

INTRODUCTION

To preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time, and to know each time you do it that you must do it again. – Bruce W. Thielemann, *The Wittenburg Door*, no. 36 (April–May 1977)

Are preachers born or made?

Is preaching gift or graft or both?

Is the work of preaching inspiration, perspiration or a combination of the two?

Can you teach preaching? Can you grow preachers?

Can you grow as a preacher?

These questions are fundamental to this book.

A survey of Scripture suggests that preaching (in its church-wide, formal sense) is something that individuals are both gifted for and required to work at. A preaching ministry is something that is both designated and developed. It is ministry that must be shaped, sharpened and cultivated. It is ministry to be 'fulfilled', 'fanned into flame', 'grown up into' and 'continued in'. It is ministry that the church identifies people for and seeks to equip them in. Therefore the fundamental premise of this book is two-fold, that *every preacher can be a better preacher* and *every preacher must strive to become a better preacher*.

Let us look at some passages of Scripture to see these twin ideas of gift and graft.

A Command in 1 Timothy 4

1 Timothy is written as a crisis letter to bolster Paul's protégé Timothy in his ministry amidst the unruly church in Ephesus. Timothy is being charged with teaching and organising the church, keeping it safe and conducting himself appropriately in the face of false teaching. Paul, in chapter 4, begins by saying that this false teaching is to be expected (v. 1), that this false teaching will demand asceticism and the rejection of good things given by God (vv. 3-5). In contrast Timothy is to pray and put before the brothers the Word of God (vv. 6). Timothy is to reject irreverence and train himself in godliness (vv. 7-9), all motivated by his hope set on the living God (v. 10). Paul then writes the following paragraph:

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Tim. 4:13-16).

In this passage there is the delicate interplay between gift and graft. Explicitly in verse 14 Timothy's ministry is a gift, something he was identified for and appointed to by the council of elders. However there is no escaping the graft that exists on either side of the verse, devotion to reading, exhortation and teaching (v. 13), practice, immersion and

progress (v. 15). All finishing with the final exhortation to be observant, diligent and persistent (v. 16), which all achieve the ultimate goal of salvation for Timothy and his congregation.

It seems therefore clear that preaching (in the narrow sense of teaching ministry in a church) is a gift given to and identified in individuals. This giftedness however does not negate the individual's responsibility to work hard, to graft and to make progress in exercising that gifting.

Paul commands Timothy to work hard at making the most of his gift. Preaching ministry is a gift, but that gift must be continually worked at in order to progress.

A Chastisement in Hebrews 5

The sermon of Hebrews is a sustained exhortation to Jewish Christians tempted to return to the shadowlands of Judaism, and in so doing renege on their commitment to Jesus Christ and so forfeit their salvation. It is a multi-faceted, extensively reasoned and thorough argument highlighting both their privileged position, ongoing responsibilities and the terrible consequences if they continue down this chosen path of walking away from Jesus.

At the end of chapter 5 after the section considering Jesus' credentials and sufficiency as the perfect great high priest we need, the writer says,

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers,

you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:11-14).

There is clear exasperation in these verses that the Hebrews have become dulled, that they haven't progressed and they haven't matured in their understanding. A symptom of this is that they are having to be taught the basics again when really, by now, they should be the teachers. They should no longer be unskilled infants in their handling of the Scriptures but matured, weaned and trained teachers. They have failed to constantly practise and therefore they are still childlike in their understanding.

Though in the middle of a dense and complex argument, on the surface it is clear that progressing into teachers of others is an expectation. To learn so as to become proficient and from proficiency to then instruct is not just commended but expected. Now it is not clear exactly the shape of that teaching ministry but mastering the Scriptures in order to be able to instruct and pass on the teaching to others seems a normal expectation.

The writer to the Hebrews chastises his readers for not progressing in the ministry expected of them. Progress to become teachers is expected.

A Clarification in Acts 18

Apollos was a gifted communicator, he had a good handle on the Scriptures and was zealous in his evangelistic preaching to his fellow Jews in Ephesus. His preaching is described as being of great fervour and teaching about Jesus accurately. However after one of his synagogue sermons, Priscilla and Aquila took him to their home and gave him lessons to further his understanding and develop his preaching (18:26).

With this teaching in place Apollos with the encouragement of the Ephesian church went to Achaia and there his preaching is described as *'greatly help[ing] those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus'* (Acts 18:27b-8).

Great fervour and accuracy in Ephesus becomes, after the intervention of Aquilla and Priscilla, vigorous refutation and proving powerfully from the Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah. A phrase perfectly in line with Paul's synagogue preaching in Corinth at the commencement of the chapter (18:5).

Apollos was a gifted preacher who was greatly helped by the clarifying tuition of Aquila and Priscilla. There are things that can be learnt to become a better, more effective preacher.

A Character like Moses in Deuteronomy 1:1

Moses became a great preacher. The tongue-tied former prince now shepherd meets God on a hillside and is

appointed to preach God's message of judgment for the salvation of His people from Egypt to Pharaoh. After some 'heated' dialogue Moses eventually declares, *'Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue'* (Exod. 4:10).

As a result God reveals His provision of Aaron, Moses' older brother who is already on his way to meet Moses. Aaron will do the talking for Moses in front of Pharaoh. This is not the most promising start to a preaching career even for an eighty year old. Yet by the end of his life, at the ripe age of 120, Moses preaches the longest sermon series, before a whole nation of people to propel them on their way into the promised land. *'These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness...'* (Deut. 1:1).

Now that is someone who has taken progressing as a preacher seriously from the age of eighty onwards.

A Challenge from Romans 12

After the great 'therefore' of Romans 12:1 Paul begins to flesh out the implications of the great mercies of God he has writ large across the first eleven chapters of the letter for his readers.

In the headline of the section are the famous words about presenting their individual bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. The command is to not be conformed, but instead be transformed by the renewing of their minds in order that they might each be able to discern what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable

and perfect. Paul now drills down into the metaphor of the church as a body with many members gifted in different ways in order to perform many different functions.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness (Rom. 12:3-8).

The gifts in view are wide ranging, but it is interesting that four of the seven listed pertain to the work of the pastor-teacher. Those of prophesying (small p), teaching, exhortation and leading.

These individuals are gifted for this role, but they are gifted in order to benefit others. With these others in mind it is incumbent on the one with the gift to use it to the best of their ability in order to bless the body as a whole. That requires effort, refinement and progress in deploying the gift in order that the body gains the most benefit from the

individual. Therefore developing, progressing and building up those gifts is necessary if the body is to function and grow properly.

There is no doubt therefore that God has called and gifted some believers in order to perform a more formal role of preaching and teaching within and for the whole body.

A Charge in Ephesians 4

Ephesians is a letter detailing the cosmic purposes of the united and solid church of Jesus Christ as the display of God's manifold wisdom. Chapter 4 concerns how this body is unified and grown to maturity in Christ.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says,

'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.'

(In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:7-13).

The picture in view is of a great military victory where the returning victor shares the spoils of war with his subjects. The gifts in view here in Ephesians 4 are not plunder, treasure or bounty but gifts of people given by the Lord Jesus, people who help other people grow and mature in their service of Christ within the church. There are four particular types of gift: apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers. These gifts are given not to do the work of ministry but to equip the saints for the work of ministry. These teaching gifts are given in order that others might be taught, built up and brought to complete unity in Christ. The whole passage is one of movement. Christ who descended is the ascending. The gifts are given down to men from the ascended Christ. Those gifts are to be continuously deployed and refined in the church in order that everyone might make progress, be equipped, built up, unified and matured.

Again it is clear from Ephesians 4 that there is gifting involved in the role of preaching but it is obvious that this gift needs deployment and work in order that the saints might be equipped to do more ministry.

The answer as to whether preachers are born or made must be, both. A pastor-teacher is the gift of a gifted individual from the Lord Jesus to the church, but that pastor-teacher does not come as a pre-packaged-out-of-the-box-preacher but one who must continually graft in order to be more useful and make continuous progress in the appointed task.

Progressing as a preacher is vital and although there are certain gifts important for preaching, gifting without graft is disobedience.

Making progress is not an optional aspiration for the few but of vital importance for all. To grow in dependence, confidence, competence and character will all mould together to elevate the faithfulness and fruitfulness of our preaching by the grace of God.

When we think about growth it is important to define what we mean. We are aiming at increasing our batting average on a year by year basis, so that our consistency, fidelity, clarity and preaching of the text are improving over the long haul. We are teaching our people faithfully and they are encouraged as they see us working hard and seeking to grow in our service of them as we develop as servants of the Word. We want our yearly appraisal to say consistently, 'His preaching has continued to improve this year.'

We are thinking in this book about how we can make progress and grow our regular, ordinary, average Sunday sermon, week in week out, year on year, until the One who has captivated our hearts and been proclaimed on our lips eventually fills our gaze.

Preaching is hard work, but it is also thrilling work.

- The excitement and apprehension of sitting down at one's desk at the beginning of a new week, with a blank sheet of paper and a fresh Bible passage in front of you.
- The pep talk you give yourself increasing your determination to marinate your heart in this passage

before an earnest prayer and then setting sail by reading the text slowly and repeatedly.

- Then during preparation the burning desire that grows daily as God by His Spirit speaks with increasing clarity as you wrestle with the text and are again convinced that this is the most important message your people need to hear.
- The anxious expectancy on Saturday knowing that you need to get this sermon out of you, even though it is not quite ready.
- The nerves you feel during the final chorus before the sermon, and grabbing your notes you desperately beg God for help on your fretful walk to the front.

Then before you know it, it is preparing to prepare time all over again.

Preaching is hard. Preaching is a privilege. It is our firm belief that *every preacher can be a better preacher* and that *every preacher must strive to be a better preacher*.

If as a preacher you can be a better preacher and indeed you must strive to be a better preacher then the remainder of this book offers some suggestions of how that might happen.

The idea for this book came out of a series of seminars delivered by Jonathan Lamb, Matt Fuller and Lewis Allen at the Evangelical Ministry Assembly in 2019 on the subjects of growing as a preacher at different stages of ministry. Their content provided the impetus for writing this book.

It is very simply structured across its five chapters. Chapter 1 is all about *Keeping your Convictions*, cementing the truths that undergird a continuing and effective Bible teaching ministry. Chapter 2 concerns *Cultivating Right Attitudes* and how we should think about our preaching ministry. Chapter 3 tackles *Heeding the Dangers*. There are so many pitfalls that endanger a preaching ministry and therefore forewarning will hopefully result in forearming. Chapter 4 addresses the *Setting and Sustaining of Priorities* before Chapter 5 is more practical and offers some ways you might continue *Honing your Skills*.

Brothers, what an amazing privilege, what synapse straining work, but we wouldn't want to expend our lives doing anything else, so let's go for growth. No matter who you are or what your ministry looks like, hold fast to these two truths. That every preacher can be a better preacher and that every preacher must strive to be a better preacher.