Introduction

> A typical Protestant sermon is a verbal essay on a contemporary theme, sometimes employing biblical illustrations in support of the essayists' point of view. The preacher who is bound to the text, confined to what he or she perceives as the biblical point of view, is a curiosity. Most often, the congregation is constrained to hear the Gospel according to the Reader's Digest, the National Review or the New Republic, depending on the preacher's orientation.[1]

To use a term that is used a lot these days, preaching is not very sexy. Preaching, in the classical sense, as exposition of Scripture, has fallen on hard times. Antipathy towards the idea of one person standing over a crowd of people from the vantage of a pulpit, preaching from the Bible in an authoritative manner, is well-nigh ubiquitous. Indeed, the caricature of the preacher as "standing six feet above contradiction" or, to use another well-known jibe, "six days invisible one day incomprehensible," is so deeply ingrained in the popular psyche on both sides of the Atlantic that anyone who feels called to this ministry must overcome a great deal of negativity in order to get a hearing. This has been the context in which I have been preaching now for well on twenty-five years, and the disdain is showing no signs of abating. If anything it is getting worse.

The reasons for the demise of preaching (has it ever been popular?) are many and varied, foremost among them being what French Reformed theologian Jacques Ellul termed "the humiliation of the word." Writing in the sixties, Ellul prophesied the ascendency of image over and against the word, echoing to some degree the age old conflict between the pulpit and the altar.[2] But for all his iconoclasm (which is

1. Lee, *Protestant Gnostics*, 214–15.
2. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 1985.

extreme to say the least), I don't think even Ellul could have predicted how pervasive the screen was going to be over the next few decades, and therefore how thorough-going the decline of preaching was going to prove. Such is the preponderance of image in our day that the audio event, which at the very least is what preaching can be described as, looks very odd indeed. And the fact that preachers are now taking up visual media such as PowerPoint in order to buttress their preaching is not so much an answer but an admission of defeat.[3]

Another factor in the demise of preaching, strangely enough, is charismatic renewal. Emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit over the last few decades, arising from a renewed appreciation of the Pentecostal life of the church, has, with some notable exceptions, meant the relativization of preaching in favor of the prophetic, so-called: the disparagement of the weekly exposition of Scripture in favor of something more immediate. It is tragic that it should be this way, for preaching, as I have argued elsewhere, ought in many ways to be *the* charismatic event.[4] Pentecost begins with tongues but ends with a sermon. The unction of the Spirit that issues forth in praise in other languages at the beginning of the narrative is the exact same unction that we discern in the preaching of the apostle Peter—indeed, it is the exact same word that is used.

By this observation, I do not mean to imply the conflation of preaching and prophecy. Quite clearly there is a difference between the routinised exposition of Scripture and the immediate word of prophecy. But to suggest, as many charismatics do, that sermonising is dead speech in contrast to the lively word of prophecy is nothing short of woeful. It may well be trendy to invoke the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards in order to support the kind of religious phenomena that charismatics prize, but what the same people conveniently fail to acknowledge (apart from the obvious point that for Edwards affections are most definitely not the same thing as mere feelings or experience), is that Edwards was also thoroughly committed to the preaching exposition of Scripture. Indeed, it was through the power of preaching Scripture, as Oliver Crisp points out in his chapter, that the religious affections were aroused. Sadly, much of this is incidental to contemporary evangelicals because such commitment to the text, as far as many are concerned, plays right back into the hands of

3. See Lischer, *The End of Words*, 24–27 for a discussion on the demerits of PowerPoint in the context of preaching.

4. See Stackhouse, "Charismatic Utterance" in G. Stevenson, ed., *The Future of Preaching*, 42–46.

a supposed dead orthodoxy. As far as I am aware, this false dichotomy not only persists within certain strands of charismatic Christianity, but in some instances seems to be getting worse.

And then, a final attack against preaching comes from those who deride it as ecclesiastical authoritarianism —"a piece of cultural baggage" that needs to be jettisoned if the church is to be taken seriously in the post-modern world.[5] David Norrington posits a now somewhat familiar argument that preaching, by which he means sermonising, was something that arose as Christianity detached from its Hebrew moorings and entered the world of Greek oratory. In other words, sermonizing finds its direct antecedents not in the New Testament but in the Greek lecture hall. Go to the New Testament, he argues, and you will be hard pressed to find sermons at all, in the way we understand sermons, but rather the democratic speech of the charismatic community, where all are given to prophecy, or the dialogical speech of the small group.[6]

Passing Norrington's book back to me a number of years ago, one of my colleagues remarked that his thesis proves only one thing: "the man can't preach." But be that as it may (and I have no idea if he can or he can't preach), what is so dismal about Norrington's thesis is not simply his hostility to gospel preaching in an ecclesial context but also his short-sightedness concerning the biblical data. Like the infamous story about the girl who went out one day to spot the hippo in the river, standing all day on a large grey rock in order to see better but returning home disappointed, the reason Norrington can't spot a sermon in the New Testament is because he is standing on one. As Philip Greenslade points out in his chapter, not only do we discern traces of sermons throughout the New Testament, we also have one actual sermon preserved for us in its entirety, namely the letter to the Hebrews. For sure, it may not conform exactly to what we now experience as a sermon. In that sense, our sermons are most definitely culture bound. But what we see in the letter to the Hebrews is precisely that homiletical trinity of preacher, text, and congregation that is played out in pulpits every Sunday. What preachers do by reading a text, and then seeking to expound its meaning and application to the congregation they serve, is no different, in essence, to what was happening in the synagogue in Acts 13:15. Whether synagogue worship can be recontextualized for our own day is a moot point, of course, and, to be

5. Pearse and Matthews, *We Must Stop Meeting.*

6. Norrington, *To Preach or Not to Preach?*

fair, one of the main points people like Norrington want to make. But to suggest, in the process, that preaching just cannot be discerned in the New Testament just flies in the face of the data.

The Retrieval of Preaching

In seeking to redress this situation, I am aware of a number of dangers, not least the danger of confusing a commitment to preaching with a particular style of preaching, be it the classical three point sermon, or even the popular interpretation-application model. Indeed, I am aware that as soon as one mentions the term expository preaching it is very hard not to associate it with a particular style of homiletics which, for all its attraction to a certain generation of preachers, will ensure that others will not even advance beyond the first chapter of this book.

The truth is I have hardly ever preached a three-point sermon in my life, nor do I intend to begin now. Trying to squeeze a biblical text into three points all beginning with the letter "p" is rather like trying to put the proverbial quart into a pint pot. In its own way this kind of alliterative trickery abuses the text every bit as much as the most liberal of sermons, for it fails to take the text seriously as text. And what this book is about is taking the text seriously. Whether from a theological, historical, biblical, or homiletical perspective, what each contributor is seeking to convey is the importance of the biblical text for the task of preaching. Above and beyond rhetorical skill, charismatic personality, and pastoral sensitivity is the sheer energy that emanates from the Scripture. This is not to deny the kerygmatic element of preaching, nor to suggest that all gospel speech must have a text attached to it. There is a great deal that goes under the name of preaching that is simply, to use the old adage, one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. But it is to say that congregational life is best formed over the long-term by the routinized exposition of Scripture. As Bonhoeffer said to his students at Finkenwalde: "The torment of waiting for fresh ideas disappears under serious textual work. The text has more than enough thoughts. One really only needs to say what is in it."[7] It is enough to be handed a text and say what is in it.

Again, this does not mean we have to look like a Puritan in the pulpit in order to pull this off, nor that we can afford to be neglectful of what

7. Fant, *Worldly Preaching*, 130.

is going on in the world. Barth's dictum that we carry a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other is as true today as it has always been. But whether we are talking about Spurgeon, Edwards, or even Chrysostom; whether we preach with notes or without notes; whether we preach from narrative, psalms, or epistles; or whether we are preaching four weddings and a funeral; what is central, as each contributor points out, is an immersion in the biblical text. In fact, precisely because Scripture itself is not simply applied ethics but the testimony of salvation history culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus, my argument (echoing something that Steve Mathewson brings out in his chapter) is that by staying faithful to the text it is likely that not only will we preachers expose our congregations to the whole counsel of God, but also deliver to them the basic core kerygma. In other words, the congregation will receive a fresh rendering each week of why we call it gospel in the first place. After all, kerygma and didache are not two distinct, mutually exclusive categories, as C. H. Dodd supposed, with the one pertaining to unbelievers and the other to believers.[8] Rather, all kerygma must eventually lead to didactic; and all didactic must arise from kerygma. The one assumes the other. To say one is an expository preacher is not to say one is simply teaching the Bible, nor simply offering moral imperatives (which, sadly, is what preaching often amounts to), but rather that one is preaching the gospel.

One only discovers this of course by preaching. Left to ourselves we might simply and erroneously conclude that the Bible is a simply a repository of truth, something to be referred to for matters of salvation. And in one sense this is true. "All Scripture," Paul says to Timothy, "is God breathed, and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in instruction."[9] But precisely because Scripture is God breathed, it means that as soon as we begin to exposit Scripture, whether it be narrative, proverb, psalms, we will likely move very quickly from mere learning into actual encounter, from didactic into kerygma, because right at the heart of Scripture—indeed, the thing that carries it along, as Dave Hansen's concluding chapter celebrates—is the core message of the gospel.

The person from whom I first heard this gospel speech, under whose ministry I got converted and then formed, embodies this truth more than anyone I know. To say Stuart Reid was a Bible preacher was to say he was a gospel preacher. He still is. And it was my great privilege to not only sit

8. Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching*, 7–8.

9. 2 Tim 3:16.

under his ministry for many years, but also to learn from him as I took my first faltering steps in the call to preach about twenty-five years ago. "Whatever you preach," he would say, "whether it is the law, the prophets, a psalm, or an epistle, make sure you leave them with the gospel." It is to Stuart that I would like to dedicate this collection of essays.