

The Problem with Preaching: *a personal response*

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I applaud David Allis' efforts to reevaluate the things we hold dear. Here he draws on a breadth of valuable experience to ask serious questions about preaching. But having lingered with this article I still remain unconvinced by its conclusions. Various reasons for this come to mind:

1. With respect to its use of definitions, it is slippery. Whether it be preaching in the Bible or preaching in the church today it is never fully clear what is meant by the word. Preaching is the target but the target seems to keep moving and morphing and slipping from my grasp.

Furthermore the approach taken tends to paint an opposing view of preaching in its worst possible light while the view being advocated is painted in its best light. This creates a weaker argument. The reader will always be left wondering if what is being criticised is really that bad and whether what is being promoted is really that good.

2. With respect to its handling of the biblical material, it is incomplete. The "preaching is extra-biblical" conclusion is reached not so much because our preaching today has strayed so far but because the original understanding of preaching in the Bible in this article is not spacious enough.

To complete the biblical picture of preaching there are three directions in which to look. One is the actual sermons in the Bible. Nehemiah 8 and Luke 24 and Acts 2 are favourites. At these crucial turning points in the biblical story God takes time over a sermon. These three are supreme examples of my preferred definition of preaching: 'preaching is when the flow of scripture and the evidences of experience are orally presented under the power of the Spirit in order to transform lives.'

Another direction to consider is the explicit teaching of the Bible. One example tends

to suffice: 2 Timothy 3:1-4:8. Here is the Apostle Paul closing his extensive letter-writing ministry and unburdening his heart to Timothy. Final words are significant words. When read aloud the pathos in his pen and the prominence given to preaching the Word are striking.

A final direction in which to turn is the vocabulary for preaching in the Bible. There is an error which is commonplace. It is to select a single Greek word (or two), image its range of meaning as a small circle, and conclude that the full meaning of preaching has been captured and contained within that single circle. No! The vocabulary of preaching in the Bible is like the vocabulary of 'snow' for Eskimoes. It is so central to life that the words proliferate. Bryan Chapell nominates 10 Hebrew words and 24 Greek words that each add something to our understanding of preaching.¹ Murray Harris once took me to Acts 17:2-4 where six of these words are used in the space of three verses.

The single circle is not the relevant image. There are at least 34 circles to consider. The way forward approximates the overlapping Olympic Rings - but covering an entire wall. We need to be careful with assertions like 'extra-biblical'. My suspicion is that while much of what we do may not fit into a favoured single circle it probably does fit somewhere on that wall. Rather than deleting it from our practice we need to give our best efforts to doing it better.

3. With respect to its understanding of history, it appears to be mistaken. New Zealand is particularly susceptible to renewal movements. These movements build out there in the ocean. We catch the incoming wave and surf it for awhile. Eventually it crashes onto the shore and off we go looking for the next wave. Signs & Wonders and the Toronto Blessing come to mind. So too does the Emerging and/or

Missional Church movement whose ideas on preaching can be overheard in this article. While there is much that is commendable about this latest wave it does need to think harder about history if it is to avoid a similar fate.

What does this 'thinking harder' involve? Characteristically these renewal movements tend to be about *under-stating* the uniqueness of the early church's moment in history, *over-stating* the uniqueness of today's moment in history and then *dismissing* much of the stuff that goes on in-between. While admittedly more restrained on this point this article still contains hints of this 'understating:overstating:dismissing' generalisation.

What about the assertion that "there is no biblical basis for preaching in churches to people who have been Christians for many years"? But on this occasion isn't this 'biblical basis' dealing with a church living so close to the time of its birth – a non-repeatable moment - that there couldn't be many people who had been Christians for many years. We cannot always turn description of the early church into prescription for today's church. Theirs was a unique moment.

Alternatively consider the twin assertions near the end of the article about how "the Christian situation has changed ... (and) society has changed". So many become so intoxicated with these changes and the bold assertions begin to flow. 'Our era is unlike any era that has gone before'. And so it demands an approach discontinuous with the past. They forget that history pendulums more than it evolves. History adds more than it deletes. While such over-statement might not be discerned in the evidence being gathered here, the conclusion comes pretty close. Is "getting rid of the preaching, preacher and sermon words" really the way forward? That is a very big call to make.

And at this point let's turn to that final 'dismissing' part of the generalisation. Just

as one example consider the seven volume work of Hughes Oliphant Olds. In it he tracks how expository, evangelistic, catechetical, festal, and prophetic preaching have "appeared and reappeared throughout the whole history of preaching."² Here is a broad and unbroken witness. Is not the way forward to be about giving ongoing expression to this witness rather than breaking it, narrowing it and thereby dismissing it?

4. With respect to being possessed by theological convictions, it appears to be distracted. Some years ago David Gill wrote about how "our lives are crushed and directed by the quest for quantifiable growth, measurable success and rational efficiency (the Technical Trinity)."³ This Trinity inspires devotion from people. It creates its own disciples. That trend from the social scientist, that statistic from the demographic survey, that theory from the educational psychologist – they all become so persuasive. And so when words like "passive" and "ineffective" and "limits learning" and "doesn't change people" are lined up against preaching as they are in this article, people just fold. The commitment to the task dissolves.

But where are the theological convictions? Where are the truths which so hold us that we confront the 'cultural shifts' rather than bow down to them? Where is the theology of preaching and a theology of the word? Is the 'other' Trinity able to join in this conversation – and maybe even control it? We can bend to the occasional trend and statistic and theory but must we be held captive so routinely to them? For example, if the essence of a biblical spirituality is a speaking God to whom people listen and obey – and it is – then any 'visual' and 'interactive' learning associated with preaching must be used to help people become better listeners not just better participants.

Speaking more personally, it matters not one whit to me if someone was to create a diagnostic test which demonstrated that

over a specific period of time my preaching had led neither to quantifiable growth nor measurable success and was therefore a total waste of money. My response would be to find ways to become more prayerful and more dependent on God and to keep giving it my best and expect God to do the rest simply because my understanding of the Bible and theology and history demonstrates that God chooses to use the foolishness of preaching to achieve his purposes in his own way and at his own pace. There is a time to be faithful to something received and revealed and not just be innovative with something new and improved. In the NZ setting biblical preaching has not been tried and found wanting, it has been wanted and not tried often enough. We are too impatient.

5. With respect to its advocacy of what needs to happen, it appears to be reductionist. Imagine the local church as a stage in a theatre. In the foreground the drama of ministry and mission is taking place. Then as a backdrop we find the props and the staging which creates the scene. Now here is the question. Is biblical preaching a foreground activity or a backdrop activity?

This article seems to be critiquing preaching as a foreground activity. That's fine. It is at its best as a backdrop activity anyway. Take the story of Spreydon Baptist Church as an example. For a generation pilgrims have visited and been inspired. They observe the ministry and mission activity in the foreground and then go home and try to cut-and-paste it. But they've copied the wrong thing. They've missed the backdrop. More tragically, they don't notice the way God uses that backdrop to inspire and sustain the activity in the foreground. The connection is virtually umbilical. And what has dominated this backdrop for forty years? It is a systematic and applied biblical preaching ministry.

Sticking with the stage imagery the unsettling feature of this article is that the stage seems to be reduced in size with

preaching then being removed from it. Why is this necessary? There are so many good ideas here: initiating participative Bible studies, exploring dialogical approaches, creating interactive and accountability groups etc. Why can't these ideas complement preaching rather than replace it? Why not make the backdrop better and the foreground larger?

6. With respect to its assumptions and assertions, it appears so foreign. Let me lay a card on the table. At the core of God's call on my life is the teaching of preaching. And as a teacher of preaching this article assumes and asserts things about preaching with which I do not want to be associated.

Preaching as "disempowering" ... as "unable to relate the Bible to the world of work" ... as "based around themes with little biblical basis" ... as "fostering biblical illiteracy" ... as "eloquent discourse" ... as a "created dependency structure" ... as "devaluing the insights of others" ... as being by "one trained professional"? What about the preacher as the sole "mediator (of God's word) to everyone else"? On and on it goes...

Every single one of these assertions is horrifying. In the training offered at Carey Baptist College every single one of them is intentionally subverted. It would be very sad indeed to discover them to be as widespread as this article suggests.

In reality I am more hopeful than I have ever been about the ministry of biblical preaching in New Zealand. I still moan occasionally to students about how 'New Zealand seems to have the weakest heritage of biblical preaching in the English-speaking world' and about how 'the sharpest criticism of preaching comes from within the church and not from beyond it'. But the times they are a-changing. I used to stammer when asked to recommend a church in Auckland where there is good Bible preaching. Not any more. Numbers in the classroom and in church-based seminars are as strong as ever – and much

younger than ever. People are hungry to learn. I delight in being a resource person at a regular gathering with former students committed to biblical preaching – a

gathering for which there is a waiting list. And in a similar vein this article by David Allis is to be welcomed. After all any headline has gotta be good!

¹ Bryan Chapell. *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Baker, 1994) 89-91

² Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* vol 1 (Eerdmans, 1998) 8

³ David Gill, *The Opening of the Christian Mind* (IVP, 1989) 42