

Confidence in the tools of our trade...

Something has bothered me for a while. I have not quite been able to put my finger on it until now.

My unease started when I began my new job teaching preaching at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. There are a number of issues which I have been coming to terms with. For one, you really set yourself up when you are introduced to a congregation as the tutor in preaching. People expect you to be making comments or observations on another person's sermon. And, of course, if you are about to preach, you are supposed to be something of an expert and will invariably disappoint! (Although my preferred definition of an expert is scientific: X is an unknown quantity, and a spurt is a gush of water!).

The second bit of unease is a degree of uncertainty as to whether a spiritual gift can really be taught by an academic institution. Can I *teach* someone to preach? At many levels the answer is 'no'. And of course, coming into an adult education environment where many of the students already have higher level degrees, persuading them to submit to being taught – well anything! – is a challenge.

But I have finally realised what it is that has been nagging away in the back of my mind. I think it is this. If I was a perfect teacher I could fill my students' heads with all sorts of information and understanding about the content of Scripture, the tools of exegesis, the craft of sermon construction, the ability to communicate engagingly and convincingly etc., but never have taught them to preach. In fact, it is possible that I could have made them worse preachers if they end up putting their confidence in the tools of the trade rather than in the thing that is most important about preaching.

Everything I am trying to teach them is focused on filling up my student's tool box in order to be able to prepare sermons throughout the rest of their ministry. I am sure that this remains the key priority of theological education.

But, in order to preach, the preacher's confidence should be in the God who is keen to communicate with the people he made. The task of preaching is to let God do the speaking through His word. I think that might be what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote:

2 Corinthians 5:20 *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

1 Thessalonians 2:13 *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*

Should my students be confident in the tools of their trade? Well, they should be able to use them skillfully and creatively in the same way a craftsman or an artist uses his lathe or brush. But their confidence should be in God. He is a God who makes and keeps promises. Who reveals Himself through His Word. When a preacher is faithful to that

word congregations don't just hear preachers, they hear God speaking through His word.

Consequently a congregation will soon become aware whether the preacher has met with the Lord as they have prepared their sermon. They may be impressed when the preacher cuts and pastes a John Stott, Don Carson, John Piper (or whoever) sermon. But *they* will not meet with God if the preacher has not. The only way in which I can help mould and shape a new generation of preachers is by encouraging them to be deeply immersed in the Scriptures and ravenously seek the presence of God in the preparation and preaching.

In the context of an appeal not to harden their hearts towards the Word of the Lord, the writer to the Hebrews says: *We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first* (Hebrews 3:14). I am cautious when we are overly dependent on our wit, our gift of illustration, our clever alliteration, our ability to tell a story, our PowerPoint or use of video clips. A truly confident preacher is one who has confidence in God and allows Him to speak faithfully through his word. This is a confidence which arises out of time spent labouring over the Scripture in God's presence. There are no tools for this task, only time and humility in God's presence.