**CHAPTER THREE**

Theological Foundations for Preaching

John Stott

Between Two Worlds:

The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century.

In a world which seems either unwilling or unable to listen,

how can we be persuaded to go on preaching, and learn to do so effectively? The essential secret is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions. In other words, theology is more important than methodology. By stating the matter thus bluntly, I am not despising homiletics as a topic for study in seminaries, but rather affirming that homiletics belongs properly to the department of practical theology and cannot be taught without a solid theological foundation. To be sure, there are principles of preaching to be learned, and a practice to be developed, but it is easy to put too much confidence in these. Technique can only make us orators; if we want to be preachers, theology is what we need. If our theology is right, then we have all the basic insights we need into what we ought to be doing, and all the incentives we need to induce us to do it faithfully,

True Christian preaching (by which I mean 'biblical' or 'expository' preaching, as I shall argue later) is extremely rare in today's Church. Thoughtful young people in many countries are asking for it, but cannot find it. Why is this? The major reason must be a lack of conviction about its importance. For it is reasonable and charitable to suppose that if those of us who are called to preach (both pastors and lay preachers) were persuaded that this is what we ought to be doing, we should go away and do it. If then we are not doing it (which, in the main, we are not), the explanation must be that we lack the necessary conviction.

So my task in this chapter is to try to convince my readers of the indispensable necessity, for the glory of God and the

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 good of the Church, of conscientious biblical preaching. I intend to marshal five theological arguments which underlie and undergird the practice of preaching. They concern the doctrines of God and Scripture, of the Church and the pastorate, and of the nature of preaching as exposition. Any one of these truths should be sufficient to convince us; the five together leave us without excuse..

A Conviction about God

Behind the concept and the act of preaching there lies a doctrine of God, a conviction about his being, his action and his purpose. The kind of God we believe in detennines the kind of sermons we preach. A Christian must be at least an amateur theologian before he can aspire to be a preacher. Three affirmations about God are particularly relevant.

First, God is light. 'This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness sat all.' (1 John 1:5) Now the biblical symbolism of light is rich and diverse, and the assertion that God is light has been variously interpreted. It could mean that God is perfect in holiness, for often in Scripture light symbolizes purity, and darkness evil. But in the Johannine literature light more frequently stands for truth, as when Jesus claimed to be 'the light of the world' (John 8: 12); he also told his followers to let their light shine into human society, instead of concealing it. (Matt. 5: 14—16) In this case John's statement that God is light and contains no darkness means that he is open and not secretive, and that he delights to make himself known. We may say then that just as it is the nature of light to shine, so it is the nature of God to reveal himself. True, he hides himself from the wise and clever,  but only because they are proud and do not want to know him; he reveals himself to 'babies', that is, to those humble



enough to receive his self-disclosure. (Matt; 11 :25, 26) The chief reason why people do not know God is not because he hides from them, but because they hide from him. People

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who are eager to share their thoughts with others we describe as 'communicative'. May we not accurately apply the same adjective to God? He does not play a game of 'hide and seek' with us, or lurk out of sight in the shadows.



Darkness is the habitat of Satan; God is light.

Every preacher needs the strong encouragement which this assurance brings. Seated before us in church are people in a wide variety of states, some estranged from God, others perplexed, even bewildered, by the mysteries of human existence, yet others enveloped in the dark night of doubt and disbelief. We need to be sure as we speak to them that God is light and that he wants to shine his light into their darkness (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4—6).

Secondly, God has acted. That is, he has taken the initiative to reveal himself in deeds. To begin with, he has shown his power and deity in the created universe, so that both heaven and earth display his glory.2 But God has revealed yet more of himself in redemption than in creation. For when man rebelled against his Creator, instead of destroying him God planned a rescue mission, whose outworking is central to human history. The Old Testament may be said to consist of three cycles of divine deliverance, as God called first Abraham from Ur, then the Israelite slaves from Egypt, and then the exiles from Babylon. Each was a liberation, and led to the making or renewing of the covenant by which Yahweh made them his people and pledged himself to be their God. 

The New Testament focusses on another redemption and covenant, which it describes as both 'better' and 'eternal'.3 For these were secured by God's most mighty acts, namely the birth, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

So the God of the Bible is a God of liberating activity, who came to the rescue of oppressed mankind, and who thus revealed himself as the God of grace or generosity.

Thirdly, God has spoken. He is not only communicative by nature, but has actually communicated with his people by speech. It is the constantly reiterated claim of the Old

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Testament prophets that 'the Word of the Lord' came to



them. -In consequence, they used to poke fun at heathen



idols because being dead, they were dumb: 'They have mouths, but do not speak' (e.g. Ps. 115:5). With these they contrasted the living God. Being spirit he had no mouth, yet they dared to say, 'The mouth of the Lord has spoken, (cf. Isaiah 40:5•, 55:11).

It is important to add that the speech of God was related to his activity: he took the trouble to explain what he was doing. Did he call Abraham from Ur? Then he spoke to him about his purpose and gave him the covenant of promise. Did he call the people of Israel out of their Egyptian slavery? Then he also commissioned Moses to teach them why he was doing it, namely, to fulfil his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to confirm his covenant with them, to give them his laws, and to instruct them in his 



worship. Did he call the people out of the humiliation of their Babylonian exile? Then he also raised up prophets to explain the reasons why his judgment had fallen upon them, the conditions on which he would restore them, and the kind of people he wanted them to be. Did he send his Son to become man, to live and serve on earth, to die, to rise, to reign and to pour out his Spirit? Then he also chose and equipped the apostles to see his works, hear his words, and bear witness to what they had seen and heard.



The modern theological tendency is to lay much emphasis on the historical activity of God and to deny that he has spoken; to say that God's self-revelation has been in deeds not words, personal not propositional; and in fact to insist that the redemption is itself the revelation. But this is a false distinction, which Scripture itself does not envisage. Instead, Scripture affirms that God has spoken both through historical deeds and through explanatory words, and that the two belong indissolubly together. Even the Word made flesh, the climax of God's progressive selfrevelation, would have remained enigmatic if it were not that he also spoke and that his apostles both described and interpreted him.

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Here then is a fundamental conviction about the living,



redeeming and self-revealing God. It is the foundation on which all Christian preaching rests. We should never presume to occupy a pulpit unless we believe in this God. How

dare we speak, if God has not spoken? By ourselves we have nothing to say. To address a congregation without any assurance that we are bearers of a divine message would be the height of arrogance and folly. It is when we are convinced that God is light (and so wanting to be known), that God has acted (and thus made himself known), and that God has spoken (and thus explained his actions), that we must speak and cannot remain silent. As Amos expressed it: 'The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?' (3:8) A similar logic lies behind Paul's statement, 'Since we have the same spirit of faith as he had who wrote "I believed, and so I spoke", we too believe, and so we speak.' (2 Cor. 4:13 quoting Ps. 116: 10) The 'spirit of faith' to which he refers is the conviction that God has spoken. If we are not sure of this, it would be better to keep our mouth shut. Once we are persuaded that God has spoken, however, then we too must speak. A compulsion rests upon us. Nothing and nobody will be able to silence us.

A Conviction about Scripture

Our doctrine of God leads naturally and inevitably to our doctrine of Scripture. Although I have headed this section 'a conviction about Scripture', it is in fact a multiple conviction which may be analyzed into at least three distinct but related beliefs.

First, Scripture is God's Word written. This definition is taken from Article 20 of the Church of England's 39 Articles. Entitled 'The Authority of the Church', it declares that 'it is not lawful for the church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written.' Moreover, although I shall qualify this in a later paragraph, 'God's Word written' is an excellent definition of Scripture.

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For it is one thing to believe that 'God has acted', revealing himself in historical deeds of salvation, and supremely in the Word made flesh. It is another to believe that 'God has spoken', inspiring prophets and apostles to interpret his deeds. It is yet a third stage to believe that the divine speech, recording and explaining the divine activity, has been committed to writing. Yet only so could God's particular revelation become universal, and what he did and said in Israel and in Christ be made available to all

people in all ages and places. Thus the action, the speech and the writing belong together in the purpose of God.

To define Scripture as 'God's Word written' says little if anything, however, about the human agents through whom God spoke and through whom his Word was written down. Hence the need for the qualification I said was necessary.



When God spoke, his normal method was not to shout in an



audible voice out of a clear blue sky. Inspiration is not dictation. Instead he put his Word into human minds and human mouths in such a way that the thoughts they conceived and the words they spoke were simultaneously and completely theirs as well as his. Inspiration was not in any way incompatible with either their historical researches or the free use of their minds. It is essential, therefore, if we are to be true to the Bible's own account of itself, to affirm its human as well as its divine authorship. Yet we must be careful to state the double authorship of the Bible (again, if we are to be true to the Bible's own self-understanding) in such a way as to maintain both the divine and the human factors, without allowing either to detract from the other. On the one hand, the divine inspiration did not override the human authorship; on the other, the human authorship did not override the divine inspiration. The Bible is equally the words of God and the words of men, as in a similar (though not identical) way Jesus Christ is both the Son of God and t he son of man. The Bible is God's Word written, God's Word through men's words, spoken through human mouths and written through human hands. 4

I COIne back now to the relevance of our doctrine of the

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Bible to our ministry of preaching. All Christians believe that God did something and said something unique in Jesus Christ; we can scarcely call ourselves Christians if we do not believe this. But what would have been the point of this definitive deed and word of God through Jesus, if it had then been irrecoverably lost in the mists of antiquity? Since God's final deed and Word through Jesus were intended for all people of all ages, he inevitably made provision for a reliable record of them to be written and preserved. Without this he would have defeated his own purpose. As a result, today, although nearly 2000 years separate us from that deed and Word, Jesus Christ is accessible to us. We can reach him and know him. But he is accessible only through the Bible, as the Holy Spirit brings to life his own witness to him in its pages. True, Tacitus made a brief, passing reference to Jesus in his famous Annals, and — more questionably — there are allusions to Jesus in Suetonius and Josephus. True, also, the unbroken tradition of the Christian Church bears eloquent witness to the dynamic reality of its Founder. True again, contemporary Christians give their contemporary testimony to Jesus out of their own experience. Yet if we want to know the full facts of the birth and life, words and works, death and resurrection of Jesus, and God's own authoritative explanation of them, we can find them only in the Bible. That is, if we want to hear the Word which God himself has spoken, we must remember that he spoke it in Christ and in the biblical witness to Christ.

Our responsibility as preachers now begins to emerge. This is not primarily to give our twentieth-century testimony to Jesus (most Western preaching today tends to be too subjective), but rather to relay with faithfulness to the twentieth century (and endorse from our own experience) the only authoritative witness there is, namely God's own witness to Christ through the first-century apostolic eye-witnesses. In this respect the Bible is unique. It is 'God's Word written', since here and here only is God's own interpretation of his redeeming action to be found. TO

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besure, the New Testament documents came to be written within the milieu of the first-century Christian communities. These communities both preserved the tradition, and to some extent shaped it, in the sense that (humanly speaking) it was their needs of evangelism, instruction and worship which largely determined what was preserved. It is also increasingly recognized that the New Testament authors were writing as theologians, each of whom selected and presented his material according to his particular theological purpose. Yet neither the churches nor the writers invented or distorted their message. Nor does its authority derive from them or from their faith. For none of the apostles or evangelists wrote in the name of a church or



churches. On the contrary, they confronted the churches in the name and with the authority of Jesus Christ. And when the time came to fix the New Testament canon, the Church was not conferring authority on the included books, but acknowledging the authority they already possessed because they contained the teaching of the apostles.

.1t is certain that we cannot handle Scripture adequately in the pulpit if our doctrine of Scripture is inadequate. Conversely, evangelical Christians, who have the highest doctrine Of Scripture in the Church, should be conspicu-



ously the most conscientious preachers. The fact that we are not should cause us to hang our heads in shame. If Scripture were largely a symposium of human ideas, though reflecting the faith of the earliest Christian communities, and lit up by an occasional flash of divine inspiration, then a fairly casual attitude to it would be pardonable. But if in Scripture we are handling the very words of the living God, 'words not taught by human wisdom but taught



by the Spirit' (1 Cor. 2: 13), God's words through men's, his own witness to his own Son, then no trouble should be too  great in the study and exposition of them.

Further, we need to keep together in our preaching the saving acts and the written words of God. Some preachers love to speak about the 'mighty acts' of God, and really seem to believe in them, yet what they say tends to be their

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own interpretation of them, rather than what God has himself said about them in Sgripture. Other preachers are entirely faithful in their exposition of God's Word, yet remain aull and academic because they have forgotten that the heart of the Bible is not what God has said, but what he has done for our salvation through Jesus Christ. The first group try to be 'heralds of God', proclaiming good news of salvation, but fail in their stewardship of his revelation. The second try to be 'stewards of God', dutifully guarding and  dispensing his Word, but have lost the excitement of the



herald's task. The true preacher is both a faithful steward of God's mysteries (1 Cor. 4: 1, 2) and a fervent herald of God's good news.

 We sometimes use the expression 'when all's said and done', referring to the conclusion of a matter. Well, Christians believe that all has been said and done. For God has said it and done it through Jesus Christ. Moreover, he has said and done it hapax, once and for all and for ever. In Christ his revelation and redemption are complete. Our task is to lift up our voices and make them known to others, and also ourselves to enter ever more deeply into an understanding and experience of them. 

Our second conviction about Scripture is that God still speaks through what he has spoken. If we are content to make the statement 'Scripture is God's Word written' and to stop there, we would expose ourselves to the critical rejoinder that our God, if not dead, appears to be as good as dead. For we give the impression that he who spoke centuries ago is silent today; and that the only word we can hear from him comes out of a book, a faint echo from the distant past, smelling strongly of the mould of libraries. But no, this is not at all what we believe. Scripture is far more than a collection of ancient documents in which the words of God are preserved. It is not a kind of museum in which God's Word is exhibited behind glass like a relic or fossil. On the contrary, it is a living word to living people from the living God, a contemporary message for the contemporary world.

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The apostles clearly understood and believed this about the Old Testament oracles. They introduced their biblical quotations with one or other of two formulae, either gegraptai gar ('for it stands written') or legei gar ('for it — or he — says'). The contrast between these formulae is not only between the perfect tense and the present continuous tense, and so between an event of the past and an activity of the present, but also between writing and speech. Both expressions assume that God has spoken, but in the one case what he has spoken has been written down and remains a permanent written record, while in the other case he is continuing to speak what he once spoke.

Take as an example Paul's statements in Galatians 4. Verse 22 begins, 'for it is written (gegraptai gar) that Abraham had two sons.' In the previous verse, however, Paul has asked 'do you not hear the law?' and in verse 30 he asks 'what does the Scripture say?' These are extraordinary expressions, for 'the law' and 'the Scripture' are ancient books. How can an old book be said to 'speak' in such a way that we can 'hear' it speaking? Only in one way, namely that God himself speaks through it, and that we must listen to his voice.

This concept of the contemporary voice of God is em-



phasized in Hebrews 3 and 4. the author quotes Psalm 95: 'Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. ' But he introduces the quotation with the words 'as the Holy Spirit says'. He thus implies that the Holy Spirit is 'today' making the same appeal to his people to listen to him as he made centuries previously when the psalm was written. Indeed, it is possible to detect here four successive stages in which God spoke and speaks. The first was the time of testing in the wilderness when God spoke but Israel hardened her heart. Next came the exhortation of Psalm 95 to the people of that day not to repeat Israel's earlier folly. Thirdly, there was the application of the same truth to the Hebrew Christians of the first century A.D. , while, fourthly, the appeal comes to us as we read the Letter to the Hebrews today. It is in this way that God's Word is contemporary: it

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moves with the times and continues to address each fresh generation.

One further example may be given, in order to show that this principle applies as much to the New Testament Scriptures as to the Old. Each of the seven letters to the Asian churches recorded in Revelation 2 and 3 concludes with an identical entreaty from the ascended Lord Jesus, 'he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' It is a remarkable sentence. Presumably each church will have heard its particular letter read out in the public assembly, and each knew that John had written it down on the island of Patmos some weeks, even months, previously. Yet each letter concluded with the same statement that the Spirit was speaking to the churches. This shows that what was addressed to each church in particular applied also to all 'the churches' in general; that what had come from John had originated with the Spirit; and that what John had written some time past the Holy Spirit was still speaking with a living voice, even to every individual church member who had an ear to listen to his message.

When once we have grasped the truth that 'God still speaks through what he has spoken', we shall be well protected against two opposite errors. The first is the belief that, though it was heard in ancient times, God's voice is silent today. The second is the claim that God is indeed speaking today, but that his Word has little or nothing to do with Scripture. The first leads to Christian antiquarianism, the second to Christian existentialism. Safety and truth are found in the related convictions that God has spoken, that God speaks, and that his two messages are closely connected to one another, because it is through what he spoke that he speaks. He makes his Word living, contemporary and relevant, until we find ourselves back on the Emmaus Road with Christ himself expounding the Scriptures to us, and with our hearts on fire. Another way of putting the same truth is to say that we must keep the Word of God and the Spirit of God together. For apart from the Spirit the Word is dead, while apart from the Word the Spirit is alien.

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I cannot express this theme better than by borrowing an expression which I have heard Dr. James I. Packer use. 'Having studied the doctrine of Scripture for a generation', he has said, 'the most satisfactory model is to describe it thus: "The Bible is God preaching". '

The third conviction which preachers need about Scripture is that God's Word is powerful. For not only has God spoken; not only does God continue to speak through what he has spoken; but when God speaks he acts. His Word does more than explain his action; it is active in itself. God accomplishes his purpose by his Word; it 'prospers' in whatever he sends it forth to doe (Is. 55:11)

It is specially important for us to be assured of the power of God's Word, because there is in our day a widespread disenchantment with all words. Millions are spoken and written every day, apparently to very little effect. The Church is one of the worst offenders, and consequently some dismiss it as nothing but a useless talking shop. Moreover, the criticism proceeds, if the Church talks too much, it also does too little. It has a big mouth, but shrunken hands. Now the time has come to stop talking and start acting. In particular, let those garrulous clergy climb down from their pulpits, roll up their sleeves and do something productive for a change!

There is too much truth in this indictment for us to be able to shrug it off. The Church does indeed have a better record for talk than for action, and some of us have to confess that we have neglected to follow the Scriptures in defending the powerless and seeking social justice. But we should not set speech and action over against each other as if they were alternatives. It is written of Jesus both that 'he went about doing good' and that 'he went about . . teaching. . and preaching. . (Acts 10:38; Matt. 4:23, 9:35) He combined words and works in his ministry. He saw no need to choose. Neither should we. Moreover, whence this distrust of words? Words are far from being impotent. The devil uses them constantly in political propaganda and commercial exploitation. And if his lies are powerful, how

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uch more powerful is God's truth? James Stalker put it like this:

It seems the frailest of all weapons: for what is a word? It is only a puff of air, a vibration trembling in the atmosphere for a moment and then disappearing (Yet) though it be only a weapon of air, the word is stronger than the sword of the warrior. 5

Luther believed this. In his famous hymn Ein' Feste Burg (c. 1529), in which he alluded to the devil's might, he added ein Wörtlein wird ihn fällen, 'one little word will fell him'.

Thomas Carlyle translated the hymn (1831), beginning A safe stronghold our God is still. Here is his rendering of the verse in question:

And were this world all devils o'er

And watching to devour us, We lay it not to heart so sore,

Not they can overpower us.

And let the prince of ill

Look grim as e'er he will, He harms us not a whit;

For why? His doom is writ;

A word shall quickly slay him.

One of our contemporaries who has the same confidence in the power of words of truth is Alexander Solzhenitsyn•  His 1970 Nobel Prize speech was entitled One Word Of Truth. He asked:

In this cruel, dynamic, explosive world, on the brink Of a  dozen destructions, what is the place and role of the writer? We writers have no rockets to blast off, we do not even trundle the most insignificant auxiliary vehicle, we are indeed altogether despised by those who respect only material power

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So what can writers do 'in the face of the merciless onslaught of open violence', especially when violence is 'bound up with the lie' and 'the lie can be maintained only by violence'? 7 Of course the courageous person will refuse to take part in the lie. But, Solzhenitsyn continued, 

writers and artists can do something more: they can vanquish the lie . . . We must not seek excuses on the grounds that we lack weapons we must go out into battle . . . One word of truth outweighs the whole world. And on such a fantastic breach of the law of conservation of mass and energy are based my own activities and my appeal to the writers of the world. 8

Not that our words are always heeded. Often they are ineffective. They fall on deaf ears and are disregarded. Yet the Word of God is different, for in his words speech and action are combined. He created the universe by his Word: 'he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth.' (Ps. 33:9) And now through the same Word of authority he recreates and saves. The gospel of Christ is God's power for salvation to every believer, for it pleases God through the kerygma, the proclaimed message, to save those who believe. (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:21 cf. 1 Thess. 2:13) Many similes are used in the Bible to illustrate the powerful influence which God's Word exerts. 'The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword' (Heb. 4: 12), for it pierces both mind and conscience. Like a hammer it can break stony hearts, and like fire it can burn up rubbish. It illumines our path, shining like a lamp on a dark night, and like a mirror it shows us both what we are and what we should be. It is also likened to seed causing birth, and milk causing growth, to wheat which strengthens and honey which sweetens, and to gold which immeasurably enriches its possessor. 9

One preacher who knew from experience the power of the Word of God was John Wesley. His journal is full of references to it, especially to its power to subdue a hostile

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crowd and bring them under conviction of sin. On 10 September 1743, only five years after his conversion, Wesley preached in the open air to an exceptionally large congregation near St. Just in Cornwall, 'I cried out, with all the authority of love, "Why will ye die, O house of Israel?" The people trembled and were still. I had not known such an hour before in Cornwall.' On 18 October 1749 he met bitter opposition in Bolton, Lancashire. A mob surrounded the house, threw stones through the window, and then broke in through the door.

Believing the time was now come, I walked down into the



thickest of them. They had now filled all the rooms below. I called for a chair. The winds were hushed, and all was calm and still. My heart was filled with love, my eyes with tears, and my mouth with arguments. They were amazed; they were ashamed; they were melted down; they devoured every word. What a turn was this!'

Twenty years later the same power was still attending Wesley's preaching. On 18 May 1770 he wrote, 'In the evening I trust God broke some of the stony hearts of Dunbar.' On 1 June 1777 he preached in a churchyard on the Isle of Man, and 'the Word of God was with power. ' In St. Luke's Church, Old Street, London, on 28 November 1778, 'the fear of God seemed to possess the whole audience'. More than a decade later, when Wesley was eightyfive years old, 'God moved wonderfully on the hearts of the people' in Falmouth, Cornwall (17 August 1789), while in Redruth 'a huge multitude' gathered, and 'the Word seemed to sink deep into every heart. ' (22 August 1789)

Let no one imagine that these experiences were peculiar to the eighteenth century or to John Wesley. Billy Graham, the world's best-known, most-travelled evangelist today, makes a similar claim. At the Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly at Nairobi in December 19761 heard him say, 'I have had the privilege of preaching the gospel on every continent and in most countries of the world, and

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THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR PREACHING when I present the message of the simple gospel of Jesus Christ with authority, he takes the message and drives it supernaturally into human hearts. '

'It's all very well', someone may interject, 'for you to quote Luther and Wesley and Billy Graham. Without doubt their words have had power. But weren't they exceptional people, exceptionally gifted and endowed? What about me? I preach my heart out Sunday by Sunday, and the good seed falls by the wayside and is trodden under foot. Why isn't God's Word more powerful when it comes from my lips?' To these questions I reply that yes, of course, in every generation God raises us up special people, gives them special gifts and endows them with special power. It would be wrong for us to envy Luther or Wesley, and foolish to imagine that each of us has Billy Graham's evangelistic gift. Nevertheless, Scripture does justify the expectation that at least sometimes our preaching of the Word will be effective. Take the Parable of the Sower, to which an allusion was made above. On the one hand, Jesus taught us not to expect all our seed-sowing to bear fruit. We have to remember that some ground is hard and stony, and that the birds, the weeds and the scorching sun take their toll of the seed. So we should not grow too discouraged. On the other hand, Jesus did lead us to expect that some soil would prove good and productive, and that the seed falling into this would bear lasting fruit. There is life and power in the seed, and when the Spirit prepares the soil and waters the seed, the growth and fruitfulness will appear.

This is what P. T. Forsyth meant when he referred to the gospel as not just a statement or a doctrine or a promise. It is more. 'It is an act and a power: it is God's act of redemption . . . A true sermon is a real deed . . . The preacher's word, when he preaches the gospel and not only delivers a sermon, is an effective deed, charged with blessing or with judgment. '10 This is because it brings dramatically into the here and now the historic redemptive work of Christ.

Perhaps no contemporary author has expressed this be-

lief in the power of the Word more eloquently than Gustaf

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Wingren, the Swedish Lutheran Professor of Theology in

the University of Lund, in his book The Living Word. The theme of the whole Bible, he argues, is conflict, the duel

between God and Satan, and it is the gospel which sets people free. Between Christ's victory and the consummation 'lies an empty space of waiting. It is in this gap, this empty space, that preaching sends forth its voice. 'l I Again,

'the time between Easter and the Parousia is the time for preaching. '12 Preaching supplies the living Christ with both feet and a mouth: 'It is the Word that provides the feet on which Christ walks when he makes his approach to us and reaches us . . . Preaching has but one aim, that Christ may come to those who have assembled to listen. '13 Again, 'preaching is not just talk about a Christ of the past, but is a mouth through which the Christ of the present offers us life today. ' 14 Professor Wingren sees human beings as 'defeated', 'conquered', in bondage to sin, guilt and death, and he sees preaching as the means of their liberation. 'It belongs to the nature of the office of preaching that it has its place in the battle between God and the Devil. '1 5 'The word

of the preacher is an attack on the prison in which man is



held. ' 16 It opens the prison, and sets him free.

These convictions about God and man, about man the prisoner and God the liberator by his Word, transform the work of preaching. We enter the pulpit with a Word in our hands, heart and mouth which has power. We expect results. We look for conversions. As Spurgeon put it in one of his addresses to pastors:

So pray and so preach that, if there are no conversions, you will be astonished, amazed, and broken-hearted. Look for the salvation of your hearers as much as the angel who will sound the last trump will look for the waking of the dead! Believe your own doctrine! Believe your own Saviour! Believe in the Holy Ghost who dwells in you! For thus shall you see your heart's desire, and God shall be glorified. 1 7

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A pleasant story is told about a travelling preacher who was passing through the security check at an airport. It was before the days of electronic scanning, and the security official was rummaging about in his brief-case. He came across the black cardboard box which contained the preacher's Bible, and was curious to discover its contents. 'What's in that box?' he asked suspiciously, and received the startling reply 'Dynamite!' Unfortunately, history does not relate what happened next. Yet to believe in the explosive power of God's Word — powerful not because it is like a magic spell but because the God who spoke it speaks it again — should be enough in itself to make an effective preacher out of every person who is called to this privileged ministry.

A Conviction about the Church

Doubtless we have numerous convictions about the Church. But for my purpose I have only this one in mind, that the Church is the creation of God by his Word. Moreover, God's new creation (the Church) is as dependent upon his Word as his old creation (the universe). Not only has he brought it into being by his Word, but he maintains and sustains it, directs and sanctifies it, reforms and renews it through the same Word. The Word of God is the sceptre by which Christ rules the Church and the food with which he nourishes it,

This dependence of the Church on the Word is not a doctrine readily acceptable to all. In former days of Roman Catholic polemic, for example, its champions would insist that 'the Church wrote the Bible' and therefore has authority over it. Still today one sometimes hears this rather simplistic argument. Now it is true, of course, that both Testaments were written within the context of the believing community, and that the substance of the New Testament in God's providence, as we have already noted, was to some extent determined by the needs of the local Christian

COngregations. In consequence, the Bible can neither be

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detached from the milieu in which it originated, nor be understood in isolation from it. Nevertheless, as Protestants have always emphasized, it is misleading to the point of inaccuracy to say that 'the Church wrote the Bible' ; the truth is almost the opposite, namely that 'God's Word created the Church'. For the people of God may be said to have come into existence when his Word came to Abraham, calling him and making a covenant with him. Similarly, it was through the apostolic preaching of God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost that the people of God became the Spirit-filled Body of Christ.

It is not difficult to demonstrate the dependence of the people of God on the Word of God. For throughout Scripture God is addressing his people, teaching them his way, and appealing to them both for his sake and for theirs to hear and heed his message. If it is true 'that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord' (Deut. 8:3, quoted by Jesus in Matt. 4:4), the same is true of the Church. God's people live and flourish only by believing and obeying his Word.

So the Old Testament is replete with God's exhortations to his people to listen to him. Adam's fall was due to his folly in listening to the serpent's voice instead of to his Creator's. When God established his covenant with Abraham, he justified him because he believed his promise, and he reiterated his blessing 'because you have obeyed my voice'. (Gen. 15:1—6; 22:15—18) When God confirmed his covenant with Israel, in fulfilment of his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and pledged to make them his special possession among all peoples, the condition he made was 'if you will obey my voice' (Exod. 2:24; 19:3—6). So when the covenant was ratified by sacrifice, and 'all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances' were rehearsed in the hearing of the people, they responded in unison, 'all the words which the Lord has spoken we will do.' (Exod. 24:3) Because of the tragic

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an example, who shocked people by likening the holy city of Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah, 'Hear the Word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah If you are willing



and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be denounced by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. ' And again later, 'O that you had hearkened to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea.' As it is, however, 'there is no peace . . for the wicked. '20

Even more explicit is the prophet Jeremiah, close ally of



good King Josiah, during whose reign the book of the law was rediscovered in the temple. Prophet and king together called for national repentance And rededication. But the people's response was superficial and short-lived. The divine complaint uttered through the lips of Jeremiah was straightforward:

This command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you. ' But they did not obey or incline this ear, but walked in the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; yet they did not listen to me, or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers. 2 1

So God's judgment fell upon them, Jerusalem was besieged and taken, the temple was razed to the ground, and the people were led away into Babylonian captivity. The national epitaph written by the Chronicler echoed the language of the prophets:

The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on

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THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR PREACHING his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and

scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, till there was no remedy. 2' 

It is clear from this brief rehearsal of the Old Testament story that God consistently hinged the welfare of his people on their listening to his voice, believing his promises and obeying his commands.

It is similar in the New Testament, although now God's spokesmen are apostles rather than prophets. They too claim to be bearers of God's Word (e.g. 1 Thess. 2:13). Appointed by Christ and invested with his authority, they speak boldly in his name, and they expect the churches to believe their instruction and obey their commands (e.g. 2 Thess. 3). So through their writings the exalted Jesus addresses his Church, just as much as through those letters of his to the seven churches. He instructs, admonishes, rebukes and encourages them, gives them promises and warnings, and appeals to them to listen, to believe, to obey and to hold fast until he comes. It is made plain throughout that the health of God's people depends on their attentive-



ness to his Word. 

Today's preachers are neither prophets nor apostles, for we are not the recipients of any fresh, direct revelation. The Word of the Lord does not come to us at it came to them; rather we have to come to it. Nevertheless, if we faithfully expound the Scriptures, it is his Word Which is in our hands and on our lips, and the Holy Spirit is able to make it a living and powerful word in the hearts of our hearers. Moreover, Our responsibility will appear to us the more onerous when We remember the indissoluble link which we have traced  between the Word of God and the people of God. A deaf church is a dead church: that is an unalterable principle. God quickens, feeds, inspires and guides his people by his Word. For whenever the Bible is truly and systematically expounde'd, God uses it to give his people the vision withOut which they perish. First, they begin to see what he

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wants them to be, his new society in the world. Then they go on to grasp the resources he has given them in Christ to fulfil his purpose. That is why •it is only by humble and obedient listening to his voice that the Church can grow into maturity, serve the world and glorify its Lord.

In laying this emphasis on the Word of God as indispensable for the Church's welfare, I am not forgetting the gospel sacraments, and in particular the Lord's Supper. For Augustine's designation of the sacraments as 'visible words' (verba visibilia) supplies an essential clue to their function and value. They too speak. Both Word and sacrament bear witness to Christ. Both promise salvation in Christ. Both quicken our faith in Christ. Both enable us to feed on Christ in our hearts. The major difference between them is that the message of the one is directed to the eye, and of the other to the ear. So the sacraments need the Word to interpret them. The ministry of Word and sacrament is a single ministry, the Word proclaiming, and the sacrament dramatizing, God's promises. Yet the Word is primary, since without it the sign becomes dark in meaning, if not actually dumb.

History supplies ample evidence of the indivisible connection between Church and Word, between the state of the Christian community and the quality of Christian preaching. 'Is it not clear', asks Dr. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, 'as you take a bird's-eye view of Church history, that the decadent periods and eras in the history of the Church have always been those periods when preaching had declined?' 'What is it', he continues, 'that always heralds the dawn of a Reformation or of a Revival? It is renewed preaching.'23

Dr. E. C. Dargan's comprehensive two-volume History of Preaching from A.D. 70—1900 amply confirms this view. He writes:

Decline of spiritual life and activity in the churches is commonly accompanied by a lifeless, formal, unfruitful preaching, and this partly as cause, partly as effect. On the other hand, the great revivals of Christian history can

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THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR PREACHING most usually be traced to the work of the pulpit, and in their progress they have developed and rendered posSible a high order of preaching. 24 

It would be impossible to delineate the world-wide Church today by sweeping generalizations, for its condition varies greatly from country to country, and culture to culture. The secularization of Europe (together with those parts of the Western world which have retained close links with Europe) has been steadily progressing for about two centuries, although there are now some signs that the tide may be turning. In the United States there is an astonishing religious boom, which nevertheless perplexes friendly observers who cannot easily reconcile it with that nation's alarming statistics of crime. violence, abortion and divorce. In most Communist countries, and in some countries of predominantly Islamic culture, the Church is inhibited, if not actively opposed and persecuted. In some of the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, however, the rates of Church growth are so rapid that, if they continue, the international leadership of the Church will soon pass into Third World hands, if indeed this handover has not already taken place. Yet these very leaders themselves confess that, alongside the vigour and enthusiasm of their churches' life, there is much shallowness and instability.

In such a variegated situation, in which overall the Church is losing ground, is it possible to pinpoint a single cause of weakness? Many would say 'no'. And certainly the causes are many. Yet personally I do not hesitate to say that a (even the) major reason for the Church's decline in some areas and immaturity in others is what Amos called a 'famine of hearing the words of the Lord'. (8:11) The low level of Christian living is due, more than anything else, to the low level of Christian preaching. More often than we like to admit, the pew is a reflection of the pulpit. Seldom if ever can the pew rise higher than the pulpit.

On the last day of 1979 Time magazine carried an article

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entitled American Preaching: A Dying Art? Its editor wrote, 'The chilling of the Word is a major contributor to the evident malaise in many a large Protestant denomination these days', while for Roman Catholics the sermon has never been very important but 'rather a kind of spiritual hors d'oeuvre before the Eucharist'. Two centuries previ-

ously, however, 'when Jonathan Edwards preached, all New England shook in its boots. '

So, if the Church is to flourish again, there is no greater need than a recovery of faithful, powerful, biblical preaching. God still says to his people, 'O that today you would listen to my Word' (cf. Ps. 95:7) and to preachers 'O that you would proclaim it. '

A Conviction about the Pastorate

There is much uncertainty in the modern Church about the nature and functions of the professional Christian ministry. To begin with, the social prestige which clergy once enjoyed in Western countries has now greatly diminished. Also, because the state has taken over much of the philanthropic work pioneered by the Church (e.g. in medicine, education and social welfare), some who would previously have offered themselves for ordination are finding that they can serve as well in the so-called 'secular city'. Then again, largely as a result of the charismatic movement, the New Testament doctrine of the Body of Christ has been recovered, with its corollary that every member has a gift and therefore a ministry. This being so, some are asking whether a professional ministry is necessary any longer? Have not the clergy been rendered redundant? These are some of the trends which have contributed to the contemporary loss of clerical morale.

In this situation, it is urgent to reassert the New Testament teaching that Jesus Christ still gives overseers to his Church and intends them to be a permanent feature of the

Church's structure. 'It is a trustworthy statement: if any

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man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.' (1 Tim. 3:1 NASB)



Moreover, in seeking to reestablish this truth, it would be helpful simultaneously to recover for these overseers the New Testament designation 'pastor'. 'Minister' is a misleading term because it is generic rather than specific, and always therefore requires a qualifying adjective to indicate what kind of ministry is in mind. 'Priest' is unfortunately ambiguous. Those with knowledge of the etymology of English words are aware that 'priest' is simply a contraction of 'presbyter', meaning 'elder'. But it is also used to translate the Greek word hiereus, a sacrificing priest, which is never used of Christian ministers in the New Testament. To call clergy 'priests' (common as the practice is in Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican circles) gives the false impression that their ministry is primarily directed towards God, whereas the New Testament portrays it as primarily directed towards the Church. So 'pastor' remains the most accurate term. The objection that it means 'shepherd', and that sheep and shepherds are irrelevant in the bustling cities

of the twentieth century, can best be met by recalling that the Lord Jesus called himself 'the Good Shepherd', that even city-dwelling Christians will always think of him as such, and that his pastoral ministry (with its characteristics Of intimate knowledge, sacrifice, leadership, protection and care) remains the permanent model for all pastors.

In England before the Reformation (as still in the Roman Catholic church), the sacerdotal concept of the ordained ministry was predominant. The ordaining bishop vested the candidate with a chasuble, saying 'Receive the sacerdotal vestment,' and gave him a paten and chalice, saying 'Receive power to offer sacrifice to God and to celebrate mass both for the living and for the dead.' This Porrectio instrumentorum, or delivery of the symbols of Office, was significantly altered by the English Reformers. Their first ordinal of 1550 directed that, in addition to the Paten and chalice, a Bible be delivered to the ordinand, giving him authority 'to preach the Word of God and to

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minister the holy sacraments'. In 1552, only two years later, the delivery of paten and chalice was discontinued and the sole 'instrument' delivered to the candidate became the Bible. The Anglican ordinal has remained substantially unaltered until our own day. 

This change in symbolism expressed the change in understanding of the ordained ministry. Its essence was now seen to be not priestly, but pastoral. It was and is a ministry of the Word. For the chief responsibility of the pastor who 'tends' his sheep is to 'feed' them. Whereas God rebuked the shepherds of Israel for feeding themselves instead of feeding their sheep, the Divine Shepherd causes his sheep to 'lie down in green pastures'. (Ezek. 34:1—3; Ps. 23:1, 2) Elaborating this Old Testament imagery, Jesus not only promised that his sheep, secure in his keeping, would 'go in and out and find pasture' but recommissioned Peter with the repeated instruction 'feed my lambs' and 'feed my sheep'. (John 10:9; 21:15, 17) This command the apostles never forgot. 'Tend the flock of God that is your charge' Peter himself wrote later, while Paul addressed the elders of the Ephesian church with the words, 'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians (or overseers), to feed the church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood.' (1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28) The elders would surely understand their privilege that the Chief Shepherd had delegated to them the pastoral care of his own sheep which he had purchased with his life-blood.

To feed God's flock is, of course, a metaphorical expression for teaching the Church. So the pastor is essentially the teacher. True, he is strictly forbidden by Christ to teach in the kind of authoritarian way which attempts to usurp the prerogative of the Spirit of truth and so to make the congregation docile in their dependence upon him. (Matt. 23:8) True also, in accordance with God's new covenant promise that 'they shall all know me' , the Holy Spirit is now given to all believers, so that all 'have been anointed by the Holy

One' and 'have been taught by God' and therefore in the

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last resort do not need human teachers. (Jer. 31 :34; 1 Thess. 4:9; I John 2:20—7) True again, all church members have a responsibility to let Christ's Word dwell richly within them so that they may 'teach and admonish one another in all wisdom' (Col. 3:16). Yet all these truths are not incom-



patible with the equipment, call and commissioning of specialists, that is, of pastors who devote themselves to a ministry of preaching and teaching. For among the many spiritual gifts which the ascended Lord bestows on his Church are those of 'pastors and teachers'. (Eph. 4:11) Commenting on this verse in its context, Calvin writes in the Institutes, 'We see how God, who could in a moment perfect his own, nevertheless desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the Church. We see the way set for it: the preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon the pastors.' He goes on to warn his readers against the folly and arrogance of rejecting this divine provision. 'Many are led either by pride, dislike or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous . . . This is like blotting out the face of God which shines upon us in teaching. '25 'For neither the light and heat of the sun, nor food and drink, are so necessary to nourish and sustain the present life, as the apostolic and pastoral office is necessary to preserve the Church on earth. '26

What Calvin was teaching in Geneva, the English Reformers were soon to grasp also. Nothing seemed more important to them than that the pastors should preach the pure Word of God and that the people should hear it. Here



is John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury:

Despise not, good brethren, despise not to hear God's Word declared. As you tender your own souls, be diligent to come to sermons; for that is the ordinary place where men's hearts be moved, and God's secrets be revealed. For, be the preacher never so weak, yet is the Word of God as mighty and as puissant as ever it was. 27

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In contrast, nothing could be more harmful to the Church than unfaithful preachers, as Thomas Becon outspokenly declared in the Preface to his book The Demands of Holy Scripture:

As there cannot be a greater jewel in a Christian commonwealth than an earnest, faithful and constant preacher of the Lord's Word, so can there not be a greater plague among any people than when they have reigning over them blind guides, dumb dogs, wicked wolves, hypocritical hirelings, popish prophets, which feed them not with the pure wheat of God's Word, but with the wormwood of men's trifling traditions. 28

I know nobody in our own century who has expressed this fundamental understanding of the pastorate more forcefully than Samuel Volbeda, whose homiletical lectures at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, were edited and published after his death under the title The Pastoral Genius of Preaching. Having defined preaching as 'the proclamation by word of mouth of God's written instead of his spoken Word', 29 he goes on to affirm that 'that written Word of God is pastoral through and through in its message, spirit and purpose.' Therefore the true preacher will never be 'a mere speaking tube or trumpet reproducing perfectly but mechanically the message Of God's written Word'; he must rather be a pastor, 'who is himself in heart and mind in perfect harmony with the pastoral Scriptures which he must preach. '30 Moreover, a good shepherd's care of his sheep is fourfold31 guiding (because sheep easily go astray), guarding — feeding,(against predatory wolves) and healing (binding up the wounds Of the injured). And all four of these activities are aspects Of the ministry of the Word.

It must not be imagined, however, that this identification of pastors as being fundamentally teachers is an idiosyncracy of reformed or evangelical Christians. It is equally acknowledged by many with more catholic leanings. Let

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me quote; for instance, from an ordination charge given by Michael Ramsey while he was Archbishop of Canterbury. It is entitled 'Why the Priest?' and the first answer he gives to his own question is as follows:

First, the priest is the teacher and preacher, and as such he is the man of theology. He is pledged to be a dedicated student of theology; and his study need not be vast in



extent but it will be deep in its integrity, not ip order that he may be erudite, but in order that he may be simple. It is those whose studies are shallow who are confused and confusing. 3

In writing thus about a 'pastoral' ministry as a 'teaching' ministry, I do not think it is necessary for me to be drawn into the debate about 'ordination' and about what if anything distinguishes clergy and laity. Suffice it to say that God desires every local church to have the benefit of episkopé or pastoral oversight; that this oversight — at least over a congregation of any size should be exercized by a team (the word 'elders' nearly always occurs in the plural in the New Testament, e.g. Acts 14:23, 20:17; 1 Tim. 4:14; Titus 1:5); and that such a team shöuld include part-time and full-time, clerical and lay, stipendiary and voluntary ministers — and I believe women as well as men, although the New Testament indicates that their roles will not be identical. There is immense value in the team concept, as I know from experience as well as Scripture, because then we can capitalize one another's strengths and supplement one another's weaknesses. Moreover, gifted lay people should be encouraged to join the team, and exercize their ministry in a voluntary capacity according to their gifts. One of these is preaching, and the Church needs many more lay Preachers. Nevertheless, the pastoral ministry of regular Preaching and teaching is extremely exacting. It demands much time and energy in study. So a pastoral team in any sizeable church needs at least one full-time leader, who will

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give himself to the ministry of the Word. Without this the congregation is bound to be impoverished.

The task of feeding the flock or teaching the church can be accomplished by the pastoral team in a variety of contexts. The Good Shepherd himself preached to the crowds, spent time with individuals and trained the twelve. A pastoral ministry which is modelled on his will similarly include preaching to the congregation, counselling individuals, and training groups. Is there a difference, then, between preaching and teaching? Certainly the two words are not interchangeable, and C. H. Dodd popularized the thesis that in the New Testament the k&rygma (preaching) was the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus, according to the Scriptures and in an eschatological setting, with a summons to repent and believe, while the didache (teaching) was instruction — mostly ethical — given to converts. This distinction is important, although probably it has been overpressed. For in the public ministry of Jesus 'teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom' (Matt. 4:23; 9:35) are not sharply distinguished, while the apostle Paul described himself as both a 'preacher' and a 'teacher' of the gospel (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11), and when Luke takes leave of him at the end Of the Acts, he is 'preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ'. (28:31) No doubt his preaching was more evangelistic in purpose and his teaching more systematic in character, but it is not clear that the one was entirely distinct from the other in content; probably they overlapped considerably.

It has sometimes been said that in the New Testament to preach (kirusso, 'herald') is entirely evangelistic, and that the modern brand of preaching (to a Christian congregation in church) neither occurs in the New Testament, nor is even contemplated. This is not so, however. The practice of assembling the people of God to hear his Word expounded goes back to the Old Testament, was continued in the synagogues, and was then taken over and christianized by the apostles. Thus Moses gave the law to the priests with

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the instruction to gather the people and read it to them, presumably explaining and applying it as they went along.  (Deut. 31:9—13; cf. Mal. 2:7—9) Ezra the priest and scribe 'brought the law before the assembly' and 'read from it'. The Levitical priests also shared in this ministry: 'they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.' (Neh. 8: 1—8) Later the synagogue services included readings from the law and the prophets, after which somebody preached. Thus Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue first read



from Isaiah 61 and then in his subsequent message claimed that he was himself the fulfilment of this Scripture, and spoke other 'gracious words' which astonished his hearers. (Luke 4: 16—22) Similarly, Paul in Pisidian Antioch, 'after the reading of the law and the prophets', was invited by the rulers of the synagogue to share with the people a 'word of exhortation', which he proceeded to do. (Acts 13:14—43)

It is not surprising, therefore, that when believers either left or were@ected from the synagogues, and began to arrange their own distinctively Christian assemblies, the same pattern of Bible reading followed by Bible exposition was preserved, except that there was now added to extracts from the law and prophets a reading from one of the apostles' letters (e.g. Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 2 Thess. 3:14). Luke gives us only one peep into such an assembly. It was the famous occasion at Troas when the Christians gathered 'on the first day of the week'. Their worship included both the breaking of bread and also a sermon from Paul which 'he prolonged until midnight' with disastrous consequences. (Acts \_20:7 ff.) Although this is the only Christian worship service in the New Testament which is specifically said to have included a sermon, there is no reason to suppose that it was exceptional. On the contrary, Paul gives Timothy specific instructions not only about the conduct of public prayer (1 Tim. 2:1 ff.) but also about Preaching: 'Till I come, attend to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, to teaching.' (1 Tim. 4:14) The clear implication is that after the reading from the Bible,

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and arising out of it, there should be both paraklésis (exhortation) and didaskalia (instruction). This is not to say that there was no element of evangelistic proclamation as well, for there will have been fringe members in attendance like the 'godfearers' on the edge of the synagogue community, together with catechumens under instruction for baptism, and even sometimes heathen visitors. (1 Cor. 14:23) Yet the emphasis will have been on teaching the faithful. It is because the pastor had this responsibility to feed the flock that among the qualifications for the presbyterate are listed both loyalty to the apostolic faith (so that he could 'give instruction in sound doctrine and confute those who contradict it') and a gift for teaching. (Titus 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:2)

If today's pastors were to take seriously the New Testament emphasis on the priority of preaching and teaching, not only would they find it extremely fulfilling themselves, but also it would undoubtedly have a very wholesome effect on the Church. Instead, tragic to relate, many are essentially administrators, whose symbols of ministry are the office rather than the study, and the telephone rather than the Bible. Preaching in August 1977 during the Centennial Thanksgiving Service of Wycliffe College , Toronto, Donald Coggan, at that time Archbishop of Canterbury, reminded the congregation that the Bishop gives each candidate a Bible at his ordination: 'he does not go forth primarily as an organizer or a financier or an entertainer; he goes as a man authorized by the Lord of the Church, entrusted with the deposit of the Christian revelation, recorded in majestic outline in the Book in his hand, and incarnate in the Word made flesh. ' Dr. Coggan went on to express the hope that during its second century Wycliffe College would send out a stream of men who would not only study the Bible themselves, feeding on it and digging into it, but also 'give all that they have to its exposition and application'.

If we were to establish 'the ministry Of the Word and prayer' as our priority, as the apostles did (Acts 6:4), it  would involve for most of us a radical restructuring of our

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programme and timetable, including a considerable delegation of other responsibilities to lay leaders, but it would express a truly New Testament conviction about the essential nature of the pastorate.

A Conviction about Preaching

Granted that pastors are preachers and teachers, what sort of sermons are they to preach? The textbooks on homiletics tend to give a long list of options. Perhaps the most thorough classification of sermon types is given by W. E. Sangster in his famous book The Craft of the Sermon. He distinguishes between three main kinds of sermon and assigns a chapter to each, although he adds that 'the range of combinations is almost infinite. '33 The first is defined 'according to subject matter' (e.g. biblical, ethical, devotional, doctrinal, social or evangelistic), the second 'according to structural type' (e.g. direct exposition, progressive argument, or 'faceting') and the third 'according to psychological method' (i.e. according to whether the preacher sees himself as teacher, barrister, perplexed man or devil's advocate).

Other writers, less thorough than Sangster, have been content with simpler classifications. There are topical sermons and textual sermons, they say. Some are evangelistic or apologetic or prophetic, others doctrinal or devotional or ethical or hortatory, while somewhere down the line 'exegetical' or 'expository' sermons are included. I cannot myself acquiesce in this relegation (sometimes even grudging) of expository preaching to one alternative among many. It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. Of course if by an 'expository' sermon is meant a verse-by-verse explanation of a lengthy Passage of Scripture, then indeed it is only one possible way Of preaching, but this would be a misuse of the word. Properly speaking, 'exposition' has a much broader meaning. It refers to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary). To expound

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Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. The expositor prizes open what appears to be closed, makes plain what is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed. The opposite of exposition is 'imposition', which is to impose on the text what is not there. But the 'text' in question could be a verse, or a sentence, or even a single word. It could equally be a paragraph, or a chapter, or a whole book. The size of the text is immaterial, so long as it is biblical. What matters is what we do with it. Whether it is long or short, our responsibility as expositors is to open it up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction or falsification. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is  said.

Let me now draw attention to some of the principal benefits of this discipline.

First, exposition sets us limits. It restricts us to the scriptural text, since expository preaching is biblical preaching. We are not expounding a passage from either secular literature or a political speech or even a religious book, let alone our own opinions. No, our text is invariably taken from God's Word. The very first qualification Of expositors is the recognition that we are guardians of a sacred 'deposit' of truth, 'trustees' of the gospel, 'stewards of the mysteries of God' 34 As Donald Coggan expressed it in his first book on preaching:

The Christian preacher has a boundary set for him. When he enters the pulpit, he is not an entirely free man. There is a very real sense in which it may be said of him that the Almighty has set him his bounds that he shall not pass. He is not at liberty to invent or choose his message: it has been committed to him, and it is for him to declare, expound and commend it to his hearers . . . It is a great

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thing to come under the magnificent tyranny of the Gospel!35

Secondly, exposition demands integrity. Not everybody is persuaded of this. It is commonly said that the Bible can be made to mean anything one wants — which is true only if one lacks integrity. Somerset Maugham in his novel The Moon and Sixpence describes how the Rev. Robert Strickland wrote a biography of his late father, which was more myth than history. In reality his father, driven by a strange demonic obsession to paint, had abandoned his wife, family and career. In the biography, however, he was portrayed as an excellent husband and father, and a man of kindness, industry and morality. This extraordinary distortion of the truth led Maugham to comment, 'The modern clergyman has acquired in his study of the science which I believe is called exegesis an astonishing facility for explain-



ing things away. ' He added with not a little sarcasm that the Rev. Robert Strickland's subtlety of interpretation 'must surely lead him in the fullness of time to the highest dignities of the Church. I see already his muscular calves encased in the gaiters episcopal. '36

The 'exegesis' which Somerset Maugham thus caricatures is in fact, or should be, a discipline of the utmost rigour. It is sometimes graced with the rather long-winded adjective 'grammatico-historical', because it signifies the interpretation of a text in accordance with both its historical origin and its grammatical construction. The sixteenthcentury Reformers are rightly given the credit for having recovered this method by rescuing biblical interpretation from the fanciful allegorizations of medieval writers. When they spoke of the 'literal' meaning, they were contrasting it with the 'allegorical'; they were not denying that some Passages of Scripture are deliberately poetical in style and figurative in meaning. They emphasized that what every Bible student must look for is the plain, natural, obvious meaning of each text, without subtleties. What did the

Original author intend his words to mean? That was the

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question. Moreover, it is a question which can with patience be answered, and answered confidently. We must not be infected by the modern cynical mood in literary criticism, which suspects every author of having secret purposes or occult meanings which need to be detected and unmasked. No, the biblical authors were honest men, not deceivers, and they intended their writings to be understood, not to be 'infinitely interpretable'

The Reformers also spoke much of 'the analogy of faith', by which they meant their belief that Scripture possesses a unity given it by the mind of God, that it must therefore be allowed to interpret itself, one passage throwing light upon another, and that the Church has no liberty so to 'expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another' (Article 20). They did not deny the diversity of formulation which Scripture contains, but they refused to emphasize it at the expense of Scripture's unity, as some modern scholars do. In contrast to these, they saw harmonization (which is not a synonym for manipulation) as a responsible Christian task. 

At the end of April 1564, a month before he died, Calvin said goodbye to the pastors of Geneva. Would that every preacher were able to claim what he was able to say to them:

I have not corrupted one single passage of Scripture, nor twisted it as far as I know, and when I might well have brought in subtle meanings, if I had studied subtlety, I have trampled the whole lot underfoot, and I have always studied to be simple 37

Another expositor, some 250 years later, who made the same claim, was Charles Simeon of Cambridge. At one Of his celebrated sermon parties, held every other Friday evening in term-time, he exhorted his student guests in these terms, 'Be most solicitous to ascertain from the original and from the context the true, faithful and primary meaning of every text. '38 For this is what he took pains to do

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himself, 'The author has endeavoured,' he explained in his preface to the collection of his sermon outlines entitled Horae Homileticae, 'without prejudice or partiality, to give to every text its just meaning, its natural bearing and its legitimate use. And in a letter to his publisher he wrote, 'My endeavour is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there. I have a great jealousy on this head: never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding. '

It was this resolute determination to sit humbly under the authority of the Scriptures, instead of standing in judgment on them, which led Simeon to distrust all schemes and systems of divinity.

The author . is no friend to systematizers in theology (he wrote). He has endeavoured to derive from the Scriptures alone his view of religion; and to them it is his wish to adhere, with scrupulous fidelity; never wresting any portion of the Word of God to favour a particular opinion, but giving to every part of it that sense which it seems to him to have been designed by its great Author to convey. 40

The same, in his opinion, could not be claimed by the partisan Calvinists and Arminians of his day. On the contrary, as Simeon wrote with innocent humour, 'there is not a determined votary of either system who, if he had been in the company of St. Paul, whilst he was writing his different Epistles, would not have recommended him to alter one or

Other of his expressions.' As for Simeon himself, such an attitude of superiority towards the inspired text was out of the question. For he was entirely 'content to sit as a learner at the feet of the holy Apostles' and had 'no ambition to teach them how they ought to have spoken' 4 1

Thirdly, exposition identifies the pitfalls we must at all costs avoid. Since the resolve of the expositor is to be faithful to his text, the two main pitfalls may be termed

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forgetfulness and disloyalty. The forgetful expositior loses sight of his text by going off at a tangent and following his own fancy. The disloyal expositor appears to remain with his text, but strains and stretches it into something quite different from its original and natural meaning.

G. Campbell Morgan, one of the great expositors of this century, emphasized the necessity of having a text and elucidating it. By contrast, he wrote, Dr. Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol College Oxford, 'declared that it was his habit to write his sermons, and then choose a text as a peg on which to hang them. I am quite free to say', continued Campbell Morgan that the study of his sermons will reveal the accuracy of his statement, and show the peril of the method Yet more unscrupulous was another preacher who 'gave out his text and said "That is my text. I am now going to preach. Maybe we'll meet again, my text and I, and maybe not

This kind of cavalier indifference to one's text at least has the merit of being candidly acknowledged. Much worse is the pretence of expounding a text when in reality one is exploiting it. The New Testament writers themselves warn us in vivid imagery against this wickedness. False teachers are condemned for 'swerving' from the truth, like an archer who misses the target, for 'peddling' God's Word, like a tradesman who sells by trickery, for 'perverting' the gospel by altering its content, and for 'twisting' the Scriptures into an unrecognizable shape. By contrast with all these crimes, Paul declares with great solemnity that he has 'renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways', that he utterly refuses 'to tamper with God's Word', and that instead he relies on 'the open statement of the truth'. 43

Yet the wilful manipulation of Scripture by those who are determined to make it mean what they want it to mean has been a constant disgrace to the Church. As Professor A. Vinet of Lausanne put it in the middle of the last century, 'a passage of Scripture has a thousand times served for a passport to ideas which were not scriptural. '44 Sometimes, it has been the comparatively harmless hunt for an

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text, let alone out of its context, reached its nadir when a preacher who thoroughly disliked the Old Testament is said to have based his diatribe on the words 'hang all the law and the prophets'.

Such unprincipled text-twisting on the part of preachers reminded R. W. Dale of conjurors, and prompted him in his 1878 Yale Lectures to say:

I always think of the tricks of those ingenious gentlemen who entertain the public by rubbing a sovereign between their hands till it becomes a canary, and drawing out of their coat sleeves half-a-dozen brilliant glass globes filled



with water, and with four or five goldfish swimming in

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each of them. For myself, I like to listen to a good preacher, and I have no objection in the world to be amused by the tricks of a clever conjuror; but I prefer to keep the conjuring and the preaching separate: conjuring on Sunday morning, conjuring in church, conjuring with texts of Scripture, is not quite to my taste. 48

Only the resolve to be a painstaking expositor will enable us to avoid these pitfalls.

Fourthly, exposition gives us confidence to preach. If we were expatiating upon our own views or those of some fallible fellow human being, we would be bound to do so diffidently. But if we are expounding God's Word with integrity and honesty, we can be very bold. Whoever speaks, wrote Peter, should do so 'as one who utters oracles of God'. (1 Pet. 4:11) This is not because we presume to regard our own words as an oracular utterance, but because like the ancient Jews we have been 'entrusted with the oracles of God' (Rom. 4:2), and because our overriding concern is to handle them with such scrupulous fidelity that they themselves are heard to speak, or rather that God speaks through them.

Professor Gustaf Wingren expresses this admirably when he writes:

The expositor is only to provide mouth and lips for t he passage itself, so that the Word may advance . The

of really the great Scriptures. preachers When . they are, have in fact, spoken only for the a time servants.

the Word gleams within the passage itself and is listened to: the voice makes itself heard . . . The passage



itself is the voice, the speech of God; the preacher is the mouth and the lips, and . the . . congregation the Wordear in which the voice sounds Only in order that the may advance -- may go out into the world, and force its way through enemy walls to the prisoners within is preaching necessary. 49

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such is the theological foundation for the ministry of preaching. God is light; God has acted; God has spoken; and God has caused his action and speech to be preserved in writing. Through this written Word he continues to speak with a living voice powerfully. And the Church needs to listen attentively to his Word, since its health and maturity depend upon it. So pastors must expound it; it is to this they have been called. Whenever they do so with integrity, the voice of God is heard, and the Church is convicted and humbled, restored and reinvigorated, and transformed into an instrument for his use and glory.

These truths about God and Scripture, the Church, the pastorate and biblical exposition, need to reinforce our trembling convictions. Then the current objections to preaching will not deter us. On the contrary, we will give ourselves to this ministry with fresh zeal and determination. Nothing will be able to deflect us from our priority task.

# Notes

I Some of the material of this chapter has already appeared in the tribute to the late Dr. Wilbur Smith, entitled Evangelical  Roots, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Nelson, 1978).

1. cf. Ps. 19:1•, Isa. 6:3; Rom. 1:19, 20.
2. cf. the use of these adjectives 'better' and 'eternal' in Heb. 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9: 12; 14, 15, 23; 13:20 and the expression 'more glorious' in 2 Cor. 3:4—11 AV. 
3. 1 have elaborated the implications of the double authorship Of Scripture, especially in relation to human cultures, in my 1979 Olivier Beguin lecture, published by the Bible Society in Australia and U.K., and by Inter-Varsity Press in the United States. 



5 Stalker, p. 93.

6 Solzhenitsyn, p. 22. 7 ibid., p. 26. 



9 Jer. 23:29; Ps. 119: 105; Jas. 1:18, 22-5; 1 Pet. Ps. 19:10. 

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1() Forsyth, pp. 3, 15, 56.

I l Wingren, p. 45.

1. ibid., p. 146.
2. ibid., pp. 207-8.
3. ibid., p. 108.
4. ibid., p. 95.
5. ibid., p. 124.
6. Spurgeon, All-Round Ministry, p. 187. 
7. e.g. Deut. 4:1, 30; 5:1•, 6:1-3•, 11:26-8•, 12:28; 15:5; 28:1.
8. Prov. 8:1-36, cf. 1:20-33. 
9. see Isa. 1:2, 10, 19, 20; 42:18-25•, 43:8•, 48:d7-19, 22.
10. Jer. 7:23-6, cf. 25:3-7; 32:33•, 35:12-16; 44:1-6.
11. 2 Chr. 36:15, 16.
12. Lloyd-Jones, Preaching, p. 24.
13. Dargan, Vol. 1, p. 13.
14. Calvin IV. 1.5.
15. ibid., IV.111.2.
16. Works Vol. 11, p. 1034. 28 Works Vol. 111, p. 598 29 Volbeda, p. 24.
17. ibid., p. 26.
18. ibid., pp. 79-85.
19. Ramsey, M., The Christian Priest, p. 7.
20. Sangster, The Craft, p. 92. 
21. 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:12-14; 1 Thess. 2:4•, 1 Cor. 4:1, 2.



1. Coggan, Stewards, pp. 46, 48. 36 Maugham, p. 8. 
2. Cadier, pp. 173-5.
3. Smyth, The Art, p. 176.
4. Simeon, Horae, p. 12.
5. ibid., pp. 4—5 Preface to Vol. 1.
6. ibid., p. 6.
7. Morgan, G. C. , Preaching, pp. 40, 42.
8. 2 Tim, 2:18; 2 Cor. 2:17; Gal. 1:7; 2 Pet. 3:16; 1 Cor. 4:2. 44 Vinet, p. 76.
9. McWilliam, p. 39.
10. Jones, p. 288.
11. Quoted at the 1935 Islington Clerical Conference by the Rev• G. T. Manley. See Authority and the Christian Faith, Thynne

1935, p. 50.

1. Dale, p. 127.
2. Wingren, pp. 201—3.

