

THE PREACHER'CHALLENGE

Every time I sit at my desk, I am challenged by a text displayed on a wooden stand which I brought for myself on one of my trips to the USA - "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim 2.15). Not surprisingly for an American piece of religious bric-a-brac, the text is taken from the Authorized Version. As modern versions of the Bible make clear, the Authorised Version is at this point a little misleading. For Paul's immediate concern was not for Timothy to devote himself to study, but rather to devote his energies to "laying out the truth plain and simple" (Eugene Peterson).

So the NRSV reads: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth". Similarly the GNB reads: "Do your best to win full approval in God's sight, as a worker who is not ashamed of his work, one who correctly teaches the message of God's truth."

I checked out the main verb (*spoudazo*) in my Greek New Testament Lexicon. There the meaning is defined as "be zealous" or "eager, "take pains", "make every effort". The same verb appears in 2 Tim 4.9 ("Do your best to come to me soon") and 4.21 ("Do your best to come before winter"). It implies commitment, effort, even sacrifice.

"Do your best". It is precisely this challenge which causes me to earmark every Tuesday for sermon preparation. Once Monday is over, and all the sorting out of Sunday is done, then my first priority of the week is to prepare my sermon for Sunday. Normally, I have an open door policy - a sign that at any time anybody is free to speak to me. But not on a Tuesday morning. On a Tuesday morning my study door is shut. Unless there is some pastoral emergency, I am not to be disturbed. That morning I do not look at my emails, I do not make phone calls, I am focussed on God's word for Sunday.

Inevitably this does involve study. I am a great believer not just in reading and ruminating upon the text, but also reading the commentaries. Why even in preparing this article, I looked at seven different commentaries on 2 Timothy before I began to write. Not to study the text in depth would not be to give my best to God.

I find it significant that Paul speaks of the preacher as a "worker" - perhaps "labourer" might be a better translation. If I want to gain God's approval, then my preparation for preaching will involve hard work on my part. Sermon writing is very different from writing for the church newsletter - the level of effort and concentration is of a different order.

Much has been written about what Paul had in mind when he urged Timothy to "rightly divide the word of truth". Literally the underlying Greek word (*orthotomeo*) means to 'cut straight' - but the actual origin of the metaphor is disputed. To quote from my New Testament Greek Lexicon again, this word is only found elsewhere in

Proverbs 3.6 & 11.5 where it “plainly means ‘cut a path in a straight direction’ or ‘cut a road across country (that is forested or otherwise difficult to pass through) in a straight direction’, so that the traveller may go directly to his destination”. If this is the underlying meaning of the metaphor, then the emphasis is on the word of God reaching its destination. Yes, preaching has to be faithful to “the word of truth”, but above all the preaching needs to be clear to the listener.

For preaching to be clear as well as faithful this means more than accurately expounding the original message of the author – it means expounding the text for today. In the words of one commentator: “Our ‘correct handling’ of the biblical text includes first understanding the original message in its original context....But the task is not finished until the original message has been brought across the centuries and applied freshly in our own situations” (Philip Towner). Alas far too much preaching focuses on one or other of the twin-tasks, but not on both.

As I reflect upon Paul’s exhortation, it seems to me that the issue is on the reception of the message as distinct from the transmission. Accuracy in exegesis is not enough. At the end of the day what counts is understanding on the part of our hearers. And that takes effort on behalf of the preacher. Certainly, that is what takes the effort for me. As a result my sermons tend to be ‘simple’ rather than ‘learned’. For communication is the ultimate challenge for the preacher.