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CONCERNING PREACHING

William J U Philip

Could it be that the devil considers the best strategy to seduce evangelicals away from the power of true biblical proclamation is actually to focus their attention and energies on preaching more and more?

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Some
thoughts
on biblical
preaching

Concerning Preaching

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***Preaching Christ from the
Old Testament***, Sinclair B Ferguson,
PT Media paper no 2.

I want to share with you some thoughts about preaching which have been occupying my mind recently. During a recent trip that Dick Lucas and I made to the United States (for a number of preaching conferences), something struck me, and it set me thinking about what we really mean in saying that The Proclamation Trust is devoted to the encouragement of biblical preaching. Let me explain.

At one of the conferences, someone from a local college (a good one) had brought a bookstall with books appropriate for a conference on preaching. As I browsed this bookstall, it struck me that here was a plethora of books on every aspect of what might be called the art or science of biblical preaching. There were books on effective preaching, power preaching, arresting preaching, anointed preaching, Christ-focused preaching, and every other aspect of preaching you could imagine. Many of them, if not all of them, were sound, orthodox, biblical and evangelical, and most of them are probably very helpful books. Nevertheless, as I looked at the books, and pondered these things subsequently, I could not help but feel some disquiet. A gentle ringing of alarm bells began in my mind.

Why should this be? Surely the fact that so many books are appearing on all aspects of preaching must indicate there is a greater appetite for preaching among evangelicals, and we should be encouraged by this. As I reflected on this, however, I began to realise how careful we need to be lest our enemy should take us unawares. The devil is very clever and very subtle, and the truth is that he is more likely to attack us where we think we are strong, than where we know we are weak. In the latter things we are often on our guard and ready to rebuff him; all too often, though, we are found to have trusted our own strengths far more than we ought to. Does Satan really think his best chance of doing damage to gospel preaching among evangelicals is by seeking to turn us away from preaching by blatant means, such as intimidation and ridicule? (Those of us really committed to biblical preaching are alert to this, and we are able to stand together, encouraging one another to resist with strength.) Or could it be that he considers it a better strategy

to seduce us away from the power of true biblical proclamation, paradoxically, by actually focusing our attention and energies on preaching more and more?

That may sound a very odd thing to suggest. But we know that often the most effective way the devil gains a hold is not through out-and-out denial, which is easy to discern and refute, but through surreptitious perversion and distortion of the truth. This may be much more difficult to see, and indeed may masquerade as the genuine article for a long time, so that by the time the real truth is discerned, the damage has been done. The devil loves to masquerade as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). What could be a better and more satisfying tactic for him, then, than to gradually lure away keen evangelicals committed to expository preaching of the Scriptures, while at the same time making them think that they are really focusing more and more upon preaching, and becoming more committed to the task they believe in? The more I think about this, the more I am convinced there are dangers here that those of us committed to expository preaching need to be aware of, lest we should find ourselves being outwitted by these subtle schemes of our enemy.

SUBTLE SHIFTS OF FOCUS IN WORD MINISTRY

So how could a zealous focus on expository preaching ministry actually lead us astray? I think there are at least three areas where subtle, and at first perhaps imperceptible, shifts can take place in our thinking, whereby, unless we are careful, we may find ourselves on a diverging course from healthy, vital, biblical ministry.

I A shift from content to form

First, there is the danger that the focus moves gradually from the *content* onto the *form* of the preaching itself. This may not be blatant, and at first may be quite inconspicuous; indeed, the danger lies in the very fact that it seems to be a wholesome and welcome development. We work hard on our preaching, and we seek to develop the craft of giving better sermons for our people – in terms of handling the text, using helpful

structures, finding the right language and so on – and all of this is of course very good, in and of itself. But the danger is that because we are still sinful people, we are constantly (albeit often unconsciously) caught in drift that seeks to re-orientate our focus away from the Divine and onto the human. As we develop as preachers, the natural tendency is for the emphasis to move away from the text itself and onto us as the preacher, and to drift away from God himself onto what we are doing with the text in the sermon. As we become familiar with handling the Scripture responsibly, we can all too easily begin to focus more on that ‘correct handling’ than on the Scripture itself that is being handled. We can inadvertently find ourselves stepping back from the text, or stepping above the text, talking a lot *about* ministry, *about* the gospel, and *about* the text before us, rather than actually spending our time in the text – and so in the gospel – opening it up, unwrapping it, expounding its meaning, and showing it in all its fullness and richness so that it can be taken in by the hearer, not as the words of man, but as it really is, the Word of God.

We must be honest and recognise that this is a real danger. The more we come to preaching conferences, and the more work we do in preaching workshops (vitaly important as I believe they are, right at the heart of the work of The Proclamation Trust), the danger is that we *could* be lulled in to becoming more absorbed in the form and the method of the preaching, than in the content – and purpose – of the actual message.

Is there some evidence of this in the way that some of us seem to relish discussing whether this preacher or that is really a ‘proper’ expositor? More often than not the criteria used to make these judgements are actually to do much more with form than the content of the preaching. For some it may be a particular structure: introduction and points, a measured tone and a calm delivery; for others the ‘right’ criteria may be a ‘free’ structure, different inflection and an (apparently) more vivacious delivery. The same is true when we look for a particular ‘shape’ to the preaching: the criteria being conformity to a particular cherished framework (or ‘big picture’) of systematic or biblical theology. Now do not misunderstand me. These matters are very important; but it is pre-

cisely because as evangelical preachers we do take all these things seriously, that we must be careful we are not eventually carried away by them from the heart of the matter. For it is the *content* of our preaching – the *Scriptures themselves* – where the focus must always be.

Lessons from history

When we turn to church history, it is chilling to observe this very pattern of drift from content to form being played out. The time of the Reformation was marked by a rediscovery of the *Scriptures themselves*, which had long since been locked up in a language of the academics and the clergy, and kept out of the reach of ordinary people. The result was an enormous renewed outpouring of expository preaching, with quite dramatic results. One reads, for example, of Ulrich Zwingli starting to minister in the great Minster in Zurich just as the Reformation was beginning in 1519. That huge building was crammed, day after day, week after week, as he started preaching through the Gospel of Matthew, verse by verse, for a whole year. Throughout the continent of Europe during the 16th century the emphasis was the same: all on the *content* of the preaching, the message of the *Scriptures*, rather than on the vehicle, the preaching process. However, it must be said that following the period of the Reformation, by the end of the 17th century and into the early 18th century, the attention had moved much more towards the vehicle of preaching itself. There was an increasing emphasis on the ‘science’ and ‘art’ of preaching, and little by little the simple homiletic style of the Reformers became lost. Preaching took on more and more of a developed sermonic style, so much so that one historian notes that during the course of the 17th century the sermon became ‘almost a province of literature, in so far as *conformity to prevailing literary standards* was required also from the preacher’.¹

A good case can be made that it was to a very great extent this increasing interest in the form and style of preaching – all of which initially gained momentum through a desire to expound the *Scriptures themselves* – that led, ultimately, to the formal and arid intellectualism of the

later Puritan period, and to the eventual obscuring of the biblical message altogether, the great gospel of the kingdom of God becoming buried in the moralism and liberalism of the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Constant rediscovery of the *Scriptures themselves*

During the latter part of the 20th century there was in this country a great rediscovery of the Word of God, and a renewed confidence in that Word proclaimed in preaching. The ministries we share in are the fruit of this, for which we thank God. But there is a real danger for us too, as for any such ‘second generation’ from those who rediscover the power of the living Word of God, that we also may begin to move on, ‘progressing’ to the science, the strategy, the practice of preaching, and so gradually to take the substance for granted. In the light of this, I think we need to make it very clear (to ourselves as well as to others) that when we say our chief focus in the work of The Proclamation Trust is on *preaching*, what we really mean is that our chief focus is on the *Scriptures themselves*.

We must beware of being beguiled. The lessons of history tell us that what we need to do most of all is keep reminding ourselves that our business is, in fact, the *constant rediscovery* of the Word of God itself, much more than it is a constant focus on the mechanics of the practice of preaching. There is an analogy with the work of the Holy Spirit here. We cannot know Christ apart from the Spirit, and the work of the Spirit is all important therefore; but the evidence of the true work of the Spirit is that all the focus is on Jesus Christ. Just so, we cannot know and discover the Word of God in Scripture without preaching, and preaching is a *sine qua non* (‘how can they hear without a preacher?’ *Romans 10:14*); but the evidence of a true and right attitude to preaching is that all the focus is on the *Scriptures* and the living Word, not on the mechanics of the preaching as a vehicle of that Word.

To put it another way: hermeneutics and homiletics, though important, do not work miracles; but the Word of God does. It is no accident that in describing their life-transforming experience on the Road to Emmaus, the two hitherto dejected and dispirited disciples testified ‘did not our hearts burn within us while ... *he opened to us the Scriptures*’ (Luke 24:32). Surely this must have been the most exegetically perfect, theo-

¹ W F Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory* (London, 1932), 46.

logically coherent, Christologically focused preaching from the Old Testament on the death and resurrection of Jesus that ever there was! But their response looks straight through the ‘preaching’ as such, as though it were transparent. All the focus is on the message itself, the living Word, the ‘opened Scriptures’, because it is this, and this alone, that causes hearts to burn, to change, to come alive with the glorious hope of the gospel. Was this not John Wesley’s experience, in the famous meeting in Aldersgate in 1738? Of the ‘preaching’ he heard that night he records only that ‘one was reading Luther’s *Preface to the Epistle to Romans*’. So it was a second hand sermon, and a read sermon – a double anathema to some! – and (significantly?) an anonymous, forgotten preacher. But what he heard, as he listened to Luther’s exposition of Romans, was the Scripture ‘opened to him’ so that his heart, too, burned within him, ‘strangely warmed’ by the Word of life. The fruit of that transformation was, as we all know, quite incalculable.

Nothing has changed. What the church needs today as much as ever is the Scriptures opened to men and women, so that hearts burn within, and eyes are opened to recognise the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ. In that sense, calling our conferences ‘preaching conferences’, and focusing on ‘preaching workshops’ is really something of a misnomer. What we are really doing is seeking to bring one another constantly back to the Word of God, to immerse ourselves together in the Scriptures, to wrestle with them, to ingest them, and by so doing to keep the only true God, the God of these Scriptures (and these only), at the heart of our lives and ministries. The preacher’s heart must first be kept burning, if in turn other hearts are to be warmed in response to the opened Word.

2 A shift from vertical to horizontal

A second subtle change that can gradually creep in, at first perhaps unconsciously, among those of us who are committed to expository Word ministry, is a shift from the vertical to the merely horizontal in terms of our understanding of what is actually happening as we open up the Scriptures. That is, we too easily begin to think of Bible ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ as merely mutual edification along the horizontal axis, and forget the vertical axis. We forget the presence of the living God himself,

whose Word is not just being heard as if from a distance, but who is himself present by his Spirit, and breathing out his living Word as the Scriptures are opened up today.

If this were not true, then preaching would be no different from mere lecturing, teaching, arguing or reasoning. I say *mere*, because true preaching does of course aim to teach, inform, reason, admonish, rebuke and so on. But it is also much more than this. It is different from any other kind of communication that exists in this world, because its origin is beyond this world. It is revelation from God, and further, it is revelation of God. If this were not true, we would have to concede that men and women could be brought to the new birth as believers through a mere intellectual process, involving learning a series of doctrinal formulations and propositional truths, because people are converted to Christ precisely through what appears to be a process just like this. As they hear and understand the message of the gospel through the Bible they are learning and receiving propositional truth; but *through* that – in a way which we can only describe as a miraculous breaking-in of the life of the world to come into their present earthly existence – they are being brought into a real and vital relationship with the living God. A miracle takes place; as the Scriptures are opened up to them, so they encounter the Christ of the Scriptures.

Creating and sustaining a living relationship

Do not think I am somehow emphasising experience and down-playing the place of the mind. Far from it! Of course the message of the gospel is first to the mind, for it is through the renewal of our minds that the darkness of our godless thinking is transformed, and we are brought to see the light of reality in Christ. But Scripture has an end in view for us; it is designed to bring us, by that very ongoing transformation, into a living relationship of union with Christ, into the state of *knowing* God through Christ (not just knowing about him). That is the purpose of biblical preaching and teaching – to create this relationship, and then to sustain and nurture believers within it, to feed them with the bread of life, and to nourish them at the table of their beloved.

We know this in theory, which is why we are committed to exposi-

tory Word ministry. But precisely *because* we are convinced of the primacy of teaching in the pastoral task, and because we want to devote time and effort to our preparation and teaching, there is always the danger that we begin to forget that the very purpose of the revelation of God in Scripture is relational in this way. We so easily focus on ‘the teaching ministry’ that we forget the whole purpose of that ministry is to be a vehicle of a love relationship, between Christ and his people. The very essence of this ministry has a vertical dimension: the triune God is, through his Word, revealing himself to us, and asking us to respond to him in love and obedience in every part of our beings. We really do *meet* God in his Word.

Peter Adam reminds us, in his excellent book *Speaking God’s Words*², that members of the congregation hear God speaking to them during the preaching because God himself is present in the means he has appointed, the preached Word. He has come down to them, and accommodated himself to their weakness in his Words in Scripture, in the ministry of the preacher, and through the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus the focus of the preacher is supremely on God; he alone has the supremacy in preaching. The preacher is the vehicle by which the Scripture itself is the mouth-piece of God, and part of God’s coming down to his people. What faithful, but often frail and struggling, believers need to hear week by week, is not just ‘what Romans is about’ or ‘how the Old Testament points us to Christ’ (though these are indeed good things to teach our congregations) but ‘this is what the God of all grace is saying to us now, today, in this very place. This is his word to us, just as it was to those first believing hearers, to help us in the fight of faith, to strengthen our weak knees, to renew in our hearts the hope of glory, and to fill us again with the unspeakable joy that is ours in knowing and loving the Saviour we own.’

To know and to love God

God gave the Scriptures, and preserved them for us, that we may know not merely things about him, but that we may *know* him. If we lose this vertical dimension, we are really pushing the person of Christ out of the

gospel. We are forgetting that ultimately what we need is more than just knowledge *about* God – even sound, biblical, expository teaching about God – it is *God* himself. We are also forgetting that all the initiative in the Word comes from God alone. We do not stand over the Scriptures because we are ‘Bible Teachers’; nor do we dictate the agenda and goal of our ministry. We must do the hard work and all the necessary study, of course; but not so that we can master the Word, merely to know ‘what it is about’ and so pass ‘it’ on and find satisfaction in ‘well-taught’ congregations. God is the author and the master of his Word; we are only the servants who carry his message of life and power, and we do so for the purpose he has ordained. His purpose is not merely that believers be well-taught; he wants them to be so in order that they may know that they are well loved, and that they may rejoice in his love, respond to it, live in it, and so overflow with this love both one to another and to a world that as yet does not know him. We are servants of this message, ambassadors of a ‘vertical’ Word from a God who speaks today.

3 A shift from the corporate to the individual

A third danger we must beware of is a shift in focus from the corporate to the individual. In essence, of course, this is just another expression of the general drift from a God-centred, Kingdom-oriented mentality to the man-centred, self-preoccupation that is the hallmark of our natural condition, and to which we constantly naturally regress if left unchecked by the correction of God’s Word. It is this same basic root of idolatry, which puts man always to the centre of the picture and pushes God to the circumference, that is behind the two shifts we have discussed already. But in our post-enlightenment, highly individualised western culture today, it is particularly important that we realise just how easily we have become children of our age. The truth is that even our thinking about preaching and teaching the Word of God has become influenced by categories quite foreign to the New Testament.

Where is the power in preaching?

It is in large measure this individual rather than corporate focus which causes us a great deal of confusion when we try to articulate what it is that makes the proclamation of the Word of God different from other

² Peter Adam, *Speaking God’s Words: A practical theology of preaching* (Leicester, 1996).

means of communication. In particular, we struggle to define where it is that the ‘power’ in preaching resides, and just how it is that this is made manifest in the preaching. But because we focus so much on the individual, we often find ourselves trying to explain this in terms of the preacher alone, and so get into all kinds of difficulties.

For some, the explanation is articulated wholly in terms of a rather indefinable ‘something extra’ that rests on the preacher, a special unction or anointing possessed by the man, without which ‘real’ preaching cannot take place. Others recoil from what appears to them to be unhelpfully mystical language, and reject all such exalted descriptions of preaching. Rather, they insist the preacher’s ‘gifts’ reside merely in the learned technical ability to ‘rightly handle’ the Scriptures, and in hard work, adequate time set aside for preparation, and clear presentation.

Both points of view are trying to articulate something profoundly true about the biblical concept of preaching, but each is inadequate on its own. The former description wants to preserve the Divine involvement in gospel proclamation, and to emphasise, quite rightly, that it is indeed God who is speaking, and this only because of the miraculous operation of the Holy Spirit. The danger, however, where this emphasis predominates, is that in a quite unwarranted way the preacher himself may become elevated into a rarefied category of his own. His oracular pronouncements are deemed sacred and untouchable, beyond any criticism, and thus he is beyond the (often much needed) help and improvement that could be gained through mutual interaction with discerning brothers and sisters in the fellowship. I have been in churches where fine and able evangelical ministers are clearly failing to attain their potential as preachers precisely for this reason. The aura of the sacrosanct around the pulpit has done nothing to ennoble the Word of God; instead it has simply become a barrier to the pastor’s (and congregation’s) development. This is not evidence of high spirituality, but of tragedy.

The latter view, on the other hand, rightly insists that there is a clear and vital element of human responsibility in preaching. We hear God’s voice as and when his written Word in Scripture is faithfully taught, and this happens when the Bible teacher takes study of the text in context seriously, and learns the disciplines of responsible exposition. The

danger here, though, is a tendency to mechanise the whole process of preaching, believing that once one has learned the ‘knack’ of the proper expository method, and so long as one ‘does the time’ in the study, and clearly teaches the Bible to the people, ‘the Word will do the work’ with guaranteed results. This comes perilously close to ignoring the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit altogether, or at least imagining he will always have to dance to our tune just so long as we ‘get the exposition right’. But we are gravely mistaken to think we can so command and control the Lord of Hosts in this way. Neither doctrinal orthodoxy nor faultless methodology guarantees spiritual life. I fear there are evangelical congregations – and preachers – becoming quietly desiccated, their spiritual life-blood draining away, because (albeit unwittingly) the Holy Spirit of God is being grieved away.

The church: God’s power among his people

Much of the reason that we become tangled up in this way is precisely because of a failure to consider the overwhelmingly corporate context in which the Bible deals with these matters. We are focussing on the individual, the preacher – on what they possess (in terms of gifting and learning) and what they do (in terms of their preaching). In the New Testament however, the focus is entirely different. It is not on the individual in this way, but on the corporate: not on the Word gifts themselves, but on the sphere of service of these gifts – the whole church – and on the purpose of the gifts, that the *one body*, ‘joined and held together’ as it is in Christ, might grow into full maturity in Christ (*Ephesians* 4:1-16). The preacher, therefore, can never be thought of as a ‘gifted Bible teacher’ *in vacuo*; he is ‘given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’ and ‘so that the church may be built up’ (*1 Corinthians* 12:7; 14:4,5).

John Stott has pointed out³ that the *edification* Paul is talking about cannot be an individual activity, but is by its very nature a corporate process; it is body growth (hence the ‘self edification’ of *1 Corinthians* 14:4 is really a jarring irony). So, it follows that the whole exercise of

³ in his treatment of *1 Corinthians* 12-14 in *Baptism and Fullness* (Leicester, 1984).

teaching the Scriptures cannot be an individual thing, but a corporate transaction, involving the whole of the body of Christ. This is the primary purpose of the Scriptures; they are not first for the individual (either teacher or reader) but for the whole church. So too for the teaching gifts; they are not individual, but given for the congregation.

This is what explains the simple fact which we as preachers all know to be true: we gain immensely more insight into the Word of God when we study it in order to teach, than when we do so merely for ourselves. This has nothing to do with the fact that we may be expending more time and concentration on our study (which may or may not always be the case!) Our shelves are full of books by scholars (including evangelicals) who have spent decades immersed in study, and yet far too many still seem to have gained precious little insight that is of life-giving use to the church. No, the reason that as the preacher in his study meditates and reflects upon the Scriptures, the Lord himself gives him such insights (cf 2 Timothy 2:7), is because we are there doing it *for the people of God*, not just for ourselves! The Word of God is *for the church of God*, and the teaching gifts of the preacher are for the service of the church as a whole. It is never an individual matter, always a corporate one. This is basic to the whole understanding of ecclesiology in the New Testament.

The power of the Holy Spirit's presence

When we take seriously the biblical emphasis on the corporate context for the exercise of teaching gifts, the difficulty we have in giving full weight to both the divine and the human aspects of the preaching task can be resolved much more easily. Take first the place of the Holy Spirit. Is there really something 'extra' happening when the Word is proclaimed by the preacher? Yes indeed! Something very special – indeed miraculous – is happening. We need not hesitate to say this out of fear of enduing the preacher with some mystical power, for the focus is not on him as an individual, but on the congregation as a whole. David Peterson puts it very helpfully: 'The *congregation* is where the sacred presence of God is to be found'⁴. When the church is thus assembled 'the

⁴ David Peterson, 'Worship in the New Testament', *Worship: Adoration and Action*, Ed D A Carson (Carlisle, 1993), 78 (italics his).

power of our Lord Jesus is present' (1 Corinthians 5:4), and as the Word is ministered, 'God presences himself in a distinctive way in the Christian meeting through his word and the operation of the Spirit.'⁵ Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25 is precisely that he expects God himself to be encountered by believers – and also by unbelievers⁶ – when the church gathers for the mutual edification that comes through the word preached. The *preacher* is not doing something miraculous; he is simply expounding the Scriptures. But *God* is doing something miraculous *for his people* through the preaching as they gather around his Word so expounded. 'Through the exercise of gifts and ministries, the exalted Christ *manifests his presence* and encourages and nurtures the faith of his flock'⁷

The struggles of the preacher

What then of the preacher's task? Is the need for the hard work – the study, the right handling of the text, the constant effort to find 'just the right words' so as to impart knowledge to the people – somehow diminished because of this focus on the powerful sovereign presence of God himself? Indeed not! Is the imperative of the great commission to go and make disciples of all nations in any way diminished by Scripture's clear assertion of the sovereignty of God in election? No! Likewise, the command to the pastor teacher to 'be diligent to present yourself approved to God, an unashamed workman' (2 Timothy 2:15) is not eclipsed, but rather reinforced and intensified, precisely because of this great expectation of the powerful and personal working of the Holy Spirit which attends gospel proclamation. The preacher's motivation is similarly elevated; he is not merely to expect that men and women will 'learn the Bible' but that they will, together, through the diligent ministry of the

⁵ Peterson, *Worship*, 77.

⁶ This is a very important point: the implication is that unbelievers, even the rank outsider, totally ignorant of spiritual things (Gk *idiotes*) will be *converted* and begin to bow down and worship God in repentance and faith, in gatherings that are first and foremost taking place for the edification of believers through the exercise of the word gifts within the church. In other words, 'teaching meetings' are *not* seeker unfriendly, but powerful unto salvation, because God himself is present, and may be encountered.

⁷ Peterson, *Worship*, 80 (italics mine).

Word, participate in a miraculous encounter with the living God himself, and hear him speak in their midst. Ought not this wonderful prospect to encourage the embattled pastor in his study? If this is really true, will he not also echo Paul's words, 'for this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works in me' (Colossians 1:29)? His extraordinary privilege is to play his part, *for the sake of the church*, in what is ultimately the work of God himself among his people.

The participation of the whole body

A proper corporate focus also liberates us from the wholly mistaken notion that the rest of the congregation are passive in the process of the preaching, merely recipients of Bible teaching, accruing knowledge and information, but not otherwise involved. We can see that nothing could be further from the truth, if we consider what is happening in terms of such a real encounter and engagement with God. Together, we draw near to God, as he draws near to us through the means of his Word.

The writer to the Hebrews in particular makes much of this great theme of 'drawing near'. As New Testament Christians the reality is that we *have* drawn near to God through Christ, nearer, that is, than even the people of Israel were able to come as Old Covenant people. We have 'drawn near' not the lesser thing of Sinai (with all its undoubted reality and efficacy as a real means of grace for believing people), but to the greater reality, the eschatological reality, to Jesus now unveiled as the great king enthroned in the heavens, to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12). Already we participate in that eschatological community. Nevertheless, even for us there remains a 'not yet' in our experience; we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, but are still looking forward to the approaching Day. In the meantime, how are we to live? How can we realise in our experience the benefits of this reality, this life which is ours now in the heavenly realms? We do so, together, by 'keeping on drawing near'; and as we do so, in our still frail flesh, we find 'mercy and grace to help in time of need' (Hebrews 4:16), and our weak and feeble hearts may nevertheless experience 'full assurance of faith' (Hebrews 10:22-23). The context makes clear that this ongoing drawing near to God is a corporate experience, one charac-

terised by ministries of mutual edification and gospel exhortation (Hebrews 3:12ff; 10:19-25); yet the central focus is nevertheless the God who is speaking and warning us from heaven (12:25). We are warned, therefore, with all seriousness not to 'give up meeting together' in this way, nor to 'refuse him who speaks' (10:25; 12:25).

We should not miss this vital connection – corporate meeting together, and God speaking in the midst. There is a current fashion around for refusing to call congregational gatherings 'Services' or 'Worship' in any sense, and an increasing preference for describing these as simply 'meetings'. There may be good and valid reason for this, as a reaction against the near obsession with 'worship' (often meaning merely endless repetitive singing) of so much of present-day evangelicism. I would not want to quibble about ecclesiastical nomenclature (though it does make us sound more like Quakers than orthodox evangelicals). But just a warning: it is very easy for reaction to lurch into over-reaction. If by insisting on 'meeting' we mean nothing more than believers meeting together, we part company altogether with the New Testament understanding of the nature and purpose of such gatherings. Once again, we have erased the vertical dimension, and lost the overwhelming focus on God himself. As Hebrews makes clear, meeting *one another* is not an end in itself. The goal is always meeting with one another in order to draw near to meet with God himself.

As we meet together with believers here on earth, around his Word, we really do meet together with our Saviour, our great High Priest. We call on him, and he answers us. We hear his voice; we know his presence. He draws near to us as we draw near to him (James 4:8). 'There am I in the midst' (Matthew 18:20).

The prayers of the saints

Just as the teacher's struggle in the work of preaching is not nullified by the work of God in the midst, so also the whole people of God have work to do. The corporate context of preaching emphasises the corporate responsibility for prayer. God's promise is that he will be a hearing God who speaks to answer his people's request. 'Call to me and I will answer you', 'ask and it will be given to you; seek and you shall find'.

This great simplicity lies at the very heart of true biblical faith: ‘You call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire he is God’ (1 Kings 18:24). The prayers of the saints, rising up before the throne of God, are still what brings down the fire of God on behalf of his people (Revelation 8:4-5). The Lord is a God who hears, and speaks in answer, in words of grace and power.

The sovereign God is not controlled by our prayers, but in his abundant grace he seems pleased to accommodate himself to them. When we seek his voice, we shall hear it. This is why in the New Testament prayer, and especially corporate prayer⁸, is so intimately linked to the ministry of the Word as to be inseparable from it. The ESV rendering of *Ephesians* 6:17-18 makes this exceptionally clear: ‘take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, *praying* at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.’ You see the logic: the sword, the word of God which is living and active, able to pierce the soul and spirit, to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart (*Hebrews* 4:12ff), is wielded and put to work *through prayer*. The prayer in view is the corporate prayer of the whole church in that one place, for the world-wide church (‘all the saints’), and focused on the proclamation of the Word of God by the preacher in particular situations (‘that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel’). This means we must recognise that the pray-ers are as important as the preachers. It is not within the power of the preacher alone to preach with power; all his efforts alone (including his own prayers) cannot wield the sword of the Spirit. There must be the prayers of the saints. I wonder if we take this nearly as seriously as the New Testament does?

God’s work and our work

If all this is so, then there is a three-way ‘partnership’ in effective gospel proclamation. The preacher is involved, struggling in his own weakness

⁸ It is worth noting that virtually every request for prayer (and indeed virtually every command to pray) in the Epistles implies a context of corporate prayer. The loss of the distinction in modern English versions of singular and plural pronouns has tended to encourage our individualistic reading of the New Testament, whereas almost all the imperatives are directed not to the individual, but to the whole congregation.

to faithfully discharge the task of teaching the Scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15, *Colossians* 1:29 etc). Those wrestling in prayer have a vital part, crying out together in the presence of the listening God. Their prayers focus on the preaching of the Word, seeking clear and bold proclamation, open doors, rapid spread of the message, and honourable reception of the Word of the gospel by the hearers (*Ephesians* 6: 19-20, *Colossians* 4:3-4; 2 *Thessalonians* 3:1 etc.). And above all, the Lord God himself is at work, his mighty Spirit moving in the midst as his voice is heard with power (1 *Corinthians* 2:4, 1 *Thessalonians* 1:5).

Where we seem to be terribly complicated, the Scriptures are so very practical. Instead of getting bogged down in the morass of unanswerable questions about the mystical or the mechanical, they simply recognise the work of preaching, the work of prayer, and the work of God. They point to the corporate context in which God has chosen to encounter his people, through the supernatural gifts he has given to his church for this purpose, and they call us all to take our own part seriously, whether as teachers, intercessors, or both. Where there is a right understanding among God’s people of these things, we should find the whole church involved together in prayer for the proclamation of the Word of the gospel, and sharing the eager expectation for God himself to speak with power, not just locally, but world-wide; we should find pastor-teachers devoted to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching; and we should expect to see evidence of the power of God at work.

Again, Christian history is illuminating. While on holiday some time ago, I happened to be reading (alongside some rather lighter titles!) a selection of historical accounts of the time of the Great Awakening, and some biographies of that period. I suppose I had expected extraordinary preaching to be one of the outstanding features of these times of true revival, and that the accounts would be full of such descriptions. Of course there were many great men of God at large in those days, and one cannot but be amazed by what the Lord accomplished through the ministries of Whitfield, Wesley and the like. But what struck me, in reading of the happenings on both sides of the Atlantic – particularly in

New England in the mid 1730s, and Cambuslang and Kilsyth, where revival broke out in 1742⁹ – was the distinct lack of any such marked focus on preachers, and preaching oratory, in so many places that were truly transformed by revival. Instead, what impressed me more than anything else was the widespread preoccupation of churches with corporate prayer.

Societies for prayer sprang up everywhere. Their focus was never merely parochial, but overwhelmingly concentrated on mission, both local and international. This was real and tangible partnership in mission; ordinary folk felt wholly involved in gospel work all over the Old and New World. Nor was the prayer vague and non-specific; the special concern of these meetings was always prayer for gospel proclamation. A great transatlantic ‘Concert for Prayer’ was co-ordinated, with hundreds of meetings for prayer on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings, these times purposely chosen as being nearest to ‘the time of dispensing gospel ordinances throughout the Christian world’¹⁰. In the midst of this, many very ordinary preachers slogged away at their preparation, and climbed the pulpit steps to do their best. They were not free from the trials of pastoral life, but had the same struggles and opposition from within and without that we all face. One of the most astonishing things of all was to read how Jonathan Edwards himself was unceremoniously ejected as pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, just a few years following the revival (which just goes to show that revival, wonderful as it may be, is not the answer to every pastor’s problems).

These preachers were just like us. Few were great orators; even Edwards is said to have preached in virtual monotone, a cushion under his elbow as he propped his head above the dense script, which he read word for word. But the focus was not on them, or their sermon; it was on God and his voice. Because they rightly understood their work of

⁹ I warmly recommend Arthur Fawcett’s account, *The Cambuslang Revival* (Edinburgh: BOT 1996), which has much wider scope than the title suggests, and gives a great insight into the real nation-wide and transatlantic networks of fellowship in mission which marked the period surrounding the Great Awakening.

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, Works, Volume 2, 440-1.

preaching and prayer, and God’s work of speaking with power in the midst, people gathered with great expectations of God. They eagerly anticipated his presence among them in power through his Word, put to work as it was, through prayer. They earnestly implored him to work similarly among their partners in mission at home and abroad. And the Lord did, with mighty effect.

This reality mirrors what we find in the New Testament. Paul’s ministry, as he recounts it to the Roman church, was full of evidence of the power of God at work. He gloried in the way God had led the Gentiles to the obedience of faith ‘by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit’ (Romans 15: 19). But this had happened as he ‘fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ’, a preaching ministry of very real and continuous battles, in which he urged all the believers ‘by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me’ (15:30). The same pattern is everywhere evident in the New Testament, and nothing has changed in gospel ministry since. These three things go together: the power of God, the prayers of the saints, and the struggles of the preacher. Just as we must not forget the vertical element of preaching – God himself speaking – so we cannot ignore the corporate context. God speaks in answer to his people’s prayers.

ARRESTING THE DRIFT

The human condition, even among those reborn, is marked by constant drift; we drift to the centre of our world, and God drifts to the periphery. In Christ we have received a new nature, but as long as we remain in the flesh, the desires of the flesh wage war against us, and we drift. We need constant Divine correction, constant reorientation, by the grace of God in the gospel. This is true in our preaching, as it is in every area of our lives, and we must be humble enough to admit it. We must be alert, lest our enemy, the father of deceit and lies, should beguile us and our churches, by causing us to drift, gently unawares, in the very area where we believe our strength lies.

Let us determine to resist him. We shall do so if we consciously

strive in our prayers, resolving not to drift in any of these ways as far as our own ministry as pastor-teachers is concerned. Our focus must be a constant rediscovery of God's own self revelation in his Word, and our determination must be to think of ourselves only as servants of that Word, never its master. Like John the Baptist we must decrease, that the Word may increase; we must be only 'a voice', our preaching always pointing beyond itself, to that living Word, never within to our own eloquence. Moreover, the stress of our preaching must go beyond merely words about God, to the personal Word, to the reality of the God of the Word himself, and to the Christ who seeks, within an intimate relationship of faith union, to nourish believers whom he loved and gave himself for on the cross at Calvary. And we must never forget that we are not in isolation in the task of preaching, neither can we ever be self-sufficient, or self-reliant. God may have given us gifts, yet they are not gifts for us, but for the church, and their exercise in ministry is part of the mutual ministry by the body, for the edification of the whole church. The congregation must play a full part. Our preaching is not just part of a corporate ministry, it is itself a corporate event, in which God hears and answers the cry of his people, and delights to presence himself among them in power.

God at the centre

If our focus is right, then God will be at the centre; he will be pre-eminent in all things. Our eyes will be all upon him, his person and his glory; our ears open to his Word of life-giving power, and our hearts open to his church, the bride of his Son, whom he gave himself up for, and is now gathering from the ends of the earth to be with him forever.

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The fundamental conviction underlying the work of The Proclamation Trust is that when the Bible is taught God's voice is heard. The main aim of the Trust, therefore, is to teach the Bible to preachers in order that they can in turn teach it to others. A further aim is to provide a fellowship of like-minded evangelicals across denominational lines for encouragement in an exacting work.