

Assess the strengths and weaknesses of preaching as an effective method of evangelism today.

Introduction

In this paper the present writer will explore the significance of evangelistic preaching today, primarily in the west. This present writer will contrast two major styles of preaching and assess their strengths and weaknesses in turn. The first will be the Classic model. This is a model based on exposition and insists on a number of truths from scripture, being expounded in a logical sequential way. The second model is the Contemporary model, which is slowly emerging in the western world and is largely a reaction to the changing culture.

Preaching, Abraham asserts ' is evangelism only in so far as it is governed by the intention to initiate the hearer into the reign of God, it is not evangelism in itself.'¹ The question is raised, what is effective evangelism?. It is that which ' by word and deed in the light of particular condition and a particular context, offers every person and community everywhere, a valid opportunity to be directly challenged to a radical reorientation of their lives... and being committed to God's purpose of placing all things under the rule of Christ.'²

In this paper the present writer holds the conviction that preaching is an effective means of evangelism provided preachers ' know their subjects, are themselves, and love their audiences'³

The Crisis

In Europe and Northern America Riddell reminds us that 53,000 are leaving the church on a weekly basis, and not returning. Christianity in the western world is

¹Abraham W, The logic of evangelism (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1989) p 173

² Bosch D, Transforming Mission (Mary Knoll:Orbis Books, 1997) p 420

³ Carswell R, And some evangelists (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2000) p 133 (adaptation of a Josh McDowell quote, quoted fully at close of paper)

in sharp decline and a crisis of preaching is a strong factor in its decline.⁴ It is the present writer's contention that in the western world what we will refer to as the Classic model of preaching is no longer a relevant part of the culture and therefore not an effective evangelism tool.

Notwithstanding it may have place in the rest of the global scene as evidenced by Luis Palau in the 1986 Evangelist's conference in Amsterdam. He exalts in the receptivity of Latin America to his preaching, he rejoices in the fast spread of the good news across Africa; of Asia he states ' I find an increasing pleasure to preach the gospel there.' However of America he argues that the sectarian nature of the church breeds arrogance, and self-righteousness. Therefore preaching lacks impact; in regards to Europe Palau grieves its hardness and its cynicism, he laments Europe as having ' a hard shell which needs to be cracked open' ⁵ As the argument develops further we turn our attention fully to the Classic model.

The Classic Model

Billy Graham in his address to the Evangelists conference heartily endorsed the Classic model to the delegates. He instructs them to preach the gospel with authority with conviction and assurance. He advises simplicity in presentation, which this present writer agrees, is a helpful check to what in the west is becoming a less effective form of evangelistic communication. A sense of urgency and a clear point of decision are Graham's next categories, he concludes his discourse by emphasizing the need for love and compassion.⁶ Although the present writer believes the Classic model is not the best model for many parts of western society, one must concede that Grahams divisions are well thought out and the Classic model could well be successful in reaching it's

⁴ Riddell M, *Threshold of the future* (London: SPCK, 1998) p 3

⁵ Douglas J, *The calling of an evangelist-The evangelist and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Luis Palau* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1987) p 140

⁶ Douglas J, *The calling of an evangelist-Preaching the World Reaching the World, Billy Graham* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1987) p 133

goal. Graham's grace is evident when he continues "even when your message includes the fact of judgement and hell, your hearers should realize that both God and his messenger speak from a broken heart"⁷

Clements also champions the cause of the Classic model. He maintains that done well expository preaching can bridge the two worlds of scripture and society. He accuses postmodern approaches to preaching as subjective where the Bible becomes an out of context book of spells. Expository preaching can teach good Bible reading skills by us explaining how we arrived at our conclusions, thereby not just 'feeding the people but teaching them how to cook.' Clements concludes his article with words of Dr Martin Lloyd Jones seeing preaching as 'logic on fire!'⁸

Coates would not in agreement, believing the Classic model to be inadequate.⁹ Coates goes on to state that the intellectual demands of expository preaching alone exclude 95% of the world's population, unless the concepts are put over in elementary terms. He adds that from what he's seen few leaders in the parts of the worldwide church which are experiencing the most prolific growth employ expository preaching. Also the two-thirds world is less rationalistic and has a much greater integration of life and faith.¹⁰ This last point will be examined in depth later in this paper. Clements would oppose this view of Coates by stating that the Classic model actually lifts the education of the people in the areas to which Coates is referring. They may be uneducated at the moment but natural upward mobility would lead them to a greater desire to pursue a deeper understanding Biblical truth.¹¹ Hilborn counters, heart-gripping images would communicate more effectively than heady lofty ideas, and story over dry

⁷ Ibid., p 133

⁸ Clements, p 4

⁹ Hilborn D, Picking up the pieces (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997) p 156

¹⁰ Clements R, Expository preaching in a post-modern world (Cambridge papers, vol. 7, no 3, Cambridge Papers Ltd., 1998) p 2

¹¹ Ibid., p 2

exploration of the original verbs. Clements counter argument to this claim would continue to support the classical model reminding us of those in the scientific community and others who still operate in concrete terms.¹²

A weakness of the Classic model is that it can appear hard; Carswell quotes Basset who implores 'A convicting gospel must be preached. The evangelist is not a comedian, or entertainer but one who convicts...' Warren responds to this type of attitude with a definition of entertain: 'capturing and holding the attention for an extended period of time', he continues, 'truth poorly delivered is ignored', we should not be afraid of being interesting. Warren further argues 'when God's word is taught in an uninteresting way, people think...God is boring'.¹³ Carswell says that we must be *earnest* (italics mine) in our preaching endeavours.¹⁴ Whilst this is true the love and compassion which Graham speaks of, and the positive engaging with our hearers must be paramount in our discourse.

Abraham draws our attention to Brown who levels some strong objections to the Classic model. He argues that the language does not relate, the attitude to the unbeliever is one of superiority, people are not seen as people but potential converts only.¹⁵

Stott reminds those who preaching coming from a conservative frame of reference, the need for relevance to the world around. He holds that the trend, generally amongst the over 40's, is to retreat into their comfort zone and their preaching if plotted on a graph would hold a straight trajectory from them to Heaven and it would not affect the hearers at all.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., p 3

¹³ Warren R, The Purpose driven Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House 1995) p 231

¹⁴ Carswell, p 136

¹⁵ Abraham, p 191

¹⁶ Stott J, I believe in preaching (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982) p 140

Whichever model of preaching is championed there are three challenges which if underestimated could be detrimental to preaching and it would lose all impact. However if these challenges are faced head on this present writer feels that they could become new and meaningful opportunities revising the future of preaching so that it can continue to be an effective evangelism tool for future generations.

The Challenge of Postmodernism

Since the middle of the 20th century the objectivity of language has been challenged. Image is favoured over words, feelings over concepts, intuition is prized more highly than knowledge. With the development of the virtual world the barrier between public certainty, and private conjecture has been demolished. Truth is seen as “do it yourself B&Q flatpack” as opposed to a ready built, pre-set structure.¹⁷ Kelly’s categories are insightful in analyzing the paradigm shift that has disabled the Classic model’s effectiveness in the west. It was born out of disillusionment and as a reaction against the prevalent modernist attitudes of the time.¹⁸ Kelly’s first breakdown is postmodernism opposition to big stories which give direction, the meta-narrative which made sense of our own stories. People listening to the gospel will struggle to hear the Christian story promote itself as the single answer to the human condition. Secondly reason is less favoured to intuition, the postmodernists want answers to questions outside of the bounds of the five senses. Issues of spirituality, experience, which transcends the material world, is highly sought after. A third area is the decline of long lasting commitments due to the diversity of choice and the desire to change. The loss of the meta-narrative, means a diversity of choice in life and so a reduction in meaningful commitment to anything.’ Life is about travelling not about arriving’ in the postmodern mindset the challenge is clear that effective evangelistic communication must be aware of the in built suspicion and hesitancy to respond to invitation, or commit to Christ. Allowing people to journey, and explore is key.¹⁹

¹⁷ Clements, p 4

¹⁸ Kelly G, Get a grip on the future without losing your hold on the past (London: Monarch books, 1999) p 137

¹⁹ Ibid., p 140

The advent of postmodernism amongst other factors have robbed preaching of its once high status it is to this which we turn our attention.

The Competition Factor

Today's evangelistic preacher has a great more competition to deal with than preachers of yesteryear. Stacey points to a number of alternatives where the role of preaching has been usurped. In terms of moral guidance, the newspaper editorials and advice pages have that. The doctor and the counselor have replaced the preacher who was once avidly listened to regarding issues of life.²⁰ A weakness of the Classic model is that it can be authoritarian. In a day of political correctness and group consensus, should a 'monologue have more authority than interactive dialogue.'²¹ There has been a hardening to authority figures on the whole. The communication revolution brings the relevance and significance of preaching in today's world into question and crisis.²²

The Communication Explosion

J Mitchell actively demonstrates how important it is for preaching to recognize the role and prominence of the media and it's effect on preaching. The advent and growth of multi media has changed the way people listen, making preaching a more difficult art. J Mitchell lists some overriding factors firstly as being length, whereas a political speech in 1890 would have been 60 minutes plus; in 1990 the British soundbite is 30 seconds. Secondly the style in which we like to receive information is changing, we do not expect to be 'spoken down to, but spoken with' television communication is increasingly becoming more and more visual.²³

The preacher is now one voice amongst many, to address these needs he needs to advocate developing a 'dialogical' approach which is multi-sensory. J Mitchell

²⁰ Stacey J, Preaching Reassessed (London: Epworth Press, 1980) p 79

²¹ Clements, p 4

²² Stacey, p 81

²³ Mitchell J, Preaching in an Audio-Visual Culture Anvil Vol. 14/4 (Cambridge: April 1997) p 265

quotes Paul Scott Wilson who maintains that ‘ the practice of preaching is the need for preachers to make a movie with words’. Using the contrast of a single lens and a multi lens camera, he encourages preachers to be willing to explore issues from a number of different directions.²⁴ Rice argues for the Ignation way of full engagement with the text, triggering the imagination allowing the images to be enlivened.²⁵ With preaching, and preachers facing hard questions in today’s world; we examine the Contemporary model, which answers, many of the questions, in the pursuit of effective evangelistic preaching in the west.

The Contemporary model

One of the key exponents of this model and the primary source of discussion in this section is Pastor Bill Hybels of Willow Creek community church. Founded over 25 years ago one of Hybels aims was to develop a new angle on preaching. Disillusioned with the seeming irrelevance of church to his unchurched friends, Hybels and several others began a service in a cinema, 25 years later 17,000 attend the church. The church is focused on mission and real conversion.²⁶ Strobel an associate of Hybels writes ‘when unchurched people were asked what could bring them into a church, the primary reason given by over 1 in 5 people was better messages.’ When the unchurched were asked what they would like out of a message 34% stated they liked to know in advance what the title was in advance, and they appreciated an interesting and informative title.²⁷

H Mitchell highlights another important aspect of contemporary preaching which makes it effective. It is an essential task to speak in the listeners’ language using vocabulary and ways of speech that they readily identify with.²⁸ This is definitely something Hybels and his team attempt week by week, comments by the

²⁴ Ibid., p 270

²⁵ Ibid., p 272

²⁶ Buckeridge J, Megachurch Christianity and Renewal, May 2001, (Sussex: Monarch CCP) p 16

²⁷ Strobel Lee, Inside the mind of unchurched Harry & Mary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993) p 211

²⁸ Mitchell H, The Recovery of Preaching (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997) p 150

unchurched include, 'the messages spoke my language', 'the messages answered my questions related to difficult life issues'²⁹

Buckeridge doing an investigation into the church speaks of a message he heard whilst visiting. He noticed it had three points to it scripture was used. However the article makes it clear that he was not prepared for the speakers opening line: 'On my first appointment to see my counselor..' ³⁰ This highlights yet another strength of the Contemporary model the vulnerability of the speaker. H Mitchell remarks 'a great failure of preachers is to address the very needs they themselves feel.' He goes on to expound that this attitude becomes a weakness because incarnation does not occur; 'there is an unhealthy distance between speaker and hearer and communication does not occur.'³¹ Strobel again uses the comments of the unchurched as they said 'the messages weren't holier than thou, Bill Hybels was very vulnerable'.³² Hybels' himself demonstrates another method of effective evangelistic communication and that is listening. In his book on personal evangelism Hybels reveals keys which he himself applies in the public arena. He encourages his readers to respect the person, learn about what they believe, 'earn the right to express more of your own thoughts'³³

Stott brings some wisdom into this field. He argues that whilst a sensitivity to the current world is beneficial, and an understanding of the ebb and flow of the contemporary thought is desirable, the revelation of Christ must not be ignored in the desire for relevance.³⁴ Carswell reminds us that in sharing the blessings and benefits, we can 'lose the basic facts that, Christ suffered died and rose again.'³⁵ Abraham challenges preachers to constantly check motives. Preaching along the lines of the Contemporary model Abraham warns of pandering to the hearers out

²⁹ Strobel, p 217

³⁰ Buckeridge, p 17

³¹ Mitchell, p 142

³² Strobel, p 218

³³ Hybels B, Becoming a Contagious Christian (Amersham: Scripture Press, 1994) p 212

³⁴ Stott, p 143

³⁵ Carswell, p127

of insecurity, sacrificing truth , to be popular or entertaining, for entertainment's sake.³⁶

The Contemporary model has been effective in Britain with the likes of J John and his topic based Just 10 mission, The Alpha course has also been very effective in relating Christ to all of life, not just the mind or the soul. In support of this integration two supporting views which argue for a more holistic view of people as a basis for effective preaching will be considered.

Henry Mitchell can be found in preaching in the African American context and is sometimes asked if emotion in preaching is mere manipulation, or just pressing the right buttons. Mitchell argues that the Greek dualism of flesh and spirit and the further dichotomy of reason and emotion brought about in the enlightenment is led to the current suspicion of preaching which engages the soul as well as the senses. The primary reason Mitchell presents for the Black integrated mindset is that the so labeled' primitive cultures' never underwent the unnatural division of mind and soul therefore they have had a more holistic approach to preaching.

There is a life and dynamism when he preaches, in some way he has been able to fuse the sense of authority, which is associated with the Classic model with an authenticity more akin to the Contemporary model.³⁷ Also there is the vulnerability and grace which is born out of suffering. Mitchell maintains that we have to 'start dealing with their (hearers) issues from inside their skin and not from some alien identity.' He goes on to draw a parallel with Christ and his incarnation and his willingness to suffer human frailty and weakness.³⁸

This is in sharp contrast to the 'prosperity gospel' which peddles health, and wealth to its supporters. Preaching again suffers a blow as the superficiality of these modern preachers is seen. Mitchell brings much need perspective.

³⁶ Abraham, p173

³⁷ Mitchell H, p 142

³⁸ Ibid., p 140

Thwaites explores the difference between the Greek and Hebrew worldviews encouraging the church to adopt the Hebrew model of integration of the Bible, life, work and relationships. Whereas the Greek worldview separated the spiritual and the created realm the Hebraic mindset knew no such division. The import for evangelistic preaching appears clear, place the cross in the culture of the hearer, that way they can see first hand its power and impact on their everyday lives. In regards to preaching Thwaites suggests the parable as the most creative way to reach out. This will be considered further in the following section.³⁹ We now turn the discussion to Jesus the master communicator and discover his way of communicating.

The Jesus way

Mike Riddel implores his readers to give true representation of who Jesus is when communicating evangelistically. Riddel grieves that when 'Christ is perceived as being the icon of good and respectable people, this has little relevance to peoples sordid and tangled lives.' Jesus who lived and died as a 'friend of sinners' has been translated into simply the judge of sinners, along with the church. Jesus has to become accessible to the common people. Jesus own treatment of himself can give us clues as to how to best communicate.⁴⁰

Whilst Hilborn supports the premise that Jesus expounded scripture in the temple. (Luke 4:16-13) Hilborn remarks Jesus preaching was often less structured, using a variety of creative methods. The setting was often the open air. Jesus used visual aids, poetry, humour, gestures, and silence, with ' the frequent avoidance of dogmatic answers to questions' Norrington concludes that Jesus emphasis was often on 'how to think, not what to think.'⁴¹

³⁹ Thwaites J, The Blizzard of Oz Compass, winter 2001, (Surrey: Pioneer Direct Ltd., 2001) p 12

⁴⁰ Riddel, p 123

⁴¹ Hilborn, p154

The power of story was a key aspect of Jesus' communication, stories carry our attention, and engage our emotions and serve as an effective memory aids Warren maintains.⁴² Jesus employed narrative to great effect, sixty parables representing one third, of Jesus' recorded communication. Hilborn argues that most of Jesus' engagement was in the form of dialogue arising from debates, discussions, with religious experts, his disciples and those he met on his travels. Their questions and issues formed the basis for his response.⁴³

Conclusion

Derek Tidball principal of London Bible College (at time of writing) speaks of the growing difficulty in instructing his students to preach in a propositional and didactic way in today's world. He closes his comments with 'we need to go beyond the classic expository model.'⁴⁴ Within the context of teaching the church the truths of God, the Classic model can be very effective, however in terms of preaching which has mission at its heart we must find new forms.

Hilborn urges us to walk a middle path by adopting the Jesus model. Jesus was referred to as 'Rabbi' and was trained and able to preach in an expository manner. Nevertheless this was no badge of privilege to him and he easily adapted his style to his audience and their needs.⁴⁵

In the western post Christian world evangelistic preachers may have to use the Classic model as the basis of their own understanding. Regarding it as the 'scaffolding' which will have to be removed from view before the message is unveiled.⁴⁶ Integrity, incarnation, integration, and inspiration are watchwords this present writer feels are an essential part of the emerging paradigm. This type of

⁴² Warren, p 231

⁴³ Hilborn, p 154

⁴⁴ Ibid., p 156

⁴⁵ Hilborn, p 160

⁴⁶ Ibid., p 160

preaching will remain effective providing we follow Josh McDowell's advice ' know your subject, be yourself and love your audience'⁴⁷

Word Count is 3222.

⁴⁷ Carswell R, And some evangelists (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2000)
p 133