

Effectual Preaching

by Anton Bosch

The true effectiveness of preaching is not measured by human means, but by the fruit of the new birth, and preachers must be willing to set aside their ego and desire to impress in order to let the power of God be manifest.

Scripture: John 3:30, Romans 1:16, Romans 8:29, Romans 10:14, 1 Corinthians 1:17, 1 Corinthians 2:1, 1 Corinthians 2:5, 1 Corinthians 4:2

Topics: "Effective Preaching", "Gospel Power"

Description

Anton Bosch challenges the common notion that successful preaching relies on eloquence, charisma, and persuasive abilities, emphasizing that a preacher's focus should be on delivering the Gospel with simplicity and faithfulness, allowing the power of God to work in the hearts of the listeners. Drawing from Paul's example, Bosch highlights the danger of relying on human wisdom and clever presentation, which can hinder the true impact of the Gospel message. He underscores the importance of preachers humbly stepping aside to let God's transformative power work in the lives of the hearers, rather than seeking personal recognition or impressive results.

Transcript

There is little doubt that most preachers want their preaching to make an impact on the hearers. But there are two questions that stem from this: How do we make preaching effectual and how do we measure the results?

There is probably universal agreement that the most important qualifications for a preacher are eloquence, a magnetic personality and a strong ability to persuade. Those are certainly the qualities that mark all the successful preachers most people admire. No one wants to listen to someone who is not entertaining, intellectually stimulating and inspirational. People who were born with a remote control in their hands have little tolerance for the unexciting. And so the better the preacher is at being exciting, the bigger the crowd he will draw. But is this a biblical model?

The reality is that there is very little difference between preachers and sales people. It is interesting how often people from the sales profession end being preachers and how easily preachers turn to selling consumer goods when preaching no longer pays. In fact, the process of the altar call has been likened to the "close" of a sales pitch (See <http://herescope.blogspot.com/2012/04/altar-call.html>).

Evangelicals have for a long time used sales techniques, not only to close the deal at the altar, but in other aspects of the presentation of the Gospel such as convincing the clients about the features, advantages and benefits of the product. The skills, qualifications and characteristics of a good salesman and a good preacher are almost identical - just the product is different. A few years ago I visited the Crystal Cathedral where the tour guide informed us with great pride that her preacher was the best salesman in the world and that he could sell ice to an Eskimo! (Her exact words.)

Paul certainly had the qualifications to be as an exciting preacher as any. He knew his "product" better than anyone else, he had a powerful personality, he was fearless, he was a powerful orator and communicator and he could relate to people at every level of society. To crown it all he could perform miracles and thereby dazzle, entertain and captivate his audience. Paul certainly had all the makings of a great and successful preacher.

But he refused to use any of his "gifts" in preaching the Gospel!

This is what he said: "And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God" (1Corinthians 2:1) "And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom" (1Corinthians 2:4). This was not just Paul being coy or faking humility. Some of those who saw him in action said: "his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible" (2Corinthians 10:10). In other words he was not worth looking at or listening to. His detractors used this as proof that Paul was not really a man of God.

To be sure, Paul could be impressive and articulate but he made a conscious decision to set those things aside. There has to be a good reason why Paul chose that route while 99 percent of preachers today would give anything to have Paul's talents. So why did Paul go out of his way to not play to the audience and use his intellect and powers of persuasion?

Because he knew something preachers today don't: Clever presentation is detrimental to the preaching of the Gospel! Not only does it not produce real results, but it hinders results. This is how Paul put it: "For Christ [sent me] to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect." (1 Corinthians 1:17). Did you get that? A clever presentation destroys the power of the cross! Let me put it in other words: The more impressive the preacher, the less likely people will really get saved!

Yes, I know that flies in the face of hundreds of years of Evangelical tradition and is contrary to every notion of common sense. But it is the truth. We must consider the possibility that common sense and tradition (even evangelical tradition) is merely human wisdom which is contrary to God's wisdom (1Corinthians 1:19, 21, James 3:13-17).

But how is it possible that "good" preaching can be ineffectual, when the outcomes are clearly visible? By outcomes we mean people flocking to the altar, large numbers of decision cards completed and crowds in the pews. Firstly, these "results" prove nothing. None of the things we traditionally use to measure success in preaching has a Biblical basis and numbers at the altar or in the pew have very little to do with true conversions or the true church.

Paul said he purposely did not use "persuasive words" "that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:5). The very context in which he says those words indicates that there were people amongst the Corinthians who were followers of men and not of Christ. It follows that the more persuasive the preacher the more likely that people would be followers of that man, rather than true

disciples of Jesus Christ.

So when Paul contrasts "the wisdom of men" with "the power of God", how is the power of God manifest? It is not measured in shouting, spitting and sweating or any other external or visible measure. The power of God is only manifest in its ability to transform sinners into saints. It does not matter how many things we cite to prove the effectualness of the preaching, if lives are not being transformed then nothing has happened. Churches and (even Evangelical) pulpits are full of people who claim to be saved but show no evidence or fruit of the new birth whatsoever.

The power of the Gospel (Romans 1:16) lies in its ability to change the very nature of a sinful man into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). And that power is not unleashed through persuasive words, psychology, shouting and sweating, miracles or a seeker-friendly approach. It comes only through the work of the Holy Spirit and modern preachers do more to hinder the work of the Spirit than to promote it.

Paul was clear that he wanted to be absolutely sure that nothing he said or did would get between the hearer and the power of God. Any display of personality, charisma and clever oratory, by its very nature, gets between the hearer and the Spirit. Effectively, Paul was saying that he (or any other preacher) needs to be as invisible as possible in order that the Gospel may be unhindered. And that is just where we preachers struggle since every one of us has an ego and desperately want to impress people with our wit, use of words personality and knowledge.

John the Baptist understood this. His outward appearance and lifestyle were decidedly unattractive because he knew that he was only a "voice". Not even a voice in the temple, but a voice in the wilderness. He further understood that his only purpose was to prepare the way for the real Preacher - Jesus Christ (John 3:27-36).

Moses had to learn the same lesson. When he was forty years old he "was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds." (Acts 7:22). But after forty years in the wilderness he confessed: "I am not eloquent... but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Exodus 4:10). It was only then that God was able to use him as one of the greatest prophets of all time.

If only preachers would understand that they are not the one who convicts, but the Spirit is, and all we have to do is prepare the way for Him. In order to do that we need to have John's desire that "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30). Yes, God uses preachers or "how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14). But He will only use those preachers who are willing to set aside every display of self in order that God alone will do the work of regeneration and that God alone will get the glory (1Corinthians 1:29).

Here is a test of a good preacher: When people leave the meeting do they understand the message or are they impressed with the preacher? Days later, do people remember the message or do they remember the preacher?

Not only was Paul unimpressive as a preacher, his results were dismal. Near the end of his life, he confessed that he had only one disciple that truly embodied his own philosophy of ministry. "For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus." (Except Timothy.) (Philippians 2:20-21). Once-again, Paul just does not compare to any of the modern successful preachers who count their disciples by the thousands.

But there's the rub. The true results cannot be measured by human means. The truth will only be manifest on the Day of Judgment. In the context of Paul's statements above, he continues: "Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God." (1 Corinthians 4:2-5).

Oh, that God may give us preachers who are willing to step aside that we may see Jesus and not men. May the Lord give us preachers who would speak the simple truth, as it was intended by the Lord, so that the hearers may hear God's Word and not the ideas of men. May He send us men who are not interested in the results or in taking credit but only in being faithful to Him who called them.

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