
Putting the Sermon Back at the Heart of Worship

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There has never been an age in church history when so much has been written about preaching and sermons. Yet, in many churches the sermon is almost an embarrassment.¹ Far from being seated at the heart of worship, it strikes people as irrelevant, or too complicated. For many it is the most boring part of a service, the time when their thoughts wander from worship and turn towards Sunday lunch.

It is easy to offer rather pious answers to this problem. Usually the listener is blamed. The problem lies with the TV age or with people's spiritual maturity or whatever. However, those who are committed to restore the preached exposition of Scriptures to the centre of church life and worship must look to themselves first. In this article I do not intend to talk of sermon preparation, of the hard technical work involved in exegesis and moving from that to the final product delivered on a Sunday. Here it is assumed that those preaching have some training in this.² My intention, rather, is to encourage those who already believe in preaching, and to offer some practical suggestions and personal reflections on developing or re-energizing an expository preaching ministry in this day and age.

An apologetic for the sermon

Ministers and others who are convinced the expository sermon is a vital, central element of corporate worship must be able to articulate an apologetic for an apparently archaic means of communication. It is not good enough simply to say it "worked" in the past so it will work today. Neither is a general apologetic for the centrality of the Word of God in church life adequate for the purpose. It fails to explain the use of the "sermon" form as opposed to any other form of communication of the Word such as showing a good teaching video, or having a discussion on a Bible passage.³ A full defence of the "sermon" will follow many lines of argument but two are vital.

a) Biblical precedent

There are several examples in the Old Testament of something akin to what we know as a "sermon". For example, Moses preached a "sermon" at the end of his life as the congregation of Israel waited to enter the Promised Land. There (in Deuteronomy) he proclaimed God's Word to the people, setting it in its historical context, expounding it and discussing how it should be applied and obeyed while illustrating how the Israelites had failed to obey in the past. In Nehemiah 8 we again see the proclamation of the Word of God to the gathered congregation as the Word was read, explained and applied publicly.

In the New Testament Jesus' ministry is itself summarised in terms of preaching, "From that time on Jesus began to preach (*kerusso*), "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."⁴ Certainly Jesus' own ministry included at least some teaching delivered in what approaches our "sermon" form, with a public exposition of Scripture

that was then applied directly to the listeners.⁵ Peter's proclamation on the Day of Pentecost⁶ also provides a clear example of a "sermon", partly because it was a monologue but also because of the clear exposition of Scripture and specific application designed to change the will of the audience. For the apostle Paul, preaching centred on the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ crucified. That this often took place in front of a congregation, that it was an authoritative proclamation and explanation and followed upon the public reading of Scripture, that it was designed to change people's will and behaviour,⁸ and that it could readily be distinguished from other forms of teaching is perhaps best seen in Paul's letters to Timothy. For example, 1 Timothy 4:13, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" and in 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction."

b) Appropriate form of communication

Given time we could also develop from Scripture an understanding that the proclamation/monologue, no doubt ending with discussion about how to respond to the message,⁹ is an entirely appropriate form of communication. Its very form speaks of authority and of exhortation, command and demand. The Gospel is not one of many options God lays before the public. Christ's return is not a theoretical possibility but must be "proclaimed" as fact – the King is coming! In the Gospel, God doesn't suggest that it might be a good idea (but let's discuss it) that we should repent, he "commands all men everywhere to repent".¹⁰ And so we could go on. The "sermon" form does, in fact, reflect some aspects of the nature of the message.

The "sermon" as one way of validly communicating the Gospel has biblical precedent and provides a means of communication appropriate to the message. If we are not convinced of this ourselves, we will never be able to persuade others why a "sermon" should be part of worship.

The sermon, the congregation and worship

It is vital that those who worship have the nature of preaching and the reason for the sermon style clearly explained to them. This should probably be done by contrasting it with the other forms of Bible teaching employed within the congregation. People who come to Christ in our day and age do not understand instinctively why we have sermons. Most have never heard one before.

a) Explain everything!

Developing an expository preaching ministry requires that we carry the congregation with us. Thus time must be given to a careful explanation of this very weird thing (as they see it) in the church services.

b) Sermon as central to worship

Apart from the points made above, it is also vital to communicate that preaching is at the heart of worship and not an "add-on". This means being clear about what worship itself is. Again much has been written on this,¹¹ but I would specially emphasise corporate worship seen in terms of dialogue. All the older Reformed liturgies made this so clear it hardly needed to be argued. Services began with Scripture (God speaking to us). This led to our response, often using God's Word back to him through, say, a

Psalm. God's Word was again read and the congregation responded further perhaps in prayer or with an appropriate hymn. The sermon or exposition of Scripture was at the heart of this dialogue for it was here that, after the public reading of Scripture, the message of that Scripture was proclaimed and explained as God's word. A response was then also expected.

Developing congregations committed to the "sermon" requires helping them to see it as a part of the "dialogue", and to appreciate that in the sermon they hear God speaking (to the extent that what is said accurately reflects and applies the Word of God). A great sadness to me is that "worship" in many circles these days refers only to a prolonged time of singing. To limit worship in this way is unbiblical and will only hinder our attempts to insist that a sermon is central to corporate worship.

c) The Preacher is not infallible!

It is precisely because the sermon form is right for the message that we must explain clearly that it is Scripture and not the preacher that is infallible. To a modern generation, the form will hide this distinction unless it is carefully explained. The pulpit reminds us that it is the Word of God to which we are listening and that it therefore "stands above us" because of its authority. This symbolism is easily misunderstood, many believing that it indicates the preacher himself is "six foot above contradiction". To help people see the distinction, we must urge open Bibles and encourage people to question the preacher at the end of the service. Any minister who is afraid of advertising opportunities for people to question him will be unlikely to persuade this generation of the value of the sermon.

Knowing the congregation

a) Preach for a particular congregation

If people are to see the value of sermons, the preacher's careful preparation will need to be based upon a deep knowledge of the congregation. If we know our people we will know what examples to suggest to them of how the passage should be applied to their lives. We will know what illustrations will be relevant to them and at what level the material should be pitched. Some years ago I heard a young minister preach on the Woman at the Well in John 4. The service was a traditional Anglican 8.00 am communion. About 20 people attended with an average age of around 75 years. Most were widows. His application related to the danger of looking at other *women* (sic!) and lusting after them and how Jesus could see our hearts. Apart from the totally inadequate understanding of a vital part of John's Gospel, the application made the whole text irrelevant to the people present. Any idea that all Scripture is useful for teaching for all Christians had gone out the window! On other occasions I have heard excellent expositions strewn with illustrations from the Puritans or Reformers. Most people do not even know who these groups were! As a young preacher, I once referred, without explanation, to "the Reformation". A Christian couple came to me the following week and asked me what the Reformation was. They couldn't find it in the Bible! Praise God for committed believers like them! They taught me that I had not really understood their background.

b) Relevance without “speaking down”

If a new generation of people is to regard the sermon as part and parcel of *their* worship, ministers will have to work hard at speaking in a direct and relevant way to their congregations. However, this does not at all mean “speaking down” to them. The sermon should still seek to stretch a congregation in faith, life, and theological understanding. I once preached in a church on a housing estate that had just seen serious riots. There was no minister there at the time. The two church wardens greeted me with the comment that the only person in their church who had had paid employment had just lost her job that week! There were over 100 adults in church. I preached a quite deep but relatively straight forward sermon from a passage of Scripture. At the end the wardens expressed gratitude that I had not “spoken down” to them. They commented that many ministers who visited them seemed to equate poor education and lack of employment with simply being “thick” spiritually! The balance is hugely difficult to achieve in all these things, but it begins by knowing our congregations thoroughly well and thus helping them see the relevance of God’s Word to them.

c) The quest for certainty

In the last few years God has given our church considerable growth, for which we continually praise him. Interestingly this has led to people simply “dropping in” on Sunday morning to see what is going on. This is exciting and has led to conversions, but also creates another set of problems when we come to the sermon. While some forms of preaching may be specially aimed at outsiders, the sermon of which we are talking is central to worship and designed for God’s people. However, we have been surprised at how well outsiders respond to preaching. It appears to satisfy some of the yearning in the postmodern heart for certainties. People are looking for security and conviction. The sermon form once again is thus an appropriate medium to convey the certainty of the Gospel. By listening to a sermon that is serious and weighty, yet relevant, many non-believers have also realised for the first time that there is real content to the Gospel of Christ and that Christians take it very seriously.

Of course, people enter church without knowing what they are coming to. They hear a sermon which they find quite hard and rather long,¹² so we do have to work hard at linking what we are saying into their experiences. Nevertheless, from time to time the introduction, the conclusion, or an illustration may make them sit up and think. Certainly, in our experience, sermons help people realise the questions they have about the faith and that, if they are to get into this “Christian thing”, they are going to have to find out more. Like most churches we offer a Christian basics course. Most come on the course because of the challenge of sermons. They are looking for answers and for spiritual certainty. We advertise the course as “the place to ask all the questions you always wanted to ask but never dared ask!” and so by God’s grace many discover the treasury of grace and salvation.

d) Biblical illiteracy

It is easy to over-estimate the level of biblical knowledge among those outside and even inside the church these days. If ministers fail to grapple with how little is understood by those who may wander into worship, then their sermons will be ignored from start to finish. We will be praying that “outsiders” will come to faith, so from early days in the

church they need to be helped to regard the sermon as important for *their* worship, even if they don't yet fully understand worship. So be aware of just how little people really know of the Bible and preach accordingly. The other day I mentioned Moses in a sermon on a passage from Matthew. One of our well-educated but new Christians asked me, "Was Moses an apostle or a friend of Jesus?" This sort of question is not at all unusual. Recently I asked 250 children in Year 9 at High School how many knew the story of Jonah. Two put up their hands. These are the people who pluck up the courage to enter our churches as God leads them to himself. The sad thing is that many of even the most well known preaching churches actually never give their congregation the opportunity to ask such questions, for they breathe an air of "everybody should know that!" Regular offerings of short and basic "Bible overview" courses covering the whole of the Old Testament or the New are hugely popular. They help give a taste of the whole Bible and build people's confidence in being able to listen to sermons without feeling "lost".¹³

Growing a Word-centred ministry

Finally, let me make a few suggestions about growing a ministry and worship services which are word centred. Much of this is commonplace but will hopefully provide at least some pointers to help us examine how we are doing.

a) An expository ministry must start gently

If expository preaching rich in content is really new to a congregation, or it consists mainly of new Christians, then build this vital ministry carefully and slowly with attention to detail. Forget the one hour sermons, preferably for ever! Fifteen minutes maybe all a congregation can cope with at this start. Set clear time limits on preaching. This can be very frustrating for the preacher, but the end result is worth waiting for! It may be humbling but necessary for most of us to realise that we do not have the gifts Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones had, we do not have the maturity of congregation that he had, and that we live in a different age! Building trust with a congregation on this point is a vital element in helping people to learn to listen to sermons and thus to God's Word and its application. To be central to worship a sermon does not have to be the longest element in that service!

b) Carefully choose the hymns

Ensure they feed into and out of the sermon and explain briefly how they do this, so that people come to see the whole of worship has been planned to respond to the public reading of and preaching of the word of God. Thus if others choose hymns or help lead worship they will need to discuss the sermon, before preparing, if it is to remain truly central to worship.

c) Link other parts of the church teaching programme into the sermons

In this way everything can point back to the sermon again. For example, with care, a Sunday school programme could be linked to the sermon, or the women's meeting could study the same passage, or the prayer meeting could elaborate upon a point expounded on the Sunday.

d) Plan ahead!

It is vital to plan an expository ministry well ahead, especially if the links to other aspects of the church's ministry are being made. The congregation need to receive a sermon card announcing the passages of Scripture at least a term in advance. They can then be encouraged from the pulpit to come having already read the relevant Scripture.

e) Preach consecutively through Scripture

Ensure the whole Scripture is covered in sermons over a period of time. Topical preaching is sometimes useful. It can provide a break in an extended series or be used to deal with some important topic of current interest but, generally, we should preach consecutively through a book of the Bible.¹⁴ This also helps the Minister avoid his personal hobby-horses.

f) Limit the length of sermon series

I find this a real struggle, but we are to preach the whole council of God. To preach for a whole year on one book simply denies our congregation much of the rest of God's word. This may mean choosing rather larger sections of text in order to get through a book more quickly, or perhaps preaching on the first few chapters of a book, leaving it for a while, and then returning to it a term or so later. There are always problems with this, but we must be careful people do not become bored with one book of Scripture because they have simply been in it too long! This will undermine Scripture as well as destroy their appreciation of the sermon as part of worship.

h) Be passionate!

This is an age when once again people are able to show emotion and are allowed to "feel" things publicly. The younger generation wants to know whether the Word is so deeply felt in our hearts that when we preach we are seen to be "real". Of course, we should not manipulate people for an emotional response to God's Word. Passion in preaching can appear forced, and all preachers must be true to the personalities God has given them. However, they must also work at how to present the emotional content of the biblical message. We can preach substitutionary atonement as dry theological truth or we can persuade people to see that it is the most moving and wonderful truth we will probably ever experience this side of eternity. If we do this we should not be surprised that even a mature Christian may have a tear in their eye as they reflect on Christ's sacrifice for them. Without being forced, ministers should be passionate and speak the Word of God with real conviction, only then will a modern generation believe they mean it and are "for real".

h) Give people a chance to respond

Here we need to think more imaginatively. Choosing a final hymn is vital, but we need to vary the form of what happens after the sermon. Recently a number of people have been asking me for a short time of silence or quiet at the end of a sermon to reflect on what has been said and to pray it through. This is easy in our evening service, but more difficult in a crowded morning service with many children out in Sunday school and time running on. But we need to work at allowing this response time.

Conclusions

The expository sermon is vital to a vibrant maturing Christian congregation. It should be regarded as an indispensable part of the dialogue nature of worship in which we hear God addressing us and seeking a response from us. The sermon form itself suits the message, but it should be backed up with teaching in many other ways. It is indeed possible to build a renewed commitment among congregations to the “sermon”, but this takes patience and time and much extra preparation on the part of the preacher. It is worth the effort, for we have a generation calling out for clarity and for conviction of belief and we will find them hugely responsive if we put in the effort.

References

- 1 I am referring here to what we might call the “traditional sermon”, that is the formal monologue delivered to an assembled congregation in which Scripture is explained and applied.
- 2 Many excellent books are available to help us in this most vital of tasks. Among the best are: S Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Leicester: IVP, 1988); J MacArthur Jr, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, (London, Word Publishing, 1992).
- 3 It is extraordinary that so few books on preaching ask this basic question about the *form* of the sermon. Even an excellent work on the theology of preaching (P Adam, *Speaking God’s Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Leicester, IVP, 1996)) hardly touches at all on this point. We need to develop an apologetic and theological base for this particular *style* of communication.
- 4 Mathew 4:17
- 5 For example, Matthew 5-7.
- 6 Acts 2.
- 7 1 Cor 1:17, 23.
- 8 Also see Acts 17:10-12,22-31 for examples of Paul’s work.
- 9 eg Acts 2:37-39.
- 10 Acts 17:30.
- 11 An outstanding book on the biblical theology of worship is D Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester, IVP, 1992)
- 12 For what it’s worth, in a church long trained to see the sermon as central to worship. I preach a maximum of twenty-five minutes in the morning and thirty minutes in the evening.
- 13 Bishop Michael Baughen used to offer a one-day intensive “through the Bible” course. Hundreds of people took this course and many say it was a highlight of their early Christian lives, enabling them to get so much more from sermons.
- 14 Again, for what it’s worth, usually when we have a series on the Old Testament in the morning, we preach on the New at the evening service and vice versa, perhaps staying for around one term on a book before changing this round again.

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