

THE "HESITANT PULPIT" SYNDROME

"Sarcasm," said Thomas Carlyle, "(is) the language of the Devil, for which reason I have, long since, as good as renounced it." However, I am not so noble as the Scottish author, so (as someone else said) although "it is the lowest form of wit", I am going to wax sarcastic.

Think about all those volumes on church growth, and all those magazines and manuals designed for pastors. One wonders how Paul and his colleagues ever managed to build and shepherd successful local churches? What sympathy the unfortunate Timothy and the unhappy Titus must deserve! How could those young men ever have hoped to succeed in ministry without the benefit of attending at least one "church growth" conference each year? Yet somehow they did rather well! Does this mean we have been sold a plastic banana? Perhaps the New Testament is adequate after all as a manual of effective ministry?

So the madness passes, and I am sensible again. No doubt the current array of books, journals, and conferences (or at least some of them) offer modern church leaders much practical benefit. Only a "pompous ignoramus" would cast them aside altogether. Whatever shrewd insight or better method we can employ to enhance the growth and vitality of our churches we should surely use. Yet the best of them may in the end do more harm than good if they cause a feeling that God's method of church planting and building is inadequate.

What is that method?

Surely just the word preached in Pentecostal power, and the saints nurtured in godly love –

"Christ did not send me to baptise people but to preach the gospel. Even then I do not depend upon eloquence or skill, or else the cross of Christ might be stripped of its power.

"Preaching about the cross seems like nonsense to those who are perishing; but to us who are being saved it is nothing less than the power of God. Is it not written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the scholars I will throw away'?"

"Where then does that leave the wise? What will the clever writer do? How will this world's brilliant debaters fare? God says that if they depend upon their learning then they are fools! Indeed, in his own wisdom, God has made up his mind that the world will never discover him through its philosophy. Instead, he is determined that only by the foolishness of our preaching will those who believe find salvation."

I wonder what use he would have made of them? Would he have ignored them all? Probably not. Paul scorned any thought of adding to the gospel secular wisdom and techniques. To fulfil his apostolic mandate he was apparently content to depend upon preaching alone, backed up by miracles.

Adding to Scripture

From a human perspective it is preposterous to suppose that something as ineffectual as preaching is enough to win the lost and to build the church. So we feel driven to surround the pulpit with a vast apparatus of promotions and property, machinery and methods.

Some years ago I discovered in a large local church no less than eight pastors who were sitting in the pews. They were neither on the staff of the church nor ministering, but were simply members of the congregation. The sight of them worshipping patiently Sunday after Sunday provoked me to make some enquiries. I learned that they were all expecting to resume their ministry eventually, but felt that they had to wait for a church to "call" them. Having sent out résumés to many places, they now sat inactive, hoping for the mail to bring them a suitable invitation (especially one offering an excellent salary).

I was astonished. I tackled each of them with the same challenge: Why do you keep on warming these pews, waiting for someone to hand you a church on a platter? Why don't you get out into the teeming fields and reap a

harvest of your own? They looked at me with dismay. Not one of them had enough confidence in his preaching to believe that he needed only a pulpit to build a church. Eventually they were driven one by one back into secular employment, while they continued to send out hopeful applications to church boards around the country.

"But," someone may protest, "perhaps they were not good speakers?" Paul scorned oratory. Another cries, "I am not handsome, and my voice is squeaky." Paul had a mean physical appearance, and probably unimpressive vocal gifts. Someone else says, "I lack money and equipment." What did Paul have other than the message of the cross preached in the power of the Holy Spirit? Still another complains, "But I have a family to care for, I need the income, I can't afford to pioneer a church." Then work with your hands, as Paul did, while he kept on preaching until each church he pioneered was large enough to meet his financial needs.

The only important question is this: has God called you to preach? If so, why do you doubt that you will succeed in doing it as well as he requires?

What is true of poets is true of preachers. If you have something to say, then say it as well as you can, and leave the rest in God's hands. The best preachers, too, do not preach for the people. They follow the rule: preach "to please God" - "as if not a single hearer existed." You may not be "artistically damned" if you become too conscious of your audience, but you will certainly inhibit your effectiveness in serving the Lord.

The gifted Dutch artist Rembrandt (1606-69), when he was just twenty-one years old, encountered a couple of older and well-established artists in a café in Leyden. They enquired when he would follow the example of other aspiring artists, and travel to Italy to continue his studies. Rembrandt announced that he had no interest in going to Italy. The Italian artists, said he, could teach him nothing. Indeed, since he was a Dutchman, not an Italian, he intended to develop a Dutch style. The older men remonstrated with him. What hope could there be that lowly Holland would produce a Raphael or a Da Vinci? The young Rembrandt retorted that Holland would produce something better: his own work!

If you are called by God to the ministry, that is the kind of confidence you too should have. Along with the divine call came sufficient ability for you to fulfil it. Of course you should apply yourself diligently to your task, honing your skills as a preacher to the finest quality you can achieve; and of course you should use whatever tools and resources are available to you. You must work hard every way you can to build success in ministry. But in the end, you need nothing more than the call of God. Whether or not you possess the kind of skills the world deems essential for a public speaker, if you are chosen by God, and are obedient to God, you can successfully do the work of God.

The insight of a pirate may help us here –

"It was a saying of Captain Blood's that the worth of a man manifests itself not so much in the ability to plan great undertakings as in the vision which perceives opportunity and the address which knows how to seize it."

The church of Jesus Christ has no richer treasure, no more powerful agency, no other essential apparatus, than a pulpit and the men and women who stand behind it. Those preachers do not have to be splendidly endowed with natural abilities (1 Co 1:20,26-28; 3:18-19); they need only be anointed by the Father for their glorious task - and in the local church there is no higher, nor more necessary task (Ac 6:2,4). Let no one in the church ever doubt it: "by the foolishness of preaching those who believe will find salvation."

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