

## Simon Vibert answers some questions about the School of Preaching

Preaching gets a bad press. I sometimes ask Wycliffe students: “if we scattered around Oxfordshire on Sunday then came back to report on the state of preaching, what would we find?” There are wonderful exceptions, but generally comments include: “irrelevant”, “boring”, “lacking in biblical insight”, “ill prepared...” Thus, we ask: what can be done about the poor quality of much preaching?

When Richard Turnbull invited me to be Vice Principal with responsibility for setting up a School of Preaching at Wycliffe Hall I was delighted to accept, but also daunted too. It sparked a number of questions in my mind.

### Can you teach preaching?

*I would rather speak 5 words out of this book than 50,000 words of the philosophers. If we want revivals, we must revive our reverence for the Word of God. If we want conversions, we must put more of God's word into our sermons*

These are wise words from Spurgeon. But how do we do this?

Paul encourages Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God”. The implication is that Timothy should not be timid, but rather he should “boldly testify about our Lord” (2 Tim 1:6-8). Clearly, preaching is a gift of God.

Some preachers seem to “come out of the (spiritual) womb speaking”. They have God-endowed ability to proclaim God’s word: engagingly, passionately and effectively. In one sense, you’ve either got it or you haven’t.

But, “fanning into flame” implies that positive action in the form of training is required. Timothy, as Paul’s travelling companion, must have learnt much “on the job”. In 1 Tim 4:13-16 we read

*... devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

So, teaching preaching must be a combination of

- fostering and developing spiritual gifting;
- bringing hermeneutics into the sphere of practical biblical interpretation;
- understanding homiletical form;
- being sensitive to biblical genres;
- engaging positively with rhetoric and communication insights;
- being exposed to good preachers and observing what they do well;
- growing in godliness and Christ-like character.

Thus, preaching is both caught and taught; it is a gift but it needs training; it requires discipline and hard work, but is also a deeply spiritual exercise; it demands a godly life alongside clear communication skills.

### **Isn't it all a bit academic?**

Academic standards at the University of Oxford are high. Would you expect anything else? Students are required to write essays on the postmodern challenge to preaching, in hermeneutics, and on the theory of homiletics. However we also believe that homiletics is the most integrative of disciplines, bringing together the academic, practical and spiritual. AW Tozer is right: "Truth engages the citadel of the human heart and it is not satisfied until it has conquered everything there."

We combine different styles of student learning through the experience of preaching in chapel, receiving evaluation from Wycliffe Tutors, visiting local churches in small peer preaching teams, as well as personal training from our voice coach. Jeff Crotts puts it well in his splendid recent book:

*The preacher must always have the goal of personal transformation in his mind as he studies the text. When God's Word and his Spirit transform the preacher's heart and actions through study, prayer and meditation, then and only then, can the preacher authentically model the transforming work of illumination to his hearers (Jeffrey Crotts, "Illuminating Preaching", p57).*

### **What can Wycliffe do that others are not doing?**

There are many preaching networks in and beyond England. I am thankful for Cornhill, the EMA, and for the work of Langham Partnership inspired by John Stott's preaching ministry. I recently went to the annual Evangelical Homiletics Society conference in Chicago and am grateful for their good work.

Having consulted widely with others who have a keen interest in training preachers I have concluded that Wycliffe School of Preaching should be doing at least the following:

- Training a new generation of Pastor/teachers: well-schooled and faithful preachers of God's Word;
- Fostering higher level academic study in homiletics and providing the academic resources for this at Wycliffe Hall;
- Networking with others involved in the training of preachers. It was good to host a Langham Consultation in Wycliffe last summer which brought together Homileticians from around the world to share best practice;
- Providing good resources for preachers, to inspire and encourage them in their ministry. The new School of Preaching website may be found at [www.schoolofpreaching.org](http://www.schoolofpreaching.org)

Whilst this view of preaching may not make the headlines, I remain encouraged that students leaving Wycliffe Hall love the Lord and his Word and value the gift of preaching. I hope too that many of you are grateful recipients!