COMMUNICATING AND PREACHING

Posted on February 14, 2010 by Eddie

Category: Christian Life

How often have you heard someone say, "that may be what I said, but it's not what I meant"?

The thing is, language is not a very exact tool for communication and there are loads of pitfalls in the way of clear communication. Firstly, people don't always speak clearly, nor do they always listen intently for that matter. Then there is the simple fact that words can have multiple meanings depending on the context. Not only that, things like the tone of voice, the relationship between the people who are communicating and the wider social context can completely transform the meaning of a simple phrase. With the right tone of voice, the double positive "yeah, right" can mean the exact opposite of what the words convey.

This socio-linguistic minefield means that you can think you are saying something very clearly, but the person you are talking to actually understands something very different to what you intended. But, and this is the important point, in terms of communication, it is what the hearer understands that is the most important. You may feel you have communicated your point very clearly, but if the person you are talking to has understood something different, then you have failed to get your idea across - it's as simple as that.

Of course, this gets even more complex when you are speaking to a group of people, all of whom might understand something slightly different from each other.

This is one of the reasons that almost all human communication takes place in dialogue or discussion. Two way communication makes it possible for each party to clarify what they have heard or what they are saying. Good teachers, regularly check that their students are following the drift of what they are saying. As a meeting facilitator, I learned that you have to spend a lot of time making sure that everyone shares the same understanding. Communication isn't always straightforward and as social beings we tend to take time to make sure that we are all getting our points across correctly.

So, what about preaching? Good Bible teaching will address profound areas in people's lives. It will challenge them to change the way they are living and cause them to examine the presuppositions on which they have built their lives. This is just the sort of profound communication that is most likely to be lost on transmission. Bringing dialogue into preaching, or allowing question time partly addresses this area as it allows people to seek clarification when they are not clear on something the preacher has said.Â However, those traditions with a high view of preaching and preachers often don't like dialogue as they feel it is inappropriate to question the preacher. In these situations, it is vital that the preacher has a group of people that they can turn to to ask how the sermon came across and what were the main issues communicated (which may not be the same as the main points in the preacher's outline).

We can know what we think we are saying, but we can only know what people are understanding when there is a mechanism for us to get feedback from them. Day to day life makes provision for feedback, but preachers have to work to get it.