

PREACHING TO AN UNRESPONSIVE CONGREGATION

Does your church have ears to hear?

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CONTENTS

	Page number
Introduction:	3
1. What are the causes of unresponsiveness?	5
2. What is the cure of unresponsiveness?	12

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Introduction

Listen to a pastor's description of his church. 'They come to meeting from one Sabbath to another and hear God's word, but all that can be said to them won't awaken them.' He goes on: 'They are gazing about the assembly minding this and the other person that is in it, or they are thinking about their worldly business.'

Which church was this? I will tell you later. It is an example of an unresponsive church and sadly it could describe many churches in the UK today. They hear the preaching – but it doesn't stir them. They are half-hearted – the preaching doesn't really produce much fruit.

Many pastors labour in such situations. What can be done about the unresponsive church? That's what this booklet is about.

But before we can see what to do, we need to understand this spiritual lifelessness. How can we describe this lack of response?

Definition

First, we ought to define more clearly what we mean by an unresponsive church.

Responsiveness is a matter of the heart. Probably the best way to comprehend a lack of response is to contrast it with the way our hearts, and those of our hearers, ought to be. The new covenant conversion is spoken of in terms of the heart of stone (unresponsive) being replaced by a heart of flesh (tender / responsive), Ezekiel 36.26. In the OT, King Josiah is an example of someone with a responsive heart, 2 Chronicles 34.27.

- *The responsive heart*

The responsive heart thirsts for God, Psalm 42.1; Psalm 84.2.

The responsive heart is one that seeks God, 2 Chronicles 19.3; is fixed on God, Psalm 57.7; is joyful in God, Luke 1.47; seeks to be upright, pure and clean, Psalm 73.1; is tender, 1 Samuel 24.5; seeks to be obedient, Psalm 119.112; is awed by God's word, Psalm 119.161. We get the idea.

- *The unresponsive heart*

The stony heart is the opposite of this. It doesn't seek God – it's in church but primarily for other reasons. It is not fixed on God – it has other priorities. It is not

very joyful or thankful – but tends to grumbling. It is not tender – but hard to get through to. It is not concerned about obedience – it may often say ‘good sermon pastor’ but it has been a long time since there has been any real change in the life or any embarking on a new venture of faith. It hears the word of God – but with a ‘we’ve heard it all before’ attitude.

Maybe people are in church regularly, they give their tithes because it’s the right thing to do, but the zeal and the first love for the Lord (and for others) has gone.

I have painted this in quite stark terms. I have given a ‘black and white’ picture of the situation. No doubt this needs to be nuanced. I’m sure there are degrees of hardness. Perhaps we could see the lukewarm heart of the Laodicean church as ‘semi-responsive’, Revelation 3.16 – but it doesn’t please the Lord.

So an unresponsive heart is one where the desire and excitement for God has gone and true obedience has been replaced by ‘keeping up appearances.’ There is little or no real life.

An unresponsive congregation is one dominated by such an attitude.

The pastor of the unresponsive church

This situation can be both tough and dangerous for a pastor.

- It can be tough because you feel that no matter what you do you aren’t getting anywhere. Like the pastor of the church we quoted to begin with you feel ‘all that can be said to them won’t awaken them’. It appears you are wasting your time. You end up questioning yourself. ‘Is it me? Am I simply no good as a preacher?’ This is hard.
- But it can also be dangerous because, (especially if the unresponsive church is able to provide you with a nice manse and an adequate salary), it is tempting to simply give in and go along with the *status quo*. ‘Nothing’s going to change here – but the church will see me through until something better comes along or to when I retire, so why rock the boat?’ You become lazy and careless. This doesn’t please the Lord and it is spiritually dangerous for the pastor.

1: What are the causes of unresponsiveness?

How does this situation arise? What does Scripture say about the origins of this spiritual deterioration that leads to lack of response in a congregation?

I want to suggest that the unresponsive church emerges from three causes. The first one is the major cause – the other two are additional factors. The major cause is idolatry. Two other frequent contributors are to do with leadership and church size.

1. Idolatry

Idolatry is seen as the primary cause of spiritual deadness in Scripture.

*Our God is in heaven;
he does whatever pleases him.
But their idols are silver and gold,
made by human hands.
They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but cannot see.
They have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but cannot smell.
They have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but cannot walk,
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.*

Psalm 115.3-8

Notice the last two lines. Idols bring deadness

Let's briefly remind ourselves of how this works in Scripture.

Genesis explains to us that we are made to be image bearers of God, Genesis 1.26, 27. We are made to be reflectors of the LORD. That means that we become like what we worship.¹

One of the great positive OT examples of this is seen in Psalms 111 and 112. They are a pair.

The first, Psalm 111, praises God – and among his attributes we see, v3, 'his

¹Greg Beale's book *We become what we worship* Apollos / IVP, 2008 is the major work on this subject – and gives a Biblical theology of idolatry while explaining how this dynamic works – both negatively and positively.

righteousness endures forever'; v4, 'the LORD is gracious and compassionate'; v5, 'he provides food' and 'remembers his covenant forever' – wisdom is to fear the LORD, v10.

The second, Psalm 112, is about the man who fears the LORD, v1 – and what is said of him? 'His righteousness endures forever', v3; he is 'gracious and compassionate', v4; 'he scatters gifts to the poor', v9 and, with a gracious twist on the remembrance aspect, 'he is remembered forever', v6. He is like the God he worships. That's sanctification.

The NT takes up the same idea positively in 2 Corinthians 3.18. As we behold Christ's glory we become like him.

But by-and-large the OT focuses on the negative side of this dynamic. What happens when we put something else in the place of God (the definition of an idol)? We find that we become like the false god and it brings spiritual death to us, Psalm 115.8.

We detect this first in Genesis 3. Satan is first introduced in 3.1: 'Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.' It will probably have been pointed out to you sometime that the word 'crafty' or 'subtle' describing the serpent is virtually the same word as 'naked' – as mentioned in close proximity of 2.25, concerning Adam and Eve. What happens after they have disobeyed God and believed and obeyed the devil's word – virtually becoming his worshippers – making him their god? It seems, they take on a new kind of 'nakedness' of which they are ashamed, Genesis 3.10. Adam says to God, 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.' Their nakedness has become the same kind of nakedness as that of the devil. They were ashamed because they have become like him! And of course, this leads to death. 'Dust you are and to dust you will return' says God to Adam, Genesis 3.19.

- *We find this same dynamic worked out throughout the rest of the OT.* The Israelites worship the golden calf and they become 'stiff-necked', just like a calf. 'The Israelites are stubborn, like a stubborn heifer,' Hosea 4.16.

In the days of Isaiah, the people of Judah worship the 'sacred oaks', Isaiah 1.29, but what effect does that have on them? Isaiah 1.29-31 tells us:

*You will be ashamed because of the sacred oaks
in which you have delighted;
you will be disgraced because of the gardens
that you have chosen.
You will be like an oak with fading leaves,
like a garden without water.
The mighty man will become tinder
and his work a spark;
both will burn together,
with no one to quench the fire.*

God is saying, 'you will wither like those trees you worship'. And it is this idolatry which is referred to in Isaiah 6 and makes even the great prophet's ministry fruitless. Judah will be cut down like a 'terebinth and oak', v13 Meanwhile their idolatry makes them unable to receive God's word: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving', Isaiah 6.9 In fact, the effect of the word will be to harden them more, 'Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed,' Isaiah 6.10.

- *The same theme is carried into the NT*
In the Gospels we find a new form of idolatry. It is the idolatry of tradition and legalism which has hardened the hearts of the Pharisees so that they are even against people being healed on the Sabbath day! They are trusting in themselves and their religious performance not in God. So often, therefore, Jesus concludes what he says with 'he who has ears to hear let him hear', Mark 4.9; Matthew 13.9. He says this because many do not have ears to hear. Their idols of self-righteousness and legalistic duty have deadened their perception.

And, of course, that same concern for hearing is carried over into the Christian congregations as Jesus, through the apostle John, addresses the 7 churches in the book of Revelation. That same phrase from the lips of the Lord Jesus rings throughout – 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches', 2.7; 2.11; 2.17; 2.29; 3.6; 3.13; 3.22.

The fact of that phrase – linked to idolatry – being repeated to every church means this is something that every church and every pastor need to be constantly concerned about if they care for the health and responsiveness of the churches.

We must identify the idols of the modern day. For us the upfront idols are those of money, sex, and power (is that an idol for your eldership?). And self is constantly seeking to take the place of God in our lives. Also in our own day, people idolize celebrity, respectability, being liked by other people, health and fitness etc. These are the things even church people look to, or at least half look to, in order to make their lives 'work' for them. They look to these instead of to Christ and him being all in all. Or again, a more subtle idol for those who are not well off is just being so taken up with 'making ends meet' or keeping the family together that it takes over their lives. Instead of seeking first God's kingdom and trusting him, immediate needs fill their horizon.

Another way of putting all this is to think in terms of the fact that idols grieve the Spirit, Ephesians 4.30. Or we can think of the parable of the sower. The riches, cares and worries of this world are idols and choke God's word.

This idolatry needs to be addressed, pastor, if you are going to see a new responsiveness in your congregation.

2. Leadership of the church

As we have seen, idolatry is the major cause of spiritual deadness – and of course, if you wanted to rephrase all we've said in terms of 'the world, the flesh and the devil', that would be legitimate – as idolatry very often equates with those things.

But the point to make now is that although idolatry is the major cause of deadness / sleepiness in congregations, that deadness is likely to gain even more of a grip if idolatry dwells (even unconsciously) among the leadership.

We find this pattern highlighted in the OT. There is often a formula which introduces kings and spells this out. After the division, Jeroboam set up the two golden calves (north and south) and he is charged with 'causing Israel to sin', 1 Kings 12.30; 1 Kings 16.26; 2 Kings 13.2 etc.

Or again the priests of Ezekiel's day (before destruction of temple) engaged in idolatry which drove the LORD from his temple, Ezekiel 8.12.

Leaders / elders are called to be examples to the flock, 1 Peter 5.3. If they engage in various forms of 'acceptable idolatry' – perhaps love of power, reputation, comfort or love of money – then others in the congregation will see

these as acceptable. They will follow suit and a deadness will come to the church.

Sadly, I have very often observed a correlation between those who are leaders in evangelical churches and those who earn the biggest salaries in those churches. I'm not saying this should never happen but maybe it is too common.

In the NT, the qualifications for eldership not only particularly highlight avoiding love of money (and what it can achieve) – but also emphasize appointing as leaders those who are outstanding for selfless service, 1 Corinthians 16.15-17.

3. Size of the church

There can be idolatry in both small churches and large churches. All idolatry leads to spiritual deafness and blindness.

- *Small church mentality*

Here the church is weak in numbers and this is perceived as a threat to its very existence. But what happens then is that a commendable loyalty to the church and a concern for its continuance becomes perverted into an idol. The continued existence of the church takes on proportions which almost mean more to the members than the gospel or even God himself.

Often it is not just the survival of the church which is the issue but the survival of the church in its current form. That's the idol. The congregation become wedded to the past and make more of 'how things used to be' than they ought. This being the case they will not hear any word, even if it is from the Lord, about change. New ideas are rejected out of hand. Of course, the gospel must not be changed. But this church sees everything as a threat, has circled the wagons and taken on a siege mentality which will hear of no innovations. The idol of the past has blinded them to God's power for the future. In Jesus' parable, the man with one talent was dominated by fear and not only hid his gift rather than putting it to work, but also adopted a very perverse view of his master, Matthew 25.24, 25.

A siege mentality will also mean that the church becomes resistant to new members with alternative thoughts from themselves – even if these people are good Christians.

- *Large church mentality*

It can be that the desire to become a large church becomes an idol for the church and for its leadership. There is a concern for reputation which outstrips the love and true worship of the Lord in our hearts. Think of Revelation 3.1,2: 'I know you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.' Notice as Jesus addresses the church in Sardis that reputation had led to sleepiness – the Lord calls them to wake up. They are not remembering the gospel and therefore have slacked off on obedience. It is because they feel no need of obedience. They have the reputation they crave. 'We are 'Christ Church' or 'St Mary's' or whatever.'

Not only so, but as a church grows it can attract other Christians with a concern to be associated with a 'successful' church. This need not lead to lack of responsiveness but it does open up avenues for spiritual deadness.

A large church can draw in Christians whose concern is simply to 'enjoy' the ministry but not particularly get involved in ministry. They prize the pastor's preaching and teaching gifts, but they have little intention of using their own gifts in service. This sets something of an example to others and again can lead to a comfortable but unresponsive congregation.

Further, when a church becomes large, it often takes a decision to move away from the NT pattern of the church as the body of Christ with every member involved in service. Instead it appoints staff to lead the children's work and the youth work and do counselling among women and to run the evangelism of the church and look after the finances and administration and so on. But we need to be careful here because if we go too far down this route then ordinary church members will begin to say, 'I don't need to get involved – we pay other people to run the children's work or the seniors' ministry etc.' This means that challenges from the pulpit to be up and doing for Christ tend to fall on deaf ears. And when Christians are 'set free' from service, the idols of our times will begin to creep in and say 'you can serve me instead – you've got plenty of time. Look after yourself. Stay comfortable.'

Summary

So here is a little bit of an analysis of some of the causes of the unresponsive congregation. We have seen areas to check if the congregation is unresponsive. Perhaps we could summarize it like this:

idolatry + leadership issues + size issues = unresponsiveness

Aware of our own failings, it might look rather dire but it gives us food for thought.

And don't give up. There is real hope. Let me just take you back to that pastor's description of his unresponsive church we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. People were distracted, more concerned with who was there in church on a Sunday and their worldly business than Christ. Which church was it? It was actually the church of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, New England, in the early 1730s. But then, as history gloriously tells us, 1734-5 everything changed. The Holy Spirit came in power. Unresponsive churches can be transformed!²

² *Heroes*, Iain H. Murray, Banner of Truth, 2013, page 7

2. What is the cure of unresponsiveness?

If our diagnosis is correct, then what is required to cure the unresponsive congregation is not just encouragement or motivation (good as those things may be in their place and we will get back to them) – but **repentance**. There must be a forsaking of the idolatry that is the root of the endemic spiritual deadness and deafness from which the church is suffering.

Repentance, of course, is Christ's great and constant call to the 5 wayward churches of Revelation: 'Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent I will come and remove your lampstand from its place,' Revelation 2.5; (2.16; 2.22; 3.3; 3.19). Something has to be removed if there is going to be a thorough cure.

We need therefore to call congregations to repentance **BUT**, of course, that is precisely the problem! People are dull and deaf and sleepy and cynical.

How will they ever hear the call to repentance? Ears have been made deaf to the word of God. That is the essence of what an unresponsive congregation is about. Idolatry has put up barriers to fend off what God is saying.

We get an insight into the kind of thing that goes on from the Lord Jesus in Matthew 11.15f after one of the 'He who has ears' sayings. Jesus says:

To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

*'We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not mourn.'*

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.

Matthew 11.16-18

The people have lost the ability to respond appropriately – to dance or to mourn (yet they expect others to do so at their call!). They can always explain things away or cynically turn things on their head in order to avoid the challenge to themselves. 'We can ignore John because he was obviously deranged with his

constant fasting. We can ignore Jesus because he doesn't do what John did.' That's what idols do. They give us specious arguments to make us resistant or even impervious to God's word.

So what are pastors meant to do when faced with an unresponsive congregation? How do you preach effectively to people you know don't really want to hear? Thankfully the Bible gives us help. We are not the first people to be called to serve and minister to people who don't really want to listen! I want to suggest five lines of attack on this problem, but will major on different approaches to preaching, given we are preaching to hard hearts.

Intensity in Prayer

The unresponsive congregation is actually a church in crisis. It may not look like it. On the surface it may not seem like that – but it is. Sardis had a reputation for being alive, but they were dead, Revelation 3.1. And they weren't aware of their situation. They were asleep. Laodicea were neither hot nor cold and Christ was on the point of spitting them out of his mouth, Revelation 3.16 – and they didn't realize. They thought they were rich when they were poor, blind and naked. In Scripture, when God's people are in crisis, leaders respond with intense prayer. There is a realization by the pastor that what is required is not simply maintenance of the *status quo* but a breakthrough – an intervention of God.

Certainly, facing a crisis we find leaders fasting. As Daniel sees the 70 years exile are up and the *status quo* of exile must be broken – he fasts and prays, Daniel 9.3. After the return, Nehemiah hears that the walls of Jerusalem are broken down. This can't continue, he feels. God's people are disgraced and unprotected, Nehemiah 1.4. We find a similar reaction later when Ezra returns to Jerusalem only to find a people resistant to God's word – still Sabbath breaking, still marrying outside God's people, Nehemiah 10.6. Fasting means something like, 'Lord our desire for you to act supersedes even our need for food!' As we have noted, John the Baptist fasted as he sought to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord Jesus. We find the Lord Jesus involved in 40 days of fasting as he stands on the brink of his ministry to a hardened people, Matthew 4.2; Luke 4.2.

- *Penitence*

There needs to be a humbling. A pastor should search his own heart and repent of his sins. He may express sorrow before God for the state of the church – how can the Lord of glory be associated with such a sinful, self-centred church?

- *Petition*

He calls for the Lord's intervention. There is need for both wisdom and power to see a real breakthrough. He humbles himself, confessing that all his labours, all his preaching will be useless without God. Using the picture of the vine and the branches Jesus tells us that without him we can do nothing, John 15.5.

- *Pleading*

A pastor uses arguments with the Lord to underline his requests. Isaac Watts, in his *A Guide to Prayer*, mentions the following: The greatness of our wants and the dangers of our sorrows (apostasy); God's nature of mercy and loving kindness to be shown; God is our Maker and Father – why should we be forgotten?; God's promises. How much more will he give the Holy Spirit to those who ask, Luke 11.13; God's name and honour in the world, Joshua 7.9.

- *Persistence*

The seriousness of our requests will be shown by not giving up in prayer for the end we desire, Luke 18.1 – the persistent widow gets justice.

Arguments are used to 'reason' with God, fasting and persistence underline our seriousness. It is intense. If your church leadership is good, involve them. Involve your wife if she is a good helper. Prayer is the place we have to start. Idolatry brings deadness and only God can raise the dead.

Strategy in Preaching

God's men address the issue. They don't avoid it or shy away from it. In facing unresponsive people and congregations in Scripture, we find God's spokesmen addressing the problem using at least four different strategies, which may sometimes be combined. Let's just identify them and then look more fully at one example.

- *Preaching warning*

You have to start here. If people are not warned of their disobedience and its consequences you can hardly expect them to change. You find many such warnings from the OT prophets. They spelled out the consequences of turning a deaf ear to God, Proverbs 28.9. This is what we find the Lord Jesus doing in the 7 letters of Revelation. 'Repent or the lampstand will be removed. The church will be closed. Do you have an ear to hear this?' Revelation 2.5, 6.

Perhaps in today's churches people don't want to hear about God's chastisement of Christians and the church. In a therapy culture we want God to

be our therapist / Father not our judge / King. We just want to be told about God's grace and how much he loves us. Well, 'the Lord disciplines those he loves, and punishes everyone he accepts as a son,' Hebrews 12.6. People need to hear things they don't want to hear.

- *Preaching from the blind-side*

This is preaching which suddenly turns the tables on people. You've captured their attention because you are saying all the things the people want to hear. Often it is propositions of which their self-righteousness would approve. But suddenly – like a left-hook from a boxer – out of the blue – they are hit from a direction they just weren't expecting. Their self-righteousness backfires on them! 'Amens' turn to agony!

There's an example of this in 1 Kings 20. Contrary to God's command, King Ahab had let Ben Hadad live after the Lord had given Ahab victory in battle.

By the word of the LORD one of the company of the prophets said to his companion, "Strike me with your weapon," but he refused.

So the prophet said, "Because you have not obeyed the LORD, as soon as you leave me a lion will kill you." And after the man went away, a lion found him and killed him. The prophet found another man and said, "Strike me, please." So the man struck him and wounded him.

Then the prophet went and stood by the road waiting for the king. He disguised himself with his headband down over his eyes. As the king passed by, the prophet called out to him, "Your servant went into the thick of the battle, and someone came to me with a captive and said, 'Guard this man. If he is missing, it will be your life for his life, or you must pay a talent of silver.' While your servant was busy here and there, the man disappeared." "That is your sentence," the king of Israel said. "You have pronounced it yourself."

Then the prophet quickly removed the headband from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. He said to the king, "This is what the LORD says: 'You have set free a man I had determined should die. Therefore it is your life for his life, your people for his people.' "

Sullen and angry, the king of Israel went to his palace in Samaria.

1 Kings 20.35-43

Ahab was not easily receptive to God's word – but the message had got through.

Not quite the same, but think of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. There's no preaching here – but it simply shows the power of turning the tables on the conscience. Judah has dealt unfairly with the widowed Tamar and then used his daughter-in-law (without realizing it) as a prostitute and has left his seal and

staff. Later Tamar is said to have committed prostitution and is pregnant. In all his self-righteousness, Judah says she should be burned to death. But then we read ‘As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. “I am pregnant by the man who owns these,” she said. And she added, “See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.” Judah recognized them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah.” Genesis 38.25, 26. He is so conscience stricken he repents! He’s been totally blind-sided.

- *Preaching in parables*

The idea here is that the congregation won’t be told. So provoke them to ask questions. They’ve heard it all before and know all the answers. So don’t tell them the answers. Set them questions.

This, of course, is the method of the Lord Jesus Christ as he preaches to a hardened generation (of Pharisees). It is interesting that it is after the rejection of Jesus in Matthew 12 (Being accused of casting out demons by the prince of demons) – that Jesus begins to preach in parables.

Pastor, they are on the look out to fend off your assertions, your answers – but if you set the right question in their hearts, the answer might come at them by surprise. Under the Spirit’s workings answers might come from the inside not the outside, from their own hearts and not from the preacher. You’ve got past the defences.

So here’s the parable of the sower. It leaves people wondering what it means. When people are asking questions they are open. The disciples – those in whom God is working – want to know. Tell us what it means. He explains Matthew 13.10-13, 18, 19. They are open.

Here’s the parable of the prodigal son. The Pharisees have been condemning Jesus for eating with sinners, Luke 15.1,2. They are drawn in by the story of a young profligate. There’s the repentance of the younger son. ‘Yes that’s what these wretched sinners need to do’ say the Pharisees in their hearts. But the story doesn’t stop there. ‘Who’s this older brother? Oh no, of course, it is us!’ And does the older brother go into the feast or not? ‘What should he do?’ The Pharisees are left wondering.

Ezekiel’s acted out parables are in this category. The exiles were a pretty hard-hearted bunch. They thought, ‘God has been unkind to us. We would be better back in Jerusalem – why us? – it’s not fair!’ But here is a prophet laying on one side day after day? ‘What’s this about?’ they think to themselves. ‘Ezekiel has built a model that looks rather like Jerusalem. It seems to be under siege.

Will it fall? If it does, perhaps we are better off here. Perhaps God has been good to us. We have completely misrepresented him. We need to repent.'

The parables provoke questions which get in under the radar.

- *Preaching prophetically*

The book of Malachi is a good book to preach through to an unresponsive congregation. Malachi is preaching to those who have returned from the Exile, but for whom their faith had gone stale. They were just keeping up appearances. They offered sacrifices to God – but only damaged and diseased animals. They brought tithes – but not the full tithe. They had become sexually lax. Malachi is written as a series of disputes with God. Complaints against God which people harboured in their hearts but which they would never air in public are addressed by God. It dawns on them that God knows what they are thinking. The way they rationalize their half-heartedness is exposed and hypocrisy answered in a way no-one would have expected. In a new way, they realize God is the living God and he knows all about them. Such a shock might well bring repentance.

This is prophetic preaching. As a preacher seeks God, he can lead him to say things which no-one could possibly know but God himself. That makes a congregation sit up and take notice!

Perhaps the great example to dwell on is the preaching strategy of the prophet Nathan to David after the adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. We find this in 2 Samuel 12.1-15. We can imagine David has silenced his conscience, hardened his heart against any feelings of guilt. He did not want the embarrassment of the truth coming out. Perhaps he was excusing himself by telling himself something like, 'well she was so beautiful I couldn't help myself.' There's no sign of sorrow over what he's done. But God is displeased.

Nathan comes to David. In his message we find a number of our strategies combined to bring repentance to an unresponsive heart.

First, there is the clever story / parable of the poor man's one sheep being taken by the rich man with vast flocks, simply to feed a guest. The story is calculated to draw in David, the ex-shepherd boy, and raise in him a sense of righteous anger, v5,6. Burning with anger, David blurts out, 'the man deserves to die!' He's listening!

Second, suddenly, totally blind-sided by his own sense of righteous anger, David is in for a shock. In comes the left hook from the prophet: 'You are the man!'

v7a. And Nathan lays it on thick – how good God has been to David and then for him to repay the Lord like this, v7b, 8. David is shocked.

Third, because he has done this, though he is forgiven, there will be judgment on his house. ‘The sword will never depart from your house,’ v10. God will chastise. There will be civil war. All this is unfolded and comes to pass in 2 Samuel with the story of Absalom.

And now David confesses and repents. His defences have been breached. ‘I have sinned against the LORD,’ admits David, v13. There is forgiveness, v13, but there will still be consequences in chastisement.

But the hard-hearted king is brought to repentance.

From all of this you can see how wise the preacher must be in pursuing such a preaching strategy. It calls for real insight. That’s why preparation for such preaching needs prayer – God given wisdom.

Consistency in practice

But such preaching needs follow-up and follow-through. As leaders of God’s flock, we have to become role models of the kind of enthusiasm and obedience we desire to see in our people. The apostle Peter calls us to be examples to the flock, 1 Peter 5.3b. The unresponsive congregation needs not simply to hear the truth presented powerfully, but to see the truth lived out enthusiastically.

We will never be sinless as leaders but...

Do you long to see your people zealous for evangelism? Then you must be zealous for evangelism.

Do you long to see your people’s love for Christ expressed in sacrificial giving? Then you must give sacrificially.

Do you long to see your people keen not simply to hear but to obey the word of God? Then you must be someone who takes heed of your own sermons. There must be consistency in practising what we preach.

It is a terrible thing when the reverse is true. The life of a pastor or the lives of other elders can become an excuse for God’s people to be less than out and out for Christ.

It is a terrible thing when the very idols which have brought such deadness to the church, have actually been planted and maintained by the leadership – e.g.

the idols of money, security, family, love of power, love of ease etc.

The NT is keen for us to honour, not the comfortable in the church, but those who have risked all for Christ:

I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety.

So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

Philippians 2.25-30

Charity in perseverance

It may be that in God's goodness things will change overnight – there will be a mini revival and suddenly everyone is in earnest for the Lord. This is what happened to the congregation of Jonathan Edwards. Revival broke out.

But it is more likely that such change in the church will take quite some time. So the pastor will need to persevere – to stick at it in prayer and preaching and setting an example. This could be a matter of months. It could take years of faithful wrestling with the situation.

Also it is unlikely that people will thank you for pointing out their sins and their idols and bringing conviction to their consciences. Rather there may well be – at least at first – a backlash against you. You might well face scowls and plots and perhaps worse, just as Jesus did from the Pharisees. But you will need to remain calm and keep on loving them – be charitable. It is not easy to have idols exposed and be called to repent:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

2 Timothy 2.24-26

Expectancy in purpose

There needs to be encouragement, hopefulness – an anticipation of good things as we lay aside our idols and go God’s way. Being gloomy won’t help.

For good parenting, the wisdom is that normally praise for a child should outweigh correction by about three to one. That is not a bad rule of thumb to transfer to the church. Paul is so thankful for the Christians in the churches, Philippians 1.3; Colossians 1.3 etc. Whenever you see a move in the right direction, no matter how small, encourage that Christian with some form of ‘well done’ in your conversation with them.

And pray and expect the Lord to work. After all it is surely his will that his churches be the best that they can be to his glory.

Your purpose is to wake the church up, to see new enthusiastic obedience, so be enthusiastic yourself. This will help motivate people.

Yes – we will need to castigate sin and lukewarmness, but we must also preach up the promises of God – believe them ourselves – and be generally upbeat about what God will do among us as we trust and obey.

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,” says the LORD Almighty. “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the LORD Almighty.

Malachi 3.10-12.