

Introduction

As the subtitle makes clear, in this book I want to talk about the preaching of a sermon, using both words – ‘preaching’ and ‘sermon’ – in the usually accepted way. Specifically, I want to address the effect which years of listening to the preaching of sermons has had on the hearers.

The issue stated

Before I begin, I need to correct any wrong impression which some might draw from what I say. Nothing in this book must be taken to mean that I denigrate the preaching of the gospel. Far from it. Scripture could not place a higher value on the activity. As Paul put it:

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome (Rom. 1:14-15).

There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’. 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? 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!’ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says: ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:12-17).

I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience – by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God – so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel (Rom. 15:18-20).

Introduction

Christ [sent] me to... preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power... For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... Since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach [or the folly of preaching] to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God... And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony [or mystery or secret or message of God] with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided [or determined] to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Cor. 1:17-24; 2:1-4).

Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16).

After that – and there is plenty more in a similar vein – how could I say anything against preaching? or even give a hint of a whiff of a suggestion of saying anything against it? What is more, I have engaged in preaching for over 60 years, I have written on the practice,¹ and, I submit, my works amply demonstrate my commitment to this glorious and vital avenue of service for Christ.

But – and there is a ‘but’ – something is wrong with the preaching of sermons *as we know it*, and the lasting effect on the hearers of the preaching of such sermons and the listening to them; something is seriously wrong. Obviously so. Take just one example. There must be a reason for the disastrous changes in the churches served for decades by men like C.H.Spurgeon and D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones (men widely regarded as exemplary preachers), changes which

¹ See my *Preaching*.

Introduction

erupted in the years following their respective ministries. Appositely, in the 1970s a friend of mine asked Lloyd-Jones why this had happened in Spurgeon's case. 'Because Spurgeon was not an expository preacher', came the prompt and assured reply. I would like to ask Lloyd-Jones why such a thing happened at Westminster Chapel after his ministry came to an end, and happened within a few years of his leaving. No doubt there were many contributory factors, but one thing is certain: the decades of his expository preaching did not prevent the lurch.

And that is just one example of what I mean when I say that something is amiss with the present state of affairs as regards the preaching of sermons and the listening to them. In addition to the countless hours of preparation, and all the other necessary behind-the-scenes effort required to maintain stated preaching Sunday by Sunday, year in, year out, millions of man-hours are devoted to the activity. To what purpose? I say that the reaping falls far short of the sowing, that the realisation falls far below the expectation, and that the lasting benefits fail to live up to the high hopes raised by those who so strongly advocate the practice. Something is wrong.²

The fundamental mistake

Let me start with the fundamental mistake. The fact is, most believers have an unbiblical view of both the preaching and the sermon; they have adopted – imbibed, without realising it

² At this stage, I fully expect to be referred to the Puritans, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, *et al.* By way of reply, I suggest that we should take a hard-nosed view of history. Just one example. Remember Edwards' confession. In his farewell sermon at Northampton (on being sacked for attempting to exercise spiritual discipline), he complained that he was leaving the majority of the church unconverted. See my *Infant*. What is more, as I have made clear, I am talking about the here and now. Living in the past, dwelling in a romantic haze, is not the best way to face the stern realities of today. We must learn from the past, of course, but not use it to escape from the here and now.

Introduction

– Christendom’s approach to the practice, and, consequently, they end up with the problems I want to address. The opening paragraph says it all. We are talking about the preaching of sermons and the listening to them in ‘the usually accepted way’; hence, in the words I later used, ‘as we know it’. Most believers think of preaching only in terms of a monologue by a duly appointed man; that is, most think of preaching as ‘a prolonged talk or discourse by a single speaker, especially one dominating or monopolising the procedure’, ‘a lengthy, uninterrupted speech by a single person’. And not only that. When I say ‘duly appointed’, the truth is that many go further to talk of ordination, and such like, and have few qualms about giving the man in question a title.³ Some actually put him in a special garb⁴. Almost without exception they put him in a special box, or on a special platform behind a special stand.⁵ And, when they refer to him, they use elevated language. All this only compounds the problem. In addition, when talking about a sermon most believers think in terms of imparting

³ See my *Pastor*.

⁴ Although Lloyd-Jones tried to justify the practice, he actually dug himself deeper into the hole he was already in: ‘...I believe it is good and right for a preacher to wear a [Geneva] gown in the pulpit... The gown to me is a sign of the call, a sign of the fact that a man has been “set apart” to do this work. It is no more than that, but it is that. Of course, I must hastily add that while I believe in wearing a gown in the pulpit I do not believe in wearing a hood on the gown! The wearing of a hood calls attention to the man and his ability, not to his call. It is not a sign of office but a sign of the man’s scholastic achievements; so one has a BD gown, another a DD gown, another an MA and so on. That is but confusion; but above all it distracts attention from the spiritual authority of the preacher. Wear a gown but never a hood!’ (D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching and Preachers*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1971, p160). Phew!

⁵ It is the word ‘special’ (not so very different to ‘sacred’) that makes this objectionable.

Introduction

information, the preacher telling them things;⁶ this, they think, is what sermons are for – to impart information;⁷ that is to say, if they think about it at all.

This is the fundamental mistake; namely, reading Scripture through Christendom's spectacles or template, and so redefining the 'what', the 'who', the 'how' and the 'why' of preaching. In all these ways, we read Christendom into the New Testament, and then read it back out. As a consequence, we can only end up in an unbiblical state of affairs. And I say we have.

I use the word 'we' advisedly. It is only in recent years that as I have come to better appreciate what we, as believers, possess in Christ in the new covenant, and increasingly seen how this dramatically affects church life – *ekklēsia*⁸ life – that I have begun to realise more and more how fearful the consequences of Christendom are. I have to confess, therefore, that I have arrived at my present understanding late. But, at least...

While the contemporary state of affairs in the churches is sad, it is not at all surprising. It is clear where it stems from. I spoke of Christendom. To see a slightly fuller explanation of what I mean by 'Christendom', please turn to Appendix 1. In brief, I am talking about the fusion of the State and the Church in the 4th century, brought about by the so-called

⁶ This raises the question of 'preaching' and 'teaching', which, in turn, involves the connection between heralding, instruction, proclamation, and such like. It could be that preaching is more to do with reaching unbelievers, and teaching more to do with the instruction of the children of God. But there is no hard and fast division between the two. Application to all should always be made.

⁷ The use of modern props like PowerPoint and the handing out of notes encourages this. Lecturing instead of preaching makes it inevitable. See my *Preaching*.

⁸ Just to explain my use of *ekklēsia* instead of 'church': the Greek word means 'the called-out ones', called out from, separate from, the world. Christendom, by confusing, confounding and often collating the church and the world, utterly ruins this fundamental biblical principle. The disastrous consequences are incalculable.

Introduction

conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine.⁹ The consequences of Christendom have blighted the churches for centuries, and continue to blight the churches to this very day, it all having stemmed from the Fathers, and having been passed on to succeeding generations (including our own) *via* the magisterial Reformers.¹⁰

Let me explain. The Reformers, while they happily undid some of the knots tied by the Fathers, left others intact. Indeed, in some senses, on occasion the Reformers actually tightened the knots. The upshot is that almost all evangelicals, evangelicals of every hue, following (whether or not they know it) Martin Luther and John Calvin, men who were themselves steeped in the Fathers,¹¹ have inherited an exalted, patristic view of the stated ‘minister’ engaged in ‘preaching’ the word of God in the form of a monologue sermon. Indeed, this forms the central part of church life for most, eclipsing every other aspect. And yet, despite sitting for decades under expository monologue-preaching, even of the highest quality (in Christendom terms), most believers seem woefully static (stagnant?) as far as their spiritual

⁹ I say ‘fusion’, but, in fact, the two have often been at each other’s throats, the political and religious factions fighting to be top dog. In the UK, for instance, see the constant jockeying for prime position between the government and the bishops ever since the Elizabethan Settlement. Today, as far as I (one who, I confess, wouldn’t touch the system with a barge pole) can judge, the political power rules the roost.

¹⁰ ‘Magisterial’ because they believed that the State (the magistrate) should enforce uniform religion on its citizens. A question suggests itself: Who defines this uniform religion?

¹¹ John T. McNeill: ‘It is often assumed that the Reformed theologians were indifferent to the Church Fathers. Their works bear ample evidence to the contrary. This is emphatically true of Oecolampadius, Bullinger, and Peter Martyr Vermigli, and not less so of Zwingli. He probably knew the patristic literature not less intimately than either Luther or Calvin – both of whom knew it well’ (John T. McNeill: *The History and Character of Calvinism*, Oxford University Press, Inc., New York, 1967, p23). For Calvin, see my *Infant*. Luther, of course, had been an Augustinian friar.

Introduction

discernment goes; their grip on the teaching of Scripture remains as weak as ever it was. After all the years of monologue preaching they have listened to – and claim to have enjoyed – they appear to be practically incapable of understanding the Bible for themselves, are almost invariably unwilling or unable to engage in spiritual discussion, and have little or no thought of teaching anyone else. In short, they remain as ignorant of Scripture, and as dependent on the pulpit, after those decades of pulpit ministry, as they were when they started. Truth to tell, they may well be even more dependent. I go further. More often than not, ‘the minister’ and the people – ‘his’ people, as they are frequently depicted – like it that way. They certainly encourage each other in the practice!¹²

As does the hymnbook. Let us never forget that many believers take their theology from the hymnbook. As for elevating ‘the minister’ or ‘the pastor’, James Montgomery’s hymn certainly does nothing to dissuade those who sing it from taking such a stance:

*Lord, pour thy Spirit from on high,
And thine ordainèd servants bless;
Graces and gifts to each supply,
And clothe thy priests with righteousness.*

*Within thy temple when they stand,
To teach the truth as taught by thee,
Saviour, like stars in thy right hand,
Let all thy church’s pastors be.¹³*

*Wisdom, and zeal, and faith impart,
Firmness with meekness, from above,
To bear thy people in their heart,
And love the souls whom thou dost love.*

*To watch, and pray, and never faint,
By day and night their guard to keep,
To warn the sinner, cheer the saint,
To feed thy lambs, and tend thy sheep.*

¹² See my *Pastor*.

¹³ Or: ‘The angels of thy churches be’.

Introduction

*So, when their work is finished here,
May they in hope their charge resign;
So, when their Master shall appear,
May they with crowns of glory shine.*

Some comments are called for. All God's saints are his servants, 'ordained' (using the word in its scriptural sense), priests – not just 'ministers' or 'pastors'. What is more, in the third verse Montgomery seems to attribute to 'the pastor' that which rightly belongs to Christ. Indeed, the hymn encourages such an elevated view of the man in the pulpit that he almost takes the place of Christ in the singer's estimation. This is a disaster of the first magnitude.

Here is another hymn, this time by W.Kingsbury:

*Great Lord of all thy churches, hear
Thy ministers' and people's prayer...*

*Thus we our suppliant voices raise,
And weeping, sow the seed of praise,
In humble hope that thou wilt hear
Thy ministers' and people's prayer.*

Once again, this calls for comments. Who gives men the right to differentiate between the prayers of the minister and the prayers of the people? Does God? Do you see what I mean, reader, when I say that believers, without realising it, can think their minister is a special man, a member of the clergy, even when they deny they do any such thing? Do they think that his prayers are special to God? All God's people are his ministers. Getting this wrong carries a high price tag.

Saying such things will be unpopular. In some quarters my charge might be dismissed as a sick joke and be laughed out of court. Hackles, if not hands, will be raised in horror in some quarters. Nonetheless, I stand by my assertion. And I am encouraged in doing so by some words of Spurgeon, who, when penning his 'final manifesto', declared:

Introduction

Brethren, leave out nothing. Be bold enough to preach unpalatable and unpopular truth.¹⁴

In my case in this present work, of course, it should read:

Brethren, leave out nothing. Be bold enough to write and assert unpalatable and unpopular truth.

So there it is. In this book, I want to talk about this business of preaching as a monologue. To make sure this is kept in mind throughout, in the extracts which I include I will, from time to time, introduce the word ‘monologue’ to stress the point. Although this, I grant, may well annoy some readers, even so I am willing to risk it. The point I want to make is so important, style must be sacrificed.

The truth is, I am flying in the face of received wisdom – always a dangerous – not to say, in the eyes of some, fatal – thing to do. The list of the advocates of monologue preaching is more than impressive; it is overwhelming! And what some of those advocates have said about the practice could not afford it a greater value and priority. In fact, their claims for the practice are mind-blowing with respect to the heights of praise to which they are prepared to ascend in their descriptions of it and its effects. I want to look at this in the next chapter. I start with the works of D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

¹⁴ C.H.Spurgeon: ‘The Greatest Fight in the World’.