

# FOUNDATIONS

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# FOUNDATIONS

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"Preaching"  
Gospel Preaching  
Expository Preaching  
Pointed Preaching  
Preaching from Hebrews  
What is Preaching?

British Evangelical  
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# FOUNDATIONS

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**Foundations** is published by the **British Evangelical Council** in May and November; its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics – and to indicate their relevance to pastoral ministry; its policy gives particular attention to the theology of evangelical churches which are outside pluralist ecumenical bodies.

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## Editor's Notes

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**L**ike many I long for a revival of preaching in our land and trust that this issue can encourage preachers to preach more effectively and to pray more fervently. We also need to encourage those who listen to us to pray for our preaching. It is striking how Paul asks for prayer for his preaching (Eph. 6:19-20; Col. 4:2-5). Should we not do the same? Spurgeon relied on the prayers of his people and so must we. We must address the mediatorial throne of the Lord Jesus Christ and ask for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on us, our preaching and our congregations. However accurate our exposition, practical and culturally relevant our application, earnest our manner, helpful our illustrations, winsome our personalities and whatever else goes into good preaching, the indispensable element is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Our gospel must come not in word only, but in power, in the Holy Spirit and in deep persuasion (1 Thess. 1:5).

If you want a book to stir up longing for such preaching I would highly recommend Douglas Kelly's *Preachers with Power* (Banner of Truth), especially the chapters on John Girardeau. Girardeau's most notable ministry was to a large, predominantly black, Presbyterian church in Charleston, South Carolina before the American Civil War. When asked why they wanted to listen to a white preacher, one of his congregation said that Girardeau had a white face but a black heart. There's an important principle in preaching in that observation. His preaching was Christ-centred and soul-searching and is described by Kelly as "exalting and proclaiming Christ". Pray for more preaching like that.

Let me recommend two other books. We owe much to Arthur Reynolds for his translations of several works by the late great Chinese leader Wong Ming-Dao. Drawing on his experience teaching homiletics in Asia, Mr Reynolds has recently published a book on preaching, *Learning from Great Preachers* (Avon Books, 1997, ISBN 1 86033 490 3). This is a very useful and practical book that should be of great help to younger preachers. Another book that will undergird your confidence in preaching is David Eby's *Power Preaching for Church Growth* (Mentor/Christian Focus, 1996, ISBN 1 857 92 252 2). Eby is a Presbyterian minister in California whose thesis is that, biblically, the key to church growth is powerful, biblical, Spirit-anointed preaching backed by persevering prayer. The chapters are short and each one concludes with a selection of superb quotations on preaching. There are three valuable appendices on praying for preaching, one of which is a guide for church members to use in preparing for Sunday. Several people in my church have begun to use it. This book is a real tonic for discouraged preachers.

The philosopher George Santayana wonderfully captured liberal Christianity in his novel *The Last Puritan*. Here is his description of a service at King's Chapel in Boston, Massachusetts where Nathaniel Alden, the principal character, attends church. It will amuse us, but it should also make us reflect on our preaching and ask what makes it different.

The music was classical and soothing, the service High Church Unitarian, with nothing in it either to discourage the believer or to annoy the unbeliever. What did doctrines matter? The lessons were chosen for their magical archaic English and were mouthed with a tone of emotional mystery and unction. With the superior knowledge and finer feelings of today might we not find in such words far deeper meanings than the original

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# Gospel Preaching

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Gareth Crossley

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**I**n an attempt to fulfil the Great Commission to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19) some enthusiastic Christians present the gospel message in the context of entertainment. However, “if the gospel has been presented to people within the context of an evening of Christian entertainment, and the mood of the music rather than the truth of the gospel has been the major factor conditioning the response to the message, we should not be surprised if the result is a number of temporary believers.”<sup>1</sup>

It may be argued that much of modern day evangelism is presenting Christ in terms of human felt wants or needs. “Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Do you want peace of mind? Do you feel that you have failed? Are you fed up with yourself? Do you want a friend? Then come to Christ; he will meet your every need...” – “as if the Lord Jesus Christ were to be thought of as a fairy godmother, or a super-psychiatrist.”<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that the accounts of the Great Commission say virtually nothing about what men need (cf. Acts 1:8). On the Day of Pentecost Peter did not preach about human need, in fact he only refers to his hearers briefly. He tells them that they are wrong in thinking that the disciples are drunk (v. 15), he refers to some facts they already know (Acts 2:22, 29), and he points out his hearers’ wickedness. But these things are not the burden of his message. The message is Christ. Or, more accurately, God and Christ and the Spirit. “God,” says Peter in effect, “sent Christ. Christ sent the Spirit. That is why you see and hear these things.” It is not that his hearers were unimportant. Peter, no doubt, longed to help them. But something came before that concern. He had to tell of Christ. And his hearers were *not* to ask, “What is there in it for me?” They had to know that Jesus is Lord. And they had to act accordingly! ... They *had not been told* that God had sent his word to them to make them happy. They had been told that they stood before a King whom they had offended. This was God-centred preaching. Peter preached that God was worthy to be known and proclaimed for who he is.<sup>3</sup>

God, in his wisdom, knows how *to choose* his goals. God also knows how *to achieve* his goals. God chooses what he wants to do, and knows how to do it. This is the remarkable wisdom of God. And God is full of wisdom. He has many purposes, many goals, and he knows perfectly well how he will bring them about.<sup>4</sup> The God who knows all things sends us to evangelise the world. Paul and his companions could have been roving troubadours with banjos slung over their shoulders, travelling from town to town as the precursors of the entertainment evangelists – but they were not. God has chosen his way to bring the knowledge of himself to the world. His choice was wise. His choice is still wise. We know that, because he is the only wise God to whom be honour and glory for ever and ever (1 Timothy 1:17). That alone settles the question, How are sinners to be saved? – through what the world regards as – “the foolishness of preaching”!

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached [lit. the proclamation] to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21)

God sets down his method for bringing men, women, young people and children to salvation in Christ. “We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:23). To the Jews a crucified Saviour looks powerless and weak. To the Greeks a crucified Saviour looks absurd and stupid. “But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24). The Cross is the strongest power in the world. The Cross is the highest wisdom in the whole universe.

Gospel preachers are commissioned: “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2). The preacher is called a “herald” of the gospel (1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11). He is a messenger, the deliverer of a message. The faithful herald does not *make* the message, *alter* the message, or *try to improve* the message. He just delivers it – intact. As with the house steward, the most important qualification in the herald is “that one be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2). When God called Jonah to be a gospel preacher to the people of Nineveh he said, “Arise, go to Nineveh that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you” (Jonah 3:2). The preacher’s business is simply to take what he finds in the Scriptures, as he finds it, and impress it upon the minds of his hearers. “The Bible is for the people; this is the great principle of Protestants.”<sup>5</sup>

## **I. What is the gospel?**

### **a. The gospel is God’s good news**

The gospel or good news is *God’s* good news. Paul calls it, “the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1). This good news originated from heaven. It is a message from the throne. It is a remarkable word from the Creator of all things. Consequently, we have no liberty to sit in judgment on it, or to tamper with its content. It is God’s gospel not ours, and its truth is to be received not criticised, declared not debated. More is at stake in our gospel preaching than is commonly realised. “God’s name, God’s honour, and God’s character are at stake. We dare not misrepresent Him. If we ignore these things we ignore God Himself. What right have we then to call ourselves His servants?”<sup>6</sup>

The whole Bible is God’s good news in all its astonishing relevance. “Bible” and “gospel” are almost interchangeable terms, for the major function of the Bible in all its length and breadth is to bear witness to Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> Paul in his ministry did not declare just a part of the gospel, he gave the whole revelation of God in Christ. To the elders of the church at Ephesus, “I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). The gospel is not just the truth concerning the remission of sins and eternal life through faith in the substitutionary offering of Christ on Calvary; it is the whole revelation given to us in the New Testament of the “mysteries” that were previously hidden in the Old Testament but are now made known – salvation through faith, the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit in the believer, the believer’s position as seated with Christ in the heavenlies, the purpose of God to manifest Christ in and through the Church, the pattern given by God for the Church, the gifts of the Spirit for ministry, and the future hope of the believer – all these are the gospel, the Good News.<sup>8</sup>

## **b. The gospel is God's good news about Jesus Christ**

The central subject of gospel preaching is the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:3), **“We do not preach ourselves”,** writes Paul, **“but Christ Jesus the Lord”** (2 Corinthians 4:5). Like Paul at Corinth we must determine to lay aside all striving for **“excellence of speech”** or for a show of human **“wisdom”** and speak only of **“Jesus Christ and him crucified”** (1 Corinthians 2:2). Our task is to proclaim Christ. Like John the Baptist we would arrest the attention of the people and point to the Saviour: **“Behold! the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”** (John 1:29.) **“The need of this Christ is universal; the adequacy of this Christ is inexhaustible; the power of this Christ is immeasurable.”**<sup>9</sup> **“We do not kindle faith by describing it but by describing Christ.”**<sup>10</sup>

To preach **“Jesus Christ and him crucified”** does not mean that the preacher will speak constantly on the bare facts of the crucifixion. It means, rather, that **“he will use all lines of biblical thought to illuminate the meaning of that fact; and he will never let his exposition of anything in Scripture get detached from, and so appear as unrelated to, Calvary's cross and the redemption that was wrought there; and in this way he will sustain a Christ-centred, cross-oriented preaching ministry year in and year out, with an evangelistic as well as a pastoral thrust.”**<sup>11</sup>

The preacher is a herald. He has a message to deliver. Christianity is not something vague or mystical. It has a solid, dogmatic core. It centres in a living Person. It builds on historical facts concerning this Person. In this Person is embodied an immense set of vital truths relating to God and humanity, life and death, time and eternity, heaven and hell.

It is a mistake to suppose that gospel sermons are a special brand of sermons, having their own peculiar style and conventions; gospel sermons are just scriptural sermons, the sort of sermons that a man cannot help preaching if he is preaching the Bible biblically. Proper sermons seek to expound and apply what is in the Bible. But what is in the Bible is just the whole counsel of God for man's salvation. All Scripture bears witness in one way or another to Christ, and all biblical themes relate to him. If these things are true, then it follows, as Jim Packer maintains, **“All proper sermons... will of necessity declare Christ in some fashion, and so be more or less directly evangelistic.”**<sup>12</sup>

As with all the New Testament apostles and evangelists, Paul's primary task in evangelism was to teach the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ. It was the news about Jesus of Nazareth. It was the news of the incarnation, the atonement, and the kingdom of Jesus Christ the Son of God – his cradle, his cross, and his crown. It was the news of how God **“glorified his servant Jesus”** (Acts 3:13) by making Him Christ, the world's long-awaited **“Prince and Saviour”** (Acts 5:31). It was the news of how God made his Son man; and how, as man, God made him Prophet, Priest, and King. As Prophet, God also made him a Lawgiver to his people. As Priest, God also made him a sacrifice for sins. As King, God also made him Judge of all the world – giving him authority and power to reign till every knee bows before him (Isaiah 45:22-23; cf. Philippians 2:9-11), and to save all who call on His name (Joel 2:32; cf. Acts 2:21; Romans 10:9,13). There can be no power in preaching that fails to proclaim this Christ and exhort men, women and children to put their trust in him.

God has fulfilled his eternal intention of glorifying his Son as a great Saviour for great sinners.

Here then is the preacher's task to stagger people with the truth of the incarnation, to



hold up in a hundred ways the wonder of the atonement, to tell of the work of the Holy Spirit, to preach about God, to show human beings their true nature, to expose sin, to proclaim the way of salvation, to declare all the marvellous aspects of the grace of God.

When the doctor abandons hope, when a dear one is certified insane, when a child bent on wickedness breaks your heart, when some awful, natural disaster seems to deny the existence of a good God, when the coffin is standing beside the bed, graceful little essays about nothing in particular are no good, and the poor souls which have been fed upon them in place of robust preaching have nothing to rest on. (WE Sangster)<sup>13</sup>

If we desire Jesus to be seen as wonderful we preachers must humble ourselves and abase ourselves and let Christ have the centre stage that all eyes may behold him and all ears hear him. We must not hunger for praise, nor hanker for admiration and congratulations when the preaching is over. We want sinners converted. We want them to be enthralled with the Lord Jesus Christ. We want them to respond to the preaching by praising and glorifying God.

“The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1). God has revealed, and continues to reveal, his eternal power and godhead in his creation (Romans 1:20). The Jews received the Law of God through Moses (Romans 2:17-18; John 1:17); Gentiles have “the law written in their hearts” (Romans 2:15); but no one can know the gospel, the Good News of God’s free grace in Jesus Christ, without a special revelation. The preacher is the herald delivering God’s message from God’s book in God’s way. He speaks from the Scriptures. He brings a word from the Word – a preached word from the written Word, concerning the Incarnate Word – the Word made flesh!

## **2. Why preach the gospel?**

### **a. We preach the gospel to honour God**

The gospel “is the power of God to salvation” (Romans 1:16). Gospel preaching is God’s method, God’s means, to achieve his purpose to save sinners. When Paul speaks of “the foolishness of preaching” (1 Corinthians 1:21) he is making a concession because that is precisely how the “wise of this world” regard it. The doctrine of the cross is foolishness in the estimation of men and women of the world. But God puts all human wisdom to shame. He makes something which the wise of this world regard as absurd into the glorious means of salvation. What could appear more ridiculous to human intelligence than to announce as the Saviour of the world One who died the vile death of a criminal on a cross? And to expect that this announcement will do what the world with all its mighty efforts and combined wisdom fails to do – to actually lift human beings: men, women and children, into full relationship and harmony with the only true God – why the thought is preposterous – to the world!

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21)

This verse, in its context clearly teaches two great truths: (i) that the cross, or the doctrine of Christ crucified, is the substance of the gospel. This is the gospel’s power



and vitality; and (ii) that the preaching, or public proclamation of this doctrine is the great means of salvation.<sup>14</sup>

The Church of Jesus Christ is in grave danger of losing all its confidence in the power of preaching. This is God's appointed *method*. This is God's ordained *way* for communicating the *message*. From the days of Enoch who prophesied (Jude 14), and of Noah who was "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), even to our present day, God has employed "the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Nothing but the truth of the gospel can be instrumental for the conversion of souls. Any wilful suppression – or any compromising statement of truth, dishonours the Holy Spirit in his own special office, and therefore restrains his quickening influence. Charles Bridges maintains that many serious-minded, warm-hearted, and diligent ministers, are bemoaning the obvious unfruitfulness of their work without suspecting for one moment, "that the root of the evil lies within themselves".<sup>15</sup> They are not preaching the gospel!

Political speeches will not save souls; social discourses will not save souls; philosophical speculation will not save souls. We must be resolved to preach, and to preach Jesus Christ, and to preach nothing except Jesus Christ, and to preach nothing "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Theological Colleges and Bible Institutes are turning out men who are conversant with other religions, well versed in differing cultures, knowledgeable concerning the history of the Puritans. They can lecture. They can teach the faithful. But where are the preachers who can preach to save souls? The great preacher, CH Spurgeon, declared: "I would sooner bring one sinner to Christ than unpick all the mysteries of the Divine Word, for salvation is the one thing we are to live for".<sup>16</sup>

Gospel preaching is preaching Jesus Christ to sinners. Gospel preaching addresses the mind. Gospel preaching makes sinners think, and think hard, and think hard about God, and think hard about themselves in relation to God. The message must be faithful and clear, true and plain. Paul boldly declares:

Since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation [or "open statements"] of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Corinthians 4:1-2)

Corruption of the Christian message indicates a lack of confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit, a lack of respect for the condition of humanity, and a lack of recognition of the true character of the Gospel. Christian preachers are guilty of worldliness whenever they are so concerned to ensure a response to the gospel, that they compromise its message, manipulate their hearers through pressure techniques, or become preoccupied with statistics or even dishonest in their use of them.

## **b. We preach the gospel to make personal contact**

How is the Lord Jesus Christ to be announced? Is the way in which he is presented likely to promote or to hinder the work of the Gospel in the minds of sinners? Is it going to clarify the meaning of the message, or to leave it enigmatic and obscure, locked up

in pious jargon? In praising God for the conversion of the believers at Rome, Paul writes:

God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:17-18)

“They had obeyed, yes; but how?” inquires Dr Lloyd-Jones, why “from the heart”.

What was it made them do this, what was it moved their hearts? It was this “form of teaching” that had been delivered to them. What had been delivered or preached to them was the Truth, and Truth is addressed primarily to the mind. As the mind grasps it, and understands it, the affections are kindled and moved, and so in turn the will is persuaded and obedience is the outcome. In other words the obedience is not the result of direct pressure on the will, it is the result of an enlightened mind and a softened heart.<sup>17</sup>

### **c. We preach the gospel to change lives**

We are engaged in the great task of influencing people. Our goal is change. We desire to motivate, to arouse, to mobilise, to excite, to move, to inspire, to stir and to impel men, women, young people and children, “not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”. We do not want their faith to rest “in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). But we are, by God’s grace and by God’s power, *persuaders*. “Knowing therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11).

Say to them: “As I live,” says the Lord GOD, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11)

Have some preachers lost their confidence in the gospel and therefore no longer preach it with fervour? “One great reason why we meet with so little success,” writes Thornwell to ministerial brethren of his day, “is that we do not expect success. Often it would surprise us to be told that sinners were cut to the heart under our ministry.”<sup>18</sup>

Words from God must not be read or quoted as though we are reading the BBC News. There must be passion, passion for the glory of God, passion for the cause of Christ, passion for the souls of men, women and children. But, as John Stott, insists there are some things forbidden to those who preach the gospel – “all deliberate contriving of effect, all artificiality, hypocrisy and play acting, all standing in front of the mirror in order self-consciously to plan our gestures and grimaces, all self-advertisement and self-reliance. More positively we are to be ourselves, to be natural, to develop and exercise the gifts which God has given us, and at the same time to rest our confidence not in ourselves but in the Holy Spirit who deigns to work through us.”<sup>19</sup>

Who could doubt the apostle Paul’s passion for souls? About his own race he wrote:

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (Romans 9:1-3)

Gospel preaching requires a response – a response to God. “We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20). We want our hearers to know that what they hear from us is not “the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God” (1 Thessalonians 1:13). The gospel preacher is not content with mere agreement. We look for “faith in God who speaks the promise, obedience to the God who commands, faithfulness to the God who has made his covenant plain, return to the God who warns, and hope in the God who foretells the future. To respond to God’s words is to respond to God.”<sup>20</sup>

The Word of God is the means through which sinners are born again (1 Peter 1:23, 25). The Word of God is the means through which all the twice-born are being changed into the likeness of Christ “from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Conversion is simply deciding to live by personal trust in a personal Saviour and commitment to a life of personal obedience to a wonderful Lord. Why preach the gospel? Because “one encounter in a lifetime with a true tongue of fire is all that is needed for the converting work of God to be done in a human soul. Having had that encounter,” a man, woman, young person or child, “will never be the same again.”<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

What is the gospel message? It is the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified. It is the message of human sin and God’s grace, of human guilt and divine forgiveness, of new birth and new life through the power of the Holy Spirit. These are issues of life and death. How can these things be preached *without* passion? Do you care about the glory of God? Do you love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength? Then preach the glorious gospel of God’s grace. Nothing more glorifies God than sinners saved by grace. Do you love your neighbour as yourself? Do you care about the eternal destiny of sinners? Then preach the glorious gospel of God’s grace. You cannot show greater love for your neighbour. “Greater love has no one than this, to lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). The Son of God laid down his life for his friends. Our commission is to find those friends and tell them!

May the Lord grant to his Church a renewed confidence in gospel preaching. May he raise up and enable men who will once more “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) by God-honouring, Holy Spirit-empowering, Christ-exalting, gospel preaching to the saving of many many sinners.

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### **Editor's Notes continued from page 1**

speakers intended? The sermon was sure to be pleasantly congratulatory and pleasantly short: even if it began by describing graphically the landscape of Sinai or of Galilee – for the Rev. Mr Hart had travelled – it would soon return to matters of living interest, would praise the virtues and flatter the vanity of the congregation, only slightly heightening the picture by contrast with the sad vices and errors of former times or of other nations. After church Mr Alden could enjoy the midday sunshine as he walked home to his Sunday roast beef and apple dumpling, confirmed in all his previous ways of thinking.

Preachers need to keep up with trends in our wider culture. There are two journals that I have found helpful recently. The first is from the United States called *First Things*. It is edited by Richard John Neuhaus and contains a wide range of articles analysing what is happening in our culture from a theologically conservative perspective. Neuhaus is a Roman Catholic priest (a former Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor) and there is a strong RC influence, but it has a number of evangelicals such as Carl Henry, Mark Noll and George Marsden contributing. Neuhaus' survey of religion and public life is invaluable. The journal can be reached at PO Box 3000, Dept. FT First Things, Denville, New Jersey 07834-9847, USA. Overseas subscriptions are US\$42 per annum for 10 issues. Closer to home is the political and cultural magazine *Prospect*. This has been going for several years now and is a very stimulating journal of ideas. If you want to identify what is happening in British culture I would recommend this journal. It draws its contributors from across the political spectrum and often has articles that take up positions that run contrary to conventional wisdom. *Prospect* can be purchased at most newsagents.

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# Expository Preaching in a Post-modern World

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Roy Clements

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It was the British intellectual Bertrand Russell who said that science is about what we know, and philosophy and theology about what we don't know. That definition identifies Russell as a modernist. He believed that there was an absolute reality external to the human mind and that the rational processes of the human mind were sufficiently congruent with that reality to give us reliable knowledge of it. Such knowledge was the business of science. It defined a domain of public Truth with a capital T, Truth which only a fool did not believe because science had proven it. Anything which could not be verified by the rigorous methods of science was not knowledge at all in the strictest sense of the word, but private speculation, imagination, superstition, prejudice, ideology, religion etc. As far as such unprovable ideas were concerned, one must learn to live with uncertainty and it was the task of philosophy to enable us to do that.

The point is well illustrated by a famous story invented by GE Lessing. A father has a magic ring which he must bequeath to one of his three sons. Because he loves them all equally and does not want them to accuse him of favouritism, he makes two imitation rings, so that each can have a ring when he dies. The result is that each of the sons thinks his own ring is the magic one and the others are not. An argument develops so they go to Nathan the Wise who offers this judgement: "Let each think his own ring is true, but in the meantime show forth gentleness and heartfelt tolerance".<sup>1</sup> The sentiment is typical of post-enlightenment modernist thinking. There is such a thing as objective truth...for the magic ring does exist. But since neither logic nor science can establish what that truth is, uncertainty must be accepted. The only valid position one can adopt over magic rings is sincere respect for other people's opinions.

Out of this seedbed grew the kind of liberal pluralism that is characteristic of western democracies. The distinction between objective facts as verified by science and subjective opinions for which no such verification is possible is the essence of modernism. But Russell and the school of philosophy he represented is now a dinosaur which is threatened with extinction. Confidence in the objectivity of science has been slowly but surely slipping away throughout the twentieth century, and with it confidence in the accessibility or even the existence of any absolute Truth external to the human mind. The emergence of virtual reality in the computer world is powerfully symbolic of what is happening to western culture as a whole today. Truth is now increasingly regarded as something self-manufactured and provisional. It no longer seeks to constrain consent with the imperious assertion: "This is fact...believe it". It issues instead the much more modest invitation: "This is a nice idea...why not try it for size?" Post-modernism has arrived: a way of thinking which denies not only *religious* objectivity, but *rational* objectivity too. Post-modernism is thus relativist and subjectivist. It has brought with it a new kind of pluralism. No longer do the three sons

each “think” their own ring is the magic one and the others are false. Now they are disposed to think instead that there is magic in all of them, or that maybe the magic does not adhere in the rings themselves but in the psychic act of believing them to be so. Post-modernism has rejected the critical method and Cartesian scepticism of scientific rationalism, and embraced instead the eclectic gullibility of New Age.<sup>2</sup> Believe in anything you like: magic rings, mystic crystals, poltergeists, reincarnation, UFOs, transcendental meditation...if it helps you to feel more emotionally integrated, if it develops your imagination, if it puts you in touch with your innate spirituality...then go for it. Post-modernism rejects all authoritarian grand-unified theories of Truth with a capital T, and offers instead the philosophical equivalent of LEGOLAND, in which all are free to gather whatever pieces they like and build them into their own Do-it-yourself Disneyworld to play in. How is the Christian preacher to respond amidst this tidal wave of cultural revolution?

## **I. What is expository preaching?**

Some, in my view, use this term far too broadly, to embrace any preaching that engages directly with the biblical text. But, for an evangelical like me at least, all preaching should surely aim to do that. If a sermon is not explicitly grounded in the text of Scripture, is it a sermon at all? Wherein lies the divine authority that distinguishes it from any other form of monologue? It is only the Bible on the lectern that distinguishes a pulpit from a soapbox. It is possible, I suppose, to imagine an apologetic address that defended Christian theism, or an ethical address that argued for Christian morality, without actually quoting the Bible. It is even possible to imagine an evangelistic address that proclaimed the gospel kerygma without, actually quoting the Bible. But such sermons would be artificial to say the least, and potentially misleading. For the onus of true preaching is to call the listener to recognise the divine Word that informs the preacher’s words. And in practical terms that means demonstrating that what is being said is grounded in Scripture.

The adjective “expository” then, if it is to fulfil any useful purpose in qualifying preaching, must mean more than simply “explicitly biblical”. But if some use the word too broadly, others use it too narrowly, to define some particular style of preaching.

For instance, expository preaching sometimes means preaching on a single text or a kind of verse-by-verse running commentary on the passage. Still others define exposition by reference to some role model, perhaps John Stott or Martyn Lloyd-Jones. According to this school, preaching is expository or not to the degree that it sounds like the work of one of these pulpit giants. In the case of Lloyd-Jones’ acolytes, this may even extend to an affected Welsh accent! I want to suggest that, properly speaking, expository preaching is not a matter of style at all. In fact, the determinative step which decides whether a sermon is going to be expository or not takes place, in my view, before a single word has been actually written or spoken. First and foremost, the adjective “expository” describes the method by which the preacher decides what to say not how to say it. As John Stott has said, the task which faces any preacher is to fuse the “two horizons” of the biblical text and the contemporary world in the experience of the listener. Preaching which is expository is marked by two distinctives in this respect.

### **a. Expository preaching gives both horizons equal weight**

They receive equal consideration in preparation and equally inform the sermon when it is finally delivered. Thus, a sermon that concentrates wholly on problems or interests of the contemporary culture with only tangential reference to the text of Scripture, while it may count as preaching if it is seeking to communicate orthodox Christian truth, is not expository preaching, because the Bible is not sufficiently central to it. On the other hand, a sermon that concentrates wholly on the biblical text with little or no insightful application to the contemporary scene, while it may count as Bible teaching, is better termed exegetical rather than expository. For an expository sermon must have a “prophetic” dimension. It is a living word for a particular time and place, targeted on the life situation of the audience.

An expository sermon, then, seeks to merge the two horizons in an even-handed and symmetrical fashion, giving equal attention to both. By modelling a dialogue between the two it aims to help listeners to integrate the Bible with their own experience. The pastoral goal of exposition is to enable the listener to develop a unified field of knowledge based on a faith relationship with the personal God who reveals himself in Scripture. Instead of living in schizophrenic compartmentalisation between the Bible and the world, expository preaching seeks to exemplify and encourage the spiritual integration of these two horizons.

### **b. Expository preaching always begins with the biblical text**

It would be possible of course to begin on the horizon of the contemporary world. This is, in fact, precisely where topical preaching does begin. The preacher identifies some contemporary issue or question and then scans the Bible for relevant material. This approach has its merits; indeed there are times when circumstances force it upon us. We may feel, for instance, that we must preach a sermon that responds to some particular moral issue or national crisis, and deliberately look for a text with that in mind.

The weakness of topical preaching, however, is that it allows the world to control the agenda. The Bible may want to address issues to which our contemporary culture is not even sensitive. Indeed, it is in the very nature of us fallen human beings that we habitually embrace wrong answers because we insist on asking the wrong questions. If we constantly allow the preoccupations of our world to be the launching-pad for our preaching we will certainly miss many vital things that God may want to say to us. Important things will be filtered out by the sieve of our selective enquiry, or the balance of Scripture will be distorted as we stretch it on the Procrustean bed of our preconceived ideas.

This of course raises the vexed question of pre-understanding. A generation ago, there was much talk of the “New Hermeneutic”. We cannot go into all its technicalities here, but in its own way, it raised the question of how we read texts. Exponents of the New Hermeneutic have made much of the fact that whenever we come to the Bible, whether as expository or topical preachers, we invariably bring a whole package of assumptions in our minds. All human learning involves us in fitting new information and experience into the pattern of knowledge that we have already acquired for ourselves. Only with great intellectual difficulty and psychological reluctance do we accept the need for a radical revolution of that cognitive paradigm. So it is inevitable that we shall read the Bible through eyes that are prejudiced by our existing world-view.



All this must be accepted, I think. But we do not have to make a virtue of a necessity! Expository preaching, by forcing us to examine with integrity every passage of Scripture, allows the Bible to challenge our pre-understanding, suggesting new questions that we had not thought of asking. This is what Anthony Thistleton, among others, has called the “hermeneutical circle”, though “spiral” might be a better metaphor, since “circle” suggests our hermeneutics may not get anywhere! Our understanding of the Bible always proceeds by a cycle of what mathematicians would call “iterative approximation”, that is: by repeated exposure to the text, we get closer and closer to the mindset of its divine author, just as repeated conversation deepens our understanding of a friend. Each time we read the Bible, we come to it with a pre-understanding that has been revised by our previous encounters with it. To use Paul’s words, our thinking is less and less moulded by the world, and we are more and more transformed by the renewal of our minds.

But we subvert this learning process fundamentally if we perpetually allow the world to set the agenda of our Bible study, as topical preaching necessarily does. It is, in my view, the noble distinctive of expository preaching, which vindicates its reputation as the kind of preaching that ought to be the staple diet of the Church, that it gives *initiative to the Word*. By its very methodology of beginning on the horizon of the text, it challenges the influence of human tradition and cultural assumption, exposing the Church to continual reformation according to the Word of God.

So expository preaching is not a style of preaching, but a method of determining the content of preaching. The expository method consists in systematically asking of each book, each chapter and each verse of the Bible these two questions: “*What is God’s intention in this portion of the Bible?*” and “*What is its relevance to our contemporary culture?*”. Notice the first deals with the meaning of the text and the second with its relevance to the world. Out of the answers which the preacher finds to these two enquiries, the sermon is constructed.

Don’t misunderstand. These two questions do not constitute necessarily or even ideally the structure of the sermon. Contrary to the stereotype, an expository sermon does not have to begin with the words: “My text this morning is...” It may well serve the expositor’s purpose far better to introduce the sermon by reference to the horizon of the contemporary world, just as a topical preacher would. These two questions, are preliminary to all decisions about sermon style. An expositor may decide, for instance, to make substantial use of narrative form in the actual delivery of his material. The key issue is that the agenda for the sermon was decided by the text itself.

## **2. How should post-modernism affect preaching?**

### **a. Expository preaching must of necessity challenge the assumptions of post-modernism because of its methodological commitment to seeking the intention of God in the biblical text**

I mentioned earlier the way the so-called New Hermeneutic had drawn attention to the role of the pre-understanding of the reader in the interpretation of a text. Post-modernist literary criticism has taken this sensitivity to reader-response much further. Something called “deconstruction” has come to the fore. It is quite a complex idea.

Deconstructionist scholars, of whom Derrida is the most influential, argue that the only meaning that any text has is the meaning the reader assigns to it. (Such meanings, of course, shift over time. We all operate with some general pictures of reality, which we can call a “paradigm”. These paradigms change through the centuries, as when a geocentric view of the world was replaced by a heliocentric view in the wake of Copernicus and Galileo). So we are imprisoned by the socially imposed constraints of our language – “paradigm-shifts” in response to a transcendent and absolute word “from outside” are inconceivable. Whatever intention authors of texts may have had (or thought they had) when they wrote a piece of literature, it is inaccessible to the reader and therefore irrelevant to the hermeneutic task. It is pointless to ask: “What does this text mean?”, as if there were a correct answer to such an enquiry. The only question we are empowered to ask is: “What does this text mean to me?”, or perhaps “to the community of which I am an individual representative?” Exegesis as it has been developed by scholarship, both conservative and liberal, over the last several centuries, is then an illusory discipline. There is only eisegesis. We cannot read out of a text the author’s intention. We can only read into a text our own subjective response.

At this point, it is important that conservative Christians do not fall into the trap of a neurotic overdefensiveness. Deconstructionism does have its moderate proponents who are very far from seeking to make nonsense of the biblical text by suggesting that it will bear any meaning the reader wants to give it. It has to be admitted that some of the genres used by the Bible, parable for instance, invite a high degree of reader involvement. It is part of the author’s intention to leave the text “open” in this way. However, it cannot be denied that, pressed to its logical extreme, deconstructionism denies the meaningfulness of all human communication, not least the books of the deconstructionists themselves. Expository preaching, by its very methodology, challenges such nihilistic scepticism. It insists that God intends to say and do things through the Bible. It is his Word. And that authorial intention is intelligible to and effective in the reader through the normal methods of interpretation which we apply to make sense of verbal communication generally. True, words can be misunderstood. True, the cultural and linguistic gap between the Bible and the modern reader increases the risk of such misunderstanding. But these admissions do not mean that there is no objective meaning in the text or that this meaning is inaccessible. No, words work...and God’s words work best of all.

The expository preacher has to believe this by definition. In so far as an expository sermon succeeds, it undermines a fundamental plank in the post-modernist mindset. For it alerts the listener to the transcendent reality of a God who chooses to reveal himself through the inspired Word. He may have turned a blind eye to the idolatrous speculations of subjective opinion and imagination in the past. But now he commands the whole human race to obey that Word and participate in the “paradigm-shift” of repentance, bowing the knee to him as he truly is.

**b. Expository preaching must engage with the concerns of post-modernism because of its commitment to contemporary relevance**

It would be a mistake, however, to think of post-modernism as an ideological enemy of the expositor. There is one respect in which post-modern ideas can and must

enrich expository preaching. As I said right at the start, post-modernism is a reaction against rationalism. Over against the cerebral and logical mindset that would disparage human emotion and imagination in the name of scientific objectivity, post-modernism affirms the value of intuitive and subjective modes of human awareness. There can be no doubt that such a corrective reaction was necessary. Science and technology were in danger of reducing all the mystery and magic of existence to molecular formulae and mathematical equations. They were in danger of so emphasising the material reality detectable by our five physical senses, that they killed the soul of western culture. Movements bearing names like romanticism, existentialism and now post-modernism are all legitimate protests against this anti-spiritual reductionism. We live in a world today where, increasingly, people demand subjective involvement with truth rather than cognitive information about it. Expository preachers cannot speak with relevance to such a post-modern audience unless they take this new situation on board.

In this respect it is vital that we listen humbly to the criticisms of those who argue that expository preaching has been in the past too wedded to rationalistic modes of interpretation. The intention of God in Scripture is certainly to impart objective knowledge of himself, but his intention goes far beyond that. Speech not only conveys information, it has other force and purpose. This may be to encourage, to warn, to challenge; it may be to make us weep, or laugh, or frown. But whatever it is, it is part of the speaker's intention. Any Bible exposition will have failed then if it locates the intellectual content of the text, but neglects to communicate the whole atmosphere and purpose which attaches to it. *Good exposition invites the listener to feel with the text as well as to think with it.* And, in a post-modern culture, we neglect that subjective dimension at our peril.

### **c. Post-modernism, then, represents both a threat and an opportunity for expository preaching**

The threat is that in its implacable hostility to the disciplined application of reason, and its scepticism about the accessibility of ultimate Truth, it may undermine our confidence in the expository method. The preacher may abandon exposition and go in search of other ways of using the pulpit that seem more in tune with the culture. As New Age drags our culture back into the Dark Ages of myth and magic, we may even be tempted to return to the allegorical spiritualising of the biblical text that so fascinated some of the medieval preachers. And the authority to define Christian doctrine may be invested once again in the Councils of the Church rather than in the perspicuity of the Word. Such a drift the expositor must resist. Other forms of preaching may well seem more avant-garde, but in its methodological reliance on the conviction that God has spoken intelligibly to our world, expository preaching is an absolutely indispensable weapon in the Church's testimony to truth with a capital T.

But post-modernism brings also a great opportunity: the opportunity for expository preaching to do justice to the whole force and purpose of the biblical text. Why is so much of the Bible narrative and poetry? It is because God intends to communicate to the heart as well as the mind. The task of the expositor is to find ways to communicate that heart involvement to a world that is once again hungry for it.

### **3. What can we learn from sermons that fail here?**

There are it seems to me two kinds of sermon which purport to be expository but which fail seriously in these two matters. The first fails sufficiently to address the threat post-modernism poses. The second fails to seize the opportunity it presents.

#### **a. The mental-arithmetic sermon**

In this sermon, the preacher prepares thoroughly and well. The intention of the text is rigorously investigated and its relevance to the contemporary world insightfully identified. The trouble is that when it comes to actually delivering the sermon, the preacher hides all evidence of that hard interpretive work. Maybe this is done out of intellectual modesty, or out of the anxiety that fears to go over people's heads, or because the clock approaches noon! But, for whatever reason, like someone who is brilliant at mental arithmetic, the preacher gives the right answer but neglects to show any of the working by which the answer was arrived at. Thus, the congregation is rarely invited to examine the text for itself. Tricky ambiguities in the text are not discussed. Scholarly controversy in the commentaries is never acknowledged. In short, the preacher never explains the route taken to the interpretive judgements upon which the sermon is based. A well-informed listener may well be able to pick up clues that confirm that the preacher carefully worked out the interpretation. But, to an ill-informed listener, the sermon sounds suspiciously subjective and arbitrary. The preacher hasn't indicated any need to convince the listeners that this reading of the text is a responsible one. And in so doing, there is a danger that the preacher may be subtly reinforcing the post-modernist presuppositions of his audience.

There are many today who read their Bible as if it were a zen-text from which they get warm fuzzies, without any consideration being given to the question of whether these are appropriate fuzzies or the same fuzzies as anybody else ought to get. Post-modernism is a breeding ground for heretical cults too, many of which exploit Christian vocabulary but in a way quite different from its biblical meaning. A Church fed on mental-arithmetic sermons will be ill-equipped to resist such trends and cults. Expository preaching, when it is done well, has the side-effect of developing in a congregation good Bible-reading skills. By the model of rigorous interpretation which it provides, it educates the people of God in responsible hermeneutics. But this means taking time to explain to the audience not only what the text means but how we have come to that conclusion. The mental-arithmetic sermon neglects to do that and thus fails to address a major element of the threat which post-modernism poses to the Christian faith. It is no longer enough to feed our people. These days we must also show them how to cook.

#### **b. The propositional paraphrase sermon**

This sermon fails too, in my view, not because it surrenders to the post-modernist threat but because it fails to rise to the post-modernist challenge. Some preaching is very close to expository, but a different initial question is put to the text. Instead of asking: "What is the intention of God in this passage?", the preacher asks: "What doctrine does this passage teach?" or: "What lessons does it contain?" or (most dangerous of all!): "Where does this passage fit in my systematic theology?"

This kind of preaching has a long tradition in evangelical churches and is particularly common in conservative circles with a strong ideological commitment to a particular confessional stance or interpretive model. There is, of course, great value in doctrine. A sound systematic theology is an indispensable aid to determining the canonical meaning of a text. It prevents the preacher ascribing to the text a meaning which would be contradictory to the plain meaning of other texts, and thus gives substance to our conviction that the Bible, in spite of its many human sources, is nevertheless one book with a single author and a coherent message.

However, by substituting “doctrine” for “intention” in the expository method, what I call the “propositional paraphrase sermon” fails to seize the homiletic opportunity which a post-modern world presents. It is very likely to lack emotional engagement with the text. There will be little sensitivity to literary genre. Apocalyptic, poetry, narrative, parable, all are flattened to the prosaic level of a theology text-book. No attempt is made to do justice to the lyrical, dramatic, ironic aspects of the text.

In the stereotypical model of such a sermon which we have all heard and practised, three propositional points are offered, each one pinned to a different part of our proof text. But this is potentially as reductionist as the chemist who says that Shakespeare’s Macbeth is just paper with printing. Our propositional points may be true, but they fail to do justice to the divine intention because they ignore aspects of the text whose purpose is not to inform. In philosophical terms, we have approached the text as modernists, applying science to deduce its objective facts. But we have failed to do justice to the openness of the text to subjective involvement on the part of the reader. It is at this point, perhaps, that the Afro-American tradition of preaching has something to teach us. I am certainly not advocating emotionalism. A good wordsmith can evoke tears or smiles without the need for any hysterical exhibitionism on the platform. And such communication skills we must develop and use responsibly, if we do not want our expositions to be dismissed as dull.

There are things about post-modernism that disturb me profoundly. If the pendulum does not start swinging back soon it may destroy all the intellectual gains of the scientific revolution. In my worst nightmares I see the fires that burned Rome consuming the libraries of Oxford and Cambridge and the Western world plunged once again into a new Dark Ages. But of course, Augustine preached the best sermons and wrote the best book of his life by the flickering light of those flames! So too for us, there is opportunity in the twilight of modernism to rediscover that integration of truth and passion which is the mark of the real expository preacher.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Lessing’s parable of the rings has a much wider scope, as well, but we are taking just one aspect of it here.
- <sup>2</sup> The phrase “Cartesian scepticism” is used with reference to the French philosopher of the early 17th century, Descartes. One thing that he did was to try to use reason to establish the fundamental truths about God, ourselves and the world.

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# Exegesis 23: The Challenge of Communication (2Timothy 4:1-8)

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Alistair Wilson

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In this portion of 2 Timothy, we find Paul is writing to his younger colleague, knowing that his ministry is fast drawing to a close. Having begun an extended appeal to Timothy in 1:6, he draws it to a conclusion with a change of tone. Picking up Paul's metaphor from verse 7, Oden nicely sums up the importance of this:

Timothy's race remains yet ahead, even as Paul's is completing. The baton is passed from one runner to another. As the letter nears its end, Paul's life is drawing towards its end. Second Timothy chapter four is the last passing of the baton – not only Paul's last opportunity to instruct and charge Timothy but the historic Christian community as a whole. It is the last instruction by a dying man to his beloved "son" to whom the whole enterprise of his life is now being turned over.<sup>1</sup>

We are therefore privileged to read very personal and heartfelt, yet far-reaching, instructions from the great missionary theologian.

## Structure

Though several commentators treat vv. 1-5 and vv. 6-8 as distinct units, there are distinct advantages in treating the whole of vv. 1-8 as a single unit of thought. There are three reasons for this decision. Firstly, there is an *inclusio*<sup>2</sup> formed by verses 1 and 8, where there is a clear conceptual parallel in the expectation of the coming judge, and even an exact verbal parallel in the Greek phrase *ten epiphaneian autou*. Secondly, there is a clear symmetry to the passage as a whole, as the imperatives of verses 2 and (especially) 5 are balanced by the indicatives in Paul's account of his own ministry which is presented as a pattern for Timothy to follow.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, there is an explicit grammatical connection between verses 5 and 6 by means of *gar* in v. 6. The decision to treat these verses as a whole is not simply a matter of convenience. Commenting of the first five verses, Gordon Fee states that,

Since this charge is grammatically tied to verses 6-8...those verses will give us the clue to much of this section.<sup>4</sup>

According to this view, we can present Paul's thought as follows:<sup>5</sup>

### A. Eschatological

#### Prologue (1)

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom,

### B. The Charge (2)

I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

- C. The Rationale (3&4)      For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.
- D. Personal Charge to Faithfulness (5)      As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.
- E. Personal Testimony of Faithfulness (6&7)      As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.
- F. Eschatological Conclusion (8)      From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

## A. Eschatological prologue

The solemnity of Paul's words is established in two ways. Firstly, he draws attention to the reality of being in the presence "of God and Christ Jesus". This form of words is common in Paul, reflecting his "Christological monotheism"<sup>6</sup> whereby he can speak of Jesus Christ in the same terms as God, yet maintain a clear commitment to the monotheism expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4-6.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, he develops his reference to Christ Jesus to identify him as the eschatological judge. It is a distinctive element of Paul's theology that he develops the OT concept of the Day of the Lord (*YOM YAHWEH*; cf. Amos, particularly chapters 5 and 8) into the Day of Christ Jesus.<sup>8</sup> The theme of judgement is of great significance to Paul. Here it would seem that Christ's role as judge is identified for two reasons. Firstly, Timothy's faithfulness to his calling here expressed will not be assessed by Paul but by Jesus Christ himself. Secondly, the reference to Jesus Christ as the judge of *all* people<sup>9</sup> indicates that Paul intends this to be a factor in Timothy's thinking about his ministry. G Knight draws attention to a similar thought elsewhere in Paul's letters,

Just as the thought of the judgment by Christ of all people motivated Paul (2 Cor. 5:9-11), so Paul wanted it to motivate Timothy.<sup>10</sup>

We can say, then, that a true understanding of the pastor's calling requires a well developed eschatology. If the realities of the future return of Jesus Christ and his role as judge of the living and the dead are not firmly held and thoroughly integrated into the broader theological position, it is unlikely that the contemporary pastor will fulfil the charge given to Timothy in the way Paul intended.<sup>11</sup>

Paul's next phrase develops what he has just said, but also provides a distinct foundation for the charge. The Greek is "rough"<sup>12</sup> here, but there is a general consensus that the unexpected use of the accusative is that "used with swearing or adjuring",<sup>13</sup> which reinforces the solemnity of Paul's words in one more way.



Paul's focus on Jesus' role as judge is, in this case, closely related to the "appearing" (*epiphaneia*) of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> The term *epiphaneia*, according to Ridderbos, is mainly used to speak of Jesus' appearance as triumphant king:

Although epiphany, otherwise than parousia, does once allude to Christ's first coming (2 Tim 1:10), it is generally employed exclusively for Christ's definitive coming in glory. The word was particularly suited for this purpose because in the Hellenistic world it had acquired the additional significance of a solemn, glorious appearance or entrance, as, for example, of the Hellenistic rulers.<sup>15</sup>

The *epiphaneia* is closely linked with the *basileia* – the kingdom. Although it is universally acknowledged that the proclamation of "the kingdom of God" was at the heart of Jesus' ministry, Paul makes very few references to the theme. This suggests that Paul was at least familiar with the words of Jesus, and to some it forms part of a body of evidence which suggests that he took such "Jesus tradition" very seriously indeed.<sup>16</sup> Even more interesting is that Paul speaks of "*his* kingdom" which in context is quite clearly a reference to Christ Jesus. This reference to Christ's role as king serves as a conceptual parallel with the later use of *kurios* ("Lord").

## B. The charge

Paul articulates what he is in fact doing: "I solemnly urge you". The Greek compound word *diamarturomai* here bears the sense of "to be emphatic in stating an opinion or desire – 'to insist'".<sup>17</sup> The first person ("I") adds a sense of both the personal relationship that exists between Paul and his young friend, and the apostolic authority with which Paul issues this charge. Guthrie comments that,

The solemnity of the present charge is doubly impressive as the parting advice of the aged warrior to his younger and rather timid lieutenant. It would be emptied of much of its meaning and dignity if it were no more than a fictitious attempt to represent what the real Paul might have said to the real Timothy.<sup>18</sup>

The form of words used here bears a striking resemblance to 1 Timothy 5:21.<sup>19</sup> The actual content of the charge is expressed with dramatic conciseness, as Paul makes his points by means of a series of aorist imperatives. It is interesting to note that they all relate to communication.

The first imperative sets the tone for what follows.<sup>20</sup> Timothy is to "preach the word". It is well known that the verb *keruxon* is related to the noun *kerux* meaning "herald" and so indicates public proclamation. In the pastoral epistles, Paul uses the full term *logos tou theou* to refer to the *gospel*, the "good news".<sup>21</sup> What is the force of the aorist imperative? As D Wallace points out, it is hardly ingressive ("*begin* to preach the word"), but rather what Wallace describes as "constative", defined as,

a solemn or categorical command. The stress is *not* "begin an action," nor "continue to act." Rather the stress is on the *solemnity* and *urgency* of the action; thus "I solemnly charge you to act – and do it now!"<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the grammatical construction of Paul's imperatives serves, once again, to reinforce the solemnity of the charge already expressed in verse 1. The priority of the

first imperative is highlighted by its development by means of a second imperative (*epistethi*, meaning “stand by” or “be ready”) plus a qualifying phrase composed of two short adverbs with a similar sound, *eukairos* and *akairos*. Paul is fond of various forms of word play including alliteration and, as here, assonance. However, it is regularly the case that the more subtle the creativity of the language, the more difficult it is to have precise expression. Here Paul’s famous phrase is not as clear as we might wish. Fee points out that they might be understood with reference to Timothy (subjective) or to his hearers (objective), tending towards the latter in view of the content of verses 3 and 4.<sup>23</sup> Thus we might paraphrase Paul, “whether they like it or not”!

This overarching imperative is followed up with three further aspects of the work Paul is calling Timothy to carry out. While Kelly draws attention to the possibility of analysing Paul’s words finely for homiletical purposes, he is probably right to restrain himself since Paul often multiplies words more for impact than for subtle nuances in meaning.<sup>24</sup> The terms might be translated “refute, rebuke and exhort” (Kelly) or “rebuke, warn and urge” (Fee). What is notable is that all three refer to verbal communication, mostly of a corrective nature. Several translations prefer “encourage” as a translation for the final imperative *parakaleson*, probably because of its more positive ring, but commentators are agreed that a more robust term is required. However, the final phrase “with the utmost patience in teaching” balances the more negative tone of the preceding imperatives, and should be understood to qualify each one of them, not simply the last.<sup>25</sup> The faithful pastor is not called simply to deliver words into space but to *communicate*. This is a much more difficult task as it involves close interaction with people, many of whom may not appear to wish your communication. This takes patience of a kind that only the Lord’s grace can bring about, and here Paul just hints at the reasons why the pastor’s character is more significant in the New Testament than his qualifications.

### C. The rationale

The connective particle *gar* (“for”) indicates the direct relationship between Paul’s imperatives and the words that follow now. Paul will explain that the insistence of his words is not overstatement, but reflects the sad situation in which the young preacher will find himself.

What is rejected is “healthy” teaching. The truth that brings health is not received by all for what it is. This apparent absurdity of people rejecting what will change their lives for the better recalls the first chapter of 1 Corinthians where Paul describes those who reject true wisdom as foolishness. The motivation is to serve their own desires (*epithumiai*), and in that cause they gather “teachers” (*didaskaloi*, plural) so as to have a variety of opinions to suit a variety of circumstances. In a wonderful image which is both endearing and chilling at once, Paul describes these people as “being tickled in their hearing” (Kelly).

Paul pursues the theme by indicating the element of deliberate rebellion against God with the active verb *apostrepsousin* (“they will turn away”<sup>26</sup>) used in relation to the truth. This echoes Romans 1:18 where Paul describes those who, though knowing the truth, “suppress the truth in unrighteousness”. Of course, turning *from* truth never comes alone,<sup>27</sup> and these rebels turn *towards* “myths”. The way we hear the word

“myth” can never be quite the same again after Bultmann’s programme of “demythologizing”.<sup>28</sup> However, despite all the modern literary nuances of the term, its sense here, as always in the New Testament, is simply “that which is false”.<sup>29</sup>

## D. Personal charge to faithfulness

Paul’s use of the singular second person pronoun (*su*) places verse 5 at the fulcrum of a two-fold contrast. Firstly, he is drawing a contrast between the foolish and fluctuating desires of those described in verses 3 and 4, and the firmly grounded stand required of Timothy. Secondly, and more obvious at the level of syntax, Paul uses the first person pronoun (*ego*) in verse 6 to contrast his completed ministry with that of Timothy which is here set before him in terms of opportunity and potential.

The call this time comes by a verb with the root meaning “to be sober”, and the more extended meaning “to be self-controlled”. This is a requirement in every conceivable situation, so that it could be said that Timothy can never be “off duty”. The second imperative is ominous: “bear hardship patiently”.<sup>30</sup> Though the term is not frequently used in the New Testament, the prospect of hardship should be no surprise to any follower of Jesus on the basis of both teaching and example. The character that shows itself in such times will communicate a message to others with startling clarity. Thirdly, Timothy is to “do the work of an evangelist”. The noun “evangelist” is uncommon in the New Testament,<sup>31</sup> and it raises the question of whether this was an “office” or whether it simply reflected characteristic behaviour. Finally, Timothy is told, “fulfil your ministry”. It is striking that this summary statement includes a term that emphasises service. The pastor is to be a servant, following the pattern of Jesus Christ the Lord (John 13; Philippians 2), and that should be a distinctive mark of what he does.

Each of these imperatives indicates that a high degree of commitment is required of Timothy, and therefore of anyone who would follow in his footsteps. There is a strong indication that the way will be hard. But in these very hardships, the pastor is called to demonstrate the character of Jesus Christ as he lives out servanthood.

## E. Personal testimony of faithfulness

The pronoun *ego* is extremely emphatic, not only due to its presence but also due to its position as the first word of the sentence. A sharp contrast is being drawn here, and yet the presence of *gar* (“for”) relates this section very closely to what has come before.

Paul describes himself in language which recalls the libation poured out on the altar.<sup>32</sup> Knight thinks that the allusion is “to the pouring out of his blood in martyrdom”,<sup>33</sup> and it is certainly the case that Paul is referring to his death, as the following parallel statement regarding his “departure”<sup>34</sup> makes clear. The use of *ede* (“already”) indicates Paul’s certainty of the event. It is not, however, entirely clear whether Knight intends a strong parallel between the pouring of the offering and the pouring of Paul’s blood. If that is what he intends then he is probably pressing the metaphor too far. This metaphor would have been entirely appropriate even if Paul’s death had involved no bloodshed, and Fee takes a more nuanced position when he writes,

The metaphor implies that *the whole present ordeal*, culminating in death, is a libation unto the Lord.<sup>35</sup>

Paul's matter-of-fact analysis of his present situation stems from a satisfaction that he has fulfilled his calling. We must surely regard the indicatives in Paul's favourite athletic imagery as *implicit* imperatives directed to Timothy: *you* fight the good fight,<sup>36</sup> *you* finish the race, *you* keep the faith.

## F. Eschatological conclusion

In concluding his reflections on his ministry, Paul's mind moves to what awaits him. The *stephanos* ("victory garland") which Paul looks forward to is qualified by the genitive phrase "of righteousness". While the *dik*-word group would most naturally be translated as "righteousness" or some cognate term, here perhaps it carries the sense of "vindication".<sup>37</sup> Though Knight argues for a more familiar exegetical rendering of the phrase ("the wreath *which is* righteousness"),<sup>38</sup> there is good reason for following Stott. What is particularly interesting about Paul's confidence is that it is rooted in his present experience. He grasps the hope of what will be as a present reality, since, for Paul, hope is not wishful thinking but certainty based on promises by the one who is faithful.<sup>39</sup>

The Lord (*kurios*) is not previously mentioned or identified. It is one of Paul's most characteristic terms of reference for Jesus.<sup>40</sup> However, the references to "the righteous judge" and "his appearing" send the reader back to verse 1 where there is no question that Christ Jesus is the referent of these terms. That the judge is "righteous" is in keeping both with the testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Gen 18:25; Psalm 7:11; Zeph 3:5) and with the character of the garland which he will award to Paul. That the award will be made on "that day" is an allusion to the *YOM YAHWEH* motif discussed earlier. It also indicates that the award is not associated with the death of a believer but with the final declaration of Jesus' Lordship when the dead in Christ will be raised and, together with those who are still alive, will be changed and receive new bodies (cf. v. 1).

This eschatological emphasis draws the present section to a close by demonstrating that Paul lived his life in the light of future hope, but the little phrase "and not only to me" broadens the focus from his joyful expectation to the opportunity for all the faithful servants of the Lord to know that same wonderful experience. Fee comments,

With this final phrase Paul redirects his concern back to Timothy. Just as he was charged in verse 1 to fulfil his ministry in light of the great Christian eschatological realities, so now he is encouraged that the prize, too, shall be his and to all who have longed for his appearing.<sup>41</sup>

It is surely a great pattern for a pastor that when Paul is captivated by the thought of meeting the Lord face to face (cf. 1 Cor 13:12) and receiving his prize (cf. Phil 3:14), he does not hold that prospect selfishly to himself but opens it out before his colleague, and indeed to all who now read his letter, as a motivation to faithfulness.<sup>42</sup> There is no indication that Paul regarded this anticipation of receiving his prize as an impure motive for service. Rather, he set his mind on it and strove to reach it. The weary pastor will no doubt find new resources if he dwells for a while on the wonder of the prospect of being with the Lord always, but he will know even more satisfaction if he shares that hope with his colleagues and fellow believers so that all may run for the prize together.

## Conclusion

Paul's charge to Timothy brings before every believer, but particularly every pastor, a call to communicate the message of "good news" in a context which may be far from receptive. The reaction of the audience, however, is not the pastor's business. The pastor is to treat the people with patience, and with all the skill he has been gifted with, to teach them clearly, keeping in mind the great eschatological drama within which he is ministering. Paul's charge to Timothy brings before those who are called to teach the reality that we cannot do so without the support of a colleague in the Lord. Let us encourage one another to faithfulness as Paul did for Timothy.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> TC Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (Interpretation; Louisville: WJKP, 1989), p. 134-5.
- <sup>2</sup> A literary device by which a unit of thought is identified by the use of parallel words, phrases or ideas at the beginning and end of the unit.
- <sup>3</sup> Paul's use of "pattern" as a motivation to discipleship is seen particularly clearly in Philippians, where Jesus Christ, Timothy and Epaphroditus, and Paul himself are all set before the Philippians as patterns to follow. See further PT O'Brien, "The Gospel and Godly Models in Philippians" in Wilkins and Paige (eds) *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church* (RP Martin FS; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), p. 273-84.
- <sup>4</sup> GD Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), p. 283.
- <sup>5</sup> English translation is normally from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.
- <sup>6</sup> The term is NT Wright's. See his *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).
- <sup>7</sup> James Dunn has a useful discussion of this subject in his massive volume, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 252-55.
- <sup>8</sup> See especially LJ Kreitzer, *Jesus and God in Paul's Eschatology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) for discussion of the evidence for this in other portions of the Pauline corpus, and *idem*. "Eschatology" in G Hawthorne et al (eds) *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester: IVP, 1993) 253-69. Also H Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 551-2.
- <sup>9</sup> Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* p. 284, notes the way in which the phrase "who will judge the living and the dead" is found in the Apostolic Fathers with the character of "a semicreedal formula".
- <sup>10</sup> GW Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 452.
- <sup>11</sup> For a valuable contemporary treatment of eschatology, see Brower and Elliot (eds) *The Reader Must Understand* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), and especially the essay in that volume by Greg K Beale, "The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology", p. 11-52.
- <sup>12</sup> So Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 284.
- <sup>13</sup> So Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles* 452. Cf. BDF p. 149; DB Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 204-5.
- <sup>14</sup> This particular term is distinctive (though not unique, 2 Thess. 2:8) of the Pastoral Epistles. See 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 1:10; Tit. 2:13 in addition to the two occurrences in the present passage. See the discussion in NIDNTT, p. 3:317-320.
- <sup>15</sup> Ridderbos, p. *Paul* 529-30. Cf. the dark irony of the self-application of term by Antiochus IV, 1 Maccabees 1:10: "From them came forth a sinful root, Antiochus Epiphanes, son of King Antiochus; he had been a hostage in Rome. He began to reign in the one hundred thirty-seventh year of the kingdom of the Greeks." See NIDNTT 3:318 for example of use with reference to Caesar.
- <sup>16</sup> See Dunn's discussion in *Theology of Paul*, p. 190-91. On Paul's knowledge of the life and

- teaching of Jesus, see David Wenham, "The Story of Jesus Known to Paul" in Green and Turner (eds) *Jesus of Nazareth – Lord and Christ* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), p. 197-311, and more fully, *idem* D Wenham, *Paul: Founder of Christianity or Follower of Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
- 17 JP Louw and EA Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: UBS, 1988-9) s.v. Compare its use in Acts 2:40.
- 18 D Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1957), p. 165.
- 19 Compare also 1 Timothy 6:13.
- 20 So Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 284.
- 21 See Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 284.
- 22 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 720-1.
- 23 Fee *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* 285. So also Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 454-5.
- 24 JND Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles* (BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1963), p. 206
- 25 So correctly, Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 206.
- 26 Knight comments that the verb "strongly implies that they once professed to hold to the truth that they 'will turn away from,' just as its usage in 1:15 implied a prior relationship" (*The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 456).
- 27 The *men...de* construction indicates a balanced statement of two contrasting parts.
- 28 See especially his famous essay, "New Testament and Mythology" in HW Bartsch (ed.) *Kerygma and Myth* (London: SPCK, 1953), also conveniently found in S Ogden (ed. and trans.) *New Testament & Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (London: SCM, 1985), p. 1-43.
- 29 See NIDNTT, p. 2:643-7. In this article, FF Bruce comments, "In NT *mythos* is found only in the Pastoral Epistles and 2 Peter, and always in a disparaging sense...The context of the Pastorals, however, suggests a Jewish element in these myths", 2:644-5.
- 30 So Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 457.
- 31 Found elsewhere only in Eph. 4:11 and Acts 21:28.
- 32 Numbers 15:5,7,10. See Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 458, on *spendomai*. Also, NIDNTT, 2:855.
- 33 Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 458.
- 34 See Louw-Nida's lexicon, s.v. *analysis*: "a figurative extension of meaning of *analysis* 'loosing' 'releasing'".
- 35 Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 289. Emphasis added.
- 36 Cf. 1 Timothy 6:12.
- 37 So Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy* (Leicester: IVP, 1973), p. 115;
- 38 Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 461.
- 39 Cf. 2 Corinthians 1:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:4; 2 Thessalonians 3:3. This thought is expressed most clearly by another anonymous author in Hebrews 10:23: "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful". See NIDNTT 2:238-46, and more briefly Hawthorne et. al. (eds) *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, p. 415-17.
- 40 Second only to "Christ" in frequency. See Hawthorne et al (eds) *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, p. 560-69. NIDNTT, p. 2:510-20.
- 41 Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 290.
- 42 See Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 462, on legitimacy of "have longed for" as translation of the perfect tense of *agapao* (usually translated as "I love"). He directs the reader to BAGD for further reference.

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# Pointed Preaching

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Stuart Olyott

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## Preaching which is not pointed is not preaching

This is why Spurgeon said, "Where the application begins, there the sermon begins." This is why John A. Broadus wrote, "The application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but is the main thing to be done". This is why Daniel Webster declared, "When a man preaches to me, I want him to make it a personal matter, a personal matter." This is why Geoffrey Thomas wrote fairly recently, "There is no more common cause of ineffective ministry than a failure in applicatory preaching". This is why John F. Bettler exclaims, "Preaching is not speaking about truth before the congregation, but rather speaking truth to the congregation".

But are these men right? Of course they are! Here are three reasons which prove it:

(i) **It is the Bible that we preach; but why did God give us the Bible?** He did it to enlighten our minds, with a view to transforming our lives. Nothing in the Bible is written just to satisfy our curiosity. It is all there to bring us to repentance, to bring us to the knowledge of God in our Lord Jesus Christ, and to progressively change us into His likeness. It follows, then, that any preaching of the Bible which does not deliberately *aim* to bring people to repentantly believe in Christ, and then to live in ever fuller obedience to Him, is not only a prostitution of preaching, but is a wicked misrepresentation of the Bible.

Paul, inspired of God, wrote, "Whatever things were written beforehand were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). In Paul's mind, the Old Testament scriptures were written to instruct us, with a view to producing in us perseverance and encouragement. It follows that any instruction of the Bible which stops at mere instruction is perverting the purpose for which it was given. To declare Scripture is to *apply* it.

Again, Paul wrote, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The Scriptures have not been given simply to inform our minds, but to teach us how to live in a godly way. All preaching of the Bible must therefore have the same purpose. If it does not, that preaching is unfaithful.

(ii) **The way the Bible talks about preaching proves these men right.** There are four great words for preaching in the New Testament. The most characteristic is *kerusso* which means "to proclaim as a herald". The preacher is to announce a message which has been given to him, and which he has not invented himself. But we have already seen that the message of the Scriptures touches the *life*. Besides, would any herald proclaim a kingly message without telling his hearers what was expected of them?

A second great word is *euangelizo* which means "to announce good news". But is good news announced *in front* of people, or *to* people? And is it not a fact that what is



good news for some is bad news for others? Can, then, the good news be announced without saying who it is *for*?

A third word is *martureo* which means “to bear witness to facts”. But if you declare facts, and nothing but facts, won’t your hearers simply respond by saying, “So what?”. Don’t you have to explain why these facts are important to *them*?

A fourth word is *didasko*, which means “to spell out in concrete terms what the message means as far as living is concerned”. Where there is no application, this has not been done.

In the New Testament these four words are used largely interchangeably, as any close study of the sacred text quickly reveals. That is, true preaching is composed of all four elements. It is beyond doubt, therefore, that application is part and parcel of New Testament preaching. The men we have quoted earlier are certainly right.

(iii) **Examples of biblical preaching prove the same thing.** The greatest Preacher of all was, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ. All His public teaching is composed of three strands which we may call *State, Illustrate, Apply*. These three strands are so closely woven together that it is sometimes impossible to say into which category a given sentence falls. This is because divine genius combines the three categories into a single plait. This can be borne out, for example, by a sentence- by-sentence study of Matthew 6:25-34. Our Lord knew nothing of preaching without application.

Nor did John the Baptist. An excellent sample of his preaching is found in Luke 3:7-18. So forcefully did he address the conscience that his hearers called out, “What shall we do then... Teacher, what shall we do?” (vv. 10,12). He then spelled out the implications of his teaching, not in vague generalities, but in precise directives. True preaching will always stir the heart to ask the same question, even if the question is not expressed audibly. True preaching will then answer the question it has provoked.

Our Lord’s apostles never forgot what they learned in His school. Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost was a frontal attack on the conscience of his hearers. “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). Doctrine led to application, and once the question above had been asked, more specific application followed. Doctrine leading to application was the apostolic method. This is seen repeatedly in the epistles. Instruction without pointed application is inconceivable in the mind of God. It should be the same in our minds too. Preaching which is not pointed is not preaching.

### **Three steps to making preaching pointed**

In Matthew 6:1-18 our Lord talks to His disciples about almsgiving, prayer, and then fasting. On each occasion He tells them what to do, how they are to do it, and why it is worth doing. We have already seen that our Lord’s method was to *state, illustrate, apply*. We now learn that, in our Lord’s mind, the category labelled *apply* could be arranged into the these three sub-divisions.

(i) **What to do.** The truth has been preached and the hearers need to know what it means in practice. What are the demands that these particular truths make upon them?

Sometimes the focus is general. But sometimes it is sharp, which is why many passages of God’s Word speak directly to wives, husbands, children, masters, slaves, young people, older people, etc. The finger needs to be put on the infected spot. Each

individual needs to know that the message is for him, without feeling that the preacher has embarrassed him by singling him out particularly.

As preachers, we will accomplish this if our application is strictly limited to pointed lessons which *obviously* spring directly from the text or passage being studied. It would be foolish to draw out of the text absolutely every lesson which it has to teach, and we will restrict ourselves to those which are clearly important for the people in front of us. When this is done, our hearers will be aware that they are being addressed by the plain text of God's Word, and not by a man who sees himself as some sort of superior creature who has the right to tell others how to live. The preacher, with them, lives under the authority of the Word of God. The preacher, with them, bows to the Lordship of Christ. So even though, with all authority, he will say "you", he will apply the Word humbly, naturally and simply.

(ii) **How to do it.** Our Lord did not just tell His disciples about almsgiving, prayer and fasting. His telling them how to do it was a divine word, and therefore infallible. In our case, unless it is clearly stated on the pages of God's book, the "how to" instruction that we give will not be inspired. This must be made clear to all our hearers.

Here we are moving into the realm of helpful suggestions, and our congregation must understand this. The preacher has no legislative power, and we dare not bind people's consciences in areas where the Word of God does not specifically do so.

This said, it remains a fact that our people badly need this "how to" sort of application, and countless congregations are not getting it. For example, it is not enough to teach from the Scriptures that husbands and fathers are responsible before God for organising and conducting family worship. They need to know how to start it and what to do. It is not enough to tell people that their hands should be full of work for the kingdom of God. They need clear, concrete suggestions about what needs doing and how it can be done. It is not enough to tell elderly believers not to fear death. They need to know, in black-and-white terms, what to do when this fear seizes them.

Pointed preaching is not the same as whipping the congregation. Where there is plenty of "how to" application, our hearers will know that they have met a preacher with a pastoral heart. When you love the person you are speaking to, you don't simply tell them what to do. You tell them how to do it. This is how mothers teach their daughters to cook. This is how fathers teach their sons to kick a football. And this is how preachers teach their hearers to enter and to live the Christian life.

(iii) **Why it's worth doing.** We are now talking about persuasion – "we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11). To tell people what to do is seldom enough to move them to do it. Even when we have told them how to do it, there remains an immense gap between what they now see clearly and their actually getting around to doing it.

Preaching must stir. It must move people. It must persuade them; it must show them why what they have to do is worth doing. The human heart is so wicked that even when it knows what to do, and how to do it, it says, "Why bother? What's the point?" So we have got to show people why.

This does not mean that application has to be long-winded. We should aim to be brief, alive and direct. But our hearers must know that if they are going to please God, if they are going to glorify Him and bring Him honour, if they are going to know His blessing, if they are honest about wanting to walk the path of holiness, if they truly love

their neighbour as themselves – then they must go the way, and do the things, which the application has pointed out.

If there is a time in the message to be stirred, this is it! Was anyone ever stirred to do anything by a man who was not stirred himself? Can you arouse men and women if you are not aroused? Can you move them if you are not moved?

How does an infantry officer get his men to advance against the enemy? Is it just by coldly giving orders? Or is it by excitedly explaining why this particular battle must be won and what will happen if it is lost? Does he not feelingly explain his tactics before shouting passionately, “Come on now, let’s go”?

It is time to stir the feelings! Passion is not unction, but that does not make passion a sin. I am not talking about the artificial passion put on by actors, but that which is the fruit of feeling deeply about obedience to revealed truth. As a preacher, don’t you feel deeply? Isn’t God’s name shamed by the disobedience of the church? Aren’t thousands of professing believers courting sin and thus courting eternal danger? Aren’t countless numbers failing to know the full blessing of God on their lives because of ignorance and confusion? Aren’t there so many others who hear the Word of God every week, but who seem as far from conversion as ever? Isn’t it wonderful to walk with God, to see His Son, to enjoy His peace and experience His providing and leading? Why, then, is the pulpit so emotionally neutral? Shouldn’t it be a place of encouragement, of joy, of dancing? A place of tears, warning, compassion, pity? A place of anger, denunciation? So, then, there are three stages in making preaching pointed – and the man who knows what they are preaches with fire.

## **Practical advice on preaching pointedly**

(i) **Know your people.** A visiting preacher cannot often do this, although he can try to get as much information as possible about his congregation before he speaks to them. But a regular preacher should be constantly asking himself questions about his people. Where are they up to, spiritually? Are they saved or lost? Are they growing or static? What are their particular joys, sorrows, trials, problems and temptations? What are their individual thought patterns? (because you are going to have to adapt your style accordingly). What obstacles are preventing them understanding or putting the truth preached into practice? What are their prejudices? Their misconceptions? What is their educational level? What illustrations would be best suited to them?

Our research must go on and on. We need to know what are the personal circumstances of every adult and child in the church. In our minds, we should be able to trace a typical day in the life of any one of them. We should know who are their relatives and friends, how they use their spare time, and what has been the course of their life so far. We cannot be satisfied until we know each one of them well.

To do this, we must spend time with them. Of course, it is good to have sustained conversations with them both before and after services. But this is not enough. They need to be in our home, and we need to be as often as possible in theirs. Preaching and pastoral work are intimately connected and our own thinking needs to underline this. We need to invent ways of spending time with our people, of doing things together with them, and of getting to know the children and young people as persons in their own right. Then we shall preach to people whom we *know* – and who also know us.

(ii) **Pray for your people.** Nobody to whom we preach regularly should be absent from our prayers. It is useful to have a prayer list arranged on a weekly or monthly basis so as to pray for them all. It is helpful to stop at different times of the day, and to imagine what different people in the congregation are doing at that moment. And why not sometimes go to the church building and sit in the place where such-and-such person usually sits? Imagine him or her listening to the next message you are going to give. How will it help them? What problems might they have in getting hold of it? What distractions are they likely to face? Is there anything in the building which you, as the preacher, could use to drive the truth home, or to cement it in place? And then pray for that person with all these things in mind.

(iii) **Prepare your preaching with your people in mind.** Not the congregation you would *like* to have, but the one that you *will* have!

Reflect on the text or passage from which you are going to preach. Ask yourself why the Holy Spirit put it in the Bible. Define this purpose in one sentence. Write out that sentence, using a second-person pronoun. Now prepare your message, making sure that everything in it furthers that purpose. From that text you are going to talk to your people about their souls and their lives. Ensure that your sub-headings *address* them, and do not just inform them. Put as much as possible into the second person.

As you are the Lord's man, why not follow the Lord's method? Divide your paper into three columns labelled *State, Illustrate, Apply*. In the first column write down all the information you are going to give. Now find or invent an illustration for each major item of teaching and put it in the second column. Sub-divide the third column into *What to do, How to do it, Why it's worth doing* and prepare suitable applications for each major item of teaching. Thoughtful and helpful application will now run throughout the whole sermon and attention is guaranteed. No one sleeps when their conscience is being touched, or when their thinking and life are being helped!

(iv) **Then preach it!** For the sermon is nothing until it is preached. At this point we need to look each person in the eyes, to speak to him or her in a direct style using a natural voice, and to do it with overflowing love. This is not the time to have a thought for ourselves. We are seeking the glory of God and the good of every man, woman, boy and girl that we can see. Yes, preach straight at them. The time has come to fire your bullets, not into the sky, but directly at the conscience of every person present. Your mission is to change them – from sinners into saints, and from saints into saintlier saints!

Christian saw the picture of a very grave person hang up against the wall; and this was the fashion of it; it had eyes lifted up to heaven, the best of books in its hand, the law of truth was written upon its lips, the world was behind its back; it stood as if it pleaded with men, and a crown of gold did hang over its head.

In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* this is the picture of the true gospel preacher that Christian saw in Interpreter's house. Who, amongst preachers, does not long to be such a man?

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# Preaching From Hebrews

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*Michael Plant*

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**A**nyone proposing preaching from Hebrews should be cautious. The book of Hebrews poses problems for the preacher in holding his hearers' interest. Spurgeon writes

I have a very lively, or rather a deadly, recollection of a certain series of discourses on the Hebrews, which made a deep impression on my mind of a most undesirable kind. I wished frequently that the Hebrews had kept the Epistle to themselves, for it sadly bored one poor gentile lad.

## **1. Encouragements to preaching from Hebrews**

### **a. It enables us to give an overview of the Bible**

Nowadays we will find that many Christians and particularly newcomers to our congregations are immensely ignorant of the Bible. A friend of mine was converted and began to teach Sunday School in his local Methodist Church and the lesson was on Noah and the Flood. He didn't know the story of Noah was in the Bible. He is a person of above average intelligence and education.

Hebrews enables us to sweep through large areas of Old Testament History. Hebrews 11 deals with the events from creation to the inter-testamental period. Hebrews 3 and 4 deal with the wanderings in the wilderness and their relevance to us. Chapters 5-10 deal with how the covenant, tabernacle, sacrificial system and priesthood have relevance for us. Hebrews 12 deals with the events of Mount Sinai and our relation to them. We are able to give people a map and compass for the strange land of the Old Testament.

### **b. It invites Christ-centred preaching**

Hebrews is almost uniquely Christ centred as a book. From the opening four verses we are confronted with the Lord Jesus and his person and work and we are constantly exhorted to turn our minds to this. See particularly Hebrews 1 vs.1 – 4, Hebrews 3 v.1 and Hebrews 12:1-3 but there is almost no part of the book not directly dealing with the person and work of Christ. Surely above anything these are the things we want to be preaching about?

### **c. It invites applied preaching**

One criticism of modern reformed preachers is the lack of the note of exhortation and application in our preaching. We perhaps tend to model our preaching on the sort of division we have in Ephesians – doctrine in chapters 1-3 leads to application in chapters 4-6. Hebrews gives us a somewhat different model because it is a "*word of exhortation*" (13:22) which is supported with some of the most richly doctrinal passages in the New Testament. If we preach with the aim of faithfully identifying with

the author's Holy Spirit inspired intention we will constantly be exhorting and applying. This is not only an encouragement to preaching from Hebrews but the key to doing so properly.

**d. It encourages a well rounded and biblical spirituality**

A number of neglected themes about the Christian life are taken up in Hebrews. Christina Rossetti writes,

Good Lord, today  
I scarce find breath to say:  
Scourge but receive me.  
For stripes are hard to bear, but worse  
Thy intolerable curse:  
So do not leave me.

Good Lord, lean down  
In pity, tho' Thou frown;  
Smite, but retrieve me:  
For so Thou hold me up to stand  
And kiss Thy smiting hand,  
It less will grieve me.<sup>2</sup>

I was initially wary of the thinking here but these verses reflect a spiritual response to Hebrews 12:5,6. If our theology and spirituality don't interact with all scripture we are stunted spiritually and our hearers will be like us.

**e. It promotes commitment**

We are all concerned about the lack of commitment of many of our hearers. We hope they are saved but there seems to be a lack of urgency in their Christian walk. However you interpret the warning passages in Hebrews they are clearly intended to be a cure for complacency.

## **2 Recommended commentaries**

As excellent commentary lists are available I am only recommending the two books I have found most helpful. Firstly, for overview and introduction, William Lane: "Hebrews – a call to commitment" – publishers Hendrickson – this is based on a series of radio bible studies and is accessible and insightful. If you struggle with Hebrews start here! As a major commentary I find PE Hughes – publishers Eerdmans – best. He is theologically aware and knowledgeable about the history of the interpretation of Hebrews.

## **3 An overview of Hebrews**

I am assuming that the author is unknown, that the recipients of the letter are Jewish Christians who are tempted to go back to Judaism and that the letter was written pre-AD70 because of the present tense references to the Levitical Priesthood. The letter shows that the recipients had undergone harsh persecution and that such times were returning.

Hebrews is in the form of a synagogue sermon with each main section being a running doctrinal commentary on a passage. The writer's method is to make summary statements of truth and to develop them by proving and applying his assertions.

Chapter 1 is based around some key Psalm passages.

Chapter 2:5-18 is based around Psalm 8:4-6.

Chapters 3:1-4:13 are based around Psalm 95:7-11.

Chapters 4:14-7:28 are based on Psalm 110:4.

Chapters 8:1-10:18 are based around Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Chapter 10:32-12:3 around Habakkuk 2:3,4.

Chapter 12:4-13 is based around Proverbs 3:11,12

The remainder of chapter 12 is about Esau from Genesis and the Sinai narrative.

### **Chapter 1:1-3**

The superiority of the Lord Jesus to the prophets of the Old Testament is brought before us, as the fragmentary and varied revelation of the Old Testament period is contrasted with the unitary and final revelation of the Son (v. 2), "*in these last days*". Because of the nature of the Son's revelation, all earlier revelations are superseded. The Son is of one substance with the Father and is the Father's agent in the creation and sustaining of the universe. He is heir and redeemer of creation and provides an offering for sin and applies redemption from his position at the Father's right hand.

### **Chapter 1:4-14**

It is part of the Christian apologetic that the incarnate Son is greater than the angels, who were regarded in Judaism, and by the writer to the Hebrews (cf. 2:2) as agents of the Sinai revelation. William Lane (page 35) notes that the confession of faith in vs. 1-3 is paralleled and proof-texted in the rest of chapter one:—

- i) appointment as royal heir (2b and vs. 5-9)
- ii) mediator of the creation (2c and v. 10)
- iii) eternal nature and pre-existent glory (v. 3a and vs. 11-22)
- iv) exaltation to God's right hand (v. 3c and v. 13)

This underlies the formal structure of Hebrews 1 which is:—

- i) The Son is called "my son" which gives him a greater name than angels (v. 5)
- ii) The Son has greater dignity than angels because he is worshipped (v. 6).
- iii) The Son has greater status than angels because he is unchangeable (vs. 7-12).
- iv) The Son, because he reigns at God's right hand and is not a "ministering spirit", has a greater function than angels.

### **Chapter 2:1-4**

With this contrast of the two revelations in mind we need to realise the danger of ignoring such a great salvation and so drifting away. The answer is to pay more careful attention to what we have heard.

### **Chapter 2:5-18**

This takes up in detail the earlier points about angels. Jesus is greater than angels but is this not disproved by his incarnation and death? In fact man's superior destiny, that everything is put under his feet, is accomplished only in Jesus. PE Hughes (page 5), "*For the Son, who to procure our salvation made himself for a little while lower than*



*the angels, is even now crowned with glory and honour, far above all angels.”* Verses 10-18 emphasise that Jesus identifies with his suffering and dying people by incarnation and suffering. By his death he destroys the evil power against them and operates as a high priest who offers atonement for sin and help in temptation.

### **Chapter 3:1-4:13**

The writer encourages us to, “*fix (y)our thoughts on Jesus the apostle and high priest whom we confess.*” He first deals with Jesus as the apostle who leads us with God’s authority. Because the Hebrews are tempted to return to Judaism, which gives Moses priority over Christ, he contrasts them in 3:1-6. Both are faithful in God’s house but Moses was faithful as a servant whose ministry pointed to the future ministry of Jesus who is son and heir.

### **Chapter 3:7-4:13**

The writer shows us that the work of Moses and Joshua (4:8) was incomplete. With Moses the people were disobedient and died in the wilderness and with Joshua the later repeat of the promise in Psalm 95 shows that the promise of rest was not fulfilled by occupying the land. The writer’s approach in warning them is significant – 3:6, “*and we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.*” and 3:14, “*We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly to the end the confidence we had at first.*” Faith’s reality is seen in its continuance and triumph. A quality of God’s word is that our response to it reveals our innermost thoughts and attitudes (4:12,13).

### **Chapter 4:14-5:10**

The challenge to hear God’s voice and respond in faith leads to the fact that we have a great high priest who offers sympathy and help. William Lane writes of this sympathy (page 75), “*It must be understood in an experiential sense; our high priest suffers together with the one being tested and brings active help.*” The confidence with which we approach God means we have a right to do so and an expectation of help.

### **Chapter 5:1-10**

This deals with his proper appointment as High Priest and the needed personal qualifications through experienced weakness and suffering so as to be able to deal gently with those in need. Proper appointment is taken up in vs.4-6 and this introduces the fact of Christ’s appointment to a new Melchizedekian order of priesthood. Personal qualification through suffering is taken up in vs. 7-9 with particular significance being placed on the tears and cries in Gethsemane.

### **Chapter 5:11-6:20**

This deals with the problem of the Hebrew Christians the writer is seeking to help. So much could be said, but the problem lies with the hearers who are at such a babyish stage of Christian living, that they are in danger of falling away. They must go on showing diligence and love in persevering faith. To encourage them, they are told that the promised blessings of the Messiah were actually promised on oath by God. This makes them absolutely certain to us and they are attached to Jesus who is in God’s very presence for us.

### **Chapter 7**

Remember the point of interest is not Melchizedek but Jesus. This great High Priest is greater than Abraham and therefore he is greater than Levi and the Levitical Priesthood (vs.1-10). The Levitical order had crucial weaknesses because it (v. 19)

*"made nothing perfect"*, because the priests were many and short-lived and sinful (vs.23-27) and because they were appointed without an oath (vs.18-22). In contrast Jesus is guarantor of a better covenant (v. 22) who is appointed with God's oath and is permanently able to offer complete salvation (vs. 24 and 25). New concepts such as a once and for all sacrifice (v. 27) and a better covenant (v. 22) are introduced for later consideration.

### **Chapter 8:1-10:18**

The three themes of the tabernacle, the covenant and the sacrificial ministry are taken up and the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 is central. The worship of the earthly tabernacle is prescribed by God and is patterned on the heavenly tabernacle (8:5), *"the pattern shown you on the mountain."* While that tabernacle stands, it shows that (9:8) *"the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed."* The worship of Judaism is a confession of the failure of the Old Covenant.

The Old Testament contains the promise of a, *"new covenant"* (8:8 quoting Jeremiah 31) which means that the first is obsolete, (8:13), *"what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear."* It failed at the most basic level to secure the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus' sacrificial ministry is superior being based on the better promises of the new covenant (8:6). It can *"cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God"* (cf. 9:14). In 10:1-18 it is established that Christ's death is once for all and no sacrifices for sin continue (v. 18). This means that a return to Judaism or the sacrifice of the mass or the erection of a new temple for sacrifice must be anathema to a Christian.

### **Chapter 10:19-31**

These verses serve as an application of the section above. The writer uses old covenant language to assure us of our access to God to urge us to use it. Secret access to God goes with a bold profession of faith and hope (v. 23) and courageous and constructive meeting together (vs. 25,26).

### **Chapter 10:26-31**

This is a passage of severe warning. Greater privilege means greater penalty. If the penalty for rejecting the law was severe, it is much more dangerous to reject the gospel, because of what this means about our attitudes to Christ's sacrifice and to the Holy Spirit's gracious influences.

### **Chapter 10:32-12:3**

Now the writer moves from contrasting our situation with that of Old Testament believers, to highlighting the parallels between us and them. We both live in the tension of having to respond in faith to the promises of God and to make them the basis for our actions. To fall away is to be destroyed (10:39) but to continue in faith is to be counted as righteous and to know God's deliverance.

### **Chapter 11**

This chapter explores the multi-faceted nature of faith with each example of faith having a relationship to the Hebrews in their life situation. For example: we need to make the right choice about the sacrifice we rely on (Abel in v. 4), to live as pilgrims without current security (vs. 8-10 and 13-16) and to keep going when the promise of salvation seems utterly hopeless (vs. 11,12). The section ends with the supreme example of Jesus enduring suffering and shame because of the promise of future joy in God's presence.

## Chapter 12:4-13

This section shows that the Hebrews are misunderstanding their experience. They are losing heart (v. 5) because they don't know the discipline of suffering is integral to salvation (v. 6). We are to accept our hardships as fatherly discipline and training (vs.7-11).<sup>3</sup>

### Chapter 12:14-18

Having had examples of faith we now have an example of "unfaith" in Esau who had the promise but rejected it and so lost the blessing. The readers are to be wary that their own tendency to sin does not lead to eternal loss.

### Chapter 12:18-29

There was a tendency to contrast the plainness of Christian worship with that of Judaism. Judaism's worship was inaugurated with visible signs of God's presence at Mount Sinai. The passage shows Christians are involved with far greater and more wonderful realities than those at Sinai. We must not confine the life of worship to cultic gatherings but such gatherings have significance beyond edification. This leads naturally to a passage of severe warning (vs. 25-27) where the greatness of the salvation involved makes its rejection more serious. Notice that the severity of the language does not exclude thankfulness, worship and assurance (see vs. 28,29).

### Chapter 13

Many commentators regard this as a largely irrelevant addendum which the writer felt that he had to include as giving direct moral guidance. Even though it is not directly linked to the main thrust of Hebrews. I think that we can easily see the relevance, because people do not fall from the faith simply because of a shift in their thinking. Generally, specific temptation and sin are involved, together with a failure to live by faith in God's promises, when tempted. That certainly applies to sin regarding sex and money (vs. 4,5). Other instructions can easily be seen (vs. 1-3 and 7-16) as fairly direct application of what it actually involves to continue in the faith.

## 4 Encouragement in Hebrews

Hebrews is "*a word of exhortation*" (Hebrews 13:22), and so to understand it we need to see how this exhortation/encouragement is seen as taking place. As an illustration, at the last Commonwealth Games, the Australians did well in the swimming, showing great team spirit with plenty of support from the team for each competitor. Much encouragement takes place at that basic level of presence and mutual commitment. We are not to, "*give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another*" (10:25). And we are to, "*See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily...*" (3:12,13). At a more direct level this may involve direct admonition from scripture as in Hebrews 12:5, "*And you have forgotten the word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:*" when he then proceeds to quote Proverbs 3:11,12. However one Australian swimmer could not be helped in this way because she had completely lost the stroke at which she had been world champion and could no longer compete in it. She needed a complete rebuild of her swimming style. Hebrews encourages when it rebuilds an understanding of truth and life and so enables Christians to cope where they are not coping. The responsibility to encourage involves firstly: a concern of the individual for the community (3:13), "*exhort one another*" and

secondly: a concern of the community for the individual (3:13), “*that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*”

## 5 Preaching difficult passages in Hebrews

### a. The warning passages

PE Hughes summarises the book’s message: “*It is evident, therefore, that the whole practical thrust of the epistle is to persuade those to whom it is addressed to resist the strong temptation to seek an easing of the hardships attendant on their Christian profession by accommodating it to the regime of the former covenant*”. Therefore the warning passages are for professing Christians as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> To introduce a warning to the almost-Christian at these points in the text is artificial, alien to the context and pastorally unhelpful. Christians are to be warned of the danger of hell if they do not continue in the faith and there is nothing unusual in this except the strength of the language employed in Hebrews. Other proposals, such as that of RT Kendall and Michael Eaton that the warning passages are to do with loss of reward and not loss of salvation, are unhelpful. Kendall and Eaton reject the doctrine of the saints’ perseverance and believe in the eternal security of those who profess faith. Some Reformed preachers would deny that this is their position but are reluctant really to warn the regenerate of eternal punishment.

It is thoroughly scriptural for the loss of salvation and the experience of eternal punishment to be given as warnings to Christians who fall away. As with Paul, “*By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise you have believed in vain*” (1 Corinthians 15:2) and Jesus, “*If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell*” (Matthew 5:29).

### b. Passages which involve seemingly irrelevant Old Testament detail

The key is to remember that the letter is not about old ceremonies but spiritual needs. When writing about the details of Old Covenant worship in 9:1-10 his concern is that, “*the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper*” (v. 9). We cannot finally know our sins are dealt with and that we, “*may serve the living God*” (9:14), without a permanent priest and a completed sacrifice. When the writer goes into small details he is still dealing with big questions and it is our task to discern these and to preach the whole passage in that context.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> CH Spurgeon, *The Early Years* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth reprint), p. 48.
- <sup>2</sup> AW Tozer: *A Christian Book of Mystical Verse* (Christian Publication Inc., 1963), p. 39.
- <sup>3</sup> See DM Lloyd-Jones: *Spiritual Depression* (Pickering and Inglis, 1965) p. 247, “In God’s Gymnasium.”
- <sup>4</sup> PE Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 10.
- <sup>5</sup> Article: “Falling Away” *Foundations*, Spring 1993, number 30.

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# **BEC Conference Report: Hermeneutics**

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*Ivan Stringer*

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Someone recently described hermeneutics as “*The epicentre of current theological conflict*”. What has become the evangelical issue at the end of the 20th Century was tackled at the **1998 Theological Studies Conference of the British Evangelical Council** at High Leigh Conference Centre in February. Fifty four men, the majority pastors, and one woman gathered for two days to consider the subject of Biblical interpretation. The importance of this topic also attracted men from outside the immediate ambit of the BEC.

The papers were circulated in advance, and were only introduced by the speakers at the conference, giving maximum time for discussion. The papers and the discussion were technical in places, but Mark Johnston in the chair saw to it that preachers’ needs were seen as central to the conference. One weakness was that some speakers had engaged with the leaders of modern thought through other writers, rather than directly, leading to some misrepresentation of their views.

## **The overall programme**

Each day was begun with a time of ministry and prayer. Alistair Wilson (Highland Theological Institute) outlined the development of Biblical interpretation from first century Jewish writers to the nineteenth century. Paul Brown (Dunstable) dealt with 20th Century developments. In order to help churches evaluate versions, Nick Needham spoke on the role of interpretation in translating the Bible. The relationship within the “Interpretative Triangle” of author, text and reader was examined by Ian Hamilton (Loudoun Church of Scotland), who added God as the Primary Author, making the triangle into a quadrilateral. In the fifth paper, Eryl Davies (Evangelical Theological College of Wales), tackled the relationship between theology and hermeneutics, and finally, Edward Donnelly (Reformed Theological College, Belfast) summarised the papers and the discussion quite helpfully.

Within these papers, the issues of Justification, Feminism, Homosexuality and Missiology were discussed, these being areas where conservative evangelicals see some other evangelicals going astray because of wrong hermeneutic principles.

## **Attitudes to modern theories**

In the general academic world, emphasis is not on the author, but on the text and the reader. What is important, then, is not the author’s conscious intention, but on what the reader finds in the text. The text’s meaning becomes multi-layered and may contain hidden attitudes to race, women, etc. Meaning does not, indeed cannot, relate to the real world outside the text.

The Conference as a whole rejected the main theses of modern theory as being harmful to Biblical interpretation. It considered that the evangelical “grammatico-historical method” has been left undamaged by recent developments. However, modern

theory does remind us of what we should have known, but have forgotten, and it is nevertheless right to interact with the New Hermeneutic at different levels. It was also considered essential to support evangelical scholars who are in the thick of the debate.

## **The Bible as human and divine**

As divine, the Bible interprets itself, speaks to our time, and is the very voice of God. It also places meaning outside of the text. As human, the Bible is subject to analyses of form and language. The intention of the human author is important, but his text might have applications beyond his understanding, e.g. in prophecy. Overstress on the divine leads to wild allegory; overstress on the human leads to barren historicism. Also, the Holy Spirit's work in the interpreter is essential for a proper understanding of Scripture.

## **The place of presuppositions**

*Relating to the Bible.* It is generally agreed today that it is impossible to come to texts without presuppositions. Eryl Davies listed those we should have as Scripture's, namely, 1. divine inspiration and truthfulness; 2. historical particularity, i.e., it contains diversity as well as unity; 3. unity and coherence; 4. organic nature, allowing a development of revelation; and 5. canonical closure.

*Relating to the Reader.* Our experiences, interests, culture, previous knowledge, ecclesiastical heritage, all affect the way we read the Bible. Such presuppositions are not always utterly wrong, but they need to be constantly challenged by Scripture. Sometimes our presuppositions lead to blindness to issues, such as materialism.

## **The text and theology**

*The sovereignty of the text.* The text should be allowed to speak for itself. Systematic theology should not be allowed to obscure the plain meaning of the text, nor should preachers find in the text what they want to say. Many preachers today do not work hard enough at a critical analysis of the text.

*The place of theology.* Systematic and Biblical theology puts individual texts into the context of the whole Bible. This theology should be a tool to help understanding, not to impose meaning on the text. Such theology, therefore, needs constant challenging and amending by Scripture. Using theology does not mean that we should read the Old Testament as if it were the New, but rather that we should trace the development of a teaching through the entire Bible.

*Christological Interpretation.* Christ is central to the whole Bible, but this does not necessarily mean we should read Christ into the Old Testament narrative, but rather that we should see how the narrative develops throughout Scripture to Christ. For example, Genesis 22 relates God's testing of Abraham's love, not primarily the cross, but within the total scheme of Scripture, the sacrificial love of a father points to Calvary.

## **The meaning of meaning**

Some wanted to restrict Biblical texts to a single meaning, but with different applications. Others were happier with seeing a text as having more than one meaning. Single meaning supporters wanted to prevent interpreters from reading what they want

into the text; liberation theology and “odd” evangelical exegesis were cited, also the over-allegorising of texts. To some degree, differences were probably a matter of semantics, but the subject needed closer attention than could be given at this conference.

## **The Bible as literature**

*Genre.* The conference was against a flat view of Scripture which treated all texts as essentially the same. Poetry, parable, history, etc. should be read in accordance with the rules of its genre. This means that exegesis and preaching should bring out imagination and feeling as well as propositional thought.

*Words.* Exegetes must try to understand the power of words as well as their meaning. Also, the meaning of a word is governed by its use in the context, not what it meant hundreds of years before in Classical Greek etc.

## **New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament**

*A model for today?* Some evangelicals suggest that we should accept NT writers’ use of the OT as the inspired word of God, but not necessarily follow their methods. At the conference, it was suggested that where problems arise in the NT use of the OT, the texts are simply being cited, being used as illustrations, or are a “vehicle of expression” rather than being interpreted.

*Types.* There was disagreement over whether we should only use as OT types those that are recognised as such in the NT. Some expressed concern over the over-allegorisation of Scripture.

## **Translations and interpretation**

*Verbal or dynamic equivalence?* Full verbal equivalence is not feasible, as languages contain idiom, different grammatical structures, and their words have different ranges of meaning. Full dynamic equivalence obscures the theological meaning of Scripture. Others preferred a version with more dynamic equivalence, but Nick Needham preferred a point nearer the verbal equivalence end, especially for Bible Study, with the church helping its members to understand technical expressions. He added that for liturgy something less stilted is required.

*The inescapability of interpretation.* Translation of necessity includes a measure of interpretation, but this should avoid conformity to a prior theology. The interpretative element is stronger in those versions closer to the dynamic equivalence end.

## **General conclusion**

Some of the matters discussed need closer study, not least the problem of meaning. In general, the conference dealt with the subject helpfully and all preachers and churches would benefit if they were able to take note of its findings. Discussions are taking place with an evangelical publisher and it is hoped that the papers, supplemented in the light of the conference, will become the basis for a much-needed book on this highly relevant issue.

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# Review Article: What Is Preaching?

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Andrew Davies

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*To preach or Not to Preach? David C Norrington, Paternoster, 1996, 240pp., £10.99*  
*Speaking God's Words, Peter Adam, IVP, 1996, 176pp., £12.99*

It is sometimes a good exercise to read books that challenge our presuppositions and practices and drive us back to the drawing board. David Norrington challenged my own thinking about the sermon as a regular feature of church life, while Peter Adam challenged me in another way by making me look at preaching itself.

Norrington's argument is that whilst there is evidence in the NT for evangelistic speeches delivered for missionary purposes there is little evidence for the regular sermon within the weekly life of the early churches. By a "sermon" he means "a speech, essentially concerned with biblical, ethical and related material, designed to increase understanding and promote godly living amongst the listening congregation, delivered by one in good standing with the local Christian community and addressed primarily to the faithful in the context of their own gatherings". He claims that the sermon, so defined, lacks biblical foundation and is injurious to the Christian community.

1. **It lacks biblical foundation** because: a) it is impossible to prove that the early churches continued the practice of regular synagogue sermons which in any case were not integral; b) although Jesus used speeches to introduce his message or to provide instructions for those with the same needs, when it came to training leaders "one-way communication was inadequate"; c) sermons seem to have played little part in the established life of the primitive churches; and d) the 30 or so NT verbs used for the ministry of the word describe a much richer variety of forms of ministry than delivering sermons. Norrington's conclusion is that the sermon came to prominence in subsequent history as a result of several factors: the decline of charismatic gifts, the development of clericalism, a loss of spirituality, the rise of church buildings, an uncritical absorption of pagan ideas of rhetoric, and a changed understanding of the sacred.

2. **The sermon is actually injurious to the life of the Christian community.** Norrington delivers a breathtaking onslaught on the sermon which he regards as being largely responsible for the following evils: the exclusion of group learning and the elevation of the "expert"; dependence on the preacher; clericalism; failure to develop analytical skills in the congregation; crushing people who cannot preach by deskilling and demoralising them; appealing only to people with high IQs; attracting needy people (especially women) to the preacher; stunting initiative and giftedness; measuring commitment by attendance at the sermon; failing to change behaviour; leading to spiritual, intellectual and emotional impoverishment; and failing to halt the decline of society into social decay, unbelief, cultism, depression and lostness. Peoples' personal problems are not resolved under the sermon, religion is privatised and individualised because of it, and it produces unattractive communities to which unbelievers are not drawn. In short almost every evil in modern church life is due to the sermon!

It is a great pity that Norrington over-states his argument in this way because he



gives the impression that he is grinding an axe rather than reasoning a case. And he does have a case to present. Over the years churches have suffered from bad preaching. Dry, dusty, letter-learned sermons have left generations of the Lord's people bored and dissatisfied. The sermon may well have been idolised as a means of instruction, isolated from other methods of edifying the people of God, such as letter writing, reading, family worship, catechising, singing, poetry, lectures, discussion groups, experience meetings etc. And the sermon itself may have been defined too narrowly and tied too rigidly to pre-conceived expository methods. After all if God himself has communicated to us in a rich variety of ways in Scripture then why should our sermons not be more imaginative and colourful than they are?

But his book suffers from too many half truths and sweeping generalisations. In his treatment of the biblical material he has argued that the NT's comparative silence about what happened in church gatherings means that there were no regular edificatory sermons. Absence of evidence constitutes evidence of absence. But arguments from silence can work both ways, and the other (overwhelming) NT evidence for the sermon – the sermons of Jesus, the sermons in Acts, the speeches referred to in the Letters, the Pastoral Letters, Hebrews (“my word of exhortation”) – cannot be simply explained away as ad hoc or evangelistic or occasional matters. On the contrary they demonstrate just how vital sermons were in the communication of God's truth in NT times.

Similarly Norrington's survey of the place of sermons in church history distorts the historical evidence to support an *a priori* position. Thus restive congregations in the early church prove the inadequacy of the sermon, not the preacher! In using sermons the Reformers and the Puritans duplicated the flaws in the preaching of the Fathers! Sermons blessed by God in revival times merely prove that God can bless defective methods without intending them to be perpetuated! Inspirational sermons are a historical rarity and quite inadequate as a regular diet! Sermons may have been useful in evangelism, but believers must break free from the “familiarity of bondage to the uncertainties of liberation”! These (and other) sweeping historical generalisations and half truths spoil the book's basic argument. If only the great figures of church history had read Norrington's book the church would have been infinitely better off!

**Peter Adam's book** breathes a different spirit and is a serious attempt at a biblical, theological, historical and experimental analysis of preaching. He defines preaching as “the explanation and application of the Word to the congregation of Christ in order to produce corporate preparation for service, unity of faith, maturity, growth and upbuilding.”

The first section introduces us to what Adam calls “three biblical foundations of preaching”. 1) **God has spoken** – not only in creation but in Christ and in Scripture, which is his own word about his work. 2) **It is written** – God has preserved what he has said for other generations and his words were intended to apply to all humankind. 3) **Preach the Word** – God called men to preach, teach and explain his spoken and written word in OT times; the OT expected the work of God in the future to be accompanied by ministers of the word, and in NT times God continued to give his words to men to minister. So the Bible is itself by nature God preaching.

The second section is called “The Preacher at work”. In a chapter on preaching as a ministry of the Word, Adam covers some of the same ground as Norrington, pointing

out that there are other forms of ministering besides preaching and indicating some of the strengths of preaching (dealing with the common needs of all, thoroughness and quality in teaching) and its potential weaknesses (passive congregations, lack of interaction, difficulty in assessing its effectiveness, failure to deal with personal needs). But his treatment of the biblical evidence is more balanced than Norrington's because he shows how the 33 NT verbs used to describe the ministry of the Word not only present a great variety of forms of ministry but also connect in various ways with preaching and indicate that preaching includes a number of elements: information, declaration, exhortation, persuasion, conversation. The model sermons of the NT are exhortations for a response through instruction.

The following chapter entitled "The Preacher's Bible" focuses attention on eight themes: 1) the importance of preaching Christ by means of the Bible rather than simply preaching the Bible; 2) the usefulness and effectiveness of Scripture; 3) the manifold forms in which Scripture expresses revelation ought to be reflected in varied and pluriform preaching; 4) the given relevance of Scripture which was intended to speak then and now; 5) the importance of using Scripture properly; 6) the usefulness and danger of the analogy between the incarnation and inscripturation of the Word; 7) the necessity of a biblical theology; and 8) the danger of identifying the Word with preaching whilst at the same time affirming that God speaks through preaching.

The chapter on "The preacher's purpose" is also very helpful. The aim of the preacher is not to preach well, but to humble the sinner, exalt the Saviour, and promote godliness. He is to serve the Lord Jesus Christ as in the presence of God he proclaims the King's message and announces the King's coming. He is to serve the Word by expounding what God has said and not his own agenda. He is to serve the people of God by carefully and sympathetically applying the Word to their condition. This chapter contains some valuable lessons gleaned from the ministry of Calvin and the Puritans, particularly the vital necessity of the Holy Spirit's action both in preachers and hearers, and the need to speak to the different kinds of hearers. The final chapter of the book is a warm encouragement to preachers to love and obey God rather than men, to be committed to God's truth, to love people, to work and pray hard, to relate the Word vividly and personally to the real world, to be willing to suffer, and to look constantly to God who alone is sufficient. I found myself humbled and strengthened as I came to the end of the book. It had not only satisfied my mind but also warmed my heart and put new verve into my will. It had done for me what real preaching ought to do.

## **What then is preaching?**

It is more than instruction, though never less.

It is more than a sermon.

It is more than the careful exposition and application of the biblical text.

It is all of that. But it is more, much more.

1. **It is a message from God through a man.** If a man does no more than prepare a sermon, explain the meaning, and show the relevance of the text without also bringing a message from God he has not preached. The exposition must become a burden.

2. **It is encounter with God through exposition.** Something is meant to *happen* when the Word is preached. Preaching is an event, an occasion, in which the preacher

and the congregation interact with each other so that there is an encounter together with God. It is a glorious thing when the preacher pours out his soul in the proclamation of the truth, and the congregation is gripped and moved and thrilled with him, both caught up and mastered by God's Word.

**3. It is praise through proclamation.** The preacher is a herald proclaiming God's Word, announcing a great message from the King. He is to declare the greatness of God and the frailty of man. But that is not all. He is also to announce the coming of the King. God comes with the preaching of his Word. So the congregation is lifted up in praise and worship. Preaching like this is worship. It is the reason why the sermon comes at the end of the service as the climax and pinnacle of worship. (See Isaiah 40:1-11)

**4. It is inspiration through instruction.** Preaching must be full of biblical content and rich in biblical theology, otherwise no basis exists for an appeal to respond. But at the same time it must inspire the congregation and move them to action. Peter said "I stir you up by putting you in remembrance". Real preaching stirs the heart and touches the conscience as it penetrates the the mind. It ought never to leave us as we were before. Paul prayed for "utterance" to be given him because he did not want simply to preach good sermons. There must be the demonstration of power as well as the power of demonstration if lives are to be changed and people galvanised to action.

**5. It is freedom through form.** There must be form! Structure, logic and order are important. Otherwise preachers will ramble. But it is very dangerous to rest contentedly with a good sermon. What is needed is real preaching, and real preaching is about authority and freedom. In the middle of a pastoral letter to a young minister Paul broke out into a cry of joy: "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief". I shall never forget a sermon I heard at Brixham Baptist Church on the preeminence of Christ from Colossians 1, when the preacher suddenly stopped in the middle of his exposition and exclaimed: "What a Gospel!" He was so thrilled by the glory of Christ that he couldn't contain himself. Nor could I! God grant more of this to today's preachers!

**6. It is application from God through attention to people.** Preachers need to be aware of their congregations and to give them their attention. All the time the Word needs to be applied to the lives of the hearers as the preacher seeks to put himself into their shoes. This will require contact with people, knowledge, pastoral love, and imagination. It is one thing to love preaching; it is another thing to love people. As the preacher gives his attention to his hearers the Holy Spirit applies the truth to their consciences. Preaching that is worthy of the name will be direct, relevant and applied.

The church today needs preaching that is authentically God glorifying, Christ-centred, and Spirit-inspired. For lack of it for too long the souls of men have suffered. But God can take his truth and make it live in our own hearts so that sermons become preaching. Above all may we avoid the terrible danger that every poet, musician and artist faces, namely, being drawn away from love of the thing told to love of the telling. As CS Lewis once said: "down in deep hell they cannot be interested in God at all but only in what they are saying about him".

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## Book Reviews

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### The Epistle to the Romans

*The New International Commentary on the New Testament, by Douglas J. Moo, Eerdmans, 1996, 1012pp, £35 (hb ISBN 0-8028-2317-3)*

What justification can there be for yet another commentary on Romans, and why replace the older volume by John Murray which is crammed full of distilled wisdom and succinctness of expression? I confess to having a soft spot for Murray because it was the first commentary on Romans that I owned. However, it was somewhat dated even when published and there is just room on my bookshelves for one more fat book on Paul's great letter. Is the £35 price tag money well spent?

Moo builds on the work he did in an earlier commentary on Chapters 1-8 to produce a massive and thorough treatment of the entire letter. The book's size means it will not lend itself to bedtime reading but its format is easy on the eye and Moo writes in a readable way. Each section of the letter is headed by excellent summaries of the flow of thought, which provide useful provisional roadmaps for the journey ahead. No stone is left unturned as Moo grapples with the complexity of Paul's argument. I was impressed by his ability to combine exegetical detail with clarity of expression and suggestive contemporary application.

Moo is clearly aware of all the cross-currents of Pauline studies and navigates them skillfully. There is a full and fair appraisal of the debate concerning the phrase "Works of the Law", both in the passage in Romans 3 and in an excursus, "*Works of the Law*" and *First-Century Judaism*. I was impressed by Moo's ability to explain complex issues whilst avoiding being lost in detail. Much of this detailed

work can be found in the extensive and very illuminating footnotes. The comprehensive bibliography is an indication of how fully he has engaged with a range of writers. It is particularly pleasing to see Dr Lloyd-Jones' work on Romans receiving such generous attention in a major commentary like this.

Moo is clear about the theme of Romans, "The gospel", explaining that we require a theme as broad as the gospel "to encompass the diverse topics in Romans."

The theological flavour is broadly Reformed, Moo is quite superb on Romans chapters 8-9. The one major area in which he departs from classic Reformed thought, at least of the Geneva brand, is one of the things which makes this commentary so distinctive. Moo's treatment of the believer's relationship to the Mosaic law is a bold attempt to explore and expound a full-orbed New Covenant theology that takes seriously the reign of grace in the life of the Christian. The 19th Century Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte had one acid test for a new commentary on Romans: if it didn't follow the classic Reformed line on Romans 7 the book went straight back to his booksellers. By that criterion Moo's weighty tome would need to be returned unread. That would, however, mean missing a host of good things, not least his bold and fresh approach to Romans 7. Moo argues that the right question to ask when approaching the chapter is not whether this is a believer or an unbeliever, but the question is how far the Mosaic Law can take a person spiritually. He concludes that the Law can neither save nor sanctify. Later in the commentary he works out the practical implications of this, for example on Romans 12:1-2 he writes, "We need 'law'; but it would be to betray Paul's call to us in these verses to substitute external

commands for the continuing work of mind-renewal that is at the heart of God's New Covenant work." It is difficult to suppress an Amen at this point!

Moo treats Romans as a whole book, and will not allow us to view chapters 1-8 as the main course and chapters 9-16 as the side-salad. They are not treated as an appendage to the main teaching but as "an important and integral part of the letter". Likewise chapters 12-16 are not a "last minute 'add-on' relatively unrelated to the real – theological – heart of the letter", instead it is the exposition of how the powerful gospel explained in the first eight chapters can change lives. If I had to have only one commentary on Romans I may well choose Moo, but be very tempted to sneak a look at someone's Bruce, Calvin, Cranfield, Dunn, Murray...

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John Woods, Lancing

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### **Some recent commentaries on the Pastoral Epistles**

*1 & 2 Timothy: Passing on the Truth*, Michael Bentley, Evangelical Press, 1997, 316 pp., £8.95

*Titus: Straightening out the Self-Centred Church*, John Benton, Evangelical Press, 1997, 192 pp., £6.99

*1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, Douglas Milne, Christian Focus Publications, 1996, 240 pp., £6.95

*The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus: The Life of the Local Church*, John RW Stott, IVP, 1996, 232 pp., £9.99

*Timothy & Titus*, Michael Griffiths, Crossway, 1996, 223 pp., £4.99

**T**he seemingly exponential expansion of choice in the world of commentaries can leave the average pastor daunted. Even confining ourselves to evangelical works the choice is still broad. This review will examine five works

chosen only because they have been published recently and are evangelical in perspective.

Michael Bentley's book on 1 & 2 Timothy: *Passing On The Truth* (Welwyn Commentary Series), is based around a series of sermons. It is written in a conversational style with many extremely pertinent and insightful personal applications. The book takes a generally conservative view on controversial issues such as the role of women with the arguments clearly and fairly set out. The end-notes are limited in their range and generally refer to older or more popular commentaries. In picking up a commentary of this sort I am mainly looking for a pastor's theological reflection with application and illustration which brings the bible alive for people living in our rapidly changing world. Unfortunately it is at these points that the book is relatively weak.

In the same series is John Benton's commentary on *Titus: Straightening Out The Self-centred Church*. He states in his preface that the commentary is the result of "trying to define and grasp more clearly... how the contemporary world around us affects, almost unconsciously the way we think" (p. 11). The book is rich in illustration and extremely contemporary in its grasp of the relevance of the message for today. There are times when one could have wanted more help, such as what exactly "the husband of one wife" does and does not mean, but no commentary can achieve everything.

John Stott, of course, is in a class of his own. His final contribution to *The Bible Speaks Today* series, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus: Life in the Local Church*, is eminently "Stottian". The work is impeccably organised and both comprehensive and succinct in its comments. As usual the commentary reflects a lifetime of pastoral experience

and theological and cultural reflection of the highest order. One may not always agree with him but one cannot fail to understand him and to warm to his impassioned plea for the church to be ruled by the scriptures. Those familiar with John Stott's other writings will find little which is surprising, though as usual in preparation for a recent sermon series I found myself starting here before branching out into less navigable waters.

Douglas Milne's commentary on all three Pastorals, in the *Focus on the Bible* series, is similarly well organised though perhaps a little more atomised in its approach to the books as a whole. Milne always has an eye for systematic theology, and for illuminating cross references, while perhaps being less sensitive to the particular cultural situation into which the epistles were written. There is no effort to interact with other positions or to provide any more than the briefest of pastoral reflection. It is more useful as an introduction than as a source for pastors.

Michael Griffiths has written the *Crossway Bible Guide* on the Pastorals. This is not a commentary but rather an aid to reflection. Griffiths is not always the most reliable of exegetes (for instance in his rather contentious statements about the greek word *authentain*) but he has an unerring eye for the key issues and questions in the minds of modern (especially young) readers which any sermon needs to address. For this alone it is worth a glance.

So what is the busy pastor of modest means to acquire? Those with a knowledge of Greek cannot afford to be without the *New International Greek Testament Commentary* on the Pastorals by George W Knight III. Its main strength is its insights into the original language. Nor should anyone ignore Gordon Fee's *New International Biblical Commentary* for his

spirited and largely persuasive attempt to sketch in a coherent picture of the churches to which the Pastorals were written. In today's world a pastor intending to preach through 1 Timothy cannot avoid doing some wider reading on the subject of the role of women. (See, for instance, Douglas Moo's brief but careful exegesis of 1 Tim. 2:11-15 in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper & Wayne Grudem.) For an eye for how a passage might become a sermon Stott and Benton are extremely helpful. The Pastorals are books in real need of being read and preached and lived out in the modern church. We are no longer short of evangelical contributions to that process.

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*Peter Comont, Oxford*

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## Briefly Noted

One of the best loved leaders of evangelicalism in Britain in this century was the late Prof. **RA Finlayson** of the Free Church College in Edinburgh, where he taught systematic theology. He was also well-known as a preacher and lecturer, not least in many Christian Unions. Tom Maclean has gathered together a number of Finlayson's finest pieces in *Reformed Theological Writings* (Mentor/Christian Focus, 1996). Steeped in the rich heritage of Scottish Calvinism, this is clear-headed, warm-hearted, accessible, confessional and biblical theology at its best, the kind of theology that our churches desperately need today. After the biographical introduction, the book is divided in three sections – general theology, issues facing evangelicals and the Westminster Confession. The first and third sections stand the test of time and are a superb introduction to reformed theology. The second section is inevitably somewhat dated, but shows a godly mind at

work wrestling with the issues of his day and provides us with a model for our times. Finlayson was one of the architects of the post-war evangelical resurgence and his life and writings merit consideration as that legacy faces new challenges today.

A book in the same tradition as Finlayson is **Andrew TB McGowan's *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston*** (Rutherford House/Paternoster, 1997). Boston is a fascinating figure in Scottish church history – a pastor-theologian who was both a popular doctrinal and devotional writer and a major contributor to the development of Scottish theology. McGowan clearly and succinctly surveys Boston's thought and brings out his theological genius. Although it began as a PhD thesis it is very readable and accessible to the non-specialist reader. As a pastor-theologian himself McGowan deals with issues that Boston dealt with in the early 18th century and which are of perennial concern to pastors.

**John Piper** is a pastor-theologian whose writings are always enriching, if sometimes controversial and provocative in the way he seeks answers to old questions. ***A Hunger for God*** (IVP, 1997) is a spiritual feast that should be required reading for every church-officer. The book is simply about, as its subtitle says, "desiring God through fasting and prayer". This is the only book I have ever read on fasting that has actually made me want to do it. Piper's great theme of enjoying God comes through on every page. The spiritual blessing of fasting is so wonderfully described that you want to start straight away. The book is deeply challenging. Take this as a sample: "The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world" (p. 14). The chapter on fasting for the poor and

oppressed is superb. It is a meditation on Isaiah 58 and if its message were taken seriously by churches the implications would be far-reaching. Here is applied theology that will set your soul on fire.

The writings of **Michael Horton** are increasingly appreciated by those who want to understand the underlying currents of what is happening in the church today. ***In the Face of God*** (Word, 1996) explores the issue of spiritual intimacy. Horton looks at what passes for spirituality in much of evangelicalism today. He shows how much of it closely resembles ancient gnosticism with its emphasis on direct knowledge of God. He then maps out an evangelical spirituality that is thoroughly biblical and owes much to the insights of the Reformers. If the book has a flaw it is that he so subsumes the work of the Spirit within the Word that I wonder if he has much room for any subjective experience in the Christian life. I would also challenge some of what he says about the sacraments. But overall the book is very good and a helpful guide in spiritually confusing times.

Even more robust and forthright is **Peter Jones' *Spirit Wars*** (WinePress, 1997). Jones, who teaches New Testament at Westminster Seminary in California, shows how paganism is being revived in America. The study of ancient Gnostic texts is something of a fad in biblical studies, but this is far from an arcane academic pursuit. There is a clear pagan agenda in what is happening. Jones does not see an organised conspiracy, but rather scholars reflecting the increasingly pagan culture around them. This is particularly evident in the way much feminist theology handles the Bible. The book is not well edited and I did not find it easy to read, but it deals with serious issues that we need to be aware of.

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*The Editor*

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## **EDITORIAL POLICY**

1. To articulate that theology characteristic of evangelical churches which are outside pluralist ecumenical bodies.
  2. To discuss any theological issues which reflect the diverse views on matters not essential to salvation held within the BEC constituency.
  3. To appraise and report on contemporary trends in theology, particularly those which represent departure from consistent evangelicalism.
  4. To stimulate interest in contemporary theological matters among evangelical churches by the way in which these topics are handled and by indicating their relevance to pastoral ministry.
  5. To keep our readers informed about the contents of new books and journals, as a means of encouraging their stewardship of time and money.
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