

## **CHAPTER 13**

### **WHY ARE SO MANY CHURCH LEADERS INEFFECTIVE AS PREACHERS?**

<sup>52</sup>*Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering."*

*Luke 11:52 (ESV)*

<sup>21</sup>*For the shepherds are stupid,  
and do not inquire of the LORD;  
therefore they have not prospered,  
and all their flock is scattered.*

*Jeremiah 10:21 (RSV)*

The general standard of teaching and preaching in British churches is lamentably poor. I don't just mean the worst speakers. I mean the average speaker. Most of the men who preach in our churches have little or no ability to do so. I have observed the following features in at least 70% of the speakers I have listened to, and probably more:

- i. They have no natural teaching gift so they aren't skilled in the art of conveying a message in a clear, lively, interesting way. So, they are trying to do something at which they are not naturally skilled. Of course, this problem of being asked to do something you aren't good at happens occasionally in the secular workplace too, but far less often than in churches.
- ii. They don't know the Bible very well, to put it mildly.
- iii. They haven't studied or prepared much before giving the talk. A man who has done his homework thoroughly is far more relaxed and is able to speak off the cuff, unrehearsed. He can 'ad lib' and speak directly to the audience and alter his message to reflect their responses and questions. By contrast, a man who has not prepared diligently will tend to stick rigidly to a written script and read it out word for word, which is one reason why they are so dull. That is much easier to do and requires less 'surplus knowledge' than it takes to speak from memory or from skeletal notes, without the 'help' of a verbatim script.
- iv. They are boring and lifeless. Partly this is because they haven't prepared properly and don't know their subject. Partly it is because they aren't sufficiently interested in it themselves. They had to look around for something to say, or needed to be given a topic to speak on, because no specific topic is burning away inside them. They are not consumed with any issue. Thus, they cannot convey any interest to the audience because they are not even gripped by the message themselves. Many even go so far as to print off someone else's sermon from the internet and read it out word for word without having done any study at all. Therefore, it will inevitably sound dull and lifeless because it is not their own message and they feel no passion about it. It's an insult to God and is also an insult to the audience.
- v. They don't really believe the Bible. They do believe, up to a point, but it isn't real to them, so it does not grip or excite them. Thus, they cannot convey conviction or enthusiasm when they themselves have little or none. They hold their beliefs tepidly. Only a man of conviction can really hold an audience. He can interest and rouse people on literally any subject provided he

is genuinely passionate about it himself. But very few preachers are that committed, or take the Bible that seriously.

- vi. They purport to speak on a certain passage but then don't. So, a passage is read out, for example, Romans chapter one, but then they will just speak about whatever they wish to say, not about what is said in the chapter that was read out. They just present their own ideas and beliefs, rather than expound upon what God is saying. The point is that what God says is always interesting and engaging, *if the speaker actually speaks about the passage*.

But the man's own opinions, stories and experiences are not necessarily of any interest. Nobody wants, or needs, to hear other men's opinions or hobby horses. Neither will God bless or anoint any sermon which consists only of that. God blesses the faithful expounding of *His own Word*, not the expounding of the preacher's own opinions.

God wants us to explain *what the Bible says*. Yet, the reality is most sermons are largely just the ideas and opinions of men and they bear little or no relation to the passage that has been read out. This is not a rare occurrence. It is the norm. Most men do it that way. But it is a grave insult to God's Word that we should choose to expound on what we think, rather than on what God says.

- vii. They are often seeking to amuse and entertain, rather than to expound God's Word. Have you ever noticed how many men start a 40 minute sermon by telling jokes or stories for 5-10 minutes, or even more? Then, even after that they continue to digress frequently onto irrelevant side issues and try to be amusing. They appear to believe that the object of the exercise is to entertain the audience, or to impress them. But the real purpose of a sermon is neither of those things.

God does not call us to be entertaining. He calls us to faithfully expound *what He is saying* in His Word. That said, He has no objection if, as a bi-product of faithfully expounding His Word, we also happen to say something amusing. There's no harm in that. In fact it can be a good thing, *provided it's not what we are aiming to achieve*.

Indeed, if a man is genuinely serious about expounding the truth of God's Word, I have noticed that God will often put into his mind amusing or interesting points or anecdotes. But it's always *spontaneous, not contrived*, and it's never done to glorify the speaker. Plus the witty comment will be relevant to the sermon. Too many men wish to impress and to be liked. But that must never be our aim, or we will just be a man - pleaser, rather than a man who pleases God.

- viii. Far too many preachers are trying to sound intellectual so as to impress the audience, especially if the church has a lot of members who are highly qualified. I remember two churches we attended in a university city and both churches had a lot of university lecturers plus doctors, lawyers and teachers. I noticed that in both churches many of the preachers seemed, in my view, to be going out of their way to insert into their talks a lot of long, complicated words and to speak in a complex, obscure, academic manner. They also made excessive references to Greek or Hebrew words and to grammar, tenses etc when it wasn't really needed. Sometimes references to the original language are valuable, even essential, but not if your goal is just to impress people.

I have heard many men who just wanted to sound clever and educated. But that approach is always disastrous for a speaker and makes his talk boring, pretentious and impenetrable. Thus, he will lose the audience and their minds will wander. At its heart this approach is all about vanity and pride and I am convinced God will not bless it, because He will not bless any man who is trying to glorify himself rather than God. It is not His will for the speaker to sound clever. His will is for the speaker *to convey the truth of God's Word in a clear, faithful, accurate manner* and that is actually best achieved by being as simple as possible rather than being complicated.

In my own preaching, I always seek to avoid long academic words. Or, if I must use them, I explain them. And I try to speak so that the message can be understood clearly by anyone, no matter how little formal education they have. I believe that is what God wants and that He is actually disgusted by any man who is using the sermon as a vehicle to bring honour to himself by sounding intellectual. Besides that, it never works and nobody is ever impressed anyway so it's a sad waste of time. I often say that I try to pitch the level of my talks as if I was addressing a meeting of the Shirebrook Miners' Welfare, a working men's club in the coal mining village where I grew up.

- ix. On average, church leadership tends to attract a lower calibre of man than is attracted to the secular workplace. I think this is partly because the church is seen as an easier career path where the rigours and demands are not so high and where less talented men can find a job and keep it. By contrast, if they had become a lawyer, accountant, engineer, shop manager etc then far more would have been demanded of them by their employer and failure to maintain the required standard would result in dismissal.

But that does not apply in most churches and even a man whose performance is consistently abysmal will be allowed to keep his position. I can think of an FIEC church where concerns arose about the laziness and ineffectiveness of a youth leader called Nick, whom I referred to earlier. But any question of even confronting him, let alone dismissing him, was instantly rejected by the leadership team. They all knew he was lazy and unproductive, but I think the other paid leaders actually took some reassurance from that fact because, while ever he remained in the church it meant they would never be considered the weakest link.

They also wanted to avoid setting any unfortunate precedent whereby it might come to be expected that leaders should work effectively and be held accountable. They immediately saw danger for themselves in that. So, they chose to do nothing. Yet, of course, in any secular workplace Nick would have been warned, then monitored and eventually dismissed for his own lack of effort. So, church leadership attracts men who lack ability and confidence and are looking for an easier life. This may sound harsh, and there are obviously exceptions, but I am convinced from long experience that there is a lot of truth in it.

- x. They lack the courage to tell the truth, or to tackle controversial or unpopular issues. Thus, such preachers play safe and aim to please their audience, rather than just say what God's Word says. But a cowardly leader will always be seen as dull, whereas a man of conviction who openly nails his colours to the mast will be interesting even to those who disagree with him. Those who play safe and always avoid controversy are seen as boring and insipid, which is exactly what they are.

- xi. Most of these men are probably not called to teach or to preach at all, even if they are called to pastoral work. However, because of the fact that most churches are led by one man who is paid, he feels obliged to justify his pay and position. Therefore, such men feel they must do everything themselves, even if they have no aptitude for some of the tasks. They assume, or have been taught, that they are supposed to be the one who does all the teaching and preaching. Indeed, that is often required of them as a condition of employment when they are appointed.

But the biblical model of church usually involves a number of different men coming forward at different times to teach and preach on whatever topic or issue they feel God is laying on their hearts as a burden. When it is done that way it means that of the 5-15 men in the church, there may be 2 or 3 or even 5 who sometimes speak.

When they do, even if they are not gifted speakers, which most men obviously aren't, they will generally say something fresh and alive, which really matters to them, and which they have received directly from God. But if they have no such message they will not speak at all. They will stand aside and let some other man speak, who does have a fresh message about which he feels passionate. That is how God wants it to be, which is obviously right when you stop and think about it.

- xii. Even if they do have a natural teaching or preaching gift, they speak too often, i.e. virtually every week. But only a man who is a genuine born teacher can do that, i.e. someone who has the ministry gift of teaching and can speak with knowledge and passion about the whole Bible. Thus, if a man is not a naturally gifted preacher then even if there are rare occasions when they do have a message to give about which they are really passionate, that is the exception. Most of the time that is not the case and they are just going through the motions. They have yet another speaking slot to fill and are just scratching around trying to find something to say. They have nothing specific to share about which they feel a deep conviction or excitement because, apart from anything else, they speak far too often.
- xiii. The pastor or leader is so insecure he will not allow any other man to speak unless he feels sure that man has even less of a teaching or preaching gift than himself. Thus, ironically those who have no gifting can actually find themselves being regularly sought out by leaders and asked to speak. They probably never realise that they have been chosen precisely because they aren't good at it and therefore won't embarrass the leader when comparisons are made.
- xiv. The pastor or leader may have other gifts, such as administration or pastoral work etc, but no teaching or preaching gift. Yet, because the traditional model of church requires that one man should do it all, he feels obliged to preach as well, even though he knows in his heart he is no good at it. Most men know deep down if they are useless at something. So, in a sensibly organised house church, elder A might be good at teaching so he focuses on that, whereas elder B is good at pastoral work, and elder C is good at music and worship. So, they each focus on their strengths and only preach when it feels right.

But if they have grown up believing that a pastor has to preach every week, then they see no alternative. They assume it is their duty. More probably they guard it as their territory because, if they ever let others do it, they fear that questions would be asked as to why they are being paid. But, of course, such questions are exactly what should be asked.