

An Invaluable Insight from Richard Dawkins

It is not often that I can quote with approval something written by Richard Dawkins,¹ but I am delighted to be able to do so now, and use it to produce this very short article.²

Serendipity, or, as I would put it, God's providence: running my eye along the shelf of books in the charity shop,³ I spied Richard Dawkins' book: *An Appetite for Wonder*.⁴ This book is, more or less, his life story thus far. Intrigued to know what earth-shattering event had turned Dawkins from the religious experience of his early life into becoming an aggressive atheist, I willingly forked out the princely sum demanded by the charity shop, and, after plonking my money down on the counter, walked out with my prize tucked under my arm. Alas, to my utter amazement – disappointment, let down, would be better ways of expressing it – I found Dawkins' explanation of his lurch into militant atheism so trite, so feeble... words fail. Ho, hum! Another duff⁵ purchase! But... no! Skimming through the work, I came across what I consider to be a gem. Hence my title: 'An Invaluable Insight from Dawkins' – invaluable in two respects, one far more important than the other.

Let me explain. At the time, I was in process of publishing *Preaching Today: Food for Action as well as Thought*, and the

¹ 'Clinton Richard Dawkins FRS FRSL is an English ethologist [that is, a scientist who studies behaviour], evolutionary biologist and author. He is an emeritus fellow of New College, Oxford, and was the University of Oxford's Professor for Public Understanding of Science from 1995 until 2008' (Wikipedia). He is a militant atheist.

² I have changed his punctuation a little, without altering the sense.

³ For non-UK readers, a charity shop sells second-hand goods – including books – which have been donated by people who wish to support various good causes; or, in some cases, to get rid of what they regard as junk!

⁴ Richard Dawkins: *An Appetite for Wonder*, Bantam Press, London, 2013.

⁵ That is, wasted, poor quality.

words I discovered in Dawkins' work⁶ leapt off the page, gripping my mind. So much so, I felt that I had to include them in my own work. But, on reflection, I decided against it, since it would have introduced an unnecessary confusion for my readers, and involved me in a somewhat convoluted explanation.

What am I talking about?

In my *Preaching Today*, I don't have a good word to say about those preachers (of whom, it seems to me, there is no shortage today) who lecture instead of preaching. In his book, Dawkins gave us his experience of lectures from both ends: receiving (as a student) and giving (as a lecturer). And what he said was rattling good stuff!

But that, of course, was not the main thing that struck me. No! Rather, I saw at once that I could accommodate Dawkins' remarks and use them to drive home what I feel about (and feel so strongly about) preaching, and what I was trying to set out in my book.

Even so, let me deal, first of all, with lectures, and attendance at lectures, in the sense which Dawkins intended. He showed, to put it mildly, that he is pretty disgruntled with what often goes on at lectures. His words on that score merit close attention – and action! I empathise very much with him, for what he said on the subject chimes in with my experience as a student, virtually word for word.

You see, my own higher education (1956-1961) – at A level and university – consisted almost entirely of attendance at lectures and consequent note-taking. I spent hours and hours at it! Hopeless! The fact is, nobody taught me how to learn; indeed, nobody taught me what 'learning' was. I duly attended lectures, listened attentively to every phrase, diligently copied every syllable. I might almost go so far as to say that if the lecturer sneezed, 'Atishoo!' would appear in my notes! Making notes, then copying them up in neat – that was my education. Education, my foot! Years later, when I was a schoolmaster, I had a colleague whose educational method consisted in giving her pupils (that is

⁶ Dawkins pp155-156.

what they were known as in those antediluvian days) exercises which they did in rough (that is, in draft). After correction, the pupils then religiously copied the ‘perfect’ answers in pristine neatness into their ‘best’ books, which were in due course duly presented to the parents, all suitably ticked in the regulation manner. Such was her understanding of education! Thinking parents should have been up in arms! Ah well...

What has all this to do with the serious business of preaching the gospel? Read on. All will become clear. But it is high time I quoted Dawkins. Here is the extract that struck me so forcibly:

Some lectures were good, some were bad, but it scarcely made any difference to me because I hadn’t yet worked out the point of going to a lecture.

So confessed Dawkins. Having thought about it, what did Dawkins think is ‘the point of going to a lecture’? First a negative, and a very important negative at that:

It is not to imbibe information...

Wow! Now, there’s a thought!

And so to the consequences of getting this wrong. The purpose of going to a lecture, Dawkins declared, ‘is not to imbibe information’. Consequently:

...there is therefore no point in doing what I did (and what virtually all undergraduates do), which was to take notes so slavishly that there was no attention [span] left over for thinking. The only time I departed from this habit was once when I had forgotten to bring a pen. I was much too shy to borrow a pen from the girl sitting next to me... So, for that one lecture I took no notes and just listened – and thought. It was not an unusually good lecture, but I got more out of it than from other lectures – some of them much better ones – because my lack of pen freed me to listen and think. But I didn’t have the sense to learn my lesson and refrain from taking notes at subsequent lectures.

Theoretically the idea was to use your lecture notes in revision, but I never looked at mine ever again,⁷ and I suspect that most of

⁷ In this, I part company with Dawkins. For I did use my notes for revision, virtually committing them to memory. My degree was nominally

my colleagues didn't either. The purpose of a lecture should not be to impart information. There are books, libraries, nowadays the internet, for that.

So what is the purpose of a lecture? And, in connection with that, what are the qualities of a good lecturer? Dawkins:

A lecturer should inspire and provoke thought. You watch a good lecturer thinking aloud in front of you, reaching for a thought, sometimes grabbing it out of the air like the celebrated historian A.J.P.Taylor. A good lecturer thinking aloud, reflecting, musing, rephrasing for clarity, hesitating and then grasping, varying the pace, pausing for thought, can be a role model in how to think about a subject⁸ and how to be transmit a passion for it. If a lecturer drones information as though reading it, the audience might as well read it – possibly in the lecturer's own book.

Dawkins went on:

I exaggerate a little when I advise never to take notes. If a lecturer produces an original thought, something striking that makes you think, then by all means write yourself a memo to think again

in Physics and Mathematics. As far as the Physics goes, it would be nearer the truth to say my degree reflected my ability to regurgitate notes.

⁸ When I was responsible for teaching Mathematics at A level, in the Spring term of their final year, revision was the order of the day for the candidates I was preparing for the approaching examinations. And that revision, for a start, involved them in attempting for themselves every question in all the past papers of recent years. I told my class that I would solve any question they couldn't cope with (and take the opportunity to explain further) – as long as they had tried it for themselves first. Moreover, I would do it off the cuff, in front of them. Which meant, of course, that occasionally I got stuck. At which point, I would pause, telling the class that this was good, warning them that they would find the same themselves. I told them to watch, to see how I got out of the bind, how I cracked this particular nut, how I unravelled the tangle, and reached the solution, doing it all in front of them, both audibly and on the board. I wanted them to learn from the way I reasoned my way out of the problem, and thus master the principles for themselves. This, I was convinced, was far more valuable for them than me giving them a pristine solution, prepared beforehand, one which avoided all the difficulties and pitfalls. My reputation was strong enough to bear this system, but, in any case, what did my reputation matter, as long as those I was teaching profited?

about it later, or look something up. But struggling to record a piece of every sentence the lecturer utters – which is what I tried to do – is pointless for the student and demoralising for the lecturer. When lecturing to a student audience today, all I notice is a sea of tops of heads, bowed over notebooks. I prefer lay [that is, non-expert] audiences, literary festivals, memorial lectures, guest lectures at universities where, if the students come, it is because they want to, and not because it is on their syllabus. At such public lectures, the lecturer sees not bowed heads and scribbling hands, but alert faces, smiling, registering comprehension – or the reverse. When lecturing in America, I get quite cross if I hear that some professor has *required* students to attend my lecture for ‘credit’. I’m not keen on the idea of ‘credit’ at the best of times, and I actively hate the idea that students are getting credit for listening to me.⁹

Very good! Very good, indeed!

But in this article I am not concerned with education methods. I am thinking of preaching. Much of what Dawkins said about *lecturing* makes invaluable sense when applied to *preaching*. By accommodating Dawkins’ words, I want to make a very serious point, one I try to make in my aforesaid *Preaching Today*. A friend, to whom I gave Dawkins’ book, and who kindly met my request by sending me a scan of the relevant pages, knowing that I saw in them an application to preaching, commented:

This resonated with me too. I’ll never forget a lecture I had as an undergraduate, from a visiting Oxford professor... He said: ‘Why are you all taking notes? Do that later in the library. Lectures are for opening the mind and expanding your horizons!’ Or words to that effect.

As you suggest, I can see that this has relevance for preaching!

So, here goes...

The purpose of listening to a preacher:

...is not to imbibe information, and there is therefore no point in mentally (and some actually do) taking notes so slavishly that there is no attention span left over for thinking.

⁹ Dawkins pp155-156, emphasis his.

The purpose of a sermon should not be to impart information. There are books, libraries, nowadays the internet, for that.

So what is the purpose of preaching? And, in connection with that, what are the qualities of a good preacher? In part – and a good part at that – this:

A preacher should inspire and provoke thought. You watch a good preacher thinking aloud in front of you, reaching for a thought, sometimes grabbing it out of the air. A good preacher thinking aloud, reflecting, musing, rephrasing for clarity, hesitating and then grasping, varying the pace, pausing for thought, can be a role model in how to think about a subject¹⁰ and how to be transmit a passion¹¹ for it. If a preacher drones information as though reading it – increasingly, he *will be* reading it, using PowerPoint and handing out notes – the congregation might as well read it – possibly in the preacher’s own notes or book.

Of course:

If a preacher produces an original thought, something striking that makes you think, then by all means write yourself a memo to think again about it later, or look something up. But struggling to get information is pointless for the hearer and demoralising for the preacher. A preacher wants to see alert faces, registering comprehension – or the reverse.

If I were restricted to certain words from the above, I would choose:

Drone – avoid it!

Read – don’t read your sermons to your hearers!

Passion – have it, aim for it and try to stimulate it!

Information – this is not the main purpose of preaching!

¹⁰ I deplore the appalling lack of curiosity among contemporary believers in general, especially among those who say they want to be preachers. I do all I can to stimulate a spirit of enquiry, urging study of the Scriptures by the Spirit for illumination. Of course, I realise many will think this far too radical, far too subversive: stimulating people to think! Why, they might even think outside the box! And then where would we be?

¹¹ Passion! Now there’s a word! See my *Preaching*.

Face – both preacher and hearer should look at each other!

So thank you Richard Dawkins for what you said about lectures. I know you won't be much concerned about my accommodation of your remarks, and my application of them to preaching, but I hope that the readers for whom I write will find this resulting article both profitable and thought-provoking. More, in conjunction with my *Preaching Today*, I hope it might lead to action. There certainly is need for it – desperate need.

Postscript

Since writing the above, I have come across a passage from Alister McGrath on C.S.Lewis which is so apposite I must include it. As with Dawkins, Lewis' stance on delivering a lecture has a corresponding application to preaching. Alister McGrath:

Lectures that were simply read out to their audiences, [Lewis] explained to his father, tend to 'send people to sleep'. He would have to learn to talk with his audiences, not to recite his lectures to them. He had to engage their attention, not merely discharge information.¹²

¹² Alister McGrath: *C.S.Lewis. A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*, Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, 2016, p167.