

Bryan is fast becoming a very effective communicator. He has come into local preaching out of a desire to present the Gospel in ways that are direct and relevant to people today. An evangelist at heart, his greatest desire is to see people give their lives to Christ. So far he has taken a number of services but has seen little visible response. He is trying not to be discouraged but he wonders what he is doing wrong.

He asks..... What does it take to move people these days?

Bryan, I've heard wonderful reports of your preaching. Your tutor says that she has rarely heard anyone with such special gifting and promise. You need to hear that and to know that you are probably not doing anything wrong. On the contrary you must keep going, learn the lessons that experience can teach and keep faithful to what is your obvious calling from God.

It might help you to reflect on what evangelism really is. Yes, it's about sharing the Good News and urging people there and then to accept the salvation Jesus offers and surrender their lives to him. In most cases however that is only the crowning moment of a process that has been going on in their lives for a considerable time. If that point comes in response to your message on a particular Sunday that's fantastic but if what you preach simply advances someone along a path that will lead one day to conversion that is also something wonderful. There are many links in the chain that leads a person to a moment of commitment.

I remember being at a conference of five thousand Christian leaders. The speaker asked people to stand up if they were won to Christ by an evangelistic message. About a hundred stood. Then he asked for those who were brought to faith by a mass media broadcast. The same sort of number stood. Again he asked for anyone who was converted through a sermon preached by their minister. A larger number stood. By this stage however only a few hundred were standing. Then he said "Stand up if the greatest single influence that brought you to faith in Christ was an ordinary lay person – perhaps a Godly parent, a Sunday School teacher, a good friend". Immediately the rest of the auditorium rose as one. The lesson was clear. Evangelism is not just a persuasive sermon preached from a pulpit. It is all that has gone before as well.

You need also to realise that your preaching cannot always be aimed at bringing people to a point of decision. If it is then it will be counterproductive and those who are not yet committed may become resentful and defensive and possibly stop coming. In addition you have to remember that those who are already Christian disciples need teaching and encouragement. They love to hear the Gospel proclaimed but they also need what Paul called "solid food" that will help them to grow in their faith and apply that faith to everyday life. That teaching ministry, based solidly on the word of God, is also part of a local preacher's calling.

You may be interested to know that John Wesley did not see all that many come to faith when he preached. He saw his open air preaching primarily as a means of arousing interest in his hearers. If a person wanted to know more and to seek after salvation he got them to join a small group or "class". Each Methodist society was divided into these classes which comprised about a dozen members meeting once a week. Wesley believed that the influence of the ordinary class members would be what God used to bring a person to surrender their life to Christ. Evangelistic preaching

would awaken the interest but the love and witness of Christian believers would be used by God to do the rest. Many churches today are again learning the effectiveness of such an approach.

Having said all that, Bryan, you have to be true to what God has gifted and called you to do. He has put in your heart a burning desire to see souls saved. That is a wonderful calling. There are plenty of preachers, lay and ordained, who can teach and speak to the faithful. What you do, however, calls for real bottle. I heard that you had an appeal a few weeks ago. I know that you were disappointed when no-one came forward but that was not your responsibility. At the end of the day you were simply providing an opportunity or a moment of choice. How people respond is between them and God. You gave that invitation because you felt God was leading you to do it and God will honour that sort of obedience and courage.

You ask what it takes to move people these days. I don't think it's really very much harder today than it was in times past. We Methodists talk a lot about "prevenient grace". By that we simply mean that although we think we are doing the choosing there is also the sense in which God has already been at work showing a person their need and planting in them a desire for something better. When that preparation has happened then often all that it takes is the faithful proclamation of a Saviour's love and the enormity of what He accomplished for us on the Cross – and blind eyes get opened. You see, as Paul wrote, the Gospel really is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes".

There is no greater message – and there is no greater privilege than being called to preach it.