

What's Wrong with Contemporary Preaching?

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In this paper I want to address the state of contemporary preaching. Interestingly, what began as an icebreaker question has now developed into an article because of the grave concerns of lay professionals, students and even several pastors on the current state of preaching with reference to the Singapore context.

The call to preach is a high and holy calling. It is a serious matter and should not be taken frivolously. To preach the Word of God boringly, lifelessly or indifferently is a travesty of biblical preaching. Hence, all preachers should 'work out their preaching with fear and trembling'. Since preaching is what a preacher does and is given priority when a church seeks a pastor, some serious reflection is required concerning what preaching is all about.¹

Haven't we all had experiences in which the singing was vibrant and exciting but the preaching was stale, insipid and pallid? What was supposed to be a high point in the service ended up as low point? On the other hand, were there not occasions when the worship services appeared like funeral dirges but somehow the ununctionised or anointed preaching charged the atmosphere with the presence of God and changed the entire ambience? It is always possible to have a great worship service but poor preaching can ruin it. On the flip side, we can have a dull and lifeless worship service but an ununctionised preaching can save the day.

Were there not times also when we went to the service full but came out empty inside while at other times we went in empty but came out full? Of course there were also occasions where both the worship service and preaching were a let down. Such experiences are common but the question we need to ask is, is it normal or abnormal?

What are some of the responses or rather complaints to the question what is wrong with contemporary preaching? Many contemporary sermons are too academic and pedantic and do nothing for the soul. Other sermons put listeners to sleep because they are boring. Some preachers make you feel you have been to the Antarctic!

Admittedly, some sermons are excellent, some appalling while others are boring. Nothing is worse than a preacher delivering a boring sermon.²

Sadly, a few preachers give the impression that preaching is a *job* to be *done* rather than a *calling* to be *fulfilled*. Therefore, it becomes more of a fulfillment of some contractual obligation to the church rather than a ministry. The danger is that instead of becoming *ministry* preachers we become *professional* preachers in the ministry.

Some laity have complained that preachers have ceased to be relevant because they are insensitive to the contemporary context by not addressing current issues. Though we are living in a digital age where the visual has overshadowed the audio, preaching continues to be conceptual and abstract rather than image driven and concrete. Illustrations used are often antiquated rather than fresh ones from the anvil of daily experiences. The pulpit instead of being a platform for the proclamation of God's truths has in fact become a platform for propagating psychological or media truths. Though we are called to preach the good news, sometimes our preaching sound more like bad news or even human views! There seems to be more bad news and not enough of grace in the news. It seems easier to preach on sin than grace, isn't it?

Preaching is also deemed to have failed to meet human needs. People are hungry for bread but are given stones instead. Is it any wonder that preachers receive stony looks? 'If people are hungry for bread and you give them stones don't be surprised when you get a stony response' says Bartow.³

Much preaching also suffer from the paralysis of analysis of biblical texts. They are strong on diagnosis but weak in prognosis in treating the symptoms. A sermon may contain a myriad of ideas that are too overwhelming for the average listeners to absorb in one go. There is also the misuse or abuse of texts which some preachers use the text simply as a starting point or attention getter but never return to it.

Contemporary preaching appears to lack authority, power and boldness. Why? Could it be that the Bible is treated simply as a religious book rather than the Word of God? With no Word to back up, the preacher is deprived and devoid of authority. Preaching also appears to 'tickle ears' rather than 'touching hearts'. Instead of helping the

listeners to *encounter* God, our preaching merely help them to know *about* God.

Interestingly, the Bible is reputed to be one of the world's greatest (if not the greatest) classics, the most inspiring, fascinating and interesting book in the world. It contains stories after stories pulsating with life and exciting the imagination. How is it that when preachers tell these stories they lack the vim and vitality? Worse still, by the time some preachers finish telling them, they seem bland and unexciting.

One lay person likens listening to sermons as eating buffet in a restaurant. The abundant spread of food on the table looks very delicious, appetizing and exotic. However, after having eaten to your heart's content, you still feel something is missing. What is missing is the 'umph'. The missing ingredient in some if not many sermons preached is the 'umph'. Why?

The aim of preaching is to effect changes in the lives of the listeners but it appears not to do so. Preaching seems innocuous and makes little difference in the lives of the listeners. Sermons don't seem to impact people now adays as much as in the past. Lives are not being changed in spite of listening to sermons after sermons each Sunday. In the words of Fred Craddock 'sermons are words, words, words'.⁴ Preaching no longer seems to communicate. Why is it so? Whose fault is it? The preacher or the listener? Is there a communication problem or a spiritual problem?

Contemporary preaching has also been labeled as passionless, purposeless, impersonal, perfunctory, monotonous, lifeless and irrelevant. There is a lack (lost?) of fire, resulting in preaching becoming 'business as usual' on Sunday. There is also a lack of freshness, sparkle, animation, vivacity, unpredictability as well as conviction.

Why are some preachers doing such a poor job in preaching? What is the problem? Wherein lies the problem? Lack of resources? Surely not. There are hundreds of books on homiletics. Each year, scores of new books on homiletics are churned out. Could it be that preachers are not preaching expository messages? I doubt so. I do not think that it is the type of message (e.g. topical, textual, etc.) that determines the effectiveness of a person's preaching. Whether a person's preaching is dynamic or hypnotic depends on some other factors.

Why do some people get switched off during sermon time? Why do some preachers preach for about 30 minutes and it seems to last for an hour while others preach for an hour and it seems to last only like 20 minutes? Why do some preachers keep on rambling past the sermon hour despite the restlessness of the congregation? What has happened to the concept of quality control? Are we aiming for qualitative preaching or quantitative preaching? Is the length of a sermon an indication of its depth or merely a lack of discipline on the preacher's part? Do preachers not know the maxim that a 'for a sermon to be immortal it does not have to be eternal?' Or, 'the mind can only absorb what the seat can endure'? Do some preachers subscribe to the notion that *much* preaching accomplishes *something* really true? Is it possible to listen to *good sermons* and yet not know the *Good Shepherd*? Must every sermon seek to explain or include the whole counsel of God? How do we explain the fact that in many seminaries, students who enrolled in homiletical classes score A or B but out in the field manage only to score either a C, D, or even an F?

How is it that Evangelicals are proud of the claim that on Sunday morning the Word of life is preached, yet there seems to be no life or excitement in some of their preaching? How do we explain the fact that preachers claim to be preaching the Word of God in the Sunday morning service but there seems to be no word from God? Why is there no message heard and why are there empty chairs and pews in Sunday morning services?⁵ Why do the listeners seem not to hear from God? If the sermons convey the Word of God, why are there some bad sermons? Whose problem is it? The preacher, the listener or the devil?

There are no easy answers to all these questions. Some preachers have a tendency to blame the devil. Not surprisingly, they spend more time rebuking the devil in Jesus' name.⁶ Others will tend to blame the listeners as 'sermon hardened' and compare them to the residents who see and hear the awesome Niagara Falls daily. As a result of daily exposure, they become immune or deaf to the beauty and magnificent sound of the cascading water of the Falls. These preachers will spend time rebuking members in Jesus' name in their prayers and occasionally from the pulpit.

The listeners also have an equal tendency to blame the preachers. Some would advocate the preachers attending more advanced classes

on homiletics, mastering of newer communication theories, using more creative methods, etc. while others just throw up their hands in despair. They are resigned to the fact that preaching on Sunday morning is 'business as usual', which means boring and dull. On the other hand, can it also be that the listeners are enjoying 'the absence of God'⁷ so much so that they expect nothing much to happen on Sunday morning? Nobody seems to care what happens on Sunday morning. Is it because they like everything to be to be status quo?

It is always easy to play 'the blaming game' ever since Adam and Madam (Eve) started it. My opinion is that the truth lies somewhere between the three. However, preachers should take a larger portion of the blame if their preaching is not producing results. Clyde Reid asks a relevant question - 'Preaching is supposed to be God's supreme saving activity, why does this activity appear powerless?'⁸

The key question then is, are the days of preaching over? Should we dispense with preaching as the primary mode of communicating the Word since our preaching does not make a visible difference in the lives of the listeners? If preaching is retained, should we spend so much time in sermon preparation⁹ when there are other more pressing demands? Should preaching be disbanded or at least changed into cell group discussion?

My immediate response is no. I believe preaching is *still* the primary mode of communicating the Word of God to this (post) modern generation. It still has a major role to play as it did in the Old and New Testament periods as well as throughout the history of the church. When we turn to the New Testament, we discover that preaching was the primary mode of communicating the Gospel. It is still as viable today as yester years. Preaching has been the heartbeat of Christianity and is still 'the singularly effective means of Grace'. There is no alternative to preaching because people still like to listen to sermons on Sunday morning.

When we preach, we are asserting a theological claim that preaching is worthwhile in God's redemptive plan. By the act of preaching we are making an important statement that God has spoken. Therefore, we should not abandon a high view of preaching. In the words of Paul, '...and how could they hear without someone [preacher] to spread the news... (Rom 10:14).'¹⁰

What we have today is both a communication problem as well as a spiritual problem. Communication problems like lack of vocal variety, poor delivery, voice projection, etc. are easier to overcome through practice. But with spiritual problem, it is another thing especially preaching with power. My primary concern is more with the latter.

Sadly speaking, much of contemporary preaching is *powerless* because the preacher is *unctionless*. In my view, the lack of unction in our preaching is not the fault of the listeners but the preachers'. You see, if there is unction (or anointing) in our preaching, even the most stiff necked and hardened listeners can be broken by the hammer of God's word. 'Are not my words like fire, says the lord; are they not like a hammer that shatters rock? (Jer 23:29).¹¹

In summary, what do the listeners ¹² want from the preachers on Sunday morning? They want to listen to sermons that are biblical, practical and yet relevant. They want to listen to sermons that create a sense of wonder for them and are unpredictable. In other words, they want to be pleasantly surprised. They also want to listen to sermons that are inspirational rather than merely instructional. After a hard week at schools or offices, they come to Sunday service to be inspired, challenged, motivated and encouraged rather than to be rebuked and be pushed.

They want to hear God speaks from His Word through our spoken words. They also want to hear sermons with one central theme/message. They want to be reminded through the sermons that God loves them in spite of who they are and that God's grace is always available to them. They yearn to listen to positive preaching that gives them hope in the midst of life's difficulties. They also want to go away knowing they have a God who is good, gracious and great.

After a week of hearing 'words, words, words', they are tired of listening to longwinded sermons that beat round the bush and are dull and boring. They want to listen to sermons that speak to the heart. They desire to listen to sermons that have fresh and personal illustrations from our living experiences and not stale illustrations copied from illustration books.

They want to see and hear preachers who are authentic, human and whose heartbeat they can feel. They also want to hear and see preachers who are excited in their preaching because they've got something to say and not because they have to say something.

They want to listen to sermons with power to move them. They want preaching that is filled with unction that can touch and transform their lives. In other words, they want to leave the service knowing they have encountered God.

That is a tall order, isn't it? In the words of the apostle Paul, 'Who is equal to such a calling?' (2 Cor 2:16). We are also reminded that we are simply 'earthenware jars to hold this treasure, and this proves that such transcendent power does not come from us; it is God's alone (2 Cor 4:7). I agree with Martyn Lloyd-Jones when he said: 'Any man who has had some glimpse of what it is to preach will inevitably feel that he has never preached. But he will go on trying, hoping that by the grace of God one day he may truly preach'.¹³

In response to the feedback (complaints?) from the listeners, part of the solution requires us first to go back to the basics and ask some fundamental questions like – Who are we as preachers? What is preaching? Why do we preach? What is the primary focus and ultimate aim of preaching? What is a sermon all about?¹⁴ Interestingly, by asking these questions, we can determine what type of preachers we are.

Secondly, we need to take a look at the hermeneutical rules of engagement in reading biblical texts. It is important that we not only read the texts correctly but also listen attentively to the texts so that the message we proclaim is consistent with biblical truths.¹⁵ We also need to exegete our contemporary culture and be aware of the dynamic changes that are taking place. The buzz word for our contemporary society is 'postmodernity' and we need to be aware of adopting uncritically its tenets.¹⁶

Thirdly, we need to improve our oratorical skills if we want persuade listeners to listen intently. One of the main problems with contemporary preaching is that while the *content* may be biblical and *anchored* to the text, the *delivery* can be boring and lifeless. I am not convinced that orthodoxy is necessarily lifeless and dull.

Finally, we need to recognise one fundamental fact: we need power in preaching.¹⁷ To preach with power, a preacher needs unction ('the conscious smile of God' to use Lloyd Jones' phrase) from above more than anything else.¹⁸ According to Martin Lloyd Jones, 'there is all the difference in the world between preaching merely from human understanding and energy, and preaching in the conscious smile of God... There is an eternity of difference between the two things. To me

there is nothing more terrible for a preacher, than to be in the pulpit alone, without the conscious smile of God'.¹⁹

Contemporary preaching by and large lacks unction. Why is that so?²⁰ Perhaps some of the reasons for unctionless preaching may include: commercialised preaching, arrogant preaching, cheapening of the Gospel; stealing God's glory, etc. There is also the lack of fervent, vibrant, travailing and prevailing prayers.

We are in desperate need of power-full and power-filled preachers in today's apathetic world. Preachers with burning hearts and flaming tongues are desperately needed today. Preaching that will and can transform lives is only possible by 'the power of the Holy Spirit and with strong conviction' (1 Thes 1:5; cf Rom 15:18-19 and 1 Pet 1:12) because the 'the kingdom of God is not a matter of words, but of power' (1 Cor 4:20).

Any dull, dry, insipid and anemic preaching can be replaced by more dynamic and intense preaching - preaching that is pulsated with life, preaching that is propelled by passion and powered by the Holy Spirit.²¹ Yesterday's unction cannot be used for today's preaching. Without divine unction we are merely *transmitting* information rather than *transforming* lives.

There is a chorus entitled 'Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning', that I used to sing when I was a little boy in Sunday School. The second stanza has a line that says 'Give me unction in my gumption, keep me function'. Whoever wrote that chorus may or may not have realised that he/she has captured a profound theological truth for preaching in a capsule. Without unction, a preacher cannot function. Without unction, preaching is more of motion than action. Without unction our preaching *is* nothing; without unction our preaching *gains* nothing and without unction our preaching also *achieves* nothing.

I may speak in the tongues of men or of angels,
But if I have no unction,
I am only a sounding gong
Or a clanging cymbal.

I may have the gift of prophecy and
The knowledge of every hidden truth;

I may have faith enough to move mountains;
But if I have no unction, I am nothing.

Uction is powerful and effective.
Uction can convince, convict, convert
And change lives.

There is nothing unction cannot face;
There is no limit to its work, power, and endurance.

There are three important things in preaching:
Rhetoric, Logic and Uction;
But the greatest of the three is Uction.²²

Without unction in our preaching it does not matter ultimately how polished our sermons may be, nor how persuasive our oratorical abilities are. A sermon powered by logic and rhetoric accompanied by human erudition and eloquence can be mind blowing, but only a sermon empowered by the Spirit is life transforming. This so called unction has *something* to do with us but *everything* to do with the third person of the Trinity. In the words of Paul, ‘...when we brought you the gospel we did not bring it in mere words but in the power of the Holy Spirit and with strong conviction’ (1Thess 1:5). Beware of becoming an *Ichabodian* preacher.

Preacher, let me ask you a searching but solemn question. Is there fire in your sermon? If there is no fire, consider throwing your sermon into the fire! Get down on your knees and pray for the fire to fall upon you. Then get up, gear up and go out and preach with all you’ve got in the power of the Holy Spirit and see what difference it will make in your preaching.²³ When you have experienced unction from above, you will want nothing *less*, nothing *else* and nothing *more* in you preaching.

If the unction which we bear come not from the Lord of Hosts, we are deceivers, since only in prayer can we obtain it. Let us continue instant, constant, fervent in Supplication. Let your fleece lie in the threshing floor of supplication till it is wet with the dew of Heaven.

Charles Spurgeon

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Endnotes

¹Just the other day two deacons from a local Baptist church visited me. We ended up spending an hour discussing homiletics. They asked many probing questions concerning preaching. Towards the end of our conversation, I asked them a point blank question, 'since the church is seeking a pastor, what are you primarily looking for?' Without any hesitation, their unanimous reply was, 'someone who can *really* preach' (that church has been without a pastor for the last two and a half years although they have interviewed several candidates). That says something doesn't it?

² On a few occasions, I have jokingly told my fellow preachers that I think God can forgive anyone except a bore! My favourite sign in the office is 'If you don't strike oil in fifteen minutes, stop boring!'

³ Charles L. Bartow, *The Preaching Moment: A Guide to Sermon Delivery* (William D. Thompson, editor; Nashville: Abingdon 1980), p. 20.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p.5.

⁵ There are always exceptions.

⁶ One joke about the devil has made an indelible mark in my mind. One day after a Church service, the pastor is preparing to go home when he sees the devil sitting at the door step crying profusely. The pastor then asks the devil 'why are you crying?' He replies 'I am utterly devastated. The parishioners always keep on blaming me for things that happened to their lives in which I had no part'.

⁷A phrase I first heard used by a young adult during one of the prayer meetings.

⁸ Clyde Reid, *The Empty Pulpit: A Study in Preaching as Communication* (New York: Harper and Row, 1995), p. 48.

⁹ On the other hand, perhaps the problem may be that some preachers are not spending enough time in sermon preparation.

¹⁰ All Bible quotations are from the Revised English Bible unless otherwise stated.

¹¹ All preachers can testify to this fact.

¹² Perhaps preachers should try doing an icebreaker question 'I wish I could tell preachers....' with the congregation. You will be in for a surprise.

¹³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), p. 99.

¹⁴ For a modest attempt to answer all these questions, see my book *Preaching with Power* (forthcoming).

¹⁵ For more discussion, see Johnson T. K. Lim, 'Historical Critical Paradigm: The Beginning of an End', *Asia Journal of Theology* 14/2 (2000), p. 252-271.

¹⁶ For my assessment of contemporary hermeneutics, see Johnson T. K. Lim, 'Contemporary Hermeneutics: Bane or Boon', *Indian Theological Journal*, 37/3 (2000), p. 225-244.

¹⁷ For a better understanding of the concept of power with reference to unction in preaching, see my book *Preaching with Power* (forthcoming).

¹⁸ Curiously, many homiletical books either do not mention or only briefly hint about the concept of divine unction. This is very surprising in light of its importance which most if not all homileticians recognise as *sine qua non*. Eg. Samuel D. Proctor, *How Shall They Hear?: Effective Preaching For Vital Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1992); William H. Willimon, Richard Lisher (eds), *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Thomas R. Swears, *Preaching to Head and Heart* (Nashville, Abingdon, 2000); Tan Jin Huat, *Preacher, Prepare Yourself: Toward a Better Preaching* (Kuala Lumpur: Good News Resources, 2000) and many others.

¹⁹ Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Revival* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1987), p. 295.

²⁰ Homiletically speaking, preachers have gone to Calvary for *pardon* but not to Pentecost for *power*. Having climbed to Calvary's hill to 'survey the wondrous cross' we have stayed there too long instead of coming down to 'experience the Old Time Power'.

²¹ For a heartwarming and true story of a transformed preacher, Rev Ng Ho Peng, see *Preaching with Power* (forthcoming)

²² With apologies to Paul. A rephrase of I Cor 13:1-13 (is it considered a copyright infringement or public domain?).

²³ The *Love Singapore Movement* (a transdenominational project) was birthed by the Holy Spirit a few years ago and coordinated by several key pastors in Singapore. The idea of uniting the body of Christ, serving the communities, gathering of pastors and church leaders for prayer summit yearly, adopting unreached peoples groups, establishing a prayer cell in every housing block by AD 2000 [this target was not reached], bringing internationally renowned speakers to motivate and prepare the people for harvest time, the launch of a seven wave harvest by the end of this year (2001) culminating in a one month centralised and decentralised evangelistic rallies and others are all highly commendable. Many good things have come out of the *LSM* and many individuals and churches have been blest. However, in thinking aloud, what would happen if there were a great emphasis of preaching with unction by all participating pastors every Sunday in their worship services? Would there not be greater and better harvests? In my opinion, unless the spiritual climate of a nation is ripe, unless pastors and preachers have unction in their preaching, unless the Spirit of God moves, no human strategies or church growth models can effectively change and turn a nation to God. One great and grave danger I see is that if we are not careful, what began as a divine-human movement can slowly but subtly degenerate into strictly a human movement and harvest strategies simply become harvest gimmicks. The net gain results will either be minimal or temporary. That happens when pastors and church leaders begin to think (perhaps unconsciously) they are part of the divine council of God; start to speak *ex cathedra* the things of God and act as the fourth member of the godhead. Hence the biblical injunction 'to watch and pray' needs to be emphasised again and again. The reason being '... our struggle is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against authorities and potentates of this dark age, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph 4:12).