“Good preaching – What is it?”

by Daniel Duda

As a leader in God’s church, you will probably be asked on some occasions to deliver a sermon to a different audience and/or congregation. Wanting to do your task well, you will inevitably ask: How do I do this well? What is a good sermon? As a member of a local church and listener to sermons Sabbath after Sabbath, you ask that question too.

Is a good sermon a matter of taste, similarly to a good meal or music? Is it that our personal upbringing, culture, taste, how we are psychologically wired and other things, determine which sermons we consider to be good and which perhaps bad and boring? Any preacher who ever preached a sermon is aware of the enormous variety of different people’s perceptions in his/her audience.

A lot could be said about what is a good sermon, good preaching. For this article, let me just highlight two.

**Good news not good advice**

In my last church, one of my members came to me and said: “Pastor Duda, I am so disappointed with you. You have been our pastor for two years now and you have not preached against women wearing trousers yet?” Obviously, her idea of a good sermon was that it should tell people what to do (and not to do).

However, from my experience as a pastor and administrator, most people know what to do; they are just not very good at that. My problem is that I already know that I am not what I ought to be; I know I am doing things that I ought not to do and that I am leaving undone things I ought to do. Like most people, I do not live my life crippled by moral indecision, paralyzed for lack of good advice. Our problem is not moral indecision, but moral impotence (Rom 7:21-25).

That’s why the remedy cannot be just good advice about what we ought to do, but good news about what God has done – “What the law could never do, because our lower nature robbed it of all potency, God has done: by sending his own Son...” (Rom 8:30). Thus remedy and good preaching is not good advice about what we ought to do, but good news about what God has done.

Ultimately preaching is about God, and what he has done, not just about us and about what we ought to do. Surely, our understanding of who God is and what he has done has implications for our lives. There will be some ethical imperatives based on that. But our self-understanding must flow from our understanding of God. When we speak of what we ought to do (and we must speak about it), these moral imperatives must issue from our knowledge of what God has done. Otherwise our imperatives become only pious moralizing, compounding in our hearers their burden of guilt.

If preaching is to be proclamation and not mere moralizing, the ethics of our preaching must be rooted in the theology of our preaching. We cannot make sense of who we are and what we ought to do, unless we first know who God is and what he has done in Jesus Christ. Theology empowers the ethics; it does not just accompany it with an encouraging, heavenly-Father pat on the back.

There is a temptation for leaders (and not only for them!) to use preaching to tell people what to do and not to do and thus straighten them out and “force” them to follow what we consider good and useful. But this can easily border on spiritual abuse. A good sermon will inspire people and help them to do what is right and not just tell them what to do.

**Seeing yourself as part of God’s story**

Preaching is kerygma, the proclamation of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Preaching therefore must be biblical, or it is not preaching at all. The talk may be interesting or edifying, but it is
not preaching. The sole source of our knowledge, of what God has
done, comes to us through the text of Scripture under the guidance
of the Holy Spirit.

However, the fact that a sermon is rooted in a particular text
or passage is no guarantee that what we are saying is authentically
biblical. It is not the frequency of quoting the Bible (or EGW) that
makes it biblical. For a sermon to be biblical, it must be rooted not
only in a specific Bible text or passage, but also the immediate and
wider context of the passage and in the cosmic sweep of God's story
as a whole.

I have been teaching Homiletics for over 20 years. In my
enquiries with pastors, theology students and members about the
sermons which they remembered after a year, 5 or 10 years, or
even more after the first time they heard them, I found one
common denominator – a memorable sermon was one that
somehow "clicked" the Bible material with the current experience
of the listener.

The Bible did not come to us as a collection of proof texts,
system of fundamental beliefs, a recipe on how to know God's will,
or seven rules for successful leadership. It came to us as a story that
has its beginning and its climax. Thus good preaching must
recognize not just what God has revealed to us, but how he has
revealed it. The gospel that we preach has come to us through the
Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments telling God's story. This
needs to be connected to our story, which is part of the bigger
story.

The stories of the Bible are not merely illustrations of the
revelation of God, they are the revelation. Biblical truth is the Event
(not just cerebral doctrine) and the Event is what God has done in
our creation and recreation (salvation), in what He is doing now and
in what he is yet to do before the story ends.

Good preaching is telling and retelling God's story and our
stories from creation to the Second coming (not in one sermon
hopefully!). The Bible speaks about this special type of
remembering (OT zakar, NT anamnesis), a remembrance which
does not merely call to mind the things past, but makes them real,
present, potent and demanding here and now.

The gospel is no longer the story of something that God did
once for all, far away then and there. It is now also the story of our
world, our society, our culture, our individual lives in all the
complexity and strange mixture of glory and shame.

That's why we need to do not only the exegesis of the Bible
text, we need to do the exegesis of life. If we have no idea where
people are today, the complexities of their lives, the demands of
their environment and allurements of culture in which they live,
then even the most brilliant exposition of historical details of Ezekiel
is not going to connect with them. However theologically sound,
however exegetically accurate, however historically informative,
however interesting and inspiring it may be, until the saving acts of
God which He accomplished once for all and there have
become embedded in our experience, our culture, our history, our
individual lives, we have not preached. We might have delivered a
religious talk, but not a sermon, and certainly not a good sermon.

A good sermon is not just remembering His story, it is also the
remembering of ours. And when our story becomes part of His
story, His bigger story, we have a good and a memorable sermon.
The two stories are not two anymore, they have become one as we
begin to live, however imperfectly "in Christ". As the apostle Paul
put it: "the life that I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ
lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

We preach the good news that in Christ God's kingdom has
come, a new kind of life has been made possible here and now, a
new kind of humanity has been born, a new kind of community has
been established. The critical and
decisive battle with the power of
darkness has been fought and won,
not by us, by what we do, but by
Christ and what he
accomplished on
the cross of
Calvary 2000 years
to. The war is not
yet over, but the
outcome is no
longer in doubt.

Our personal future may be uncertain, but the outcome is not
unknown for those who know the story of God. We know for sure
how His story will end. Paradise lost has been regained and will be
restored by Him. And we all can be a part of it. That's what good
preaching is all about! •

The best book I have read on Christian leadership is very
short and contains no lists, no steps. It was written by a man
who, by his own admission, was entirely lacking in the ability
to manage any large venture. But leading is not at all the same as
managing. And he remains a great leader of minds worldwide.
Henri Nouwen has important things to say to us in the Church
today in his book In the Name of Jesus: reflections on Christian
leadership.

In a few short pages he confronts us with some
uncomfortable truths about the ways we exercise leadership. He
says: “We have been tempted to replace love with
power...Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who
do not know how to develop healthy and intimate relationships
and have opted for power and control instead” (p60). He adds
that "it seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to
control people than to love people” (p59). Such tensions mean
that we are often engaged in “political battles for power [rather]
than spiritual searches for the truth” (p31).

We all, if we are honest, want to make our mark, to draw
attention to our own contribution. But no, says Nouwen. We
must resist the “temptation to do something spectacular”, after
all “Jesus refused to be a stunt man” (p38). Nouwen says we
must “overcome the temptation to individual heroism” (p25).

(Continues on page 3)
Many of us are servants of the system which promoted us. So we are wary of giving or receiving criticism. He who critiques will himself be critiqued. And so we maintain polite silences. We lack the courage or the skills necessary to offer life-giving criticism. Yet we have not only to accept criticism but to embrace it. This is the mark of a mature leader who turns critique into momentum for future action. Ultimately criticism only really becomes valuable when we transform it into self-criticism.

You might think that is only negative critique which is difficult to take. But no. Many Christian leaders find it impossible to accept affirmations. They deflect them. This has always puzzled me. It masquerades as humility but is often false. It is a serious spiritual problem because it shows that we find it difficult to accept grace when it is extended, and for a Christian that is serious.

Nouwen calls for “a whole new type of leadership...not modelled on the power games of the world, but on the servant leader, Jesus”. And then he announces the final unpalatable truth - that “the mystery [is] that leadership for a large part means to be led” (p57).

Maybe Nouwen is right. Maybe we have sometimes mistaken managerialism for leadership. Maybe we have thereby invited secular styles into Church structures. If Nouwen is right we have a lot of rethinking to do about our approaches to leadership in our own places of work.

All references are to Henri J.M. Nouwen, In the name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership, London: Darton, Longman,Todd, 1989

And the temptation to heroism is strong among us. The mark of true Christian leaders is that they are “always willing to confess their own brokenness” (p46). That is not easy to do in the midst of the pressure to impress which is as present in the life of the Church as anywhere else.

Well at least we can stand for justice and be the model of a moral human being. But no: “it is not enough for the priests...of the future...to be moral people”. They will have above all “an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence” (p29). Many things in the institutional life of the Church stifle this desire but “when we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft and true witnesses without being manipulative” (p32).

If only...

Nouwen identifies my weaknesses as a leader with disturbing accuracy. It is a rather painful read. He raises the bar higher: “The Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self” (p17). But I desperately do not want to be irrelevant! I want all my activism to count for something!

He reassures us: “Through contemplative prayer we can keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own and God’s heart” (pp28-29). All of this means that we have to be wide open to the opinions of others, open to critique without being destroyed. God’s correction will often come through the critique of others.

‘Critique’ is somehow a gentler word than ‘criticism’. Whichever word you choose it is hard to accept. The reason often is fear. Many of us are insecure in ourselves, in our own judgements and leadership ability. And so we become entrenched in our own views, fearing critique as an attack on us. It takes a depth of spirit to accept criticism from others.

---

Book Review

By Bertil Wiklander

The Seventh-day Adventist Church today emphasises the crucial importance of good leaders at all levels of church organisation. After the prominent focus on Adventist leadership at the St Louis General Conference Session 2005, a profile of the Adventist leader was widely circulated, and we have published it in this newsletter. A special GC leadership council began to meet every year from 2006 in order to bring various initiatives to stimulate and promote leadership in the church (TED’s representative there is pastor Raafat Kamal). Andrews University is nowadays offering an attractive leadership programme and its leadership institute issues a pastoral leader is “to be a channel through which the grace of God, of good pastoral leadership, the author concludes that being a good pastor means, what characteristics, skills, and attitudes would mark his/her ministry. After nine chapters that outline the key areas of good pastoral leadership, the author concludes that being a pastoral leader is “to be a channel through which the grace of God, love of Christ, and the comfort of the Holy Spirit can flow to others”. He acknowledges the sacrifices and hard work that pastoral leadership entails, but refers us to our calling from God and the promise of eternal rewards as firm anchors in our self-sacrificial ministry. He also underlines the importance of faithfulness in being a servant after God’s mind. And he calls attention to the fact that we must accept that we are never perfect but often make mistakes, and that the important part is to learn from those mistakes and grow in our ministry – ministry is a process of growth that never ends. The pastoral ministry is seen as journey, an adventure, and therefore this book does not end with a full stop but a comma, ... (!). Pastor Arrais says that a pastor friend of his once defined good pastoral leadership very briefly: “If you want to be a good pastor, you

---

Jonas Arrais, Wanted: A Good Pastor – The Characteristics, Skills, and Attitudes Every Effective Church Leader Needs, General Conference Ministerial Association, Silver Spring, MD, 2011 (109 pages)

---

“WANTED: A GOOD PASTOR

The Characteristics, Skills, and Attitudes Every Effective Church Leader Needs.”

---

Jonas Arrais is an associate secretary in the GC Ministerial Association and edits the Elder’s Digest while developing resources for pastors and church leaders. He holds a Doctor of Ministry and has spent thirty years in pastoral and administrative leadership in his home country Brazil, where our church is experiencing rapid growth. He is the author of A Positive Church in a Negative World.

As the title indicates, the book seeks to define what being a good pastor means, what characteristics, skills, and attitudes would mark his/her ministry. After nine chapters that outline the key areas of good pastoral leadership, the author concludes that being a pastoral leader is “to be a channel through which the grace of God, love of Christ, and the comfort of the Holy Spirit can flow to others”. He acknowledges the sacrifices and hard work that pastoral leadership entails, but refers us to our calling from God and the promise of eternal rewards as firm anchors in our self-sacrificial ministry. He also underlines the importance of faithfulness in being a servant after God’s mind. And he calls attention to the fact that we must accept that we are never perfect but often make mistakes, and that the important part is to learn from those mistakes and grow in our ministry – ministry is a process of growth that never ends. The pastoral ministry is seen as journey, an adventure, and therefore this book does not end with a full stop but a comma, ... (!). Pastor Arrais says that a pastor friend of his once defined good pastoral leadership very briefly: “If you want to be a good pastor, you

---

(Continues on page 4)
should teach your church members three things: how to pray, how to study the Bible, and how to share their faith”. He also quotes a former church leader who said that the difference between the average and the extraordinary pastoral leader is “in the details”. What those details might be about is what Arrais presents in his book. But they are all rooted in a deep spiritual connection with Jesus Christ.

In the first chapter, on “the essence of a pastor”, Arrais says that “authentic ministry comes from within”: “It is not the result of a hierarchical position, or the completion of a Masters or Doctoral degree. Ministry reflects the essence of the pastor’s life. Above all else, authentic ministry is God living through you. It is more than what you do; it is who you are. It is your God-given essence.” He then goes on to define certain values in ministry: avoiding hypocrisy, pursuing and maintaining integrity, being honest with yourself, and seeking God’s remedy to all challenges.

In successive chapters, the author deals with being an effective preacher, a spiritual leader, a prayerful person, a relationship-oriented pastor, having a strong family, being an exceptional visitor (a separate chapter is devoted to the six elements of visitation), and having a passion for mission.

In two chapters on visitation, the reader will find a lot of wisdom, spiritual food and practical advice on visitation. The author first removes common obstacles to visitation, explaining why we fail to make visitation a priority and how we misunderstand what visitation is all about, and then he goes on to show how the visit can be made an efficient tool in God’s hands, even including a spiritual check-list that is rich in practical suggestions.

From my own experience, as I have travelled widely in our division, and especially as I look at our church in Europe, I resonate positively with Arrais’ emphasis on visitation. As a pastoral leader you will succeed in teaching your flock to pray, to read the Bible and how to share their faith with others, if you visit them. A visit may not always be the time to teach these things, but it builds trust in the pastor by building a relationship to the pastor as a human being, a friend, a child of God, and not just as an official performing in church. If this trust is there, members will positively receive and integrate your teaching on the essentials of Christian life. Ministry is fundamentally about relationships.

The presentation is balanced, humble, Christ-centred – and practical: after each chapter there is a set of questions that may be used for group discussions, so this booklet (in English or translated) could be a fine tool for pastors’ meetings across our division.

Michael Pearson appropriately reminds us in this edition of our newsletter that leadership is not about following a list of things to do in order to achieve success but that it is about “strong, respectful, and creative relationships”, making it more of an art than a science. I was pleased to see throughout Jonas Arrais’ book how he seeks to maintain this balance throughout. Arrais, Nouwen and Pearson all agree that “leadership for a large part means to be led” (Nouwen) or “a good leader, above all, is a good follower” (Arrais).

Rightly used, Arrais’ book – or booklet (only 109 pages) – will be a valuable asset to us in growing as pastoral leaders. There is no doubt that this is a crucial need in our work as a church in Europe. While the pastor in the old days might have been more of a church planter or evangelist (that would be true of my grandfather who worked in 1920-1960) – today he/she needs to bring the presence of Christ into the church and teach the members the essence of Christ. When Christ is with us, all authority and power in heaven and on earth is with us and we may confidently go out into the world – even in Europe - and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). But we must bear in mind that the essence of Christ is not his power or our power, but the way he walked in order to be given God’s power, the way of the cross and of Christ’s, deep, deep humility and love for others (Philippians 2:1-11).

Encourage Others’ Strengths

And Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are a youth, and he a man of war from his youth.” 1 Samuel 17:33.

When some leaders begin to work with others on their development, they gravitate to weaknesses rather than strengths. Maybe that’s because it’s so easy to see other people’s problems and shortcomings. But if you start by putting your energies into correcting people’s weaknesses, you will demoralize them and unintentionally sabotage the enlarging process.

Instead of focusing on weaknesses, give your attention to people’s strengths. Focus on sharpening skills that already exist. Compliment positive qualities. Bring out the gifts inherent in them. Weaknesses can wait — unless they are character flaws. Only after you have developed a strong rapport with the person and they have begun to grow and gain confidence should you address areas of weakness. And then those should be handled gently and one at a time.

Becoming a Person of Influence