

THE LEADER IN THE PULPIT

BY GRAHAM ARCHER

Two forceful giants, viewing each other with suspicion – is the kind of language that Michael J. Quicke uses to describe the relationship (or lack of it) between preaching and leadership. ‘Perhaps glancing at each other occasionally, they mostly focus on their own tasks, never thinking to meet and shake hands, let alone work together in partnership.’ (360-degree Leadership p61)

I wouldn’t say that Quicke’s sentiment completely describes my experience of preaching and leading churches, but I do believe that there are reasons why some would keep them apart. Let me offer some caricatures, *mostly overstated*:

- Preaching is focused on God’s word, leadership is a human system.
- Preaching has a strong historic pedigree, leadership is a newfangled Johnny come lately.
- Preaching is honoured in the church, leadership raises suspicion.
- Preaching is pure and spiritual, leadership is secular and sullied.

Or how about:

- Leadership is a collaborative team-based exercise, preaching is one person’s opinion.
- Leadership is about developing people, preaching points out their failings.
- Leadership involves consultation, preaching is six feet above contradiction.
- Leadership engages with new discoveries, preaching prefers old truths.

Very few books on Christian leadership make reference to the role of preaching and very few books on preaching mention the leadership task. This separation is bewildering to me. I am both preacher and leader. The same body inhabits the pulpit and church council chair, the same hand types sermon notes and agenda

outlines, and the same voice seeks to express the mind of Christ through exegesis and strategic planning.

It appears to me that the two co-exist pretty well in the Scriptures. In the life of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount was a good definition of the values that would shape the emerging Christian community. It interpreted current legislation, outlined how conflicts would be resolved, defined the vision of the kingdom of God and set the Church onto its new strategic priorities.

Peter’s first sermon in Acts explained the story of the community up to that point, called people to account for the things that had gone wrong, defined the new reality and invited people to get on board. Not a bad



act of leadership and a pretty good sermon leading to an emerging community with values that still inspire us.

So how might the two giants converse today? Let me offer some starters.

1. **Good preaching informs the leadership task.** One church I know had a preaching series on Amos. The congregation thought it was one of the most inspiring they had heard in recent years. The preachers moved on to the letters to the churches in Revelation, but people were still talking about Amos, and asking the question, 'what are we going to do about what we have learned?' Eight weeks of hearing about and engaging with God's hatred of injustice made them want to do something about it. Faithful preaching will inform the leadership task and vice versa.
2. **Good leadership is underpinned by good preaching.** A church that decided it needed to change the way it disciplined children began a sermon series looking at what the Bible said about children. Armed with some good biblical evidence about the value, protection and calling of children the church made much more radical decisions than it had initially proposed.
3. **Leadership and preaching together define reality.** If a primary task of leadership is to define current reality, (Max De Pree) a Christian leader does that in both spheres of influence. On the one hand they pursue objective truth about the current state of the church through mission audits, parish visiting, financial projections or church council away days. On the other they prayerfully search the Scriptures for the objective spiritual reality that informs a true understanding of the present, past and future. One church council member I knew was known for asking a challenging question every time a decision became complex and adversarial. 'Is there something that God wants to say about this that we aren't hearing?' i.e. Is there some aspect of our spiritual reality that is in conflict with our human plans and is our disagreement symptomatic of it?

4. **Christian leaders are followers and as such are dependent on Christ.** John Stott called the pulpit a place of ultimate humility since 'I cannot save anyone'. That same dependency needs to inform our leadership role, for if Christ is the head of the Church, without his direction, we are clueless concerning the direction. The AV translation of Proverbs 29:18, 'where there is no vision, the people perish', is sometimes unhelpfully used as a prompt to churches to write a vision statement. A more accurate translation is 'without a revelation the people perish'. Good leadership doesn't start with a well-crafted mission statement, it finds one through prayerful dependency on the revealer, a bit like a good sermon.

5. **Christian preachers need to take the community's strategic priorities into a pulpit.** Good ones don't use Back to Church Sunday to talk about giving, or weddings to talk about various views on eschatology; they are in touch with the purpose and direction of the community gathered. If God is leading a church towards mission, renewal, unity, a specific project or challenge, it is entirely appropriate to explore the biblical foundation to that priority through preaching. What is not appropriate and rightly attracts criticism is when a preacher uses the pulpit to promote his or her personal priorities.

Finally, there is no escaping the fact that when a church leader mounts the steps of a pulpit (or clears the photocopies off the nearest music stand ready to preach) something different happens in the minds of the hearers. We take our leadership role into the act of preaching and we are heard as both preacher and leader. Our insights will be heard as policy. So let's try and integrate the roles as they are already within us. Let's apply some rigorous biblical theology to our leadership task and allow our leadership insights to inform priorities we set in preaching and combine the forces of two related giants.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Next time I am chairing an important meeting, is there some aspect of the preparation that I could approach through the lens of a preacher. Biblical insights? Time of prayer? Discerning the voice of God? Acknowledging my dependency on the Holy Spirit?
2. Next time I am preaching, are there insights from my leadership responsibility that I want to carry into the pulpit? Strategic priorities? Carrying a vision? Examples of key values being put into practice? Steps that help to bring about change in the community?
3. Which Bible passage would I preach from right now that addresses a key leadership challenge I am facing?