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Negative Preaching and the Modern Mind: a Crisis in Evangelical Preaching

We welcome another contribution from Mr Stackhouse (cf. 'The Native Roots of Early English Reformation Theology', EQ 66 [Jan. 1994], 19-35); he is currently pastor of King's Church, Amersham.

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The title of this article is a play on that great Forsythian classic on preaching, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind,* which begins its defence of the preachers call with the claim: 'The Christian preacher is not the successor of the Greek orator but of the Hebrew prophet.'[1] Forsyth goes on to uphold the belief in preaching as a creation of the gospel itself, the means by which it prolongs itself throughout the generations. A high calling indeed.

However, given the shift in the last few decades towards a more pragmatic view of ecclesial ministry, one of the most notable effects it has had is upon preaching as a mode of gospel communication. Increasingly dominated by market concerns and the missiological challenges of a post-Christian society, the concern here in this paper is that preaching, in the classical sense of proclamation, has almost completely disappeared from the church's agenda. In fact, in a recent publication, from someone lecturing in one of the main evangelical colleges in the UK, it has been thoroughly debunked, dismissed as a piece of cultural baggage that we have picked up along the way. Drawing heavily from David Norrington's critique of classical preaching, in which Norrington derides sermons as mere rhetoric,[2] Meic Pearse similarly parodies the proclamatory manner of preaching, claiming that in the post-modern world, where all claims to authority are suspect, such a high view of preaching cannot be sustained.[3]

1 P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London: Independent Press, 1964), 1.

2 D. C. Norrington, *To Preach or Not To Preach?* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 20-23.

3 M. Pearse and C. Matthews, *We Must Stop Meeting Like This* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1999), 101.

In many ways what these writers are saying is only confirmation of what has actually been happening on the ground in the last couple of decades. Their vitriol against the grand manner is expressive of a good deal of negativity towards what was, after all, considered the staple diet of evangelical piety for much of this century. The current interest in other models of church, such as cell church and Alpha, is to some extent symptomatic of this negativity; a criticism of the inefficiency of preaching in its attempts to inculcate doctrine in its hearers.

This is not the only evidence we have. One only need observe the amount of time devoted to preaching, and the inability of many congregations to articulate exactly what is happening in the event called preaching, to know that there is a crisis. At best preaching is understood as one person's attempts to expound biblical truth, at worst tolerated as a digression from the main purpose of our gathering, namely the worhip time, or the ministry time, as it is now commonly referred to. One notes this dialectical tension between preaching and worship, Word and Spirit, in a great many of the popular publications in the evangelical/charismatic world. And sadly it is preaching that comes in for the most severe attack, invariably caricatured as cerebral in comparison with the emotional pull of the worship experience, or ministry that is more prophetic.[4]

All of this is not to say that gospel communication has ceased to be regarded by these critics as a definable ministry in the church. Rather, it is argued, the church needs to seek fresh ways of presenting the gospel, ways that serve Generation X, instead of the largely middle-class, middle-aged, well-educated congregations that make up the evangelical constituency.[5] Thus we are encouraged towards a more dialogical, interactive and most definitely visual form of communication which is more conducive to the learning process. Pearse challenges church leadership to seek these ways of communicating the gospel because they are modes that cohere with the present hermeneutic of suspicion. They allow for participation in a way that traditional preaching does not, and spares the congregation, says Pearse, from the egocentricity of the preacher.[6]

The Sacrament of the Word

In response, it is undoubtedly true that there are a whole plethora of

4 For an example see J. Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God: How God Speaks to us Today* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1996), 67.

5 J. Drane, *Evangelism For a New Age* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), 133-139.

6 Pearse and Matthews, *We Must Stop Meeting Like This*, 100-101

ways of communicating the gospel, be it visual, liturgical, sacramental, dramatic and apologetic, that have been stymied over the years by an over reliance on preaching. Much of what I would like to say here, though space does not permit, is that preaching is just one among a number of tools by which the gospel shapes and forms Christian living. Moreover, proclamation can be achieved through means other than preaching. What is liturgy if not an attempt at proclamation? But what is lamentable however, in the general attack upon preaching, be it from those promoting small group interaction, or those more geared to prophetic ministry, or more generally from those who just cannot take more than ten minutes of sustained monologue, is the loss of what the Reformers understood as one of the prime sacraments of the church – the sacrament of the word.

This is not to deny the issue of pulpiteering. Norrington undoubtedly has a point. But what Norrington and others achieve in their denunciation of the preaching event is the removal of a vital means by which Christians encounter the living Christ. Preaching is not just a word *about* Christ; it is a word *of* Christ. Thus the Reformers understood the preaching ministry of the church, a view articulated most faithfully this century by the German Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Within this tradition it is not just discussion *about* the word that is being upheld in preaching. Nor are we advocating mere information *from* the word. All of these have their place and appropriate settings. Preaching is at times apologetic, at times didactic, at times moral exhortation in the way that Pearse and others describe. And it is undoubtedly true that preaching, as I am advocating it here, is not the most efficient method for learning. To rely solely on preaching for this purpose is to discount the many ways historically the church has sought to catechise and disciple its members. However, what is under consideration here transcends just learning, and subverts our obsession with information. What the Reformers understood by preaching relates to what they called the finished work of Christ, so that what congregations celebrate week after week in the retelling of this story, is a fresh understanding of why we call it *gospel* in the first place, and a fresh summons to live obediently in the light of it. 'It is in this spirit,' claims Bonhoeffer, 'that the preacher should enter the pulpit, as the messenger from Marathon with his exultant cry – "the victory is won!"'[7] Discussion about finding the most appropriate model of church must bow to this claim upon church leaders – the need to keep alive speech that is truly gospel speech, telling us what

7 *Bonhoeffer's Lectures on Preaching*, quoted in C. E. Fant, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1975), 123.

we already are.[8] And there is undoubtedly a dimension in this mode of communication that dialogical, apologetic or inductive preaching cannot, by definition, aspire to. The heart of it, as Capon reminds us, is an announcement, an invitation to a party of outrageous proportions.[9]

It has often been said, somewhat sarcastically, that such a view of preaching sounds dangerously sacramental – a means of grace in the church. Pearse himself takes a critical look at the way preaching is exalted in certain traditions, credited with almost sacramental powers. And yet, as we have already noted, that is precisely what the Reformers were arguing for. Bonhoeffer in his lectures on preaching describes it in a typically Lutheran fashion as a *sacramentum verbi*, a sacrament that actually ushers in the living Christ.[10] 'The preacher should be assured that Christ enters the congregation through those words he proclaims from the Scripture.'[11] It is nothing that scripture does not claim for itself. Paul talks about faith that comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ,[12] by which he understands preaching as affective speech; the word itself being the deed, achieving that for which God has purposed it.[13] Gospel preaching is not just *about* the power of God, information about what he has done through Christ and the Spirit for our salvation. Gospel preaching done in the power of the Spirit is actually *in itself* the power of God unto salvation.[14] It actually delivers Christ to the congregation week after week.

Failure to convince

In his denunciation of this form of communication Norrington singularly fails to convince that this proclamatory manner was not a feature of early church practice. According to Norrington, if it does feature it is in the service of evangelism, but certainly not in the context of believers, in which teaching as opposed to preaching is deployed.[15] This tired, well-worn distinction that is implicit if not explicit in Norrington's work, between the didache and the kerygma, between communication that is appropriate to the church and to the world

8 R. F. Capon, *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 105.
9 *Ibid*, 106.
10 Fant, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching*, 116
11 Fant, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching*, 130.
12 Rom. 10:17.
13 Is 55:10-11.
14 Rom 1:16.
15 Norrington, *To Preach or Not to Preach?* 10-11, 101.

respectively, is not original to him. It goes as far back as C. H. Dodd who seemed to find in it a certain simplicity. But unfortunately scripture posits no such distinction.[16] The terms are interchangeable and very often appear together with no attempt to be too precise as to their distinctives. Indeed in Rom. 1:15, as Moo points out in his recent commentary, Paul' s eagerness is to preach the gospel 'to you who are in Rome', the primary reference being to the believing community in Rome.[17]

Traces of a preaching ministry in the church are discernible elsewhere in the New Testament, and even Norrington admits as much in the case of 1 Tim. 4:13 and 2 Tim. 4:2 – the command to Timothy to preach the word. Norrington adds a disclaimer of this own at this point, namely that such a command in no way justifies a regular pattern of preaching in the church, both then and now.[18] Because precise details about homiletic style are beyond recovery, he argues, we cannot deduce from such texts, or project back on to them our own sermonic forms. But others may equally well assert that if precise details have conveniently been lost to us, there is nothing to suggest either that sermonising or regular preaching in the church was *not* an early church practice. Indeed it may have been more widespread than even we are suggesting here. Homiletic patterns, like those infamous Christ hymns, are discernible everywhere in the New Testament for those who have eyes to see them. And the roots of the sermon form, as Forsyth reminds us, need not be traced back to the Greek rhetor, but rather to the Hebrew prophet, the herald of glad tidings.

Thomas Long's image of the preacher as one who bears witness to this gospel is very apt in this regard. The preacher 'is one whom the congregation sends on their behalf, week after week, to the scripture.'[19] Not only is this image of the preacher striking by virtue of its originality, it challenges the notion of the busy pastor who abandons

16 As Moule puts it: if we maintain the familiar distinction between kerygma and didache too rigidly, we shall not do justice to the real nature of all Christian edification, which builds, sometimes more, sometimes less, but always at least some of the foundational material into the walls and floors.' C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (London : Adam & Charles Black, 19662), 130.

17 Moo's interpretation of Romans 1:15 is crucial here. Paul's eagerness, so Moo argues, is to preach the gospel to those who are in Rome, namely the Christians. Within Paul's horizon is obviously the evangelistic mission of the church, but his first horizon is determined by the need to continually refresh the church in the achievements of the gospel. See D. Moo, *Romans: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 62-3.

18 Norrington, *To Preach or Not to Preach?* 11.

19 T. G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 44.

the vocational call in favour of managing the church franchise.[20] For Long the crucial activity of the ordained leader is not running the church program, nor trying to increase the size of the church membership, but going to the scripture to listen for the truth. And the truth one is listening for comes ultimately in the form of promise. Admittedly for Long this is not the same as heralding, because the preacher as witness takes on the journey the concerns and questions of the congregation. But then good proclamation has always been mindful of these questions. The relevance of Long's image for our purposes is that it underlines the centrality of the promise of scripture in the preacher's task, and the unashamed uncovering and declaring of that promise before the church who has sent the preacher out. It is an unashamed belief in the centrality of preaching in the church's life; a belief that the preachers task is scriptural, historic and essential. Our concerns that this is tantamount to claiming inerrancy for the preacher should be more than offset by the scriptural perspective that 'whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God.'[21]

Is it any wonder that when this dimension of preaching is lost to the church it ends up with a philosophy of mission that is uncomfortably closer to some of the more exotic new age spirituality on sale than to any biblical understanding of evangelism? The current fascination in certain sections of the charismatic movement with territorial spirits, or what is termed Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare, is a direct consequence, as Chuck Lowe has shown, of abandoning this regular proclamation of the victory of Christ within the church.[22] It is inevitably so. Once the church considers it no longer important to evangelise itself in its own gospel, then all we can expect by way of communication is anything ranging from bland moralism to exotic excitement. In the end it amounts to much the same thing: a church that must pray harder and work harder if it is to get the job done. No longer fuelled by, or confident of the message of the gospel itself, the Pelagian temper becomes all too apparent as the church wearies itself with yet another strategy. It promises itself to be the great panacea, the latest method to cure all ills, but in the end it reveals itself for what it is – a cheap substitute for the real thing: gospel preaching which in the power of the Spirit is what Forsyth describes as 'the organised Hallelujah' of the church.[23]

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20 For a scathing attack upon contemporary models of church leadership see E. H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1-12.

21 1 Pet. 4:11.

22 C. Lowe, *Territorial Spirits and World Evangelization?* (OMF/Mentor, 1998), 46-73.

23 Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, 66.

Obsession with relevance

Is this too high a view of preaching? It certainly is a lot further than most are prepared to go, and leaves those who advocate such a position wide open to the quasi-magical charge that has often been levelled at the reformation view on preaching – a transference of sacramental power from the high altar to the pulpit. However in preaching the Word of God, the Spirit does not transfigure our words to the status of canon, nor can we claim for them a form of immediacy with the divine. Rather 'God adopts our words', claims David Hansen. 'He condescends entering the congregation through the foolishness of our words, as we testify to Christ, expositing the scriptures, speaking the words which we must believe God provides, all the while knowing how profoundly flawed our best sermons are.'[24] Once again it is the presence of the Risen Jesus, and a celebration of his gospel that is the goal of good preaching, more than a lesson about Christ. 'The point of preaching is not so much to teach the incarnation as it is for Jesus to become present through our stammering words.'[25]

At a time when congregations, charismatic ones in particular, seek encounter in worship and in ministry, it seems somewhat ironic that they jettison such an obvious means of enabling such an encounter to take place. The reasons given are worth adumbrating once again. Preaching is too cerebral. It does not engage the emotions. Preaching is not relevant. Preaching is too long, making too many demands upon the listener. All of these criticisms have some validity and would repay some consideration. A high view of preaching is no excuse for boring homiletics! But what many fail to understand is the dynamic whereby in the preaching event, and it is an event that is being advocated here, a word of Christ impacts the church. And this word is for its own sake. Not necessarily motivational nor informational. Not necessarily relevant. But, in so far as it is faithful to the scriptures – a word of Christ nevertheless.

To state the point in such a way seems outrageously outmoded when the call from almost every quarter of the evangelical-charismatic world is for communication that is relevant, inductive, and practical. Only recently Rob Warner, representing the Evangelical Alliance, called for preaching that is pertinent to the needs of the 21st century.[26] And by this he understands preaching that is communicable in everyday language and sensitive to the realities of modern

24 D. Hansen, 'Preaching Cats and Dogs' in *American Baptist Evangelicals Journal* Volume 7 No 3, 20.

25 *Ibid*, 18.

26 An Address to a Preachers Conference, 27th February 1999, King's Centre, High Wycombe.

living. It sounds incredibly right. And yet there is something disturbingly sinister, as well as simplistic, about such a politically correct posture on preaching. It is sinister because, in the desire to make our preaching communicable and relevant, something of the gospel's own inscrutability, its own refusal to submit to our world, is lost. As William Willimon points out: if the gospel is so communicable why didn't the disciples understand it?[27] Parables, contrary to what Warner surmises, are not there to make things simple. Rather parables are there to subvert our presuppositions and deliver to us a gospel that, in the final analysis, requires a miracle in order for us to understand it. So if our congregations go away somewhat bemused, or even confused by the message, this may be no bad thing. The greater danger is that they will go away with everything intact.

Gospel preaching, therefore, if it is done well, is a regular invitation to have one's graceless world dismantled and to enter once again into what Barth described as 'the strange world of the scriptures.' This is a view of preaching that stands over against petty moralisms, exhortatory bullying or bits and pieces of curious information. Its horizon is the eschatological future of sins forgiven, of righteousness received and of adoption into the family of God, now realised in the death/resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit. Its announcement brings with it the atmosphere of a celebration and the mystery of event. To that extent, contrary to what our post-modern critics say, we *must* go on meeting like this. If not in degree, certainly in kind. Without this regular exposure to the emancipating word of Christ, of a deed already done and of holiness already secured, church life will indeed become dull and tedious.

The modern obsession for relevance is peripheral in all of this. Firstly, what relevancy amounts to in many cases is a story or some anecdote that gives the sermon a whiff of immediacy. True relevancy, however, will take seriously the modern condition of alienation and seek to address it head on. Our attempts at relevancy in effect make light of this. But more importantly, relevancy ceases to be the driving motivation of our preaching because there is an unashamed belief that the text itself and the world it holds up before us is relevant in itself. It is this world, as Lindbeck reminds us, that is interpretative of our world and not the other way around.[28] So when we enter church to praise God, to hear his word, to baptise and to break bread we are

27 W. Willimon, *The Intrusive Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 22.

28 'Religious communities are likely to be practically relevant in the long run to the degree that they do not first ask what is either practical or relevant, but instead concentrate on their own intratextual outlooks and forms of life.' G. A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 128.

entering the real world. The fact that it smacks of a churchly culture is precisely the point. It is supposed to. To crave for relevancy at all costs, and to prize the democratic speech of the small group, in the way that Pearse and others do, is 'a kind of slander against the text,'[29] and, one might add, against the grace- filled world it heralds the arrival of. It is this grace which must be performed Sunday by Sunday, not for nostalgia's sake, but because it actually has the power to transform.

However, for the meantime at least, preaching will continue to receive a bad press precisely because it falls foul of the relevancy criteria. One suspects that Norrington's own criticisms of preaching are driven by this agenda, more than by the actual biblical evidence against preaching which, as we have seen, is tenuous to say the least. What he may regard as fragmentary evidence of sermonic material in the New Testament actually amounts to quite an impressive array of texts in which kerygmatic discourse is prominent. But clearly, for Norrington, this is not a significant factor. More important is the need to be culturally relevant in our communication and for Norrington 'the prevailing culture, far from supporting the use of the sermon, points to its abandonment.'[30] Such a comment betrays the underlying antipathy he has against preaching and the weakness of his overall methodology. In the final analysis, even if sermons were to be a proven, biblical form of communication, one suspects that the needs of the listener would override, for Norrington, the challenges that such gospel speech would require. As long as this remains the case it is difficult to see how preaching, in the classical sense, might reappear in our churches as a credible form of gospel communication. Without preaching, however, the worshipping life of the church, in the opinion of this writer at least, will be seriously impaired.

Abstract

A number of publications have appeared in recent years attacking preaching as a mode of gospel communication. Most notable among these is David Norrington's provocative title, *To Preach or not to Preach*, in which he highlights the inadequacy of traditional proclamation. The view put forward in this article goes in the opposite direction, challenging the present antipathy to preaching. These critics, it is

29 G. O. Forde, 'The Word That Kills and the Word That Makes Alive' in C. E. Braaten and R. Jensen (eds.), *Marks of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1-12.

30 Norrington, *To Preach or Not to Preach?* 103.

argued, have gone too far, and have misunderstood what is being upheld in preaching, namely the sacrament of the Word. The churches' time would be better spent, he contends, recovering this high view of preaching, and the language that pertains to the preached gospel, rather than always submitting to the criteria of relevancy and accessibility.