

PARALYZED SPEAKERS AND HEARERS

By John Stott

Even those who no longer see any particular merit in preaching would probably agree that it is not what it was. Many of those who value it would say that it is in a state of steep decline, and to recall a few notable names from the past would appear to confirm this. Of course, styles have changed, the world has changed. But are we not missing out? Are we not in danger of losing a basic ingredient of a living church?

The cure is recovery of Bible exposition

Nothing troubles me more in church today than our Christian superficiality. So few of us are 'mature in Christ'. We deserve the rebukes Paul addressed to the Corinthians, for we are still babes when we should be adults, and need milk when we should be eating meat. While we rejoice at the astonishing statistics of church growth in some regions of the Third World, our euphoria should be tempered by the question of whether the growth is as deep as it is broad.

Observers differ in their diagnosis of the church's malady. For myself, I have no doubt that the major cause is what Amos called 'a famine of hearing the words of the Lord' (8:11). E. L. Dargan, in his famous two-volume *History of Preaching*, sees the phenomenon partly as cause, partly as effect. On the one hand, a decline of spiritual life 'is commonly accompanied by a lifeless, formal, unfruitful preaching', while on the other, 'the great revivals of Christian history can most usually be traced to the work of the pulpit.'

True, greater problems face modern preachers than their predecessors: much of contemporary culture is unfriendly to preaching. If the anti-authority mood makes many people less willing to listen to authoritative proclamation, the cybernetics revolution and the addiction to television make people less able to listen to anything. In addition, the atmosphere of doubt and the loss of confidence in the gospel have undermined the morale of many preachers. Thus there is paralysis at both ends—in the speaking and in the hearing.

The gravity of this situation becomes plain when we reflect on the biblical story, for the prosperity of God's people rose and fell according to their receptivity to his Word. Although his covenant with them was of his own initiative of grace, he yet hinged it on the condition 'if you will obey my voice'. Consequently, we hear him constantly appealing to them to listen, and complaining when they refused to do so: 'I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; yet they did not listen to me. . . but stiffened their neck.' These words are like a divine epitaph on the national grave. Similarly, in New Testament days, Christ addressed his church through his apostles: instructing, admonishing, encouraging, and rebuking it. He still does. And the church's spiritual health depends on its response. A live church is always a listening church, but a deaf church is dead: that is the unalterable principle.

This is not to say that there are prophets and apostles in the church today with an authority equivalent to that of the biblical prophets and apostles, but that the preacher is called faithfully to expound the message of those biblical writers. As he does so, God speaks, and the Holy Spirit brings the written Word to life. Hence the tremendous need for the church to recover the ministry of expository preaching. Christian preaching is not the proud ventilation of human opinions: it is the humble exposition of God's Word. Biblical expositors bring out of Scripture what is there: they refuse to thrust into the text what is not there. They pry open what appears closed, make plain what

seems obscure, unravel what is knotted, and unfold what is tightly packed. In expository preaching, the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different topic, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said.

An exacting task

Exposition is not a synonym for exegesis, however. True biblical preaching goes beyond the elucidation of the text to its application. Indeed, the discipline of discovering a text's original meaning is of little profit if we do not go on to discern its contemporary message. We have to ask of every Scripture not only 'what did it mean?' but 'what does it say?' Perhaps it is the failure to ask both these questions, and to persevere with the asking until the answers come, which is the greatest tragedy of current preaching. We evangelicals enjoy studying the text with a view to opening it up, but we are often weak in applying it to the realities of modern life. Our liberal colleagues, however, tend to make the opposite mistake. Their great concern is to relate to the modern world, but their message is less than fully biblical. Thus almost nobody is building bridges between the biblical world and the modern world, across the wide chasm of 2,000 years of changing culture. Yet preaching is essentially a bridge-building exercise. It is the exacting task of relating God's Word to our world with an equal degree of faithfulness and relevance.

This earthing of the Word in the world is not optional. It is an obligation laid upon us by the kind of God we believe in, and by the way in which he has himself communicated with us, namely in Christ and in Scripture. In both, he reached down to where the people were to whom he desired to disclose himself. He spoke in human language; he appeared in human flesh. Our bridges, too, must be firmly anchored on both sides of the cultural chasm, by refusing either to compromise the divine content of the message or to ignore the human context in which it has to be spoken. We have to plunge fearlessly into both worlds, ancient and modern, biblical and contemporary, and to listen attentively to both. Only then shall we understand what each is saying, and so discern the Spirit's message to the present generation.

A Christian response

If we are to build bridges for the Word of God to penetrate the real world, we have to take seriously both the biblical text and the contemporary scene, and study both. We cannot afford to remain on either side of the cultural divide. To withdraw from the world into the Bible (which is escapism), or from the Bible into the world (which is conformity), will be fatal to our preaching ministry. Either mistake makes bridge-building impossible, and non-communication inevitable. On the one hand, we preachers need to be as familiar with the Bible 'as the housewife with her needle, the merchant with his ledger, the mariner with his ship' (Spurgeon). On the other, we have to grapple with the much more difficult—and usually less congenial—task of studying the modern world. We have to look and listen and read and watch television. We have to go to the theatre and the cinema (though selectively), because nothing mirrors contemporary society more faithfully than the stage and the screen.

It has been a great help to me to have the stimulus of a reading group. Its members are intelligent young graduates (doctors, lawyers, teachers, architects, and others). We meet monthly when I am in London, having previously agreed to read the same book, or see the same play or film. Then we spend a whole evening together, share our reactions, and seek to develop a Christian response.

As the nineteenth-century German theologian Tholuck said, ‘A sermon ought to have heaven for its father and the earth for its mother.’ But if such sermons are to be born, heaven and earth have to meet in the preacher.

John Stott is Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church, Langham Place, London W1, and Director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.