

Thoughts on Preaching in an International Church

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Having served in just two of the more than one thousand international churches does not qualify me as an authority on I.C.s; and falling short of my hopes in almost every sermon I've preached does not make me an expert pulpiteer! But I am an eager learner – ever desiring to more faithfully proclaim the Lord and His Word. I think preaching in an international church, as in many other aspects of our ministry, is “the same but different” than what we know from our homelands.

The Lord and His Word are Eternal and Unchanging

So, every Gospel messenger has a global relevance. And the craft of preaching -- both a science and an art – has much in common wherever the Word is faithfully expository. Along this line there are many good books to aid us in our calling. Authors like John Stott, Bryan Chapell, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and Edmund Clowney top my list. We all have our favorite homiletics mentors. But the focus of this writing is not the general task of preaching, it is the unique opportunity we have as preachers in the international church.

Many of the issues we might categorize as “the same” are on steroids in an I.C. Every congregation around the globe is a gathering of saints and sinners. But those lines are often etched more deeply in an I.C. Some prodigals who have found themselves in a far-away land with a few extra coins in their pocket have begun to do things they hope their Father will not discover. Some tender hearts have brushed against really lost people for the first time. And now they are more zealous to confirm their own faith and convey it to others. Some have lost the secure footing of the familiar, far from the Jesus of their home church and family; now they want to fully embrace Him as their own. Preachers in an I.C. must deal with people who are struggling with new tasks, strange customs and neighbors, missing friends, families, and foods, wondering about questions they have never considered, and the frustrations of gadget problems, money worries, and tummy troubles. These life-challenges often prepare our I.C. congregations to be like the one Peter met in the home of Cornelius, which said, “Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord” (Acts 10.33). God make us ready!

Words: Our Building Blocks

I am writing from a British friend’s guest house that has a nice collection of DVDs. Yet my wife and I have had to give up trying to watch several of their ‘classics.’ Our ‘Yankee’ ears just could not decipher their Queen’s English. Many great sermons, painstakingly prepared, are sometimes not clearly understood by the wider audiences of an I.C. When we moved to Uganda in 1983, we were subjected to the Voice of America’s “Special English” broadcasts. Basically, it was news readers speaking painfully slow, tediously droning out every syllable.

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It drove us nuts! But Ugandan friends thanked us for this news (in what we came to call ‘Silly English’) because even though they belonged to the Commonwealth they could not ‘pick’ the news from the BBC. (My apologies to British friends who’ve lost English teaching jobs because their accent was not American enough!) What an odd world of words we’re in; but “if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for the battle?” (1 Corinthians 14.8).

I.C.s contain one of the broadest collections of “English speakers” on the planet. What might be ‘silly’ English to you could possibly spread the banquet farther. It is a great help to have Scriptures and key thoughts projected on power point for wider clarity. Be careful of idioms – we often use far more than we expect. Work hard to make your illustrations broader than old stories from Europe and America. (I have gained much by adding the “Africa Bible Commentary” [ISBN-10: 0310291879] to the pile of commentaries I read as I preach through Bible books.) And, believe it or not, most people in the world do not know the towns, TV shows, and teams from your homeland! Nor do they really care. One more thing, the world went metric – a long time ago! “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25.11).

His Word: The Spirit’s Sword

Like Peter we have the enormous privilege of proclaiming the Risen Jesus. We regularly see that He truly is the “desire of nations,” as people from lands we cannot pronounce adore Him too. The Word that comforts and challenges our heart does the same in theirs. The Spirit who exalts Jesus back home is at work even here, the same God, but often a slightly different and deeper experience of Him. What speaks most powerfully in an I.C. are not those great lecture notes from seminary, or the sure-to-preach illustrations you’ve dutifully filed, or even that great sermon you downloaded from your home church – give them Jesus and His Word. That sermon on “How to Win over Worry” might calm hearts from home but brothers and sisters from the majority world will worry that they are not hearing the Word. (Oops! I show my bias for *lectio-continua* preaching through the books of the Bible.) All true preaching is from the Bible, as John Stott said, “It is my conviction that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. Every sermon should in some sense be an exposition of Scripture in the context.” So, however the Lord leads you to ‘break the bread of life’ to your people, the main thing is that it really is His Word proclaimed in the power of His Spirit.

David could not kill giants in Saul’s armor. Preaching through Bible books fits me best. When I have sometimes chosen to “go topical” in my preaching, it has been Wednesday or Thursday until I have determined my text – there are too many great ones! My good friends (they really are!) who prefer to feed their flocks from biblical topics they determine week by week have asked me how I could be “relevant” plotting out a Bible book series months in advance. Having preached through Bible books for over twenty years there have been many Sundays when God did an amazing “set up” for a particular text. If God orders all events for the advance of His Church (Ephesians 1.22) it is easy for Him to orchestrate blessings for a

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local assembly. Big things like elections, earthquakes, and Olympic Games, and even deaths, divorce, and job loss are part of the heart-mix that He designs for His gathered congregation. A couple of years ago we were going through Acts and found ourselves in Chapters 3-5 during the weeks when a large local unregistered church was being attacked by police just a few blocks away. If I had seized the ‘bully pulpit’ to read those inflammatory texts in our repressive atmosphere I could have been deported. But I was just an expository preacher turning to the next page of my text! A couple of months ago the Supreme Court in my homeland made some wicked decrees about homosexuality. The very next Sunday in our Genesis series we landed in chapter 19. It would have looked cruel if I’d “chosen the topic” of Sodom’s destruction for that day. But we were all hushed before God that Sunday because He clearly chose that text.

Perhaps you’ve served a church in your homeland with just a couple of different ‘people groups.’ In such places it is somewhat easier for the shepherd to assess the needs of the sheep week by week. But in the congregation I serve, with folks from more than 70 nations, I am not really sure I always know what “they” need. Frankly, I am often not even sure who they are! Many contemporary topical sermon series are “need” oriented – families, jobs, temptations, tasks. Some of those point-by-point life-tips might be better communicated in small groups and classes with more focused audiences. Topical sermon series that are more biblically based would be the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, Fruit/Gifts of the Spirit, the doctrinal headings of the Apostles’ Creed, or following the time-tested plan of the Lectionary. In our church we have seen God bless our very diverse congregation when the Elders and I prayerfully consider a Bible book and we go through it Sunday by Sunday. It is also our practice that the assigned text is preached no matter who is the preacher. We think this exalts the Message over the messenger, as Paul instructs: “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Timothy 4.13).

One problem of preaching through Bible books is the transience of the congregation. This is true anywhere, whether your series lasts three weeks or three years! Most I.C.s are filled with folks who jet in and out. It is a faithful few who will hear every sermon of any series. Locking into a particular book helps here too, because folks gain a basic understanding of the author and his theme from any one of the messages. Each message just goes deeper and wider into its premise. So, you the preacher are teaching them how to better read Paul, or John, or Moses. One of the best compliments I received was from a brother who heard me preach through Romans and said, “Now I can understand this book on my own!”

Because of this transience we need to be wise in how we plan any series. I preached my first sermon on Leviticus earlier this year. One of my former students pastors a church in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and is taking them through a chapter by chapter study of that book! I got Chapter 4. Not every church, or preacher, is ready for that. But that church has been going through Bible books for so many years, and Leviticus was the only one they had not done! I served an old, very traditional, congregation in Hawaii where the leaders and I had serious questions about the salvation of many “members.” Our messages through 1 John extended the nagging

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examination of whether “the truth is in us...we walk in the light...we love the brethren.” Certain books will better fit the ebb and flow of your congregations. Our church, in the shadow of many universities, is oriented to the academic year. We have a big “Fall push” and almost as big a “Spring push;” then we get a bunch of short term folks to fill the seats our members vacate for the summer. We try to start preaching through books in September. Sometimes Advent and Holy Week necessitate pausing a series, although many texts have great bridges between the cradle and the cross. But when I preached through Revelation, I could not find any acceptable way to use the great harlot of Babylon for my Easter Sunday text.

Plan your preaching in advance. A wise professor once spoke about the preaching schedule: “Plant a garden over the long term but pick a vegetable to serve each week.” Having long term goals and direction in place is so helpful. A brother pastor who just began a new work shares his situation: “The church here has 3 sermons a week and about 70% of the 120 or so people who attend hear most of the services. I am anxious to get our lay preachers involved because preparing 3 sermons each week is wearing very quickly on me. However, the group has never had a long term plan or assigned schedule to work with. It has been good to work with them to develop a longer term plan.” We should consider the total menu of Scripture our people are likely to receive from sermons, small groups, Bible studies, and devotional readings and ask whether they are receiving the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20.27). Keep in mind that your people from many nations are very likely hearing and reading preachers and teachings from their homelands. Some of these might conflict with your theology and the collisions can create some confusion – for them and the folks they influence. What a comfort to have our “Chief Shepherd” to sort out problems we often don’t even know exist! Hold the course with love, patience, and consistency.

Most preachers and congregations are comfortable with studies through short books. But big books have big messages too. We are slowly making our way through Genesis. We began a couple of years ago with Chapters 1-3, did another book, then Chapters 4-11, did a couple other books, and just finished Chapters 12-25. God knows if we will reach Chapter 50. We took eleven months straight through the 28 chapters of Acts and when we finished many people wished there was a 29th chapter! We took 12 weeks in Ecclesiastes and it was just about more *Qoheleth* than folks could handle! But an agnostic Jewish professor showed up then and stayed with us for two more years! Not every message is supposed to be ‘happy clappy’ -- some messages are hard. Our charge is to be faithful, not to make people feel good.

Even as we preach through books of the Bible, it is important that each sermon stand alone. Focus on the primary idea of the text of the day. Do not begin your sermon with a long review of what was covered in previous weeks. Speak as if there are folks present for just that one Sunday – because there are! They don’t need a survey course on the book you happen to be in. Along the way as you preach you can say “we saw this in previous chapters...here is a theme often repeated in this book...Abraham has not seemed to learn his lesson yet...” Those asides will be enough for your week-by-week faithful to make the biblical-theological

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connections. Sometimes through-the-Bible-preachers make their hearers feel guilty for arriving “late”: “If you were really a serious Christian you would have been here for the beginning of this series (*despite the fact they were on another continent then!*)” It is not surprising when those folks stay away until a new series begins, or just don’t come back.

Tim Keller has observed that most members of Redeemer Presbyterian Church stay about three years. So they are committed to preaching through Bible books, but want to offer a wide variety of biblical genres in three year periods. Within each three year cycle the preachers at Redeemer will speak for several-week periods from Law, History, Poetry, Prophets, Gospel, Epistle, and Apocalyptic biblical books. Members who stay longer make incremental progress through Bible books piece by piece. We moderns are blessed to offer the ‘full series’ via the web. Many of our I.C. members will keep up with a sermon series by listening from various corners of the globe. (We found it wise to put a legal disclaimer on our audio output that we do not recommend listening while driving or operating heavy equipment.)

You: The Lord’s Messenger

Chances are you are somewhere other preachers wish they were. And preachers who have more letters after their name, or publications in their quiver, will probably come to your town. Preaching in new and exotic places would surely stir their tired blood, and hopefully expand their donor list. (*Wow! I am jaded! But I have seen this train come through many times.*) And when they arrive many people in your I.C. will expect you to step aside and welcome the traveler into your pulpit. Sometimes you should. Some ‘big name’ preachers are big because the blessing of God is truly on their lives and ministries. But think about a few things before you invite them to preach.

My humble opinion is that the best person to speak to your flock is you, their shepherd. Even if you don’t have thousands of YouTube followers, your sheep know your voice and they will follow. Our job is to edify, not to entertain them. I also think the Bible message you and your Elders have thought it good for your people to hear is more important than the messenger. That means visiting speakers should fit in with your preaching plan. If you have some advance notice of their coming (which we rarely do!) we can send the assigned text and ask them to speak from it. I have done this for a number of years. I have consistently found many of the “stars” who come through appreciate that our church has a plan and a high view of Scripture. And they have prepared messages which brought great insight and perspective to the Bible book we were studying. Many of these brothers have a deep personal ‘sermon barrel.’ Sometimes a speaker has said they don’t have time to prepare a message from that particular text as they’ve already left their homeland study. Sometimes they have a message which expands upon or parallels the theme of the assigned text. This can work sometimes. But sometimes they have nothing that fits well into your Sunday plan and the best decision is for you to proceed with your plan to be the preacher of the day.

The Sunday sermon is not the only chance for your people to gain from the person passing

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through. You might want to interview them during the service so the people can hear about their ministry. You can schedule a special service at another convenient time and encourage your members, and members from other churches, to come and hear them. You can gain their friendship and understanding and encourage them to give you more notice about their next trip to your city. They might have print, audio, or video resources to share with your people to enjoy during their free time.

It is a great blessing for an I.C. to hear preachers from all around the world. Even if you are the primary preacher, you can be wise and wide in who fills the pulpit in your absence. Of course the main thing is that God's Word be clearly and faithfully announced, even if it is from another old white American. We preachers should help coach young preachers who have come to our I.C.s from around the world. One of the main reasons we started a Sunday Night Service was to open another 'preaching point.' And we have had the joy of seeing a number of young men become better equipped in Bible proclamation. After they have proven themselves by faithfully handling the Word in Bible studies and small groups we invite them to take a turn preaching on Sunday night. We trust the world is being changed as they return to their homelands. "The Lord announced the word, and great was the company of those who proclaimed it" (Psalm 68.11).

The People Who Hear Us Preach

The joyful surprises of Sunday morning are wonderful in any church. Who will come and what will happen is way beyond our script or imagination. Funny how that person you have been crafting that sermon 'just for them' all week never seems to make it! But, as promised, the Lord Jesus arrives in the midst of His gathered ones - and this also seems to be super-sized in many I.C.s. The greeting time becomes a geography lesson! Members rush to meet visiting country-mates from the other side of the globe, only to find they're from the same town, or church, or sometimes even the same family! That lonely nonbeliever who feels so alone in your city, who would never dream of visiting a church in their homeland, dares to come. A traveling seminary professor stealthily enters the assembly, then kindly corrects your exegesis as he bids you farewell. Muslims, Buddhists, Marxists, and Hindus take the chance to do what they have secretly wanted to do, but would never dare do at home -- visit a Christian church! And then there is that heartfelt handshake from a dear saint who says with deep gratitude, "When I left home, I never dreamed I would find a church I could attend in this place. I am so glad you are here!" "Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone." (Ezekiel 11.16)

Mark Dever says the preacher should assume their hearers are very intelligent but biblically uneducated. I think his words especially fit an I.C. Visiting scholars, top executives, and graduate students commonly comprise our congregations. We'd better know what we are talking about! We should be, in the words of J. Gresham Machen, "experts in the Bible." But many of our hearers don't know the difference between a Pentateuch and a propitiation.

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Some are not quite sure what is the difference between the Old and New Testaments. But they are keen to know! Our sermons should have “seeker sidebars” to help them. “This morning our sermon text is from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures which were written before Jesus came; in fact this was Jesus’ Bible...” . . . “*Penta* is the Greek word for five and *teuch* is the word for scroll or book – our sermon text today is from the Pentateuch, one of the first five books of the Bible...” . . . “We now have peace with God, our sin aroused His righteous anger and wrath, but Jesus’ death propitiated Him – removing God’s wrath from us forever...” Most I.C. attendees are not Sunday school graduates. Even ‘simple’ words like ‘sin’ are not in their common vernacular. And if they are, they probably have a less than biblical understanding of their meaning. So be careful about thoughtlessly rattling off lots of your tribal ‘Christianeze.’ Grow your people patiently and systematically to better understand the vital truths of our faith. In this way we can better equip the saints for ministry and even raise up Elders who are mature in their faith and ready to defend the church against heresy.

All those in our I.C. share one of the main characteristics that describe the New Testament church – pilgrims, wanderers, strangers in a foreign land. Abraham, who held a promise he never fully obtained in life, is the father of our faith. And it was those rare opportunities of hearing God’s voice, about ten times in a hundred years; that kept Abraham pressing on. When Abraham took a ten-year detour in Haran on his trek from Ur to the Promised Land, God called him again. When he and Sarah cooked up shenanigans – twice – that almost compromised her chastity, God spoke with correction. When Abraham humbly allowed his upstart nephew Lot to choose the seemingly better land, God spoke with consolation. When Abraham doubted whether God would ever keep His promises, God took him outside to count the stars. When Abraham lacked a symbol to remember the covenant, God spoke and gave a sign of circumcision. When Abraham understandably wanted the best for his son Ishmael, God clarified His sovereign plan. When Abraham waved a knife over the head of his beloved son, God stopped him and commended Abraham’s faith and obedience. That might have been the last time Abraham heard God’s voice, and when he “saw Jesus and rejoiced!” We preachers have the great responsibility of helping His people hear His voice each week. Obviously we don’t have the same omniscient insight into their exact needs as they journey. And each person is at a different place in the trek. But the Lord precisely ministers by His Word and Spirit in the hearts of all His children through our preaching: “...you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4.21).

Challenges – Some You Can’t Even See!

Thirty years ago when we were listening to “Special English” we were teaching in an Anglican pastoral training center in a remote part of Uganda. It became vividly clear just how remote when I made a passing reference to The Beatles. I am stumped to remember how or why they found their way into my lecture. (It was more than a decade after “Beatlemania”!) But when that word popped out of my mouth students looked down at the floor for invading critters. My world shook when I realized their “lack of knowledge” meant they’d never get the full value out of my theological expertise -- so I vainly thought! But I needed to humble

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myself and realize that if I had any real expertise to offer, I better figure out how to put the cookies on the lower shelves. Maybe this is just another way of making Mark Dever's point – very intelligent but biblically (and in perhaps other ways compared to your culture) uneducated. But Christians can live delightful lives even with deficient knowledge of The Beatles – or any other “non-essential” important to us.

One of the biggest challenges about preaching in an I.C. is keeping “the main thing the main thing.” The world does not need any more Mark Blairs! Many of us battle against the notion that “we” really are the standard – our theology, our views, our convictions, and our approach. David Adeney said that hidden cultural prejudice is as obvious as garlic on our breath. We need to try to peel away our own cultural appendages from our Bibles. There is nothing I can do about being a white American male – unpopular as that might be in the world today – but I can strive so that the only “stumbling block” in my practice and preaching be Jesus Christ and Him crucified. But I know that I will fail in many many ways that I will never even notice. Cultural anthropologist Jacob Loewen said the global Church will more clearly understand the Bible when it is exegeted by believers from all nations. Being part of an I.C. moves us closer to that goal. This opens the very important topic of our cultural viewpoint as preachers. None of us ever delivers a ‘purely Biblical’ sermon. The fact that we have chosen to speak in English, from an English translation of the Bible, in a three-point thirty-minute discourse conveys a truckload of our own culture(s). We instinctively know this any time we preach anywhere, but this is also greatly enhanced when as we gaze out to faces from around the globe. Tim Keller’s book, *Center Church*, offers great practical help in this important area (especially Part 3: Gospel Contextualization). When the “great multitude...from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” gathers before the throne of God, their song will not be from The Beatles, Barcelona F.C., or even the latest iPhone! As we well know, they will cry with loud voices, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” (Revelation 7.9,10)

Theologically, an I.C. preacher camps out in the core. Centrist creedal statements like the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, and Lausanne Covenant are our standards. Many of us come from traditions and denominations which mean a great deal to us. But if your true goal in preaching in an I.C. is to make everyone a Calvinist or a Charismatic – to name just two of our many camps - you should find another pulpit. This does not mean you cannot commend the good things from these viewpoints or any other tradition at points where they are faithful to Jesus and His Word. I find that it enhances my preaching and connectedness to our widely diverse congregation to cite thinkers and theologians from throughout Christendom. But I primarily want our members to know Jesus and be faithfully obedient to His Word. And I am comfortable that they might land in a different camp as they do this. There are some ‘branded’ I.C.s – ‘International Baptist,’ ‘International Pentecostal,’ etc. – and it is expected for them to present a message from their distinctive viewpoints. But those of us in more generic I.C.s will keep the peace and forward the Gospel more by majoring on the Major.

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Some preachers can't be true to themselves – and their strongly held convictions – to live happily in such churches. You need to decide accordingly.

The biggest challenge in an I.C. is that if you ever get the mix right, it will change next week! Someone has rightly described I.C. ministry as trying to help someone on the down escalator as you pass them by on the up escalator. One quick touch is all you get sometimes. Finally you get an awesome worship leader, a faithful, reliable team of Elders, small groups where lives are being changed -- and then somebody gets sick, businesses merge, economies collapse, students graduate, visa rules change, and that wonderful ministry tumbles like a house of cards. It hurts to be pilgrims, a constant work in progress, aliens and strangers. Sometimes I ask why is this era of salvation history not more like the finished kingdom the prosperity preachers promise? But then, an even better worship leader arrives, more Elders, small groups pop up that you don't even know about! It really is His church. He knows best how to lead and equip it – because He bought it with His blood.

And (here I go again) the pattern of preaching through books of the Bible can help buoy your church amidst these storms of change. Even changes like your vacation and other times away from the church can be unsettling. I believe this is amplified when the focus is more upon the messenger – you coming “down from the mountain” with a new word, text, or topic each Sunday. But there is stability when the people hear the same ‘boring’ announcement: “Today in our study of Luke we turn to Chapter 7....” It might be a new face in the pulpit, even with a different accent and theological viewpoint, but there he stands on that same timeless text -- the chapter right after where our pastor taught us last week.

When I arrived in my present assignment, I found the church had the motto “Gathering, Growing, Going.” It was a happy coincidence, as my own pastoral ministry motto was “Knowing, Growing, Going.” (I can’t remember who I stole that from as I launched into ministry.) Both of these catchy phrases offer a good tip – embrace the challenge of transience as a ministry opportunity. “Gathering”: As has been mentioned, many people have come to your city that just might come to your I.C. You and all the members are the gatherers. Your preaching and your people should be winsome and welcoming. They might not be interested in becoming a Calvinist or a Charismatic, or even a Christian at this point, but they likely have a deep respect and openness to Jesus. “Growing”: This is the duty of all of us. If you preach as if you have already “arrived,” you will be the chief inhibitor of congregational growth. Bob Dylan said, “he not busy bein’ born is busy dyin’.” I hope you don’t die before you’re dead! Joyous, humble, expectant enthusiasm should describe all of our hearts before our gracious God. This is the posture of growth. Only the Holy Spirit can cause this, but you can strive to model it. We are all called to be hearers AND heralds, followers who call others to follow too. One of the frustrations of my pastoral ministry is that many times people get excited about serving the Lord shortly before they need to leave. Partly this challenges us as leaders to Gather and get them Growing more quickly. Sometimes they have been in the city, and even in the church, for several years! But this also reminds us that our I.C. is not their final home. It is not anyone’s final home. We are preparing people for their next assignment,

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because everyone is “Going”: Whether they go to another city or to the Heavenly City, we want them to be ready. I.C.s are both landing places and launching pads. We want our people to “hit the ground running” as vibrant, Spirit-filled, God worshippers and witnesses wherever they next land. You cannot keep your members, but you can leave a deep lifelong Gospel imprint on them for the glory of His Name. “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives growth” (1 Corinthians 3.7).

Opportunities – You Won’t See All These Either!

Paul spoke of some of his disciples as “his crown.” This intriguing image points us to the eternal impact of our ministry. Every pastor holds onto this Biblical hope. We don’t do this job for the lousy pay and the grumbling complaints! But the I.C. pastor gets some global benefits along with their eternal rewards. We cannot look at a map without thinking of people – people we have poured ministry and messages into. People that have taken the little we have given them and gone on to do amazing exploits for God’s Kingdom. This hope should buoy your heart in the long hours of faithful study of the Word for preaching. You are quite visible standing to preach, but if there is no unseen preparation in your study and in your spirit, there will be little eternal impact.

The old, historic church I served in Hawaii had an old, historic building – and it needed painting. One day the painting contractor dropped by and found only me at the office. He had a long list of reasons why we needed a different color scheme. Half listening to him, inwardly thinking I was a preacher and not a painting consultant, I said, “Whatever you think best.” I soon found out that the building had the same color scheme for over a century. And most of the town found out this new pastor had really messed up! It might have been more forgivable to burn the building down. In eleven years of pastoring an I.C. in Central Asia our church moved seven times. I can’t really remember the color schemes of any of these venues. And I can’t think of any of our members who ever cared. I.C.s are wet cement; there is no ‘that is the way we’ve always done it,’ no ‘my grandfather endowed this pew so find another seat,’ and not even so many worship wars. Instead there are lots of folks who are grateful to worship God and hear His Word in their heart language in a foreign land.

Another unique opportunity we have in an I.C. is preaching to people we could never reach in our homelands. For each of us this will be different. I still remember the Sunday morning a young Samoan man introduced me to a young lady from North Korea. She had never been in a church, never even met Christians before, and she never came back either. Her ‘minders’ found out she’d come and made sure she never returned. But we have Korean-speaking members who often quietly share with their North Korean classmates. We have members who have gone to teach right in Pyongyang. We have taken offerings to feed – physically and spiritually – hungry people in North Korea. Could I get my big white nose into North Korea? Probably not. But as I mention North Koreans in my preaching and prayers, God stirs hearts and raises laborers right in our congregation. We have direct access to dozens of lost peoples – Japanese, Saudis, Uighurs, Iranians, Syrians. We as I.C. preachers can extend the Gospel

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footprint far and wide. Our people are shoulder to shoulder with these people from Monday to Saturday. Our people can ‘catch’ our heart for the lost, if it is contagious enough. And we can model for them how to clearly, simply, and winsomely present the Word of Jesus Christ.

Another opportunity we preachers can never control are those ‘*kairos*’ moments in the lives of our people. God often ‘sets up’ unique times for people to grow deeper while they are in our midst. Sometimes, sadly, these are the times Prodigals head deep into the ‘far country’ of bars and babes. The corporate worker who has come on a three-month job assignment, the student on a semester abroad, the diplomat on a language learning course, the patient who has come for a round of chemotherapy – your preaching ministry might be key to sustain their souls. I remember the diplomat who was on a one-month assignment in our city who taught children’s Sunday school three of her four Sundays with us! I can think of many who spent their ‘television-less’ hours getting a deep soak in the Scriptures. Some of those who pop in have just ‘crashed and burned’ back home. They recently lost their job, their business, their spouse, their virginity – they thought a new address would provide a cure. But they got out of the plane the same old people. We will never fully know the ‘seasons of life’ for those who gather to hear us preach the Word. But abundant studies emphasize that times of transition are times of change. Paul saw an unusual harvest amidst great upheaval in Thessalonica. “We ought always give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel...” (2 Thessalonians 2.13,14).

The greatest opportunity we have in preaching in an I.C. is in the tools of our task – the Word of God and the Spirit of God. We are not selling soap. We are not legalists, or moralists, miracle workers, or showmen. We are instruments of a life-giving, re-creating, sin-forgiving, society-transforming, Kingdom-bringing God. We have no comprehension of the deep sins and scars hiding behind those smiling faces. Nor do they really know us. But we have just what we all need. The Jesus who walked the earth works in the hall and hearts where we open His Word. Billy Graham spoke about feeling like a “spectator in the act of proclaiming the Word.” May we sense that blessed experience more and more. You might find a “preaching formula” that fills the room and pays the bills, but if it is anything less than Jesus and His Word you are ultimately only populating hell.

When we were unexpectedly invited to come and serve in Beijing my wife and I were caught by surprise. We spent eleven happy years serving the I.C. of Almaty. We had become ‘empty nesters’ but felt no ‘push’ to leave. At this time of deliberation a Bible translator who was a friend and church member came by for a chat and said in passing, “Beijing is the new Rome.” And I thought, well, I guess we better go there then. And I had the unique privilege of sitting with the BICF ZGC Elders as we considered the possibility and sharing many of the convictions about preaching I have written here. Not having to leave Almaty, I gave ‘full disclosure’ about what my dreams and hopes would be if we came to Beijing. This was much easier for me to articulate in my fifties than in my twenties, and probably easier for them to accept. In the early chapters of his *Institutes*, John Calvin explains that coming to better know

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God is also coming to better know yourself. I agree. And my prayer for you is that you will know God's calling to be an I.C. preacher. Not a Mark Blair kind of preacher, but the one that He has fashioned you alone to be. See and seize the unique Gospel-harvest, speeding the return of Jesus, opportunities He has placed right there in your place of service. Do your best in His power and for His glory to "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4.2).

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