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# Effective Preaching

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*by Michael Green*

Thank you for your welcome. I feel very welcome, indeed. I call this first address “Effective Preaching.” You know how it is. The hymn stops and the minister prays, the congregation settles in, the organist slips off his stool, a few people slink out, the ushers glance at their watches, the choir members start unwrapping their chewing gum, and the deaf switch off their hearing aids; the preaching is about to happen.

## **Power of Preaching**

All I can say is, “It was not always thus.” Look with me first at the power of preaching in the New Testament. The powerful preaching of Jesus drew such great crowds. Here was this man: sure of His God, dynamic in His teaching, clear and relevant, profound and simple. The people had never heard anything like it. “He teaches as one who has authority, not like the clergy,” they said. The Sermon on the Mount, or the controversies, or the parables, or the synagogue expositions—that’s the dynamic stuff. Jesus came telling the Good News of the Kingdom and the common people heard him gladly, which is more than can be said for preaching today. The church was born through preaching—open air preaching at that. Don’t let anybody tell you that it’s disrespectful. It’s not! That’s what Jesus did! That’s what we’re called to do in the right context and place for it.

But whether indoors or out, it was confident stuff. The preaching of the Early Church was born of a relationship with Jesus, and people listened. They said, “These guys have been with

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Jesus.” That’s a sort of translation of Acts 4:12. Their preaching didn’t lull men to sleep. It stirred them into action. They had to decide, and sometimes they decided to imprison the preachers or to kill them. Sometimes they decided to believe them and to join them. Not much preaching produces those kinds of reactions these days. It was powerful stuff, bold, confrontational, written in the Old Testament and in their experience of the living Jesus. It was preaching bathed in prayer and in the awareness that the Holy Spirit was active in what they were doing. They did this preaching in the streets at Pentecost. They did it before being executed, like Steven. It has a very clear aim—to bring men to Christ or to build them up in Him. It’s a far cry from the five-minute sermonettes and cozy chats of today.

Not long ago some Christians in Uganda were slated for execution for daring to say something against the government. These men had been converted while in prison. Now they were tied to stakes and the execution squads were ready. The prisoners said, “Jesus is alive! We know Him. He’s changed our lives. We’re going to meet Him. Do you know Him?” They preached until their bodies were riddled with bullets.

In Acts, chapter 3, observe Peter and John toddling along quite happily when they meet a beggar who wants cash. They give him a bit more than cash and it turns their experience into a preach-in.

A Christian friend and preacher from India was visiting in my study the other day. My friend didn’t allow himself to get ordained because that would make him a professional. He didn’t allow himself to get any money because that would make him a professional too. He just spends his life telling the Good News of Jesus. I said to him, “Tell me, you’re leading so many, many Hindus to Christ. What is the most important thing that brings them to the faith?” He said, “Oh, it is the healings!” Could you say that here? What’s the main thing that brings people to Christ in Kentucky? That people get healed? Is that what it is? For when people get healed they want to know why. And you tell them why.

That happened at one of our house meetings the other day. Somebody came in with an ill baby, and we layed hands on the baby and prayed for him and he got well and the people said, “Wow, tell us about this Jesus.”

When Paul was on trial for his life in front of Agrippa and he

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## *Green: Effective Preaching*

gave his apologia, his defense, at the end he turned to Agrippa and said, “You believe this stuff. I know you believe it.” And Paul has some humor. He said, “I wish you were just like me, except for these chains.” He really tried to evangelize his judge.

When those early Christians preached in the synagogues in Pisdian Antioch, people said, “Please come back next week and do it again, longer.”

There was power in their kind of preaching. No wonder the apostles didn’t get too dragged into administration. Sure, it’s got to be done, but if we’re not careful it eats us up. They gave themselves to prayer, and the study and proclamation of the Word. More than thirty times in the Acts of the Apostles we read that the *Word* grew, or the people believed the *Word*, or the *Word* flourished, or the *Word* prevailed. The early preaching, the *kerygma*, was the means by which the church spread. Let us read I Thessalonians 1:4, 5: “For we know, brethren beloved by God, that He has chosen you; for our Gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction...” Power, the Holy Spirit, conviction attending the word. Very frequently those three elements are absent today. But those features made the Early Church take off.

Indeed, Paul saw preaching as a means whereby people come from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God. He says so in II Corinthians 4:4-6. Those verses are amazing, relating that the God of this world blinds the minds of unbelievers. Right? That’s what you’ve got to face in your ministry. Most of you are going into pastoral ministry and I’m thrilled to hear that. You will find charming, delightful people, but their minds are blinded to the Gospel. They say, “Christianity is dull, I don’t want to join that lot,” and other things of that sort. The god of this world blinds their minds. The God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” (way back in Genesis) has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (v. 6, RSV). You’ve got the god who blinds the mind and the God who illuminates the heart—two massive, cosmic forces. And in between this great mountain, the little molehill of a verse 5 says, “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” What good is preaching going to do when you’ve got a god that blinds the mind and another God

that can shine into the heart, quite irrespective of our preaching? I'll tell you what good it does. God in His humility has determined to use the proclamation of the Word as the prime means (there are other means) whereby He shines into hearts and minds that have been blinded by the anti-God forces prevalent in our world.

That's why preaching is important. It brings people from the power of Satan to God. Mark's Gospel puts it, "They went out and preached everywhere."

There's a lovely last glimpse of Paul in prison in Rome. He's got the jailers there; every six hours they've been changed, and he says, "This is fantastic, the whole Praetorian guard has heard the Gospel through me." And it wasn't just the jailers, it was the visitors that were allowed in to see him. The last words in the Book of Acts state that he was "...preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered." *Akolytos*, and no man hindered him. Why? Because his Gospel was dynamite. It converted jailers; it converted visitors; it converted you and me. It's powerful. So I submit to you that preaching was not this prophetic rabbit of a creature in the Early Church; it was dynamite.

### **The Glory of Preaching**

Look at the glory of preaching in the history of the church. I have carefully studied the first three centuries and found that the Christian proclamation was one of the church's prime concerns. They did it in the streets, in house churches, in villages, by rivers, where people were doing their washing—the launderette today. Have you ever preached in a launderette? It can be done. Go and try it in your town because people are sitting around doing nothing for twenty minutes while their stuff churns 'round. Chat them up with the Good News. Why not? They did it in the Early Church. Why don't you try it? I did! What I am trying to say is that in the first three centuries of the church, so far as I can see, those people had fire in their belly—all of them. Women preached as much as men. They were lit up with Jesus inside and they couldn't keep quiet about Him.

The mission of the church, for the most part, (so Adolph Harnack tells us, and he's quite right) was carried out by lay missionaries. They went from village to village, according to Eusebius, to talk to people and to win fresh converts to their Lord. But they

## *Green: Effective Preaching*

went to the famous, too.

Think of Origen with his catechetical school, high grade Christianity for the real elite. What is not so well known about Origen is that he used to conduct addresses using very simple words of two syllables, especially for the uneducated people of Alexandria. How many high-flown theologians do that?

Or think of Justin. Justin was one of the great catches of the second century. A fantastic philosopher. And Justin was won to Christ by a little old man in the country who had a copy of the Gospels and the Old Testament Scriptures. Dynamite stuff! Anyway, Justin was converted in more ways than one. He continued to wear the philosopher's cloak when he preached Christianity as the true philosophy.

Or think of Irenaeus, that great Christian leader from the East and later from Gaul where he was bishop. He apologized in the *Adversus Haereseis* for his grotty Greek and Latin which had gone down the drain a bit because he'd been preaching so much in the vernacular in the marketplace, in the open air.

Think of Chrysostom talking about the human "disease of self-centeredness." Mighty good analogy that. There's only one "cure" that has been given to us and that is the teaching of the Word, he says. That is the best instrument, the best climate, the best "diet." Look how he sticks with the analogy. Brilliant! This serves instead of "medicine," instead of "cautery" or "cutting," whether it is needful to burn or amputate. This one method (the Word) must be used and without it naught else will avail.

In the days of the friars of Europe, Francis of Assisi, better known for his skill with the birds and the beasts, said that unless you preach everywhere you go, there's no use going everywhere to preach. Preachers ought to remember that when they go on visiting journeys like I do.

Luther, Calvin, or Cranmer's preaching of the Reformation lit up the world of their day. Luther was very funny about it. He said that he simply taught and preached and wrote God's Word, and otherwise, as Luther, he did nothing. While he slept, or drank his beer with his friends, the Word so greatly weakened the Papacy that never a prince or emperor inflicted such damage upon it. Luther did nothing; the Word did it all!

England in the eighteenth century was hovering on the edge of

total moral and spiritual collapse. Across the channel the French Revolution had wrought carnage to established patterns of the centuries. Deism held the day in Britain. People believed in a vague God that wound up the clock of the world and then set it ticking. You could go 'round the churches in London and not hear the name of Jesus Christ used in the pulpit. Two men, both educated within a hundred yards of where I work, changed all that in the eighteenth century: John Wesley, primarily in the United Kingdom, and Whitefield, primarily in the U.S., but both in each area. These men preached the Gospel with such power that thousands and thousands of people came to Christ, thus changing the whole climate of two great countries.

### **The State of Preaching Today**

You've had, in this country, a succession of great awakenings since Whitefield, and every one, if I mistake not, has been marked by a revival of preaching. Will Sangster, a British Methodist, wrote one of the best books on preaching, *The Craft of the Sermon*. He says, "Preaching the good news of Jesus is the highest and holiest task which any man can be given. It is a task for which archangels might forsake the courts of heaven." There is a glory of preaching in the history of the church, but the state of preaching today is very low. There are few great preachers. Few churches or congregations can cope with a sermon of even half an hour in length. It's usually folksy stuff, rather sentimental, rather comfortable, rather sugary, stories with odd texts floating around in them like the odd piece of toast in soup. I miss the wrestling with great themes today. I miss expectancy that the Word will do anything to people when they come to hear it.

### **What Has Happened?**

*First, a collapse of belief.* Many clergy do not even believe in God. They are hollow men. Skepticism and biblical criticism has eaten them up; modern unbelief has poisoned them. Belief in Scripture, in the New Birth, in preaching have all gone, and instead they give us comparative religion, existentialism, and a negative approach to the Scriptures. I'm not against biblical criticism, let me hasten to add. The word *krino* means to discern. I'm against skeptical biblical criticism that takes on board the presuppositions of unexamined secularism. And that has happened in a big way in the

## *Green: Effective Preaching*

church resulting in a collapse of belief. It's not the opposition from outside that is rotting the church. It is the lack of conviction from inside.

*Second, there is a revolution in communication.* This is the Marshall McLuhan age. It is the TV age—the age of instant visual communication. Nobody speaks for more than ten minutes, not even the newscaster. How can preaching survive? That is deeply rooted in people's guts. As a matter of fact it can survive. But it needs a little bit of understanding how.

*The third thing is a rejection of authority* which accounts for the collapse of preaching. Authority figures are anathema. We don't proclaim anything anymore; we discuss it. We don't expound anything anymore; we say, "Well, I guess I feel like this, how about you?" It is an egalitarian society and that is understood to mean that nobody needs to be told anything by anyone. Ask the young people; ask the disadvantaged. Authority is a dirty word. There is a rejection of authority mood that has resulted in a decrease of preaching.

*Fourth, there is a growth of relativism.* We live as citizens of a global village. There are many roads up the mountain to God. Why get so turned on about any particular one? They're all as good as each other. There are no absolutes. We live in the world of the relative. But the Gospel says that the absolute became relative. Say, that makes you out as one of the last of the merchants.

*Fifth, there's a change in priority.* Churches major more on worship; the service mustn't go on more than an hour, and it must be fun for an hour. Clergy-ministers major on further degrees, and further research after further degrees; on non-directional counseling; on amateur political, social, and psychological activity; and above all, on administration and the joy of every clergy heart—meetings. There is a change in priorities.

I present these five things as among the reasons for the decline of preaching, and they have caused the ministry of preaching to become the Cinderella of the ball. As a result, modern preaching, when it occurs, usually suffers in two ways at least. On the one hand it is dull. It's undistinguished, it's tentative, it's produced by people in formal clothes with formal language and formal manner and formal subject matter. Get a Billy Graham, get an Archbishop Hume, get the current Pope, and men flock to hear. That tells me



that there is a hunger in the human heart which we ordinary preachers aren't touching. It's a crime, brothers and sisters, to make Jesus dull.

Also, modern preaching suffers because it is not only dull, it is defective. It does not bridge gaps. It does not affect real life. It is either not really rooted in the Word of God and thus has no power, or it's not rooted in the contemporary scene and nobody gets hit by it. It doesn't affect life on Monday morning. It is part of a show that is expected by churchgoers. It is not vital for the life and growth of the church. That's as I see it, the state of preaching today is diseased.

### **A Diagnosis of Our Disease**

We talked of the power of preaching in the New Testament, the glory of preaching in the history of the church, and the state of preaching today. Now let's diagnose our sickness. *First, I see no authority in much modern preaching.* There is, it seems to me, a "how does it seem to you" sort of thing. Nobody can be vaguely misunderstood when saying, "Thus saith the Lord." Where is the authority? Not the authority of people who shout louder, I'm not after that. Where is the authority of the truth? Where is the authority of the Lord? Where is the authority that is taken home to the hearts of men and women by the Holy Spirit? Where is that sense that God is doing business with me? I'm only asking. Maybe it happens around these parts. It doesn't happen around my parts. That's all. No authority. No real biblical content. Oh, of course, there's some biblical content. It is attached to a text, tenuously or otherwise. But the power, the impact of the Word of God doesn't hammer us in much of today's preaching. There are moral values, there are stories, but there is no wrestling with the Word of God in such a way that people are changed by that Word.

I have a note in my room from one of the most depressed and awkward members of my congregation. She has been to every conceivable sort of psychiatrist and healing agency. Recently, she had been away for a week to one of them. As she came back on Sunday night, my colleague was preaching about Job, the third of three sermons on suffering. Turn to chapter 42 and observe how Job didn't get all his problems settled. But he met the living God and he stopped asking questions; he repented of his bellyaching attitude



## *Green: Effective Preaching*

before the Lord. And the Lord touched Job and renewed him. He touched this woman, too, who was very much snarled up inside. Her note to us said, “I’ve seen it. I’ve faced the Lord. I’m not complaining anymore. I’m not asking why. I’m just saying, ‘Lord, whether I’m coming or going, whether I’m here or whether I’m gone, I’m yours, please take me, use me.’” That was the turning of a corner. The power of the Word of God did that. The Word is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. My words are not, and therefore I need throughout my words to expose people to the Word.

There is no authority, no biblical content, no variety in our preaching. The length is predictable, the style is predictable. Why don’t we have an apologetic sermon sometime? Why don’t we have something that is real exaltation? Why don’t we have a sermon that just goes on to encourage? Most people need encouragement most of the time.

Why don’t we have a debate? I love debating people in missions. I find the local atheist and I set him up. I say to him, “You say your piece for twenty minutes and I’ll say my piece for twenty minutes. Then we’ll have the floor argue about it.” I minister to him afterwards, but I don’t tell him that last bit; it just happens. When the saints come in with the coffee and the personal conversation, that’s when the real thing happens. People come to Christ in that kind of context.

What happened to Paul on Mars Hill? They had the whole debating thing. What’s happened to real organized teaching? What’s happened to evangelism? Our preaching is all a bit “samey”; is all a bit predictable. There’s not much grappling with great issues. There’s not much impact on the casual visitor who comes into the church.

## **Structure in Preaching**

People can’t remember what the preacher said because he doesn’t aim at anything. How could he possibly hit it? How about the use of Scripture? It’s a shambles. People are not servants of the Word. They’re not there to open up the Word and so the Scripture doesn’t do its thing. If there is no plan in the minister’s mind, how can there be response in the poor person who just hears it once off and he’s half asleep anyway? The beginning and the end are a

disaster. The application is nil, and the manner is sugary.

There is more to this diagnosis of our sickness. *There is no sharing.* I am deliberately overstating a bit in order to sharpen us. There is some sharing, of course, but not enough. Preaching is powerful when it comes from shared situations, whether they involve prayer or poverty, mourning or danger. You have to sit where the people sit if you're going to preach to them effectively. That's why the preacher must be a visitor. If you don't visit you don't know what your people are thinking. You may be fabulous in the Word of God, but you'll be useless in fastening it into the hearts of the people.

There is a marvelous character here in your part of the world called Shorty. He's a farrier of horses. You've got a few horses around these parts, yes? In the article I was reading it said that the horseshoes are now manufactured in all prevalent sizes; the farrier doesn't make them anymore. But the farrier is still essential because every six weeks those horses have got to be shoed with new horseshoes. And the farrier has to apply nails to put those shoes on to those horses. That's what preaching has got to do. It's got to be applied. (A horse cannot be shoed from a distance.) We've got to sit where the people sit. We've got to get within kicking range to do it.

Another part of the diagnosis of the disease of modern *preaching involves a lack of seriousness.* In one sense we are serious, deadly serious and dull. But I mean a serious wrestling with the text, the presentation, the illustrations, and, above all, God. Do not preach so as to be understood, my friends. Preach so that you cannot be misunderstood. There needs to be passion and pleading with men and women, and warning and encouragement and confrontation. This is not milk and water stuff. It is life and death stuff, and preaching should be marked by seriousness. Frivolity in the pulpit, (I'm not saying jokes) is anathema.

*What about prayer?* Maybe the minister prays briefly. But, is there a united sense of prayer in the congregation? In our church people gather round the preacher before he goes into the pulpit and they lay hands on him and pray that the living God will light him up so that he can light somebody else up. Prayer changes things. Are folks so little changed in our churches because so little expectant prayer is made? I don't know, but I submit to you that it could be.

## *Green: Effective Preaching*

In Acts 4:31 they had an amazing time of prayer together, and the place was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they proclaimed the Word of God with boldness. I guess there could have been a link somewhere.

So, my diagnosis for the disease that has attacked effective preaching includes no authority, no biblical content, no variety, no structure, no sharing, no seriousness, and no prayer.

### **Pathways to Effective Preaching**

*First, believe in it.* Do you or do you not believe that there is power in the proclamation of Jesus Christ? Do you believe it is a major means of grace? Do you believe it changes lives of Christians and non-Christians? Do you expect it to pierce to the very heart and marrow? If not, give up preaching. Bishop William Walsham How of another generation said, "I do not mean to get through a sermon somehow, but to speak in God's name to the souls He would save." We feel, "Oh God, I cannot speak for I am a child." Yet it is just this realization of the awesome nature of what we do that can enable us to do it at all. I believe in preaching. I expect God to act.

*Second, for effective preaching, trust the Scriptures.* All great preaching has been biblical preaching. Behind the words of men, congregations have heard the Word of God. Do you believe that God has spoken and revealed Himself? If not, you have no business preaching at all. I am totally serious about that. Do you believe that the Word of God is contained in this Scripture which is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for conviction, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be mature and equipped for every good work? It is out of this conviction that Paul said, "We preach the Word in season and out of season." It is the preacher's responsibility to convince, rebuke, and exhort without failing in patience or teaching.

Spurgeon, the great nineteenth century preacher, had some trenchant words for those who pursue fresh lines of thought when they spread the tidings of salvation. He said, "To be forever deliberating as to the proper mode of making bread while a nation perishes of hunger is detestable trifling. Highly cultured soul murderers will find their boasted culture to be no excuse in the day of judgment." It is time we knew what to preach or else renounce

our office. We're not in a pulpit to show our learning or to share our problems or to give more advice.

*Third, we are in the pulpit to be ambassadors for Jesus Christ;* God beseeches the listener by the preacher. "Be reconciled to God." So, "If anybody speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God," says the New Testament. The preacher must show that he can rightly divide the Word of Truth and drive a straight path through it. Believe in it. Trust the Scriptures. Be Christ-centered. He is the supreme attraction. Speak often of Him because He is the wisdom of God and the power of God. I am determined to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ and His cross. Paul at Athens was found preaching Jesus and the resurrection. Walsham How again, "Do not forget that our religion is the religion of a person. It draws all it's meaning and power from this person. Jesus Christ is the alpha and the omega. Let all your preaching show you realize this. The hearts of your people long to hear about Him. They never feel quite satisfied if they do not." Of course. Because the living Word, Christ, is encountered in the written Word, inspired by the Spirit, and preached by men and women full of the Spirit. Him we proclaim. Be Christ-centered in your preaching.

*Fourth, effective preaching involves bridge-building.* The good preacher is stretched between profundity and relevance. He sometimes is crucified between those two poles. He has one foot in the New Testament and one foot in the contemporary scene. He reads the Bible and Karl Marx. He wrestles to get inside the biblical mind and the modern mind, earthing the eternal Word in the soil of the modern mind so that it can grow and produce much fruit in the world where the Christian mind is notable for its nonexistence. The good preacher hits social issues like poverty and justice, and the exploitation of Third World nations. He hits sexual issues like homosexuality and divorce; personal issues like affluence and guilt. We have to build bridges into places where it hurts because the Word of God is like medicine. We've got to see what makes modern man tick. They're dominated by the box so we've got to know what's going on in the box. We've got to know what's going on in society. We've got to see that the presidential election is not simply fought on issues that the politicians want, but on issues of justice, truth and integrity.

### **Be Definite Bridge Builders**

In this country, people are opinion formers. A lot of people here go to church. How criminal, therefore, if you're not really rooted in the Scriptures and in the contemporary scene. Be definite and bold. Definite in content, aim, structure, language, thought, prayer, and expectancy. Be definite! Leave no doubt what you're all about. Be bold. Be bold in preaching directly at the wills of people. Bold in debate. Bold in tackling contentious issues. Bold in preaching for a verdict. We need to be bold in preaching a proper sermon, even if the deacons say that it mustn't go for over ten minutes. We cannot do this in five-minute sermonettes. I leave you with one thought: sermonettes build Christianettes.

