



God, Theology & the Pulpit: Perspectives on Preaching

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Introduction

'What is the chief end of preaching? I like to think it is this. It is to give men and women a sense of God and His presence.' [1] So wrote Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the most eminent preachers of the twentieth century. Of course his words were not intended to convey all that is included in the art and science of preaching, but as an expression of the goal and aim of preaching they would be hard to improve on. A little closer to our day John Piper has expressed the essence of the preacher's message and mandate:

God himself is the necessary subject matter of our preaching, in his majesty and truth and holiness and righteousness and wisdom and faithfulness and sovereignty and grace. I don't mean that we shouldn't preach about nitty-gritty things like parenthood and divorce and AIDS and gluttony and television and sex. What I mean is that every one of those things should be swept up into the holy presence of God and laid bare to the roots of its Godwardness or godlessness. [2]

God is the necessary subject matter of preaching because Christianity is God-centred and not man-centred. Furthermore because God has spoken and made himself known, preaching is the authoritative declaring of God and his ways and not the speculations of men and women about themselves and their world. From Him, through Him and to Him are all things (Rom. 11:36). The one true God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit made all things, by His will and power all things were made and have their being (Rev. 4:11). It is because God is the Holy, infinite-personal Creator, who thereby possesses ownership rights over men and women made in his image, that sin is primarily an offence against Him rather than against humanity. We are so attuned to the appalling inhumanity that is woven indelibly into the very fabric of history, and which continues unabated into the third millennium, that preaching which does not address these issues appears

removed, remote, indifferent and irrelevant. Yet the truth remains that the social, economic and environmental effects of sin are but symptoms and side effects of something that is much deeper and far worse. It is that we do not *know God*; that we are hostile in our minds towards Him, that we are alienated from His life, and that we neither thank nor glorify Him as God (Col. 1:21; Eph. 4:17-19; Gal. 4:8; Rom. 1:21-23, 28). Ultimately all men and women by virtue of their rebellion against a Holy God have provoked His anger, have incurred His wrath, and stand under His judgement both now and forever (Rom. 2:1-9). Preaching then must be God-centred precisely because it is estrangement from God that lies at the heart of the problem, and the Gospel alone is God's gracious declaration of how sinners may know Him and be accepted by Him. In the Gospel those who were without God in the world are brought near by the blood of Christ, those who did not know Him have now come to know Him and are known by Him (Eph. 2:12-13; Gal. 4:8-9). Eternal life is nothing short of knowing God and his Son Jesus Christ (John 17:3). Of course to say that the chief need of human beings is to 'know God' goes beyond the mere possession of true information about Him. It is that, but it is much more than that. By his sin-bearing substitutionary death, Jesus Christ the Father's Son received in himself the punishment that sinners deserved, he took all the consequences of sin upon himself and satisfied the righteous demands of a Holy God. The result of his death was to justify those who trust in him alone, forgiving their sins, averting God's wrath, accounting them as righteous in God's sight by imputing Christ's righteousness to them, establishing peace with God, and granting access to God's presence. All this is made a reality on a personal level by the working of the Holy Spirit as He enables sinful men and women to understand these things and receive them by faith, and as He implants a new principal of life and a desire to know God and be like Him. The Christian life is one therefore of knowing God, and knowing Him better and better, both in this life and in eternity. The death of Christ rescues from this present evil age, which is destined for destruction, and makes believers citizens of a kingdom that will be consummated when Christ the king returns and ushers in an everlasting reign of righteousness. What then is the chief end of preaching? It is, and must be, to bring men and women to a right knowledge of God, as the Gospel of Jesus Christ is unfolded to them. Therefore as the Bible is correctly taught, in relation to its central message-the Gospel of God (Rom. 1:1-4), God speaks and deals with human beings. The acceptance of the message brings eternal life; the rejection of it leaves individual men and women in a state of condemnation. Little wonder then that the Puritan Richard Baxter determined to preach 'as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men'. In an interview for *Christianity Today*, published in 1980, Carl Henry asked Martyn Lloyd-Jones why he seldom used humour in the pulpit. The veteran Welsh preacher answered in a way that is entirely in tune with the words of Richard Baxter:

I find it very difficult to be humorous in the pulpit. I always feel in the pulpit that I am in the terrible position of standing between God and souls that may go to hell. That position is too appalling for humour [3].

True preaching inevitably, then, makes us aware of God's existence and character, of the divine origin and authority of the Bible, and brings a consciousness that God is dealing with us and addressing us. Whenever the Bible is expounded truly, because of the inescapable relations of its constituent parts, what is at stake is eternal life or eternal condemnation. And this in the direct sense that the Gospel presents of our ultimate destination, and in the indirect sense that one is either persevering in the life of holiness or playing with the knowledge of God.

The Doctrine of God and Preaching

Preaching is made or marred by the view of God that sustains it. If we imagine God to be other than He is, then we will speak of Him in ways that correspond with our underlying theological assumptions. It is this that draws out from J. I. Packer an unfavourable assessment of contemporary evangelical life in comparison to former generations:

Whereas to the Puritans communion with God was a *great* thing, to evangelicals today it is a comparatively *small* thing. The Puritans were concerned about communion with God in a way that we are not...we do not spend much time, alone or together, in dwelling on the wonder of the fact that God and sinners have communion at all; no, we just take it for granted, and give our minds to other matters. Thus we make it plain that communion with God is a small thing to us...it does not startle us that the holy Creator should receive sinners into his company; rather, we take it for granted! [4]

If, as I have been arguing, preaching is to give us a sense of God and His presence, then the meaning of this must be filled out by Scripture and not be contemporary ideas and agendas, nor by taking God's attributes out of their Scriptural harmony. Models for understanding God and His relation to the world and sinners must be taken from Scripture not the perceived needs and ideas of society. That is to say, for example, God's immanence must never minimize His transcendence, or His love obscure His holiness. God can never be reduced to manageable proportions, He can never be related to on easy terms. True faith will always lead to the fear of a gracious God, for God is never less than holy. Therefore where there is no awe, reverence, fear, and repentance, there is no true knowledge of God. For it is these things that render God's love so amazing and His grace and mercy so astounding. Calvin's observations on the encounters with God recorded in Scripture are worth pondering:

Hence the dread and wonder with which the Scripture commonly represents the saints as stricken and overcome whenever they felt the presence of God. Thus it comes about that we see men who in his absence normally remained firm and constant, but who, when he manifests his glory, are so shaken and struck dumb as to be laid low by the dread of death-are in fact overwhelmed by it and almost annihilated. As a

consequence, we must infer that man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty. [5]

Again this seems strangely out of place in contemporary worship and preaching, as Piper notes:

Most people today have so little experience of deep, earnest, reverent, powerful encounters with God in preaching that the only associations that come to mind when the notion is mentioned are that the preacher is morose or boring or dismal or sullen or gloomy or surly or unfriendly...the result is a preaching atmosphere and a preaching style plagued by triviality, levity, carelessness, flippancy, and a general spirit that nothing of eternal and infinite proportions is being done or said on Sunday morning [6].

The factor that accounts for the seriousness that ought to be found in the preacher, and the seriousness to be found in the hearers, is the nature of the Word of God and of the God who has spoken. The impression given by those whose task it is to preach the Word, and by those who listen and take part in corporate worship, speaks volumes about the kind of God we imagine God to be. Tony Sargent, in his survey of the preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, comments that 'the doctrine you believe will shape the prayers that you offer' [7]. To this we might add all the other elements of public worship, including preaching. Great preachers and great preaching can only be produced where there is a vision of a great and holy God.

The Message and the Method must correlate

Preaching rests, therefore, on two theological foundations; firstly God and His essential nature and, secondly, our ability to know God's through His revelation. Both of these realities may be submerged by practices and methods that are not governed by the message itself and its theological bearings. Preaching ought never to be done in a cold detached manner as if the preacher stood in no emotional relation to the text. This is the antithesis of the way theological study is pursued in the academy, where 'objective scholarship' is a virtue. But it is impossible to approach the text of Scripture in a value neutral way and therefore to handle it with analytical detachment. Again, to imply that we may sit in judgement over the teaching of Scripture, or preach in such a way that is designed to explain away the text and emasculate it, merely indicates that we are operating from a different theological base than that of the self-revealing Holy God of Scripture. Preaching that is infected by a theology that is not subservient to in-scripturated-revelation is calculated only to parade its supposed learning, or piety, and impoverish the spiritual lives of those that it is inflicted upon. Even an orthodox view of Scripture and its teaching that leads to dullness and indifference in delivery is inadequate and unacceptable. Such preaching shows signs of being unconvinced that the Bible really is the Word of God or that the dire predicament of humanity in sin is really that bad, or the solution offered so great. Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the greatest theologian that the North American continent has ever produced, has been described as a

preacher who continually stood in awe at the weight of the truth he was charged to proclaim [8]. It is all the more remarkable when we consider Edwards' daily commitment to study and preparation, his immense learning and intellectual endeavours, which all but dwarf contemporary models but which did not produce a method of preaching that lacked conviction and intensity [9]. For Edwards it was an impossibility that a preacher could believe in heaven, and particularly in hell, and preach in a way that implied indifference to these truths. To do so betrays a contradiction, for the manner of the preaching is then clearly at odds with the subject [10]. Rather the words of J. C. Ryle, one time Bishop of Liverpool, used to describe the great evangelists of the 18th Century (themselves contemporaries of Edwards), must be true of all preachers:

They preached *fervently* and *directly*...they spoke with fiery zeal, like men who were thoroughly persuaded that what they said was true, and that it was of the utmost importance to your eternal interest to hear it. They spoke like men who had got a message from God to you, and must deliver it... [11]

It is not that pulpit fire-works are evidence of true fervour or spirituality; exuberant delivery may be no more than the amplification of natural personality. Ryle's words strike at the fundamental convictions about God and the truth of the Gospel that produces deadly earnestness in preaching. If these are some of the dangers that may work their way into the pulpit from the academy there are other errors that may intrude from popular sources. If our temptation is not to appear scholarly it may well be to appear affable, humorous and entertaining. This is not to say that humour has no place in preaching but that it is ever subservient and secondary to the preacher's first task. Humour and illustrations are only in place to draw appropriate attention to the actual teaching of Scripture. If they fail in this task then they simply draw attention away from God and His Word. Moreover, there are subjects that are too solemn for humour. Unless these things are checked by the message they are liable to cheapen and lighten subjects that are weighty, serious and precious. Again we return to controlling principles. The Apostle Paul's charge to Timothy was to 'preach the Word'; an imperative issued against the backdrop of the return of Christ, the judge of the living and the dead (2 Tim. 4:1-2). This is harder to do in an age where entertainment reigns and consumerism is the order of the day. It is far easier to pander to the demands of the moment. After all we are seeking to communicate into the twenty-first century, and how can we do so if we do not adopt the methods and techniques of our society? Yet to adopt this course of action uncritically would be to forget that God has condemned this world and its passing fads and fashions. It is not antiquated modes of communication that hold the church back but a lack of preachers who know God. Os Guinness has stated it well:

...transcendence is the source of all true proclamation. What did Jeremiah say of the false prophets? 'Which of them has stood in the presence of the Lord?' The Word is transcendent and those who bear the message of the Word must come from there. When I was a boy being brought up in evangelicalism, you could see from the very

demeanour of the preacher coming into the pulpit where he had come from. I don't often see that now amongst modern evangelical preachers, the sense of awe at having received a message from the King of Kings and which is about to be delivered to the people [12].

True Knowledge

Thus far we have concentrated on the message and its effects on how preaching ought to be done in a general way. As important as it is to note the several steps and stages, and all the other constituent elements that make up preaching, our focus has been on the end result of preaching and its relationship to God. Without this, preaching is of no value. Techniques and aides may prove useful in preparation and delivery but the big picture is the knowledge of who God is and how we relate to Him. This brings us to an absolute pre-requisite in the life of the preacher (which is also applicable to anyone who shares the Gospel, or who gives a talk to a group of any age, or who is studying the Bible with a friend). Quite simply, *you must be born again* (John 3:3). If there is an absence of a work of grace in your life, if you have not repented of your sins and are not trusting in the death of God's Son for your acceptance with God then your speaking is worthless. Without doubt the greatest blight that the church has faced are those who have the office of Christian leadership but who do not believe the Gospel or have not experienced its power in their lives. How can men and women see their sins as infinitely offensive in the sight of a Holy God if the preacher regards sins as the vestigial remains of an outdated morality, or of a God who is so loving that he can smile on wrong doing with benign indifference? How can people know true conviction and repentance, or seek holiness of life, if God is presented as happy to accept any lifestyle provided it is tolerant of others? Why should anyone trust in Jesus Christ and Him crucified, when God is said to welcome those of all religions or none? Who need fear hell and judgement when all will go to heaven and punishment is deemed incompatible with love? Why read the Bible when all it contains are human insights and best guesses at what some people imagined God to be like, but which we may take or leave as we see fit? Again it is not only overt liberal diversions from the truth of Scripture that may ruin the spiritual welfare of the preacher but also a dead, or merely cerebral, orthodoxy. It is possible to outline what faith in Christ is, and yet the description of it will do us no good if we know nothing of actually trusting in Christ to save us. Likewise to wax eloquently about walking with God is of no use if there is no reality of it lived out day by day. What advantage is there in declaring God's holiness if we know nothing of the fear of the Lord and think little of offending Him? It is possible, therefore, to live on preaching and doctrinal correctness and not to live on Christ, to condemn sin with the lips but to cherish and tolerate it in the life. This is a snare and temptation for all true Christians, but it is not impossible that there may be great learning, even evangelical orthodoxy, but no personal acquaintance with God. The way to begin the Christian life is also the way to maintain it, and the absence of applied truth is nothing short of spiritual disaster. Few have seen and stated this as clearly as John Owen:

When the heart is cast into the mould of the doctrine that the mind embraceth;...when not the sense of the words only is in our heads, but the sense of the things abides in our hearts; when we have communion with God in the doctrine that we contend for,- then shall we be garrisoned, by the grace of God, against all the assaults of men. And without this all our contending is, as to ourselves, of no value. What am I the better if I can dispute that Christ is God, but have no sense of sweetness in my heart from hence that he is God in covenant with my soul? What will it avail me to evince, by testimonies and arguments, that he hath made satisfaction for sin, if, through my unbelief, the wrath of God abideth on me, and I have no experience of my own being made the righteousness of God in him?...Will it be any advantage to me, in the issue, to profess and dispute that God worketh the conversion of a sinner by the irresistible grace of his Spirit, if I was never acquainted experimentally with the deadness and utter impotency to good, that opposition to the law of God, which is in my own soul by nature, [and] with the efficacy of the exceeding greatness of the power of God in quickening, enlightening, and bringing forth the fruits of obedience in me?...Let us, then, not think that we are any thing the better for our conviction of the truths of the great doctrines of the Gospel...unless we find the power of the truths abiding in our own hearts and have a continual experience of their necessity and excellency in our standing before God and our communion with him [13].

Owen is contending for the reality of Gospel truth as it displays itself in the experience and personal lives of theological students and all involved in Christian ministry. One of the many dangers that face evangelicals in the Western world is the assumption that intellectual affirmations of the Gospel are a sufficient indication of spiritual life. The Gospel may then be assumed, but not be the central reality of Christian belief and experience, with what it means to 'encounter God' being filtered through other, experiential, criteria. Similarly, creedal affirmation may be taken as a substitute for a genuine work of conversion. Richard Baxter, a contemporary of Owen, set out the tragedy of those who are ordained but ultimately worship an unknown God, preach an unknown Christ, pray through an unknown Spirit, and thus who recommend a state of holiness and communion with God and a glory and happiness which is unknown to them [14]. Baxter's words, as with Paul's in 2 Corinthians 13:5-6, are not a description of imaginary people. It is therefore wrong to assume that all professions of faith and Christian life are genuine. The tragedy of this is magnified in those who teach and have pastoral responsibility for others.

Knowing God

The preparation needed for a sermon can be plotted in two ways. Along one axis is the specific time needed for exegesis, interpretation, structure, and application of a particular text for a one off message or a series of sermons. Along another axis is the necessary preparation of the spiritual

life of the preacher. This task is continual and far more difficult to manage. It is also the backdrop to the specific task of preparing a particular message. We can sum it up in one important word, godliness. Furthermore it can be subdivided into the private or secret life of communion with God, and the outward observable life of holiness. Jonathan Edwards prized the importance of secret fellowship with God:

Some are greatly affected when in company but have nothing that bears any manner of proportion to it in secret, in close meditation, secret prayer, and conversing with God, when alone and separated from all the world. A true Christian doubtless delights in religious fellowship and Christian conversation, and finds much to affect his heart in it, but he also delights at times to retire from all mankind to converse with God...True religion disposes persons to be much alone in solitary places for holy meditation and prayer. So it wrought in Isaac, Gen. 24.63. And which is much more, so it wrought in Jesus Christ...The most eminent divine favours that the saints obtained that we read of in Scripture, were in their retirement...True grace delights in secret converse with God [15].

It would be easy to mark this off as the source of true power in preaching, as if the cultivation of the inner life was the magic wand that produced great preachers and will do so again. What is at stake is the distinction that needs to be made between technique and substance. When addressing a group of ministers Martyn Lloyd-Jones was closer to the mark when he said that failure to spend time in prayer was due to an insufficient desire for God, and that we do not desire Him because we do not know Him [16]. Once more it is not techniques that are needed but a recognition that to know God and be known by Him is the only thing that matters both now and for eternity. It is a measure of our spiritual well being both how we think about God and how that knowledge shapes the people we are, the people that we want to become, and how we will order our lives in the meantime. The traditional evangelical 'quiet time', the daily setting apart of Bible reading, prayer and reflection, has fallen somewhat on hard times as it has had to compete with the demands of the modern world on our lives. Yet although some circumstances in life squeeze out time for personal devotion, which ought not to drive anyone into a state of guilt, there is a question of spiritual appetite that needs addressing. If meeting with God in secret is not a priority, that in itself may be an indication that we simply do not know God as we ought to. In a sermon entitled 'The Most High a Prayer-Hearing God' Jonathan Edwards remarked:

We may learn how highly we are privileged, in that we have the Most High revealed to us, who is a God that heareth prayer...we have the true God made known to us; a God of infinite grace and mercy; a God full of compassion to the miserable, who is ready to pity us under all our troubles and sorrows, to hear our cries, and to give us all the relief which we need...How highly privileged are we, in that we have the holy word of this

same God, to direct us how to seek for mercy!...If we enjoy so great a privilege as to have the prayer-hearing God revealed to us, how great will be our folly and inexcusableness, if we neglect the privilege, or make no use of it, and deprive ourselves of the advantage by not seeking this God in prayer [17].

There is no substitute for private prayer and meditation on Scripture in order for us to be better acquainted with God. This is the staple diet of the spiritual life for all Christians, and so where it is neglected in preachers and teachers it must have an ill effect on their listeners. John Owen once remarked that if the Word does not dwell with power in us then it would not pass with power from us [18]. Neglect of the inner life is the cause of much of the weakness we experience in preaching. At this point the resources and help that can be gleaned from the biographies of preachers used of God in the past are invaluable. Robert Murray M'Cheyne, the nineteenth century Scot, recorded this as his goal for 'Reformation in Secret Prayer':

I ought to spend the best hours of the day in communion with God. It is my noblest and most fruitful employment, and is not to be thrust into any corner. The morning hours, from six to eight, are the most uninterrupted, and should be thus employed, if I can prevent drowsiness [19].

His friend and fellow minister Andrew Bonar noted M'Cheyne's reflections on the ministry of preaching 'Jesus to dying men' in a letter to a colleague in Scotland, 'speak for eternity. Above all things cultivate your own spirit. A word spoken by you when your conscience is clear, and your heart full of God's Spirit, is worth ten thousand words spoken in unbelief and sin' [20]. This he sought to do by 'giving the eye the habit of looking upward all the day, and drawing down gleams from the reconciled countenance' and by the daily enlargement of his heart in fellowship with God [21]. The value of building a secret history with God and its effects on ministering to others draws the following comment from Bonar concerning M'Cheyne's preaching:

From the first he fed others by what he himself was feeding upon. His preaching was in a manner the development of his soul's experience. It was a giving out of the inward life. He loved to come up from the pastures wherein the Chief Shepherd had met him - to lead the flock entrusted to his care to the spots where he had found nourishment [22].

While it is possible, and regrettable, to live a surrogate Christian life from the experiences of others, both past and present, nevertheless there is great help to be gained from knowing church history better and learning from Christians who have already walked on the way that leads to life. There are no short cuts in the Christian life, and no final conflict between a life of disciplined living

and grace. To the extent that we can say 'to know Him properly is a life full of peace', [23] to the greater extent that we can state as our aim gaining Christ and being found in Him (Phil. 2:8-9), and know the reality of those words, to that extent the priorities of our lives will be ordered by the great and glorious God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Holiness and the Preacher

Having considered something of fellowship and communion with God we now turn to the necessity of holiness of life for the preacher. It is not too much to say that personal holiness is indispensable for Christian service. Positively this will mean dedication to God and the bending of all our faculties and powers for His service. Negatively it involves the 'mortification', to use the old word, or 'putting to death of sin' (Rom. 8:12-13; Col. 3:5-8). For the Christian this is carried out in the context of union with Christ in His death and resurrection, so that by the Spirit this union is brought to bear on sin and its dethroned mastery (Rom. 6:1-14; Col. 3:1-4). It also includes the reality of indwelling sin, this side of the resurrection of the body, and the subsequent frustrations and struggles that constitute the normal Christian life (Rom. 8:9-13, 22-23; Gal. 5:16-18). With piercing clarity Robert Murray M'Cheyne set the requirements for fruitful preaching ministry in the context of holiness, when writing to a friend, 'In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God' [24]. In the final analysis we can all admire and aspire to the gifts and abilities of others but unless they play a secondary role to the pursuit of holiness our priorities are frankly askew. Paul lays out for Timothy the pattern of his ministry, as it will be seen by his personal example. The things Paul lists, speech, life, love, faith, and purity (1 Tim. 4:12), are not only to be present for others to see but cover the private life of the preacher also. The evangelist Roger Carswell comments in one of his books that the battle for godly character is won or lost in the way that we go about the small things in daily life. It is not big sins, as we perceive them, that constitute the greatest threat but the daily acts of disobedience and neglect that pave the way for greater falls. Thus Paul's exhortation to watch your life and doctrine closely (1 Tim. 4:16) needs to be worked out in all day, every day obedience, in a humble and contrite walk with God. Richard Baxter warned ministers of the dangers of unsaying with their lives what they say with their tongues, and of living in the sins that they preach against in others [25]. The neglect of holiness saps preaching of its life:

This is the way to make men think that the Word of God is but an idle tale, and to make preaching seem no better than prating. He that means as he speaks, will surely do as he speaks ...We must study as hard how to live well, as how to preach well. We must think again, how to compose our lives, as may most tend to men's salvation, as well as our sermons [26].

The qualifications for overseers in the Pastoral Epistles, in addition to doctrinal purity and teaching ability, place holiness and consistency of life high on the agenda for Christian service (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:6-14). It is not that Paul is recommending these things for *effective* service to be achieved; rather they are the basic pre-requisites of any, and all, Christian work. To lower these standards is to tarnish and undermine the purpose of the ministry of the Gospel that is 'the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness' (Titus 1:1b). Much more can and ought to be said on the nature of sin and sins, of the necessity of high standards, and the maintaining of a close walk with God, and this must be the dominant thought in the life and preparation of preachers. Who is fit then to preach the Word? Is there anyone whose conscience is clear, who feels no regret over past sins or condemnation for their present behaviour? It is an axiom of the Christian life that the longer it goes on the better acquainted with indwelling sin you become. John Newton once wrote to advise a friend on this subject:

Every sin, in its own nature, has a tendency towards a final apostasy; but there is a provision in the covenant of grace, and the Lord, in His own time, returns to convince, humble, pardon, comfort and renew the soul...we begin at length to learn that we are nothing, have nothing, can do nothing, but sin. And thus we are gradually prepared to live more out of ourselves, and to derive all our sufficiency of every kind from Jesus, the fountain of grace. We learn to tread more warily, to trust less to our own strength, to have lower thoughts of ourselves, and higher thoughts of *Him*.' [27]

J. I. Packer summarised the stated aims of Charles Simeon's sermons as 'to humble the sinner, to exalt the Saviour, and to promote holiness; and it was the second aim that gave point to the first and meaning to the third.' [28] What Simeon intended to produce in his hearers is the very thing that must first be worked out in the life of the preacher. God's holiness would overwhelm us entirely if it were not for the blood of Christ. And it is to Christ's blood that the Apostle John directs us if we are to walk in the light and go on being cleansed from our sins (1 John 1:5-2:2). One who deeply understood the nature of his own heart and the unqualified demands of holiness put it like this:

I am persuaded that I shall obtain the highest amount of present happiness, I shall do most for God's glory and the good of man, and I shall have the fullest reward in eternity, by maintaining a conscience always washed in Christ's blood, by being filled with the Holy Spirit at all times, and by attaining the most entire likeness to Christ in mind, will, and heart, that is possible for a redeemed sinner to attain to in this world [29].

We would do well to ponder these words and be persuaded of them for ourselves.

Why Preaching matters

Students entering Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, in the summer of 1944, did so whilst many of their peers were fighting and laying down their lives in Europe and the Pacific. Professor John Murray who presented the seriousness of the choice they had made addressed them, and the vocation they would take up, in these words:

You are preparing yourselves in pursuance of a divine call for the ministry of the Word without which the whole world perishes in sin, in misery and death. You are training for the most militant service in that kingdom that is an everlasting kingdom and in that dominion which shall not be destroyed. Militant service, indeed, for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places. All of this lays upon you an exacting obligation [30].

With the brevity of life a daily reality in the long off summer of 1944 the choice of training for the ministry ahead of military service, and hence studies over hardship, may well have appeared close to cowardice. Certainly the distinguished English preacher John Stott knew acute family pain as he chose ordination over military service in the early 1940s [31]. Yet it is because eternal issues are at stake, that eclipse the struggles and suffering of this world, that preaching is not an occupation designed to provide an escape from the hardships of life or an alternative to other careers. John Piper has unfavourably contrasted Jonathan Edwards' grasp of eternal realities to present standards:

Compelling preaching gives the impression that something very great is at stake. With Edwards' view of the reality of heaven and hell and the necessity of persevering in a life of holy affections and godliness, eternity was at stake every Sunday. This sets him apart from the average preacher today. Our emotional rejection of hell, and our facile view of conversion and the abundant false security we purvey have created an atmosphere in which the great biblical intensity of preaching is almost impossible [32].

Without the knowledge of God as the Holy Creator and Judge of all, and of human beings as rebellious sinners who are held accountable for their actions and who are thereby under God's just condemnation, the urgency of being right with God solely through Christ's death is dissipated and undermined. Without this true knowledge of God, preaching is reduced to a tiresome monologue or second-class entertainment. Great preaching is utterly dependable on the vision of God that sustains it, and it requires men of God to produce it. B. B. Warfield saw no disparity between the office of the theologian and that of the preacher, for it is the knowledge of God that produces both:

The systematic theologian is pre-eminently a preacher of the gospel; and the end of his work is obviously not merely the logical arrangements of the truths which come under his hand, but the moving of men, through their power, to love God with all their hearts and their neighbours as themselves; to choose their portion with the Saviour of their souls; to find and hold Him precious; and to recognise and yield to the sweet influences of the Holy Spirit whom He has sent. With such truth as this he will not dare to deal in a cold and merely scientific spirit, but will justly and necessarily permit its preciousness and its practical destination to determine the spirit in which he handles it, and to awaken the reverential love with which alone he should investigate its reciprocal relations. For this he needs to be suffused at all times with a sense of the unspeakable worth of the revelation which lies before him as the source of his material, and with the personal bearings of its separate truths on his own heart and life; he needs to have had and to be having a full, rich, and deep religious experience of the great doctrines with which he deals; he needs to be living close to his God, to be resting always on the bosom of his Redeemer, to be filled at all times with the manifest influences of the Holy Spirit. The student of systematic theology needs a very sensitive religious nature, a most thoroughly consecrated heart, and an outpouring of the Holy Ghost upon him, such as will fill him with that spiritual discernment, without which all native intellect is in vain. He needs to be not merely a student, not merely a thinker, not merely a systematizer, not merely a teacher—he needs to be like the beloved disciple himself in the highest, truest, and the holiest sense, a divine [33].

The knowledge of a Holy God, personally grasped and daily lived out in His presence, among His people and before a watching world. Is this vision too much to ask? Is it too high an ideal for the evangelical church in the twenty-first century? In the words of the greatest pioneer missionary the church has known ‘...who is equal to such a task?’ His own answer drives us back to the One who makes and sends out preachers, ‘in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God’ (2 Cor. 2:16-17).

Theology and Preaching

‘Though he was a scientific theologian who intended, God helping him, to establish solid doctrinal foundations in the Reformed Churches; and though he was also a lecturer to the students who met in the College at Geneva...nevertheless it was not to these activities so much as to the pulpit itself that the major part of his time was given. His primary obligation was not to fellow scholars, nor even to his students, but to the ordinary people...who crowded St. Peter’s day by day to listen to his sermons’ [34]. So reads the introduction to a modern reprint of John Calvin’s sermons on Ephesians. It is historically indisputable that Calvin was pre-eminently *the theologian* of the

Protestant Reformation in Europe, whose thought has shaped theology in the church and the academy for over four centuries. And yet for Calvin theology was to be preached, and preaching was none other than the exposition of the Word of God. In the previous section we noted that the aim of preaching is to bring men and women to a right knowledge of God, as the Gospel about God's Son is unfolded. Preaching ought to be shaped by the knowledge of the holiness and majesty of God, and both public worship and the private life of the preacher must be moulded by the same truths. In this section we will consider something of the relationship between theology and preaching, particularly systematic theology. In an age where biblical illiteracy is rampant, and privatised beliefs are the norm, it is essential that the whole revealed, and complete, will of God is known both in the church and in the world. Our aim therefore is fairly modest. Preaching ought to be expository, explaining what the Bible says and what it means, and doctrinal, articulating the truths that the Bible teaches and how they relate to each other. To begin to answer questions such as 'Who is Jesus Christ?' 'What is salvation?' 'How can someone be saved?' 'What happens to people when they die?' 'How can God be sovereign and human beings be accountable for their actions?' is to engage in theology. The answers to those questions will be culled from the total knowledge someone possesses of God, the sum of individual parts of the Bible rightly or wrongly understood, as well as thoughts derived from outside of the Bible. Forming appropriate answers to these questions is the task of systematic theology. The challenge to anyone who preaches is whether they are explaining the Bible correctly, and whether they are enabling their listeners to form a right understanding of the whole of Christian truth.

What is theology?

Put succinctly, it is the knowledge of God [35]. Christian theology is drawn from the data of revelation. This comprises general revelation, in creation, providence, and in human beings made in God's image; and special revelation, in God's redemptive acts, in Scripture, and in the incarnation of the second person in the Godhead. David F. Wells has argued that theology should mean the same thing whatever the setting (the lecture room, church service, hall group Bible study or Sunday school class). Furthermore theology is made up of three constituent elements that have become fragmented in the modern world and have undermined the subject:

- (1)
- (2) A confessional element, (2) reflection on this confession, and (3) the cultivation of a set of virtues that are grounded on the first two elements [36].

The meaning of these elements for evangelical theology, with its roots in the Protestant Reformation, is clear. Confession is what the Church believes and is derived from and dependent on the Word of God. Even where there is disagreement on the precise details of what the Bible teaches it is, nevertheless, the sole and final authority in all things. Confession, says Wells, 'must be at the center of every theology that wants to be seen as *theologia*, the knowledge of God' [37].

Reflection is the attempt to understand confession in the present by ranging over the whole of God's disclosure in Scripture, humbly recognising and receiving the labours and insights of the church throughout history, and finally untangling what is confessed from the prevailing trends of the day that intrude upon the life and thought of the church [38]. The cultivation of virtues is the logical outworking of wisdom for life 'built on the pillars of confession and surrounded by the scaffolding of reflection', viewing God as holy, spirituality as centrally moral, and Christian life as the practice of truth not a matter of technique [39]. It is the estimation of David Wells that evangelicals are substituting the confessional centre with a new set of principles and are drifting away from the point where they can meaningfully be called historic Protestants, not so much by denying what is central but by orchestrating evangelical practice in such a way that doctrine does not define how things are done. Technique replaces truth and theology disappears, or rather a different kind of theology replaces it.

Borrowing Wells' three-part framework we may note the various sub-disciplines that are to inform reflection and feed the cultivation of virtues [40]. There are at least ten, and it would be hard to improve on J. I. Packer's summary:

The first is *exegesis*, for which the question always is: what was this or that biblical text written to convey to its readers? The second is *biblical theology*, for which the question is: what is the total message of the canonical books on this or that subject? The third is *historical theology*, the bonding glue of church history, exploring how Christians in the past viewed specific biblical truths. The fourth is *systematic theology*, which rethinks biblical theology with the help of historical theology in order to restate the faith, topic by topic and as a whole, in relation to current interests, assumptions, questions, hopes, fears and uncertainties in today's church and world. The fifth is *apologetics*, which seeks to commend and defend the faith as rational and true in face of current unbelief, misbelief and puzzlement. The sixth is *ethics*, which systematizes the standards of Christian life and conduct and applies them to particular cases. The seventh is *spiritual theology*...which studies how to maintain sanctifying communion with God. The eighth is *missiology*, which aims to see how God's people should view and tackle their gospel-spreading, church-planting and welfare-bringing tasks across cultural barriers worldwide. The ninth is *liturgy*, which asks how God is best and most truly worshipped, and how true worship may be achieved in existing churches. The tenth is *practical theology*, embracing pastoral theology, family theology and political theology as it explores how to further God's work and glory in home, church and society [41].

Systematic theology, although it appears fourth in the list, forms the apex and fulcrum for the other nine disciplines. It is the sum of the material of the first three and the source of material for the

remaining six. Whether theology is ever taught and consistently practiced in this manner is another question. Evangelical theology and scholarship must be committed to pursuing all ten disciplines, and that in a unified and coherent way. And it is not too much to say that the preacher, as with all believers, must be a theologian.

The Primacy of Systematic Theology

The task and method of systematic theology is easy to malign and misunderstand. It does not imply that any other theological disciplines are less than logical or that they are haphazard in their arrangements. Neither is it dependant on proof-texting in order to produce its results. Nor does it treat texts as a-temporal and a-historical thereby ignoring historical and cultural settings and literary context. To be sure it may be guilty of both these errors but not as a matter of course. Rather systematic theology seeks to answer the following question in the following way:

“What does the whole Bible teach us about a given topic?” Stated more technically, systematic theology is that methodological study of the Bible that views the Holy Scriptures as a *completed* revelation, in distinction from the disciplines of Old Testament theology, New Testament theology, and biblical theology, which approach the Scriptures as an *unfolding* revelation. Accordingly, the systematic theologian, viewing the Scriptures as a completed revelation, seeks to understand holistically the plan, purpose, and didactic intention of the divine mind revealed in Holy Scripture, and to arrange that plan, purpose and didactic intention in orderly and coherent fashion as articles of the Christian faith [42].

This quotation from the Presbyterian theologian Robert Reymond helpfully illuminates why systematic theology is primary, and what under girds it. Systematic theology is only as good as the Biblical theology that it has attempted to collate, which in itself is made up of the exegesis of various parts of Scripture from the stages of redemptive history. Evangelicals hold to fundamental convictions about the authority of the Bible, its nature as a completed revelation, and its sufficiency for faith and life. It is God’s final Word that reliably teaches salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The end task, then, of all departments of theology is to contribute to the total understanding of God’s self-revelation in Scripture. Systematic theology is not revelation; it merely deals with the subject matter of revelation and arranges it logically and coherently for the benefit of the church. The value of a systematic theology is determined by its pre-suppositions regarding the sources of revelation and their authority. It is the consolidated reflection on the confession of the Christian church, to borrow Wells’ categories. Furthermore the task of systematic theology is never complete. The Christian life is not just about the transformation of character but also the renewing of the mind. There is to be progression in knowledge as bad theology is excised and truth built into the framework of our total understanding of God and his ways. In short the Christian must be

committed to loving God with their mind and does so as the Bible shapes his or her total understanding of Christian truth. No church or Christian can ignore the task of systematic theology because it is simply unavoidable. Any, and all reflection on God, drawn from whatever source, and leading to whatever results, is a form of systematic theology. What is needed for the Christian who is seeking to grow in their individual and corporate relationship with God is thoughtful reflection on this process and the willingness to do it as best they can. One thing that is definite is that it cannot be avoided because as Gerald Bray has said:

The message of the Bible is a message of spiritual truth addressed to the human mind. Dogmatic definitions of its content are not an aberration, but the logical outcome of the process of revelation itself. Salvation for the whole man cannot bypass the mind, but must use it for the powerful weapon which it is [43].

How theology can mar preaching

This subject can be dealt with in two ways. It is clear from the New Testament that preaching, which is after all the communication of theological truth, can be ruined if the theology that feeds it is wrong. Throughout the history of the church, largely until the Enlightenment's erosion of orthodoxy, Christians have operated with the categories of truth and error and therefore have understood there to be such a thing as false teaching and heresy. False teaching is the perversion of Christian truth that stems from rival sources of authority to Scripture, wrong exegesis, the isolation of particular truths (and therefore the miss-shaping of a particular truth), and/or the addition and subtraction of truths. Given that for the past two centuries theology in the academy, and in seminaries, has been shaped by Enlightenment ideas about reason and revelation (and now by post-modernity the stepchild of the Enlightenment project) the waters of Christian orthodoxy have been muddied and poisoned. So much so that to hold onto categories of orthodoxy and heresy has become the only heresy that remains. The effects of this as it has trickled down from the university to the pulpit to the pew have, to borrow a phrase, succeeded in emptying churches and lives. In this sense theology has had a catastrophic effect on preaching because its controlling principles, the Word of God correctly handled, have been eroded and replaced by reason and experience. It is little wonder then that the dangers that still face believing students in university theology departments remain those of bowing to the god of scholarship, crafted by the results of Higher learning and the whims of what the scholarly guild will allow. It is understandable to feel intimidated by tutors with several degrees, years of teaching their discipline, and general life experience. Nevertheless, and with all due respect, theology has not always been taught in this way, nobody is free from bias (particularly the intellectual effects of sin) and thinks in a value neutral way, and there are inevitable consequences in life from the view of God that is being offered. The results of liberalism have been disastrous for the church and particularly for preaching [44]. It is remarkable that a senior church figure has said that 'liberalism is a creative

and constructive element for exploring theology today' [45]. One finds it hard to imagine the Apostle Paul speaking so warmly about error given his words in Acts 20:28-31 (assuming of course that the Paul of Luke-Acts is not a figure constructed by the author who pays a passing resemblance to the author of some of the New Testament epistles that bear his name).

The second way that theology mars preaching can take a number of forms. The pulpit, or platform, can be the place where someone parades his or her learning and voluminous reading. Implying that those who are aware of the latest research, or who can cite what the most notable authorities have said on this or that verse can only handle texts. None of this is intended to disparage learning. It is very easy, however, to keep the Scriptures and their meaning in the hands of a new breed of priests. Again it would be wrong to suggest that parts of Scripture are not very hard to understand, and that the Church does not owe a great debt to those who have dedicated their lives to theological research. What needs reflecting on is the capacity for the preacher, or theology student, to be puffed up with intellectual pride like a swollen toad (to borrow a phrase from Calvin). Martyn Lloyd-Jones summed up this attitude well:

'A little learning is a dangerous thing'. That does not mean, of course, that there is no danger in much knowledge. There is. But I am not sure that in this respect there is not a greater danger in a little, because it always means that the element of the tyro or novice who imagines that his little knowledge is all knowledge comes in...That in turn expresses itself in the use of slogans, clichés, tabloid expressions and phrases which always characterizes this condition...That is unfailingly indicative of a little knowledge, a lack of true knowledge, and above all of this lack of balance of knowledge [46].

At least one temptation that arises from this is to turn the pulpit into a lecture theatre, a platform to impart to a congregation all the complex issues that they have never thought about but that *you* think they simply must consider. Once more the subtle threat is to display learning rather than to teach and edify. The test of true preaching, including that which is trying to stimulate better theological understanding, is whether it is motivated by love. To leave people impressed with your knowledge, dazzled by your intellect, and frustrated by their supposed ignorance, is to fail as a Christian preacher. Anyone can repeat theological terminology but it requires skill and craft to take complex subjects and to explain them at a level that is accessible, whilst being motivated by a desire to see people grow and mature in Christ.

As the tyranny of learning can be inflicted on congregations, so can the fog of ignorance. If a preacher fills out the meaning of a passage not by explaining what is there (exegesis) but by importing ideas from elsewhere then the capacity to skew right understanding is a real threat. Preachers and teachers are responsible for the spiritual welfare of their listeners, even if they are a

visiting speaker, and must let the weight of this impress itself on how they prepare and what they deliver. Each sermon has the capacity to advance or retard a congregations' understanding of God and His ways and will contribute to or hinder each individual's capacity to think authentically about God, Christ, sin, salvation, the world and themselves. Earlier we stated the truism that everyone has a theology because any thoughts or discussion about God means that we are theologising. What is needed is a good theology rather than a bad one. Good theology is formed as we submit our thoughts to the authority and teaching of the Bible so that our thinking is not coloured by a few verses here and there but by the whole counsel of God. Part of the process of possessing a renewed mind is the ongoing experience of grasping the meaning of individual parts of Scripture. This is in fact what Christians do if they are asked why they believe certain things (e.g. 'how is someone right with God?' or 'how can one God be three persons?'). The answers to these questions rely on previous understanding of particular parts of Scripture. Therefore while there may be nothing pernicious or deliberately misleading in announcing a text and then giving a talk that fails to derive its structure and content from that text, its long term effects weaken the ability of listeners to construct a right understanding of God. Where a talk has explicit truth content, the material is patently Biblical, but fails to explain the passage it is meant to be based on, the immediate effects may be very beneficial but not necessarily so helpful if this occurs week in week out. The reasons why this occurs are varied and may not be universally or acutely present. At one level it may merely demonstrate insufficient training or inappropriate models of ministry. For churches that do not have full time ministers, or speakers who also have other occupations, there is the difficulty of insufficient time for preparation and personal study. Whatever the setbacks involved churches that seek to uphold the authority of Scripture and preach the Gospel need to aim for excellence in teaching the Bible. On the other hand it is possible that a failure to structure sermons around a section of Scripture may indicate an element of unbelief about the importance and sufficiency of Scripture. Either as a preacher, or a member of a church, it is worth reflecting on how the Bible is being taught and what criteria are being used to teach it. Are hard passages being avoided or explained away? If the preaching is topical or subject based rather than sequential and expository (verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book after book) who decides on the subjects, and why? Are there important truths that are being neglected and ignored? Do certain subjects dominate? Why are many books of the Bible unfamiliar and unexplored? The Bible is open to massive abuse in the hands of church leaders and preachers, not only can they misinterpret it but they may also preside over which parts are taught and which parts are passed over. In the end such malpractice deforms our vision of God for we are encouraged to think of Him as other than He is. Lurking behind this failure is a faulty theology, for if what 'Scripture says' 'God says' [47] then teaching the whole Bible must be the priority of every church. Anything less than this betrays a different manifesto for the role of the Bible in the church than the one laid down by the Apostle Paul (2 Tim. 3:16).

How theology helps preaching

If theology that mars preaching ultimately stems from a failure to teach the Bible then the starting point for faithful preaching must stem from a right view of the authority and life-giving nature of Holy Scripture. After all God's words are not idle but life (Deut. 32:46-47). Indeed the perennial question that must be faced by all theologies is that of ultimate authority. Classical liberalism subverted the authority of 'Scripture alone' and supplanted it with reason and experience. Both of these replacement authorities continue to clamour for the high ground by relativizing Scripture's demands on belief and behaviour by appealing to the cultural context of language, symbolic non-literal history, and by the kind of deft exegetical ingenuity that can make Scripture say whatever you want it to say [48]. Thus the authority of Scripture is upheld but is hollowed out by what it is made to say.

How then do theology and preaching relate? In the main preaching must be the exposition of the Word of God, explaining and unfolding what the text says, what it means, and how it applies. Because exposition is not the same as giving a running commentary on a passage, preachers may begin with contemporary assumptions and attitudes about God from both within and without the church and show how the text addresses these and corrects them. The goal is to expound and apply what the text says and to do that effectively the preacher may anticipate the conclusions that the audience already hold to on the subject in hand, as well as the conclusions that he wishes to steer them towards. Whenever a passage of Scripture is read or is expounded there is a framework present in how we move from text to application, and therefore how we articulate what God is saying to the contemporary Christian, church and the world. As a minimum there are four steps or stages:

1. Exegesis, or what does the text say?
2. Hermeneutics, or what does the text mean?
3. Biblical and systematic theology, or where does the text fit in the unfolding revelation in Scripture and how does it fit into the total system of Christian truth?
4. Application, or how does the text apply today?

Preachers must do the hard work of exegeting a passage. This necessitates working from a correct translation and carefully reading the passage noting its literary type, structure, language patterns etc. Closely related is the task of establishing what the text originally meant. The meaning for today will be found in what the text meant to the original audience and this will be dependent on what the text says. A text cannot mean what it does not say. Unless the meaning of a text is established from what the text says the constant danger is that its meaning will be filled out from by what the reader or preacher thinks it means. The third step is crucial in aiding correct interpretation. Whenever we read or expound a text we do so from a particular context (a chapter

or book), from a distinct genre or corpus (wisdom literature, gospels, Pauline epistles etc.) and from a certain stage in redemptive history (Old and New Testament, pre- and post-resurrection). In this way we must recognise where the text fits, and how it contributes to, the unfolding purposes of God from Genesis to Revelation. Moreover, we are then able to see how the text fits into the total system of Christian truth and how that system contributes to our grasp of that particular text. For example the account in 1 Kings 19 of Elijah meeting with God at Mount Horeb has important precursors in Moses receiving the covenant at Sinai/Horeb (Exodus 19). The text then is not about Elijah hearing the still small voice of God and his example for us (1 Kings 19:12), so much as his complaint at the failure of the covenant and his return to the place where the covenant was originally given. No new covenant or revelation is given to Elijah, there is still an election by God's grace (1 Kings 19:18) and so the covenant has not been undone. There will, however, be a new covenant, a new Moses and a new Exodus and it will come through the one who Moses and Elijah will see with the human eye in His divine splendour, Jesus the Son of God (Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36). Whatever lessons can be drawn from Elijah's faith for contemporary believers must also be seen in the context of the unfolding revelation of God, the nature of the covenant, and the coming of God's Son. To put it another way we move from Elijah to today only by route of how the story of Elijah directs back to Moses at Sinai and forward to Jesus' transfiguration. The narrative from 1 Kings also has important things to tell us about God's faithfulness and how he relates to His people by way of covenant and electing grace which Paul draws on in Romans 11:1-6 (cf. Romans 9:1-9). We will return to the task of systematic theology and the aid that it gives in a later section. The process of correctly applying a text can now be approached, and that is now safeguarded by the work of exegesis, hermeneutics, Biblical, and systematic theology.

Biblical and Systematic Theology

Remarkably the twentieth century witnessed the rise of a Biblical theology movement and a renaissance, in its last quarter, of the writing of systematic theologies. The emergence of the latter is striking given the academic antipathy in Biblical studies towards any form of unity between Old and New Testament theology and even between individual authors. The Bible should not be viewed as a unity but as a collection of overlapping and at many points conflicting theologies. To even suggest, as we have been doing, that there is agreement in concept, a unity of theology amidst diversity of style, between Moses, Isaiah, John, Paul and the writer to the Hebrews, is to swim against the tide of liberal scholarship. To outline a defence of the possibility of Biblical and systematic theology is beyond the scope of this chapter and would ultimately include an articulation of the very foundations of evangelical theology [49]. Both Biblical and systematic theology are possible because of the nature of God and His ability to reveal Himself through personal and verbal revelation to fallen men and women in space and time. It is the unity provided by the one divine author who stands behind, initiates and superintends the work of the human authors that makes systematic theology possible, and by implication also makes the task of Biblical theology a

viable reality. Both branches of theology must be pursued by the preacher as he seeks to understand the progressive unfolding of revelation in each stage in Redemptive history and the logical relations of each part of the completed revelation. John Murray helpfully explains the interconnection of the two disciplines:

Systematic theology deals with special revelation as a finished product incorporated for us in Holy Scripture. But special revelation in its totality is never conceived of apart from the history by which it became a finished product. As we think of, study, appreciate, appropriate, and apply the revelation put into our possession by inscripturation, we do not properly engage in any of these exercises except as the panorama of God's movements in history comes within our vision or at least forms the background of our thought. In other words, redemptive and revelatory history conditions our thought at every point or stage in our study of Scripture revelation. Therefore, what is the special interest of Biblical theology is never divorced from our thought when we study any part of Scripture and seek to bring its treasures of truth to bear upon the synthesis which systematic theology aims to accomplish. Furthermore, the tendency to abstraction which ever lurks for systematic theology is hereby counteracted. The various data are interpreted not only in their scriptural context but also in their historical context...Texts will not thus be forced to bear a meaning they do not possess nor forced into a service they cannot perform. But in the locus to which they belong and by the import they do possess they will contribute to the sum-total of revelatory evidence by which biblical doctrine is established [50].

Biblical theology acts as a corrective against reading texts in isolation, as if they are hermetically sealed off from the storyline of redemptive history. Positively it enables the preacher to stimulate good habits of Bible reading in the church and to enrich the understanding of Christians as they see the plan of redemption foretold, patterned, promised and fulfilled in the incarnation, death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Why preaching must draw on Systematic Theology

The effect of culture upon the church is similar to a moth being drawn to a light bulb. The power of attraction continues whilst the health of the fluttering insect is being impaired. In the previous section on 'God and Preaching' we argued that the worth and value of preaching is determined by the theology that sustains it, and therefore where the doctrine of God falls short of His greatness and majesty the pulpit is inevitably moulded into the shape of the idol it serves. One of the most beneficial remedies for the evangelical church in the twenty first century is the rich history of theology and preaching from former generations. It is only presumption of the worst kind that imagines that the present is the benchmark for true spirituality. In spite of the educational

advances of the last two hundred years and the availability of Bibles in contemporary language the standards of Biblical literacy and articulate theological definition are far from acceptable. In large measure the fault is attributable to the lack of theological preaching in the churches. That is not to say that it is entirely absent at present, and it must be born in mind that truth is not necessarily popular or sought after (2 Tim. 4:3-5). Nevertheless it is the task of preachers to teach the Word of God. Positively this involves enabling believers to know what they believe, and why they believe it, so that they will speak the truth in love and be built up in Christ; negatively the warnings posted about false teachers and every wind of teaching that leaves believers tossed back and forth by the waves is no idle threat (Eph. 4:14-16).

Systematic theology aids the preacher's task and forms an integral part of the goal of preaching for the following reasons. We naturally think in terms of subjects that can be stated as questions. In fact this is the way non-Christians most often enquire about what Christians believe and why. An example would be 'what happens to people when they die?' The way in which we answer this question involves at the very least eschatology (the last things, heaven and hell etc.), our doctrine of what a human being is (are we more than biological entities? do we have immortal souls?), and the doctrine of sin. The form of our answer will be a propositional summary of Biblical teaching. We may state it in the following way, 'the Bible says that death is the punishment for sin, death isn't natural because we were made to know God and relate to Him, when people die the Bible says that they will be judged...' and so on. This kind of answer is made up of our reading of the Bible, the Christian books we have read, the results of reflection and discussion, personal views, and what we have been taught at home and church. If our questioner was to probe a little further then all the component parts of our answer will need to be substantiated from the Book that we regard as our ultimate authority. How many verses would we turn to? Have we understood these verses in context and their implications for other parts of our answer? Assuming that we have listened well, a significant resource in forming our answer will have been the teaching we have received in church; or, for the preacher, one hopes that the people who listen week by week have been equipped to give a satisfying answer. It is in part because we think in subjects that are logically related to other subjects that preaching must aim toward establishing a good understanding of the system of Christian truth. Another example would be how a series of expository sermons deals with doctrines as and when they arise in the text. John in the prologue to his gospel tells us that the Word was with God, the Word was God, and that the Word became flesh. Assuming that the amount of text to be covered and the amount of time to expound it in are not disproportionate, some thought ought to be given to how John 1:1-18 contributes to the understanding of what Scripture teaches about the person of Christ and the doctrine of God. Because the doctrinal understanding of who Jesus is (Eternal God, who became incarnate, and so was fully God and fully man; or more simply the Son of God, equal with the Father) is the answer that is likely to be given to the question 'who is Jesus?' it is necessary to show that John affirms the full deity of

Christ as do the other New Testament writers. The doctrine of the person of Christ runs throughout the New Testament not only in the passages that explicitly call him God (*theos*), but also in those that attribute to Jesus the titles and names of God and the prerogatives of deity. In this way the audience are given a fuller picture of what Scripture teaches and why this truth is so important. Conversely it also gives an opportunity to look at alleged verses that deny Christ's deity (and why opponents put weight on them) and what the implications would be if one part of Scripture contradicted another. Granted that systematic theology is an ongoing process it would not be out of place to consider how Christians in the past have faced these issues (there is an obvious connection with the Arian controversy and the debate that ensued about the identity of Jesus). Clearly John's prologue should not become the platform for a series of lectures on Christology but, nevertheless, John introduces us to the one who was a baby lying in a manger and yet at the same time was God over all blessed forever. Thus in teaching the text there is also the possibility of equipping the congregation to think rightly about Jesus Christ as they range over the teaching of the New Testament. The deity of Christ is a major doctrine that all Christians need to understand as best they can, but what of God's sovereignty? Justification by faith alone? Penal substitution? Regeneration? Sanctification? Sin? Exposition and systematic theology feed each other. As we understand individual texts we inform our understanding of doctrines and how doctrines interrelate, the better informed our framework of truth is the better able we are to interpret individual texts. It is the responsibility of the pulpit to teach people how to think theologically. It is not enough just to teach the passage in hand. There must be a serious attempt made to teach people Biblical doctrine.

Unless there is a recovery of doctrinal preaching not only will the gains of the past be buried under the semblance of Christian truth that is served up today, but also the church will become a shadow of what it is intended to be. D. A. Carson's words are incisive:

Above all the problem lies in the pulpit. Too few preachers have so married content and passion that they have taught their people to think biblically and love and honour God passionately. The books on many church bookstalls are a disgrace - thousands of pages of sentimental twaddle laced with the occasional biblical gem. There is very little effort to build up a biblical mind in our churches... [51]

Remarkably the same point was made by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones at the close of the 1940s. His biographer records an incident that illustrates this:

He was also persuaded that too often Christians had no grasp of truth as a *system* because of the type of preaching to which they had been chiefly accustomed. 'The great trouble of our time is the lack of theological preaching,' he told students at

Spurgeon's College when he spoke there in January 1948...Before concluding that address he anticipated the question likely to be put to him, 'Will people listen to this kind of preaching?' To which he replied 'they have more or less given up listening to the other kind!' The low level of the life of the church today is due to the lack of doctrinal preaching. This is a question never to be asked: we have a commission to preach; a commission to God; not the call to satisfy the popular palate. Preach the Word. Our one concern should be to preach the truth [52].

The passing of time has not diminished the need for this kind of preaching that builds the church, confronts error, and calls the world to listen to the voice of God.

God and Preaching revisited

The plea for a more doctrinal form of preaching is not an attempt to champion one form of preaching over another. Neither can it be accomplished by the mere recitation of truths logically arranged and cogently presented. Systematic theology finds its *raison d'être* in its panoramic vision of the greatness of God and His ways. What C. H. Spurgeon once called the loftiest piece of writing in the human tongue, the epistle of Paul to the Romans, at the climax of eleven chapters of rich theology breaks out into adoring praise at the mystery of God and His judgements (Romans 11:33-36). It is the absence of awe and reverence at the greatness of God's being that marks the deepest poverty of preaching that does not put God and his glory as its central focus. A. W. Tozer lamented this state of affairs:

The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshipping men...The decline of the knowledge of the holy has brought on our troubles. A rediscovery of the majesty of God will go a long way toward curing them. It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as he is [53].

The theology student, church member, Christian Union leader, fledgling preacher, all alike must make the knowledge of God their starting point for study, worship and life. The greatest threat to this knowledge is not necessarily the liberal theology of the lecture theatre but the life of the Church. David F. Wells has the final word:

Unless the evangelical Church can recover the knowledge of what it means to live before a holy God, unless in its worship it can relearn humility, wonder, love and praise, unless it can find again a moral purpose in the world that resonates with the holiness of

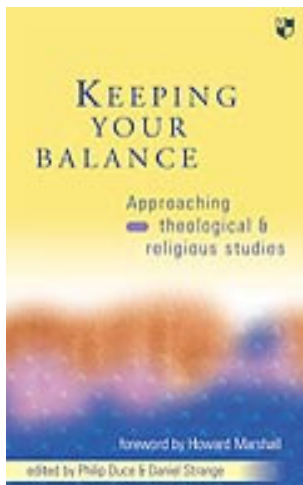
God and that is accordingly deep and unyielding-unless the evangelical Church can do all these things, theology will have no place in its life. But the reverse is also true. If the Church can begin to find a place for theology by refocusing itself on the centrality of God, if it can rest upon his sufficiency, if it can recover its moral fiber, then it will have something to say to a world now drowning in modernity [54].

ENDNOTES

- [1] D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 97.
- [2] John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1998), 12.
- [3] Quoted in *Martyn Lloyd-Jones: Chosen by God* ed. Christopher Catherwood, (East Sussex: Highland Books, 1986), 104.
- [4] J. I. Packer, *Among God's Giants: the Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1997), 282-3.
- [5] John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion vol. 1* ed. John T. McNeill, (Philadelphia: the Westminster Press, 1960), 1.1.3.
- [6] Piper, *The Supremacy of God*, 51-2.
- [7] Tony Sargent, *The Sacred Anointing: The Preaching of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994), 133.
- [8] Piper, *The Supremacy of God*, 103.
- [9] See the comments in I. H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 137-151.
- [10] See the comments on this in 'The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God' in, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards vol. 2*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996 rep.), 265-6.
- [11] J. C. Ryle, *The Christian Leaders of the Last Century*, (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1891), 25.
- [12] Os Guinness, 'The Word in the Age of the Image' in *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis: A radical agenda for a Bible based church*, ed. Melvin Tinker (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1995), 170.
- [13] Cited in Packer, *Among God's Giants*, 285.
- [14] Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997 rep.), 56.
- [15] Cited in I. H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 136.
- [16] I. H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith, 1939-1981*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 372.
- [17] 'The Most High a Prayer Hearing God' in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards vol. 2*, 116-7.
- [18] Quoted in Packer, *Among God's Giants*, 377.
- [19] A. A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1892), 158.
- [20] Bonar, *Memoir and Remains*, 93.

- [21] Bonar, *Memoir and Remains*, 55.
- [22] Bonar, *Memoir and Remains*, 36.
- [23] I. H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, 1939-1981*, 220.
- [24] Bonar, *Memoir and Remains*, 282.
- [25] Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 63,67-8.
- [26] Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 63-4.
- [27] John Newton, *The Utterance of the Heart*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979 rep.), 13-4.
- [28] Packer, *Among God's Giants*, 376.
- [29] Bonar, *Memoir and Remains*, 150.
- [30] John Murray, *Collected Writings vol. 1*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989 rep.), 105-6.
- [31] T. Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: The Making of a Leader*, (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1999), 157-178.
- [32] Piper, *The Supremacy of God*, 103.
- [33] B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Theology: the Works of B. B. Warfield vol. 9*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991 rep.), 86-7.
- [34] *John Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987 rep), vii.
- [35] For the purposes of this paper we will not address the fact that any religion that has a place for a God or Goddess (or gods and goddesses) is strictly speaking engaging in theology.
- [36] D. F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 98.
- [37] Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 99.
- [38] Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 100.
- [39] Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 100.
- [40] In a paper given to theology students at an RTSF conference in Regent College, Oxford, Dr. Carl R. Trueman commented that 'it is rather misleading to speak of theology or divinity as a university discipline. More often than not, it is a disparate collection of various subjects, methodologies, and philosophies that just happen to be in the same department for reasons which have more to do with institutional history and administration than any inner-coherence or mutual relationship'. See his article 'The Importance of Being Earnest: Approaching Theological Study' in *Themelios* 26/1.
- [41] J. I. Packer 'The Preacher as Theologian' in, C. Green and D. Jackman (eds.), *When God's Voice is Heard: Essays on preaching presented to Dick Lucas*, (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1995), 80.
- [42] R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), xxv-xxvi.
- [43] G. Bray, *Creeks, Councils and Christ: Did the early Christians misrepresent Jesus?*, (Ross-shire: Mentor, 1997 rep.), 37.

- [44] See the incisive statistics and comments in M. J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Post conservative Evangelical Theology*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 1-6.
- [45] The words of Dr. George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, quoted in I. H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*, 142-3.
- [46] D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 28, 32-3.
- [47] B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991 rep), 283-332.
- [48] See the excellent articles by M. Tinker 'Currents of change: Trends in Anglican Evangelical Theology Today' and G. Bray 'Whatever happened to the authority of Scripture?' in M. Tinker [ed.] *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis: A radical agenda for a Bible based church*, (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1995), 42-71.
- [49] An excellent starting point is the essay by D. A. Carson 'Unity in Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology' in D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge [eds.], *Scripture and Truth*, (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1983).
- [50] J. Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray 4: Studies in Theology*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 20-21.
- [51] D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 484.
- [52] I. H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith 1939-1981*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 166.
- [53] A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, (Carlisle: O. M. Publishing, 1994), 7-8.
- [54] D. F. Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 301.



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