
Review Article: What Is Preaching?

Andrew Davies

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 inscription 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".

Rev. Andrew Davies MA is minister of Smithfield Baptist Church, Sydney
