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1. The necessity of preaching

Romans 10:14–15 [14] *How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? [15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (ESV)*

1 Corinthians 9:16 [16] *For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (ESV)*

2 Corinthians 5:11 [11] *Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. (ESV)*

2 Timothy 4:1–2 [1] *I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: [2] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. (ESV)*

The passages above are a sample. Many others could be added to impress on us the urgency of preaching. The need is plain.

- A world of humanity lost in sin and death.
- A culture in darkness without hope, increasingly reaping the whirlwind it has sown in ignorant rebellion.
- A church in the west that seems voiceless, muddled, timid and uninspiring.

Things are bleak. We have prayed for change, some over decades - for renewal, for revival. We have prayed ‘*Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come...*’. Generally, when God answers this prayer (read the stories) it involves preachers. Preachers are a big part of the answer. When they speak, a new voice is heard. They have authority. They don’t come with ideas, with suggestions or with speculation. Nor do they come with a motivational talk. They come with an announcement. They are not looking for our authorization, they already have someone else’s. They don’t join the conversation. They start a new one. And then they finish it.

The world thinks preachers are the last thing it needs. The world couldn’t be more wrong.

The need *within* the church is also urgent. The health of the church is tied inextricably to preaching.

PT Forsyth: *The church stands or falls by its preaching.*

Perhaps we live in a unique time. There’s a peculiar mismatch in the ordinary believer’s experience of preaching. In a moment, anybody can instantly access global pulpit megastars, seemingly tailored to the consumer’s preferences of style and theology. At the same time, most believers might go through long seasons of their ‘christian’ lives without the dial seeming to move in their hearts/consciences during a sunday sermon. Online ‘excellence’ and congregational

mediocrity seems a hazardous concoction. Believers need to hear their elders *preach to them*. That is surely a staple feature of the Christian life.

1 Corinthians 4:15 *For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

Pretty much every church meeting has a 'talk' component. This is one of the features that makes it legit. Perhaps it's easy to drift into a merely organisational mentality here. We have to do the 'preach'. Someone needs to do the 'preach' bit. I remember a conversation with a new young pastor in which he confided in me his attitude to preaching. He saw preaching as the unfortunate necessity of his job. He would sooner be without it, and released to focus on the things he felt motivated to do as a pastor. He wasn't proud of this and I don't include this to dismiss the man (who is a dear friend). I also hope he has grown to become a far more confident preacher. But the church culture in which this circumstance can prevail seems wrong. If you are called to be a pastor you are, by definition, called, compelled, to preach. Surely?

Someone may say that 'pastor' is synonymous in the NT with 'elder' and not all elders are called upon to preach (1 Timothy 5.17). We might agree on this (although the same epistle states that ability to 'teach' should be a qualification of all elders (1 Timothy 3.2)), but churches should receive the work of those called to preach.

There is a dominant rhetorical tone in any local church. This is unavoidable. If it's not formed by authoritative preaching, it will be formed by something else.

Some common dominant discourse in contemporary churches:

- Therapy and self-help.
- Sentimental affirmation.
- Prophetic words.
- 'Worship song theology'.
- Learning from experiences.

Over against these current tendencies, we hear Paul thundering out His vision for church health:

1 Timothy 4:11–16 *[11] Command and teach these things. [12] Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. [13] Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. [14] Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. [15] Practise these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. [16] Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (ESV)*

2 Timothy 4:1–5 *[1] I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: [2] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. [3] For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. [5] As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, and fulfil your ministry. (ESV)*

The preacher does not ultimately look to join the consensus, hoping for acceptance in the prevailing discussions. We need preachers who are men under authority and having authority. Our goal in writing this material is to help elevate the office and the action of preaching, to raise aspirations and hopes, and to recover the sense of wonder and gravity that should rightly belong to this work.

The progress of our mission (helping to re-disciple post christian cities, by planting and establishing churches) will greatly depend on a recovery of pulpit confidence in the next few years. Bizarrely this is one of the less fashionable things one can say about mission and church growth. It seems we are more likely to talk about the need for anything rather than preaching. Perhaps this is because preaching is where the rubber hits the road. It's in the preaching especially that we are vulnerable to the charge of foolishness (1 Corinthians 1). It's in preaching that we touch the third rail. People have noticed that this sometimes doesn't go well, including some who consider themselves leadership experts. So they suggest that we dial down the preaching, reminding us that in this postmodern age people don't like preaching.

Thankfully I hear this kind of nonsense less than I used to, but I am sure someone is 'discovering' it right now and poised to write a groundbreaking book about it. Most stupid ideas come back every couple of decades.

The simple reality is that no one likes being preached to and this has always been so. This is why preachers get bullied into the job by God. People who see it as a pleasant career prospect are like men joining the foreign legion because they like the uniforms.

It's a dangerous job. There is a tough and sometimes lonely side to this work, it will require everything of us. But it's also a unique and sacred privilege and a great joy.

Life-giving, soul-building, Christ-prizing, worship-eliciting, sin-banishing, mind-instructing, heart-shaping, life-changing preaching must become the norm in our churches. This is why we are doing this.

John Stott: *Preaching is indispensable to Christianity. Without preaching a necessary part of its authenticity has been lost. For Christianity is, in its very essence, a religion of the word of God. No attempt to understand Christianity can succeed which overlooks or denies the truth that the living God has taken the initiative to reveal himself savingly to fallen humanity; or that his self-revelation has been given by the most straightforward means of communication known to us, namely by a word and words.*

Karl Barth: *...there is nothing more important, more urgent, more helpful, more redemptive and more salutary; there is nothing from the viewpoint of heaven and earth, more relevant to the real situation than the speaking and the hearing of the word of God in the... power of its truth.*

Questions for reflection:

1. What do you think of Forsyth's claim that the church 'Stands or falls by its preaching'? How true is this? Is it exaggerated? Can you think of historical exceptions?
2. What characteristics of preaching make it a unique (and vital) means of communication?
3. Why does preaching especially seem like 'foolishness' (1 Corinthians 1)? How might this connect the preacher to Paul's idea of the 'weakness of the cross'?

2. The Essence of Preaching

Most training materials I've come across in the last 20 years on the subject of preaching have especially emphasised matters of practical development and improvement. Sessions or chapters are quickly given over to themes of communication technique. The crying need, we are often told, is for more exciting and livelier delivery, or greater clarity. The primary concerns seem to be the gaining and keeping of attention and the methodology of disclosing a message.

I am not about to dismiss these things. There are exceptional books on preaching (like Martyn Lloyd-Jones '*Preachers and Preaching*') which pretty much seem to categorically avoid treating these things - seemingly as a protest! I don't intend to go that far. They are important matters and any preacher should aim to improve and grow in them. But they need to find their place in the order of priority.

It's essential first to better appreciate what preaching is. What is going on when a preacher faces a congregation and opens up the bible to them? I've become more convinced over the years that one of the greatest weaknesses of the 21st century church is a flat and dull concept of preaching. We reduce it to a mundane and bland exercise without realising it. It's possible to celebrate individual sermons (even to preach them!) and enjoy the benefits of good bible teaching, while not knowing the gravity of preaching. We can be like children playing with toy guns, unaware that, in fact, we carry loaded weapons.

Preaching is more than the disclosure of data. It's the Lord's presence: the voice of the living God.

There are several key witnesses to this reality in the history of the church. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin (and many of the confessions and catechisms that subsequently emerged from the Reformation) loved to emphasise preaching as the proclamation of the very words of God. PT Forsyth talked about the *sacrament* of preaching.

There are many ways in which this can be established from scripture. Here is a sample:

In one of Paul's earliest letters he describes the nature of preaching.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 *And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.*

The message Paul had preached in Thessalonica was nothing less than God's very word. It came with power that continued and prevailed as it was remembered and discussed amongst the church community - even in Paul's absence.

From a much later letter:

Ephesians 2:17 *And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.*

Paul knows that the Ephesians did not get a visit in the flesh from Jesus of Nazareth. And yet he's prepared to say that Jesus came and preached to them. How? As far as scripture is concerned, the preaching of Christ, by Paul himself, was the *Lord* preaching. Jesus, the Word, was there, present through the proclamation of the word.

This claim is perfectly consistent with the words of Jesus to his original apostles:

Matthew 10:40 *Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.*

Also from Ephesians:

Ephesians 5.26 *that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word*

Perhaps it seems a big claim, but Jesus prepares His bride for glory through preaching. (The 'washing of the water with the word' must refer to preaching at least as much as it refers to any other administering of the word.)

This famous passage from Hebrews further asserts the living dynamic power of God's word proclaimed:

Hebrews 4.12 *For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

Also from Peter:

1 Peter 1:23–25 *[23] since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; [24] for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, [25] but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*

Finally, look at the language used to describe the advance of the gospel in the Acts narratives:

Acts 6.7 *the word of God continued to increase*

Acts 12.24 *But the word of God increased and multiplied*

Acts 13.49 *The word of the Lord spread through the whole region*

Acts 19.20 *so the word of God continued to increase and prevail mightily*

Finally look at how the apostle John summarises his ministry at the start of his first epistle.

1 John 1 *[1] That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—[2] the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—[3] that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. [4] And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.*

In the act of proclaiming (in this case through a letter) the word of Christ, John is initiating his hearers/readers into the same fellowship that he enjoys with the risen Jesus - the word of life.

The combined effect of these passages (and others could be cited) should be a heightened sense of the sacredness of preaching. Jesus is present, heavenly bread is offered, sinners are invited to partake on Him.

True exposure to God's word is exposure to *the word/logos* - the *person* who is the eternal word of God - who speaks graciously and authoritatively through mere men, offering *Himself* to sinners.

There should be a revelation of God – an encounter making spiritual renewal occur 'in the pew'

- Not only as the 'principles' of the sermon are put into practice.

- Not only in the worship time before or afterwards
- Not only at communion.
- But in the preaching itself.

This high view of preaching needn't make it impractical. The preacher is no less involved with life change and application because of this sacramental aspect. In fact it's this essential dynamic of preaching - the active presence of the Lord - that makes for the most exciting possibilities when it comes to transformation. It's exposure to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ that brings creative power and change in the human heart (2 Corinthians 3.18-4.6). The preacher's glorious privilege is to play a part in shedding heavenly light. Our ultimate goal: by presenting God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ we invite hearers to '*behold the lamb of God*' and thereby become renewed. As a congregation's gaze is lifted heavenward and the Glory of Christ is seen more clearly, the result is worship, repentance and faith.

Questions for reflection:

1. What do you think we've lost in our understanding of the gravity of preaching, and how do you think we might have lost it?
2. What might be involved in a 'sacramental' view of the christian life in general? What difference can this make?
3. Does this bring a solemnity to the work? Is there any danger in this?

3. The Call to Preach

Romans 10:14–17 [14] *How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? [15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” [16] But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” [17] So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (ESV)*

There is a repeated theme in the bible - the calling of the preacher - a reoccurring narrative, each with its own features. It's there in the story of Moses at the burning bush (although he's given Aaron as a mouthpiece). Later we see it in the calling of the young Samuel. Then there are Isaiah and Jeremiah's stories. In the New Testament we have the calling of the twelve apostles and the calling of Paul. We also pick up features of Timothy's journey into preaching. As a backdrop to these we'll always have the story of Jesus growing into his unique preaching vocation, as described centuries before in Isaiah 61. Along with some other scriptures, these combined examples should reserve the place of the 'called preacher' in our ecclesiology (our idea of the church).

This is especially worth mentioning nowadays. In recent generations the global church has been blessed, enriched and equipped by a necessary and wholly positive rediscovery of 'the body', the church as a community (both globally and locally) of interdependent and Holy Spirit gifted members. The instruction of Colossians 3.16 (*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God*) is not addressed to 'clergy' but to the whole church. The same is true of Ephesians 4.15–16:

[15] speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, [16] from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (ESV)

As is often the way, over time, churches have lurched between alternate emphases, rather than pursuing strength and fire in both directions. Body ministry should not squash preachers any more than preaching replacing body ministry. The healthy church will excel at both.

If preaching has been subtly squashed in recent times, part of the damage is in the erosion of the *calling* concept. If everyone can serve (right!) then everyone can minister (right? means the same thing anyway...), and if everyone can minister, then everyone can lead (er... kind of... maybe?), and if everyone can lead then everyone can preach (errrr.... maybe in a sense?). The reality is that not everybody is called, in the fullest sense, to preach. As a warning, scripture refers to those who presume to preach without the calling - without being sent (Jeremiah 23.21).

Since no two vocational journeys are quite the same, it's maybe smart to identify some dependable features of the calling, which generally apply in all cases. I have done the right thing and set them out as four 'C's. You're welcome.

1. Compulsion

- We should be aware of a certain overriding of our prior plans. A preacher is someone with whom the Lord has interfered. He is a man in chains and he's aware of the one before whom he gives an account (*the God before whom I stand... as Elijah calls Him (1 Kings 18.15)*). *You did not choose me but I have chosen you*, is how Jesus' puts this in John 15. *Woe unto me if I preach not the gospel...* is how Paul puts it (1 Corinthians 9.16). You could almost describe this as a certain reluctance on the part of the preacher. They live with a

sense of having been charged, and must operate under authority. *'Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them'* (Jeremiah 1.17)

- In other words The preacher is not 'stagestruck'. Celebrity and glamour must be lightyears from this. It's cancerous to us and to churches when we feel lured towards the pulpit as a means of popularity. Preachers will be unable to stand their ground if the goal is people-pleasing (*'tickling itching ears'* as Paul warns Timothy (2 Timothy 4.3)). There are seasons of very little encouragement, times of pushback and criticism, decisions of necessary departure and moments of painful failure and weakness. We won't go on unless we know we are compelled *'in and out of season'*.
- If this first 'c' leaves you unsure about your own calling I would generally advise giving the question some time. A true compulsion to preach will come to the surface some way or another and you're better off waiting to be overwhelmed by this than you are in assuming a preaching role unbidden. Spurgeon used to say: *stay out of the ministry for as long as you are able and if you can do something else, then do it*. A true call will become a dominant force.

2. Conviction

Jeremiah 20 [9] *If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.*

- A called preacher has become somewhat tied up with their message. They have *'eaten the scroll'* (Ezekiel 3.3). D Martyn Lloyd-Jones was asked to describe his own call to preach and answered that he was not aware of the personal sense of his own destiny as a preacher so much as he became overwhelmingly concerned for *what needed to be preached*. The burden itself began to church him up.
- As a boy I'd visit any zoo hoping to see (and to ideally hear) a lion. It's fairly normal for the lion to be either non-existent (*'we don't have lions. We have a goat...'*), or asleep (*'it's at the back, can you see, behind the rock?'*). You don't forget the times you heard the thing roaring. Everyone coming to your church this Sunday is in need of hearing the roar. A preacher must carry a burden, a sense of conviction. A helpful slogan: *Does the pulpit drive you to the bible or does the bible drive you to the pulpit?*
- One of the puritans tells of a dream in which he heard preaching in the market square and, stepping closer, saw to his confusion that the preacher was the devil. In the dream he asked the devil, *'why are you, Satan, preaching the gospel?!'*. The devil replied *'I'm preaching without conviction. And this does more harm than good'*.

3. Craft

- By this I refer to the interest a preacher will take in the craft of preaching. A called preacher will feel a jealousy for the right handling of the word of truth (2 Timothy 2.15). Anyone who trembles at the Lord's word (Isaiah 66.2) will feel a care about its delivery. Good communication skills are helpful but they do not make a preacher as much as this.
 - Are you eager to learn and to grow in this craft? Would you seek input and help? Do you listen to preachers in order to learn from their work as well as their message? Do you read books on preaching? (If this all sounds a bit serious and dull it is less likely that you are called to preach.)

4. Confirmation

- A vital component of the calling to preach will be the evidence of it. This isn't immediately available, but eventually it's a healthy reality check. Anyone claiming to be a shepherd won't be taken seriously if sheep only die or disappear under his care.
 - Are people hearing the Lord speak to them when you preach? Are they growing more healthy, turning from sin and trusting Jesus more? Does this include the ordinary people of your mission field? Well-meaning church people will sometimes affirm a would-be preacher in a confusing way. It can have more to do with a general sense of positivity than true discernment of calling and gifting. Be real and test whether ordinary blokes are coming to hear you.

None of the above should preclude a time of trying out the calling. In the process of discovering whether or not one is called to preach, it is wise to take any appropriate opportunities and learn as much as possible. When Jeremiah spoke of those who had not been sent but who preached anyway (Jeremiah 23), he wasn't warning against this!

Neither should this infer that all preachers should start the preaching ministry as the finished product. We have to start somewhere - and beginnings, generally, are humble by nature.

Questions for Reflection:

1. We can overemphasise the plurality of gifts and also the uniqueness of the call to preach. Explore and consider the dangers in both of these extremes.
2. Self awareness has to play a huge part in discerning a genuine calling to preach. What are the typical defeaters of self awareness? How do we prevent these?
3. Have you seen examples of people being called to preach? Consider some differences and some common features.

4. The Parameters of Preaching

Preaching means proclaiming the word of God. The preacher is a messenger for someone else. He will answer for how faithfully he delivers this message (*'we who teach will be judged with greater strictness'* James 3.1).

So the preacher is not called to declare his own opinions. Nor is he to regurgitate the ideas of his contemporaries - or of any other age. He's been delivered from the futility of simply speculating. Instead, the preacher has the privilege of being a mouthpiece for heaven on earth.

The preacher needs to settle on the wonder of this and discern the genuine treasure with which he's been entrusted. Otherwise he will be easily distracted into the flat, dull and powerless activity of echoing ideas and opinions that people may hear from others and for which they needn't come to the church. D Martyn Lloyd-Jones made this point through the story of Peter and John, when they were asked for alms by the lame beggar at the Gate-Beautiful. Peter's response to the beggar is instructive: *look at us... I have no silver and gold... but what I do have I give to you* (Acts 3.4-6). Lloyd-Jones suggests that preachers need to clarify in their own minds that they have no silver and gold! When it comes to that which the world would value, we are potless and we need to be sure of it. But what we have is miraculous in its power.

The way in which a preacher exercises this focused confidence is partly in the discipline of expository preaching. The preacher's business is the communication of the word of God - by which we mean the exposition of scripture (making the meaning plain - 'giving the sense' Nehemiah 8.8). This is not to despise prophecy, nor the way in which exposition may be mixed with the gift of prophecy. But when exposition is faithful it is more authoritative, we have the Lord speaking just as powerfully, perhaps moreso (and more unmistakably) than with the gift of prophecy. If you struggle to accept this claim, it might be that you have drifted away from the high view of scripture that is fitting for a child of God. Look at Peter's comparison of scripture with the testimony of his own experience:

2 Peter 1:17-21 [17] *For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"* [18] *we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. [19] And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, [20] knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. [21] For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

The bible makes mind blowing claims about its own power and authority - and these are consistent with Jesus' matching attitude.

This reminds us where the authority lies when preaching takes place: The authority is in the *text*. However persuasive, forceful - even accompanied by signs and wonders - a preacher may be, his authority is entirely resting in the bible, and the moment he strays from it he is on his own - and in danger.

Generally this should mean that preachers begin with the text. Scripture must not be co-opted into an ulterior agenda. Let the text be read, and let the text be explained, with conviction. It's disheartening and tragic to watch preachers shoehorn passages of scripture into a 'sermon' that could have been given, with or without the added supposed validity of those bible verses. Let the text provide the theme and the message of the sermon. It has power. Trust the Holy Spirit to honour the words He inspired.

Note, however, that this doesn't mean that one specific portion of the bible is the *only* focus of the sermon. This is impossible. Adequately giving the sense and force of a passage involves grasping the mind and worldview of the

writer. This necessitates some familiarity with the rest of that writer's literature. The preacher also needs to bring to bear 'the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20) in the preaching of any one text. So strengthen your grasp of the bible as a whole - in the story it tells and the unfolding of its message (what we call Biblical Theology). Also learn how the various teachings of the bible integrate together into a consistent body of truth (what we call systematic theology).

Especially be sure to preach all scripture as what Jesus claims it to be in John 5: as testimony to himself concerning Himself. All of the Spirit-breathed pages of the bible are telling of Christ. In our exposition we must ultimately and deliberately set Him forth. We'll have more to say on this in later sessions.

Let each individual doctrine be taught as it relates to the rest, not jettisoning truth, but keep these parameters clear: preach the text. Preach truth, not as you devise it, but as His word has set it forth

Proclamation and Persuasion

Should the preacher just make assertions?

Certainly he will use the presuppositions of his audience to persuade them toward the whole truth, but the truth to which he calls them is authored by God – not himself.

- There are two ways in which this works:

1. Agreed grounds of appeal.
2. The inner witness of the Holy Spirit.

- The second is the most fundamental but both are important and the preacher should neglect neither. Persuasion and sheer proclamation work hand in hand, and both can point to the final authority of the Bible.

- These convictions lead to the primacy of expository preaching.

The bible has both the truthfulness and the 'sacramental' power to do transforming work when delivered in faithful exposition. It only needs to be channelled through the speaker. When CH Spurgeon was asked to defend the Bible from the onslaught of continental higher criticism he would say – 'I would sooner defend a lion. Simply let it out of the cage'.

If we believe this we will pursue the style of preaching which

- Allows scripture to direct the content of the message.
- Preaching which appeals to scripture as the source of truth and the authority on all matters.
- Preaching which teaches through scripture steadily, confident that all is profitable (2 Timothy 3.16-17)
- Preaching which seeks to make the plain meaning of all texts very clear (explaining, where necessary, how scripture interprets scripture). This also trains listeners in hearing from God in their own time.
- Preaching which applies that plain meaning to the city.
- Preaching which expects the Holy Spirit to lead people into the truth.

This is expository preaching.

A final point:

Preaching the message of a passage may include preaching the tone. The preacher should seek to understand the emotional appeal of any passage preached. It may be appropriate to express this in the delivery, with the help of the Holy Spirit. A passage that expresses urgent warning, for example, or loving comfort, surely should not be preached in

a detached, speculative or academic tone. So ask the help of the Holy Spirit. The Lord wants to speak. Do not hinder His voice.

Questions for Reflection:

1. The 21st century church doesn't generally share the concept, held by the 16th century reformers, of faithful expository preaching as the 'very word of God'. Why do you think we may have drifted away from this perspective?
2. Preachers will be often tempted to preach their own thoughts and not the Lord's. What are some subtle ways this temptation attacks us?
3. How can we learn to preach not only the *message* of a text but its *tone*? What are some of the pitfalls?

5. The Goal of Preaching (Part I) - Mind, Emotions and Will

In Romans 12, the apostle Paul urges believers to make use of the various spiritual gifts with which they're endowed, 'each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned'. Within this section of teaching he refers separately to the gifts of teaching and exhortation

Romans 12:8

the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

It's instructive to note that these are two distinct dimensions of communication, each necessary for spiritual health, and each given, by the Holy Spirit, to the church.

Fruitful preaching must take elements of both **teaching** and **exhortation** into account. Biblical models of preaching are rarely reduced to one or the other. Exhortations and imperatives need to be made on the basis of revelation and argument. The epistles are good examples. The general layout of most of Paul's letters is several statements (even chapters) of sustained teaching before any instructions are given.

This is not a matter of shallow protocol. It marks the difference between long-term fruitfulness and time wasting (whatever the apparent immediate results of sermons).

The point is that unless our exhortations are embedded clearly in the gospel, they are in danger of being false and certainly built on a precarious foundation.

Here some words from Luther are relevant:

Here I must take counsel of the gospel. I must hearken to the gospel, which teacheth me, not what I ought to do, (for that is the proper office of the law,) but what Jesus Christ the Son of God hath done for me: to wit, that He suffered and died to deliver me from sin and death. The gospel willeth me to receive this, and to believe it. And this is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principal article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the knowledge of all godliness consisteth.

Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually.

From Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (1535)

It is not just a question of 'evangelism'. It's easy to mistake this emphasis for a plea to remember the unconverted in the room. This is a noble concern, but it is a part of our point here - not the whole of it. We are not merely avoiding the assumption that all our hearers 'know the gospel' (though that assumption should be avoided indeed). There is a more fundamental principle at work: we are never to 'move beyond' the gospel. The gospel is not the ABC - it is the A-Z - and each of our hearers will desperately need to hear it at every opportunity. To know the gospel at all is to know the need for regular reminding.

Colossians 1.28 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Colossians 2:6-7 [6] Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, [7] rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

The writer to the Hebrews (the recipients being believers facing severe trial and persecution) opens his letter with a chapter highlighting the wonders of the Christ they had already come to know, and then begins chapter two:

Hebrews 2.1 [1] Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

Surely it was time for the writer to move on to something more fitting for the crisis...? But no, the writer emphasises again the centrality and glory of Jesus, '*lest we drift away...*'.

And look at how the now elderly apostle John opens his letter:

1 John 1.1-3 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

The preacher is at his most faithful and most fruitful when he remains close to this supreme and very present Christ as his theme, his announcement and his passionate exultation.

This needn't mean that we resort always to exactly the same verbal 'formulas' for articulating the gospel. The apostles demonstrate a massive range of language, images and styles in presenting the orthodox doctrine that undergirds all their exhortations.

You may get tired of some specific words or illustrations (though maybe even this needn't be), but you must *never* get tired of the gospel. If you do, you must stop preaching at once and invite someone up who is still lost in wonder.

I remember Michael Eaton being invited to go somewhere and preach on Ephesians 5. He was given 4 sessions. He spent the first 3 preaching thru chapters 1-4 and touched on chapter 5 in the last session. He said *you are not ready for chapter 5 till you have digested 1-4*. Obviously Paul felt the same way. And God.

This emphasis on doctrinal content is not an excuse to shroud our messages in a lot of opaque discourse. We are not trying to impress people with our intellect. Neither are we arguing for a kind of 'dogmatic correctness' – i.e. scoring a sermon on whether it included sufficient theological substance. No, the motivation is *more power*. Sermons that do not appeal to the whole person are unlikely to generate lasting change.

It's perhaps helpful to talk in terms of the **mind** (the intellect), the **emotions** and the **will**. Preachers will be naturally strong at addressing one or two of these. For maximum effect we should aim for all three.

[Let me make a brief digression here. You might expect me to say mind, heart and will, but this is to use a non-biblical definition of the **heart**. Scripture doesn't limit the heart to the emotions but makes it the core of all one's faculties, including our reason. In fact the heart is really a word speaking of the inner *motives* and *desires* of an individual. This is why the book of Proverbs is so emphatic about guarding the heart:

Proverbs 4.23: Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

You could say that the *heart* in the bible is closer to meaning intellect *and* emotions. Perhaps it is a western thing (and not Hebrew) to divide these things up. In fact the word the Puritans used, *affections*, is a helpful parallel. They referred to the emotions – but *more* than the emotions. They meant the inclination of the soul in terms of desire and hope.]

In order to help us see the merits of this triple-target preaching, let's spend the last part of this session observing the costs of imbalance here. All preachers will likely have a natural bias in favour of one or two of these faculties. Some default to the emotions while others naturally address the intellect and still others focus on the will. Each will then have a second strength.

Among the three possible blends set out below you may recognise your own default style (and that of others).

Mind and emotions only...

- Would probably be a temptation for charismatic Calvinists (like us...). '*We leave the application to God*' may sound vaguely spiritual but can be an excuse for lack of courage. Calling people to a decision and to action is no denial of God's sovereignty.
- The preacher is assuming too much wisdom on the part of his audience in *how* to respond. This kind of practical outworking was clearly not beneath the NT writers.
- It is often in the practical application that the weight and importance of the doctrine preached is brought home. Many people will need the practical inference before they really *see* what you have been saying.
- The church may kid itself that progress is made because here the preaching is biblical. But people must not be only moved to a point of repentance – they need to be instructed in *how* to repent.

Emotions and Will only...

- Harder to see the weaknesses here because the immediate results and atmosphere can be impressive.
- Maybe preaching a gospel of works without realising.
- No sustained power in life change.
- Creating moralists – another load of Pharisees.
- Justifying caricature of preachers.
- People of intellect will struggle. They may come under guilt because they are not 'feeling it' and because they have so many unanswered questions. But the fault is not necessarily theirs.

Mind and Will only...

- Cultivates a clinical atmosphere where people may respond with cold compliance to the logic of a sermon but have no greater appetite for righteousness than when you started.
- To get caught up with God through the word must touch the emotions. People will struggle to respond if they haven't *felt* the presence of Jesus, if they haven't sensed Him, if they cannot 'taste and see that the Lord is good'. Pascal said it plainly:

Blaise Pascal: *Men despise religion, they hate it and are afraid it might be true. To cure that we have to begin by showing that religion is not contrary to reason. That it is worthy of veneration and should be given respect. Next it should be made loveable, should make the good wish it were true, then show that it is indeed true.*

Mind, emotions and will: God calls us to engage all three.

Conclusion:

So our goal is nothing less than life-change through heart-change, and this takes place as we successfully persuade the intellect, appeal to the emotions and charge the will. Don't panic and force sermons into a bland attempt to do justice to each by 33.3%. This is more a matter of long term diet than individual Sundays.

Nevertheless, when getting ready to speak, consider how you intend to present Jesus as credible to the mind, wondrous to the emotions and compelling to the will.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Some perceive a division between *theological richness* in preaching and *spiritual power* in preaching. Why do you think this thinking comes about? Do you think it is ever fair?
2. Theological conviction is not the same thing as theological correctness. What is the difference?
3. Which of the three tendencies outlined above do you most commonly drift into? What might you do to make for more balance in your preaching?

6. The Goal of Preaching (Part II) - Emotions and Truth

We'd do well to reflect still further on the necessity and the task of engaging the hearts of our hearers, in the fullest sense, reaching all three faculties of mind, emotions and will.

Consider the sequence there, which is not accidental. We start with the mind because the preacher's route to the emotions is that way. A direct assault on our hearer's *feelings* without any appeal to reason is a denial of their humanity. We treat them as little more than lizards that way. The limbic cortex is capable of instinctive responses which bypass the rational. If you tap my knee in a certain place my leg will move. I don't take time to consider the decision - nor do I find my yearnings aroused towards it.

It's possible to provoke similar results, preaching for direct emotional effect while ignoring the mental faculties. God did not make our hearers for this. We've been dignified, as creatures, with a higher capacity (a capacity that distinguishes us from beasts of instinct and impulse, and even calls us to rule over them). The image of God in us and in our hearers demands the involvement of reason.

This point must not be gainsaid with the vital and worthy reminder our hearers have mixed levels of education. To be sure, that is not an irrelevance for the preacher. But it should be considered separately. There are contextual and cultural matters to weigh when we communicate to any audience, but whether we speak in a style that assumes a certain education in our hearers or not, we are always preaching to humans (unless your calling is extremely niche) with a capacity for reason. More than this, we speak to humans whose emotions are tied to their mental grasp.

Matthew Elliot's excellent book '*Faithful Feelings*' brings together the conclusions of contemporary neurology with orthodox biblical anthropology, showing remarkable agreement between the two. It turns out that Augustine, Aquinas, the Reformers, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley (all standing on the shoulders of the bible) were right all along about what makes us tick. Our 'passions' are tied inextricably to what we think/believe/cognate. And, ultimately, our emotions, as they are mastered and won over to a way of thinking and believing, become the driving force of our will and our behaviour. For our people's lives to change their deepest feelings need to change - and this will require persuasion.

To be sure, it is possible for whole populations to be bullied by the emotional manipulation of shallow one-dimensional hectoring. Ask the great propagandists of history. Slogans and soundbites, with shrewd use of lights, dry ice and keyboard padding will produce results. But the best that this achieves, on its own, is a disciple who has been greatly moved upon - but also only partially moved upon, and perhaps even moved upon against his or her own honest judgement, so that the emotional storm has only really generated an internal conflict, a dissonance. Now the conflict may be the beginning of real change, but it may also provoke a reaction (after the lights, music and hype have died down) which carries the day *against* the gospel. We should not be deceived. The waves may be spectacular while the tide is going out.

So should preachers leave the emotions and appeal only to the intellect? After all, who needs waves if it's about the tide coming in?

Or, alternatively, do we aim to simply stir up our hearers and hope that enough of the hype remains for the church to grow by staying on the credit side in a war of emotional attrition.

The biblical answer is that we do neither. Preaching that appeals to the passions through honest persuasion and explanation is the satisfying and healthy route.

Jonathan Edwards argued that Christian immaturity is caused by a disconnect here. Intellectual understanding that is not 'real' to the heart changes nothing. If the need for financial security or respect and affection from my spouse or attention from my peers seems more real to me than the claims of the gospel, then moral exhortation is only a loud gong or clanging cymbal.

Tim Keller states it clearly: *'Clear preaching, then, is a means to the end of making the truth more real to the hearts of the listeners than it has been before'*.

And here is Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *The first and primary object of preaching... is to produce an impression. It is the impression at the time that matters, even more than what you can remember subsequently... Edwards, in my opinion, has the true notion of preaching. It is not primarily to impart information; and while [the listeners are taking] notes you may be missing something of the impact of the Spirit. As preachers we must not forget this. We are not merely imparters of information. We should tell our people to read certain books themselves and get the information there. The business of preaching is to make such knowledge live.*

This brings some colour to Lloyd-Jones' own definition of preaching as *'logic on fire, eloquent reason'*.

Conrad Cherry, in a book on Jonathan Edwards, says *'Religious man is not one who subjects passion to the rule of reason, but one whose reason is passionate and whose affection is intellectual'*.

(As a side comment, the fact that our culture has become less committed to reasonable discourse, and more immersed in superficial argument than previous societies, is not a good thing. Preaching which persuades the whole person is one of the ways in which the church can perform its role as salt and light for the common good - quite apart from the main goal, the winning of souls. I wonder if a large part of the church's mission in the coming generations will reflect this need. The reason the western world originally became a literate society was, in large part, because of the churches of the reformation who took seriously their calling to train children in the scriptures. We cannot honestly pray and dream about lasting gospel transformation in our cities and beyond, without preparing to teach people how to learn and think.

Side comment over.)

Two further considerations on this: Firstly, the relationship between our thoughts and our passions doesn't seem to be a predictable and mechanical one. We can accept the causal priority of thoughts and ideas and beliefs over emotions without making it always a chronological priority. What I mean by this is that our hearer's emotions and thoughts can be worked upon at the same time. There is not some kind of necessary delay. We needn't insist that people are given a kind of sequential diet of fifteen to twenty minutes of plain exposition before we start adding some pathos. The relationship between the two can seem more like the moving of a lever which instantly turns on a fulcrum. A sermon can move very genuinely on someone's thoughts *and* feelings immediately. But it can also happen with slow accumulation.

Secondly, we should also take into consideration the variation of personalities in our hearers. Some people's emotions (and the expression of their emotions) are moved upon more quickly and with seemingly less complexity than others. Perhaps this can be put down to a difference of temperament. Imagine the difference in a kitchen cooker between a gas hob and an electrical hob. Some will seem less passionate than others because the expression of their emotions is a slower process. But we are misled if we conclude that nothing is going on. This mistake seems fairly common in our kind of church culture.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Is there any genuine *spiritual* danger in preaching that merely exhorts but doesn't teach?

2. Spending time and energy teaching the gospel to people who have been conditioned to low levels of attention and cognition can feel less rewarding than preaching which provokes an easy emotional response. How can preachers push through this pain barrier?
3. Are you more like a gas heater or an electric one? Why should you bear this in mind in the context of your own preparation and delivery of sermons? How might 'gas heater' and 'electric heater' people misunderstand and even unfairly judge one another?

7. The Goal of Preaching (Part III) - Engaging the Will

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point* tells the story of a medical clinic at a USA university which, every winter, became overwhelmed with flu outbreaks amongst the undergrads. In order to prevent this the staff tried all kinds of campaigns to ensure that students took their flu jab in good time. They made flyers and posters each year, trying every creative approach in the hope of successfully connecting with students and motivating them to take the medicine. None of their efforts seemed to work, however, and every year the spread of influenza seemed more or less the same as the year before - despite some impressive and even lurid attempts by the medical department to advertise the injection. The situation changed dramatically one winter when the university launched a flyer about the flu jab, featuring a very simple and prominent map with directions to the clinic. This boring strategy was the game changer. Annual campus flu outbreaks became manageable from this point on.

Here we see a principle that needs to be held in tension with the wider point we've made. And, in fact, let me make it again, loud and clear: real change must be heart change. Transformation in the soul comes through the renewal of our affections. So the preacher's main task is to present Christ in a way that warms the hearts of listeners. Our hearers are not transformed by mere lists of commands, nor sheer exhortations and imperatives, nor descriptions of better behaviour.

But, having said all of this, it's also possible for an audience to be treated to an emotional experience and still not moved forward in holiness. They may remain '*hearers only and not doers of the word*' (James 1.22). The heart which has been stirred to faithfulness and devotion will often need a specific and practical step set before it in order for the Holy Spirit's work to not be stunted at birth. Just like the University clinic, we might even impress ourselves with our vivid and moving warnings against sin or our calls to faith and obedience, while the actual enemy (unrepentant sin in the lives of our hearers - influenza on the college campus) is largely untouched. Simple and clear application will make sermons more complete and potent. Bryan Chappel tells preachers to imagine their (busy and distracted) hearers asking the question: '*so what?*' as each sermon comes into land. All of our engagement with the mind and our appeals to affections should have their sharp application in clear calls to the will.

Aspects of application:

1. The heart of application: repentance and faith.

- When preaching application we are still preaching Christ and the connection between gospel foundation and practical follow-through must remain in view (if we are to avoid legalism). The obedience we are called to promote is a specific kind: '*the obedience of faith*' (Romans 1.5; 16.26). This is what distinguishes it from the works of the law. For righteous living to be pleasing to God it must spring forth from faith - the faith without which it's impossible to please God (Heb 11.6). One of the most practically helpful books I've known as a preacher is John Piper's *Future Grace* - simply because it provides such a comprehensive explanation of the mechanism of faith, shown in obedience, applied in numerous and very familiar areas of sin and temptation.
- So the *heart* of application is true repentance, which starts with revelation of the living God, in the gospel, bringing the sobering, liberating and ultimately joyful willingness to change. If this isn't rooted in the faith, brought about by the Holy Spirit, it will not last.

2. Confrontation of patterns

- Preaching in scripture is frequently confrontational - and not only by subtle implication, but often in brazen intent. Preachers sometimes imagine they've cornered their hearers and given them their orders, when in fact they've done nothing of the sort. I've sometimes stepped down from the platform conscious (in my saintly way) of how boldly I just stuck it to them and only gradually realised that my savage chastening was received by the congregation as something closer to an avuncular tap on the wrist. Part of the danger is that a preacher can be so aware of the work he's put into his exegesis and sermon outline (not to mention

dazzling wit and cultural savvy) that he's satisfied he's scored high enough for one sermon and anyone would agree with he's a man at the top of his game. After one Sunday when I felt especially like a successful prize fighter, a godly friend said to me 'Joel, there was no call to repentance'. I might have protested that the whole sermon was a call to repentance. But she was right. I had assumed it.

- When I was a trainee school teacher I had a mentor who checked the way I was marking the pupils' books (pupils wrote things in books then in the 20th century). I was looking forward to his feedback as I was so pleased with my extensive and conscientious marking. Turned out he wasn't. He pointed out that my pupils were not improving in areas I'd been correcting them - despite the evidence that I'd kept 'on top of the marking'. My marking was extensive but useless. My goal had been an impressive record of consistent pupil assessment. It had not been the development of my pupils. He said to me: 'don't mark the books for your own conscience. You're here to educate them'. The early apostles didn't preach to satisfy their own sense of creative aspiration, but to '*present every man mature in Christ*' (Colossians 1.28-29).
- This will involve learning something counter-cultural (and learning things that are counter-cultural is one of the reasons we need to deliberately learn from people outside of our culture (past and present)). One puritan saying was: *Hard words create soft hearts; soft words create hard hearts*. The western church of today seems convinced of the exact opposite. Hard hearts need to run into something harder. This is where forthright preaching can come in.

Jeremiah 23:29 *Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD,
and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?*

For a rarely quoted example, with an edgy and non-contemporary tone (and very different to the puritans), here are a few lines from Billy Sunday.

...The reason you don't like the Bible, you old sinner, is because it knows all about you.

...One reason sin flourishes is that it is treated like a cream puff instead of a rattlesnake.

...They tell me that I rub the fur the wrong way. I don't. Let the cat turn around.

- This is not an endorsement of casual rebukes and harshness. Nor are we denying the importance of winning one's audience with warmth, humour and gentleness. Wisdom in preaching has many facets. All preachers should study the whole book of Proverbs with an eye to the many parts played by speech. Speaking and listening are commended in many ways by Solomon. Some words should be characterised by tenderness and some by toughness. If our true goal is the salvation of our hearers we will balance it right. If our goal is our own reputation we will *lose* our balance.

3. Creating new patterns

- Lasting change in the believer's life is mostly gradual. It's barely discernible while it happens, as with most organic growth, but undeniable in its accumulative effect. Preachers should remember this when we pray (or even announce) that a sermon will 'change your life'. The hope that God's word will bring mighty impact is completely appropriate, but the nature and scale of the change will take place as part of a lifelong process that the Holy Spirit is superintending.
- When it comes to application, preachers should emphasise the forming of habits rather than expect too much from individual pivot moments. To be sure, lives are transformed by individual sermons. This is biblical and worth aiming for and praying for and celebrating. But preaching in its most rounded kind, especially when spread against the backdrop of a community's ongoing journey over years, will avoid repeating the false expectation and wearying rhetoric of instant transformation week after week. Persistent talk of life change without habit formation is like driving a car from John O'Groats to Lands End without moving above second gear.
- The point here is not to deny the transforming effect of preaching that presents Christ as glorious (much more on this later) and *certainly* not to prescribe lame life-hacks instead. The point, rather, is that heart change will tend to be a long-term and cumulative process. The biblical metaphors of life change tend to be organic ones (soil, roots, mustard seeds, trees, vine, branches, growing into Christ). We are '*being*

transformed...' (2 Corinthians 3.18) - present continuous. Preaching will do its great work over years. People must see Jesus - and they must see him every week.

- This is relevant to how a major part of our sermon application - the individual's communion with Christ. These days we tend to talk about 'spiritual disciplines' or even 'habits of formation'. These phrases can be misleading. Listeners gain the impression that certain repeated behaviours have inherent spiritual force, i.e. fasting, bible reading and prayer times, etc will guarantee growth in themselves. (There's also been recent talk about liturgical formation.) In fact these things only have power in as much as they help us (although in themselves they may not) to see the Lord more, and thus have our hearts changed and our will liberated. It's not my daily quiet times (or involvement in a liturgical event) which make me holier (left to themselves they will only make me proud and blind or depressed), it is the Saviour I get to behold in those contexts. And because of this, and only because of this, they are to be encouraged.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Sermons with no application are like mouths with no teeth (I'm not sure if that analogy works but I'm pressing on...) There can be various reasons why preachers neglect application. Think of a few of these, so that you're more aware of the danger. One free answer to get you started: lack of courage.
2. When it comes to maturing in our speech ('seasoned with salt' Colossians ___) the book of Proverbs may be our best guide. What are the key lessons we learn from there?
3. Aiming for accumulative gospel growth in our hearers should shape our practices, expectations and maybe our emotional journey in preaching. Think of some ways this will be so.

8. The Goal of Preaching (Part IV) - Engaging the Will (II)

4. Immediate response

Those sermons that call for immediate response will remain a necessary part of the congregation's diet. When preachers aim for immediate response they must aim for it wholeheartedly, unapologetically and confidently. At appropriate times, preachers will preach intentionally with specific measurable outcomes in view.

- Raising offerings towards specific projects, or generally improving the congregation's giving patterns.
- Asking people to volunteer for roles in church life and mission.
- Prayer for specific areas of need.
- Evangelistic response (see below).

It's noteworthy that Paul refers, in Romans 13, to the two distinct gifts of 'teaching' and 'exhortation'. Perhaps a good way to distinguish these is by linking teaching with the mind and exhortation with the will. This is, of course, a generalisation, and a tentative one (reality is always more nuanced, complex and overlapped). In my experience, most preachers veer towards one or the other of these as a dominant style. This is not necessarily a bad thing, especially if it reflects a spiritual gift. But even the classic teacher will need to address the will - and sometimes for an immediate response. One typical bad habit that teachers will show here, is that of apologising for the call to response. If a preacher is uncomfortable about asking people to act, it will show. You may need to overcome some discomfort here. Also 'teachers' sometimes aim for too much precision about what they are asking for, so that their appeal dies by a thousand qualifications. I've heard very gifted teachers spend more time telling a congregation the reasons *not* to respond than they have spent urging them to do so (i.e. 'please *don't* respond just because I say so - or just because of an emotional experience, just please only respond if you really know that it's really certain that the Lord is really persuading you...'). Usually the result has been zero visible response from the congregation (who are too confused and self-scrutinising to know what to do). When exhorting, go after results.

5. Evangelistic appeals

Quite apart from anything else there will be non-believers in nearly every gathering. And if there are not, preachers should preach as if there are (and this is a more likely way to ensure that they begin to attend. If you preach as though assuming that non believers are not listening, your people will probably not bring their unconverted friends to hear you).

Here, the comments above about wholeheartedness are vital. A preacher must call people to repentance and faith, confident that this is going to happen - that it is likely to happen (i.e. that there are unrepentant people present, that the word proclaimed is mighty and that the Holy Spirit is present and eager to save). A young preacher asked CH Spurgeon why it was that he didn't seem to see conversions when he preached. In response, Spurgeon asked him 'you don't expect to see people converted every time you preach the gospel do you?' The young man replied 'no, of course not'. Spurgeon said 'then this is why you don't see conversions'. Our expectations should be huge. God desires that the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of His glory. The preacher's task could seem, therefore, like rolling off a log. The living God has a great interest in it. If we are preaching the knowledge of the glory of His Son, we are going with the grain of heaven. Expect things to happen!

Besides an apologising tone, evangelistic appeals can also suffer for lack of clarity:

- Make the **purpose**, the **target** and the **method** of the appeal especially simple. All three of these are essential and if a preacher is unclear about any one of them, the outcome will likely be muddled.
- Your hearers need to know:
 - What it is you are asking them to do
 - The reason they should do this
 - How they should do it

This works best when it's planned in advance. A preacher may feel led to make an unplanned appeal/invitation of some kind, but generally the more clear the advance planning is the less room there is for confusion.

6. Immediate application: the Lord's supper

Churches do well to celebrate communion regularly. I've been very grateful for weekly communion in my church for years. It would take us down a rabbit hole for me to list the benefits, but for our purpose it's worth saying that weekly communion can help keep a community close to the cross. In my experience, the pattern of following nearly every Sunday sermon with communion has positively shaped our preaching and application. Sermons are gently and appropriately 'forced' toward the person and work of Jesus. This makes that immediate application already plain: *come to the table*.

- Potential as a method of **evangelistic invitation**: inviting people to consider taking communion for the first time presents people with the question of where they stand with Christ.
- The table becomes a perfect context for **prayer ministry**: rather than inviting people to 'the front' or even to a gifted individual, we invite people to the Lord Jesus, his body and his blood.
- The guidance of the congregation towards the table can foster a general atmosphere of repentant responsiveness (even vital moments of body ministry, healing, forgiveness and reconciliation).

7. Seeking accountability

We began this section with James' distinction between a mere hearing of the word and the 'doing' that God intends (James 1.22). For a final practical tool, remember to make use of accountability. This is one of the benefits of public responses to the message (mentioned above), but other means are useful too (e.g. urging listeners to speak to someone before they leave if they sense the Lord convicting them; taking out phones and making a note of a decision - then texting it to a trusted friend). Accountability can make a decisive and eternal difference.

Questions for Reflection:

1. If the 'exhorter' is the preacher who naturally leans into addressing the will with imperatives, and the 'teacher' is the one who generally targets the mind with indicatives, which one of the two are you? How can you develop in both areas?
2. What do you think of evangelistic appeals? Do you have a theology for them? What is it? Can you defend it from the bible?
3. Think of examples of jargon which prevent clarity when it comes to evangelistic appeals.

9. The Substance of Preaching: Christ (I)

CH Spurgeon: *A sermon without Christ in it is like a loaf of bread without any flour in it. No Christ in your sermon, sir? Then go home, and never preach again until you have something worth preaching.*

Colossians 1.28 *Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*

1 Corinthians 1:22–25 [22] *For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, [23] but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, [24] but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. [25] For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

The message we preach is Jesus - who he is and what he has done. We have nothing better and there is nothing better. This is our instruction and this is the model we have in scripture. And this is the message with actual life changing potency.

Some further words from Paul can help us to grasp this. He opens an extremely important insight here about the substance of his preaching - and how he expected it to have its effect.

2 Corinthians 3:18 - 4:6 [18] *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. [4:1] Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. [2] But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practise cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. [3] And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. [4] In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. [5] For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. [6] For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

Some key learning points from Paul's description of his ministry.

- What we proclaim is the gospel of Jesus Christ
- Our proclamation of the gospel *is* the actual light of God's glory shining out
- When people see this glory (the glory of God in the face of Jesus) in our preaching they are transformed inwardly, by degrees (and one day they will be transformed outwardly as this dynamic reaches its complete fulfilment - 1 John 3.2)
- The devil (*'the god of this world'*) actively prevents people from seeing this light.

All of this lends further weight to our claim that Christ must be the substance of our preaching. Here is where its power really lies. If we allow our message to become unbalanced we can't say we haven't been clearly instructed.

Practically, this should create a tendency to:

1. Ultimately preach the **person and work of Jesus** as the answer in the context of all that we preach.
 - We are not just preaching obedience - we are preaching *'the obedience of faith'* (Romans 1 and 16) in the person and work of Christ.

- We are not preaching general improvement by a general attempt to 'try harder'. We are proclaiming the saviour who's work liberates and changes us to live free from sin.

(I say 'ultimately' in order to discourage a formulaic model of this which becomes stale, hackneyed and powerless. If sermons become predictably strained into a repetitive shape, we have misapplied this. The preacher wants to open eyes to the light of Christ. The sign of success is for hearts to be turned in desire for Him and trust in Him - and the resulting obedience.)

2. Preach the **entire Bible as God's word concerning His Son**, from start to finish. Whichever text we preach, it speaks about Jesus.

Here are some key NT texts in establishing the principle of Christ centred hermeneutics:

John 5.39 You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me

1 Peter 1.10 Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, **11** inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.

Luke 24.25 And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! **26** Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" **27** And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Luke 24.45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, **46** and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, **47** and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

2 Corinthians 1.20 For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.

Various traditions in church history have followed a Christ-centred trajectory in Bible interpretation and homiletics. The tendency in some quarters has been to allegorise many Old Testament narratives (e.g. Rahab's scarlet signal at Jericho in Joshua 6). In this less sophisticated approach the OT is kind of treated as an assortment of atomised stories each reflecting Christ in their own way.

This hasn't been altogether bad but it tends to run the risk of riding roughshod over the contours of the 'big story' of the Bible. This approach does not really make an effort to look at authorial intent *and then* show how it fits into the big story of God's work in Christ; rather it immediately forces each story into an allegorical interpretation.

This allegorising tendency ignores authorial intent and becomes vulnerable to charges of high speculation.

(This isn't to say that allegorizing is necessarily inappropriate. But simplistic, one dimensional allegorizing yields a shallow result in comparison with the richness of the Lord's word. We can use Rahab's scarlet cord as an example. It's not wrong to see this story prefiguring the cross, but it's weightier to observe also the reference to the passover blood on the door in Exodus 12. Her story refers to the cross because it is consistent with a more prevailing and persistent theme of blood which propitiates (and brings about a deliverance), which goes backwards and forwards in the scripture.)

The Reformed tradition has a more helpful record of Christ-centred hermeneutics and preaching (Geerhardus Vos is a key name). Here a passionate commitment to Christ as the focus of God's self-disclosure comes together with a closely guarded exegesis of each text within its own context.

The issue of authorial intent rightly tends to come up when one is interpreting OT texts Christologically without apparent NT warrant. Here the Reformed tradition can please the scholars (except for liberal scholars who are against any over-all interpretative grids for the bible since they don't believe God inspired it).

When you understand the Bible as a meta-narrative with Jesus as hero at the centre, the lines going out from him are traceable in every direction. It is a fascinating lesson to look at the ways in which the OT is referenced in the NT. The idea that there are *some* rare OT texts which are Messianic doesn't seem to follow. Look at the way Hebrews quotes Psalms, for example, and you'll realise that there must be 150 Messianic Psalms – not just Psalms 2; 45 and 110. Another example: look at how Hosea is quoted in Matthew 2.15.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How does the teaching of 2 Corinthians 3.18-4.6 affect the way you see (and prepare and preach) your next sermon?
2. What makes Christ-centred preaching to become thin and formulaic, rather than stirring and worship-inducing?
3. Do you have thoughts about the original intent of OT authors? It is fascinating to consider the degree to which writers were *intentionally* referring to Christ. Some see this as an almost entirely unconscious thing (so that writers were thinking of only their immediate situations and had no idea that the Holy Spirit was working through them to refer to Jesus). Some teach the opposite and see OT saints consciously looking forward to Christ as fulfilment (e.g. Isaiah consciously referring to The Virgin Birth in Isaiah 7). Can you think of scriptures which might help us decide upon this?

10. The Substance of Preaching: Christ (II)

In the last session we began to apply the principle of 'Christ Centred Preaching' to our hermeneutics. If we are preaching the bible as the bible intends to be preached, we will be preaching about Jesus incessantly. At first this can seem a wild claim since the majority of the bible - especially the Old Testament - doesn't seem directly concerned with him. We must take the Lord at his word, however. It was He who claimed '*the scriptures testify concerning me*' (John 5). Our task is to search the scriptures so as to find Him as the central theme.

This is a glorious and profound theme. My notes here are just that: notes. Please do not treat them as anything more than a very light introduction. Each point could (and should) be explored further in proper depth. There are good books on this from almost any era of church history and it's an appropriate field of a lifetime of study for any preacher. (For many people Ed Clowney's book *The Unfolding Mystery* has proved a really helpful launch pad).

Different ways in which Christ-centred hermeneutics are observable:

- **Jesus Present *in* the story.**
 - Jesus is present at creation. We know this from John 1, Hebrews 1 and Colossians 1. Reading Genesis 1 in the light of these claims helps us to identify Him as God's word (*the word/logos*), by which creation was formed.
 - Jesus is plainly the one personified as 'The Lord' in several OT scriptures. Visible to Moses ('face to face as when a man speaks to His friend' Exodus 33.11). John's gospel clearly identifies Jesus as 'the Lord' whom Isaiah saw, with his glory filling the temple (John 12.41).
 - Various 'christophanies': E.g. the captain of the armies of the Lord (Joshua 5) and the fourth man in the furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3), 'the angel of the Lord' in various stories.
- **The flow of OT narrative points to The Christ.** The simple fact that Jesus comes into history as a fulfilment of the hopes of the Lord's Old Testament people means the scriptures point Jesus-ward in a pretty obvious way. Here are some examples:
 - Genesis 1.26-28 - the commission given to mankind in the garden (sometimes referred to as 'the cultural mandate) is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, the Son of Man ruling faithfully (Psalm 8, Hebrews 2).
 - Genesis 3.15 - the promise of redemption (in fact a redeemer), given to Eve, at the point of Adam's failure, further develops the plot-line in Christ's direction.
 - The calling of Abram, in the context of the promise to bring blessing to all the families of the nations (Genesis 12, 15, 17 and 22) points forward to Christ, the seed of Abraham.
 - The promise of a king from David's line who will rule eternally and justly, under the Lord's favour (2 Samuel 7). (James Hamilton's commentary on the Psalms is a meditation on this as the prevailing theme of the Psalter as we have it.)
- **Typology.**
 - **People:** there are numerous individuals who occupy a role that somehow prefigures the work of Jesus and fills out our understanding of what he accomplished. In some cases the NT identifies them as types – (e.g. Hebrews 8 and Melchizedek; the sign of Jonah in Matthew 16; Adam in Romans 5), in other places they are just stunningly obvious anyway, e.g. Joseph.
 - OT typology is John 15.20 working backwards in time. The lives of those who are in Christ will bear resemblance to his - whether they come before or after Him chronologically. Some are so great they shape history after themselves. Jesus, uniquely, is so great that he shapes history in both directions. Human lives and the whole cosmos echo with His story.
 - Some *types* are the unlikeliest people but they are still just as illuminating as 'anti-types' – e.g. Esther; Jonah. Others are less shocking but not much more obvious at first (e.g. Nehemiah; Boaz). The credibility of this model rests on a grasp of Israel as God's covenant people which we will look at further next week.

- **Symbols:** certain objects with symbolic meaning anticipate Jesus by temporarily fulfilling a role which he alone can bring to perfection. This is at the heart of such statements in the gospels as *something greater than the temple is here...* Matthew 12.6 and others. One could set out the three core motifs of the priesthood, the monarchy and the prophets as a distinct category here (i.e. Jesus is the perfect and long awaited Prophet, Priest and King). Then, in the same way, Jesus fulfils the motifs of Noah's ark, the Passover lamb, various sacrificial animals, the rock struck in the wilderness, etc.
- **Theological themes:** In other passages themes such as sin; grace; sacrifice; worship; substitution etc, are dealt with. Since these doctrinal themes are dealt with most conclusively in the work of Jesus the stories have an ongoing resonance and can be linked, in preaching, to Christ in a way which gives fresh views into his person and work. How could anyone preach, for example, from Deuteronomy 28 without referring to Jesus as the one who carried our curse so we could freely know his blessings? As another example, the Lamentations as expressions of horror from God's faithful remnant, considered stricken by God, point awesomely to the one who was truly stricken and abandoned by God.

- **Some Literary Genres Besides Narrative**

The Psalms

These are the archetypal hymns of God's faithful people. Jesus as the perfect Israelite offers them up rightly – even beautifying Psalm 51 by confessing the guilt he carries on our behalf. In eternity the Son offered perfect worship to the Father, in his incarnation he did the same through Israel's Psalter. It is actually *only* in Jesus' mouth that some Psalms begin to sound quite right (e.g. protestations of righteousness whilst being treated violently by evil men).

Wisdom literature

In the NT Jesus is literally the personification of 'wisdom'. The eternal *logos*, through whom all things were made, also holds the universe together by his *logos*. In him are hidden all the riches of wisdom and knowledge. The wisdom writings of the OT (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Song of Solomon and some of the Psalms) are a mixture of wisdom on how to live fruitfully in God's good world – going *with* the grain – and puzzlement about the ways in which the world seems so out of kilter that even a wise man's life can be filled with pain – as though he were going *against* the grain.

This tension points to, and is only fulfilled in, the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

- The alternative to being Christ centred is either powerless moralism and exhortation, or powerless self- help.

And Sinclair Ferguson is right – many preachers don't really preach Jesus from the NT either!

The missional implications of this are, of course, enormous. But remember that this is not only a tool for getting people converted. Whoever we preach to, we preach Christ. Glen Scrivener brilliantly defines **evangelism** as *pastoring the lost* and **pastoring** as *evangelising the saved*. In this sense, the gospel is 'one size fits all'.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How does the fact that Jesus *is* the Lord of the Old Testament, present and active in places like the conquest of Jericho, affect your view of Him and the way you might preach about Him?
2. We are rightly concerned to make the truth of God plain to people and not to allow obscurities to confuse people. This goal may seem at odds with presenting Jesus as the fulfilment of Israel's (ancient and culturally remote) story.
3. Of all of the OT genres, it is probably the *wisdom* genre that can seem least christocentric. How can we begin to understand the Proverbs (for example) more richly through the lens of the gospel of Jesus?

11. The Substance of Preaching: Christ (III)

We are looking at some principles of Bible exposition that especially relate to centrality of the person and work of Christ – the central theme of scripture. This obviously has practical strategic implications for evangelism, but it is wider than this. In aiming to preach Christ (the gospel) in every sermon we are digging into our apostolic identity and are able to be prophetic, evangelistic and pastoral all at once (though some will gravitate to one emphasis more than another).

- **The richness of the Gospel.** It is important to note that there are wider aspects of the gospel than fitting OT texts into one 'model' of the atonement. It may be true that justification by faith alone (and the propitiatory work of the cross) is the foundational plank of the *kerygma* (despite how fashionable it is in nerdy circles to see this as a *passé* idea) but the gospel is certainly wider than this doctrine. There are other planks.

An important key is a meta-narrative approach to the whole of scripture. We need to observe the various letters-through-the-stick-of-rock of God's historical-redemptive purpose as revealed in scripture. The strands going through the meta-narrative all pass through the incarnation, life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and are shaped by this. The big meta-narrative themes are such things as kingdom; faith; city; covenant; new creation; presence; sacrifice and people of God.

For example, until I reflected on the *Cristus Victor* model of the atonement (Colossians 2.15) I would never have seen Jesus in 1 Samuel 17 – but now the story of David and Goliath fills me with Jesus-honouring awe.

Again (and here is an example where the Kingdom theme is prominent), in preaching through Jonah I am struck by the parallels (and revealing differences) between Jonah and Jesus. If Jonah is a sign of Christ by virtue of his 3 days and nights spent in the belly of a fish, so is he an anti-type by being useless on the boat in a storm. A prophet under *authority* might have rebuked the wind to silence (as in Mark 4) – not hard to believe. He rebukes the world's greatest city to silence on the next page – no less a miracle.

The point is: I would not have been alert to this if I hadn't already seen part of the redemptive work of the gospel as the restoration of kingdom authority of man over creation, lost in Genesis 3, prefigured in Israel's monarchy, alluded to in Psalm 8 and Daniel 7 and recovered in Hebrews 2, Romans 8 and Revelation 21-22.

- A **big-story** approach reveals that the gospel is about more than forgiveness of personal sins. It takes into its scope the restoration of all things and the redemption of a new-race of Adamites (through the second Adam) to rule faithfully over a new creation.

This big-story flow also explains why our message has to be the gospel of the *resurrection* as well as the blood. Technically propitiation might have been possible if Jesus had not been physically raised. But the gospel achieves more than propitiation. Notice that the resurrection was essential to the gospel-preaching of the apostles in the book of Acts. The gospel reveals not only the way to deal with sin, but the destiny of man and creation.

- **Systematic and Biblical theology.** Generally in the west, and especially since the Reformation, theology has mostly been done through systematic, decontextualized categories (i.e. God, man, sin, salvation, sacraments, heaven and hell). This has both reflected and produced an individually oriented culture (inside and outside the church) and a religion of personal salvation and personal relationship with God.

In more recent times biblical studies have thrown up more time/history related ways of doing theology. This approach is sometimes referred to (unhelpfully) as *biblical theology*. I basically take it to mean reading the bible as a story in order to understand the unfolding revelation of God's plan. The spin off of this is theology which provides vision, momentum, purpose, hope – and on a global (even cosmic) level.

It could certainly be argued that if *systematic theology* reflects modernist culture in terms of its method and its emphases, so *biblical theology*, with its characteristics of story, new community, societal renewal and restored creation, is more in line with postmodernism. (Some people have gotten much too excited about that last point.)

Let me stress that neither of these alternative approaches is wrong. A lot of trouble emerges from trendy people – or reactionaries – trying to jettison one for the other. In fact they are both essential and necessary. At their best they both take the bible to be inerrant and see Jesus as God’s fullest revelation. They are complementary. Each needs the other.

- This is all very **important for preachers** who have the job of proclaiming the *full counsel of God* (Acts 20). To put it in crude terms, if you only preach within a biblical theology framework you will potentially miss issues of individual sin and judgement – ending up with a gospel of community building and social renewal and a Jesus who would do very well as a Guardian columnist. If you only preach in systematic theological terms you might leave people wondering why Jesus did and said so many things in his life since the only thing he really needed to do was get killed and have Paul write Romans 3 to explain why.

My longing is to raise up an army of men who know the whole counsel of God and are well able to wield the sword very dangerously. Not swaying off to the right with an individualistic gospel of personal salvation, nor over-swinging to the left, preaching exclusively about ‘Kingdom’ and brushing aside the references to sin and wrath. With guys who do this bravely and wisely we can wage spiritual war in our cities.

In labouring this I am being true to our roots as a wider movement, which have rightly held in tension the individual and corporate implications of the gospel. If you ask informed people to name the twin theological pillars (and passions) of Newfrontiers they should say *grace* and *church*. This has kept us healthy.

Covenant – Interpreting OT Law, Narrative and Prophecy

Finally, and with a slight gear change, let me use the theme of covenant to illustrate how we can understand much of the OT (especially the law) in gospel terms. Three principle covenants are made between God and Israel in the OT:

- Abrahamic – the promise of blessing to Abraham’s seed for the sake of *global* blessing.
- Mosaic – the promise of blessing and life in God’s chosen land.
- Davidic – the promise of an abiding monarchy from David’s line ruling in peace before God.

All of these covenantal promises come into partial fulfilment in the OT (stories of blessing to gentiles; the inhabitation of the land in Joshua; the glorious, peaceful and globally renowned reign of Solomon). Through their consistent unfaithfulness, Israel failed to receive these hopes. The law describes in frightening detail the consequences for Israel of falling short of covenant responsibilities. The prophets then draw attention to Israel’s shortcomings - not as abstract ‘sins’ but as covenant faithlessness. They warn against the impending consequences, but they also begin (especially in Isaiah) to draw attention to the possibility of a faithful remnant even in the culture of apostasy.

This remnant is reduced in Isaiah to the figure of a ‘servant’ who will act wisely as *the* faithful Israelite. The reason there is controversy about who is referred to in Isaiah 53 is that it actually can be said to refer to Israel. As the NT writers understood, however, faithful Israel was finally reduced to a remnant of one man, and instead of receiving the blessings of the covenant he received the curse promised in places like Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. As faithful Israel, his sufferings were the means of restoration to covenant blessings, these received by those placed in him through faith – Jew and gentile, the ‘new Israel’. (This is the subject of Paul’s argument in Galatians 3.)

Since Jesus is the true covenant keeper, our preaching from the law, and the prophets and all texts relating to God’s

requirements of his people should be understood through the gospel. No one can fulfil the righteous requirement of the law. No one keeps this covenant. NEVER leave an audience thinking they can (or should try). We are called to trust in, and be changed by, his supreme act of covenant faithfulness – *and* to look forward to, and work towards, the restoration of all things as promised to (and through) Israel.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Not putting aside propitiatory atonement (for a moment) can you think of aspects of the gospel that might be under-emphasised if we *only* see this element of Jesus and His work?
2. From an evangelistic point of view (and perhaps pastoral too) we tend to land at the cross as the non-negotiable point of connection for people to 'access' the gospel. Perhaps this is right, but we are forced to reflect when seeing the emphasis on the resurrection in Acts. How might we preach the resurrection more compellingly as a way of presenting the gospel savingly?
3. Have you noticed, in yourself, a tendency to emphasise the social implications of the gospel at the expense of the personal, or vice versa? How might you do well to counter any imbalance in yourself here?

12. The Power of Preaching: Prayer

Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." 1 Kings 17:1

The preacher must stand before men having stood before God. That is one thing that distinguishes him from other public speakers. His private life with God is therefore integral to his calling. A man with no **prayer life** should not preach – and usually *cannot* fruitfully. Robert Murray M'Cheyne's famous quotation '*a man is what he is on his knees before God, and nothing more*' is not over-the-top and should preoccupy your mind, preacher.

It is grotesque for a man to be red-hot in the pulpit but stone cold in prayer. You and I should emulate Howell Harris (18th Century Welsh Calvinist-Methodist) about whom it was said '*in the secret place with God Harris was in his element...*' Prayer and preaching belong together as two sides of a coin.

Two-way communication: Obviously a preacher gains from the opportunity to seek God's blessing on his efforts. This is in-line with the way the apostles prayed (e.g. Acts 4.29; Ephesians 6.19); but it's only half the story. The preacher also needs to be before God so that his message may be shaped. Quite apart from specific requests his prayer life gives opportunity for God to speak and place burdens upon the heart.

Jeremiah 23.18-22 contains magnificent denunciations of false prophets in the time of the exile who had no business 'speaking for God' since they had never 'stood in my council'.

To truly stand before the council of God must mean that we open ourselves up to him in worship and repentance. He must have full access to us and we must stay soft-hearted, quick to obey.

The sermons we preach must first do their work in our hearts as we turn them over before God, applying them to our own souls. Surely the masters here were the Puritans who would not dream of preaching without doing 'heart work' on themselves. It was John Owen who said '*he preaches that sermon best who first preaches it to his own soul*'.

We are saying that the preparation of the preacher carries greater importance than preparation of the sermon. All my learning from scripture and the lives of God's great ambassadors (living and dead) proves to me that this is no myth. However good we get at the other stuff, this is what will make the difference.

The **goal** a preacher should pursue is a sense of having been handled by the word before handling it himself. This must mean meeting God in the scripture before we take it to the people.

How do we do this?

This is perhaps easier talked about than done. I find that consistent prayer is one of the hardest things. This is territory where a conscientious servant of God will be easy prey to discouragement and enemy accusation.

Fight hard to stay in grace. Paul tells Timothy '*be strong in the grace of Christ*' (2 Timothy 2.1) for a reason. There are times when this is hand to hand combat. My Dad told me that he heard a friend, and extraordinarily fruitful church planter in Thailand, training leaders with the words '*those times when you get to your feet to preach and the devil tells you: you have not prayed enough... those are the times to **be strong**...*' I have had to remember that a few times.

Your prayer life must feed you, not exhaust you. Young men with a passion for God are especially susceptible to waves of despair upon discovering that they are not John Knox or David Brainerd (in fact Brainerd was probably even more discouraged to actually *be* Brainerd). If you have any streak of melancholy in your emotional make-up, be on

your guard. I mean this seriously. You are not earning points in your closet. You come to receive the joy and peace that are your *rightful* possession through the work of Jesus. Don't serve out of a bad conscience, but a good one.

Don't be crushed by another man's prayer life. There are multiple ways in which a private walk with God can be done – surely as many ways as there are people. I already notice that my children all relate to me differently from one another – and none are right or wrong. As long as I am still the same father in those relationships they are healthy. You will have your own genius when it comes to fellowship with God. Sure it is good to learn from other men – but learn from several.

Whatever we say, some degree of **regularity** is what will make this work. Set a time and a routine that works for you. Be yourself. I have had to let my prayer life evolve over the years, but regularity has always been a key to any kind of progress.

I am not naturally a morning person, but I reckoned in my teens that 6-7.30am was my only window for less distracted moments. I still like this time as I enjoy being up before the morning clamour.

I have become more modest in my **expectations** in prayer each morning. I will usually read some scripture and something from a more devotional style commentary, as a way of engaging my mind on the Lord. Roughly following Paul Miller's model in *A Praying Life* I have a set of prayer cards with themed headings, which I usually go through in each prayer time. My cards each have a line from the Lord's prayer and then various relevant subheadings (relevant people, situations, projects, challenges) pencilled under each.

Some regular patterns of **fasting** will also provide seasons for standing in God's council. Even missing a weekly meal or two can open up time and mental focus for God's presence. I start most terms with a fast of a few days. This is probably a lot easier for me than a lot of you as I can take it as work time and can even spend a couple of nights somewhere out of town.

The **gift of tongues** should not be underestimated as a useful weapon from God for the praying man who struggles. It does seem likely to me that Paul is getting at this in Romans 8.26. There have been occasions when to pray in tongues was all I could do in my distress – and God has intervened in undeniable ways.

In the context of your preparation, make time for prayerful meditation. Take the text with you as you go about your week. As you walk, drive, shower and shave... reflect upon it. Scribble it and ask the Holy Spirit to shed light. Live in it. I heard of some members of a church who hosted Martyn Lloyd-Jones when he preached for them one Sunday. He had passionately expounded the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. Afterwards, they needed to buy something from a shop but it had closed just before the group of them reached the entrance. One of them overheard Lloyd Jones whispering (as to himself) 'too late... too late...'. The urgent and solemn theme of his sermon remained his sober meditation some time after he'd preached. He'd been living with it for days.

Finally, let me briefly question the myth that a preacher's reading from a passage he is to preach should not interfere with his 'devotions'. I see no biblical warrant for this modern evangelical rule. Sure the guy should aim to be feeding his own soul – not just his notepad for Sunday. But surely the way to be sure the stuff you are cooking up for the flock goes down well is to have a bite yourself. Discuss...

Questions for Reflection:

1. DL Moody is quoted as saying: '*I would rather teach one man to pray than ten men to preach*'. Statements like this may seem to come from another universe. What thoughts does this provoke in your own mind?
2. What are the two main practical steps you could make today, immediately (right now...) in order to improve your own prayer life?
3. Why are you not doing them?
4. Do them. Now.

13. The Disciplines of Preaching: Study & Learn

'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth' 2 Timothy 2.15

Good preachers are readers. John Wesley believed that if his guys did not spend at least three hours reading every day, then Methodism would die out in a generation. In fact I can't resist throwing in what he has to say to one of his preachers on the circuit:

What has exceedingly hurt you, in time past, nay, and I fear, to this day, is want of reading. I scarce ever knew a preacher read so little. And perhaps, by neglecting it, you have lost the taste for it. Hence your talent in preaching does not increase. It is just the same as it was seventy years ago. It is lively; but not deep: there is little variety; there is no compass of thought. Reading only can supply this, with meditation and the daily prayer. You wrong yourself greatly by omitting this. You can never be a deep preacher without it; anymore than a thorough Christian. Oh begin! Fix some part of everyday for private exercises. You may acquire the taste which you have not: what is tedious at first will afterwards be pleasant. Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life: there is no other way: else you will be a trifler all your days and a pretty superficial preacher. Do justice to your own soul: give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a Christian altogether. Then will all the children of God rejoice [not grieve] over you...

Reasons we MUST read:

- **Inspiration.** It's often overlooked that reading is a means God will use for our personal refreshment and strengthening. Obviously this is the case with scripture – but it can apply to all kinds of writing. You should not be surprised if you find your heart burning and your mind brought to life through exposure to another mind. The more you take in through reading the more there is to come out when it is time to preach. Phillips Brooks used the illustration of a pump that needs to be primed as opposed to a fountain, which gushes out freely. Readers are fountains.
- **Breadth** in our preaching. This has at least two gains. A preacher with some breadth to his reading will be freshly engaging and less likely to stay dull and predictable. He will also be more likely to gain a hearing amongst those who otherwise caricature Christians as being ignorant and obscurantist.
- **Understanding.** Our task often hinges upon us being men of understanding (1 Corinthians 14.20), particularly when it comes to three particular areas:
 1. The gospel: We need to be confident with our message. Do we understand it? Are we preaching the gospel Paul preached? If we are not sure we'd better become sure. So read some theology
 2. The world: God created the world with wisdom. The wisdom revealed in scripture teaches us how best to live in it. But under the scripture (and always interpreted through it) there is much skill to be learned and applied. This means reading books which give insight into humanity: books on leadership; history; creativity; management; heroism; courage; good; evil... anything really.
 3. The culture: we need to learn the culture to which we preach. Paul clearly made it his business to know the culture when engaging with the debaters of Athens. He could quote their poets and philosophers. You'll gain a lot by reading the books and articles that truly reflect the thoughts and values of your mission field.

Depth of understanding is a lifetime's pursuit and a persistent student gradually accumulates depth and substance.

God **commands** us to love him with our minds. This is impossible without exercising them.

Reasons we DON'T read:

- We may consider it **unspiritual**. This stems from an anti-intellectualism that makes people nervous to really use their minds. It is based on an unbiblical, dualistic worldview, but it's still very prevalent in much of the church. It may be expressed as a phobia towards books other than the bible (which, it is said, shouldn't be read 'intellectually'). This sounds impressive to some but reduces our minds to unnecessary jelly and leaves us with an impoverished, empty view of the world God made, for the antidote is simply the cultural mandate of Genesis 1.28. To subdue the whole earth on God's behalf is not possible for those unwilling to learn about it. A trusting heart, which can pray Psalm 131 and mean it, is on safe ground to read heartily – and worshipfully.
- We may consider it **unprofitable**. Time spent in books can seem hard to justify in a life filled with concrete deadlines and very tangible needs. The simple fact, however, must rule: a man called to preach is called to read. The issue in the end is the relationship between **important** and **urgent**. The former must be prioritised above the latter. We must, must, must *set regular times*. There are things, to be sure, which will legitimately interrupt our reading – but they should only be **important urgent** things – not simply urgent. Urgency has a way of looking important. It usually isn't.

[This will also affect the way you budget. Guys who only ever borrow books prove that reading is a low priority for them – unworthy of investment. If you are going to spend money, spend it on books. This is why God invented second hand bookshops and used-book sales online.]

- We find it **difficult** to read. Guys have different reading capacities, speeds and attention spans. You need to know yourself in this area and set the right goals. Unrealistic targets will lead to discouragement and will also hinder the fruitfulness of your reading. What reading pattern stretches you but also *suits* you? You may be surprised by the different possible approaches:

Not every book needs to be read cover to cover. Some will give you 80% of what they can in a quick skim: the blurb; a scan of the contents page, the index and a few items that especially catch your eye.

It's not always a sin to rush, or even skip a chapter or two (choose wisely what to skip). Better to go on reading and learning then dutifully get stuck in a book, which is giving you little.

Enjoy what you are reading and feel no pressure to finish it.

Listen to good material. Use audiobooks and podcasts. You can download just about anything now: great books; the Bible; sermons; even world-class bible/theology lectures.

Read a few books at a time. You are more likely to fall into the trap of inertia if you are stuck with one book that is not grabbing your attention. Different books will appeal to you for different reasons at different times of the day. You can use this to cover more ground in your reading..

- We don't know **where to start**. The paralysis of choice can be serious. So many things to read... best to make a short list of priority books (for life *and* doctrine) and work through it.
- Some will struggle for the opposite reason. They can only think of two or three books they know to be truly profitable. If so, please ask for a list of suggested titles.

The things we should read – apart from the Bible:

- Straight theology and Bible scholarship. This comes first. Helps you see God, and preach from a worshipful heart. And read writers who apply theology to the heart – DM Lloyd-Jones, John Piper, the Puritans (Owen, Goodwin, Sibbes, Borroughs, Flavel, Manton), JI Packer, David Powlison, Paul Miller, Ed Welch. Paul Tripp, Brian Rosner, Michael Reeves and of course CS Lewis... This will help prevent your sermons becoming theoretical.
- Church history and biography. Should inspire you, wake you up to the shallowness of our age; shake you out of it; instruct you about the way the church does it best (and worst). And don't just read about Pentecostals. God was alive before Azusa Street.
- Leadership books. Enormous wisdom can be learned from believers and non-believers. Principles and observations. Read about great leaders. You'll be surprised at what can be related to your own challenges.
- The things read by the people you are called to reach: newspapers; magazines, etc.
- Books which you just enjoy. Important.
- **Finally:** it might be an idea to focus on one particular area of study in which you aim to excel. You can't master everything, but possibly one thing – and this might make you a resource when people need help there.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Disciplined, intentional and broad reading is one of the surest ways for preachers to remain sharp, inspired, excited, insightful and 'worth listening to'. Perhaps we don't associate passionate and fruitful preaching with 'study'. Why do you think this is?
2. What, amongst the reasons given above for not reading, is the one that most applies to you? Can you suggest other reasons that might be given? What responses might you give to them?
3. After reading this session, what are three specific steps you can take this week in developing your reading habits?

14. The Vocation of Preaching: Finding Your Voice

John 1.1,14: *in the beginning was the word... and the word became flesh.*

G.C. Berkouwer: *when God speaks, human voices echo in our ears.*

Humans wrote the bible; humans preached the law; humans prophesied to Israel; humans preached the gospel. God could have done it all directly, but He deliberately didn't... Even the time he came to speak to us most definitively, He *became* human to do so.

For some reason God wants to speak through people – He wants his word, His self-revelation, to come through **flesh**. Flesh formed from dust.

This should give us a thrill about the dignity of preaching. Yes there are other ways God will speak to people, but preaching stands in no mean tradition.

- It should also make each of us feel more assured about our unique individual characteristics as God-given qualities he is eager to use for his self-revelation. Your personality is not an accident – neither is it irrelevant to your preaching.

Phillips Brooks: *preaching is truth mediated through personality.*

Your character may need work, but your personality is unique and God made you that way for a reason. He wanted to communicate something of himself especially through *you*.

If this is sounding a little bit sentimental, do bear in mind the call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1). We are told that God foreknew Jeremiah with a particular calling in mind. No doubt he gave him his highly sensitive personality (and probably some fairly tough growing up experiences) with some very emotive preaching in mind.

Amos was a very different personality – probably not given to tears. He might have slapped Jeremiah had he lived at the same time. For all we know Paul did actually slap Barnabas (maybe when Barnabas tried to go in for a hug). Neither was right or wrong – just different personalities differently expressing God. Paul puts it plainly in 1 Corinthians 15.10: *by the grace of God I am what I am...*

All this to say you should try and find your own voice and learn to be happy with it. And this is easier said than done – for 2 reasons:

1. We probably don't **like** our voice much. Now this is not because we have a poor self-image or a hurting inner-child – it is because our pride is so scandalously blatant that we dare say to God *why did you make me like this? I would have done a better job. I would have made me to be just like _____* [your favourite preacher's name here]. *I cannot trust you God. I will not be me...'* So don't get all self-help paperback on me... It's plain old-fashioned **sin** to want to be someone else all the time. Put it to death.
2. We don't **know** our voice much. This is trickier. It is still very good to have heroes, and to find ourselves sounding like them is to be expected, but *not* to be accepted. The problem is we will find ourselves asking *what am I meant to sound like?*

I heard another preacher say it should take about 3-4 years of regular preaching to find your voice... So you don't want this to become an obsessive question. That is self-indulgence and preaching is all about God, not you.

There are three things to be said which may help.

- **Firstly:** worship God and listen for **HIS voice**. This is obvious but the more we know God for ourselves the more liberated we will be from the scaffolding of precedent. The Spirit of God brings freedom – not cloning. As you listen to God in prayer, meditation and Bible reading (on your own – not listening to downloads of Tim Keller) you will learn to hear something of the *tone* with which God wants to speak.

Again, different tones will come to, and through, different preachers, but that is just an expression of God's manifold wisdom. Read some of John Calvin's preaching and then read some of George Whitefield's and you'll hear a different tone. (I deliberately choose two with more or less the same theology.) Is either better than the other? They both stood before God (Jeremiah 23). They each expressed what God had to say through *them*.

My Dad described to me a vivid occasion when he was just leaving his caravan to go and preach in the main marquee to thousands at the Downs Bible Week in the 1980s. He knew he had a word from God re: David and Bathsheba, and he was ready to go ballistic. As his foot touched the ground, however, he felt God urgently say: *Speak gently to them tonight...* it changed the whole way he delivered it – and the whole evening, and probably many lives.

- **Secondly:** try to **relax**. This sounds like unspiritual advice. It is very spiritual. Certainly the burden God gives us to preach may come with a sense of distress, but this distress is miles away from *stress*. This is *really* important. It's a good sign if you feel comfortable up there. Awkwardness may have more to do with a fear of man than a fear of God.

The sense of anointing is a hugely important but probably misunderstood concept amongst preachers. Lloyd-Jones probably spoke the most about it. My only concern is that young preachers (including myself) can read all of their positive/negative experiences of preaching through the prism of *the anointing*. I.e. a feeling of liberty means *the Lord was with me*; while a sense of frustration and clumsiness in delivery means *the Lord withdrew his hand*.

I don't despise this perspective, but warn against becoming dualistic with it. God made you with a pulse, respiratory and digestive systems, physical needs, mundane emotions and even a need for mental focus. You are not only a carrier of the anointing. Dare I say it? *Sometimes* the best thing to do while the scripture passage is being read is take a few long deep breaths, relax and think of something funny.

I remember watching a friend preach years ago and being struck by his remarkable liberty on his feet. What occurred to me was the absence of any *preacher mask*. It was not like he'd just come out of Bible College. If anything he was slightly playing up his eccentricities. It was almost an act – but he was acting the part of himself! I felt I learned a ton that day. Maybe there's a better way to say it, but you must find your *swagger*.

Thirdly: listen to **discerning feedback**. You need to choose which people it is wisest to take seriously. Not everyone's praise is valid. Listen to guys with wisdom and listen to preachers – and obviously listen to your mission field. Listen for what you do best – don't accept flattery. What makes your preaching work? What are your strengths? (e.g. vocabulary; story telling gift; vocal range; physical presence; compassion; humour...?) This kind of criticism is invaluable. A man who knows his strengths can play to them and more readily drop the things which his friends say *aren't really him*.

Some final tips on being you:

- Don't dress in a way that leaves you feeling awkward (unless the occasion demands – e.g. crossing cultures – though even here the goal is to become *natural* in that cultural attire – not feeling like you are in costume.)

Avoid, if you can, having administrative responsibilities in a meeting you are preaching in. A lot of cares will stop you from relaxing – and being yourself.

- Humour can help you relax but don't let it be the highlight of the sermon. And avoid 'preacher humour', where people laugh at your quips because they are too nice not to. That is not missional. Non-Christians think your jokes are rubbish and that the laughing Christians are all needy.
- In all of this, avoid self consciousness:
 - The paradox is that we 'become ourselves' most usefully when our focus is not on ourselves. The joint target of our attention must be the Lord we serve and the people we teach. Be you, but leave people aware of God rather than you.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Can you think of examples of God's wisdom shown in the matching of a preacher's personality to a particular message (beside the examples of this in the bible)?
2. What is the difference between a healthy emulation of a preacher we admire, on the one hand, and an unhealthy attempt to clone ourselves into their image?
3. How are you at listening to feedback? Whose feedback do you seek? Why? (I have sometimes rejected critical feedback at first but come to agree with it some time later.)

15. The Craft of Preaching: Preparation

When it comes to preparing messages there are two obvious dangers to avoid: Over preparation and under preparation. Like a pendulum you may find yourself swinging between the two. My general advice is that it is safer (for you and your listeners) to err on the side of over-preparation in the early days and become looser as you grow in confidence. I guess there are lessons which only experience can teach.

As a schoolteacher just starting in my training I remember being a little daunted by the amount of planning required for each lesson. I'm glad I had mentors who wouldn't let us wing it. When I protested on one occasion an experienced teacher told me that the more diligent I was with planning in the early stages the easier it would become in the later stages. I reckon that is a transferable lesson.

This especially applies to the skills of study and exposition. Getting to grips with the book is the main thing to which we must apply ourselves. Sweat over that and there will be times when it flows easily and your study will pay off. Don't get lazy with the bible.

2 Timothy 2.15 *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*

Here, in note form, is a preparation-for-dummies way of doing it (perhaps more appropriate to some texts [e.g. epistles] than others). It may be useful but it is not direct from heaven.

Hone in on passage

- Picking out key, key, key themes – and especially the one theme binding it all.
- Text (get as much exposure to the original language as possible. I use an Interlinear New Testament but I also find biblehub.com helpful.)

Scribble, scribble, scribble...

- Any themes, preaching points which emerge
- Keep before God and ask him to help ideas, themes emerge in your reading
- Stream of consciousness

Read, read, read...

- Commentaries – anything else that is scholarly and relevant. Steal if you must.
- Make decisions re: difficult exegesis. Don't leave important things ambiguous in your own mind – even if you don't intend to directly touch them.
- Continue to scribble. Preferably one side of A4. This makes the whole thing more manageable than sprawling pages.

Look at A4 sheet

- Isolate (by scribbling on another sheet) the macro themes (the roots) - 3 or 4 at most.
- Can they be connected by one great theme: the summary of the sermon? If not you may have several sermons there and it's best to accept that now – rather than while you are preaching it...
- If they can be connected meaningfully, connect them:
You can colour code them (felt tips/crayons?)– then use those colours to gather micro themes/points according to macro themes.

Or you can just draw a table and set the macro-points out as columns, placing other things into those columns. Anything that doesn't fit a column doesn't fit your sermon.

Assemble macro (+ micro) themes

- Try to reflect the order (+ flow) of the passage (maybe use number and letter scheme to produce order)
- Work on the links – make it linear and easy to follow
- Be ready to chop some (a lot) out!

Work on intro and conclusion

- **Intro:**
 - Main theme of sermon: state as objective plan.
 - Macro, macro theme of passage (getting a sermon title from the passage might help keep the attention on scripture).
 - Setting agenda for sermon
 - Using stories / illustrations to draw people in
 - Pushing questions out to demonstrate relevance of passage
 - Touch on cultural nerves...
- **Conclusion:**
 - Summarise macro points then the one macro, macro theme/point
 - Apply boldly /with conviction and go for the real issue
 - Look for gut impact
 - Relevant examples from life (very recent or maybe historic)
 - Appeal to the unsaved in all of this

Now go back into the message

- Where's the rawest point (i.e. close to the bone) is it raw enough? Does it go under the skin?
- Are there enough imperatives? Are they concrete?
- Do you have enough 'wake-up moments'
- Humour (unexpected)
- Shock factor
- Story
- Are the links strong and understandable?
- How is Jesus at the heart of this message? Is he the hero of the sermon?
- Is there enough Gospel to save a soul? Where is the grace factor? The cross?
- Are there 'gospel hooks' – appeals to the unsaved?
- Does it engage culture? Throw in contact points.
- Throw out jargon (N.B. zero tolerance for jargon – ZERO). And do **not** say that things are *awesome* or *amazing*. Instead, say awesome and amazing things.
- Is there any apologetic material? Do you deal with any classic objections? These are usually best woven into the introduction.
- Points of contact with teens, single mums, 30 something's, older people, young men (most unreached group), immigrants, different classes, students, internationals, etc...

Finding hooks:

- A final word about making your points count. Look for genuine points of connection with every point you make. How will it actually *preach*? Don't be satisfied with bald statements of conceptual truth. Find a way to make it land in a concrete way – and that will involve emotional connection. If you cannot *preach it* – don't preach it... drop the point from the sermon.

Questions for Reflection:

1. It's obvious what is meant by 'under-preparing', but what do you think might be meant by 'over-preparing'?
2. What stages in the process described above seem most challenging to you?
3. Some preachers especially struggle to cut material from a sermon. Why is this the case? How can this be made easier?

16. The Context of Preaching: Engaging Culture

The message is one thing – the mission field is another. You will preach to people who create and live in *culture*. Like Jesus we must learn the culture into which we have been sent, incarnating it, challenging it from within and creating a community within the culture under His lordship.

1. Culture

Human culture is a product of the mandate given in Genesis 1.28. Owing to man's rebellion the project has been entirely distorted. Three different features now characterise it: things that oppose the gospel; things that (owing to common grace, and the abiding *imago dei*) are aligned with the gospel; and things that are neutral.

God remains committed to the establishment, through Christ, of a righteous culture in a new heavenly city described in Revelation 21. Until that time we preach. We preach not to see hands raised, or people coming forward to the front. We preach to build a city. We preach to shape culture – none of which is beyond redemption through the gospel.

2. Incarnation within the culture

There is no existing 'Christian culture' as such (which means, for example, that 'Christian music' or a Christians dress code can be harmful concepts if we are not careful). We must be prepared to truly inhabit the culture into which we are sent. This will mean learning it, filtering it through a gospel lens and decoding it for the sake of effective communication.

This, of course, is the model of the incarnation. Jesus, the ultimate missionary – sent from the Father – was prepared to take on cultural trappings of a human – specifically a male Galilean artisan. He became what he wasn't – and saw the world from a completely new angle – relating to us that much better (John 1.14; Philippians 2.5-8; 2 Corinthians 8.9; Hebrews 2.5-12).

Paul famously handles this dynamic in **1 Corinthians 9**:

19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

In Acts 17 we see him putting this into practice in Athens. He spends time in the culture, he is instructed by what he sees as to how he should operate (how to preach; what to major on; what to condone; what to refute; how to appeal to the Athenians; even which people he should quote – in this case not the OT prophets but pagan poets).

Why do I labour this? Because I want you to see that cultural engagement is not just an optional extra for the true NT church. We may secretly entertain the notion that all innovative steps in learning culture are somehow unspiritual. But this is not some kind of church growth trick; it goes back further – not just to Hudson-Taylor; not just to Paul; but also to Jesus. Anything that helps create a ghettoised, insular and irrelevant Christian subculture must be resisted – not as unfashionable, or non-conducive to church growth – but as un-Christian.

Learning the culture of those we are targeting is thus non-negotiable. Certainly we must learn from preacher-heroes of ours – but be sensitive to the distinct cultural settings in which they operate. The best preachers will learn from a whole cloud of witnesses – but live in the present. CH Spurgeon was absolutely steeped in the writing/preaching of the 17th century Puritans – but preached in a style utterly different to any of them; far more geared, in fact, to the London of his own 19th Century. He drank deeply from one era, but was a man for his own. Follow his example.

Learning and incarnating culture will likely, for the preacher, affect such things as: language/jargon spoken, clothes worn, illustrations used (a graphic example of a culturally engaging illustration in mission is found in Don Richardson's *Peace Child*), and learning styles (e.g. some audiences/cultures are non-literate). The guys to whom we must listen are not going to be the ones who have been with us for years (though our goal for all such people is to help them remain as missional as possible). For the sake of reaching an unreached world, we must be listening to the unreached.

This will have increasingly nuanced pertinence to us as we become aggressive in planting congregations across our cities. Cultural realities might have implications on our work. Things will work better in one suburb than they do in another for example – and vice versa.

3. Challenge the worldview from within

Most importantly, incarnating culture will (*must*) affect the idols we target in our audience. To bring down strongholds in culture you will need to identify them. This requires some intellectual work. Behind people's sin, and behind their objections to your preaching, is a set of presuppositions about reality, which we call a **worldview**. Your job is to understand the worldviews controlling your listeners – and (winsomely) assail them with truth.

The basis on which you do this is the word of God, but the way to reason with people will mean using some of their presuppositions to point out the inconsistency of their other ones. This practice is called **presuppositional apologetics**. It gets associated with the Dutch theologian/apologist of the early 20th century Cornelius Van Til, and the American philosopher Francis Schaeffer (who had an amusing beard).

Van Til, taking the doctrine of human depravity as a starting block, argued that it is faulty to appeal to the unregenerate mind with 'rational evidence' for the gospel, as though such people would dispassionately and reasonably consider Christ's claims. Man's objections come from a heart darkened by sin. Thus 'neutrality' is a myth. Here Van Til was applying the points Paul makes in Romans 1 about the totality of human corruption; and in 1 Corinthians 1 about the bankruptcy of human wisdom.

This doesn't necessarily mean that a presuppositionalist does no apologetics (defending of the faith); rather it means he concentrates his apologetics on showing the inconsistencies of the unbeliever's presuppositions. We all come with our presuppositions/worldviews – whether we consider ourselves 'believers' or 'atheists'. The preacher must demonstrate the Christian worldview as consistent in and of itself – intellectually satisfying and thus unique (all other worldviews being inconsistent under scrutiny).

Tim Keller puts this in very practical terms when he talks about deconstructing 'defeater beliefs'. A classic example would be the objection '*Christianity must be false because it claims exclusivity*', which is easily shown to be inconsistent on its own terms when examined closely.

4. Promote submission to Christ

It's impossible to overestimate the importance of worldview deconstruction in our preaching. This is where the real work is done. If we never tear down we are unwise to build up (Jeremiah 1.10). The danger is we will evaluate our success only by the number of immediate responses.

This is **not** to downplay the importance of the response, but the simple fact is that a person may make a 'response' while their idolatrous worldview remains perfectly intact. And this, horribly, will explain the staggeringly shallow level of gospel influence in some of the most evangelised places on the planet (e.g. Rwanda in the mid-nineties). We are not salesmen – we are demolition men. Don't whip up the crowd: take every thought captive – until it is obedient to Christ.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What are some vital practices for learning the culture of our hearers? What prevents us doing this and what might be some traps to avoid?
2. Some preachers learn a great deal from heroes in cultures remote from their own (eras or places) but fail to adapt the lessons to their own context. Other preachers only learn from their own culture and fail to benefit from such inspiration and example. How can we find the sweet spot, where we glean all we can from the giants God has given to help us, but stay fully engaged in our own time and place?
3. Think of a commonly cited objection to christianity which is levelled by those to whom you preach. Consider some of the assumptions upon which this objection is based. See if you can show how the assumption is inconsistent with a worldview which rejects Christ.

17. The Journey of Preaching: General Advice

Here is a disordered and jumbled section with some important advice that won't fit elsewhere. In other words, it's like one of those messages that breaks all the rules (no order, no overall theme, no flow of ideas...hence the lame title 'Journey of Preaching') but... deal with it.

Common early mistakes in preaching:

- **Trying to say too much.** Young guys with rare opportunities fall into this trap routinely. All the time you've spent not preaching has pent you up with hours worth of intense burden. You feel like Jeremiah, weary of holding it in... bad news is: you have to. Inflicting all your thoughts on one congregation is not going to edify in the way you imagine. If you are preaching irregularly, for whatever reason, watch this danger and edit yourself mercilessly.
- **Preaching too long.** This relates to the point above. Many arguments for shorter sermons are flippant and I disagree with them. I am not arguing for shorter sermons per se, but encouraging the discipline (especially for younger preachers) of knowing your limits here. If someone asks how long a man should preach, I might answer: *as long as people are listening*. In some cases this will mean that a sermon should be ten minutes at most, in others cases it could be well over an hour. Young preachers too often err on the long side. *People need more teaching, agreed. There is not enough time given to this, agreed. Churches must go deeper, agreed*. All agreed. But if the last person stopped listening to you eleven minutes ago, it doesn't matter how deep you are going. You're going there alone.
- **Being top-heavy with the learning.** Another temptation for the young is to parade our reading. This usually shows in an awkward and even embarrassing way. It's not always because of conceit. It can be naive enthusiasm. Something may stimulate and excite us in our study and our instant response is to regurgitate it. Jonathan Pennington helpfully describes the preacher who is 'book-heavy' as an iceberg half under the surface and half above it. The correct proportion is $\frac{7}{8}$ under. In other words, let the learning run deep. Aim to know 7x more than what you preach. Let your knowledge and understanding provide the ballast. You don't need to say everything you *could* say on a topic. You are serving a meal - not showing off your kitchen.
- **Too few illustrations.** Most of the books on preaching seem to make this point - and they're right. The invaluable importance of stories, personal examples and analogies is best shown by their absence. A congregation will gasp and suffocate without the oxygen provided by well chosen and frequent illustrations.
- **Lack of tonal range.** There are rare sermons which are best delivered in one fairly constant and unwavering tone (i.e. gentle and reflective; cool and assertive; passionate and earnest). But most will need a range of emotional expression. Young preachers, in trying to express concern, can just sound whiny - and this is intolerable. Preachers who have shown some depth and range (in tone of voice, posture, perhaps even humour) will have more impact when they press challenges home with passion. Watch for monotony. Deliberately change your pace and your volume from time to time. Pauses and unexpected shouts are superb tools against attention bleed. (On this subject, an older friend of mine, who is a pastor, was part of a group being trained by Bryn Jones (key figure in the restoration movement of the 1970's and 80's). He remembers Bryn urging young preachers about the importance of vocal range in preaching. '*Voice...! Voice...! Voice...!*' He repeated, on full volume - yearning to emphasise the need for strong, bold, confident *declaration* of truth. It is simply not fitting for the message, with which we've been entrusted, to be apologetic dribbled out by nervous, well meaning conciliators with a doomed facial expression. We are heralds: *VOICE! VOICE VOICE!*)

Use of notes and manuscripts:

- The general rule seems to be that the more extemporaneous the preacher, the more freedom to express the word and therefore the more impact the preacher has. I reserve an important caveat here: Some preach from a full manuscript and make it land with power. This is rare but vital and we shouldn't make up too many rules.

- Interestingly, a general survey of church history shows that, amongst those who've been associated with significant kingdom breakthroughs, preaching with a full manuscript has been the exception. Preachers during the Reformation, the Great awakening, and other great eras of impact (men like DL Moody, Spurgeon) have often preached with quite bare notes, if any.
- Preaching is oral communication as opposed to textual, and oral communication has strengths, to which we should play. An athlete running the 800m as if doing the 400 metre hurdles would lose the race - not because they are poor with hurdles, but because they've trained for the wrong event. An oral event is different.
- A helpful principle is to aim for general freedom from notes so that, though one may bring notes into the pulpit, one does not lean into them, but refers to them as a kind of emergency back up.
- This is *not* an argument for less preparation. It's probably an argument for more. The preacher who has prepared so fully that he has full command of the sermon and is even ready to share it freely without much notice, is a preacher who has prepared well and vigorously. As with a concert musician, discipline in the secret place means greater freedom in the public place.
- Greater freedom from manuscripts is best achieved in stages. Confidence will grow like a muscle. Preachers can write fewer and fewer headings on their scripts and reduce them to bare skeletons. If this seems to work ok, we may feel ready to simply write a few headings into the margin of our bible - leaving aside the need for a lectern all together. The benefit here is that preachers can begin to enjoy more freedom and perhaps higher engagement with the congregation. Freedom to follow a line of thought and to press a point home with more time and intensity may also follow. Preachers may be grateful for more flexibility under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and this seems more likely to follow with less dependence on manuscripts.

Remember Authority

- '*Whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God...*' instructs Peter (1 Pet 4:11) and obedience to this will involve **authoritative delivery**. Authority of this kind may be hard to define and perhaps it's most easily grasped subjectively (i.e. we can't describe it but we know it when we see it). They noticed it with Jesus: '*he spoke as one having authority - and not as their scribes*' (Matt 7.29). There are some important principles to be borne in mind here.
 - This is perhaps a subjective matter, but there is an important objective component too: The word of God is authoritative - whether or not this authority is acknowledged. It is never appropriate to apologise for the Word, but some have been struck by how fruitful some preaching has been when the preacher has 'felt' little authority and barely exuded it. God's word does not return empty (Isaiah 55.10). Some take the comment of the crowds (in Matt 7.29), about Jesus' authority in preaching, as a reference to His placing himself above the law as they knew it ('*you have heard it said... but I say unto you...*'), rather than a reference to His charisma as an orator. Don't be conned by the 'wrong feelings'. The word of God is mighty when we feel weak.
 - Nevertheless, yearn for a greater *awareness* of authority in your delivery. Paul especially asks the Ephesians to pray that he would know particular **boldness** (Eph 6.20). Whatever else the preacher brings, he brings an announcement. He is a herald, rather than a facilitator. The preacher is not stirring up the embers of dialogue, hoping to draw out what is already in the room. The preacher comes from outside of the existing conversation. However respectful and gentle he is, the preacher interferes with the situation. The goal is not consensus and harmony so much as realignment. The world is wrong, heaven is right. The preacher stands between them. Even the announcement of reconciliation is *not* one of *conciliation*. Even the gospel (good-news) offends the hearers in their attachment to self-made, self affirming and bastardised gospels. The preacher is an ambassador; a peculiar ambassador to be sure, representing a still-to-be-recognised sovereign (Pharaoh was not the last to heckle a sermon with '*who is the Lord that I should obey?*' Exodus 5.2). The preacher must remember the one before whom he stands (1 Kings 18.5). He carries **authority**. And the consciousness of this is his indispensable weapon.
 - Three stories which hint illustrate this point.

- Howell Harris, used by God to help catalyse the 18th century Great Awakening, especially in his native Wales, would talk about 'the authority', longing for it to descend upon him, counting a sermon valid only if he'd known the authority.
- D Martyn Lloyd-Jones told of a church member who, when asked to go and beckon a guest preacher from the vestry (the service was beginning), reported back '*he was in a tense conversation with somebody else and I didn't dare interrupt. He said he wouldn't go to speak to these people unless the other person would come with him and he seemed agitated that the other fellow hadn't agreed to this yet...*'
- In the early 1970's, while Tim and Kathy Keller were students at Gordon Conwell College, the faculty staff enthusiastically announced a scheduled visit from Billy Graham. The Kellers were clever and always eager to be intellectually stretched. They had evaluated their professors, and the visitors, in terms of their academic prowess. So when they heard that Billy Graham, a nonintellectual from the rural south, was coming to speak on the campus, they were not expecting much. Tim Keller said that they were both significantly taken aback when he came and they saw him in person. The thing that struck me in the way I remember Keller telling the story was that he could sense that 'Billy Graham had authority'. It silenced and humbled Tim and Kathy and gave them something completely different to think about. I find this story moving and stirring. It reminds me of the fascinating account of the 'seven sons of Sceva' in Acts 19. When they tried to cast an evil spirit from a demoniac in Ephesus ('*in the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches*'), the man leaped upon them saying: '*Jesus I know and Paul I have heard of, but who are you?!*' It seems valid to me that aspiring preachers should hope to be known to the demons by name. I hope this is not a trivial sentiment. I'm sure it comes with costs, weighty costs, but everyday ones too. I remember John Piper, while preaching, speaking about looking away, the night before, from a TV screen which showed a momentary flash of female nudity (intended to be sensual): '*do you know why I looked away? Because I knew I'd be preaching to you now, and I wanted POWER!*' Well said.
- Finally, a great part of the preacher's conscious authority will come from experience of the message preached - Luther might have called it *suffering* of the message. The preacher who has not enjoyed the benefit of what he preaches, or felt its warning or tasted its delight, will preach it with none of the urgency, passion or *authority* of the one who has. Preachers, said John Owen, must have '*experience of the power of the truth which they preach in and upon their own souls*'. It's best if a large part of the preparation time is given over to meditation on the themes preached, until a felt awareness of its emotional impact has grown inwardly.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Which of the five common mistakes at the start of this section do you find (or imagine) yourself making most easily? (There may be more than one.) Would other reliable people agree with your choice? Are there any steps you can take to begin to prevent these?
2. If there are dangers involved with a preacher's over dependence upon written manuscripts, what would be the counter dangers that come with freedom from manuscripts? Have you known preachers to make insufficient use of written notes?
3. A confident *feeling* of authority as a preacher is not easily retained. What are some decisions and disciplines that would help in this? The answers may not be obvious. We are talking about staying aware of God's presence and calling upon our lives, but also we are talking about a certain perspective and attitude toward the people to whom we are sent.

18. The Focus of the Preacher: Loving People

In John 10 we have Jesus comparing the true shepherd to the hired hand. Ultimately self-interest seems to signal the difference. The true shepherd is driven by sacrificial concern for the sheep he's called to protect. The hired-hand is willing to sacrifice the sheep for his own gain. In our 21st century context, Jesus might envisage a preacher primarily concerned with career development. There is generally not a lot of money to be found in preaching (of course some have managed to make it lucrative... ingeniously), but mammon is not the only distraction to lure the hired hand. Some degree of worldly honour (worldly seems a strange word to use, given how small the church 'world' really is. But it's amazing how reputation, even within the subculture of the church becomes a snare) will quite easily be enough to turn some of our heads - even to the point where we see congregants as a means to the central aim of raising our profile. If this drives us, we are the hired hand of John 10 - and sheep are not safe with us.

Jesus has similar targets in mind in Matthew 23.

Matthew 23:1–15 [1] *Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, [2] "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, [3] so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practise. [4] They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not*

willing to move them with their

finger. [5] They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, [6] and they love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues [7] and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. [8] But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. [9] And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. [10] Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. [11] The greatest among you shall be your servant. [12] Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

[13] "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. [15] Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

The condition described here is serious. But it is not remote from the hearts of ordinary men in ministry. For many this will be a persistent temptation; for others, an area for repentance. The good news is that there is great hope where there is repentance. Perhaps this session provides an opportunity for you to go to God with your true condition, seeking forgiveness, renewal and a heart united to fear His name (Psalm 86).

One of Jesus' surest targets in all of his preaching was performative righteousness (Matt 6.1-18). Perhaps for much of my life I've mistakenly thought myself innocent here. Most of my fasting/praying/giving has generally remained secret and I've not sought the false reward of acclaim for these things. The 21st century version of what Jesus critiques, however, is celebrity Christian culture. This is especially the temptation of preachers and worship leaders. This is going on every time we see ministry as an opportunity to shine. I must testify, to my shame, that it's all too possible to plan a meeting, and then evaluate it afterwards, entirely in terms of how well I would have come across, with little or no real concern for the people to whom I preached. This kind of mentality goes directly against that to which we were called - and spawns all kinds of anxieties as well. My Dad (I'll use one of his stories again) was on his way, as a young man, to guest-preach at the church of a great preacher of his time. The sense of trepidation at the shoes he was filling, and the likely comparisons that would be made, unnerved him terribly while he drove to the meeting. He asked God for help against panic and felt gently rebuked. He realised he'd been so concerned about his

own performance that he'd barely thought about the people in the congregation. He felt the Lord telling him to pray for them, which he did for the rest of his journey. And this delivered him from anxiety - and helped him to preach with freedom that evening.

One danger that is an occupational hazard for some preachers is what we might call 'conceptual contentment'. A bible teacher, almost by nature, will tend to be inspired and gratified by the experience of grasping an idea *intellectually*. When he begins to discover a doctrine for the first time in all of its vitality and depth, or when he refreshes his understanding of it by exposure to a new perspective from a fresh scholarly voice, say, he should be mentally stimulated. This is highly appropriate and fits very well with the way that the Lord has gifted him. Cerebral energy and alertness can bring glory to God and helps teachers to communicate with passion. Nevertheless, this should not be confused with spiritual growth. Mental comprehension may not lead to spiritual growth automatically. In fact it can deceive us because of the very pleasure we take in it! If we found the doctrine of the incarnation boring, for example, we might not be too easily pleased and might remain hungry for more of God. Ironically the person (usually the teacher-type) is at a disadvantage here. Having enjoyed the intellectual muscle-stretch, he closes his books and calls it a day, assuming he's received all there is to receive. Being able to explain how one theological school differs from another on a topic has left him replete. As Lewis says in *The Weight of Glory* 'We are far too easily satisfied'. This kind of gratification is of little use in a spiritual battle and will not feed those we teach. Press in to apply the doctrine to your heart - then you will have power for the fight - and food for other hungry souls.

Some signs that we are going astray in this area:

- Perceiving the congregation as an audience and yourself as a performer.
- Ingratiating yourself with the congregation by flattery and words which tickle ears.
- Being unwilling to bring biblical confrontation.
- Allowing disappointing attendance to affect your thinking - to the point that you feel resentment even toward the people that *have* shown up (!)
- Spending far more time preaching to people than praying for them.
- Seeing preaching opportunities as career stepping stones.

Some advice on cultivating love for the people to whom you preach.

- Take time in the week leading up to a sermon to pray for the congregation. The Lord knows who will be there. Ask him to help you see them as He does.
- It's a good exercise to prayerfully imagine your listeners before you preach. Consider that they all carry pain, guilt, shame, sorrow, depression and disappointment of some kind. Stay conscious of the back row. If you preach to the back row you will reach the other rows by default.
- Seek to grow as a listener. Here I'll include a longer quotation from Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *"The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too*

valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.”

- Remember the importance of **story** in all of your thinking and reading. This may seem a peculiar point to raise but, preachers become unbalanced when thinking only within conceptual categories. A pure interest in systematic theology will result in sterile preaching. Get to know people's stories - even fictional ones. Great novels are potential tools enriching our imagination and capacity for human sympathy.
- Learn to see your own trials and challenges in this context. We are told that the Lord is able to sympathise with us in our weakness because of the suffering he took upon himself (Hebrews 2.18). He cares for us and loves us from a position of incarnational compassion. The Lord will draw preachers into the same pattern of compassion-inducing pain. It will make all the difference when we can see it this way. We will be less inclined to murmur and resent the Lord and more inclined to 'sanctify the trial'. This seems to be Paul's mentality in 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 1:3–7 [3] *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, [4] who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. [5] For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. [6] If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. [7] Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. (ESV)*

- In all of this, stay in touch with your own temperament and limitations. Some will express love for the people to whom they preach in a striking way. We can be so impressed with some personalities that we're left assuming that any failure to follow their precise example is compromise, coldness and sin. This is surely unhelpful. Consider the issue of introversion vs extroversion. When introverts measure their love for the flock against the behaviours of extroverts they are heading for ruin! I've been around one or two preachers who will personally connect with almost everyone in the room, both before and after preaching, using the break time in a conference to talk with new people, or holding court with a small group of new friends (just before preaching all over again). No doubt such people are partly doing this out of genuine love. But I imagine this also reflects an extrovert personality which thrives off such interaction. If you are more the type who longs for some quiet space (and if you know this because you find interactions extremely difficult after preaching), be realistic about what you can achieve. I personally find it most fruitful if I make myself available to people pastorally - especially if they have been affected by the sermon - so I deliberately try to reduce small-talk and other types of conversation with people I know. I know I can serve someone who is troubled / challenged / stirred by the message, far better than I can serve a group who want to simply become acquainted. It's completely appropriate to politely go with this preference (e.g. *excuse me, I think I'd better chat with this person over here so perhaps you and I can catch up later*).

Questions for Reflection:

1. 'Preaching' and 'compassion' are concepts that are not naturally joined in our culture. But in Jesus life we see precisely this:

Mark 6:34 [34] *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. (ESV)*

His compassion for the crowd was the very thing which led Him to preach to them. Why might this seem strange to us? Name some of the other motivations that could drive us to preaching.

2. How might love for the people to whom we preach affect our preparation, our delivery and our interaction with individuals?
3. Taking into consideration your own temperament, what would be a realistic way in which you might grow in this area?

19. The Burden of Preaching: Fighting the War

The key thing: preaching is warfare. To preach and then be surprised by tough seasons is like breaking into a stranger's house in the early hours and being surprised when they strongly object. You have a relentless enemy who hates you anyway, but is especially annoyed when you herald the gospel. You're breaking into his domain (John 14.30; Eph 2.2; 2 Corinthians 4.4; 1 Peter 5.8-9). So prepare for a skirmish.

Emotions

D Martyn Lloyd-Jones referred to preaching as '*the most romantic thing I know*'. He did not mean it is a good thing to try on your wife, but referred rather to the sheer unpredictability of it. One of God's ways of aiding our humility is to remind us (without any warning) of our dependence on him in the pulpit. Those occasions when we expect to single-handedly usher in the Lord's return with our mighty oratory usually end up as a shambles. Then we turn up another day feeling hopelessly underprepared (in every sense) and God does something spectacular.

So maybe you start thinking: *that's the secret – I'll prepare badly, that way God will show up – disaster again...* There is no pattern, guys. That's what Lloyd-Jones meant. You need to be ready to handle both elation and disappointment.

Elation needs watching. It's no sin to be encouraged, even personally affirmed, by observable fruit and good feedback. Rejoice in it. *But rejoice more that your names are written in heaven* (Luke 10.20). Don't imagine that you have anything to boast about – and **never** use your apparent success as grounds for a stubborn and superior attitude. All you have done is function with the gift God gave you. The guys on the PA desk did that too.

Disappointment can also be harmful – and maybe more pervasive. I heard Dick Lucas say discouragement is a more serious temptation for preachers than pride. At least it seems to be a go-to strategy for the devil. The feeling, after a sermon goes sideways, that you would prefer to be at the bottom of the ocean is not unique to you. If nothing else, remember you are not the first man tempted to assume the foetal position.

The fact is you need to push through a lot of this to become a useful vessel. If you do make a habit of hitting the wilderness on a regular basis we will have a problem. So learn to fight. Here are some tips:

- Get to know yourself. When are you most likely to hit a low? How can you pre-empt it? What are your best remedies? Do you need to go and be alone after you have preached? Lloyd-Jones would deal with elation by going home and reading sermons/biographies of great preachers. This would bring him down to earth. I don't know what he did with disappointments... Some kind of escape and relaxation is going to help.
- Don't forget to take your own temptations, temperament and weaknesses into account, and consider yourself with 'sober judgement' (Romans 12.3). Some of us need to actively remind ourselves of weaknesses so that we properly interpret moments and seasons of 'growing faint'. Especially avoid measuring yourself unfairly against others. Heroes, living or dead, can provide inspiration and example - but they can also be used by our enemy as grist to his mill of accusation.
- Remember you have bigger dragons to fight than your self-pity. This may sound callous and counter productive, but all you need sometimes is *perspective*. I often tell myself that I may end up in prison in five or ten years if the devil has his way. We need to take the occasional bad sermon more or less in our stride.
Proverbs 24.10 *If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.*
- Life is not over. There are new battles to fight. And you are going to win them. I heard a pastor demonstrating this frame of mind, describing an occasion immediately after a below-average sermon. He knew it was a chance to succumb to discouragement. His wife asked him how he felt about it and he replied '*that was a month ago*'.

- Most importantly: remember the gospel. Preach it to yourself too. Persuade yourself that you have everything in Christ. You have received fullness in him. Remember Tim Keller's reworking of the statement in Romans 'he who is righteous by faith shall live': **he who is righteous by preaching will die every week.**

Handling feedback

However trustworthy our gut instincts, we all have weaknesses. Without letting people expose them we are going into battle unprepared and uncovered. Wise and specific feedback can move you forward a league at a time if you receive it well. But this is not easy. It comes as the surgeon's knife. Here are a few comments on receiving it:

- Don't clam up and get defensive. You will just make it less fun for your 'coach' to try again, and doom yourself to repeating and aggravating your weaknesses. You want to make it easy, not hard, for people.
- Receiving feedback in a public context has unique challenges. Even positive feedback is hard when you're being watched... Just be aware of the added dynamic and don't let it affect your ability to hear.
- Thank people (if you want them to do it again – and you do).
- Ask for specific examples, especially if you don't quite understand the criticism.
- Assuming you're married, listen to your wife. Even if she knows little about preaching, she knows you. God gave you her as a 'helper'.
- Don't be ashamed of asking for feedback. If it won't come to you, go find it.
- Don't listen to everyone – or at least, listen to some more than others. Choose who you need to listen to on the basis of their wisdom, their love for you and their understanding of your mission.
 - Wisdom – they need to know what they are talking about. They cannot just be well meaning.
 - Love – do they want to serve you? Some will dress their sin up as an objection to the sermon. They say you preached badly, in fact they didn't like their sin being exposed. Be discerning. Others may dress it up even as a prophetic word. Yuk. Such people are to be ignored. In fact, even prophetic words from good people just before you preach are usually red herrings. I have learned to take little notice. One young preacher was set to preach at a conference in his twenties and three separate people gave him 'words from God' about pride in his life. He was traumatised and unfit to preach. When his mentor, who was hosting the event, discovered what had happened, he told the young man to ignore all these prophecies: *'if I see pride in your life I'll tell you, trust me. I've asked you to preach – now preach.'*
 - Understanding – feedback, like preaching, needs to be contextual. Does this person understand your objective? [N.B. this affects the way you receive feedback from those 'above' you. They should know your mission at least as well as you – and may know it better. So be humble or they may think you cannot help them in their mission – and you will find you are not preaching anymore. This is more than an issue of feedback, it's about **spiritual authority**. Don't you get into the pompous delusion that your elders don't really understand what 'the people' need to hear. You are serving their vision, not yours.]

Humility

Be aware that you are nothing great. Any greatness you have is an outrageous gift from God. The most helpful thing I have ever heard when it comes to keeping my ego in check and walking through demeaning times is from David Pawson. When going through a season of slander from some critics he felt God say to him: *The worst they can say about you is not as bad as the truth...* remember what God forgave you and you will soon forget your delusions, 'rights' and self importance.

CS Lewis said humility is not the art of trying to think low thoughts of oneself, but the art of not thinking of oneself very often. It seems to me that the more we focus on Humility for itself, the more we miss it. Get preoccupied with Jesus, and the people he loves, and humility should follow. True humility may be more present than we realise. Any man who stands before God will occasionally come across as arrogant in his boldness – though he may in fact be

humble. It is more humble to take a bold 'heroic' risk knowing you may look an idiot for it, than to keep a low, safe, 'humble' profile and never do anything courageous.

Conflict

Let's end where we started. We are at war. Conflict is an inherent part of the preacher's life. Our master told us not to think he had come to bring peace but a sword. Don't look for an easy life as a preacher. That is an oxymoron. **Luke 6.26:** *Woe to you when all men speak well of you.*

Keep going under skin – don't only massage it. Comfort the discomforted and discomfort the comfortable. Let me leave you with one of my favourite quotations from CH Spurgeon:

CH Spurgeon: *I have found it utterly impossible to please, let me say or do what I will. One becomes somewhat indifferent when dealing with those whom every word offends. I notice that, when I have measured my words, and weight my sentences most carefully, I have then offended most; while some of my stronger utterances have passed unnoticed. Therefore, I am comparatively careless as to how my expressions may be received, and only anxious that they may be in themselves just and true.*

This doesn't mean you won't get into trouble – just means you might as well get into trouble for something worthwhile.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Think about your own emotional wiring. Do you think that you are generally more likely to succumb to discouragement or to over-confidence? Do you see how pride may be involved either way? Are there any close people with whom you can discuss this?
2. How does discouragement affect you? Do you see patterns in the relationship between emotional lows and temptations to sin? Can you see enemy tactics here? How might you prepare more strategically for this?
3. If you want to ask someone for specific feedback, how would you maximise the usefulness of the exercise? What questions would you ask them?

APPENDIX: The Refuelling of Preaching: Other Resources and Models

This preaching course is intended to start a journey for you. If it stirs you to read good books / resources on preaching and look for good role models from whom you can really learn, then it's achieved something very worthwhile. This section may send you in a good direction:

Here are some books and resources. Some of the books are out of print, but they will be well worth hunting down:

BOOKS:

- *I Believe in Preaching* - John Stott
 - A textbook on preaching, taking into account its theology, its importance and its craft. It's inspiring, wise and practical, written by a model expositor.
- *Preachers and Preaching* - DM Lloyd-Jones
 - A series of lectures given at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) in 1968. Lloyd-Jones didn't much believe in homiletics (preaching craft) as a subject worthy of study, so it was exceptional

for him to give this kind of focus to training preachers in their work. As a result these talks are unique and represent MLJ's opinionated and quirky views (some might call them hang-ups). But what Lloyd-Jones does like nobody else is recover the solemn and eternal significance of preaching. For him, this is deadly serious and deserves our most earnest attention.

- It's also instructive to *listen* to MLJ. You can now find a regular podcast (from the MLJ Trust) backdating live recordings. He didn't approve of sermon 'tapes', but thankfully this didn't prevent people taping him.
- *Expository Exultation* - John Piper
 - Unique as a comprehensive theology of the purpose of preaching. Piper wants us to see that revelation of God's glory in Christ is the great goal and that we should therefore maximise preaching to achieve this. He gives a range of techniques to help with this - all compellingly argued from scripture. A really remarkable book.
- *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* - John Piper.
 - I vividly remember discovering this book on a gap year in 1994. I picked it up, out of curiosity, from a shelf in a bookshop in Nairobi. The opening sentence was the first thing I'd ever read by Piper and it arrested me: '*People are starving for the greatness of God*'.
- *The Gift of Prophetic Preaching* - Michael Eaton
 - Michael Eaton was a protege of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, perhaps especially in his view of preaching and the work of the Holy Spirit. In this simple, pithy and quite eccentric book he stands on Lloyd-Jones' shoulders, exploring the way that preaching must be a different kind of speech than any other - anointed by the Spirit of God.
- *Lectures To My Students* - CH Spurgeon
 - These are weighty, punchy and deadly serious, but sometimes seriously funny. Spurgeon takes a whole range of topics in hand here, in what are transcribed occasional lectures he would give to the students at his college. There is wisdom on staying close to the cross in your sermons, dealing with critics and opposition, using illustrations, looking after your vocal chords (a bigger issue in days without amplification), going after souls, and many other themes. Common sense, straight talk and gospel fire.
- *Explosive Preaching* - Ronald Boyd-Macmillan
 - I like this book because of its breadth as well as its pithy insights. The author, who is enthusiastic about the subject, has a practical approach and shares wisdom learned from a wide range of historical examples and from non-western cultures. There are lessons to learn on preaching from persecuted churches in Russia and China, for example.
- *Preach the Word* - edited by Greg Haslam
 - This collection of talks, given at a training course, hosted by Greg Haslam in London in the 2000's, is so helpful. He managed to get a fantastic range of people to speak. Some of them (including Greg) were giants who have now gone to be with the Lord, and their wisdom shouldn't be lost and forgotten. The passion for God, His word and His Kingdom, comes through in every section and there don't seem to be many dull pages.
- *Why Johnny Can't Preach* - T. David Gordon
 - Gordon laments the prevalence of poor preaching in too many churches. He writes as someone weary with mediocrity and concerned that most are accustomed enough to settle for it. He links this underachievement with poor reading diets amongst pastors. Preachers who don't read texts thoughtfully will tend to speak in platitudes. The book places the bar bracingly high, and perhaps the diagnosis could be more rounded, but the challenge is a healthy one.
- *The Power of Speaking God's Word* - Wilbur Ellsworth
 - Possibly the most unusual book on this list and probably the hardest to get hold of. The focus of the book is on preaching as an oral (not textual exercise) and, therefore, not to be over dependent upon notes and manuscripts. Even if you are not convinced you might be stimulated by it. Easily the best

(and longest) chapter is his delve into church history where he shows that extempore preaching has been way more normal in church history than we might have realised.

PAPERS: (to be found online)

- *A Theology of Preaching* - Glen Scrivener
<https://www.unionpublishing.org/resource/a-theology-of-preaching/>
- Glen sets out the essence of preaching with insight and inspiration, as well as some practical implications.

- *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* - Sinclair Ferguson
<https://cst-media.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/doc-sferguson-peachingchrist.pdf>
- A very helpful summary of the hermeneutical principles of a Jesus-centred bible, and the need to preach it that way. Ferguson makes the point that too many preachers also need to be reminded to preach a Christ-centred New Testament.

A PODCAST SERIES

- *Preaching in a Postmodern World* - Ed Clowney & Tim Keller.
- <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/preaching-christ-postmodern-world/#introduction-to-the-course>
- I've recommended this series of recordings to many over the years. Ed Clowney and Tim Keller work as a potent duo with Clowney providing the theological and biblical spine to the course, while Keller shares wisdom on making it work in 21st century contexts. A whole range of practical ideas and themes are covered in fascinating ways. Keller had an enormous effect on the way I have thought as a leader and pastor and definitely as a preacher, and this series is probably the best way to grab hold of his insights.