain the standard. They might get stuck - and in time it will become *sinful* because it is about *performance* and *appearance*.

Fourthly (and this is the kicker), borrowed or pre-packaged sermons often fail to highlight the difference between law and gospel. They often sound impressive but are subtly law-based. Each point in the message might tell us how to think differently, how to live differently, how to change, or how to grow. These sermons often have more in common with self-help literature than real exploration of scripture. Often pre-packaged sermons are actually law - should, ought, must! In time this sort of preaching will paralyse hearers. Yes, preaching *should* contain God's law, but the Gospel of grace creates change. Lutherans and other grace-centred Christians believe that grace must predominate. The pure joyful delightful preaching of *grace alone* was the best thing about the Lutheran movement. But by borrowing sermons and uncritically using them, we are in danger of losing this. This is not just about a narrow focus on Lutheran identity - this is big - this is about our identity in Christ!

3. THE UNETHICAL: SINFUL AND DECEITFUL PRACTICES THAT DAMAGE THE CHURCH

I am ashamed to write what follows. I am a sinner. I do not write the following with a sense of superiority, but with tears and grief, because the things described here are being done by more of us than we care to admit. Preachers - we need to watch out for the following:

- a. Not reflecting deeply on the Word before preaching.**
- b. Not reflecting on the people to whom the Word will be preached, not praying for them, and not engaging in conversation with them around the preaching.**
- c. Failing to distinguish between law and gospel and making should/ought/must the focus.**

If sermons boil down to something like 'pray harder/better/more' or 'read the Bible more' or 'give more' or 'love more' then they are law. This happens when we take on other people's content without critical thought.

- d. Lying by not acknowledging sources and letting people think it was our own ideas.**

Let's talk about lying. If someone preaches someone else's sermon series without publicly acknowledging the source then they *are* lying. It is a sin not of commission (active doing) but of omission (omitting to do what is right). We may not have actively said "I made this" but if we have allowed anyone to draw that conclusion (or not corrected that conclusion) then it is sin. When someone says, "That was a great message Pastor" and has no idea that it was not really our work, then we are in grave danger! If we give people the impression that

other people's ideas are our own, then this is most certainly lying. This form of lying is being done in local churches every week - and it is the death of real preaching.

Let's talk about being truthful. If a pastor preached a sermon series from www.lifeway.com then they might still do significant work to tailor it to their situation. It might even be just what people needed! They might put in their own stories and tweak the content to reflect grace-centred theology. But they *still* need to acknowledge the source. It needs to be acknowledged wherever that preaching goes - verbally when delivering the sermon, in the newsletter, on any sermon notes, or on the website it is featured on.

A minimum ethical acknowledgement be something like, '*This sermon series is based on material provided by lifeway.com*'. But that bare minimum could still be untruthful depending on context and how obvious it was. It would seem more truthful to write, '*This sermon series was written by Bob Jones at Lifeway.com but we have prayed, reflected and adapted it for our community.*' Dear preachers, if you won't do this because it's right, then at least do it out of fear that someone will Google your sermon series and the Gospel might be discredited because of you!

These days high-school and university students have to repeatedly study academic integrity. They learn about plagiarism over and over again. They learn that integrity means never passing off someone else's work as your own. How is it that preachers think integrity might be defined differently? It's a no-brainer. Truthful people *do* rely on other's work, but they openly admit and acknowledge it. They build others up by affirming their work.

I am fearful of what results in faith-communities when the 'word' they hear relies on lying. This cannot be good for us, either as preachers or hearers. It results in declining spiritual health for communities and preachers.

AN APPEAL TO HEARERS AND PREACHERS

I appeal to hearers of preaching. Hearers are a key part of the ministry of preaching. Support your pastors and preachers; be kind to them. Pray for them each week. Pray for their ears, pray for their mouths! Preaching is not easy. At this time being a Christian leader is difficult. Don't compare our local preaching to the latest greatest you watched on YouTube. This is not helping. Don't watch twenty LiveStreams and compare them to decide which you like best - just don't - it's sinful consumerism. Engage with a local faith community. I appeal to you to think of Christian preaching as a *local relational* thing. Preaching is incarnate (local in a body) just as Jesus Christ was incarnate (local in a body). Your preacher is not bringing you the TED talk of the century, but a simple local moment of grace - God's love localised - for you.

I appeal to preachers. Invite your people into your struggle with the Word. Perhaps we can even include them in the sermon study and preparation? Be totally honest about your sources. Do your best to present yourself as 'above reproach.' Quote other Christian teachers often - with joy and humility. Most importantly, foster your relationship with your community and ensure that what you preach to them is *for them*. Don't worry about bringing them caviar, just bring them baked beans on toast - but let it be real.

A short word to preachers who have often relied on other's work and feel unsure of preparing their own sermons... Start small. Keep it simple. One point or idea is plenty. It's OK to be short. Work together with a companion in studying the Word (even me). Perhaps you can incorporate conversation? If you preach for 5 minutes but are focussed on the Gospel and speak directly to your community, that is truer than a 30 minute wonder you got from a mega church!

Jesus does not come to us image-driven like a Hollywood model. He is the One who comes disfigured and bleeding, with us and for us. Paul did not preach with wise and persuasive words but of Christ crucified. In the name of Jesus, I appeal to you all for this sort of humble local real preaching. That is all we need.

Grace and peace to you all,

Matt. Thiele

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