

'Putting the Gospel back into preaching'

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One colleague turned to the other at the end of the service and said, 'Did he mention Christ at all in that sermon?' They agreed he had not except once in passing in the introduction. A well constructed, doctrinally secure, excellently illustrated teaching sermon had just been delivered in a Christian church to a very large congregation—but it would have gone down without offence in the local synagogue.

This is an extreme case of a disease infecting much preaching today; it is preaching without gospel. As a pastor I rarely sat in the pews. In the last two years I have probably sat and listened to more sermons than in all the previous twenty years. Present duties mean that I am obliged to listen to preaching regularly and the view I have formed is that the disease of gospel deficiency is well advanced. Not only does the diagnosis apply to student preachers or beginners, but in many cases to experienced and well-versed individuals. This observation has also been made in the United States by David

Wells¹ who asks about 'the prevailing Geist in today's pulpit. Is it anthropocentric or theocentric?' From one study of sermon content he found that 80 percent of sermons were anthropocentric, 'less than half were explicitly biblical and a significant number not discernibly Christian at all'.²

Lost preaching

In arguing for putting the gospel back into preaching I am not referring to preaching in the 'seeker service' or another evangelistic context. There is thankfully plenty of that and it is no doubt rightly full of gospel themes, declarations of salvation in Christ and calls to faith. I am speaking of preaching in the normal course of Sunday worship; the teaching or preaching of the minister in the local church to the assembled believers and others. It is here the disease seems to infect us.

Preaching is lost if preaching has lost its gospel. Without gospel themes we are left with exhortations to commitment, urges to pray and witness, calls to obedience and pleas to love one another and serve the world. What, we could ask, is wrong with all that? Nothing at all, except that these things are not good news and on their own will leave the congregation tired and burdened. Craddock speaks of the 'hortatory terms that too often characterise entire sermons: we must, we ought, we should, let us, let us not'³ and points out how easy it is to turn 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' into 'we ought to be poor in spirit.'⁴ It is the gospel of grace that liberates and energizes. In this context therefore the distinction drawn between διδασχη and κηρυγμα is not helpful.⁵ The proclaiming of the good news is not merely for the unbeliever but for the church and needs to be part of the fundamental structure of all preaching.⁶ One careful attempt at a definition of evangelism by David Bosch contains at its centre the idea of an activity that 'offers every person . . . a valid opportunity to be directly challenged to a radical reorientation of their lives.'⁷ This seems to have lost the very heart of the gospel, even in a definition of evangelism. The essential gospel note, though present in the later phrase 'embracing Christ as Saviour and Lord', is subsumed under the idea of 'challenge to radical reorientation'.

It is this shift in emphasis that is most vital to perceive and for us to make in practice. If the heart of our preaching is a challenge to change, then we are lost. If the central note and underlying framework is the good news of God's gracious provision of Christ as Saviour, and all that is consequent on this, then the whole of our preaching shifts and our hearers' perception too. With these notes sounding preaching becomes truly Christian and essentially biblical. The vital centre of the gospel offer, and thus of all our preaching is Christ himself, his revelation of the grace of God, his saving power in the cross and his enabling by the gift of the Spirit. Calvin defined the gospel teaching as 'the clear manifestation of the mystery of Christ'.⁸ There can be no greater theme for the preacher. But it is not sufficient merely to preach about him; the preacher's purpose 'is so to unveil him that people are drawn to come to him and to receive him'.⁹ Luther spoke of the gospel as the principal article of doctrine claiming that 'we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually. For as it is very tender, so it is soon hurt.'¹⁰ It is all too easy for the preacher to abuse the tender themes of the gospel with over-strong demands and ceaseless instructing.

Gospel preaching

The subject of this article then is gospel preaching, not in the limited sense of a two minute presentation or an

evangelistic sermon, but gospel in its widest meaning; preaching with notes of grace and redemption, of the love and favour of God, of the glorious person of Christ, risen and exalted and at work on behalf of, within and towards the final salvation of all who believe and the liberation of the whole creation.

I am not arguing for a simple diet of basic themes repeated over and over again but for a framework of grace, a substructure of the vision of the saving and redeeming God. There must be place for the exhorting and the rebuking, the challenging and the convicting word. But this without the tender word, the restoring and winsome lines of the gospel, is death to the hearers, or worse, confirmation in hypocrisy. It is the underlying structure of thought and attitude that stays with the hearer longer than the impact of the particular theme or the individual points of the sermon. Therefore it is still possible to preach on Christ's command to love, justice in society or the importance of obedience, while at the same time holding out, in the name of that same Christ, hope and strength to the hearers. The framework of grace will place our exhortations within the broader context of the Christian gospel.

Nor am I arguing for continual preaching of the love of God. If holiness without grace leads to death, so a message of love which is separated from the cross leads to indiscipline. The love of God is a glorious gospel theme, but we proclaim the love of God 'in Christ Jesus our Lord' and it cannot be divorced from him and his sacrifice. Gospel themes therefore continually keep the cost of salvation before the people of God and relate the blessings of mercy through the cross to the issues of discipleship in a liberating and empowering way, not a condemning and burdensome one.

Why and how?

So if the analysis of the disease is correct, why should we put the gospel back into preaching?

Because without gospel notes in preaching we leave the people under the law. This can be true of each individual service at which preaching takes place. There is always a danger of merely preaching the pleasant and not the difficult aspects of the gospel and its demands, of making all preaching mere unjustified comfort. But the opposite is the greater danger. Preaching without gospel turns everything into a burden and true faith into ashes and is not truly Christian. May not such an approach give room for the lax and the disobedient merely to find comfort and continue in sin? This is an ancient criticism and Paul's riposte, 'God forbid', is still the answer. A similar blast from this century reads, 'wherever the true gospel is preached, the fools are still sure to ask this question. Wherever they do not ask this

question, there is at least room for a serious suspicion that something very different from the gospel has perhaps been preached.¹¹ If we are accused of this, it is a commendation that we have rightly understood and are conveying the revolutionary gospel of Jesus and of his apostles.¹² The opposite is legalism and we must shun it.

Because Christians are sinners needing grace. Christians come to the average church on a Sunday and sit listening to the preaching with needs varying from the deepest guilt over real sins to the vague feeling that all is not well with their lives. Recent experience may have demonstrated their own frailty and sinfulness. Such people should not leave church without anything having changed, or without the possibility of change being offered to them. The outcome depends in some way on their response, but the response depends on the gracious offer on behalf of Christ being made clear by the preacher. No doubt many believers are able to make the move from guilt to liberty from their own knowledge and their own inner resources. But not all, perhaps fewer than we would hope, and this is precisely the point. Christian people do misunderstand, we do forget the glory of our salvation and allow the temptations and failures to dominate. The sermon can offer the new perspective of 'the redemptive alternative, which all but the most fatalistic and very cynical believe exists, if only someone would point them to it'.¹³ This is exactly why it is the primary duty of the preacher to bring into this scene of possible defeat the wonder of the victory won on our behalf, so that life can be lived differently and the instructions in discipleship have a foundation.

Because this approach is true to the balance of scripture; The scriptures set out gospel doctrine, then exhortation, not one without the other. It is clear that Paul's letters, and by inference all the New Testament letters, were written to be read aloud in church. The Colossian letter was to be read to the church and then exchanged with one sent to Laodicea.¹⁴ The intention appears to be that the letter was read at one sitting. The church thus has the whole balance of the truth in one hearing, the gospel and doctrinal exposition and the exhortations to holy living and practical instructions that follow. The traditional Reformed practice of 'expounding' scripture has often come to mean removing the dimensions of the whole text, in this case the epistle, and the sermon is then made to focus on one small portion of it. This in itself is no bad thing. In doing so we have the opportunity to develop a particular truth of scripture. The danger of it is precisely what happened in the incident recorded at the beginning of this article. The particular text can be made to dominate to such an extent that the broader context of the passage, the message of the book and finally the very gospel of God is either omitted or, at worst, denied by implication. Scriptural balance can be maintained in any sermon,

exhortation placed in the context of comfort and encouragement.

Because there are always those who are not believers in any congregation. Even if the pastor thinks they are all believers, there will be those present who doubt that they themselves are true believers and they above all need the gospel preached. John Wesley, aware of this dimension in the gathered congregation spoke of the Sacrament as a 'converting' as well as a 'confirming' ordinance 'a means of grace to those who were seeking salvation, but had not yet felt that they had received an assurance of it'.¹⁵ For many people, perhaps indeed the vast majority, faith comes by some period of attendance at the normal Sunday worship of the church. In one study 96% of people finding faith said that in the time before they found faith they used to believe they were Christians.¹⁶ If this figure is even a mild reflection of the facts then preachers have people before them week by week in church who may not yet truly believe. This is not in any way to diminish the immense task of evangelizing outside the church context, but in the last stages of their journey to conscious faith many people are there in the church on a Sunday not outside it. If 'for many new Christians, the route to faith came via the ordinary non-guest services'¹⁷, the implication is that we do not need to lay on special 'gospel' services, nor to preach directly at the unbelievers present every week. Rather we should make sure that the gospel framework is well and truly a part of the regular Sunday teaching.

Because disciples need to hear the gospel themselves and come to know and love the message entrusted to the church. C.S. Lewis confessed: 'About past, long past sins. I had been a Christian for many years before I really believed in the forgiveness of sins, or more strictly, before my theoretical belief became a reality to me. I fancy that may not be so uncommon.'¹⁸ I believe he is right. The gospel is not something that is learned once by rote and trotted out on appropriate occasions, though there may be some value in such learning. The gospel is something to be heard and received into a person's own life in terms of faith, and worked out in obedience, worship and service. This may take a long time, in fact it is probably intended to take a lifetime. Good news is to become the underlying foundation of the Christian life and the inner source and motive of all discipleship. Such learning is not a once for all event, but needs constant recall and reminder, as is clearly demonstrated by Jesus' command that we 'proclaim his death' in the Lord's Supper. It can be concluded that such proclaiming is equally vital as part of the normal Sunday preaching of the local church. Most of us, though we know the gospel with our heads, need it to penetrate our hearts and feelings further. And the more the disciples have a good grasp of it the more they are able to tell it to their neighbours.

Because the gospel is our great motivation.

Exhortation alone can leave us incapable and disheartened. Exhortation tells us what to do, gospel tells us why and moves us to obedience. So both are necessary. People on the whole know what they ought to do, they hear it in their conscience, they are told it in the preaching and they read it in the Bible. But the motivation and ability to obey defeats them so often. Gospel themes exalt the activity of God and the work of Christ and not our efforts and will. In meditating on these there will be change and fruit. In addition it is the gospel itself, learned and appreciated in continuing preaching, that will ultimately inspire evangelism, not often repeated appeals to evangelize and witness. There is a message of good news for the bearer as well as the recipient of the message. The motivation that we so badly need is inherent in the gospel itself. The disciple in his or her own cultural space is the best evangelist, but if that disciple has lost the sense of gospel in their own life the value of their witness is removed. A recent article from the South American context urges that, 'this is a moment for recreating as many human spaces as possible. In this respect evangelism urgently needs to recover its motivation, and for this we need to return to our sources: the gospel. . . .'¹⁹ and helpfully quotes Gustavo Gutiérrez that the needed return to our roots is 'drinking from our own well'. This drinking by the church and the satisfying of our own souls in God comes not from the instructing elements of preaching, vital as they are in their place, but from the deep river of gospel truths which must come breaking to the surface in true Christian preaching.

Because preaching of this kind forms a grace-conscious, forgiving and loving community. Any withdrawal from a gospel framework in the normal course of Sunday worship and teaching draws us inevitably away from grace-filled living and gospel-founded relationships. Since we ourselves need the grace of God, we are to live and experience the gospel among us before we can offer it effectively to others. The absence of these notes from preaching will form a certain kind of church whose spirit is arrogant and self satisfied, whose members assume that the gospel which has saved them in the past has no further application to them and is only for those who do not believe. The framework of gospel in the teaching of the church forms a people who themselves are grateful to God and gracious to others. We are still in need of his gospel, we want to hear it and we need to hear it so we can continue to live it out as a gospel community. Preachers must not omit it.

Because it enables the preacher to stand with the people. To some extent the preacher is always representing God to the people in the speaking of his word. But at the same time the preacher is to stand with the people in receiving that word. The best and simplest way is to keep gospel in view. The pulpit calls to holy living which may appear unyielding, even unattainable,

but this can be turned in a moment with the introduction of a note of mercy. Even the merest hint that holiness is not always the preacher's experience, that we are together in this quest and need the grace of God working with us, may change a sermon from unhelpful condemnation to liberation. Such a widening of the frame to include gospel notes does nothing to diminish the power of the exhortation, but makes the better way a possibility for the most faltering saint.

Because gospel is an essential theme for the time preceding a communion service. In the usual course of Sunday liturgy, the word precedes the eucharist. How many times has a service and the sermon been rescued by the acted gospel of the communion? There have been occasions in my experience in a congregation, and perhaps to my shame when preaching too, when the sermon has had the overall effect of leaving the whole congregation separated from God and distant from his offered mercy because of the lack of gospel in the preaching. Worse still the people may be left waiting for some further new experience of God's grace that, it is implied, we have not yet gained because we have not prayed enough, believed enough, committed ourselves enough or because, in today's parlance, we are not 'open'. How utterly different is the coming of the bread and wine into this context; an offering once made and complete, an atonement fully accomplished, a Saviour given to me right now. This can sometimes be in stark contrast to the gospel-denuded things heard in the exhortations that precede the moment of receiving communion. Such preaching threatens to close the door on the true penitent, or to open the door to total misunderstanding of the sacrament. These things should be stated or implicit in the sermon, not left for the confused or burdened believer to work out alone. The mystery of Christ in his grace to the sinner should be the underlying note of any sermon preceding communion, or at the very least the point of arrival at the end of it.

To complete a clutch of ten reasons (though no doubt there are many more) we conclude briefly with: *because gospel is the true source of joy in preaching.* Whatever else it is, a sermon should never be completely without joy. The theme may be sober, or be in a context of sadness, but the gospel of God is joyful, resurrection news and the true source of joy is there for the preacher every time a sermon is preached. If the joyful news is present, even hidden in the underlying structure, then the hearers will know that for this preacher at least 'there is a small party going on in the back of the mind'.²⁰

The Gospel tent

There is a proper place for exhortation in Christian preaching. Paul instructed Timothy to 'correct, rebuke

and encourage with great patience'. We are to disturb as well as comfort. We need to preach the law of God as part of the pattern of the scriptures; ethical instruction cannot be neglected. My question is; with what word is the congregation left at the end of the sermon? If they are left drained from a challenge they have not met, discouraged from instructions they have not kept or condemned by laws they have not obeyed, then they have not heard Christian preaching. We should acknowledge that there are those whose hardness of heart or unwillingness to hear leaves them untouched and their life unchanged. But even here the hoped for change is more likely through hearing good news than through exhortations to response. If later a softening of spirit should come, what will be the recollection of the last sermon heard? It should be the vision of a way back, a God who has provided a saviour, a means of restoration for such a penitent.

So, in all the welcome interest in preaching style and communication method may we also attend to content? If the heart-beat of the Christian gospel is not present, the method of the sermon, however good, will die with the last sentence. It is the gospel threads that make a truly Christian sermon and give our preaching power to be lived out. Let every preacher look on their church as 'an extraordinary evangelistic tent'²¹ with gospel as its banner. We are a gospel people and gospel must be at the heart of all we are and do. And so, particularly if we have in any measure lost it, let us put gospel back into our preaching.

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Footnotes

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2 *ibid.* p. 251, n.54

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6 *cf.* Campbell, Alastair 'Do the Work of an Evangelist', *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (April, 1992), p. 117ff.

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12 *cf.* John Stott's vivid illustration of this *I believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder, 1982), p. 310.

13 Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 89.

14 Col. 4:16 etc.

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