

WHY DO SO MANY PREACHERS FAIL TO CONNECT?

By Stuart Olyott

I am a troubled man. There is something dangerously wrong with a great deal of modern preaching. Countless Bible-loving preachers are failing to connect.

What do I mean? I have chosen the word 'connect' deliberately. In my mind I can see an estate of new houses. The electricity cables have been laid, but: the new homes are entirely without power - it simply hasn't got through to them. The current is flowing a few yards from the houses, but no connection has been made.

In the same way the preacher speaks and speaks and speaks. The people in the congregation are only a few yards away. But the message doesn't get through. Men and women and boys and girls are not touched by any new energy. They go out as they came in. They return home untransformed.

Why is this so? It is something I have been trying to get my head round for months now. My wife is tired of my talking about it. Again, and again we have come home from meetings in Wales and well beyond, and I have asked her the same questions: Did he connect? Did the message get through?

Was there a meeting of spirits between the preacher and his hearers? Did the sermon come across as a man having a heart-to-heart talk with us? Did deep call unto deep? In his speaking, did the man in the pulpit meet the men and women in the pews? Was there any man-to-man communication? In nearly all cases our answer has been both simple and sad: No!

Searching for the Reason

So, what is wrong? I need to say straight away that the content of the messages has been sound enough. Yes, it is true that too many men preach what they see in the passage, rather than what the passage says. But that does not explain their failure to connect. Yes, it is also true that many preachers do not remain close to the passage in front of them, but rather preach thoughts that come to them from all over the place. But even a man who does that can surely learn to connect with his listeners. No, we have not been listening to any heresy. Indeed, some of the sermons we have heard have been wonderfully rich in teaching. But does not this make the preachers' failure to connect even more tragic?

So, is it something to do with communication skills? Many of you will know that I have had a lot to say about this over the years. I have campaigned for men to look people in the eyes and to preach to them simple sermons using ordinary words, short sentences and plenty of questions. I have pleaded for more illustrations, and especially for more use of narrative and story. I have urged men to realize that preaching is about change, and so to give themselves to addressing people's consciences.

I am glad to note that a handful of preachers has listened to me. Some of these connect well, and one or two of them connect exceptionally well. But there are others who don't connect at all, despite their improvement in these areas. So, the failure to connect cannot be explained simply by pointing to poor communication skills. The problem is clearly much deeper than that.

At this point somebody is going to interrupt and say something like this: 'It is obvious what is wrong. What preachers need is the Spirit of God. When He comes upon them, their preaching will take on a new quality. They will speak with authority, persuade people's minds, stir their emotions and reach their hearts.'

This is what our forefathers called "unction", and it is the great need of the hour. Seeing that such a blessing can only be obtained from God Himself we should be urging preachers everywhere to seek the Lord in a new way, and to take hold of Him.'

To all that I can only say 'Amen!' I wouldn't detract from it in any way at all. Many modern preachers know nothing of conquering God in the secret place, and then going out to speak for Him with power and conviction. If they had been doing that, I would certainly not be writing this article today.

But, that said, I am not convinced that we have got to the root of the matter. May I explain why? It is because I am privileged to know quite a number of very prayerful men. They walk with the Lord. They breathe out the atmosphere of heaven - they really do! They are intimate with the Eternal. There is

something about them that cannot be put into words. Those who know them well are marked by them forever.

And yet, despite all this, there is a fact that remains true and unchanged: when they are in the pulpit, many of these men do not connect. Meanwhile, out in the world of politics, business and entertainment, there are dozens of speakers who connect very well indeed.

So where, oh, where, does this failure to connect come from? I have been despairing of finding an answer. Quite frankly, I have been dreading going to some meetings, because I have been afraid of coming across the same phenomenon again.

Believe me, I try to listen to every preacher with a prayerful and teachable spirit. I am making a sustained effort not to be critical. But I can't help it: if the preacher does not connect, I am as certain to notice it as everyone else.

However, I think my search for an answer may be coming to an end. It looks as if I am on the way to finding a solution. As is so often the case, I have received help from a surprising source. In recent months, for various reasons, I have been reading books about storytelling. I have long been fascinated by the fact that some story tellers can have their audience eating out of their hands, while others turn everybody off.

I know which sort of storyteller I want to be! I want to improve my skills in this area, and I want it very badly. It is in reading round this subject that I think I have begun to understand why some public speakers, and therefore some preachers, fail to connect.

Preaching is Relational

It now seems to me that there are two main reasons for this failure. The first reason is that men forget that preaching is *relational*. How can I explain this? They look upon the men and women in the congregation as people to *speak* to, rather than people to *relate* to. They see them simply as hearers, and not as people to know and to love. What is wrong here, then, is the preacher's attitude. He has a message from God. This message is intended for creatures made in God's image. But the preacher himself, through whose lips that message will come, is also made in that image. So, although the message is divine, the normal rules of human communication apply.

Now everyone knows that for one human being to get through to another, it is not enough just to speak words. A relationship has to be built and developed. When this is done, the words, at last, get through successfully. So, although preaching is proclamation, it is not *just* proclamation. It is conversation. It is dialogue. This is true, although only one person is speaking. It is also something that is borne out by a study of New Testament verbs. Preaching resembles heart-to-heart conversation.

Does this mean that we can't preach to people unless we know them? Not at all. But it means that we speak to people in such a way that we communicate the fact that we want to know and love them. Our manner of speaking actually begins to build a relationship with them. We give our message; but we also give ourselves. Our manner is engaging, friendly, pastoral and inviting, without in anyway being distant or patronizing.

As we continue to preach, the congregation senses not only that it is receiving a message from God, but also that it is getting to know His messenger. There is no invisible wall between the preacher and his hearers. Everyone picks up a series of unmistakable vibes. They each *know* that the person in front of them wishes him well and seeks his good. They look upon him less and less as a stranger. They open their hearts to him. They begin to look on him as one of them. He belongs.

This sense *belonging* to the hearers is something consistently present in the sermons recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. When Peter at Pentecost calls out 'Men of Judea', 'Men of Israel', 'Men and brethren' and 'Every'- one of you', he is not simply trying to get attention {Acts 2:14, 22, 29, 38}.

It is not what books on preaching call 'a rhetorical device'. He is doing what any one of you would do in an animated conversation: 'C'mon, lads', 'Over here, girls', 'Oh, darling, how could you do such a thing!' It is the language of relationship.

Paul is doing something similar in Acts chapter 17. Here he is certainly talking to people that he has not met before. The language of relationship is seen not only in his 'Men of Athens' {Acts 17:22}, but also in the whole of his introduction to his speech to the Areopagus {Acts 17:22-23}. What is he doing here?

He is not seeking common ground in the sense that he is looking for some point on which the gospel and Athenian paganism are agreed. But he is showing that his feet and theirs have walked the same streets, and that their eyes have seen the same sights. He is not, then, a complete outsider; he is not someone 'other'. He knows their city, he knows their culture and he knows their belief-system, as his sermon makes completely clear. He is not to be regarded as an utter stranger. He and his hearers have some points of contact. And it is with that relationship firmly fixed in everyone's mind that he sets out to bring to them the Word of God.

Preaching, then, is **relational**, and it is the forgetting of this which has led so many men into their persistent failure to connect with their hearers. This is why they seldom launch into the vulnerability that comes from revealing personal information. This also explains why they are slow to use rhetorical questions, and never use real questions that the congregation is expected to answer audibly.

They avoid almost every sign of humour, are afraid even to enjoy themselves (or to weep) in the pulpit, shrink from open displays of love or concern, and seem quite content to remain somewhat distant from the people they are speaking to.

No wonder they fail to connect! And they will never improve until they realize that it is not enough to get the words right. That, on its own, just will not do. The preacher's job is also to build a relationship with the people to whom he is speaking.

Preaching is Incarnational

But there is a second reason for their failure to connect. Besides forgetting that preaching is relational, they also forget that it is incarnational. Once more, I am a bit stuck as to how I can explain this. Perhaps the best way is to think of someone telling a story. As he begins, we are more conscious of the teller than we are of the story. But, as things proceed, everything changes. The story begins to grip us.

We visualize its characters, enter their world, see their problems, and wonder what is going to happen.

The storyteller fades from view. The world of the story becomes our real world. And, when the story ends, we all say 'Aaaah!' We say it loudly, because of our obvious disappointment. The time has come to leave the world of the story, to blink our eyes, and to return to our dull and everyday life.

The storyteller has done his job, and he has done it well. He has been heard; but he has hardly been seen. It was the story that grabbed us, held us and moved us. But there would have been no story if there had not been a storyteller! It was because he did it as he did it that we were so enthralled. He was so much part of the story, he was so much 'in' it, that we soon forgot him - although it was only to him that we were listening! At some point we, as hearers, crossed an invisible line. From that point on it was impossible for us to separate the teller from the story. And even if he had been telling a story written by somebody else, we would not have objected if he had called it 'my story'. The teller was the story, and the story was the teller, because storytelling is **incarnational**.

So, it is with preaching. This perhaps explains why Paul, in expounding the divinely revealed gospel to the Romans, calls it 'my gospel' (Romans 2:16). Be that as it may, it is certainly true that great numbers of modern preachers, possibly the majority of them, do not see preaching as incarnational. They believe the message. They even live by it. But, as they sound that message, they see it as something separate from themselves. To them, the preacher is the man who stands in the pulpit, the message is what is written on his notes, and **he** is here to give **that**. In his mind he is a bit like a postman: he has a message to deliver, and he delivers it faithfully. He pushes it through the letterbox of our hearts, but he does not attempt to get through the letterbox himself. He thinks that it is possible to leave the message with someone, while he himself walks away. He does not see that, for a message to get into a heart, the man himself must also get into that heart. He has not realized that either the man and his message get in or nothing gets in at all.

This, of course, raises an obvious question: How does this fit in with Paul's declaration: 'We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord'? (2 **Corinthians** 4:5). Isn't Paul saying in that verse that his sole interest is in getting his message across, and that he is not looking for anything for himself at all? Doesn't this challenge the idea that preaching is incarnational, and that you can't separate the message from the messenger?

On first sight that is how it may look. But that is not how it **is**, as the context reveals. Paul goes on immediately to say that true gospel preachers **do** preach themselves - not as lords or owners of their

hearers, it is true, but as their **servants** for Jesus' sake (2 **Corinthians** 4:5). In other words, preaching creates a relationship between the preacher and his hearers. The hearers absorb the message of the Lordship of Christ, and, in doing so, they also receive Paul and his colleagues as their servants.

Of course! If the hearers had not been served by Paul and the others, the gospel would never have come to them. The gospel has no wings of its own. It only gets to people through people! So, when you receive the gospel, you also receive the people through whom it comes. The glorious treasure is carried around in clay jars. When you receive the treasure, you have the clay jar in your hands as well! You can't receive one without the other.

Practical Effects

How, then, does all this affect preaching? Well, a truly biblical preacher realizes that he is completely identified with the gospel message that he preaches. What happens to that message will also happen to him, and what happens to him will also happen to the gospel message. If one is accepted, so is the other; and if one is rejected, so is the other. He labours, then, to proclaim the content of the gospel exactly as it is found in the inscripturated Word. But, in doing that, he also seeks to win his way into people's hearts.

In practice this means that he deliberately sets out to be as personable, winsome and engaging as it is possible to be. He resolves to be a thoroughly likeable, pleasant and appealing person. He does this, not to be smarmy, or dishonestly to ingratiate himself with his hearers. Not at all! He does it because he realizes that true preaching is incarnational, and that there must be no tension or contradiction between the message proclaimed and the character of the proclaimer. And his request to those who pray for his ministry goes like this: 'Praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ' (*Colossians 4:3*).

This sort of Word-serving charm-offensive is sadly lacking in the modern pulpit and is one of the main reasons why so many men are failing to connect. Even men who are captivating in personal conversation seem unable to carry their appealing ways into the pulpit. As they open up the Word of God to the adults and children in front of them, they come across as stiff artificial, austere, detached, formal, laboured, stand-offish, unrelaxed and wooden. What other adjectives could I use?

No wonder they don't get through to people! Who wants to listen to a sombre, unpersonable hologram? If you don't appear to have heart, how will you ever persuade people that true religion is a matter of the heart? If people don't find you engaging, how will you ever convince them that you are a bearer of good news? If they can't feel that your pulse is beating with warm desires for their welfare, why should they ever listen to the solemn warnings that will inevitably sometimes roar from your lips?

I don't think, not even for one minute, that this article is the last word on this subject. But of this one thing I am sure: those preachers who understand that preaching is relational and incarnational will connect with their hearers a thousand times better than those who have never taken these two points on board.