

*Artizo Discussion Paper – Section: Teaching the Bible*

**'The Risks A Preacher Takes'**

**Philip Jensen**

**Questions:**

**1) 'I like to be liked'. Why might this be a problem for a minister?**

**2) 'We need to be unbalanced'. Comment**

**3) How do you teach someone to preach?**

**4) Watch Mark Driscoll on preaching and context. Compare what he says to the discussion paper.**

see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBnSbeM2J1w&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBnSbeM2J1w&feature=player_embedded)



## MTS Training Discussion Paper

# The Risks a Preacher Takes

By Phillip Jensen

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Preaching is more than conveying information. Although it must involve the communication of ideas, it is not the same thing as a lecture. It is also more than pulpitering. It can occur just as well in a letter or a conversation as from behind a lectern. In fact, we struggle to define exactly what it is that a preacher does. Here is an attempt at a definition: "Preaching is declaring the mind of God, seeking a response".

The two parts of the definition are both crucial if we are to be true to the gospel. We must provide information for people's minds, that they might know God, for God's mind is revealed to us in the Scriptures. This is something that few evangelicals would contest, either in theory or practice.

However, the second half of the definition is equally important. People will never hear the word of God without responding to it in some way. His word digs deeply into the hearers' inner beings, judging their hearts (Heb 4:12). It is not something that can be received with impartial neutrality, nor is it something that can be preached in abstract terms. God's word can be rejected or ignored or superficially accepted or wholeheartedly embraced, but precisely because it is *God's* word, it calls forth a response, and we must preach it this way—that is, calling for the right response. As James reminds us, to treat God's word otherwise is about as clever as looking into a mirror and then immediately forgetting what you look like. God exhorts us to be doers who act, not hearers who forget (Jas 1:22-25). The preacher must preach for a response from each of his hearers.

For this reason, preaching is inherently dangerous. In attempting to gain a response to his call, the preacher can become manipulative, histrionic or inappropriately charming. Preachers are not requesting minor alterations in behaviour, like an advertiser trying to persuade someone to change their deodorant. We are calling people to entirely reconstruct their lives under God's rulership. We set out to capture their minds and hearts for Christ. Because of the weight of our message, we can be tempted to skew our preaching in order to reach our goal. This emphasis upon response can also lead to a creeping Arminianism which distrusts the power of God in the gospel and distorts the very message that is being preached.

As an exercise in balancing declaration with application, and information with challenge, preaching is fraught with risks. Here are seven reasons why preachers should be paid danger money.

### 1. We are absolutists in an age of relativism

The worst offence in today's society is being seen to impose your views upon others. Ours is an 'I'm OK, you're OK' age where evangelism is considered bad form. Relativism is seen as a way of creating peace. You can detect this in popular jargon. Terms like 'one world', 'tolerance', 'New World Order' and 'global village' have one thing in common—a sense of unity. The modern world cannot stand division.

This isn't an exclusively modern emphasis. Pilate is the great Relativist King. He could see no difference between releasing from prison Barabbas, a convicted murderer, or Jesus, an innocent. As long as the people were happy, Pilate was happy. He stands for a relativistic view of peace.



Christian preaching has always been unpopular because it insists that there are right and wrong ideas about life. When we suggest that it is universally true that God can only be known through Jesus Christ, we put every religious relativist offside. This a risk that a preacher must take.

## **2. We call for repentance**

Not only do we declare what we believe to be universally true, but we also claim that our listeners need to change. We get personal. We call for sinners to change their lives; to turn towards God and away from what is wrong.

It is hard to call for repentance in a genteel fashion. Suggesting to someone that his or her life is odious to God is hardly the stuff of after-dinner conversation. Preaching the gospel can mean social death. However, we must approach our task of exhortation to repentance with humility and discernment, knowing that we are also speaking to ourselves. It is not the preacher who has the power to condemn, but the message he preaches. Even so, calling people to repentance, and accepting the consequences, is another risk that a preacher takes.

## **3. We risk offending the powerful**

As preachers, we are going to put powerful noses out of joint. People who are powerful, but do not appreciate that power, cannot accept challenges levelled at their lives. Unrecognized power is like a set of blinkers which makes true understanding very difficult. When powerful people are attacked by our preaching, and they sense their power waning, they may go to any lengths to regain it.

Sometimes, however, the boot is on the other foot. We may at times sense that our own power is slipping away from us. When a visiting preacher attacks our views while we sit helplessly in the pews, smiling nervously, then we become aware of the power of the platform. We tend to take our power as preachers for granted—until it is taken away from us. Then we become frustrated with the limitations of our power rather than noticing its strength.

## **4. Popular prophets are either dead or foreigners**

After a dud sermon, many a desperate preacher finds solace in Jesus' words in Luke 4:24: "I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his home town". Everyone loves a prophet, as long as he is either well dead and therefore idealized to the point of fantasy, or a foreign 'treasure' whom no-one really understands anyway. Jesus' words in Matthew 23:29-32 tell us more about people's attitudes towards prophets:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, "If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets". So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!

Although they would not align themselves with the message of the dead prophets, later Jewish leaders still venerated them, along with the forefathers who killed them. Religious authorities have a history of persecuting prophets. In 1660, the Anglican authorities sent John Bunyan to prison for 12 years; now, he's a saint. The story is similar for Wesley, Simeon and Whitefield. All are praised today as great leaders and visionaries, but in their time they were persecuted by the established church. That is a preacher's lot. All preachers risk unpopularity and persecution, from the pagans as well as from the religious authorities. Strangely enough, the reverse situation is also true. It is somewhat trendy to talk about a leader as a 'prophetic voice'. But if the gurus of current religious fashion consider us 'prophetic', chances are we aren't saying anything other than what they want to hear. If you earn that epithet, ask yourself whether you are bowing to the pressures of current fads and compromising the eternal gospel.



### **5. People want to catch us out**

Jesus experienced the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (in Mk 12:13ff.) when they tried to trap him over a question of financial loyalty. Jesus' reply was brilliant. Without surrendering the power of rhetoric, he turned the tables on his accusers and amazed them with the truth.

In the twentieth century, hypocrites who are opposed to God's word are still trying to catch preachers in their words. These days, they are assisted in their task by the recorded media—tapes, videos, magazines—which enables them to pore over our words in search of dirt.

Such people are hypocrites because they appear to be listening, but they are not. They are not listening to what we are saying for its own value; rather, they intend to dredge up material by which to condemn us. They may quote us out of context, or focus upon trivial issues in order to tarnish our reputations, or pose loaded questions to catch us out. All this goes with the preacher's territory.

### **6. We risk being misunderstood**

People tend to have extreme reactions to anything a preacher states which is against the norm. If we are challenging careerism, they will hear us denying that work has any value. If we are challenging the Western pattern of romance, they will hear us saying that you choose your marriage partner out of a hat. If we are challenging British imperialism, they will hear that we are against missionary work. If we are challenging unbiblical uses of ecclesiastical power, they will hear that we are disloyal to our denominations. If we are being misunderstood, it is our responsibility to become better communicators. However, every preacher lives with the knowledge that he cannot reach all of his listeners all of the time. The flexibility and ambiguity of language, along with the inflexibility and fixed mindset of some hearers, means that preachers are bound to be misunderstood. You may find your name used to support ideas which are distortions of what you really think. And the bigger your audience and the more remote your relationship with them, the more chance you have of being misrepresented.

### **7. We avoid balance**

It may seem strange to suggest that preachers should strive for anything other than balanced preaching, but we must. Balanced preaching is impossible, boring, un motivating and ultimately unbalanced!

It is impossible because we can never say everything in a sermon. Our message is always slanted to a certain extent by what we have left unsaid. There is a time and place for balanced statements and careful constructions of Christian beliefs, but it is not preaching. However, we will still be able to speak the truth, since each part of the truth is still true. Balanced preaching is boring and un motivating because it lacks the vigour to challenge people's presuppositions. People need to be taken step-by-step into the gospel, and suffer the disturbing and motivating experience of having their pagan presuppositions dismantled. Balanced preaching tends to proceed too quickly to the rounded, balanced, finished product, leaving the hearer with a sense of neatness and familiarity rather than challenge. Balanced preaching ends up being unbalanced itself, for it teaches a moderate, safe, half-hearted Christianity. The Bible doesn't call us to a 'balanced Christian life'. God calls us to have a 'madness' for God ('zeal' is the religiously acceptable word)—a madness which makes us challenge people to abandon their careers, leave their families and give up their lives to follow Christ.

### **The necessity of unbalanced preaching**

Preachers are compelled, therefore, to be unbalanced. We have to so confront pagan apathy and conservatism with the gospel that lives will be changed. In doing so, we run the risk of being offensive, unpopular, persecuted and misunderstood. Yet we must do so. We cannot change people's lifelong presuppositions by merely mentioning them in passing. A penitent heart is one that has been battered by the truth. We are better off attacking one important point with vigour, humour and repetition than presenting a balanced and comprehensive message which causes no wounds.

We are required to take a stand against religious relativism, denying the alternatives to the truth that we want to hammer home. We may, at times, have to come down on one side of a paradox. We may have to employ rhetorical hyperbole, shocking people's minds in order



to reach their hearts. Jesus' outrageous remark in Luke 14:25 that his disciples must hate their families was not flippant and should not be blunted. It smashes our most treasured preconceptions in order to make room for the truth. That's what a gospel preacher does. Preachers shine strong light into the darkest corners of people's hearts and chase out their excuses for ignoring God. We reveal their hiding places, demanding a response to what we say. We simplify the issues for people, clearing the foggy areas in which people hide from God so that they can see the decisions before them.

We are called to run the risk of laying bare a heart that is blocked up with sin. It's the risk of being unbalanced. If we are committed to balanced preaching, we are denying the depth and resilience of that sin. True gospel preaching is a commitment to the dangerous declaration of a gospel that demands response.