Preaching in worship

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A deacon once told me the following story. A young minister accepted the call to his first pastorate on a year-by-year basis. During his first year he preached virtually the same sermon every Sunday morning. At the end of the first year he fully expected that his congregation would not extend a call for another year. To his surprise (and delight), he was given a unanimous re-call. But during his second year his preaching did not improve; it was the same sermon with little variation. He knew now that his time was up. He candidly admitted to his wife that they had better be prepared to move. But, lo and behold, another unanimous re-call. He tried bravely to produce better sermons during his third year, but he knew that the congregation knew that the content of his preaching was the same old thing. This time both he and his wife were actually beginning to pack their belongings as re-call time arrived. They were going to hold no grudge toward their congregation and leave with dignity. But to their astonishment the congregation gave them a unanimous recall for the third year in a row.

The minister courageously called the senior deacon to one side. 'Look,' he said, 'you know and I know that I am not much of a preacher. I have preached the same sermon every Sunday for three years, and yet you keep giving me unanimous recalls. What is going on?' 'Oh,' replied the senior deacon, 'the answer to that is quite simple. We never wanted a preacher in the first place.'

When I agreed to write this article on 'Preaching in Worship' (meaning the worship service in church), I immediately thought of this story. As a matter of fact, I have thought of this story many times since I came to England in 1973. I don't know of any church over here that accepts a minister on a year-by-year basis but I have been around long enough to know that this story ominously relates to a condition in Britain that I find very painful. I refer specifically to the low regard for preaching in British churches.

You may ask how I know there is such a low regard for preaching over here. I answer, because so little time is given to it in the worship services. And yet this fact did not hit me with force until a student from Oxford, who attended the little church of which I was pastor in Lower Heyford, said to me, 'I enjoy your long sermons.' I immediately apologized for preaching so long, but she soon made it clear that she really meant that as a compliment. She pointed out that she was used to twelve-minute sermons and that she was surprised that anybody ever preached for as long as forty minutes. I realized for the first time there was a quantitative difference between most of the clergy over here and myself.

Since then I have been more aware of the worship services over here, and have attended as many different churches as possible. I have come to see precisely what this student meant. I have heard many sermons that lasted longer than twelve minutes and some that lasted less (the record is two minutes!). But in nearly every case the preaching has come through to me as but a PS at the end of the service.

My purpose here is not to be critical of any minister, neither would I want to be understood as saying that the long sermon per se is a good thing. Some ministers can say more in twelve minutes than many can in forty, and some twelve-minute sermons are far too long.

I want to make the case that preaching must be central in worship. The length of a sermon in one sense is irrelevant, but if it is carried out with dignity I should think it will likely be regarded as 'long' by contemporary standards. It will merely 'happen' to be long.

Why? Because it is more important to worship God immediately and directly than second-hand. I regard the best hymns and the best prayers as but second-hand worship. When I read a prayer or sing a hymn, God's word is mediated to me via an instrument; someone else probably wrote under an immediate awareness of God's presence. I, no doubt, can be deeply moved as I re-live what someone else undoubtedly felt. But the sense of God's presence in such a case is but mediate and indirect.

'The Testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy'
(Rev. 19: 10). Whatever else this fascinating verse means, it shows that the witness of Jesus Christ is to be fresh and alive. The time was when it was mandatory by parliamentary law that a certain Prayer Book had to be followed in Divine Worship. This ensured that conformity and uniformity would stay intact. For preaching was dangerous. Thus it was felt that men and women could get enough of God by the Prayer Book. It was but a way to quench the fires that spread over Europe as a consequence of the Great Reformation, which resurrected preaching from the dead. The time came that it was not illegal not meticulously to follow the Prayer Book, but by then nobody was worried that preaching would do any great harm. And it didn’t.

By now the church has become so lifeless and irrelevant that nobody worries if there is a fanatical preacher like John Bunyan here or there. Few today outside take notice of the church generally or preaching particularly. But this is because preaching particularly became so shallow and boring that it lulled the church to sleep. It was once feared because it was dangerous; it is now feared because it is dull.

There is a widespread notion that preaching in the traditional sense is irrelevant for today’s generation. I am sympathetic with this mood to some extent. I’d much prefer dialogue to most monologues I’ve heard. And who wouldn’t prefer guitar-strumming, or holding hands in a circle, or dancing, to what is most readily available today? The vogue approach to worship is at least an attractive alternative to the affected tone and mannerisms of so many clerics.

Preaching became irrelevant because preachers did not know what to preach. Preaching is preaching only when it is the Bible that is expounded. But as a robust conviction in the Divine inspiration of Scriptures has diminished, so has preaching. A preacher is at home in the pulpit only when he is at home in God’s Word. But when the Bible becomes but a human book to him, preaching itself becomes a threat.

Preaching should be central in worship that men may hear God speak immediately today. Men may read hymns and prayers at home. When these are used at church they should be but heart-preparation for the sermon. If the prepared preacher speaks to the prepared heart in the pew then spontaneous combustion should take place in worship every time. For that is what preaching should produce in a worship service. It is not hymns that men and women should come to church for; it is not prayers; it is not music; neither is it merely fellowship.

It should be to receive the testimony of Jesus.

I know a minister in Louisville who got on the band wagon (which was passing through Kentucky a few years ago) and started preaching that preaching is irrelevant. He actually preached against preaching. (The only thing more ridiculous than that was a minister I know who preached against watching television on television.) The Louisville preacher had a vast number of converts in his congregation; they quit coming to hear him.

The contemporary notion that traditional preaching is largely irrelevant has apparently caught on, for fewer come to church today than at any time in living memory. But what is truly at stake here is that yesterday’s clergy emptied the churches and today’s clergy are sometimes endeavouring earnestly to find some justification for their existence.

The trend toward ‘contemporary worship’ will pass as rapidly as the countless theological fads that have come and gone in this century.

Men and women today do not want preaching partly because they haven’t heard it. The reputation of preaching is at an all-time low and this reputation is by no means improving.

Is there hope for reversing the trend? YES: by taking seriously the Bible from cover to cover. You may want to reply; but that is simplistic and naive. I say, it is not. I am persuaded of the power of Scripture to re-vitalise the church. When men and women—whether students or elderly—see that the minister himself really believes that Bible he holds in his hands, they will believe it too. And when they believe it, it begins to affect their lives.

You may ask: but cannot God speak today apart from the Bible? The answer is, He could but He doesn’t. And anybody who thinks he is speaking God’s Word who isn’t preaching the Bible is a fool. Preaching and the Bible are joined together by God’s decree; most people need preaching to enable them to understand the Bible; and a man who preaches without it is a disgrace to the name of Christ.

Preaching is central to worship, then, because it is God’s instrument by which He speaks immediately to men. Preaching is not a religious experience for the preacher. If it were, then preaching would be no more powerful than a hymn or a prayer by which one may feel something second-hand. Preaching is the instrument by which nothing is lost in the transmission between the Transmitter and the receiver. One does not listen to the radio second-hand; one hears it immediately. That is like true preaching. Thus when one hears the preacher expound God’s Word with authority, one forgets the preacher (as one forgets a radio) and
hears God. This is why preaching is central to worship. And when this is recovered in the church today, we will not have to use gimmicks or anything else to draw crowds.

You will say: 'But you are presenting the ideal, and where is it to be found?' I answer, 'You are right. I am presenting the ideal. Why should I talk about anything else? The ideal is the only thing that will attract men and women to our churches. As for its unavailability, that is no excuse for us to make it less than central in worship. We have removed it from its rightful prominence in Divine Worship because we have accepted liturgy as ideal; we have imputed inspiration to yesterday’s prayers and poetry and have placed a vote of no-confidence in preaching to arrest us and change our lives today.

Have we forgotten that preaching was God’s method for saving men? ‘For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe’ (1 Cor. 1: 21). Have we outgrown God’s method? The Apostle Paul did not want Titus to outgrow this method, for, although eternal life was God’s promise from the beginning of the ages, it was to be manifested ‘through preaching’ (Titus 1: 2-3).

Why preaching? Why was this God’s method? Answer: because God wanted men to pass on what Jesus began. There is the apocryphal story that when Jesus went back from earth to heaven the angels asked him, ‘Is your work finished?’ He replied, ‘It’s finished.’ ‘How then will your work go on?’ ‘Through those the Father gave me and those that believe on me through their word.’ The angels then asked Him, ‘What if that fails?’ Jesus replied: ‘I have no other plan.’ The Apostle Paul said that God has ‘committed unto us the world of reconciliation’ (2 Cor. 5: 19). In other words, it is to us to whom the responsibility of spreading the Gospel is given.

You will say: ‘Then anybody can spread the Word by word of mouth and surely that is preaching.’ I agree. The genius of the early church was that men and women went everywhere preaching the word (Acts 8: 4), and the Apostles were left behind (Acts 8: 1). But those who were so equipped could do so because they were well taught. Take for example Philip’s adroitness in handling the Word (Acts 8: 26-40). Philip was the product of great preaching. How many Philip’s do you know?

But today’s generation of Christians are so anaemic and superficial that most conversions nowadays may be regarded (almost) as accidental. I have been stunned again and again over the shallowness of the average Christian student at college or university level. If the knowledge of their chosen field were commensurate with their knowledge of Christianity and the Bible, they wouldn’t even pass! But one cannot be too hard on them, for the depth of learning and teaching from many pulpits suggests that many ministers know their Bibles little better. If they do, their sermons often don’t show it. And if their sermons did show it, they would surely want to give much, much more time to preaching than they generally do.

If preaching were made central in worship throughout Britain, there would be time allowed for the people in the pew to learn. Learn ‘Take my yoke upon you and learn of me,’ said Jesus, ‘and ye shall find rest unto your souls’ (Matt. 11: 29). There would also be time to think. Think. ‘If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things’ (Phil. 4: 8). Christianity ought to teach a person how to think. But when liturgy makes the sermon the PS, then men are encouraged to remain as ignorant and stupid as men were generally during the Middle Ages.

You may say: ‘If preaching were made central in the way herein suggested, people would quit coming to church.’ I answer: ‘They have already quit coming.’ You may say: ‘People don’t want long sermons.’ Answer: ‘The church exists, not to give people what they want but what they need.’ You may ask: ‘What if people sleep through the sermon?’ Answer: ‘They probably sleep through short ones anyway. Long ones would force the minister to be sharp and interesting enough to hold their attention.’

I am certain that the appalling ignorance of today’s Christian student is traceable to the (lack of) preaching in the typical Divine Worship service.

You may now say: ‘Suppose I did agree with you. What can I do about it?’ I answer: ‘Take one other person with you to your minister and tell him tactfully and kindly you would like preaching to have a more prominent place in the worship service.’ He may well be very pleased that you feel this way. He may be the first to agree with you and will be encouraged to do what he secretly wished to do anyway, namely, preach better and longer sermons. Any minister worth his salt will be delighted to know there are those in his congregation that desire to know the Bible better. You may also discover there are not a few others in your congregation that feel precisely as you do. (After all, most people who go to the trouble to make their way to church these days probably have some rather strong convictions.) God may indeed use you to turn things right around. Who knows? You may be an instrument of the Holy Spirit to make your
congregation a place to which non-Christians may come and be converted!

What about fellowship? Is not Christian fellowship more important than anything else in the church? I answer that Christian fellowship is a subsidiary effect of true worship. Christian fellowship is centred on Jesus Christ. The more we know of Christ—who He is and what He did—the more we will love one another and the richer fellowship in the church will be. There is no greater folly than building a church around fellowship when that church does not make the Gospel central. For a church is nothing but a religious club (without much religion) when the Gospel is not central. And I do not see how the Gospel can be said to be central when the preaching of that Gospel is not central; for that Gospel is to be known by preaching. Fellowship, then, is that which follows sound preaching. 'And they (three thousand souls that had been converted) continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship' (Acts 2: 42). Note the order: first, doctrine; secondly, fellowship.

I should like now to put down what I believe true worship is: the response of the mind, heart and will to the preached Word and the Holy Spirit. But this raises a question. If the preaching of the Word does not begin the service, how can one worship before the sermon comes along? I answer that (1) one may not be worshipping indeed until the sermon comes but merely seeking to worship; or (2) that one's worship in the first part of the service is carried along by the momentum of a previous message from God; and (3) that worship is something that should be the warp and woof of one's being twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and not merely in a church building.

Preaching, therefore, is to be central in the worship service because it is central to worship. The worship of God in the sanctuary must be centred on preaching because it is preaching that produces the kind of response in us that may be truly called worship. Worship is a way of life. If we hear God speak second-hand in church, our lives outside church will be sub-standard. If we hear God speak immediately, we are thus not dependent upon another's experience but only the pure word of God. It is the sharp, two-edged sword (Heb. 4: 12) that must operate upon our hearts. It begins in the mind, that we may apprehend; it continues in the heart, that we may be persuaded; it then affects the will, that we may live obediently in the real world. That is true worship but worship which can be precipitated only by the immediate and direct Word from heaven.

It should be noted that I added above 'and the Holy Spirit' in my definition. If the Spirit does not accompany the preached Word, preaching will indeed be boring, irrelevant and ineffective. And I add that it is (alas) possible for the preacher to spend thirty or forty or fifty minutes giving an exposition of the Word and be deadly dull. I suspect that yesterday's clergy emptied the churches for this reason, namely, that they assumed that sheer exposition of the Scriptures was sufficient. That the people yawned during their arid performances did not bother them. We pay for their folly today.

What is needed, then, is preaching that is expository but also on fire. If it is on fire without being expository, it is likely that the net result will be the same as being expository without the fire, namely, an emptied church. There must therefore be both. As Jesus put it, 'Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God' (Matt. 22: 29). It is not one or the other; it is both.

Paul said to Timothy, 'Thou hast fully known my doctrine' (2 Tim. 3: 10). The question is, do we? Do we know Paul's doctrine? It was Paul's doctrine that gave St Augustine his greatest impetus; it was Paul's doctrine that helped St Anselm shape his doctrine of the atonement; it was Paul's doctrine that turned the world upside down in Luther's day; it was Luther's exposition of Paul's epistle to the Romans that made John Wesley say, 'I felt my heart strangely warmed' and he subsequently became a mighty instrument of God in both England and America. We today need to be immersed in Paul's doctrine. For it is the understanding of justification by faith that opens up the whole of Jesus' teachings.

Preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit will do this. It will give us an understanding of the whole of the Bible. When this happens, our lives will be transformed from week to week. Those outside the church will take notice of us and enquire of us, 'What makes the difference?' We may then take them to church to hear the life-changing word that still heals the hearts of men and women.

Back in the 1930s the Marxists were scoffed at minority. They were to be found in isolated pockets here and there in this country. When accosted they would simply reply, 'But time is on our side.' Would to God they had been wrong. But as I write these lines, England is torn apart with brutal strikes in every direction. The soul of Britain is filled with fear. The church is powerless to do anything about it.

My convictions to be found above I believe point to the only solution. We need to hear a word from
beyond, an undoubted Word from God. But we have forgotten God; indeed, Britain has rejected God and God's way. God speaks through preaching, but we have so lost faith in His method that we have relegated it to nearly nothing in our worship. We cannot worship God if we play oneupmanship with Him by bypassing the way He has ordained. If indeed the churches of Great Britain would come before God with weeping; if indeed the services of Divine Worship in this country would make preaching central; if indeed the ministers of the Gospel would preach the Word under the anointing of the Spirit, this nation would be healed. In the meantime, when men laugh and scoff at our antiquated method, we can confidently reply, 'But time is on our side.'