
The Ministry of the Word

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A personal view of the 1993 BEC Study Conference

“Not only is good preaching rare but preaching itself is at a discount in today’s churches. Many Christians have lost confidence in what previous generations would have called **the power of the Word**. This conference aims to consider the broad Biblical basis for the Ministry of the Word and to evaluate this for our own generation.” (*Introduction to the study papers*)

The BEC Study Conference took place over three days at High Leigh Conference Centre at the end of March. Under the chairmanship of Rev Hywel Jones about 40 men from various constituencies within the Council met to consider **The Ministry of the Word in the Church**.

Unlike most conferences, the six papers had already been printed and circulated. Each speaker introduced his paper, but did not read it; he was asked to highlight particular points, and the subject was then open for discussion. Those attending were expected to have read and considered the papers already.

Contemporary Pressures

Dr David Smith, Principal of Northumbria Bible College had analysed the factors affecting preaching today. First he focused on external pressures relating to our cultural context. A major problem is that “churches have been left stranded as sub-cultural islands and preaching has become confined to the circle of those who ‘speak the language’”.

Secularization has fragmented society, destroying any consensus as to the purpose of human life. *Despair* and loneliness are the terrible price people are paying for apparent freedom from Christian values. *Consumer religion* fills the void left by abandoning Christianity. Rather than believe in nothing, modern man will believe in anything.

Preachers face three dangers; they can be insular, turning away from society’s developments and so failing to tackle problems church members actually face. They can be culturally irrelevant, experts in exegesis but incapable of communicating the gospel meaningfully to the people around them. Or they can fall into the opposite danger of over-accommodation to cultural mores in communication and virtually lose the gospel.

The difficulties do not end there, however. A whole host of **internal pressures** affect the preacher, arising from changes within churches.

The feel-good factor has subordinated truth to experience and **the latter** is confused with the former. The *body-life principle* blames the “one-man ministry” as the main cause of death in churches and consequently preaching is sidelined.

Congregational gifts do need to be developed and “For too long the church has resembled a sporting event in which twenty-thousand people desperately in need

of exercise come to watch twenty-two men desperately in need of rest. *Communications technology* elevates the visual over the verbal and has affected churches. How can we make the message of the Book relevant to a *generation of non-readers*? Lastly the *minister himself* faces the pressures of "burn-out", whilst incidences of "serious moral failure" are common. When sinful people, battered by this society, look to the pastor for aid, he may well be overwhelmed by the demands they make. So who pastors the pastor?

Discussion

How do we get in touch with the way people are thinking and feeling? Ought there to be more discussional opportunities in local church ministry so that there can be feed-back from the people? Reading widely can help, but some wondered whether many "ordinary people" were asking any questions at all! If they are asking questions, aren't they asking many different kinds of questions?

There is a need to exegete the person as well as the text. Evangelistic methods can reinforce churches' cultural isolation; a programme is less necessary than neighbourliness. We can be over-hasty in separating converts from their culture. Despite having had time to reflect on the issues, the debate was not well focused; perhaps the quotation by Helmut Thielicke with which Dr Smith ended his paper was really the issue - "As long as we have not conquered this 'sickness unto death', which is seated in our unconvincing Christian existence and nowhere else, all secondary remedies are meaningless and restricted to very innocuous symptom-therapy."

Certainly, "We ought not to struggle for the place of preaching any harder than we ought to struggle for better preaching. The best way to secure the place of preaching is by better preaching". So saying, the chairman concluded the first session.

The Old Covenant Community

This paper had been prepared by Rev John Waite, but he was unable to be at the conference due to his daughter's serious illness.

His paper dealt with the leading figures in the Old Covenant Community: Priest & Levite, Prophet, Judge, Wise Man and King. The second part of the paper covered the relationship to the Sinaitic revelation of these offices and advisers. Each one in his own way was responsible before God for supporting the divine covenant with Israel.

In Mr Waite's absence the chairman made some introductory comments, drawing out the way in which there is movement within the Old Testament pointing us in the direction of the New Testament's fuller development.

Discussion

What had happened to the "Judge" function in the transition from old covenant to new? For example, when Presbyterian elders act together, are they acting in this "judging" function? And to what extent has the arrival of the new covenant made judging less significant? Judging has to do with law. The more widespread knowledge of God among the covenant people and the greater emphasis upon (not dichotomy between) grace rather than law might mean that this function

would be less evident and less necessary. Does it come into the province of the gathered church on the basis of Mt 18 or 1 Cor 5?

Then what of the functions of Wise Man/Counsellor? How should such functions be viewed, especially in the light of the growth of the modern counselling movement? Are churches too ready to hand over responsibility for judging and counselling to the "secular powers"? Ought not the new covenant community to deal with these issues? Yet if the church is to carry out such functions, there is also a need to teach proper submission to the caring authority - something unknown in the secular world.

This early evening discussion was most stimulating, but unsatisfactory because there was not enough time to pursue any matter to its conclusion. We still had to discuss another area of the paper so the session had to end.

Prophets - Old Testament

Due to Mr Waite's absence, Dr John Benton's paper figured prominently in the conference discussions. His work on Prophets was taken in two parts, the section on the Old Testament being dealt with in relation to the old covenant community. His argument, based on the view originating from Wayne Grudem, was that there were two "kinds" of prophecy to be found in the Old Testament. The "classical" prophets, ie the writers of Scripture, are inspired in the fullest sense, but he proposed a secondary class of prophecy that was analogous to the non-apostolic prophecy he saw in the New Testament.

This session was most perplexing; there was a lot of metaphorical and literal head-scratching going on. Speaking personally, it felt like being taken on an anthropological dig to find evidence of the missing link! We investigated a number of hopeful sites and a few things were unearthed. Yet rather than hominid remains, the Scriptural equivalent of the remains of an ancient pig came to light. We were raking over the deposits of Holy Scripture and many felt there was too little to support too much.

Enough questions were asked about 2 Peter 1:21 and the warnings against false prophecy in Deut 13 and 18 to give pause for serious reflection.

Prophets - New Testament

The next morning Dr Benton was back in harness introducing the rest of his paper, with an opportunity to develop the basic thesis. He identified aspects of cessation and continuation in the Old Testament; the canonical prophets were related to God's redemptive acts, but there was also a line of secondary prophets that could be linked to the Levitical priesthood and the Temple.

In the New Testament, he argued, we find the same kind of thing. The canonical prophets are in view in Eph 2:20; the secondary prophets are those mentioned in 1 Cor 13:8. Hence it is perfectly possible that a secondary gift of prophecy may continue today.

He cited the instance drawn from C H Spurgeon's ministry of his identifying a shoemaker in the congregation one Sunday who had been continuing his business on the Lord's Day. He not only identified the man, but also publicly - and accurately - declared the amount of profit the man had made. All this was verified when the man was subsequently visited by a London City Missionary.

Dr Benton suggested that this surely was an instance of prophecy where we nevertheless did not need to claim inspiration for every word. Is it not the case, he suggested, that the charismatic movement has rather polarised things and so now we have difficulty accepting what an earlier generation of evangelicals had no difficulty receiving?

Discussion

There was a considerable debate in an excellent spirit. Dr Benton very graciously defended his position, others very graciously differed. The BEC Study Conference proves that evangelicals can disagree, whilst remaining in true fellowship with one another.

The major point of debate focused on 1 Cor 14:29-32. Dr Grudem is undoubtedly a very clever man; he has gained a PhD and considerable celebrity for his conjectural interpretation of a possible translation of one word in the New Testament - the word, of course, is "*weigh/judge*" found in the verses referred to. The other major area of discussion related to what the nature of this "secondary" prophecy might be. Is the example of Spurgeon helpful here?

In Spurgeon's case, accuracy of detail was essential. The man himself testified later that he would not have minded so much about his Sabbath-breaking, but what really troubled him was that Spurgeon had revealed exactly how much profit he had made! This does not really fit Wayne Grudem's secondary prophecy that has to be "weighed" - it was unanswerable because it was correct in every respect. One error would have let the man off the hook.

This debate will run and run, as they say. It is hardly a criticism to say that the conference failed to settle the matter to the satisfaction of all present.

The danger, it was observed, in both charismatic and non-charismatic churches is to disregard the prophetic aspect of preaching. None of this discussion of prophecy impinges upon the primary need for prophetic, expository preaching.

Apostles and Evangelists

Roger Welch introduced his paper on two of the gifts to the church mentioned by Paul in Eph 4:11. He listed seven propositions for discussion:

1. The gifts of Eph 4 are people-gifts, ie men who are gifts.
2. The distinction that is made between the Eph 4 gifts and, for example, elders and deacons is that the former gifts have trans-local potential. "Elders function in local churches; Eph 4 ministers function across the boundaries of local churches as called, or sent, and recognised by one or more such church." Their emphasis is particularly on the proclamation of the gospel and the exposition of the Word revealed.
3. The differences from one to another is that certainly *some aspects* of these gifts are temporary, belonging to the New Testament times - especially apostles, and perhaps much that has to do with prophets.
4. The paucity of references to evangelists really points to the extensive overlap of these gifts.
5. Contemporary use of the word "apostle" is misleading; Restorationist apostles would be better described as Bishops, Moderators or Superintendents!
6. Whilst it may be Biblically *permissible* to use the word "apostle" for a messenger,

one who gathers an offering, a church planter or a missionary, it may well not be expedient. Moreover, if Eph 4 refers to the foundational apostles, it would be better to use a different word altogether for these other activities.

7. There is a great need for accountability in churches today. The multitude of "ministries" cry out for regulation. Designation of people in terms of Eph 4 would help, as would local churches being responsible for recognising those involved, eg itinerant preachers who ought to be both recognised and regulated.

The New Testament revelation, though final, also reflects development and transition. There is flexibility in use of terms for function and office. Perhaps it is legitimate to use extra-Biblical terms to avoid confusion if Eph 4 terms were to be employed inappropriately.

Discussion

We covered much familiar ground: how is the word "apostle" used in Scripture? What kind of apostle was Paul? What of the issue of pre- and post-Pentecost gifting?

More practically, how can the trans-local character of these gifts be expressed today? The phenomenon of ministerial movement may not be the tragedy some see it to be. Is a long pastorate *really* nearer to the Biblical model? Is it appropriate to send non-ministerial candidates to the mission field - weren't Paul and Barnabas just about the best available?

The emphasis on the pastor-teacher has produced men who aspire to a settled situation, to the neglect of evangelist-like ministries with more mobility. What is needed is more church-planter role models.

Underlying this is a deeper spiritual issue. Such men will need a love for the lost; this comes from a love for the Saviour who loved the lost - and wept over Jerusalem. We are in desperate need of such spiritual experience. If we aren't concerned our people won't be either. Perhaps our own relegation of evangelistic preaching has led to young preachers prizing preaching to saints above preaching to sinners. (Budding preachers are often allowed to address children and the unconverted but can't go near the pulpit until properly "trained".)

Nevertheless, Christ can still give gifts to his church, and we can petition him for them. We need men who can reap the harvest - we should pray for them! The session ended with the chairman leading us all in fervent prayer for the cause of the gospel and our own personal quickening.

Elders and Deacons

Professor Donald Macleod began by pointing out that ministry is a matter of *service*, not power. Ministry is practised by the whole body of Christ, each having his own gift and responsibility. The fluidity and flexibility of New Testament terminology means that we must not bind word and concept - it is impossible to develop the role of the elder simply from a word-study of its occurrences. Moreover, we cannot hope to produce the New Testament pattern exactly, because of the transition and development displayed regarding church structures. It is hard to know what the final position was - what of Titus' role for example? Changing social and church circumstances make it even harder.

Nevertheless, three basic ministries can be identified in the area under

consideration: *compassion, the word and pastoral oversight.*

The current social situation means the ministry of compassion is still relevant and the examples of Thomas Chalmers and General Booth should make us ask searching questions. In the paper itself, the Professor had dealt with deacons first, and at considerable length. The diaconate must be recovered from the "gutter and drains" syndrome. There is a role distinct from being just second-class or semi-elders. Churches need to do a lot more thinking about how we can meaningfully show a ministry of compassion today, and think carefully about who to appoint to undertake such a task. The model of diaconate developed in the paper would give a place for female deacons without conflicts about authority. There is no term to designate a preaching "office"; we confuse the primacy of preaching with the primacy of a pulpit-bound ministry. Yet New Testament preaching was very varied and flexible; discussion, argument etc implies that preaching should be defined by its content not its method. If the truth is proclaimed - in whatever way - that is preaching.

Preachers should be full-time and trained; they are not identical to elders or presbyters. Elders have a distinct, though closely related function in terms of shepherding the flock, leading the church, counselling, warning, guarding and praying.

The relationship between elders and preachers/teachers is important. Pastoral care and teaching are closely linked. The elders were supported by their local congregations. Yet ability to teach does not constitute one an elder, nor does being an elder make one a pastor/teacher. The ministries are related but distinct.

Discussion

What is preaching? The method must be able to carry the message, because propositional truth is involved, but isn't the most effective way to evangelize usually plain simple gospel preaching? The regulative principle for evangelism is surely "all possible means". Perhaps in our gospel services it might be appropriate to drop the musical element altogether if it is poor in quality or dated in form.

The dismantling of the welfare state discerned by at least some at the conference meant that the diaconal ministry of compassion would come into prominence once again. Yet was there any distinction to be made between the involvement of churches/the Church and of individuals in social concern? Certainly we must seek to provide for our own people; but if we stumble upon a wider problem, can we pass by on the other side?

This led to a discussion of the work of Thomas Chalmers in 1820s Glasgow. How 20th century developments have changed the picture received attention; John Stott has said that social concern and the gospel are equally mandated by Christ; Moore College, Sydney has criticised this. Yet if we have no way of helping the poor, why should they listen?

The deacons ministered to the covenant community, but we are still to do good to all men, Gal 6. The need is so great that our energies can easily be dissipated; each must follow his own calling and gifting.

Particular examples of what local churches had done were mentioned. Perhaps stronger churches could help the weak. Can we be satisfied with the situation

where a church says it will have a full-time pastor-teacher and leave it at that? Should we not look more widely at other full-time workers?

If the summary of this discussion appears somewhat diffuse, that is because the subjects raised in such a stimulating manner demanded responses on a range of issues that have usually been examined in a rather different way.

Professor Macleod's paper provoked his brethren to think; he opened up a fresh approach to the major ministries of the local church and a great deal of careful thinking now needs to be done.

Summary of Issues

How do you arrange a session to sum up a conference on such an important theme, yet with so many different aspects? You begin by giving the job to Rev Hywel Jones, who undoubtedly preached to us and almost gave us a sermon.

He highlighted the qualities of the Word we are called to minister - in the church, and by the church to the world. It is a book, Scripture, and it is a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. In both cases it is the Word of God; his self-revelation. On this we are all united and clear; nothing must erode the uniqueness of the Word of God. The Word has life and abides, 1 Peter 1:23. It remains relevant because it has life - it does not have to be "made relevant". The Word "stands", Isa 40:8; not simply in the sense of fixed immobility, but in that it will arise - it is dynamic! The Word is always standing up to do its work. The idea is not of immovability, but of invincibility!

Consider the ark before Dagon; who fell down? Today it may seem the other way round, but that is not the true character of the Word in the face of the world's unbelief and opposition. In the Hebrew language "word" also means "event" - when God speaks, something happens!

The Ministry therefore is that means by which the Word gets up and goes. It is the means by which the Word produces its everlasting results. The Word is not a liability but our resource; "There's a stone here for every Goliath in every age." We are to let it loose - but how?

There is the ministry of the Word by all in the church. All believers can engage to some degree in edification and evangelism.

We must look to Christ, who gives gifts to his church. We must not look to fill offices, but for those who are already ministering. Look for those who are being compassionate, who are already counselling helpfully from Scripture. We need preachers who will so proclaim the Word that God makes his Son heard through the message, Eph 2:17.

Discussion

In response to such a rallying cry the discussion focused on the matter of the "call to the ministry". What constitutes a call? Are desire + character + gifts sufficient? Is an experience analogous to that of the apostles or prophets necessary? Or is the "call" a reflection of our individualistic culture, so that people go off and "get trained" without reference to their home church?

Conclusion

Alan Gibson and his helpers are to be congratulated on a well-run conference. Early on he publicly acknowledged a mistake he had made; such an admission from one of his efficiency encourages us all.

One difficulty was properly addressing six papers in the equivalent of two full days; there was never enough time to pursue a matter thoroughly. Even in an apparently focused theme there are so many strands that even if superficiality in discussion is avoided, the danger of inconclusiveness isn't. Perhaps just three papers would have been better. Or perhaps only three of the six could have been designed for discussion. We really had an embarrassment of riches.

Probably the best way of assessing the conference is in terms indirectly related to the theme. The BEC is alive and functioning. It can host a conference on problematical matters and have everyone sit down to meals together after discussions. It can tackle important matters related to the ministry of the Word without one doubt being raised as to the necessity of ministering that Word.

At a conference where so many questions were asked we can gain much encouragement from knowing there are still a lot of big questions we do not need to ask. For those attending, and for those whom many there represented, silence meant not mere acquiescence but agreement - and more than that; absolute commitment.

The ministry of the Word of God holds centre stage in the BEC and our great need is for the **power of the Word** to be displayed again in our day, and to this generation.

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The Ministry of the Word

This ministry clearly requires that a man give himself wholly to it. This is why the apostles did not want to become involved in the problems of administration. They wanted to 'give themselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word' (Acts 6:4). It is important to note that the precise business with which the apostles did not wish to be entangled was ecclesiastical. Not even the work of the diaconate should be allowed to distract a preacher of the gospel. How much more does this apply to secular pursuits! It is impossible to engage in an effective preaching ministry if we have to snatch our moments of preparation from the demands of business, trade, politics or the caring professions. Men must give themselves wholly to these matters, devoting themselves single-mindedly to reading, teaching and preaching (1 Tim 4:13f) - and to prayer (Acts 6:4).

There may be times in the history of the modern church, as there were in the days of the apostles, when circumstances force preachers into a part-time ministry. But this is not the biblical pattern. Preaching is no exception to Dr Johnston's dictum: 'No man ever did anything well to which he did not give the whole bent of his mind.'

Donald Macleod, Paper V, 1993 Study Conference
