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29 February 2012 Huis ter Heide, the Netherlands [tedNEWS] This spring four church plants in the Netherlands Union Conference (NUC) are being organised into a recognised Seventh-day Adventist church.

The Netherlands Union has from the beginning of this century heavily invested in the starting of new church plants. These projects, 23 in total that have started since 2000, are always carried by teams of church members, who are monitored by a minister, usually the pastor of their ‘mother’ church. Unfortunately, three out of these 23 church plants have stopped working, however, three others were organised into a church a few years ago. These churches have become big congregations belonging to the top level in the NUC when it comes to membership and tithes numbers.

While these three churches are mainly geared to the Dutch Caribbean (Antillean) culture, the four new ones are predominantly linked to the postmoderns, post-Christian culture of the Netherlands. Pastor Wim Altink, NUC President, congratulates the four new Adventist centers of faith. Together with Pastor Rudy Dingjan, NUC staff member for church growth, he will lead out in the inauguration feasts of Student Church ‘Uniek’ in Utrecht, ‘Het Middelpunt’ in Purmerend, ‘X-preszo’ in Rotterdam East and ‘Het Kompas’ in Rotterdam South.

The Netherlands Union has 5375 members worshipping now in 58 churches and 13 church plants. [tedNEWS]

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In Hungary, Amended Religion Law Recognises Seventh-day Adventist Church

28 February 2012 Silver Spring, Maryland, United States [Bettina Krause; TED] A difficult saga for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hungary took a new turn this week when the nation’s lawmakers voted to restore the denomination’s official church status.

Hungary’s parliament amended the country’s controversial “Law on Churches” February 27 to expand the list of officially recognized churches from 14 to a total of 32. Among other faith groups added to the law were the Methodist Church, the Pentecostal Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Hungarian Islamic Council.

Tamás Ócsai, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hungary, said the vote concludes months of uncertainty for both church leaders and members. Under the Law on Churches, first passed in July last year, 14 denominations retained their traditional legal status while some 300 minority religious groups, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, were “de-registered” and invited to reapply for church status. The Hungarian government said the law is part of its broader efforts to shore up the country’s struggling economy, and is aimed at preventing sham religious groups from claiming rights and privileges extended to churches.

“The past six months have been challenging,” said Ócsai, speaking just minutes after parliament voted on the amendment. “But throughout it all, we haven’t felt alone. We’ve experienced a tremendous sense of support from our worldwide church family who’ve been praying, along with us, that God’s purpose will prevail.”

Bertil Wiklander, president of the Adventist Church’s Trans-European Division, welcomed the news, saying the vote allows the church in Hungary to look to the future with renewed purpose and energy. “The Hungarian Seventh-day Adventist Church has a long tradition of community service through its houses of worship, education programs, and welfare and public health initiatives,” he said. “We’re very pleased the government of Hungary has recognized this rich heritage, and that our church’s many fine ministries for the public good can continue.”

Wiklander also commended church leaders in Hungary for their “balanced, persistent approach in dealing with a complex political and legal situation.”

“Today, we join our brothers and sisters in Hungary in giving thanks to God for leading them through what has been a tremendously difficult time,” he said.

Raafat Kamal, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Trans-European Division, called passage of the amendment “an immense relief for all those who’ve been working tirelessly for this outcome.” But he also noted that the Law on Churches has stirred considerable international concern since it was passed last year, with some analysts saying it overtly politicizes the religious landscape in Hungary.

In response to criticisms, the Hungarian government has emphasized that even religious groups without church status can continue to meet, worship, and evangelize -- rights which are protected under Hungary’s constitution.

John Graz, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Adventist world church, said Seventh-day Adventists in Hungary and around the world have reason to give thanks.

“My hope,” he added, “is that the government of Hungary will continue to reassess the way it deals with religious minorities. Religious freedom is best served when a government makes no legal distinction between religions, and extends the same protections and privileges to all.”
The Adventist Church in Hungary was first officially recognized by the government in 1957, and today has more than 100 congregations and 5,000 members. It also operates the Adventist Theological Seminary in Pécel, near Budapest, which serves 66 students.

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Survey of Adventist ‘Opinions, Attitudes and Spiritual Life Patterns’ Coming to Local Churches

24 February 2012 Silver Spring, Maryland, United States [Elizabeth Lechleitner/ANN] More than 60 percent of Seventh-day Adventists worldwide are women. Less than 40 percent of American Adventists study their Bible once a week.

Regularly cited at Adventist board meetings and business sessions, these and other so-called church statistics are not actually known to be factual. Many familiar “facts” might better be classified as “anecdotes, hunches and instincts,” says Adventist researcher David Trim.

Trim, who directs the world church’s Office of Archives, Statistics and Research, wants to see anecdotal evidence replaced by “actual data.” Beginning this year, his office will oversee a major research project to survey the opinions, attitudes and spiritual life patterns of Adventist pastors, church members, institutional employees and college and university professors worldwide.

“We need to know what is actually happening in the church, not just what we’d like to be happening,” Trim says. That knowledge can equip church leaders to use money and resources more judiciously and effectively, he says.

“We're doing this because we want to do ministry and mission better. We want to be better stewards of what God has given to us, and we want to be more effective in discipling and winning souls,” Trim says.

It wasn't until last year that top church officials first voted to establish an ongoing budget for Adventist research meant to inform the church's strategic plan. Previously, Adventist research was conducted sporadically, with limited focus and funding, and almost exclusively in North America, Trim says.

This time around, the plan is for a ‘rigorous’ survey carried out in each of the church’s 13 world divisions, Trim says. Using the new research budget, his office has contracted with research teams at Adventist universities in North America, South America, Inter-America, Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia and Australia. Each team has demonstrated research “expertise and experience,” Trim says. While much of the anonymous polling will take place this year, some surveys may continue into early 2013, with full results due back at world church headquarters by June of 2013.

Survey questions will go beyond age, gender, ethnicity and other statistics-based research to ask about attitudes and opinions on spiritual life, fundamental beliefs and values, church leadership, Adventist institutions and fellow members, among other topics.

“The Adventist Church is committed to a strategic planning process that provides direction based on a body of evidence,” says Michael L. Ryan, a world church general vice president and vice-chair of the church's Strategic Planning and Budgeting Committee.

“All strategic planning is really only for one reason: How do we better advance the mission?” Ryan says.

How beneficial the results are depends largely upon whether Adventists worldwide fully engage in the survey, Trim says. There’s no way to track survey results back to individual respondents, so researchers are hoping members will feel confident in giving honest answers -- “not what you think we’d like to hear,” he says.

“We understand that people will not always be doing what we wish they were doing. We understand that people are not necessarily believing what we want them to believe. And we understand that often they won’t be feeling very happy with us,” Trim says. “There’s going to be what will be perceived as bad news. But we want to know this so we can do a better job.”
In some cases, survey results might spur church leaders to launch programs that would "modify our behavior and practices," Trim says. Other results may prompt better communication between leaders and members. "If people are unhappy with an area that’s fundamental to our faith, then we can educate and explain to members why this is essential," Trim says.

While he expects that much of the research will be published by Adventist scholars, Trim says some of it will remain confidential.

"My hope is that in fact we would not only get answers to really important questions, but — as a side product — we would also increase the research capacity of the church," Trim says.

Many Adventist researchers have demonstrated that they can produce "good, rigorous research," and Trim is keen to see them given "time and space" to benefit the church.

"I think at times we have made decisions based on who can give the best speech at a [church business meeting]. Somebody who gets up and has a burden on his heart and says, 'Brethren, I feel we should do thus and so,' and he's eloquent, he's impassioned, and he uses all the right Adventist buzzwords and everybody says, 'Amen, vote the money.' And often nobody asks, 'Is this really reflecting a need wider than this one person's perception?'" Trim says.

More and better Adventist research will equip leadership to use church money and resources in the best possible way rather than the most immediately appealing way, Trim says.

He also hopes the church’s growing commitment to research will help boost member confidence in Adventist leadership. They’ll know that research is steering leadership toward better informed decision-making and, ultimately, better methods of spreading the Adventist hope.

Church leaders expect the first wave of surveys to begin by the end of April. [tedNEWS]
'Bible 3D - Would the Bible fit in Harpa?'

24 February 2012 Reykjavik, Iceland [teoNEWS] Reykjavik, Iceland provided the venue for a pilot outreach project which could serve as a new method within the most secular countries of the Trans-European Division of the Seventh-day Adventists (TED).

During the period 4-16 February 2012 the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Iceland organised an exhibition called ‘Bible 3D – Would the Bible fit in Harpa?’ Harpa is the capital’s most well-known Conference Centre where the church rented a 144 square metre space for the exhibition, and a second hall to hold relevant presentations on social issues and biblical themes, concerts, and the performance of the ‘Jesus Painter’ from the USA.

The idea for the exhibition came out of a long study of the Bible and the local culture, and inspiration also came from the following Bible verse: NKJ Galatians 3:1 ‘O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?’

The organising team in Iceland led by Janos Kovacs-Biro, TED Evangelism Director, decided that there must be a way to present Jesus Christ in a very compelling and relevant way which would make sense to the present generation. After studying the local culture the team realised that the Icelandic nation had survived many centuries by accepting and communicating biblical principles through participating in the evening family Bible reading time. The present generation tends to forget about this practice – so the exhibition needed to remind everyone about the time when their nation had been strong and how that strength had been achieved.

The Biblical messages were presented by Janos Kovacs-Biro, who addressed the most important Biblical principles for dealing with crises. For the last two

Today's generation enjoys stories and wants to experience things, so this proved to be one of the strengths of the ‘Bible 3D’ exhibition. People could walk through the section on the story of redemption, experiencing a gospel presentation together with a comprehensive Bible-based story. At the first exhibition booth people were reminded of the Bible reading of their ancestors, then at subsequent booths they were introduced to the story of the Bible: Creation, the Fall, the promise of the Redeemer, Christ’s birth and His earthly life, Christ as Saviour, Christ crucified and resurrected, the offer of a personal relationship with Christ, ‘His Word is as good as His presence while we wait’, and the Restoration. In essence, the exhibition told the story of the Great Controversy.

Well known speakers were invited to address the following relevant issues: a philosopher talking on values; a police chief talking about crime prevention and the relevance of God’s law; a nutritionist addressing the need for a healthy lifestyle; pastors dealing with family relationships, children, grieving, and our responsibility while we wait for the return of Christ; an expert dealing with abuse; and a leader from the national rescue team talking about the importance of communication.

The music, organised by Gardar Cortes, director of the Opera in Reykjavik, was provided by the most well known choirs of the country. All the choirs gave a mini-concert of about five pieces – an excellent musical experience and a treat for the participants.

About 1500 people visited the exhibition and received brochures of the relevant chapters of Ellen White’s books at every booth and everybody left feeling impressed and inspired.

The organisers had given prayerful thought to which topics were the most relevant issues facing society in Iceland, and during the evening presentations, the speakers delivered Bible messages which could help in the midst of the financial, relational and ecological crises.
evenings the ‘Jesus Painter’ painted two beautiful and compelling images of Jesus while Kovacs-Biro spoke, ensuring that the word of God made a lasting impact on the participants.

To our great surprise, 28 of the 32 slots for school visits were booked quickly and about 500 young people aged 10-15 visited the exhibition with their teachers. The feedback, both from the children and their teachers was very positive. ‘This was far better than I expected’ was the comment of a teacher who obviously had entered the exhibition with certain reservations. ‘This is the best exhibition I have ever seen’ said one child enjoying the various activities provided to illustrate the message about Jesus.

The 120-150 visitors who attended each evening were extremely happy being part of the ‘Bible 3D’ project. In response to the question attached to the title of the event: ‘Would the Bible fit in Harpa?’, we can praise God that the Bible and its story could not only fit into a building, but also into the lives of the participants.

To those who are interested in the details of this new approach, please contact Janos Kovacs-Biro and if you would like to see more photos of this event, please click here.

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LIFEconnect Comes to Sweden

24 February 2012 Jönköping, Sweden [tedNEWS] LIFEconnect, a new and dynamic initiative for sharing the Gospel on the web, was introduced last weekend by Pr Miroslav Pujic, Communication & Media Ministries Director for the Trans-European Division (TED), emphasising the power inherent in social media.

The training started on Friday, 17 February with over sixty people who gathered in the Adventist church in Jönköping for a time of food, fellowship and worship where Berny Carlsson, Youth Director and Web Pastor for Sweden, spoke on the topic of Mission. He suggested that worship and fellowship that does not lead to evangelism and mission is hypocrisy. ‘We cannot ask God to bless us if we have no desire to share the good news’, he said quoting John 20:21 and Acts 1:8; 20:24.

Carlsson pointed out that LC had opened up his eyes to the fact that ‘opportunities to share the good news are staring at us in the face every single day’. Social Media and the Internet is very well developed and utilized in Sweden due to the ever-increasing advancements in technology.

On Saturday morning, the church in Jönköping, which usually seats between 65-75 visitors, was quickly filled beyond capacity. Extra chairs had to be carried into the church and people had to squeeze together. After a very inspiring message by Pr Pujic, it was time for a quick lunch followed by the LC training event.

During our first session Pr Pujic briefly introduced the concept of LC and how people in Sweden can use their own blogs and social networking profiles to bring interested people to the LC hub. In other words, digital missionaries can engage in discipleship through activities they already participate in.

Mirjana Kicusic, Marketing & Social Media Coordinator, emphasised the importance of content not only to attract visitors but also to ensure that what we are sharing is both credible and relevant to people’s lives and the culture we are living in. She also spoke about marketing and how online pastors and digital missionaries need to work together as a team in spreading good content and have a weekly strategy on how to market the gospel message in new and innovative ways.

Finally, Pr Pujic concluded the meetings by describing how this new frontline evangelism is based on Christ’s method to interact with people where they are: mingling – being online, using social networks, writing blogs; sympathising with them by chatting/interacting with people and meeting their needs; and most importantly, inviting people to get to know and follow Jesus.

Very excitedly, Julia Telfer, a student missionary at Ekebyholm school in Sweden commented: ‘This is so wonderful that all countries should be doing it’.

Inspired by the words of the famous Adventist song: ‘We have this hope that burns within our hearts, hope in the coming of the Lord’, the evening finished with twenty-one people answering the call to become digital missionaries and help connect people to Jesus Christ.

LIFEconnect Internet Ministry is now available in 16 languages with few more coming soon. To register and select your language, please visit www.lifeconnect.info. [tedNEWS]

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New Boost to Anglo-German Relations

22 February 2012 Bracknell, United Kingdom [Newbold] Detailed discussions over the last six months with our state-recognised Seventh-day Adventist university in Germany have resulted in Newbold College being granted permission to offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees which will be conferred by the Theologische Hochschule Friedensau. This is excellent news and will enable the College to teach towards German university degrees as well as degrees through a UK university. On Friday 17 February Dr John Baildam (Deputy Principal) received confirmation from Dr Friedbert Ninow (Principal at Friedensau) that earlier that day the German education authorities in Magdeburg had cleared the way for Friedensau to enter into an academic partnership with Newbold College.

Dr Ninow was delighted to announce that the authorities had given an ‘absolute yes’ to our proposal. Newbold College Principal Dr Philip Brown, commenting on the news while out of the country, pronounced himself ‘delighted to learn that students of Theology at Newbold College will have the choice between German or British university qualifications’. Dr Baildam is ‘excited to know that much hard work at both institutions has resulted in a more formal relationship between them. The arrangement will be an outstanding one for our students, whether visa nationals or from within the European Economic Area. We very much look forward to this new era in Newbold College’s history.’
Building Beneath the Surface - The Leader's Inner Life

Brooklyn Bridge is a famous landmark spanning the East River in New York City. At the time it opened (1883), it was the longest suspension bridge in the world — 50% longer than any previously built. For several years the towers were the tallest structures in the Western Hemisphere.

When the bridge opened there were many skeptics who claimed that such a large structure could not long remain suspended by cables. It could not bear the strain of traffic or wind and weather. Before long it would collapse into the river. Yet for well over a century it has served as a major transportation artery connecting the boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan.

During the early stages of constructing the New York tower progress was not apparent. Local citizens complained about the passage of time and the absence of any visible development. In response, the Chief Engineer wrote: "To such of the general public as might imagine that no work had been done on the New York tower, because they see no evidence of it above the water, I should simply remark that the amount of the masonry and concrete laid on that foundation during the past winter, under water, is equal in quantity to the entire masonry of the Brooklyn tower visible today above the water line."

The Chief Engineer's statement illustrates a vital truth about leadership: It is the work that is done inside the heart and mind, where people cannot see, that determines whether a leader will stand the tests of time and circumstance. It is the inner life, where only God sees, that informs, stabilizes, sustains or weakens and corrodes the visible aspects of leadership. This inner work is accomplished by worship, devotion, prayer and reflection about ethics, morals, and values.

Today one hears a lot about leadership strategy, leadership vision, the marketing and communication of leadership ideas. The risk is that a person may spend all his/her time on these leadership concepts and forget that character-building is the first priority for leadership.

Jesus spoke in graphic terms about the contrasts between the outer and the inner life. (See Matthew 23:13-28) The outside of cup and platter may be so clean as to glisten in the sun but the inside is full of corruption and excess. Religious leaders might be as attractive as newly-painted tombstones in a well-manicured cemetery but the inviting exterior only hides inner decay. This is the tragedy of leaders failing to recognize the importance of the inner life.

On another occasion Jesus spoke about the influence of one’s life. “On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” —John 7:37,38 NKJV

What Jesus is saying is that if you want your life to be influential the first thing is to make sure it is connected to the right source. Perhaps the leadership principle that is most important for spiritual leaders is that “when you guard your secret life with God, your public life will take care of itself.” Jesus assures us that if we are connected to Him, the visible effect of our lives, however small, will be a blessing to the world.

Far too often news headlines these days describe the moral downfall of persons who have hitherto carried enormous responsibility and enjoyed public trust. And then to everyone’s amazement the corroded inner life of such a leader is exposed—perhaps an act of financial fraud, failure to tell the truth in a moment of crisis, unfaithfulness to a spouse, or the cancerous effects of a private habit such as pornography. Leaders of religious organisations are not immune to the general public as might imagine that no work had been done on the New York tower, because they see no evidence of it above the water, I should simply remark that the amount of the masonry and concrete laid on that foundation during the past winter, under water, is equal in quantity to the entire masonry of the Brooklyn tower visible today above the water line."

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How then do we attend to the inner life, the character-building work that is so essential to survival in public leadership? It happens primarily in what we do with our quiet time—those moments of the day that are reserved for feeding and focusing the mind. Those periods in private when we wrestle with huge questions: what kind of person do I want to be? for what purpose am I living? to whom do I turn for mentoring? what are the values by which I live?

It is a myth that a crisis develops character. It does not. Crisis only reveals character. The urgent lesson for leaders is that in changing times, in moments of crisis, strength comes from one’s spiritual disciplines. These habits are not
developed on the spur of the moment. They yield their fruit only when carefully cultivated with consistency and honesty.

And there is a marvelous assurance that the inner life of dependence upon God will have its beneficial effect in one's public life. Jesus affirmed that in His statement about a person, who believes in Him, becoming a river of living water.

Ellen G White cautioned and encouraged leaders that, "It is not the capabilities you now possess or ever will have that will give you success. It is that which the Lord can do for you. He longs to give you understanding in temporal as well as in spiritual matters. He can sharpen the intellect. He can give tact and skill. Put your talents into the work, ask God for wisdom, and it will be given you."

Building beneath the surface is the most important work that any leader can do.

1 Ellen G White, Christ's Object Lessons, p. 146

By Lowell C Cooper, General Vice President, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Leadership Development Journal - January 2012
A World of Possibilities

It is canny how ideas converge to capture our attention. Among Heathrow’s advertising graffiti last week was the strap: HSBC - the Bank that sees a world of possibilities.

During a training event this month, school governors were introduced to the idea of ‘possibility thinking’ - what happens when a student believes that they are an A-grade student? What happens when teachers perceive their students worthy of the A-grade? It would appear that the students cease to operate from a basis of fear, or in a spirit of competition, they become adventurous and creative, they begin to live into their possibilities. They live into the person they want to be. Teachers find new respect and passion for those they teach and find common purpose with their students.

Coincidently one of the themes in our Trans-European Division meetings was ‘thinking possibilities’. We were challenged to think of 82,000 members all inspired to speak of God’s grace, people in twenty nations speaking to needs and conflicts of their communities, we spoke at length of the coming Christ who will overcome in the face of the saga of controversy during the last six thousand years of human history. We spoke with passion about recognising possibilities, gifts for service and leadership, in every person both male and female.

Ben and Roz Zander, in their inspiring ‘The Art of Possibility’ write as follows:

"The action in the universe of possibility may be described as generative, or giving, in all senses of the word - producing new life, creating new ideas, consciously endowing with meaning, contributing, yielding to the power of contexts. The relationship between people and environments is highlighted, not the people and things themselves. Emotions that are relegated to the special category of spirituality are abundant here: joy, grace, awe, wholeness, passion and compassion."

"You are more likely to be successful overall, if you participate joyfully with projects and goals and do not think your life depends upon them...resources are likely to come to you in greater abundance when you are generous and inclusive and engage people in your passion for life... In the universe of possibility, you set the context and let life unfold."

"The leader of possibility invigorates lines of affiliation and compassion from person to person in the face of a tyranny of fear",... we can exercise this kind of leadership whoever or wherever we are.

Clearly, when we think possibility with respect to our neighbours, we see them not as enemies to be conquered, or heathens to be converted, incorrigible secularists, but people created in the image of God who could grow into disciples of Christ. People like James and John, common fishermen, to whom Jesus simply said: follow me. The same people who years later described the vision of their experience: for we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth.

Thank you for seeing possibility in the people you serve by offering them hope in these times of despair. Improbable, but with possibility!

By Victor Pilmoor - Treasurer, British Union of Conferences of the Seventh-day Adventists

Leadership Development Journal - January 2012
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. Our problem is not moral indecision, but moral impotence (Rom 7:21-25).

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 then 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 ago. 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!

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