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with each other and welcomed all Christians. The third was led by a Deacon Yin, and was a former LF assembly with 40 members. This group had little contact with the other two fellowships, and characteristically believed Christmas to be a pagan festival.

Many of the features of the 'post-denominational Church' in China Nee would warmly endorse. Denominational labels have gone, and groups meet each week 'in the name of Jesus', as he advocated for many years. Most of the pastors are self-supporting and the laity plays a prominent role in Church life—features with which he would be in full agreement. The Church has been freed from the encumbrances of maintaining large premises and of running institutional work, both of which have been taken over by the government. Nee emphasized this approach in his *Concerning our Missions*.

But he would be critical of other facets of Church life in China. Many house churches are led by women, some of whom have assumed this role because their pastor husbands were killed or imprisoned. Women are being ordained as ministers. Nee would strongly condemn this procedure. Then with such widely diverging groups as Seventh Day Adventists, Baptists, Lutherans and Anglicans sharing a house church there has inevitably been considerable 'give and take' in questions of worshipping on Saturday, Sunday or both; on baptism by immersion or sprinkling; and the formal or informal conducting of the Lord's Supper. To Nee making concessions to paedo-baptism, liturgical worship etc. would be unthinkable. To be inclusivist would be to p. 297 dilute and obscure New Testament teaching and practice.

We have observed Nee's undoubted influence in both registered and unregistered churches. Some China watchers estimate the Protestant Church in China to number over 15 million, and from all accounts there is vitality and continued church growth. There is little doubt that the strength and quality of this present day Church is due under God at least partly to the widespread ministry of Ni To Sheng in the second quarter of this century, the preacher whose motto was 'I want nothing for myself. I want everything for the Lord'.

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# Preaching in History

## James Philip

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*The author takes us through the vicissitudes of Church history showing how the Church again and again returned to the use of homily as practised by the Fathers and the exposition of Scripture modelled on the New Testament itself.*
(Editor)

The history of the Christian Church down the years shows only too clearly that the high dignity of the Biblical pattern of preaching was often but indifferently maintained, and sometimes and for long periods obscured and lost altogether.

## 1. CHURCH FATHERS' USE OF HOMILY

In the hundred years or so following the close of the New Testament era there is scanty documentary evidence to enable us to construct a reasonable history of the development of preaching. What does seem certain, however is that the preaching of those days took the form of homily (from the Latin, *homilia*, meaning 'a conversation'). This was essentially a simple, unpretentious address, spoken extempore, although not without preparation, with little in the way of structure, and certainly far removed from the grossly ramified structures of later medieval scholasticism. As time went on, the evidences point to a gradual progression in the homily towards a more orderly structure and more expository character. Historians of this period agree that the movement towards this received its most significant impetus through men like Clement of Alexandria (c. 160–220) and his distinguished pupil Origen (185–254), particularly the latter. Origen was unquestionably a figure of immense and definitive significance in the early Church. One historian maintains that it was 'through him that exegesis and preaching were so firmly united that throughout the history of the ancient church and long afterwards they remain intertwined'. His influence was indeed seminal, in that it set a pattern which was followed and developed increasingly from his time onwards to that of the great and significant figures of Chrysostom (344–407) and Augustine (354–430), with whom the full flowering of the ancient homiletical preaching took place, representing respectively the Greek and Latin branches of the church.

Following them there came, however, an ebb-tide, that led inexorably to the decline of the Middle Ages. With Chrysostom, the Greek church spent itself, and after him there was no really great preacher. p. 299 After Augustine also there was a marked decline for two centuries and a dark period of five or more in the West; and even when western preaching within the Latin church revived, it was a very different kind of preaching, far removed from its expository, homiletic roots, that persisted until the Reformation.

## 2. PREACHING IN MIDDLE AGES

It is a remarkable, even fateful, phenomenon that following the time of Augustine and onwards through the Middle Ages until the time of the Reformation. The whole concept of preaching, both in form and in content underwent fundamental changes. It is not so much that there was no preaching—indeed, preaching was revived from time to time through the labours of Dominican and Franciscan friars, among others—but rather that preaching had degenerated to a mechanical level, lacking in true inspiration. Several factors contributed to this, and although it would be easy to over-simplify the nature of this retrograde development—and thus be in danger of distorting, even falsifying it—it is possible to trace it, at least in its initial stages, back to the time (before even the ascendancy of Chrysostom and Augustine) when Christianity became the 'official' religion of the Roman empire, in the reign of Constantine. For with the Constantinian era, conditions favourable to the development of preaching obtained, and increased. Christianity became 'respectable', and with the development of worship in elaborate and attractive forms culturally, preaching gradually became more formal and stately. "The development of preaching", as one historian observes, "towards an oratorical form became an integral part of the general ecclesiastical movement."[1]

With this, the influence of classical oratory began inevitably to make itself felt. "In the traditional and accepted educational system, rhetorical studies occupied the chief place.

[1] Dargan, *History of Preaching*, vol. 1, p.63.

If educated at all, man was educated in rhetoric.... So when the schools were open to Christians, without persecution or social disfavour, there was an opportunity for them to receive the customary oratorical training from the best teachers ... Also, there hearers were so educated. There was a demand for oratory and rhetoric, and the Church tended to oblige."[2] Another historian quotes Chrysostom as observing that fashionable people in Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and hundreds of smaller towns, began to speak almost as enthusiastically about the favourite preacher p. 300 of the hour as they spoke of the favourite horse in the races, or the reigning actor in the theatre.[3]

What was unquestionably already a trend in Augustine's day became more and more a fixed pattern after his time, until in the medieval period the decline of the ancient, traditional Christian preaching was complete. The influence of the scholastic theology of the universities, which from the beginning were clerical institutions, took over, and the combination of theology and philosophy, and the application of Aristotelian logic to the interpretation of Scripture, with its speculation, analysis and ratiocination imposed an intolerable incubus upon preaching which virtually destroyed it as an effective means for communicating the gospel. It is not surprising, therefore, that hardly any counterparts to the comprehensive patristic expositions of complete books of the Bible are to be found in mediaeval ecclesiastical literature.

Another deleterious influence on preaching was the growth in liturgy and forms of worship which led to the spoken word having, and being given, far less relative value, and to confining it within the liturgical context of the Mass, a process which constricted and impoverished it and finally dismissed it to a place so minor as to be practically irrelevent in the life of the Church. The cure of souls came to belong in the context of penance rather than preaching—in contrast to Paul's famous affirmation in Ephesians 4 about 'the perfecting of the saints'.

Furthermore, what attempts the Middle Ages made to be faithful to the Bible ended in tragedy because of the very manner of their use of it, for they followed and developed Origen's allegorical method—this was a most fateful influence very different from the definitive direction he gave to the true expository method!—finding not only double, but triple and even quadruple meanings in Scripture. In this way the possibility of real exegesis was destroyed; the basic rule of interpretation, that everything must mean something else, that the merely explicit or obvious led to uninhibited and all too often absurd spiritualisations. This was one of the major factors in making the Bible a sealed book, and finally led the Church to believe that Bible-reading was much too perilous a business for ordinary lay-people to engage in. It is an irony of the time that sanction for such an attitude was found in allegorising the story given in Exodus 19: Mount Sinai represents Scripture, and the laymen who accidentally or presumptuously trespasses on the Holy Mount shall die.[4] p. 301

The medieval Schoolmen's patterns of preaching, moreover, became incredibly complex, with all manner of ramifications, divisions and sub-divisions, showing a punctiliousness that to the modern mind is not only artificial but ludicrous.[5] T. H. L. Parker comments, remarkably, that 'some writers regard the Schoolmen as saviours of the sermon, in that they free it from the bondage (!) of the homily. But the form they gave it

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[2] Dargan, *History of Preaching*, vol. 1, p.65.

[3] Broadus, *Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, p.61.

[4] J. S. McEwan, *The Faith of John Knox*, pp.32, 33.

[5] See C. Smyth, *The Art of Preaching*, for an extended treatment of scholastic preaching.

was far more rigid and artificial, and not so well suited to the purpose of preaching'; and he goes on to quote from C. Smyth, 'Such preaching may be clever and ingenious, but its connection with the Word of God, though undeniable, is purely superficial and purely formal. There is in here no wrestling with the Word, no preaching as of a dying man to dying men. The text from Scripture is supposed to be the preacher's theme: it is in fact merely the peg on which he hangs an academic exercise'.[6] It is scarcely surprising that such a pattern became increasingly unacceptable and powerless. Its decay was inevitable; it had the touch of death.

## 3. ROOTS OF REFORMATION PREACHING

The time of the Reformation saw a marked, indeed fundamental, change. The antecedents of the movement that was destined to revolutionize the whole of Europe go as far back as Wyclif and his Lollard bands, who initiated what Dargen calls 'that wave of mighty reformatory preaching' in the later part of the fourteenth century. It was Wyclif who first departed decisively from the mediaeval pattern, both in form and content, returning to the homily and making preaching once again, as in the patristic age, the exposition of the Scriptures. It was this noble heritage that was passed on, through John Hus to Luther and other Reformers, and that became, under God, the foundation of the Reformation. It was an idea whose hour had come; for Wyclif's Lollards travelled the length and breadth of England, spreading the message of the gospel and making known the Word of God to the common people through the use of Wyclif's translation of the Scriptures into the English language. It was a movement that gathered momentum and became ultimately irresistible, and the Reformation became a glorious fact, setting the whole of Europe aflame with its liberating message of grace.

The transformation in preaching was astonishing. It would not be too much to say that it came into its own in a way that had not been p. 302 known since the fifth century. It is certainly no accident that Chrysostom and Augustine were the fathers to whom the Reformers looked back with great approval, and they unquestionably stand in the early tradition. As Parker says, 'the Gospel is a return through Augustine to the New Testament; the form is a return to the homily of the Fathers'.[7]

But while it may be true that it was Luther who first 'rediscovered both the form and the substance of this preaching' (Parker), it was supremely in the Reformed, as distinct from the Lutheran, tradition that the continuous exposition of Scripture, brought into its own by Origen and into its fullest flowering by Chrysostom and Augustine, found its fullest expression and reached its greatest heights. The output of the Reformers was prodigious, and makes it clear just what a central place preaching now had in the life of the Church. Calvin and Zwingli in particular, with Bullinger following them, preached continuously through books of the Bible, often in the greatest detail. Dargan points out that Bullinger's biographer "enumerates as having come down from the eighteen years following 1549 one hundred sermons on the book of Revelation, sixty six on Daniel, one hundred and seventy on Jeremiah, one hundred and ninety on Isaiah", and that in the first ten years of his ministry he had gone through nearly all the books of the Bible, matching Calvin himself in the comprehensiveness of his biblical coverage.

The implications of this revolution can hardly be over-estimated. With the preaching of the Word being recognized as the primary task of the ministry, preaching resumed its

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[6] C. Smyth, *The Art of Preaching*, p.53.

[7] T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God*, p.20.

proper place in worship; the Mass was 'dethroned from its usurped reign in the Church', and 'the pulpit, instead of the altar became the central point' in the Reformed churches: "Preaching was bound to the Scriptures, both in form and in substance. The purpose of preaching, the Reformers said, was to lay bare and interpret the Word of God in Scripture. Hence they set up the Scripture as the criterion by which all their preaching must be judged."[8] Preaching became more prominent in worship than it had been since the fourth century. Luther, indeed, maintained that preaching is the most important part of worship, an attitude well illustrated by the following quotation from his Table Talk:

> "I am sure and certain, when I go up to the pulpit to preach or read, that it is not my word I speak, but that my tongue is the pen of a ready writer, as the Psalmist has it. God speaks in the prophets and men of God, as St. Peter in his epistle says: The holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy p. 303 Ghost. Therefore we must not separate of part God and man, according to our natural reason or understanding. In like manner every hearer must say: I hear not St. Paul, St. Peter, or man speak, but God himself."

We must now turn our attention to two matters in particular which have a direct bearing on our theme, both integrally related, and emerging from what has been said: (i) the basic presuppositions underlying the essential need felt by the Reformers to make a clean break with the mediaeval scholastic form of preaching and return to the earlier, patristic model, the expositional homily; and (ii) the Reformed doctrine of preaching itself.

## 4. REFORMED DOCTRINE OF PERSPICUITY

Over against the situation that obtained in the mediaeval Church, in which the Bible had become a sealed book,—for the reasons graphically expressed by Pope Innocent III about the year 1210, "No doubt it is a laudable thing that a man should aspire to study for himself the oracles of God in Scripture. But the task is so difficult, the possibilities of error so great, and the consequences of error so terrible, that no man should embark on such study unless he has prepared himself for it by a thorough training in theology"—the Reformers resolutely believed and taught the essential *perspicuity* or intelligibility of Scripture to the ordinary spiritual mind. John Knox's words to Mary, Queen of Scots make this point well:

> "The Word of God is plain in itself; and if there appear any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, who is never contrary to Himself, explains the same more clearly in other places: so that there can remain no doubt, but to such as remain obstinately ignorant".[1]

Elsewhere, in *A Most Wholesome Counsel*, written in July 1556 to his brethren in Scotland 'touching the daily exercise of God's most holy and sacred Word', Knox speaks of the need to study widely, reading whole books at a time—'ever ending such books as ye begin (as the time will suffer)'—and to 'join some books of the Old, and some of the New Testament together; as Genesis and one of the Evangelists, Exodus with another, and so forth.... Be frequent in the Prophets, and the Epistles of St. Paul, for the multitude of matters most comfortable therein contained requireth exercise and a good memory'. And he adds:

> "For it shall greatly comfort you, to hear that harmony and well-tuned song of the Holy Spirit speaking in our fathers from the beginning. It shall confirm you in these dangerous

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[8] T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God*, p.21.

[1] Dargan, *History of Preaching*, vol. 1, p.63.

and perilous days, to behold the face of p. 304 Christ Jesus' loving Spouse and Kirk from Abel to Himself, and from Himself to this day, in all ages to be on."[9]

Here, as J. S. McEwen points out,[10] we have, admirably stated, the essentials of the Reformed doctrine of the perspicuitas of Scripture. He adds

> "The Bible is not a rag-bag of assorted proof-texts, as the mediaeval church had made it: it is a unity of revelation, and is to be read in the light of the revelation which it, itself, communicates. Take it where you will, it tells—chapter after chapter—the one story of God's unfolding plan of redemption. Isolated sentences torn from their context, may well be unintelligible or even misleading; but their meaning will become plain when they are read as parts of that great story. Therefore read widely to learn the story, before reading narrowly to elucidate the meaning of single texts."

It is true that in the above-mentioned *Wholesome Counsel* Knox is referring to the reading of the Scriptures; but this does not mean, and Knox does not suggest, that the man in the pew can dispense with the man in the pulpit.

> "Knox is well aware that the ordinary believer may have neither the time nor the ability to reach that conspectus of all Scripture which is essential to a balanced interpretation of the Faith in its wholeness, for the well-being of the Church and of the individual believers who require to hear the Word in its wholeness for their edification in the faith, the labours of trained exegetom theologian and skilled preacher are essential.
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> But the *perspicuitas* of Scripture did mean this: that the way-faring men, though fools, would meet their God in the Bible, hear His voice, take His promises and comforts and rebukes personally and directly to themselves, and understand enough of what was being said to them to receive, by faith, salvation."[11]

The profound significance of all this can scarcely be exaggerated, in relation to the Reformer's adoption of, or rather reversion to, the continuous exposition of Scripture practised in the early centuries of the Christian era. On the one hand—and this was particularly true at the time of the Reformation—there was a clamant need for a knowledge of the Scriptures to be imparted to the common people. They had been denied it for so long, and now men were hungry for the Word of life. How else could that knowledge be imparted, except by the most comprehensive exposition of all its parts? On the other hand—and p. 305 this is even more basic and fundamental—the Reformers maintained that Christ and the Scriptures were inseparable, in the sense that it is only in and through the Scriptures that Christ can be known. Therefore to communicate a whole Christ and mediate a whole salvation, a whole Bible is necessary, for Christ is in the Scriptures. 'Search and Scriptures', said our Lord, 'for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and *they are they which testify of Me* (John 5:39).

It can hardly be controverted that in respect to both these considerations, the wheel has come round full circle; for today, there is a widespread ignorance of the Scriptures throughout the land, and—thankfully—a growing awareness of the need for a presentation of the message of the whole biblical revelation with a view to the production of balanced and mature Christian character in the lives of God's people.

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[9] Knox, *History*, vol. 2, p.18.

[10] Knox, *Select Writings*, p.178.

[11] J. S. McEwan, *The Faith of John Knox*, particularly the Chapter on 'The Bible and the Holy Spirit', to which the material in this section is indebted.

## 5. THE PREACHED WORD OF GOD

(ii) The indissoluble bond between Christ and the Scriptures has significance for the Reformers' doctrine of preaching also, for indeed this one the corollary of the other. T. H. L. Parker discusses this at some length in a fine chapter of his book on Calvin,[12] and sums up the distinctive characteristics of the great Reformer's position.

Preaching is the Word of God, first, in the sense that it is an exposition and interpretation of the Bible, which is as much the word of God as if men 'heard the very words pronounced by God himself'. Secondly, preaching is the Word of God because the preacher has been sent and commissioned by God as His ambassador, the one who has authority to speak in His name. Thirdly, preaching is the Word of God in the sense that it is Revelation. It is the Word of God when God speaks through the human words, revealing Himself through them and using them as the vehicle of His grace. To use Calvin's own words, "He deigns to consecrate the mouths and tongues of men to His service, making His own voice to be heard in them";[13] and "Whenever God is pleased to bless their labour, He makes their doctrine efficacious by the power of His Spirit; and the voice which is in itself mortal, is made an instrument to communicate eternal life".[14] It is not so much that Calvin *identifies* the spoken, human word with the living Word of God—the distinction between the two is always there—but rather that he recognizes that God is pleased to speak in the word that p. 306 is preached, as indeed is made clear in the important passage in Acts 10:44: "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all of them that heard the word." In other words, the Holy Spirit is given in the preaching of the Word (i.e. when true preaching takes place, for it can never be taken for granted, as a matter of course, that this anointing takes place every time a man chooses to speak forth the truth of the gospel—orthodoxy of doctrine of itself does not guarantee the unction of the Spirit), making the word spoken a living word from on high that creates faith, mediates forgiveness and newness of life.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS FOR EVERY PREACHER

There are two necessary corollaries or implications of this doctrine of preaching. One is that it is the preaching, rather than the preacher, that is of decisive importance, the message rather than the man. Far from 'new presbyter' being 'old priest writ large', a familiar enough accusation, he is in fact the 'servant of the Word', and it is the Word, not the man, that makes the impact and accomplishes the work of grace in men's lives. This is of greater significance than is often realized. If the gospel were, of course, simply a story to relate, then the important consideration *would be* the preacher—his style, his presentation, his oratory. But if it *is*, as the Apostles and Reformers held, the power of God unto salvation, and not *simply* something attended by the power of God, then the emphasis necessarily passes from the preacher to the thing preached, and from the 'excellency of speech' and the 'enticing words of man's wisdom' to the message that comes 'in demonstration of the Spirit and of power'.

The other corollary of the biblical doctrine of preaching is that since it is God that speaks to men in the proclamation of the Word, no man, however spiritually mature or

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[12] McEwen, *The Faith of John Knox*, pp.35, 36.

[13] T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God*, p.45–64.

[14] Institutes, IV 1:5.

sanctified, is ever in a position where He does not need that ministry to submit himself in obedience to it. As Calvin puts it,

> "We see that the most learned need to be taught, the most upright and the most righteous have need to be admonished. If God has already put us on the good road and bestowed upon us the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we must not think that preaching is now unnecessary for us, for we must be led right up to the end, since our perfection is not in this world".[15]

T. H. L. Parker quotes from one of Calvin's sermons on Deuteronomy to illustrate the kind of authority preaching has and the duty of obedience that it lays on those who hear it: p. 307

> "It is especially said 'The people has been rebellious against the mouth of God'. And how is that? It is not narrated that God appeared visibly, or that a voice was heard from heaven. No, it was Moses who had spoken it, it was a man who said that the people resisted the mouth of God. So we see how God wishes His Word to be received in such humility when He sends men to declare what He commands them, as if He were in the midst of us. The doctrine, then, which is put forward in the name of God, ought to be as authoritative as if all the Angels of Heaven descended to us, as if God Himself had revealed His majesty before our eyes. In this way He wished to test the obedience of our faith."[16]

A greater appreciation of this important truth would surely serve to deliver the people of God from the cardinal error of confusing the proclamation of the Word of God with an exercise in public speaking to be assessed, judged, criticized and even patronized, instead of accepted humbly and joyfully in a spirit of obedience and submission as a word from on high. The Apostle Paul says it all in his memorable words to the Thessalonians:

> "For this cause thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the Word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the Word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe."[17]

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# From the Third World: A New Approach to Theological Education

Irene W. Foulkes

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[15] Commentary on 1 Peter 1:25.

[16] Corpus Reformatorum, xxv, p.638.

[17] 1 Thess. 2:13.