

2 Corinthians 10

The best a man can get

Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

I am a dangerous man. "Why?" you may wonder. I am a dangerous man, because I am a preacher.

It is, I know, fashionable, both inside and outside the church to say that preaching has had its day. That it is no longer influential and significant in people's lives and that other methods of learning are far more significant than preaching.

But I think that if Christians start to believe that they are heading on a dangerous path. Because the truth is that preachers in the church; and in our church that means, principally, the elders of the church – me, Maurice, Tom and, since Thursday, Nick and Jeremy... the truth is that preachers in the church are massively dangerous. Because what we do, whether you acknowledge it or not, is hugely influential.

Human behaviour is complicated, and the things that influence what each of us think and do are very varied. But if you come along to church week by week, Sunday morning, maybe Sunday evening, housegroup, members' meetings, church weekends, one on one conversations etc you will be listening to talks given by the elders, Bible studies written by them and meetings with agendas set by them for perhaps as many as 200 hours every year.

That, by any reckoning, is going to be a petty big percentage of all the input you get in your life about life's biggest issues.

However fashionable it may be to deny the influence of preaching I do not think there is any doubt that people in a local church are, for the most part significantly influenced in their view of the world by the teaching and example of the leaders of the church. And, of course, if you're a leader in the church here, we significantly influence one another too. I am a dangerous man.

Many of us might worry about our lives being unhelpfully moulded by the biases of our lecturers, textbooks, bosses or the producers of BBC news – well I hope you are concerned about those things, because you should be.

But what about the biases of your pastors? Surely they are likely to be just as significant in shaping your life as any of those other things?

I know that we all like to think we are very independent minded. And that in a church full of university students and graduates we are all very proud of our abilities to be free thinkers. But I think that's more of an illusion that we care to admit. Because the people we listen to influence us more than most of us realise. And that makes people like me very dangerous.

The apostle Paul, founder of the church in the Greek city of Corinth to which this letter is addressed, knew all too well the powerful influence of the preacher.

And he was deeply afraid that the people the Corinthians Christians were choosing to listen to were damaging to them.

He was passionately concerned that the Corinthian church should listen to him. Not because he had a massive ego, quite the opposite, but because he exhibited all the right characteristics of a dangerous preacher.

If you've been with us for the whole of our series in 2 Corinthians you'll remember that Paul spent much of the first part of the letter defending the genuineness of the work he did amongst them when he founded the church and wrote to and visited it in the past.

Then, over the last three weeks, we've seen how Paul instructed the Corinthians about how they ought to behave in the present if they take his authority amongst them seriously.

Well now, in this final section of the letter from chapters 10-13, Paul prepares them for his next visit by telling the Corinthian church how they can expect the right sort of preacher to behave amongst them.

You could summarise the whole letter, therefore, a bit like this:

Paul's agenda in 2 Corinthians

- Chapters 1-6: The Past – remember genuine Christian leadership.
- Chapters 7-9: The Present – respond to genuine Christian leadership.
- Chapter 10-13: The Future – expect genuine Christian leadership.

So what ought this bunch of Christians expect when

Paul arrives? And what ought we to be looking for in a preacher given that preachers are such dangerous people?

Well Paul presents lots of important characteristics in this passage. But I think they can be summarised into three main categories. Three things that a preacher must do before they qualify as the sort of person Christians ought to listen to.

So let's dig into 2 Corinthians 10 and find out what they are... *Choose your dangerous preachers carefully. They must:*

1 Demonstrate gentle consistency

Paul found himself attacked by those in Corinth who wanted to undermine his ministry saying that although he was, v1, "bold" in his letters and, v10, even "weighty and forceful" he was "timid" (that's not meant to be a compliment!) when he was actually with them and that, v10, in person he was unimpressive and his speaking amounted to nothing.

It's as if they were saying he suffered from small dog syndrome; yapping noisily from behind the safety of the front door but cowering in a corner as soon as a bigger dog entered the house.

You, they were saying, have a problem Paul. You act like you're the big cheese when you're not here but as soon as you pitch up it's all tears and sympathy.

I'm sure all of us know people; in our work, or perhaps even in our church or our family, who can be, frankly, two faced about these sorts of things.

They spit feathers from a safe distance; firing off crossly worded e-mails and preaching fierce messages from the unanswerable safety of their desk or their pulpit.

But they are totally unable to handle conflict and divergent opinion face-to-face and retreat to either stubborn defensiveness, tears or simply appearing to cave in and as soon as anybody actually challenges them in person.

In fact I think it's fair to say that all of us, including the apostle Paul, face a temptation in that direction; because, one way or another, all of us want both to have our own way and to be liked by other people.

But when people are like that all the time. Unwilling to confront anything other than through memos, faxes and intermediaries there is something profoundly

wrong that means that this is a person you should not be listening to. That sort of inconsistency is a deep flaw in someone's character and disqualifies them as a Christian preacher.

But, Paul asserts, that is not what he is like. Because although it's true that addressing people differently face-to-face and through letters can be a sign of profound moral cowardice, it's not the only reason why someone might appear gentler than at some times than others.

There is, Paul says, a sort of gentle consistency that seeks to avoid hurting people wherever possible and to deal with issues in a way that doesn't unnecessarily inflame the situation. But which is still willing, if the need arises, to take people head on and challenge them, even if it results in considerable pain.

Paul has written to them more forcefully than he has spoken, not because he hates conflict, but because he knows that it will be much better for everyone if they take notice of his words of warning before he has to come and take action in person.

He hopes, v2, that he will not have to be "bold" in person. Not because he is not willing to be bold. For Paul will do whatever it takes to deal with those who are undermining the message of Christ he brings. But because he hopes they will respond to his letter so that he does not have to be "bold" in exerting spiritual authority amongst them.

That's not inconsistency. It is, v1, the meekness and gentleness of Christ. In fact the whole pattern of the life and work of Jesus is that he spoke, didn't he, with great clarity of warning, even to the point of being offensive as Jesus talked about hell and judgment more than anybody else in the Bible.

But Jesus came to the world, speaking such harsh words, in order to seek reconciliation between human beings and God so that he might not have to come in judgment on those who repent.

Paul's agenda is always the same. He has a gentle consistency that is willing to speak clearly to show people how God would have them live but which doesn't create unnecessary conflict by constantly berating and rebuking people.

What does that mean for us? Well the first thing it means is that this is the way in which God deals with us. Paul is God's apostle, his messenger, and he, just like Jesus, warns us with clear and powerful words, not to make us feel bad but to move us to change so that

God will not have to come in judgment upon us.

God is quite clear that the thing that transforms human hearts is not a set of rules but his wonderful love, grace and mercy. But that does not mean that he refuses to spell out the consequences of not accepting that grace. Instead he does so in the clearest possible terms with words from the lips of the Lord Jesus about terrible, eternal death and torment if we will not listen and turn away from our sin and rebellion.

We should expect the words of the Bible, Old testament and New, to come to us both with wonderful comfort and sensitivity to our weakness and failing. AND with solemn warnings of awful judgment and clear instructions as to how to avoid it.

That is not two-facedness. It is the gentle consistency of a just lover.

And because the Christian preacher is to teach the same message that Christ and his apostles taught the second implication of 2 Corinthians 10 for us is that this sort of gentle consistency is what you ought to be looking for in the leaders of your church.

As we teach through the Bible you ought to find that we pronounce the warnings of the Scripture very clearly and pull no punches in describing the awful and forever consequences of rejecting God or living a life of disobedience to him.

But you ought also to find a group of men who empathise with your weakness and seek your spiritual welfare not only by pointing out your sin and its seriousness but also by comforting you with the gentle, meek mercy and grace of Christ.

Depending on your behaviour, your response to God's word and, of course, the particular portion of the Bible we are looking at, on any one occasion you might see more of one or the other; just as the Corinthians did with Paul. But that is not a mark of inconsistency. It is a sign of a ministry like Jesus' ministry.

Be worried, rather, if your preachers say only nice things to you or if every Sunday feels like going 10 rounds with a moral version of Joe Calzaghe.

Christian preachers must demonstrate gentle consistency. Secondly Christian preachers must...

2 Present powerful arguments

How convincing do you think the Christian message is?

Judging by the way that lots of contemporary preachers talk about it the answer to that question is "not very". There are endless speakers who emphasise the mystical and strange nature of the Christian gospel and talk about how much one needs faith in order to receive it.

Now it is true that in a very real sense the message about Jesus, the king of kings, being humiliated, beaten and murdered is not impressive. As Paul put it in another letter to this same Corinthian church the message of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

But we mustn't confuse the fact that the Christian message is weak with the idea that its arguments aren't powerful.

The Christian message is weak not because it's illogical. Or because it doesn't make sense philosophically or historically. It is weak because the things it says about people and about God are things they don't want to hear.

And in this passage Paul presents the other side of the coin. OK so the Christian message isn't what you'd choose if you were writing a religion that would attract people. But it is still powerful.

The weapons of the gospel, v4, are divine weapons. They can demolish strongholds. They can destroy the inconsistent but seemingly invincible philosophies of the Marxists, the atheists and the Islamists. They can show up the many reasons people give for not knowing the God of the Bible to be nothing more than bluff and pretention. They can take ideas on board and show how anything true in the universe fits with the Bible's message about the true good news of Jesus Christ.

The weapons of the gospel are powerful weapons. They are not the sophisticated sounding but ultimately hollow arguments of the world; the tired clichés of politicians, the cheap emotionalism of religious charlatans, the theories of academia protected by use of words so impenetrable that nobody can see that what they are saying makes no sense.

Gospel arguments, Christian reason, makes sense of the world that we live in and consistently explain the most important things in life: why does the world seem beautiful but cruel? Why do we long not to die? Why do most of the world's cultures and peoples share very common moral convictions?

The seemingly impregnable arguments of all sorts of philosophers, religionists and thinkers, Paul says, come crashing down when the power of the arguments of the gospel are unleashed.

So, for example, the gospel can demonstrate the ridiculousness of the argument that believing you are chosen by God by grace then means you can live however you like; because the gospel says that to be a gospel person is to follow Christ and followers of Christ live like him. The gospel can show the stupidity of the idea that doing good deeds can get you into heaven because Jesus' death on the cross exposes the total, utter depravity of the human heart and the impossibility of ever doing any good deed to atone for the insult we have offered God by rejecting his kingship over us.

The truth of the gospel can expose the flaws in the arguments of Marx, Dawkins and Freud, in Stalinism and capitalism, in western liberal thought and in the reasoning of fascist dictators.

The message about Jesus has divine power to capture strongholds. That's not merely a rational or logical power; but it isn't less than a logical power. Jesus Christ makes sense of the world in a way that nothing and nobody else does.

The trouble with the false teachers capturing the hearts of the Corinthians wasn't that they weren't persuasive – they were very plausible and well presented.

The problem was that their arguments didn't stack up. Their arguments weren't powerful. They didn't fit with the real facts of the real world.

So, today, take for example those many preachers in the world, and in our city, who tell you that if only you have enough faith you will have better health and more money. Some do it crassly: like one pastor in the city who said she didn't want anyone to park rubbish old cars outside the church building because it was a bad testimony the power of Jesus to make you rich. Others do it more subtly, by spending much more time when someone in the church is sick that they'll get better than that they'll keep trusting Christ. But their arguments for this false gospel are not powerful.

Because the vast majority of Christians in the world and throughout history are poor. Really poor. And the true gospel, the message of Jesus Christ, makes sense of that, explains why it is and recognises that although there are great blessings to being a Christian now

most of the material blessings are to be found in the future and not now.

So, in our church, if the preachers ever start trying to get you to believe things by simply asserting that other points of view are wrong that is a sign that you are listening to the wrong preachers. Because the true gospel, the Christian good news, presents solid arguments that are not only logical and reasonable but that come with divine power to expose the wrong headedness of the world for what it is.

Christian preachers must present powerful arguments.

But thirdly, and finally, genuine Christian leaders...

3 Emphasise providence not personality

In the end, as far as Paul is concerned, the biggest thing Christians should be concerned about regarding his, or any other ministry, is who commends it.

And he launches into the self-congratulatory style of the new teachers in the Corinthian church with biting sarcasm.

V12 there; I wouldn't dare to compare myself, I wouldn't even think of comparing myself with the astonishing CVs and references of these people who wrote their own recommendations!

Who do they measure themselves by? Themselves. Who do they compare themselves with? Themselves. And guess what, they find they're great. Well whoopee do.

The internet is full of Christian teachers with ministries named after themselves whose web site (written by who one wonders) proclaim their magnetic powers of speech, their powerful evangelism and their significant international influence.

To which, I hope, all sane and thoughtful Christians want to say: "so what?"

Such extravagant claims about your own ability, Paul says, are "not wise". And, as for himself, he chooses only to boast about the ministry God has given to him. In other words God commissioned Paul to plant churches. What will he say about his ministry to commend it? Not that he's a brilliant orator. Not that he's a famous evangelist. But that he did what God told him to do; he planted a church in Corinth and they are all there to bear witness to the fact.

So much so that, v8, if they are going to cast doubt on

the genuineness of Paul's faith they are really casting doubts on themselves because their belief is dependent in the fact that he brought them the gospel in the first place.

Unlike the new teachers in Corinth Paul, v15, doesn't boast about work that other people have actually done. He planted this church; who are they to come and crow about how wonderful they are in it when all they are doing is tearing it apart with strife and division?

Paul's authority, by contrast, the role of apostleship that God has given him, is not about destroying others; though he may sometimes have to do that. It is, v8, all about building up and forming churches that glorify God.

What that means, of course, is that we can know the message Paul brings is trustworthy because it did exactly what God said it would do; create churches in all sorts of cultures, amongst all sorts of people that have survived the test of time.

But what does this mean for who we listen to?

Now of course in much conservative church culture it's not really the done thing to talk about yourself at all. So I suspect that for cultural reasons it's unlikely that we're ever going to see a "Tom Askew International Ministries" (or TAIM!) coming out of Christ Church Liverpool.

But that mustn't blind us to the fact that all of us are prone, all the time, to elevate personality over faithfulness in looking for leaders.

We tend to be impressed by those who talk of their own achievements, not in terms of following God's commands.

And it's in this area that the danger of listening to internet sermons and having Christian gurus whose books we devour can be dangerous.

Don't get me wrong – I'm all in favour of people getting good Bible teaching from wherever they can.

But, in the end, most of those people whose sermons you download from the web you don't know.

You don't know if their life matches up with their sermon. You don't know if they are boasting in someone else's work. You don't know if you are listening to them just because they have a personality that happens to captivate you.

That's not how it should be in church. You ought, if you've been here any length of time, to know the people who teach you. To be aware of the things that God is doing through the church we lead. The local church is a much better place to find people you want to listen to than the internet. It's a much more disappointing place; because once you know people you find out just how weak and frail they really are. But it's a much better place; because what you see is a real life not a digital version of one.

The preachers in our church may be strong, or we may not. We may be wise, or we may not. We may be rich, or we may not. But what every person you listen to should have in common is that those things are not the source of their boasting. Instead, v17, the things in which they boast, the things in which they glory, will be the things of God.

Preachers, Paul says, are dangerous people. Choose the ones you listen to carefully.

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