

# A THEOLOGY OF PREACHING

Lying behind all preaching is a series of assumptions. It is not possible to either preach or listen to a sermon without this preunderstanding as without it no sermon would ever make sense. Each of us speaks and listens through the filters of our preunderstanding. What we say and what we hear is affected by our past experience, current expectations and future hopes.

This set of presuppositions that lies at the heart of our understanding, for the most part goes unrecognised – it is “just part of who we are”. Yet it is possible to examine this preunderstanding and so come to a clearer view of why we believe the way we believe and do as we do. Within any individual there may well be a number of interrelated sets of presuppositions, some mutually supporting one another, some flatly contradicting others. One of these sets will be labelled “My theology of preaching”.

Of course, when one sets down these underlying assumptions they may take on the form of a doctrinal statement. The main difference between the two is that a stated doctrine may be no more than that – like the man who believes that exercise is good for him but spends all his time watching television, whereas the less articulated, underlying assumptions will have a very direct bearing on how we behave; in this case, how we both preach and listen to sermons.

## What is preaching?

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Preaching is a word that is notoriously difficult to define. The use of the word in every day English carries a variety of meanings, many of them with negative overtones. Most people seem to have an instinctive, or at least subconscious, understanding of the word and recognise when they are being “preached at”. A search through the Bible for a ready-made definition leads to even more confusion. Key words directly affecting our understanding of preaching are the word groups *NTP* (to prophesy) and *QHLT* (a preacher), together with *BSR* (to announce, declare) in the Old Testament and *kērussō* (to proclaim) and *euangelizō* (to bring or announce good news) in the New. However,

word studies alone cannot define “preaching”, for preaching is not simply an activity, it is an event.

Fundamentally, preaching is declaring the message of Scripture, but it is not simply repeating that message. There has to be an interaction between Scripture and the present time and situation. A plain reading of certain texts may have its own impact on the minds and hearts of the listeners, but many other passages are not so immediately accessible. Preaching seeks to do today, for the current congregation, what the passage did for the original listeners/readers. This is more than attempting to discover the author’s original intent. It accepts that Scripture not only *says* certain things but that it also *does* certain things. Preaching is not only an attempt to discover what Scripture says to these people on this particular day, it also seeks to discover what God, through this Scripture, wants to do for, with and through this particular congregation.

However, preaching cannot be defined in terms of its results. It is the role of the preacher to place the message of Scripture before the listeners as one who has stood in the presence of God on behalf of his congregation and now stands before that congregation on behalf of God. He is not responsible for what the listeners do with the message. Although both men preached, Jonah’s preaching had a result (though not necessarily the one he wanted) while Jeremiah’s was largely ignored.

There are many views as to the role and place of preaching within and outside the church. Some, like Martyn Lloyd-Jones, have a very high, or at least hierarchical, view of preachers and preaching<sup>1</sup>, while others see it as little more than an extension of current teaching theory and communications technique. The statement in the Second Helvetic Confession that the preaching of the word of God is the word of God should not be taken too far. As John Stott says, “Today’s preachers are neither prophets nor apostles, for we are not the recipients of any fresh, direct revelation. The Word of the Lord does not come to us as it came to them; rather we have to come to it.”<sup>2</sup> However, we are reminded that the message is not to be taken lightly, either in its delivery or its reception.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn, *Preaching and Preachers*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971). Also Stott, John R.W., *I Believe in Preaching*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, p113.

So we see that preaching takes place when a number of factors intersect in time and space. The principle factors may be considered as (i) the message, (ii) the messenger, (iii) the listener(s) and (iv) the presence of God. Other factors may have a bearing on sermon preparation, delivery and outcome, but without these basic four “preaching” will not take place. We will look in turn at each of these more closely below.

## **What do I preach? – the message**

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The first of these four factors is the message itself. What is the preacher to preach? Paul’s admonition to Timothy to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2) is often quoted yet little understood. The question has only been reworded, without giving any answer. Paul’s explanation, “be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction” has more to do with how to preach than what is to be the content of that preaching. The only clue as to content comes in the next couple of verses. Paul refers to “sound doctrine” (v3) and “truth” (v4), but does not define them.

If we stay with Paul for a while longer we will find that he has more to say on the content of the message to be preached. In his first letter to the church at Corinth Paul says, “for I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Cor 2:2) It is evident that Paul did not have a simple recitation of the Easter story in mind when he wrote this. His point is rather that the historic facts about Jesus, and particularly his death, were the foundation and core of all he preached (cf 1 Cor 15:1ff). The writer of the letter to the Hebrews similarly saw Jesus as God’s last word, (Heb 1:1f) and the focal point of all God was saying and doing.

For the writers of the New Testament all God’s self-revelation prior to the first Easter had been anticipation, from then on it would all be reflection. God had decisively spoken; our preaching is to echo God’s Word. This anticipation and reflection is recorded in the Bible, but what is the relationship between the Bible and God’s Word? (We may also include at this point terms such as Revelation, Scripture

and Canon, each of which add to our understanding, and confusion, about the content of preaching.) Many have noted that the Word of God is not a synonymous term for the Bible. The presence of a Bible on a desk or lectern does not guarantee that what is heard is the Word of God. Yet the Bible may be described as our access to the Word of God. Duncan Ferguson says of this relationship, “the Word cannot generally be heard except through the teaching and preaching of the Bible.”<sup>3</sup>

Giving access to the Word of God is the primary purpose of preaching. We do want to preach nothing but Christ and him crucified, but the effect of such a momentous event will impact on all that we say and do. Being Biblical in our preaching will both constrain us, not allowing our preaching to become simple fire-side chats on the meaning of life and the injustice of the present situation, and also open up vistas we had never dreamed possible, enabling us to hear God afresh as we hear and see him speak and act in the lives of others.

There is another aspect of the message that we are to preach that is implicit. The message we have is *good* news. As we approach this particular point, a sub-set of presuppositions, our doctrine of man, that is our understanding of man and human history, will direct our thoughts – is the human race in need of “good news”, do we really need saving, and if so, from what, and for what?

We have to admit that often the only good news to be found in our preaching is that it finishes on time. More often the message tends to either bind greater burdens onto the backs of the listeners or pretends there is no burden except those that we make for ourselves. One of the effects of the rise in interest and popularity among Christians of the talking therapies, as for example, counselling, is that problems can be resolved by analysis and self-actualisation. “If I can discover the root of this behaviour pattern,” the thinking goes, “I can gain control over it and so over my life.” In many circles this is seen as an alternative to the Christian message. Books like Tom Harris’ *I’m OK – You’re OK* and Eric Berne’s *Games People Play*, first published in the late 1960s, are still best sellers. Their success may be seen as an indictment on the church’s presentation of the Good News, but now we see the same worldview affecting the church and the message it proclaims. This is not to say there is no place for counselling

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<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, Duncan S., *Biblical Hermeneutics*, (London: SCM Press, 1987), p81.

within the Christian community but there is a need to examine these ideas in the light of God's self-disclosure.

If the message to be preached is defined in the light of God's self-disclosure, the task of preaching that message is no easier. Even if preachers know what they are to preach they are still faced with the problem of how, and why, they are to preach. It is to that question that we now turn.

## **Why and how do I preach? – the messenger**

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The Bible gives reasons as to why we preach. In the first place it is to bring everyone to saving faith by presenting the Good News to the lost in response to God's call (Rom 10:14f). Secondly it is to instruct in both doctrine and practice (1 Tim 4:6ff and 2 Tim 4:2).

Of course, the Bible teaches the "preacherhood" of all believers<sup>4</sup>. All are to go and preach (Luke 24:47) yet there is a very real sense in which preachers are set apart. Luke reports that, "those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there" (Acts 8:4f NIV). Some, for example, Lloyd-Jones<sup>5</sup>, have drawn a strong distinction between the two words (*euangelizō*, to preach, v4 and *kērussō*, to proclaim, v5). The distinction, whilst real, may not be that great. However, it cannot be denied certain people were set aside by God to preach (see Acts 13:2). Paul makes it clear that preachers are called and sent by God (Rom 10:15), they are not self-appointed.

Similarly, as preachers are called by God, so they are recognised by the church (Acts 13:3). This recognition may take a number of forms, what has always been important is that a preacher does not stand alone. Indeed it is doubtful that it is possible to preach without the recognition of the listening congregation that this is someone set aside by God. If it is indeed the responsibility of the preacher to enter into God's presence on behalf of the congregation and wrestle, as Craddock puts it, until he

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<sup>4</sup> Hugenberger, G.P. "Preach" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* Bromily, G.W. (ed) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), Vol 3, p943.

receives a blessing to take back to that congregation, how can he stand alone. A preacher does not simply preach *to* a congregation, he preaches *for* it<sup>6</sup>.

There is, as well as potential spiritual power in this, a safeguard. As a preacher is recognised by the Christian community so he is responsible to it. By being part of the community the preacher and his listeners share certain things in common, particularly their history and theology. This does not prevent the preacher from thinking new thoughts, but it does ground him in the community, ensuring his relevance and his orthodoxy. Many heresies, and much heartache, has been caused it the church by those who had taken to themselves the right to speak without the call of God or the recognition of the community.

As we consider who is to preach we must also ask how they are to preach. It is this question that has come under the closest scrutiny, and greatest criticism, in recent years. There have, in the last quarter century, been a number of serious calls to abandon the traditional sermon. These calls have come from a number of different sources. There have been those who have approached the question from a sociological standpoint. It is argued that there is no place in today's society for the expert who stands above and beyond contradiction. Others have approached preaching from an educational viewpoint. They point out that traditional preaching is at odds with modern educational practice and communication theory. Still others have approached this issue from a theological perspective. In a recent booklet, Jeremy Thomson argues that the conventional sermon does not conform to any Biblical pattern and is, indeed, contrary to good theology<sup>7</sup>. He argues that God's normal approach to man is one of dialogue, (eg Moses at the burning bush) so that pattern should be reflected in our preaching.

All of these approaches, coming as they do from a variety of standpoints, come to remarkably similar conclusions. As Thomson puts it, "The conventional sermon can no longer be regarded as the preaching format. Changes must be introduced to allow preaching to be explicitly dialogical."<sup>8</sup> He goes as far as to say, "We must repent of the

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<sup>5</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p24.

<sup>6</sup> Craddock, Fred B, *Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), p44.

<sup>7</sup> Thomson, Jeremy, *Preaching as Dialogue*, (Cambridge: Grove Booklet No. 68, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p19.

Sacred Cow of the sermon.”<sup>9</sup> If so many criticisms lead to the same conclusion should we not be listening?

The problem with each of these criticisms is that they are founded on (i) a distorted view of preaching and (ii) an unhealthy reliance on current theory and/or practice. If preaching were synonymous with teaching perhaps there would be some basis for adapting current educational practice. And if our relationship with God was truly dialogical then Moses at the burning bush or Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well could well be our primary guide as to the best way to preach. But I would suggest that the premise is false in each case and so, therefore, is the conclusion.

This is not to say they we have nothing to learn from these various sources. Educationalists tell us that variety aids learning, so we are willing to try new ways of doing old things. To the theologian we must say thanks for reminding us that God speaks in many ways, but to the specific point raised we must say with John Stott, “true preaching is always dialogical”<sup>10</sup>. Not in the sense that Thomson wishes to see but as Fred Craddock describes in his chapter on the listeners in his book, *Preaching*<sup>11</sup>. There is a continuous flow of information back and forth between messenger and listener; the sermon is part of that dialogue.

## **Who do I preach to? – the listener**

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We are now introduced to the third element in the preaching event, the listener. Who is to receive the message, and how? Today most preaching goes on within the confines of a church. In the early church, as described in the book of Acts, preaching was much more public, carried out on street corners, in market places, public halls and anywhere people gathered together to go about their daily business. In this sense the listener was anyone who heard the message, and at one important level that is still true; the Good News is to be preached to all who will listen, and even those who will not. By

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p19.

<sup>10</sup> Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, p60.

restricting our preaching to an in-house activity we run the risk of preaching to the converted in the negative sense of that expression. The first call on each and every preacher is to proclaim the Good News to the whole world (Matt 28:19f). In this case the listener is anyone with a need to hear, that is everyone.

However, we can define the listener a little more closely. Our first audience is the world. The term audience is used here, as by Craddock<sup>12</sup>, is to define those who listen simply as a gathering of people. The only thing they have in common is that they are, hopefully, listening. As a group they are separate from the messenger. He is not “one of the boys”, they are not “his” people. This separation needs to be remembered or the messenger may become confused as to who is the recipient of the message. While every preacher knows what it is to hear God speaking through, even during, his own sermons, he is there primarily as a channel. If he identifies too closely with his audience he will not be as effective as he could be. Maintaining a proper separation between messenger and listener has always been difficult. Apart from natural friendships, all Christians are called to love one another, and this cannot be done at a distance. However, the distinction between messenger and listener, between speaker and audience, is an important part of the preaching equation.

The world as the recipient of the message soon resolves into the church. And not just any church, but this particular church on this particular day. In other words, the audience has become a congregation. The differences between the two are numerous and profound. In the first place an audience is largely passive; they are there to hear, to receive and then to go away. A congregation on the other hand is active, they relate to the messenger. They are not there simply to receive, but to share, not only with each other but also with the messenger. In the second place, a congregation has names and faces that the messenger knows. It is in this relationship between messenger and congregation that the dialogical element of preaching takes place. It is here that preaching is earthed. It is the listeners, who the messenger knows, who give focus to the message. Some have gone as far as to say that sermon preparation consists of two equal parts, exegeting the text and exegeting the congregation<sup>13</sup>. This is to overstate the

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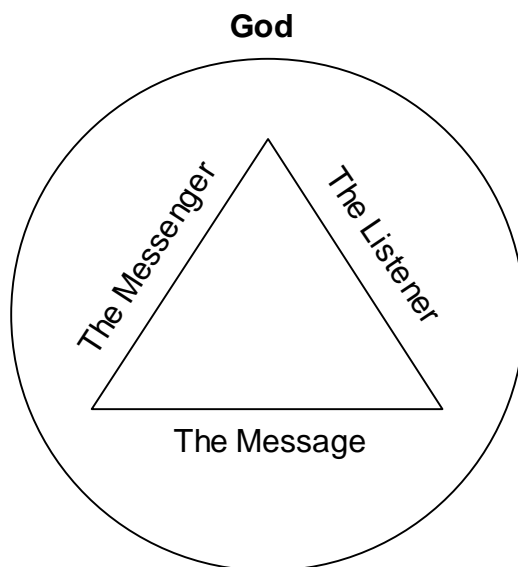
<sup>11</sup> Craddock, *Preaching*, ch5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pp 86ff.

<sup>13</sup> As, for example, Runia, K., “Theology of Preaching” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Ferguson, S.B. and Wright, D.F. (eds), (Leicester: IVP, 1988).



case, as it implies a degree of separation that is neither possible nor desirable, but the fact that the messenger knows the listener, is aware of his situation, hopes and problems, means that the message can have an edge it would otherwise lack.



Apart from the relationship of the listener to the messenger there is also a relationship between the listener and the message. Congregations need to know how to listen to what is being said, or to put it another way, they need to own the message as their own. After all, they recognised the calling of this messenger, or at least invited him to preach. Their responsibility did not stop at that point. If they have sent the messenger into the presence of God to wrestle and so gain a blessing on their behalf then they have a duty to hear that message and receive it as from God.

This three-way relationship of message – messenger – listener is fundamental to preaching and marks preaching out as different from all other forms of communication. Preaching is not the same as teaching. There is no similar relationship, for instance, between lesson – teacher – class. But there is one last thing that marks preaching out from all other forms of public communication and that is the fourth element, the presence of God.

## **The presence of God**

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It is a basic tenant of the Christian faith that God has revealed himself both through his word to us and as he has acted decisively in history. We should not fall into the extreme of either claiming that God's self-revelation is entirely subjective, or that he is the God who is only seen through his historic acts. Rather, he is the one who both speaks and acts, and that he still does so today. The Bible often refers to God speaking in the present continuous tense (God *says*, not *said*) and of our hearing *today* (cf Heb 3:7).

It is because God still interacts with his people that we can speak of preaching as effective. Although there are unique features in the relationship between message, messenger and listener, it is God's own activity that truly differentiates the preaching event from all other forms of human communication. The church has always recognised the need for God to be active in the declaration of his Word. Calvin says, "As God alone can truly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not be given complete acknowledgement in the hearts of men, until they are sealed by the inner witness of the Spirit."<sup>14</sup> Stott puts the same thought a different way when he says, "Scripture is far more than a collection of ancient documents in which the words of God are preserved. It is not a kind of museum in which God's Word is exhibited behind glass like a relic or fossil. On the contrary, it is a living word to living people from the living God."<sup>15</sup> The experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was enlightenment only when the risen Jesus, "explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (Luke 24:27). It is in this way that the Bible becomes the Word of God in the lives, minds and hearts of both the preacher and the listeners and why it is permissible to label the Bible as God's Word.

That God is present and active in this way is an extension of the doctrine of the Incarnation. In Jesus, God broke into human history in a unique way; the Word became flesh. Although a unique event it should not surprise us that God acted in this way, after all he had been taking risks with us for centuries prior to this. Ever since God first spoke to man in that man's own language he has been accommodating himself to our limitations and shortcomings. Without this accommodation there would be no communication. Whenever God has wanted to speak to man it has been necessary for

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<sup>14</sup> Calvin, John, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book One, II, 7, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, p100.

him to “work at it”. Without his participation in the preaching event nothing will or, indeed, can happen.

## **A witness to the truth**

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So we bring together these four elements and we have “preaching”! Not quite. There is at least one further question we need to address before we can claim to have any sort of theology of preaching, and that is the purpose of preaching. What is it that preaching does? Specifically, of course, preaching does many things, at least as many as there are listeners to any sermon, here we are asking this question in a general sense.

It is here that Thomas Long’s description of the preacher as a witness is helpful<sup>16</sup>. It draws together the elements of preaching in a meaningful framework that gives due weight to each. A traditional, high, view of preaching, such as that set out by Lloyd-Jones in *Preaching and Preachers*, is too hierarchical. It sees the preacher as a one-way conduit from God to the pews and is largely based on a socially defined authority structure. On the other hand, Jeremy Thomson’s dialogical approach in *Preaching as Dialogue* makes all men equal and runs the very real risk of becoming no more than the blind leading the blind.

If we see the preacher as a witness to the truth then the two-way relationship between the messenger and the listener(s) and between the messenger and the message is not just maintained, it is also given shape and purpose. The preacher is the one sent by the congregation to witness the things God would say and do for them on their behalf. Having witnessed (seen and heard) these things on their behalf, the preacher returns to witness (report) to the congregation. The congregation receives the message as from one who has gone where they have not been, and seen and heard things they have neither seen nor heard. Thus the preacher has a high and noble calling (1 Tim 3:1) but it is not as one with a worldly authority over the congregation. Rather he is their representative, walking in often strange places to bring them a blessing. Similarly, the

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<sup>16</sup> Long, Thomas G., *The Witness of Preaching*, (Louisville: Westminster, 1989), pp42-47.

listeners are not passive recipients of the message. In a very real sense the message is theirs. They sent out for it, and now they must own it!

At this point we return to our opening remarks. Whatever our theology of preaching, it will effect the way we preach, and listen to sermons. How we see ourselves as preachers, how we perceive our congregations and what we believe about the message we bring will interact not only at an academic level but also at a pastoral one. A theology of preaching is not a job description for a sermon constructor. It touches on how we relate to message and listener at the deepest level. In this sense our theology of preaching overlaps with our pastoral theology, the one set of presuppositions informing the other.

Recognising this set of relationships brings another aspect of a theology of preaching to the fore; no such can theology stands alone. Although we tend to compartmentalise this and that theology for convenience sake, there is no such separation in real terms. In the above statement of a theology of preaching much has been taken for granted, but small shifts in one area may have a disproportionate knock-on effect in others. A minor adjustment in our thinking about our doctrine of the church may have a profound effect on our preaching. Theology, whatever area it deals with, is a living issue, and any theology must have one over-riding principle – the possibility of growth.

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