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The Trouble with Expository Preaching

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Preaching is part of the Reformation heritage. According to Martyn Lloyd-Jones, it is “the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called”.¹ Luther would say of someone preaching, that it is *God himself who is speaking*. “Preaching is indispensable to Christianity,” says John Stott. “(Christianity) is, in its very essence, a religion of the Word of God”.² Yet nowadays we inhabit a culture in which learning from words, whether printed or spoken, is increasingly difficult. There is a growing disillusionment with the kind of expository preaching that has been so crucial to the Reformation tradition. It is held to be less and less appropriate in a visually oriented, post-literate society. Some suggest that the centrality of the sermon, and its over-regularity in church life, are even damaging to the witness of the gospel in our postmodern environment.³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones declared in 1971 that preaching is “the primary task of the church ... everything else is subsidiary to this”.⁴ Not so, says David Hillborn in 1997. “The times have changed”.⁵ Much has been published in recent years concerning the difficulty (even futility) of the careful expository approach. The following charges are usually laid.

First, expository preaching in today’s culture is unacceptably authoritarian. There is an implied assumption of power and control on the part of the preacher which listeners are unwilling to grant. He/she is elevated, equipped with a microphone, carefully prepared, and reluctant to receive questions or enter public discussion in mid-sermon. Truth-claims delivered from on high like this meet with increasing resistance in a culture which tends to deconstruct all human relationships into matters of ‘power’, and is suspicious of any abuse of authority. The long didactic monologue raises postmodern hackles simply as a communication style, quite apart from anything that is being said.

Secondly, expository preachers, it is alleged, are ignoring the insights of educationalists into the way people learn. No teacher would dream of doing in their classes at school what preachers do every Sunday in church. Not even at ‘A’ level. The ‘talking head’ is considered the least effective way of imparting knowledge. Countless studies demonstrate that most people only recall a small proportion of what they have been told in a half-hour lecture. There has been a huge shift in the way people are trained to learn. Students learn through guided discussion, debate, interviews, seeing-as-well-as-hearing, and teamwork in hands-on experience. The role of the teacher is much more complex than just to ‘stand and deliver’. Recycling the old notes from their own school or university studies won’t do!

We live in a fast-paced, media-saturated society. People read less than they used to, and attention spans have been getting shorter. 15 -20 minutes may be the maximum, not just for teenagers brought up on MTV, but for their parents. Digital technology can combine word, image, sound as a single learning experience, and young people are so used to this that mono-media communications seem uninspired and dated. ‘True truth’, as Schaeffer used to call it, now

needs experiencing as well as explaining. Old ideas dressed in old clothing will always therefore be suspect as inherently 'untrue'.

Increasingly congregations inhabit the world of interactive media, with the TV audience influencing the outcome of many programmes. Passive armchair observers are being drawn into complicity with the programme-makers in deciding endings and applications. More people voted for the final outcome of the first *Big Brother* series than voted in the European elections a few months later. The Radio 5 Live audience across the country is invited each afternoon to vote on which news issues they want covered in the programme **that day**. There's a buzz about being involved, and having a say, rather than merely sitting as a passive receptor of one-way traffic. Has preaching developed in any way to take account of this? Can it?

Thirdly, we hear it said that expository preaching of this traditional sort is 'elitist'. It appeals to people with an old-fashioned university background. It requires preachers to invest many hours in the study, and the listeners to have the discipline and mental energy to follow a careful argument from the pulpit, and so excludes those who don't aspire to that style of discourse.

Finally, it is alleged, preaching – as an effective means of teaching and instructing Christians – is "manifestly a failure". John Drane comments "the obvious fact that much of what we think is 'teaching' is not getting through anyway. I never cease to be surprised at the number of ministers who tell me they have been faithfully teaching their people for years, and yet at the same time bemoan how untaught they are!"⁶ The issue is not whether the Bible is 'God speaking'. It is whether our reliance on sermons alone as the chief vehicle for Christian instruction is misplaced. People who have been listening to sermons for years can remain largely ignorant of the Bible, and immature in discipleship. This approach leaves no room for interaction, or reinforcing discussion. Often the geography of the meeting place, as well as the number of people present, precludes proper feedback and discussion – so people listen but don't hear, and barely engage with the material at all. At the end (if not before) they switch off, and leave unchanged. It is alarmingly common to find church members who cannot recall with any clarity what last Sunday's sermon was about when asked just two days later. Obviously no one is being *taught* until someone has *learned* something. This reliance on sermons can instead just foster dependence on the preacher, and lead to a domi-

nation of the clergy, or a priesthood of ordained academics. People are overawed by their preachers, but hardly transformed in this passive environment. The Chinese encapsulated this point in the proverb, "I hear – I forget, I see – I understand, I do – I remember."

Much work has been done in recent years on the cultural chasm growing between church and society at large. There is no one set of shared ideas, references and values, which preachers can plug into. Ministers have little contact with the daily lives of their congregation. David Smith has commented, "Listening to sermons one often wonders whether preachers have the slightest idea of the ethical dilemmas facing the businessmen in their audience, or whether they appreciate the intellectual doubts which may be troubling teachers or students who have encountered modern critics of theism, or how far they are aware of the massive pressures which youth culture creates for the teenage sons and daughters of their members."⁷ The assumption that preaching is still the chief instrument of public Christian communication is now under attack.

So much for the prosecution. It is a substantial case. Is there any defence? Or should Britain's preachers all be sentenced to a period of community service?

Firstly, it is the nature of Christianity itself which provokes some of these problems. Any faith which holds to the idea of divine revelation is in danger of being judged, or misjudged, as 'authoritarian'. The Bible consistently witnesses to a God who speaks precise authoritative words, which reveal his nature and his purposes. Though people have visual imaginations, and an ability to respond to symbols and pictures, he chooses to reveal himself chiefly through speech. When the Apostle Paul was facing his end, and passing the torch to Timothy (2 Timothy 4), it was amidst an array of first-century philosophies outside the church, and a growing impatience with sound doctrine inside. His charge is one that should not be forgotten – "Preach the Word". Paul was "keeping the faith" (verse 7). The Lord himself had **commanded** that the gospel be preached, that everyone, everywhere be **commanded** to repent, and that forgiveness be proclaimed to all nations.⁸ No matter how we may package the message, there is something non-negotiable at the heart of Christianity – an authoritative declaration of what God has chosen to reveal. The relationship between Christian teacher and listener is always going to be somewhat skewed as a result, and the preacher must

not lose his/her nerve about the source of that revelation.

There is an important practical distinction, however, between being authoritative and being authoritarian. The trap set for the preacher is when he moves from humbly expounding an 'authoritative word' to clothing himself with an authority that properly belongs to God. It is one thing to sit oneself under the Word one is seeking to preach, acknowledging one's understanding is partial, and remaining open to the listeners' questions, and another to demand that the congregation agrees simply because 'I say so'.

It may be asked, 'How can there be any authority for the postmodern reader in an ancient text written for a network of far-off cultures?' Postmodern literary theory has gone to the lengths of denying even the possibility of God speaking through a written word. It's an extreme position. It is true there is a wide cultural gap between the Bible and its modern global readership, but that is not to demonstrate conclusive proof that Biblical texts can have no objective meaning. God is not gagged. He has spoken truly; we can have access to revelation.⁹ Luke's intention that Theophilus could have 'certainty' concerning the things he was taught was a reasonable one.

It is also undeniable that certain churches are increasingly crowded! One of the reasons for this is the continuing appeal of clear preaching that expounds an authoritative text. Many are being changed through this kind of preaching, and John Drane is overstating his case that much of what we think is teaching is not getting through. It is easy to overlook the fact that the Holy Spirit can add a supernatural authority to preaching that takes it to a higher level than mere classroom instruction.

The second charge laid at the door of expository preachers is that they've learnt little from our present educational understanding of how people learn. Here the charges can begin to stick. Just to point to a few full churches, and say 'Therefore we continue with 'business as usual'' is a poor response to the hundreds that are emptying. I would argue there needs to be a return to a richness and variety in the ministry of preaching the Word of God, that is actually more biblical than our over-reliance on monologic exposition.

Preaching to postmoderns may need to include more room for dialogue and evident listening. Paul in Troas (Acts 20:7) was 'dialoguing' with his hearers ... interacting with their responses, fram-

ing questions, listening to arguments, discerning applications. The different learning styles of the listeners were able to come alive in that environment. The event is best remembered because Eutychus fell asleep! Of more relevance to us is the fact that this late-night session could only have been sustained because it wasn't a monologue but a dialogue. The congregation stayed engaged (apart from one!).

Fresh skills will be needed. They are in fact the 'old skills' of Jesus and his apostles freshly discovered. John Drane has made the challenging comment, "In the kind of pluralistic world inhabited by the first Christians, it was stories and community that made the difference."¹⁰

Jesus insisted on telling stories. He did it so as not to **govern** his hearers' response (Mark 4:10-12). He always left people space to choose. Stories evoke their own response – that's why they are so important in mission and evangelism. They catch the listener up into the drama, and so can become part of the listener's own story. The stories that Jesus told, and the stories about him in the gospels, embody what Jesus was commissioned to say and represent about his Father in a way theological abstractions never could. They are particularly suited to conveying the life of a God who is personal, not just propositional, who lives, and is not merely described on a page. Stories are full of the unexpected and the unexplained ... like life. Not everything is neatly dissected, explained, and then left dead on the slab. Stories cross cultural boundaries. I remember preaching many hours a day in the streets of Northern India in my early twenties. It was always the stories that drew a crowd, and linear argument that sent them empty away. Audiences in a modern British university have been responding in the same way for some years.

How should preachers cope with the way television has influenced people's responses to linear argument? People today probably see more images in 24 hours than people at the time of Jesus did in their whole lifetime. The extreme response to this is to abandon responsibility to give careful attention to the words of Scripture, and to look for alternative sources of 'revelation' in painting, music, drama, symbolic events, even silence. Pictures are beguiling, and certainly produce a faster adrenalin rush than words. They demand attention more stridently. They sell papers. What matters to a photo-journalist is newness, shock, violence or uncommon beauty. But words are capable of a precision which pictures cannot reliably carry. You can't photograph faithfulness or honour or

repentance with anything like the same certainty of meaning. The 'meaning' of the crucifixion was not automatically evident to those who stood watching its dramatic course and conclusion. The prophets and apostles had to **teach** it with careful words. Only then was God's glory apparent. Faith comes by hearing, but the modern preacher, seeking to be biblical, must also be careful to 'enflesh' his words that people start to 'see' with their ears. Actors do it all the time.

There is clearly a rich variety in the different forms of revelation in Scripture - poetry, parables, diatribes, historical stories, sermons, epigrams, songs, laments, symbolic visions. Surely they need different styles of appropriate response and 'exposition'. It is obvious that God's intention in Scripture is not merely to inform our mind but also to connect with our feelings, and to communicate with our 'heart'. The newer generation is crying out for a biblical 'wholism' among Christian communicators that has reflected on how to address people as heart, soul, and strength, as well as mind. It is arguable that the result could be more faithful to the God who opened his own heart to us in Scripture, than the mass-produced three-pointers we often sit under.

The final challenge to a preacher in a postmodern environment will be to his/her own life. Whereas Paul the rabbi used to live in close contact with his students, listeners and converts, and they could observe his every move, (see Acts 20:2-6; 1 Thess. 2:7-11), the modern lecturer is as likely as not to turn up at the class on a bicycle, deliver his address, and an hour later be gone. If the preacher gradually becomes just a 'holy lecturer', he's lost the plot in today's world. As Mike Riddell puts it, "The emerging culture is more interested in reality than truth ... where there is consistency between word and action."¹¹ The congregation is looking for visible integrity, compassion, and humility in action as well as a carefully marshalled statement of reasons for believing. Paul would have asked, 'Is there actually any other way to preach the incarnation?'

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3. See Meic Pearse and Chris Matthews, *We Must Stop Meeting Like This*, Eastbourne, Kingsway, (1999), Chapter 6
4. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *op.cit.* p.26
5. David Hillborn, *Picking up the Pieces*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, (1997)
6. John Drane, *Evangelism for a New Age*, Marshall Pickering, (1994), p.135
7. David Smith, *Crying in the Wilderness*, Paternoster, (2000), p46
8. See Acts 17:30; Luke 24:47
9. See D.A.Carson, *The Gagging of God*, Leicester, Apollos, (1996)
10. John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, London, Darton Longman and Todd Ltd, (2000), p.140
11. Mike Riddell, *alt.spirit@metro.m3*, Lion, (1997)

For Further Reading

All of the works referred to in this paper are recommended for further reading.

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