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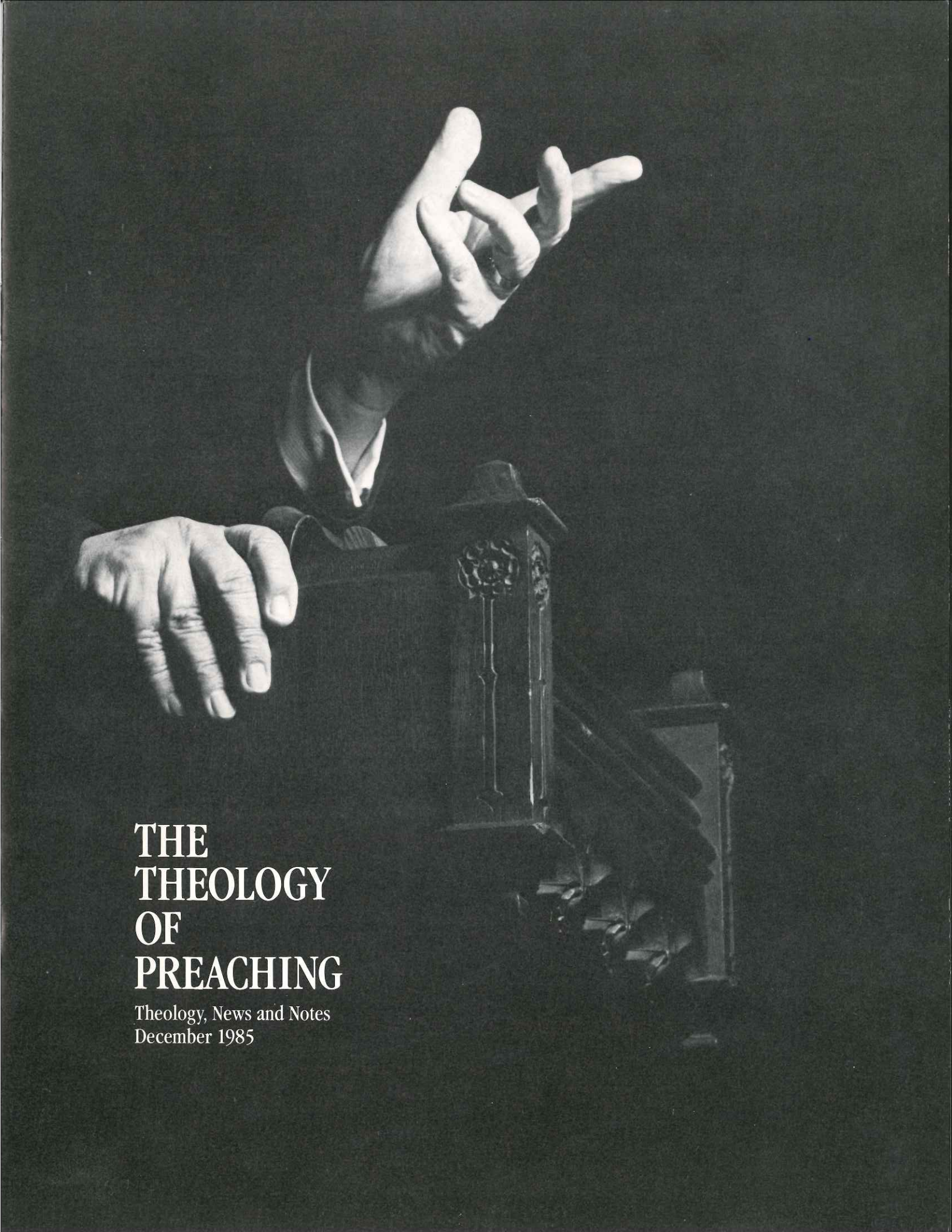


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**THE
THEOLOGY
OF
PREACHING**

Theology, News and Notes
December 1985

Introduction

by Robert N. Schaper

This issue of *Theology, News and Notes* will allow the reader to participate in the conference sponsored by Fuller Theological Seminary and the Committee on Biblical Exposition (COBE) held at the Seminary in April, 1985. The theme "Preaching in Today's World" dominated an impressive array of workshops, seminars, study groups and plenary sessions. Leaders included Fuller's David Allan Hubbard, Ian Pitt-Watson, Roberta Hestenes, Mitties McDonald DeChamplain, Walter C. Wright, Jr., John Holland and Hugh James. Al Jepson, director of the Lowell W. Berry Institute of Continuing Education at Fuller, organized the conference along with Michael Regele, the executive secretary of COBE; Michael is also an M.Div. student at Fuller. Fuller alums and adjunct faculty were also part of the conference, including Dan Baumann from College Avenue Baptist Church in San Diego and Paul Cedar from Lake Avenue Congregational Church in Pasadena. Numbers of alumni/ae and former students attended the conference, which drew over 300 pastors and church leaders to Pasadena.

Our issue includes the addresses of the three plenary session speakers, Ian Pitt-Watson, Ray Stedman and Earl Palmer. Given in the evenings in the sanctuary of the Pasadena Presbyterian Church, they in essence describe the basic approach of each one to the task of biblical preaching. The following mornings at Fuller worship services these men preached sermons that in a very real way exemplified what they had presented.

We decided to share with you what they had to say at the plenary sessions. We were tempted to print the sermons, but we had to make a choice, and for this journal these discussions of the theology of preaching seemed to us more appropriate.

This is a welcome opportunity to reaffirm the commitment of our Seminary to the task of biblical preaching. Without getting into a semantic discussion, we can affirm that the "expository" preaching which COBE sponsors is precisely the commitment to "biblical" preaching which has characterized Fuller since its founding. It is a commitment to the full authority of the biblical text and the grand quest to bring that text authentically to the present moment and allow it to speak with power and meaning. That task sounds simple enough, but it is an adventure and a challenge, as all who preach know full well. We are confident that the words of our authors will renew and enhance that challenge for us all, and we are grateful for the privilege of presenting them to you. ■

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Menu or Meal

by Robert N. Schaper

"**T**hy words were found and I did eat them, and they became for me the joy and rejoicing of my heart" (Jeremiah 15:16). If we tell someone they will have to eat their words, it is hardly welcome news. Yet the prophet finds the words of the Lord to be succulent indeed, and I find myself eager to discover the same delight in God's word today. "Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb; more to be desired than gold, yea, than much fine gold" (Psalm 19:10). Here is another metaphor to challenge our concept of the value of the word of God.

I have observed in preaching, both my own and others', a tendency to make the sermon a guide to action or response that is projected beyond the worship event. This is not automatically bad, especially if the text is leading us on to conduct or obedience that is of necessity impossible to carry out fully in the context of the church service. I will have to admit that this is true of a great deal of biblical material, given that there is a volume of ethical exhortations that apply to every arena of life. My concern is that this kind of preaching will produce a congregation that is struggling and generally discouraged rather than advancing and genuinely delighted.

This is related to but not identical with the distinction between the indicative and the imperative, or the theological and the ethical, or the emotional and the volitional. These distinctions are important, indeed they are indispensable, to a full understanding of the nature of effective biblical preaching. This was the model for the epistles and, above

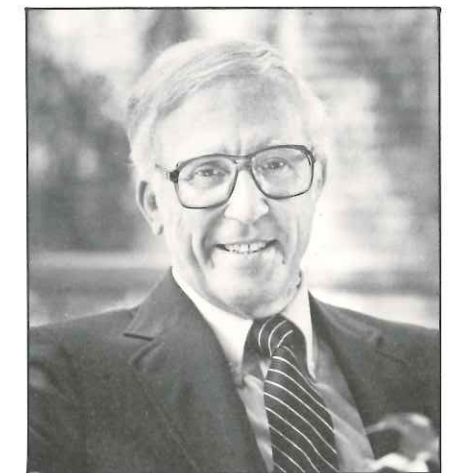
all, it is the form of the gospel. Grace must come first, for God's love precedes our response in faith and obedience.

Yet I see something more than a call to provide motivation for our action. I am talking about the sermon as the word of God; I daresay that most of our readers accept this as a biblical principle. If this is true, then the preaching of the word is a divinely provided means for the nurture of the people of God. Barth spoke of such preaching as an "acoustical sacrament." I have titled this brief article "Menu or Meal," and I am advocating a self-conscious understanding that a sermon can be, indeed should be, a means of grace.

There is more to this than meets the eye. I know it is a subtle difference, but I am not referring to the divine authority of the preacher by which she commissions the hearer to obey the word that has been proclaimed. Nor is it even the fact that the preacher provides motivation through the presentation of truth that, properly understood, can inspire the hearer to proper obedience. I am trying to explore the mysterious and divine resource of the word preached that is powerful in and of itself to bring about a response. When the preacher calls on the congregation to take the high ground of Christian commitment in virtually any area, the power to respond to that call is in that word itself, as well as in the Holy Spirit resident in the believer who answers. It is an unacceptable works-righteousness if we assume that the power to respond is in our human ability. The preacher has a magnificent resource of power and grace that only needs liberating. There is the emotional and volitional impact of the gospel, being what it is, the good news of God in Christ. But I am

urging not to forget the form in which this good news comes, the proclamation by stumbling human beings of a word empowered by the Spirit. I risk oversimplification, but if the preacher announces that there is hope for the most despondent and strength for the weak, then part of the ability to have hope and to be strong is precisely in the hearer's receiving that word. The hearer is strengthened, not just can be strengthened, when God's liberating word is faithfully proclaimed. It is quite different to go from worship having been challenged to find nutrition in a careful observance of the directions given than to go from worship having received the nutrition that one needs to gain strength. The first is to be handed a menu; the second, to receive a meal. ■

DR. ROBERT N. SCHAPER is dean of the chapel and professor of practical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. He received his Th.M. from Fuller and his Th.D. from the School of Theology at Claremont, California. An ordained minister, he has wide experience as a pastor and teacher, and is the author of *Why Me, God?*



Why I Am an Expositor

by Ray C. Stedman

What a joy it is to see how many men and women are interested in sharpening their skills in exposition. We are brothers and sisters who share together a deep concern for the expounding and opening up of the word of God. Gordon McDonald tells a story about a student in one of New England's private schools who was expelled by the headmaster. When the alumnus father of the boy heard what had happened, he took a plane to Boston, walked unceremoniously into the headmaster's office and said these exact words: "You must damn well think you're the one who runs this place." The headmaster looked at him and replied, "Sir, your language is crass and your grammar is atrocious, but you have definitely grasped the idea."

I think this conference seeks to grasp a single point of a pastor's many-faceted work and labors in the ministry. It seems to me that everything centers on the exposition of the word of God. I am not going to attempt an exposition myself, but I would like to share with you a bit of my own personal journey in this matter of expounding Scripture, and speak to you on the subject "Why I Am an Expositor."

I have dredged up from my 35 years of pastoral experience in Palo Alto the compelling reasons why I have felt exposition was important. Without much difficulty I jotted down 14 reasons for biblical exposition and for making it central in one's ministry.

I cut my eyeteeth on exposition, back in the days of World War II when I was in the Navy and stationed at Pearl Harbor. I had been teaching a

Bible class in a church for some time before that and had become interested in and fascinated by the Scriptures. Many sailors of the U.S. fleet came through Pearl Harbor, so I had a Bible class on Tuesday nights for the servicemen and was attempting to teach the book of Romans. Because I wasn't yet very skilled, I looked around for helps. I began to run into books by an expositor who soon became my model and whose name is familiar to all of you—Dr. G. Campbell Morgan. Shortly after I finished Romans, I started in on Matthew; I would lie on my bunk and read G. Campbell Morgan and then that evening teach what I had read, not trying to steal Morgan's outline or his approach, but to gather the truth that he had so diligently put together. In his day Morgan was known as "the Prince of Preachers," and he was a wonderful expositor. You would find *The Westminster Pulpit*, a collection of his messages, very profitable in your ministry. I learned from Morgan something of the beauty of language, but I learned more than that. I learned that it is not oratory or rhetoric that carries the point, but that it is necessary to work first at understanding the text. I was startled to read that Morgan never began to expound a book of the Bible until he had read it 50 times! After 50 readings of a book, you begin to catch on to something of its message. It seeps down and permeates you, and, to use Spurgeon's term, "your very blood becomes Bible."

After the war I enrolled at Dallas Theological Seminary. The highlights of my years there were the visits of special expositors who came for two weeks at a time and lectured to the students. One of them was Dr. Jack Mitchell from Portland, Oregon, who is now in his ninety-second year and still expounding the word of God. Another was Dr. H. A. Ironside, the

long-term pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, a member of the Plymouth Brethren and a great Bible teacher. I had some secretarial skills which I had used in the Navy as a court reporter, so I offered to help these men with their correspondence. Dr. Ironside and I often worked together, and when I graduated from Seminary he invited me to travel with him for an entire summer and to be his companion, chauffeur and secretary. By that time he was suffering severely from cataracts and was almost totally blind. I worked with him in his book-writing, served as his secretary and listened to him at various conferences.

While I was a student at Dallas, I came to Pasadena to be the summer youth worker for J. Vernon McGee at the Lincoln Avenue Presbyterian Church. Dr. McGee made a contribution to my understanding of exposition, and I learned from him something about the use of colorful illustrations.

By the time I graduated from Seminary, I was already deeply immersed in the world of biblical exposition. I believed in it and I was anxious to get my teeth into it.

Then I came to Palo Alto to a church that had just begun. In fact, it was not even a church when I arrived; I didn't actually come as a pastor but as a kind of director of activities. During this time I eagerly began to go through books of the Bible and preach from them, using much material from others, but about four months after I had arrived I found my barrel was totally dry. I had to dig in and begin to

"I began to see the powerful attractiveness of Scripture to the non-Christian."

learn for myself what the text of Scripture actually said and how it related to contemporary life.

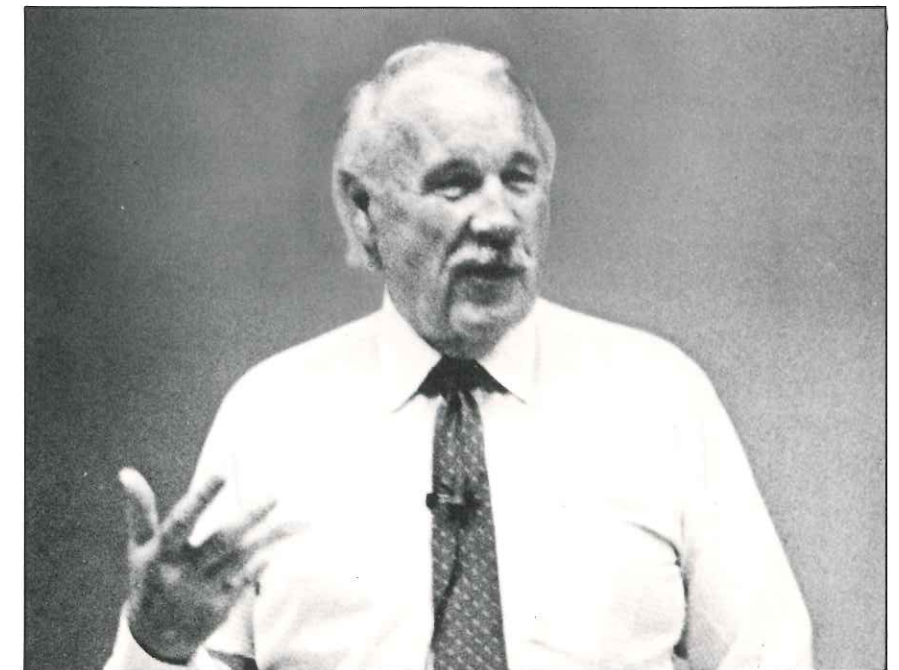
We began a series of outreach Bible classes distinctly aimed at non-Christians, held in the homes of brand-new believers who were all excited about their Christian life and who had a whole host of friends who knew nothing about the Lord. We all sat down in an informal way and I began to open up the Scriptures, usually beginning with the book of Romans. I began to see the powerful attractiveness of Scripture to the non-Christian, which surprised me. I had thought that Christianity was something which would only interest religious people and that you could only teach the Bible to Christians. But I discovered that these people were fascinated by the word of God. Many of them, of course, were typical men and women of the world. The air was often blue with smoke and we sometimes had to deal with someone who had drunk a little too much. When I would announce a Bible book such as Romans, I would often hear someone whisper, "Where in hell is Romans?" Many of them became Christians, and out of that I began to see that the word of God is an intensely practical thing, and very attractive to the non-Christian world.

I began to preach from the Scriptures myself, taking whole books of the Bible and going through them in sequence from beginning to end, preaching a message on a certain section one week and the next Sunday picking up right where I had left off. I was fascinated by the radical character

of the word of God as it directly challenged widely accepted concepts of the world around me. I was located near Stanford University and I discovered that university life as well as the world of business in which many of our people were involved, the world of politics, the world of arts and so on, intensely emphasized success, ability, personal confidence and high achievement. But when I turned to the Scriptures I found something entirely different.

I found that God sought out the weak, the lowly, the hurting and helpless, the crushed and broken. The problem with much of the church today is that it adopts the philosophy of the world and does not challenge it at all. I still remember how shaken I was one day to come across the verse in Luke 16 where Jesus said, "That which is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God!"

What is it that men highly esteem? The world esteems success, power and the perquisites of money and pride. I remember reading the text where Jesus said, "I thank thee, Father, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them unto babes." That's a difficult text to preach from when you live in the shadow of a great university. I learned very quickly that the way you say it is important, that you don't come on heavy-handed and beat people over the head and try to make them feel small and inferior. That is absolutely the wrong way. But you still must be faithful to the message, because this book is no low-keyed accompaniment to the song of the world. It is the voice of truth in the midst of a confused and fantasy-ridden society. It is the business of preaching to help people to understand that and to recognize the



“It is the business of preaching to help people understand...”

confusion that abounds in the secular world.

There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. I saw that the Scriptures never put down human knowledge. Everywhere in the Bible we are encouraged to seek out the mysteries that God has hidden in the universe around us, and there is nothing wrong with the search for knowledge. But the apostle Paul throws down the gauntlet where the wisdom of the world is concerned. Wisdom is the use of knowledge—that which guides the knowledge which has been discovered, and teaches how to use it. It is the business of preaching to help people understand that difference, because that is where the world is wrong.

What a challenge it was for me to see myself as one chosen of the Lord. I could never get over that: chosen of the Lord to declare a unique revelation which one could never find in any great university in the country. That revelation contains truth which is desperately needed by the very people who are involved in these high-pressured business enterprises and far-flung scientific endeavors around us. Life is like a great jigsaw puzzle, and the philosopher comes and puts in his piece, and the scientist comes and puts in his piece, and the teacher and businessman and others come and add their pieces to the understanding of the jigsaw puzzle of life. But when they have all finished, there are still a great many missing pieces. And, according to the word of God, it is given to the church to supply those missing pieces so essential to the understanding of the proper functioning of human life, and even to correct some of the pieces that are already there.

A passage which meant a great deal to me is the fourth chapter of II Corinthians. It seemed to apply to me as a preacher. “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we

do not lose heart.” Did you ever feel like quitting as a pastor? I have felt that way many times, and yet this verse reminds me that the character of our ministry is such that if we understand what it is, we will not lose heart. Paul goes on to say, “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth, we would commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” That’s been a great guideline to me in my preaching. It says you don’t need gimmicks to get people motivated and involved in a ministry. Nothing has ever commended itself more powerfully to me than to remind myself that when I step into the pulpit to open the word of God, what I’m giving people is basic, utter, fundamental reality. When they begin to think like the Bible, they are thinking realistically. When they depart from it, they wander off into fantasies. And when you get a congregation understanding that fact, you will have some tremendous changes in congregational behavior.

I have found the Old Testament to be a marvelous source for preaching. I preached 14 messages in a series once on the entire book of Leviticus. Leviticus, of course, is the book where most people grind to a halt in their reading through the Bible in one year. It’s where the “clean” pages are found in the Old Testament! The opening chapters are devoted to the five offerings of Israel—the peace offering, the burnt offering, the meal offering, the sin offering and the trespass offering. Such offerings are a kind of visual aid that God employed to teach people the important truth he wanted them to know. One level of approach

to that kind of a passage is to teach simply, methodically and systematically what the offerings were, how they were conducted and what animals were involved. But what does that mean to a modern congregation? We must understand that each one of the sacrifices is representative of a deep, psychological need in humanity; each is dealing with a basic problem that human beings wrestle with all the time. And each supplies the answer of God to that need.

I remember a series that I did on the predictive passages of Daniel and how stirred we were, not merely to try to find out who the anti-Christ is, but to see what Daniel reveals about the unfolding of the divine plan by which God moves through history to accomplish his purposes.

Once I dealt with a series based on the exalted language of Job as he wrestled in angry resentment with the apparent unfairness of God. Do you know that perhaps half of my congregation is wrestling with that problem? They really don’t think God is fair with them. They feel they have been mistreated, that any time he sends difficulty upon them they have been put upon, and all of them are feeling very much like Job. There’s no book in the Bible that captures in such vivid and vibrant language the deep-seated resentments of the human heart against what looks like injustice.

I found that I was personally reproved and corrected by the Scriptures. I have never dealt with a book of the Bible without having to stop in the preparation of a message to kneel in prayer and confess to God and deal with something in my own heart. I remember one occasion when, as a young preacher, I was invited to my first Bible conference. You know what that does to a preacher? He wants so much to succeed, to do a great and wonderful thing, to preach a great and powerful message that will

“I don’t want you ever to be concerned with how many people you’re preaching to.”

never be forgotten. I had prepared and worked very hard on a message about the revelation of God in the world of nature. I thought I could preach a powerful message that would sway the people, but everything came apart. I could not say anything right, the message ground on and on, and when I finally finished, I stumbled out of that place into the dark. I walked around the corner of the lake, dejected, feeling lower than the proverbial snake’s belly.

Standing on the other side of the lake in a swampy kind of place, with croaking frogs all around me, I heard the voice of God—a still small voice that said to me, in the words of Scripture, “He that thinks he knows something, knows nothing yet as he ought to know it.” And then the Lord gave me three things that have guided my ministry ever since. “There are three things I want you never to be concerned with,” the voice intoned within; “I don’t want you ever to be concerned with how many people you’re preaching to. I don’t care if it’s two or three, you preach the message I give you.” And second, God said, “I don’t want you ever to be concerned about how much they’re going to give you when you get through. Never worry about that.” And third, he said, “I don’t want you ever to be concerned with how well you think you’ve done.” I can’t say that I’ve always followed those, but when I’ve departed from them I’ve felt the Spirit of God depart from me as well. When I’ve been faithful to them, I’ve left it up to God and he’s done his usual wonders with some very feeble work on my part. But that’s the Lord, isn’t it? That’s the way he works. It’s both

the mystery and majesty of ministry that God picks up our human efforts and uses them.

I soon began to see some marvelous changes in people’s lives. I saw many homes reconstructed, a lot of marriages put back together. I discovered that when you preach the truth like that to the entire congregation, you’re saving yourself enormous personal counseling time because you’re counseling the whole congregation at once.

Finally, I became aware of a growing sense in my own life of the grandeur of preaching, of what I have called the majesty of ministry. I have always been conscious, I think, of a divine compulsion to preach. I understand Jeremiah’s words, that when he kept silent there was a burning in his bones and he felt he had to speak, or the apostle Paul’s when he said, “Woe to me if I preach not the Gospel.” This truth is so fantastic, so marvelous in its content, so challenging in its power, that anybody who understands it to any degree must feel that compulsion to say something, to deliver this message, to preach to the people of our day. But more than that, I have felt a deeply humbling conviction that I will never be given a greater honor than what has already been given to me, that I should preach “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Do you hear that phrase? The unsearchable riches of Christ. The truth of this word is so enriching in people’s lives that to withhold it from them is to do a dastardly deed, to deprive them of that which can render their lives marvelously rich and exciting and fulfilled. I feel the greatest honor that I could ever have is to be given this assignment: preaching the word of truth. There is a phrase in I Corinthians 4 that greatly moves me: “This is how one should

regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” That captivates me: “stewards of the mysteries of God.” A steward is someone who has been entrusted with a great responsibility. And God has entrusted us with this tremendous content of truth, the mysteries of God, the deep things of God, the secret and hidden wisdom of God, ordained before the foundation of the world.

I believe that the church of Jesus Christ holds in its hand all that is needed to correct much of the hurt and the agony of society around us, but we are withholding it from people because we are often too lazy or too ignorant or too uncaring to take the time to expound properly this fantastic word of God. I hope we can give ourselves fully to that task and go back to our ministries, determined that every message we preach, when we meet it again at the judgment seat of Christ, will bring forth a word of praise from him. ■

THE REVEREND RAY C. STEDMAN has been the pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, since 1950. After attending Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, he graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary. Mr. Stedman has authored many books and traveled extensively, speaking at conferences and ministering to community leaders and students.

The Case for Expository Preaching

by Earl Palmer

It is a great privilege to be at this conference. I want to share with you, from my own experience as a pastor, what I believe to be the importance of Bible study and expository preaching in the church. This isn't really a sermon, though I do have a text. It's a wonderful text and I am going to save it until the end. What I would like to do is make the case for expository preaching.

I want to begin by being autobiographical, to tell you something about my own personal journey. I think it is important for you to understand how my own sense of priorities was set in the ministry that I now have at the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, and the ministries that I had at Union Church in Manila and the University Presbyterian Church in Seattle prior to that. Then you can understand not only the theological perspectives, but also my own theological formation, which is so fundamental to a person's ministry.

I am a third-generation Californian and I was brought up near Mount Shasta. My family was wonderful, free-wheeling, enthusiastic, encouraging, but not particularly religious. I stopped attending church toward the end of my high school years, and continued to refrain from attending during my first two years at the University of California at Berkeley. It just was not part of my life.

During my sophomore year at Cal, I lived in Barrington Hall, which was then and still is an outlandish place. We had the reputation of being the only dormitory in America that was on the House Un-American Activities Committee list as an un-American

activity. About 250 men lived in Barrington Hall at that time, and I eventually became president of the hall. I drove by Barrington the other day; it's still there. To give you a little of the present flavor, there is graffiti all over it right now because there is a lot of protesting going on in Berkeley. One piece of graffiti that I thought was symbolic of Barrington Hall was right over the front door, written in big, black, spray-painted letters: "Go Away!"

In the middle of my sophomore year I was invited by a friend to go to a Bible study group. This little group was meeting once a week in a student's room and they were studying a book from the New Testament; it was that simple. They met for about an hour to have a quasi-inductive time of shared discussion on a New Testament book. I can still remember my first impression when I attended that Bible study group. I was shocked to see young men my own age, young adults, reading the New Testament through adult eyes and talking about it seriously. It was a stunning experience.

I did not have a Bible at that time, so I had to look on with somebody else. I was so impressed that I said, "I want to keep coming to this Bible study group." So I went out that week and bought a Bible. We had Bibles at home, of course, but I did not have one at Berkeley with me. Not knowing the different translations, I ended up buying the wrong one, a King James. The following week when I went back to the study group, they said, "We're not using that Bible; we're using the RSV." I had to go back out and buy another Bible. There I was, not even a Christian yet, and I had already bought two Bibles in one week. I got an RSV

and began to regularly attend that little group.

I started to attend the college group at the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley that spring, and that summer I went to a conference at Lake Tahoe where the two speakers were Edward John Carnell, from this Seminary, and Robert Boyd Munger. I will always remember the turning point in my life when, at that conference, Bob Munger posed the issue. He said, "When you are convinced of the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ so that you are willing to trust in his trustworthiness, then you are ready to become a Christian." He said it to the group as a whole, not me in particular, yet in a way he did say those words to me. I can remember going down to the lake and deciding that I wanted to trust in the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ.

This took place at the beginning of my junior year. When I returned to Berkeley, I rose fast. I had become more involved in the Barrington Bible study group and, as already mentioned, finally became president of Barrington Hall, as well as president of the college group at First Presbyterian. During this same time I was also becoming more active in that small Bible study group.

We saw amazing things happen toward the end of my senior year at Cal. We saw men in that hall, almost

"If I can get people to consider the text seriously, it will do its own convincing."

one a week toward the end, becoming Christians. It just happened, one way or another. They were simply coming out of the woodwork, and the Lord honored that ministry.

In the middle of my senior year, although I was a pre-law/political science major, I was so turned on by what was happening in that Bible study group and by having chances to witness as a Christian that I said to my pastor, Bob Munger, "You know, this is what really turns me on. I wonder if I should be a minister." He replied, "Why don't you apply at Princeton and see?" So I applied to Princeton Seminary. I am sure that I was the rawest, greenest recruit they ever had.

First Church-Berkeley arranged for me to have Lynn Bolick, a staunch Calvinist, as my roommate. He helped me a great deal in my first year at Princeton. Others who were worried sick that I would be lost to liberalism made sure that I went to a Navigator conference that fall at Star Ranch, before I went to Princeton. Then, when I went to Princeton, I had what was for me a renaissance experience. I made all kinds of discoveries that were theologically important to me; I also discovered John A. MacKay, the greatest preacher that I had ever heard. I had three great years at Princeton and then went into my ministry. But what had first happened to me at Barrington Hall in Berkeley left an indelible mark.

At Princeton in those days we were all supposed to go out in gospel teams,

which I despised. It wasn't my thing to go out to churches and read the scriptures in worship services, and then talk to the youth and be farmed out to families for lunch. We were representing the Seminary and we were doing good, of course, more or less. I did that about four times before I sort of dropped out of the program; but the next-to-last time I went out, it was to Jenkintown outside of Philadelphia, and I had lunch with the Kelly family. There was a young son in that family named Glen, a freshman at Princeton University, who happened to be home at the time. Talk about divine appointments—I really believe in them. I said, "Oh, you're from Princeton University. I'm from Princeton Seminary. How interesting. We ought to get together up there." He said, "Great." So the next week we got together and I told him, "You know, Glen, when I was at Berkeley I got

involved with a small Bible study group and it really meant a lot to me. I don't have one of those here at Princeton. Do you think you guys might be interested in one?" He said, "I'll ask my roommate." So that began a little Bible study group at Princeton.

I ended up involved with about seven of those groups at one time, because different groups began to ask me to help them out. That was my ministry all through my three years at Princeton. The groups met at either 10 p.m., 6 a.m. or 4:30 p.m. They were always about one hour long, and I used exactly the same format that we used at Berkeley, a simple quasi-inductive Bible study looking at different books in the New Testament. Some weeks the apostle Paul won and some weeks he lost. But I didn't worry about that. I simply tried to look at the text with the other students and to understand what



"I became convinced that the most meaningful preaching would, over the long haul, be biblical exposition."

was in the text. What I discovered here was the same thing that I had discovered at Barrington. Given time, if I could get somebody to look at the text, it would sooner or later win their respect. Investigative Bible study groups is what I called them. I don't like the term "Evangelistic study groups." Once, when I was talking to some InterVarsity student leaders, I said, "Don't call your Bible study groups 'Evangelistic Bible study groups.' Let's call them 'Investigative Bible study groups.'" Why carry special baggage to the Bible study group? Let's study the text because it deserves to be studied and let God do the evangelizing if He chooses. Today in northern California, InterVarsity calls those Bible study groups Investigative Bible study groups.

I saw several young men at Princeton become Christians in those Bible study groups. I never put any pressure on them or made any great move to try to get them to become Christians; it just happened. This discovery shaped my whole style of ministry in a very basic way, as well as my theological method. I can honestly tell you that my ministry in Seattle, in Manila and in Berkeley has really been founded upon this basic premise: if I can get people to consider the text seriously, it will do its own convincing. That principle took much pressure off me, and I did not have to try to be clever or have elaborate programs. All I needed to do was to get people to consider the text, although it sometimes takes a little skill to get people to do that. I became convinced that the best theology is always a theology that begins with the text. It is not taking the world-questions and then trying to see if you can find something in the Bible to speak to the

world, but rather drawing your ethics from the text and then confronting the world with them.

In Helmut Thielecke's remarkable two-volume work, *Theological Ethics*, he draws the distinction between the theologies of Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, and he uses this very basic approach to contrasting the two theological methods. He points out that Paul Tillich, whose main concern was correlation, begins with the categories of the world. That is why his theology is basically existential and speculative. He begins with the categories of the world, and then asks questions of existence and moves toward their theological implications. Thielecke points out that, in contrast, Karl Barth begins with the text and moves toward the world to see where the collision occurs. He uses as an example of this theological modeling the Barmen Declaration of 1934 written by Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller and Wilhelm Niemöller. It is interesting to note that each of the seven articles of the Barmen Declaration begins with a text and moves from the text toward the world. For example, Article I begins with John 14: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by me." Then comes the Article: Jesus Christ is the one word we have to obey, both in life and death. And then the negation: "We reject the false doctrine that there are other words with equal authority we have to hear and obey apart from this one word, Jesus Christ." Notice that Barth started with the text, moved toward the Nazi Germany of 1934, and then saw the collision. He did not

start with the existential setting and then try to speculate possible correlations. In other words, he began as a biblical theologian. Barth as the theologian took the same journey: he began with his *Romanbrief*, his commentary on Romans, then went on to systematic theology.

Theologically and ethically I became convinced from my own experience with these Bible study groups, and then my own theological formation took that biblical/theological direction. I think that is why I would rather be an angular biblical theologian than a smoothly synchronized systematic theologian.

I became convinced that the best evangelism would grow out of the uncomplicated low-agenda setting found in investigative Bible study, where you are almost unconscious of the fact that you are evangelizing. My whole philosophy of evangelism is a thousand single steps which happen in friendship, in natural settings. Most of the people in Berkeley who are won to Christ are from small study groups, investigative Bible study groups, prayer groups, relationships in which people get a chance to observe Christians thinking and loving, to observe Christians in their day-to-day lives. Then their curiosity is piqued, they inquire and they become Christians.

Finally, I became convinced that the most meaningful preaching and teaching over the long haul would be biblical exposition. I guess I owe you a definition of biblical exposition. I have slightly refined my definition from the first time I wrote it down, which was in an article for Fuller's *Theology, News and Notes*. That was my first printed article concerning my feelings on that subject. In that article I offered a definition of biblical preaching, which is essentially this: biblical preaching, as I see it, is the

"Preaching is not simply saying what the text says: you also have to say what the text means."

task of enabling a text in the Old or New Testament to make its own point within the whole witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to affirm that message with persuasiveness and urgency to people in the language of today. There is a theological side to preaching, of course. Preaching is not simply saying what the text says; you also have to say what the text means.

As I see it, this involves for the pastor or teacher a journey from the text understood to the discipleship implications affirmed. That is biblical preaching, and I am convinced that it is what the church needs. I am convinced that it is the most persuasive, evangelistically and ethically. I am very concerned about relevant ethical preaching, but I really believe that the best ethical preaching is that which comes out of the text.

I am going to end on a positive note, but let me be negative for a moment. Let me reflect on what I will call the crisis in contemporary preaching. It seems to me that there is a crisis in preaching and teaching in the church today. I am not just talking here about the crisis of theological liberalism or fundamentalism. It is a crisis through the whole of the church. It is a crisis in preaching. I think that is one of the reasons why the Committee on Biblical Exposition has been formed.

I think there are two main forms of this crisis. The first form is the crisis of what I am going to describe as the thematic domination of preaching. I think that most preaching in the church today is thematic. What I mean is that the source of the proclamation comes from the great themes of our faith that are explained and illustrated by the teacher for the listeners, but the listeners do not watch and discover these themes as they come to

the surface of a text that is uncovered. They just hear it told by an authority figure, by the preacher or teacher who says, "This is what we believe." They do not see where it comes from, nor do they discover it for themselves. They are simply told, and that is the thematic domination of preaching. The pastor says, "God loves you." They do not find it in the text. They do not get to see it come out of the text; they are simply told it.

I am trying to be as charitable as I can with the modern preaching dilemma as I see it, but the gospel message that is being preached by far too many preachers comes from three main sources.

(1) First is the concern of the pastor and teacher. In other words, the burden of the Lord that the pastor feels is the source of the message: it is what I feel based on my own walk with the Lord.

(2) The second source for the preaching message is based on the experience of the pastor. I am a little worried about this new fascination in the seminaries of America about story/narrative preaching, where you tell your story and it is supposed to convey the gospel to somebody else. This means that the pastor's experiences, his or her walk with the Lord this week, now become the source of the message. The better the storyteller you are, the more autographs you are going to be asked for. Remember that line from the play *Mass Appeal*? It's where Father Tim says to Mark, the young seminarian, who was not too

impressed with Father Tim's sermon, "You didn't like my sermon, did you?" And Mark says, "No, I didn't." So Father Tim says, "Don't you know they ask for autographs after I preach? They ask for autographs!" Father Tim is the masterful storyteller. His message comes from his walk during the week.

(3) The third source, and this is probably the most dangerous of all, is what I call a sense of general Christian truth that everyone is supposed to know, but no one actually discovers. We all know that God loves us. We all know wonderful truths, but that is how things become blurred in civic religion: the young Christian in particular does not know where they are found.

I repeat: the source of the message is threefold in the thematic domination of preaching. First is the pastor's own burden, and I thank God for that burden. Many times the burden is from the Holy Spirit, I don't doubt that. Second is the pastor's experience, and the third is what I call a general sense of Christian truth that everyone is supposed to know.

All of this causes a subtle shift away from the gospel "extra nos" to the gospel "intra nos," and a theological disaster begins to take shape. Luther's great concern was for the gospel "extra nos"—the gospel outside of us, with its own integrity. It can be studied; it can be examined. It is an historical faith. God did speak and can be understood. But when that becomes blurred, the gospel becomes captive to my experience. Let me give you an example of this.

A couple years ago, my family and I were on a trip and unable to go to church, so we listened to a pastor

"The gospel and your experience are two different things."

preaching on the radio. He announced that he was going to preach on the theology of hope, using as his text a passage from Romans 8. That excited me because I love that book, especially the eighth chapter.

The text he read was about the whole creative order being consigned to futility. In other words, it was consigned to boundaries not by its own decision, but by the decision of God. You would expect the text to say that he consigned it to boundaries "in judgment," but Paul surprises his readers. The actual words are that he consigned it to boundaries "in hope." That is where the word "hope" appears. This pastor read that text at the beginning of his sermon and I can honestly say that it was the most moving reading of a text I have ever heard. It was magnificently read and I was glued to the radio when the sermon began.

The pastor preached his sermon on hope, but what took place was a series of very moving anecdotes from his own life. He told about various incidents in his life and things he had observed. One of them was so moving it brought me to tears; I am a very emotional person. Several other incidents were shared and then the sermon closed in prayer.

I did not want to say much, but I was terribly disappointed. Not once during the entire sermon did he make any reference to that text so magnificently read from Romans. Not once during the sermon was the text

allowed to say anything. In no way did it shed any light on the sermon. The sermon was instead a narrative of his own experiences in which he learned hope in life.

My daughter Anne asked me, "Dad, what did you think of that sermon?" I wanted to say something positive because, after all, we clergymen have got to stick together. I said, "Well, I'll tell you one thing, Anne. I was brought to tears with one of those illustrations." And that was the truth. But that did not satisfy my daughter, who said, "You know, Dad, I didn't like that sermon." Her answer when I asked why was something that I hope I never forget. "What was wrong with that sermon, it seemed to me, was that the pastor said, 'You should have hope because I have hope,' and that was his message. That's not the gospel." She has been in too many Bible study groups. She has been exposed to two years of Paul Byer's manuscript study of Mark, and also his manuscript study of Habakkuk, so Anne was simply not ready to take that, because she was used to seeing the gospel come out of the text.

She was also bothered because the text never had a chance to speak. Here is the greatest text on hope in all of Paul's writings and not once was Paul allowed to say a word. Instead, there was only a series of moving stories. Believe me, the autographs would be asked for that day. Father Tim could not do any better. That was storytelling at its best.

The tragedy of the sermon is not the tragedy of orthodoxy, because it was an orthodox sermon. There wasn't a single thing, theologically, that I would disagree with, and, after

all, isn't that the main test? The tragedy of the sermon is that the people who heard it did not get a chance to see and discover the hope rooted in the text, in the gospel. They only heard about it in the pastor's experience.

I have to ask you a huge question. If you have an experience this week, maybe an experience with the Holy Spirit, perhaps a dream or a vision, will you preach that on Sunday? Not if you are in the Reformed tradition, you won't. For your experiences you are grateful, but you preach the gospel. The gospel and your experience are two different things. Your experiences may bear witness to the gospel, and as preachers we should use such experiences as illustrations to help make connections between us and the people. That is what illustrations are for, and what the stories from your life are for. But they are not the message. If the illustration becomes the message, it is no longer a connector that binds the people to the text. As a matter of fact, it deflects the people from the text. What about the times when you don't have hope, or when you don't care? Experience, illustrations, stories from one's life—they are not enough. Thank God for Mother Teresa, but she is not the gospel. Her great love seen in Calcutta is not the good news. It is a wonderful witness to the good news, but the good news is Jesus Christ himself. The gospel is "extra nos." The gospel is in

"The task of preaching is to make the point and make it stick."

the text, and what a marvelous thing it is when a person can discover the theology of hope from the text. Then the illustrations fit in wonderfully.

Let me give another example of this problem. There are many pastors who cannot preach a sermon without, at the end, rattling off as clichés the most precious truths of the Christian faith. This seems to occur because they feel that they have to bring the people to a decision. So a pastor will give a perfectly good sermon from the text, giving the text a chance to speak. Then he or she gets to the last five minutes of the sermon and along comes a flood of automatic phrases that are not going through his or her mind nor through the listeners' minds. No, by that time the people are putting their papers away; they know that they and the sermon are coming in for a landing.

When you finish saying what is in the text, stop.

As I have already stated, I think the crisis of preaching today is the thematic domination of preaching. The opposite danger is what I call the non-discipleship exposition, where the results of research are shared, but without urgency and without soul, without that sense of the burden of the Lord. A person sometimes justifies this problem with "Well, I told them the truth. I told them the gospel." But you have to remember in homiletics and in preaching that just because you stated the point does not mean that you made the point. The task of preaching is to make the point and

make it stick. That takes work and skill. Ultimately, it takes the mystery of the Holy Spirit to confirm the gospel and the text.

The best way to make a point stick is to allow people to discover it for themselves. The task of expositional preaching is to help a person see, "Ah, the text says it. I see where it is. I found it... I saw it." In other words, the point of expositional preaching is to enable a text in the Old or New Testament to make its own point.

Whether it's in leading a Bible study group or in preaching expositionally, I really think that's the preaching the church needs. I will admit it is not always the preaching that the church wants, but I do believe that it is the preaching the church needs.

I am advocating that you as pastors get involved in small Bible study groups. I told my class today, "The first rule of being a communicator is to avoid the Peter Principle," wherein a person is elevated to the point of his or her incompetency. We have to be very careful of that in preaching. If you are not teaching the youth-communicants' class, why not? If you are not teaching and involved in a small Bible study group or in some sort of a mentor Bible study group with some people who are holding you accountable, why not? Why have you allowed yourself to be elevated above those very places where you learn

what the text is saying, and where you put yourself under the text for its own sake and not simply to preach it? I would advocate, both for ourselves and for our people, that we try to start investigative Bible study groups in the lives of our churches.

Finally, I am advocating the serious expositional goal in regular preaching. I honestly believe that the best expositional preaching is where you invite people to think with you over a long period of time, through textual material, through a book, through the entire Bible. Encourage your people to dialogue with you.

I have a text, taken from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. The first books of the New Testament which Paul wrote were letters he sent from Athens to the church at Thessalonica, at that time the capital city of Macedonia. He wrote two letters to that church because they were confused over several points, but he also paid them a tribute by asking for their help. This text is found in the third chapter of II Thessalonians: "Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph as it did among you." I love that line; that's the mystery of preaching. The mystery of it all is that the Holy Spirit will use us, and we must pray for that above all else. ■

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What Comes First

by Ian Pitt-Watson

What comes first—That is intended to make a statement, not ask a question. Psychologically, we are all impatient to get on to the “how?” question: how do we preach and how can we do it better? But that is the wrong question to start with. Logically and theologically, “what?” comes first. Anxious seminarians and overworked pastors are hungry for pragmatics. Implicitly or explicitly the teacher of homiletics receives the signal clearly and often: “Tell me how to do it. Don’t start by answering theoretical questions that I’m not even asking. The theology can wait, next Sunday’s sermon can’t.” I too have felt the pressure of that impatience during fifteen impossible, rewarding years spent as a pastor-preacher. I am also acutely conscious that any communicator who wants to be listened to or read ought to be aware of the risk of ignoring the questions which the listener or reader is first asking and first wants to be answered. But sometimes that risk has to be taken. Right answers are of little use if they are given to the wrong questions. How can I tell you how to do something until first we have agreed what it is that you and I are meant to be doing? The pragmatic “how?” question must indeed be addressed by the homiletician. But the theological “what?” question must come first, however strong the psychological pressures may be to reverse the order.

The reasons for the pressure to ask the wrong question first are all too obvious. We have come to think of theology as being a purely academic

discipline. It can indeed be that, for the academic theologian has his own vital and honorable contribution to make to the life of the church. But a biblical theology can never be merely reflective or academic. It is at the heart of it practical. The New Testament church preached, taught, worshipped and cared before it did anything else, and certainly before it articulated its reflective theology. But the raw material of practical theology—homiletics, Christian nurture, liturgics, pastoral care—has been there from the beginning, long before systematic theology had found a clear voice. We who exercise the functions of a biblical Christian ministry are therefore not merely dependent relatives of our full-time colleagues in reflective theology. We are ourselves practical theologians, no less theologians because we are practical. We not only apply academic theology to the practice of ministry, we discover it there. Preaching is itself a kind of practical theology. That is why homiletics can never be content to be merely a skills discipline, concerned alone with pragmatics and the question “how?” How *what?*! The answer to the question “what?” must precede the answer to the question “how?” The theology of preaching must determine its methodology and therefore the nature of homiletics.

Let me first make clear what homiletics is not. It is not simply a subspecies of speech communication theory that happens to be about God. If that sounds negative or even arrogantly dismissive, it certainly is not meant to be. Rhetorical theory has a long and honorable history. It was already an integral part of our western culture long before the Christian gospel was first preached, and throughout the Christian centuries

the church has treasured and sought enrichment from that ancient classical tradition. It is an aberration of our own century and culture that for most of us the word “rhetoric” carries with it so much negative emotive freight. For men and women of my age who remember World War II, it still irrationally but involuntarily calls to mind the frenetic, satanic eloquence of Adolf Hitler. For younger people, the word tends to suggest, at best, an archaic art form; at worst, an anachronistic pomposity. Mercifully, the work of dedicated and able scholars in the field of rhetorical theory and speech communication has enabled us in recent decades to shed some of our irrational suspicion of the word rhetoric. But still if you tell me that what I have said is “pure rhetoric,” you are usually not commending my communication skills so much as questioning the sincerity of what I have said. The time is long overdue for the complete reinstatement of rhetoric to an honorable place in our popular vocabulary and in our theological curriculum; for interpersonal communication through the spoken word is the lifeblood of Christian community.

But my thesis still stands. Rhetoric and speech communication for the homiletician is not a master discipline of which preaching is a subspecies, the subject matter of which happens to be about God, but might equally well be about astrophysics or fishing or George Washington. Precisely because God is the subject of the communi-

“Communication theory is an honored servant of the word but must never presume to be its master.”

cation, because preaching is about God and not about anything else, it is “sui generis”—like no other. Even to call God the “subject” of the communication or to speak of the communication as being “about” him is to falsify the situation. For in the preaching event it is not just we who are talking “about” God, God being the subject of our talk (or for that matter the object of our inquiry). It is God who is the communicator. It is not just we who are communicating truths about him. He is communicating himself. In some crazy-divine way God speaks through our fumbblings and bumbblings in the pulpit Sunday by Sunday—sometimes because of what we have said, sometimes (I suspect) in spite of it. His word does not return to him fruitless without accomplishing his purpose (Isaiah 55:11).

The word of God comes to us in three ways: first, in Jesus Christ, the word made flesh; second, in the written word of Scripture as contained in the Old and New Testaments; but third (and this is the divine-crazy absurdity), in the word preached. The Second Helvetic Confession is outrageously specific. “Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei”—“the preaching of the word of God is the word of God.” If this is true, then indeed preaching is a communication transaction like no other. This is not to invalidate the importance of communication theory for the preacher. On the contrary, such a high doctrine of preaching should make us passionately concerned to ensure that we have done everything humanly possible to become the kind of people who in the pulpit will facilitate and not obstruct

the word of God that speaks to us and through us. We preachers need more speech communication skills, not less. That is all too obvious. But these speech communication skills must be subject to theological scrutiny. They must be seen as a vital part of the discipline of homiletics and thus as a subspecies of practical theology. Homiletics employs communication skills but owes obedience to biblical theology alone. Communication theory is an honored servant of the word but must never presume to be its master.

The plot thickens. We have said what preaching is not: it is not just a kind of speech communication that happens to be about God. We have said what preaching is or is meant to be: it is God speaking through us who preach. The first answer sounds plausible but negative. The second answer sounds positive but im-

plausible. No wonder anxious seminarians and overworked pastors hunger for pragmatics when even a would-be practical theology of preaching must start by apparently raising more problems than it solves, and by asking more questions than it answers. Yet the questions about the nature of preaching cannot be avoided. Our failure to wrestle honestly with these questions has itself become a major part of the problem. Our uncertainty about what is meant to be happening when we preach has created both in us and in our hearers a profound ambivalence in our attitude towards preaching. The recognition of that ambivalence and the identification of its cause will prove to be a necessary final step in our clearing of the theological ground, and a first step toward a pragmatically relevant answer to the key theological question



“Across the whole face of Christendom, Christians have been rediscovering the Bible.”

we are addressing concerning the nature of preaching itself.

I believe that many of us, some consciously and others subconsciously, are disturbed by our own uncertainty about what we are meant to be doing when we preach. Most of us can give an all-purpose formula answer to the question “What is preaching?” But our formulae, even when scripturally based and theologically sound, seldom seem accurately to reflect our own experience and procedures. Homiletics in this regard are especially vulnerable, not least when they are preaching to their own students. Even the most charitable student must find it hard to resist the temptation to “quote the proverb.... ‘Physician, heal yourself!’, and say, ‘We have heard of all your doings at Capernaum; do the same here in your home town’” (Luke 4:23). And, of course, often we can’t. We fail constantly to practice what we preach about preaching—homiletics, preacher-pastors and student-preachers alike. Hence our ambivalence. Many of us find ourselves mounting the pulpit steps torn by conflicting emotions. On the one hand, we are tense and apprehensive, knowing our own inadequacies for the task ahead. On the other hand, there is an irrepressible part of us that is expectant and exhilarated, knowing that just sometimes things of mysterious power and beauty do happen when we preach, things we could scarcely have imagined, far less created.

Many of us preach within the tension of that ambivalence. I have a kind of love-hate relationship with preaching. One part of me would gladly be quit of the stress and burden of it. When I was younger, I thought it would become easier as one became more experienced. I find it is not so, but I no longer wish it to be otherwise. When I stop being scared I think I’ll quit, for I suspect that that will mean either that I no longer believe

that anything of power and beauty can happen, and therefore having nothing to lose I shall have nothing to fear; or else it will mean that I believe myself at last to have obtained a sufficient degree of professional competence to ensure that I will give a good performance. Either way, if ever I lose my fear of preaching and my frustration at my own inadequacies in that task, I suspect it will be a sign that I ought to quit.

Yet, while one part of me would gladly be rid of that burden of fear and frustration, another part of me knows that in the pulpit I find a kind of fulfillment, a joy, an exhilaration like no other. Part of that experience I know can be tarnished and flawed. The pulpit is a great place for an ego trip. But I know there is more to it than that, and that without that “more” I would be painfully impoverished. “It would be misery to me not to preach” (1 Corinthians 9:16). I am drawn to that task irresistibly. I love with my whole heart this fearsome, frustrating, burdensome, exhilarating, beautiful thing we face Sunday by Sunday as we mount the pulpit steps. I know I share this strange ambivalence with many others. I see it constantly in the students and pastors I am privileged to teach. I believe it reflects the fact that we often don’t know what we are doing when we preach, and we know we ought to know—hence the frustration of it. But I believe it also reflects the fact that God knows precisely what he is doing—hence the exhilaration of it. The recognition of that embarrassing, encouraging paradox may be a first, faltering step toward understanding the impossible claim that “the

preaching of the word of God is the word of God.”

But that ambivalence towards preaching in many of us who are preachers is not ours alone. It is shared by many of those to whom we preach. They too have a love-hate relationship with it. The love is there and is real. We are seeing in many of our churches a hunger for preaching and a genuine love of the word, not least among the young, that offers rich promise for the years ahead. Across the whole face of Christendom, Christians have been rediscovering the Bible. That is the root of the resurgence of interest in preaching that we have been witnessing, and it may well be a sign, as it was at the time of the Reformation, that a new reformation is already upon us. We must hope and pray that it is so, and that this time we may be guided by God to gather the rich harvest of his word without sowing the bitter seeds of sectarianism. But whatever the future may hold in that regard, the present is full of promise for the preacher. I doubt if ever the ability to preach has stood higher in the list of priorities of the average search committee. Indeed it may well be that in some quarters the pendulum has swung too far and that other functions of ministry, pastoral and liturgical, have been undervalued as preaching has been exalted. However that may be, there is little doubt that ordinary people in our churches are saying loud and clear, “Give us more and better preaching.” The love is there.

But, as with us, so with our hearers, that attraction to preaching is part of a love-hate relationship. For our hearers the hate element is partly an inevitable consequence of their disappointment and disillusionment when our ineptitude in the pulpit so

“The hunger for preaching... is a hunger for hearing the word of God.”

often falls short of their expectations. But precisely what they expect is usually very ill-defined. That is the root cause of their ambivalence about preaching, as it is the root cause of ours. They don’t quite know what to expect, just as we don’t know what is expected of us. So preacher and congregation make a few pragmatic adjustments until some compromised role-expectation for the preacher has been tacitly agreed. Sadly, the result is sometimes an endless series of sermons on the same theme: “It’s nice to be nice and it’s good to be good, and if we’re nice, good people Jesus will help us to become even nicer and better.” No one is really satisfied with this as a preaching model, but no one is actually offended, so it stays.

Below the surface, however, the tension is mounting in the listener, and sooner or later the frustration must find voice. When it comes, it is usually a scream of protest that no one ever hears, but that the preacher can read all too easily in the body language of the congregation. The flaccid postures and dead faces cry to heaven with one voice: “Stop preaching at me!” What has happened? It is worth noting what usually has happened when in ordinary conversation we say to one another, “Stop preaching!” It is invariably meant to be a severe rebuke. I say it to someone who is making me angry by insisting on telling me what to do and what not to do. I am not angry because the moral precepts being offered me are untrue; if that were the case I would say, “Stop talking nonsense.” I am angry because I am being told what I already know to be true and suspect to be no less true of the one who is “preaching at me.” I already know that I am not what I ought to be; I know I am doing things

that I ought not to do and that I am leaving undone things I ought to do. Like most people, I do not live my life crippled by moral indecision, paralyzed for lack of good advice. For the most part, I know what to do; I’m just not very good at doing it. My problem is not my moral indecision, but my moral impotence.

Paul describes that human predicament with precision and passion.

When I want to do the right, only the wrong is within my reach. In my inmost self I delight in the law of God, but I perceive that there is in my bodily members a different law, fighting against the law that my reason approves and making me a prisoner under the law that is in my members, the law of sin. Miserable creature that I am, who is there to rescue me out of this body doomed to death? God alone, through Jesus Christ our Lord! Thanks be to God! (Romans 7:21-25)

Notice how Paul’s ethical analysis of our human predicament (including his own) issues not into moral prescription and exhortation, but into a kind of doxology. Why? Because “what the law could never do, because our lower nature robbed it of all potency, God has done: by sending his own Son” (Romans 8:3). Paul knows that the problem is not our indecision but our impotence, and that the remedy will not be good advice about what we ought to do, but good news about what God has done. “Don’t preach!” Paul was used to hearing that rebuke from people who thought he was playing with dynamite and talking dangerous nonsense. But neither friend nor foe ever accused Paul of preaching a vain repetition of boring moral platitudes—“It’s nice to be nice and it’s good to be good, for Jesus’ sake, amen.” I wish the same were true of us when overtly or covertly we

receive the rebuke, “Don’t preach!” But broken eye contact between us and the congregation, their body language and the discreet rustle of candy papers sometimes sadly suggest another conclusion.

Now at last we are in a position to attempt a direct answer to the question with which we began. What is preaching? We have seen already that if, in some divine-crazy way, God is the communicator in the preaching event (1 Cor. 1:21), then preaching is not just a special kind of human speech communication that happens to be about God. The implausible conclusion of the Second Helvetic Confession becomes inescapable: “The preaching of the word of God is the word of God.” We have seen also how the ambivalence of our experience as preachers seems to affirm **both** the truth **and** the implausibility of that high doctrine of preaching. But it is the ambivalence of our **hearers** that takes us to the heart of the matter. The hunger for preaching is not a hunger for **any** kind of religious or moral talk. It is a hunger for the hearing of the word of God. That hunger is not being satisfied because often what we are saying in our pulpits is not firmly rooted in God’s written word, our sole and sufficient authority for saying anything. If people, hungry for bread, are offered a stone, we need not be surprised if our preaching receives a stony response.

But this is not merely to indict the kind of blatantly unbiblical preaching that clearly uses texts (if at all) as mere pretexts. Those of us who, like

"What is preaching? It is good news, not just good advice; it is gospel..."

myself, are wholeheartedly and unambiguously committed to the authority of Scripture as our supreme rule of faith and life do well to remember that the frequency with which we quote Scripture in our preaching is no reliable index of the biblical authenticity of what we are saying. Satan too can quote Scripture! (Matthew 4:6). Indeed, there is no doctrine, however heretical, and no action, however immoral, that cannot be proof-texted from Scripture with the assistance of a large enough concordance and just a little perverted ingenuity. It is not lack of sufficient biblical quotation that usually occasions the silent protest from the pews (slumped bodies and dull, downcast eyes) that says so clearly "Stop preaching!" The heart of the dis-ease lies elsewhere. We have debased the word "preaching"; we have distorted the authentic biblical nature of the event; we have forgotten what the word means. As I said at the outset, we have been so anxious to ask the "How do you do it?" question that we have forgotten to ask the prior "What are we meant to be doing?" question. You may remember in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* that when Alice first meets the Red Queen she says politely, "How do you do?" And the queen replies tartly and disconcertingly, "How do you do what?" The Red Queen could have made a daunting but effective homiletics teacher. "What?" comes first.

What is preaching? It is proclamation, not just moralizing. It is good news, not just good advice; it is gospel, not just law. Supremely, it is about God and what he has done, not just about us and about what we ought to do. Logically and theologically (though by no means always chronologically) preaching is about God before it is

about us; it is about what God has done before it is about what we ought to do. Our self-understanding must flow from our understanding of God. When we speak of what we ought to do (as of course we must) our moral imperatives must issue from our knowledge of what God has done. Otherwise our imperatives are no more than pious moralizings that refuse to face the facts of life: "When I want to do the right, only the wrong is within my reach" (Romans 7:21). Or else, if the moral exhortations are seriously intended and seriously attempted, the consequence is simply to compound in our hearers their burden of guilt when, inevitably, they make the same desolating discovery that Paul made: "The good which I want to do, I fail to do; but what I do is the wrong which is against my will" (Romans 7:19). Only through what God is and has done can I be what I ought to be and do what I ought to do. What I cannot do for myself, "what the Law could never do, because our lower nature robbed it of all potency, God has done." At the heart of it, preaching is about that: it is about "what God has done by sending his own Son in a form like that of our own sinful nature" (Romans 8:3). That is the gospel.

The practical consequences of these theological conclusions are of immense importance to the preacher. Now that the "what?" question has been faced, the "how do you do's" of preaching can be answered with more confidence. If preaching is to be proclamation and not mere moralizing, then the

ethics of our preaching must be rooted in the theology of our preaching. We cannot make sense of who we are and what we ought to do until first we know who God is and what he has done in Jesus Christ. The Christian ethic, severed from its theological roots, is no more than a new law, more demanding and therefore more burdensome than the old. That is why it is always so clear in the letters of Paul that the ethic flows out of the theology. We can be what we ought to be and do what we ought to do only because of what God is and has done. The theology empowers the ethic; it does not just accompany it with an encouraging, heavenly-fatherly pat on the back. For every imperative of the Christian ethic there is an empowering indicative of Christian theology. In the Sermon on the Mount the imperatives are indeed there and inescapable in their demand. But they are more than imperatives; they are descriptions of life in the Kingdom of God, indicatives of that Kingdom. Perhaps that is why the Sermon starts, not in the imperative mood speaking of how things ought to be, but in the indicative mood speaking of how things are. "Blessed are those who know their need of God; the kingdom of heaven is theirs" (Matt. 5:3). This is how things are in the Kingdom that in Christ is already in our midst. People are happy ("makarios") with the special kind of happiness that comes from God alone. The most surprising people are happy in the most surprising circumstances. They are not told to be happy or trying to be happy. They just are happy. The blessed indicative of the Beatitudes precedes and empowers

the demanding imperatives of the Kingdom that are to follow.

"Don't preach!" means: "Don't just tell me what to do; help me to do it." That is precisely what authentic biblical preaching is all about. It is about action enabled by insight, imperatives empowered by indicatives, ethics rooted in theology, "what we ought to do" made possible by what God has done. ■

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Designed for the church professional and the committed layperson, the conference will provide an excellent opportunity to increase the church's effectiveness in its vital ministry with children.

Dr. Julie Gorman, assistant professor of Christian formation and discipleship at the Seminary, will serve as dean of the conference. Gorman commented, "'Today's Child: Ministry Now!' offers exciting insight and impetus to every parent, pastor and ministering person who seeks to communicate with and care for children. There is an urgency to build bridges to children — bridges that will lead the way to greater faith commitment now and in the future." Gorman will integrate an upcoming issue of *Theology, News and Notes* based on the content of the conference.

Plan to attend "Today's Child: Ministry Now!" in April. Continuing education units will be available. For a brochure or for further information on the conference, write to the Rev. Al Jepson at the Seminary or call (800) 235-2222, ext. 3359; in California (818) 449-1745.

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