

Article by Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley, first published in *Irish Baptist* magazine, April 1986

Preaching: 1
Introduction

This article is the first in a series on preaching. While certain emphases in the series will have particular relevance to those in fulltime ministry, it is hoped that all who are in this vital work of the kingdom, will derive some help. Indeed the articles will have been worthwhile if only they help the man in the pew to appreciate a little more the task of those who are engaged in the ministry of the Word. Contrary to what many people think, the Christian ministry is not one of life's soft options but, when properly and conscientiously performed, it is the most responsible and demanding work in the world.

A number of writers on the subject will be alluded to or quoted. It is intended that in this way readers will be encouraged to read their works on this and indeed other topics. This does not necessarily imply a complete endorsement of all they have written but it does indicate that the discriminating reader has much to learn from them if he is prepared to do so.

Some definitions of preaching

No one can go very far in reading about the subject of preaching before he is faced with a bewildering variety of definitions. Often they say something very important but the reader is frequently left with the feeling that they are not sufficiently comprehensive as they stand.

One of the most popular but least satisfactory definitions is that preaching is a public discourse on a religious subject. Apart from the fact that this definition contains nothing which is specifically Christian in content, it suffers from the major defect of suggesting that preaching is essentially the expression of a man's ideas about God. But preaching in the fully Christian sense is, on the contrary, God's authoritative word to men through His servants. In this connection it is worth noting W.E.Sangster's firm rejection of the idea that an address and a sermon are synonymous – an idea whose origin is to be traced to a low view of preaching. An address, he argues, suggests a man talking to men but a sermon involves a man speaking from God, declaring God's Word with God's authority. The platform is not to be confused with the pulpit.

Phillips Brooks speaks of preaching as the communication of truth by man to men in which truth and personality are two essential elements. Bernard Lord Manning neatly describes it as the manifestation of the Incarnate Word, from the written Word by the spoken word. To James Black it is the natural outflow of our religion as we long to tell others the good news which we have received. So we present Jesus as the fullness of our life, the Lord and Saviour, whose religion is the fine crown of things. (This definition prompts a reference to Andrew Bonar's reply to one of the elders who rebuked him for preaching too often on his holidays. Said Bonar, "Tis joy not duty to speak his beauty.") H.H.Farmer stresses another aspect of the subject when he sees it as God actively probing me, challenging my will, calling on me for decision, offering me His succour. Augustine makes yet another valid point in his declaration, "So ought

the speaker to fulfil his task that he teaches, that he attracts, that he turns.” In other words the preacher’s appeal is to the whole man – mind, emotions and will. John Calvin impressively defines preaching as the public exposition of Scripture by the man sent from God in which God Himself is present in judgement and grace.

But perhaps the most adequate comment on the true nature of preaching is that of Donald Coggan whose advice to anyone attempting to define preaching, is, “Let him make sure of the centrality of Christ, let him see that his preaching is anchored to the written Word, let him remember the element of persuasion and of volitional as well as of mental and emotional response, let him insist on the fact that preaching is a divine activity and moreover that God in the mystery of His wonderful economy, has entrusted it to His men.”

The Place of Preaching in the Purposes of God

Since the Christian faith is essentially a religion of the Word of God, preaching is clearly very important to it. P.T.Forsyth insists that with its preaching, Christianity stands or falls because it is the declaration of a Gospel – indeed it is the Gospel prolonging and declaring itself. He also points out that wherever the Bible has the primacy which is given it in Protestantism, preaching is the most distinctive feature of worship. Certainly it is no accident that the pulpit is traditionally given the central position in Reformed churches. It is the “throne of the Word of God”. In fact it is this insight which causes many people to feel that the growing practice of erecting side pulpits in newer churches nowadays marks a retrograde step.

Preaching has already been a dominant characteristic of Christianity in its highest and purest expression. Jesus came preaching (Mark 1:14). During his ministry his miracles were always subordinate to his work of preaching and teaching. The apostles spent themselves in preaching. Great movements in the church and religious revivals have invariably been initiated and developed by preaching. By way of contrast, the decadent periods in the history of the church have always been characterized by, among other things, a decline in preaching. When men are in the apostolic succession in the true sense of that much misused phrase, they will undoubtedly make their priorities prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4).

Preaching has always been God’s principal way of announcing His will to men and nothing will ever replace it. Radio, T.V., books, films and newspapers may all help to spread the Christian message, but as Sangster reminds us, “There is no substitute for a spirit-filled man looking men in the face and speaking the Word of God to their consciences and hearts ... A personal God seeking the love and fellowship of persons seeks best by a person speaking to persons”.

The true preacher is no mere orator and even less is he an entertainer. Some of the New Testament descriptions of the preacher make clear the importance and dignity of his office. He is the one who has been divinely called and anointed by the Spirit of God to be His instrument and mouthpiece. He is a steward of God’s mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1) – truths hitherto concealed, which have now been made known by God. It is therefore required of a preacher that he is faithful to the sacred trust committed to him. He is the herald of the good news of the grace of God (1 Tim. 2:7) and an ambassador (2 Cor. 5:20) who is required to deliver without diminution or addition

the message of the king whom he represents. He is a witness (Acts 1:8) to the truth of Christ, who – in the words of William Temple – must be able to bid men not just to go to the cross but come to the cross. It is through the “foolishness” of preaching (not, by the way, “through foolish preaching”) that God is pleased to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21).

The preacher’s commission is to set forth the whole counsel of God in all its depth and fullness, and apply it relevantly to the condition of those to whom he speaks. Unless we deal with the great themes, it has been well said, we shall neither have great preaching nor create great saints. The dominant note of preaching is the Gospel not just of a helper, but of a Saviour. The orator stirs men to rally, the preacher invites them to be redeemed.

The Priority of Preaching in the Preacher’s Life

The minister of the Word is required to magnify – not himself – but his office (Romans 11:13). If he thinks little of it, his people will think even less. It has well been described as “the highest and greatest and most glorious calling to which any one can ever be called.” (M. Lloyd-Jones) “Commissioned of God to teach the Word. A herald of the great king. A witness of the eternal Gospel. Could any work be more high and holy? ... In all the frustration and confusion of the times is it possible to imagine a work comparable in importance with that of preaching the will of God to wayward man?” (Sangster). James Stewart notes that in his journal John Wesley frequently wrote “I came into the town and offered them Christ”, and goes on to comment, “To spend your days doing that – not just describing Christianity, or arguing for a creed not apologising for the faith or debating fine shades of religious meaning, but actually offering and giving men Christ – could any life work be more thrilling and momentous?”.

The preacher needs constantly to ensure that in all the busy-ness of his life and the constant calls which are made upon him, nothing is allowed to encroach on his preparation for the pulpit. He will give that supreme responsibility his whole-hearted commitment and the very best of his endeavours. He will certainly not bring to his people a few desultory ideas cobbled together in haste late on a Saturday night or “a few thoughts which came to me while I was standing in the bus queue”! The best hours of every week will be jealously guarded so that there can be a prayerful and thorough preparation for his ministry of the Word. Shoddy workmanship is unworthy of a Christian in any sphere but in the task of preaching God’s Word it is nothing less than blasphemous.

But in the complexity of modern life the preacher can easily be side-tracked by secondary matters, which, while they may have a place in his ministry, ought never to detract in time or effort from his supreme task. Youth work, marriage preparation classes, a concern for the social outworking of the Gospel, counselling on various subjects or further academic study may all make a legitimate claim upon a man’s time but they must be kept in strict subordination to his pulpit work. As Hanley Moule puts it, “Preaching is the goal and summing up of the other parts and works of the ministry ... The pulpit will be a sacred central point, the living heart of a busy life to which everything will bear relation. To the pulpit everything will somehow converge and

from it everything will be influenced ... For the very life of our flocks, and of our church and for the dear glory of our master 'Let us labour in the Word and teaching'".

The Relevance of Preaching

Preaching today is frequently thought of as being in the shadows. The pulpit is commonly dismissed as an outmoded form of address which is of antiquarian value only. For the great majority of people the sermon is no longer the high point of the week to be discussed eagerly until the next Sunday. No longer do daily newspapers carry extensive reports of noteworthy sermons preached by the pulpit giants of the day. For most people nowadays Sunday means the newspaper, the T.V. and the family car.

In such circumstances it is easy for the preacher to become discouraged, to suffer from loss of nerve and even to question the value of the work to which he once felt so strongly called. There is plenty of ice around us to bring down the temperature. But let him think again and take heart. The day of preaching is not over and never will be while men remain sinners and Christ is present and mighty to save. Evidence abounds on every hand of the plight of a world out of touch with God and indeed completely alienated from Him. The result is the moral and spiritual chaos which we see all around us. Much of the noise and superficiality of modern life betokens an underlying sense of fear, the loneliness and uncertainty of life, and the bankruptcy of human resources. Those who appear so confident and brash outwardly are often the most disillusioned and desperate inwardly. Each generation supplies its proof that the hearts of men are restless till they find their rest in God.

It is into this situation that the Christian preacher can step with confidence, as he realises the relevance and power of his message. To men who ask the fundamental questions about God, the way to know Him, the purpose of life, the answer to the sin problem, or what happens after death, the Christian minister brings not his own speculations but the sure divine Word. As he heralds forth the good news of what God has done for men in Christ, in His atoning death and triumphant resurrection, he can speak with assurance about the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God and therefore with one's fellows, the resources of the risen Christ to remake broken lives, the will of God for daily living, and a sure and certain hope of life beyond the grave for those who belong to Christ. The need of men and the provision of God find their meeting place in the preaching of the Word. The day of preaching will never be over while the grace of God and the sin of men remain, for it provides the essential link to bring them together.