THE CHALLENGE OF PREACHING

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Category: Reviews

The first book that I ever read on preaching was by John Stott and came with the snappy title, I Believe in Preaching. It was a truly excellent and I don't think I've come across a better book on the subject until very recently. As I read Stott's book, there were three themes that struck me. The first was the need to engage deeply and methodically with the Biblical text. I come from a strongly Reformed background which placed a high emphasis on the disciplined study and exposition of Scripture, so though well written and useful, this bit didn't knock my socks off.

However, the second theme which I discovered in the book was revolutionary. Stott insisted that a good preacher needed to engage with the culture in which they were living; to understand the news agenda, the arts and current affairs. The discipline of bringing Scriptural truth to bear within the context of modern life was quite new to me. Looking back, this simple insight has shaped a great deal of my life and ministry ever since. The task of the cross-cultural missionary and preacher both have to understand the cultural milieu in which they live and to make the Gospel comprehensible within that setting. It's somewhat harder for the cross-cultural missionary who is an outsider than for the preacher in his own cultural context, but the disciplines of cultural observation and understanding are the same for both.

The third theme I discerned in Stott's book was the need for personal holiness and devotion from the preacher. All too often books about Christian practice are simply books about technique, ignoring the crucial importance of character in any form of ministry. Books which effectively integrate both practice and devotional are rare, but they are well worth reading. The best example of this sort of book is by a colleague of John Stott's: Chris Wright.

Anyway, I mentioned that I have found a better book on preaching than Stott's earlier work, though I am cheating. The Challenge of Preaching is an update of John Stott's earlier book, with extra content by Greg Scharf. I found this updated book to be just as fresh and inspiring as the original was when I read it thirty years ago. I'm certainly older, and hopefully, wiser but I've still got a lot to learn and "The Challenge of Preaching" was an excellent reminder of things that I need to be continually developing and putting into practice.

I have not gone back to the original to compare the two books, but the updated material fits in very well and it is hard to know where the old stops and the new starts. One obvious addition is material on using PowerPoint. This is well done but doesn't overwhelm the book (unlike the way that PowerPoint overwhelms some sermons!). All in all this is a truly excellent book. If you are a preacher or want to be a preacher, you should read it. If you know a preacher, you should buy them a copy. It is that good.

> *The secret of preaching is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions. in other words, theology is more important than methodology. Certainly, there are principles of preaching to be learned and skills to be developed, but it is easy to put too much confidence in these. Technique can only make us orators; if we want to be preachers, then*

> *theology is what we need. If our theology is right, then we have all the basic insights we need into what we ought to be doing and all the incentives we need to encourage us to do it faithfully.*

I am very grateful to the Langham Partnership for providing me with a copy of this book to review.