

The Cure

The world knows the principle: ‘If something isn’t broke, don’t fix it!’ The corollary, of course, is that if something of importance clearly is not working, then it must be fixed. How necessary this is with regard to this matter of preaching monologue sermons and listening to them for decades with, sad to say, for many, too little lasting profit!

Let me say it as plainly as I can: I am convinced there is an important place for preaching in terms of a monologue address. I see evidence of it in such passages as Matthew 5 – 7, Acts 2, 13, 14, 17 and 20, and in the apostolic letters. But do not miss how Paul, when writing his letters, constantly asks questions,¹ raises objections and gives voice to burning issues, surely inviting his readers – in those days, nearly always, if not always, his listeners – to participate, at least with the mind.

Take for instance his letter to the Galatians:

¹ Let me say a little more on questions. A rhetorical question is one where no answer is required because it is obvious. This can be powerful – the same as making a statement, but even stronger. By a ‘closed’ question, I mean where the expected answer is yes or no. By an ‘open’ question, I mean one where the answer demands the respondent’s own words. For example: ‘Do you believe?’ is a closed question. It is too easy for the one asked simply to say yes or no. ‘What does it mean to be a Christian?’ is an open question. Closed questions are weak; open questions are strong. Many preachers think they use open questions when they round off a statement with ‘isn’t it?’ or ‘isn’t he?’ or some such. For example: ‘Christ is a glorious Saviour, isn’t he?’ But this actually weakens the statement. Compare: ‘What do you think of Christ?’ followed by a pregnant pause. Preachers and congregations generally do not like open questions with those embarrassing pauses: they are too pointed and searching for comfort. And ‘comfort’ seems to be the main aim today. ‘Do all you can to keep the people snug in their comfort zone’ seems to be the watchword.

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For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man?... But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?... O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?... Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain – if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith...?... Why then the law?... Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?... But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?... What then has become of your blessedness?... Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?... But what does the Scripture say?... Who hindered you from obeying the truth?... But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? (Gal. 1:10; 2:17; 3:1-5,19,21; 4:9,15-16,30; 5:7,11).

In this, of course, Paul was adopting the same style as Christ. How often the Lord Jesus dialogued – probed – even when he was delivering a monologue! Although I have culled the following from several discourses, consider this selection from just one chapter, Matthew 21:

Have you never read...?... I also will ask you one question... The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?... What do you think?... Which of the two did the will of his father?... What will he do to those tenants?... Have you never read in the Scriptures...? (Matt. 21:16,24,25,28,31,40,42).

And, it goes without saying, Jesus raised these questions in order to draw in his hearers and provoke a response from them. He did not use questions to pad out his discourse, nor was he seeking needed approval from the crowd. Far from it!² Very far from it! He was confronting his hearers, forcing

² See the previous note.

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them to think about his words and apply them to themselves.³ The idea that they were mute absorbers of an uninterrupted monologue is ludicrous.

Furthermore, the prophets had done the very same. Take Malachi. To do justice to the point I am making, I would have to quote his entire book, apart from the final, small chapter. Indeed, Malachi reads as one continuous dialogue – disputation – between God and his people, question and answer, probing question and expected retort. This is how the prophet preached! He delivered a monologue, but he did not simply drone on, repeating facts, handing out notes after using the equivalent of a PowerPoint presentation. All through his discourse, he was arguing, forcing his hearers (by dint of his provocative passion) to take part in the dialogue. He gave them a voice, even in his monologue, brought out their objections, exposed their inner hostility, made public their arrogant defiance, even of God himself. This is the scriptural monologue. How different to the average sermon today!

It should come as no surprise, therefore, to learn that while I remain convinced that there is an important place for the monologue (properly done, that is), nevertheless – and this is a vital qualification – the preacher in his monologue must involve the hearers as Christ, the prophets and Paul did. Moreover, this participation shows that the monologue should not be the only mode of teaching; nor perhaps, the main method. Even so, the advantage of the monologue is that it allows a teacher time and space to reason out his

³ If I had to use one word to describe what preaching ought to be about, I would use ‘confront’. The preacher should confront men with the gospel. Those who disagree – may I ask what word you would use? And plenty would disagree, I am sure. I am thinking of the current love affair with user-friendly, anti-confrontational psychological counselling – which sets out to build up self-esteem in man and, consequently, reduces God; in short, with its promise of the penny and the bun, it is live as you like now and heaven hereafter.

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argument – the scriptural argument, that is – and to develop it, to pile up the evidence, to give the big picture.

Let me illustrate. As a schoolmaster teaching Mathematics, I delivered little monologues when introducing a topic, but I always laced my monologue with probing questions, constantly encouraging and demanding a response from the pupils. I did all I could to get them to speak, to ask questions. I tried to break down their shyness, and their fear of looking foolish in openly owning their difficulties, assuring them that if they had a problem, others almost certainly would be wrestling with the same difficulty. Even so, it was an uphill struggle! As my daughter, decades after her school days were over, informed me (I had not realised it before), when I taught a class with her in it, her friends would try to get her to ask their questions for them! Fear of looking foolish held many back, even though I bent over backwards to give every pupil reassurance on this score. How much more, within the *ekklēsia*, where loving trust ought to reign, should fear of embarrassment be unknown. It is in such a liberated and encouraging atmosphere, an atmosphere of love, that the weakest believer can surely feel free to speak. If not, something is seriously wrong. When I had the responsibility, I used to encourage new believers to pray publicly, assuring them that their little, faltering prayers were of far greater worth in God's eyes than my 'professional' efforts. In a further attempt to remove anxiety, I promised them that I would always step in and finish for them if they got stuck – without embarrassing them. Do we not all know how an infant's struggling with words gives us wonderful family jargon? Who, but my sister and brother (if *they* do), knows what a booktle is? (As I think of it, I don't recall having ever written the word before!)

Continuing with my illustration from the world of school teaching: it was not only questions which pupils raised. On occasion, a bright pupil would make a suggestion that gave rise to a better solution to the problem in hand, better than I had proposed. Oh yes, a teacher can be too proud to admit and accept such, but if he is then he simply advertises his

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folly. I knew more than my pupils by reason of age and experience, but I have taught better brains than mine, far better!

After the lesson was over, I then set homework to reinforce what I had taught. In due course, I resorted to test papers, and such like.⁴

In all these ways, I was taking every step I could think of to make sure that my instruction was driven home and securely fixed in my pupils' minds. Instinctively I was working on Spurgeon's principle:

One thought fixed on the mind will be better than fifty thoughts made to flit across the ear. One tenpenny nail driven home and clenched will be more useful than a score of tin tacks loosely fixed, to be pulled out again in an hour.⁵

How strongly this applies to the preaching of sermons and listening to them! I, for one, can see principles here which apply to the teaching of believers.

Getting back to my days as a schoolmaster, to have a silent class was relatively easy, but a 'learning-hum' – where pupils were mutually helping each other, a fellow-pupil often being the best teacher – which I could pull back when I wanted, was ideal. A graveyard may have been easier (easy) to manage, but it would not have been the best teaching atmosphere. Too much preaching within the meeting house is too much like a man standing in the graveyard outside and delivering a discourse to the rigid headstones. With as about much good in each case!

In saying this, I do not want to be misunderstood. Far more is involved in preaching than imparting information – I am convinced it is better to think of it in terms of giving an

⁴ The illustration must not be pushed too far. I am not trying to reduce *ekklēsia* life to a classroom. Compare likening the spiritual life to a barracks, a parade ground, a battlefield, and so on. Think of Christ's return being likened to the coming of a thief. Don't stretch the illustration, but grasp the main point!

⁵ C.H.Spurgeon: 'Sermons – Their Matter' in his *Lectures to My Students*, Vol.1.

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impression⁶ – but since most people look upon the sermon as existing to give information, I have had to concentrate on that. In any case, God works through the truth entering the mind, penetrating the heart and being worked out in the life (Rom. 6:17). So the imparting of information is not to be sneezed at. But to what end should that information be imparted? That’s the question! As William Perkins, the Puritan, used to say: ‘What’s the use of it?’

That’s enough of illustrations! As my American friends say, let us cut to the chase; let us get down to brass tacks. You will recall that I closed the previous chapter by saying that the place to find the cure must be obvious – or else! Well, here it is.

The emphasis in the Bible is on the total involvement of all the believers, without exception, both men and women, in the life of the *ekklēsia*. And this includes a participation in a teaching ministry. Routinely today, however, there seems to be a notion abroad that church life, if not Christianity itself, is, for the majority, little more than a ‘spectator sport’, with the added advantage of an entrance ticket into eternal glory. As far as *ekklēsia* life goes, that’s about it! A few get ‘involved’ – they are especially ‘keen’ – while the majority can watch (and criticise) from the safety of the sidelines; spiritually speaking, the majority are passive. The monologue preacher with his monologue sermon encourages this kind of attitude, and constantly reinforces believers in this dreadful system, even though God’s word cuts right across all such shenanigans. The Lord stipulates that *all* his people must be totally involved in the life of the *ekklēsia*. All are priests: God has made all his people such – both men and women. ‘The priesthood of *all* believers’. *All* sacrifice. They all have a service to perform for him. There are no exceptions, no special cases. Prayer (including public prayer meetings), gospel service, mutual instruction, reproof and edification, practical care of the saints, daily holiness and

⁶ See my *Preaching* and my ‘Watershed of the Ages’.

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dedication to God, financial support of the gospel and its ministers, true spiritual humility... these are not just for the few, the fanatical super-saints, to be concerned about. They comprise the duty which God demands of *all* his people; he has made them *all* priests, and expects *all* of them to offer the sacrifices that he has commanded. This is not only their duty; it is their privilege. There is no opting out, no holiday, no retirement. All God's people, all their days, carry the responsibilities, *and the privileges*, of being priests; they all engage in priestly duty in serving God. Or should do.⁷

What is more, and in tandem with it, even though God raises stated and recognised teachers in his church, he does this in order to encourage and enhance (educate, refine) believers in their mutual ministry, since all believers are, in the proper sense, teaching ministers; all are gifted and appointed by Christ so that they may mutually edify one another. I say again, this is their duty, this is their privilege. The stated ministry – the monologue sermon or discourse – is designed by God (and should be designed in our experience) to inform and stimulate this mutual ministry. I am not suggesting that all are able to address a congregation, but no child of God is without some ability to pass on a word of experience, encouragement, instruction, comfort, reproof... to a fellow-believer. Let me emphasise this. Scripture is rich on the subject:

For as we have many members in one body, but all members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives... I... am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another (Rom. 12:3-8; 15:14).

⁷ See my *The Priesthood*.

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I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by him in all utterance and all knowledge... so that you come short in no gift... There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all... God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as he pleased (1 Cor. 1:4-7; 12:1-40, especially 4-7,18).

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:5-6).

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling-place of God in the Spirit... To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift... for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ... from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love... Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers... Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God (Eph. 2:19-22; 4:7-16,29; 5:18-21).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in

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the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:16-17).

Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing (1 Thess. 5:11).

Exhort⁸ one another every day [note that, every day], as long as it is called ‘today’, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin... Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging⁹ one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25).

As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. Coming to him as a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 2:2-5; 4:10-11).

You, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh (Jude 20-23).

Is that not proof enough?

It is, I say, abundantly clear: All the saints are ministers; all engage in ministry. Note the emphasis, ‘to each one’. To each believer, Christ gives a gift or gifts so that each might

⁸ The word comes from *parakaleō*, ‘to call, beseech, admonish, exhort, urge’. In some versions, it is translated as ‘encourage’.

⁹ See the previous note. The AV has ‘exhorting’.

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serve the *ekklēsia*. These passages tell us that *all* the saints are ministers, *all* are engaged in the ministry. Not just the monologue preacher! What is more, we know that apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors-and-teachers are given to the churches,¹⁰ and used by Christ, in order to equip the saints for this work of the ministry:

[Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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 (Eph. 4:11-16).

This passage sets out the relationship between the preacher/teacher and his hearers. The former's task and privilege is to promote – in every way – the mutual ministry of all the believers among themselves. They are members, members one with another, and all of them have a part to play – a vital part to play – in the 'one-another' ministry. This is what 'sharing' or 'fellowship' means.¹¹ One of the main tasks of the elders – it may well be the highest task – is to stimulate this 'members-one-of-another' activity.

As I argue in my *The Pastor: Does He Exist?*, the elder's aim, in a sense, should be closer to doing himself out of a job than making himself more indispensable. His job is not to massage his hearers into spiritual passivity, but to mature them into spiritual activity. All of them. A principal part of

¹⁰ Some of these were extraordinary, foundational for the church. See my *Pastor*.

¹¹ 'Fellowship' means far more than swapping recipes, or the like, over a cup of coffee.

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his work is to show believers how to read the Bible for themselves, and so teach themselves and, thence, others. To this end, his ‘notes’ should be the text of Scripture, not a clever template imposed on the word.

Let me emphasise it: Christ gives teachers to his people *for the very purpose of fitting believers – all of them – to engage in profitable ministry*. Filling believers’ heads (or notebooks) with facts, delivered in a monologue sermon, falls a long way short of this glorious work; a long way. Imagine, in a physical sense, always eating four square meals a day, and never doing any work, never doing anything productive with all the calories, protein, and so on, which has been taken in. The very suggestion is laughable. Or, rather, lamentable. So it ought to be in a spiritual sense.

All believers need constant, consistent and continual teaching, of course. No question of it! But that teaching is designed (or ought to be designed) to prepare every believer to engage in ‘the ministry’. This ‘work of the ministry’ is something *all* the saints are to do. It is not something reserved for elders or deacons; certainly it is not confined to an ‘ordained’ minister.

If I may pick just one verse from the above, may I stress: ‘Therefore comfort *each other* and edify *one another*, just as you also are doing’ (1 Thess. 5:11)? Could Paul say this to the majority of believers in the majority of churches today? I especially note the ‘just as you also are doing’. I am not talking about mere theory; ‘just as you also are doing’. Not ‘just as you used to do’; not ‘just as you once did’; not ‘just as you would like to do’. But ‘just as you also *are* doing’.

This is the cure: we need to look on the stated ministry by recognised teachers as a God-ordained means of stimulating the whole body of believers to mutual edification.

Edward Donnelly put it very well:

All of God’s people, whatever their calling may be, should see themselves as engaged in his full-time service... Who are [the] priests? All believers – everyone who is loved and delivered by Christ... (Rev. 1:5). As priests, each of us has a

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holy service to discharge. There is a ministry for every member... (Rom. 12:5-6)... This means that a major part of the responsibility of the gospel minister is to equip God's people to work for their Lord. Far from doing their Christian work for them [or, even worse, on their behalf, in a sacerdotal sense – DG], the minister's task is to enable them to do much more for themselves. And it is significant that Ephesians 4:11-12... makes clear his function as an enabler... Those of us who are in the Reformed tradition need to keep this clearly in view... Some pastors are so insecure that they regard anything as a threat which they themselves do not do or do not control. But we have to be clear in our minds that such an approach is unbiblical and stunts the ministry and growth of the church.

If we were to remember that the gospel minister is the enabler of the people of God, [countless] beneficial results would follow. Ministers would be less stressed and harassed than they are at present. We would liberate our fellow-Christians, and equip them to go where we cannot go, and do what we cannot do. More work would be accomplished. Much of the heat would be taken out of the present controversy over the status of the minister, for it would become clear that, far from being a restraint on the gifts of others, he is the means appointed [by God] to encourage the development and use of their gifts. Our calling is not stop anyone doing anything that Christ has entrusted to him or her, but rather to encourage and help others to do more and more for him.¹²

If only Donnelly had used the plural – elders – instead of 'the minister' in that extract, he would have been hitting the bull's eye. The stated ministry of the elders is to encourage the all-body ministry throughout the *ekklēsia*.

Spurgeon, speaking to every believer, addressed the same vital question:

Who ought to preach, then? Everyone who can preach should do so. The gift of preaching is the responsibility for preaching. I often wonder at some Christian men who can

¹² Edward Donnelly in Philip H. Eveson (ed.): *The Gospel Ministry Today...*, Evangelical Press, Darlington, 2005, pp18-21.

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fire away so grandly on the platform, but who never speak for Christ – they will have to account for those prostituted tongues!... There are a great many persons who ought to preach the gospel, but who do not. Every man who knows the gospel ought to make it known. ‘Let him that hears say, Come’. When you hear the gospel, tell it to somebody else – you Christian people are all bound, in proportion to your gifts and your opportunity – to make the gospel known. ‘Why’, says one, ‘I thought that work was for priests’. Just so, it is only for priests! But then, all believers are priests. By his mighty grace, our Lord Jesus Christ has made us kings and priests unto God! And it is our duty, as well as our privilege, to exercise this blessed priestly function of telling to the sons of men the way whereby they may be saved. Each man, then, in this place, who knows Christ, and each woman and each young person, too, are bound to tell of Christ in some way or other to all who are round about them.

What? All believers able to speak? Surely not! Oh, yes, they can:

For this work, a high degree of gifts is not required. It does not say: ‘How shall they hear without a doctor of divinity?’ It does not say: ‘How shall they hear without a popular preacher?’ Oh, dear, some of us would have been lost if we could not have been saved without hearing a man of great abilities! I thank God that I owe my conversion to Christ to an unknown person who certainly was no minister in the ordinary acceptation of the term, but who could say this much: ‘Look unto Christ, and be saved, all you ends of the earth’.

I break in to draw attention to what Spurgeon immediately went on to say. Up to this point, it might be imagined he was repeating the same mistake as others, and allowing that every believer can witness to an unbeliever, but that is all. Far from it! Spurgeon:

I learned my theology, from which I have never swerved, from an old woman who was a cook in the house where I was an usher [that is, a pupil-teacher]. She could talk about the deep things of God, and as I sat and heard what she had to say, as an aged Christian, of what the Lord had done for

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her, I learned more from her instruction than from anybody I have ever met with since! It does not require a college training to enable you to tell about Christ – some of the best workers in this church have little enough of education, but they bring many to Christ. Go on, my dear brothers and sisters, telling of Christ’s love to you, even if you have very few gifts.¹³

This, then, is the cure, the scriptural cure, for the poor level of understanding of so many believers and their churches today, where a mutual teaching-ministry is virtually unknown despite – or because of – the way the monologue sermon (in its degenerate state) has come to dominate things. God has designed the *ekklēsia* to be a body, and that body to be a members-one-of-another body, with each member ministering to and edifying the rest, this mutual ministry being stimulated by the stated ministry. This not only benefits the saints – both in their giving and receiving – but, above all, it glorifies God who planned and established it all. For centuries, the clerical structure introduced by the Fathers, developed by the Medieval Church, and tweaked by the Reformers, has been imposed upon the *ekklēsia*,¹⁴ and so for centuries churches have suffered – and continue to suffer – a self-imposed loss, with grievous consequences. The only hope is for a return to a vigorous, full-blown exercise of the priesthood of all believers, eagerly and fully sustained by the loving care of a recognised eldership. Is such a desire wishing for the moon? I fear it may be.

¹³ C.H.Spurgeon sermon number 2327.

¹⁴ See my *Pastor; The Priesthood*.