

## Preface

The inspiration for this book came from an off-the-cuff remark by Dick Lucas on one of his visits to Cornhill Scotland. 'Why,' he said, 'since we have so many excellent resources, commentaries and the like, is our preaching often so boring? Why don't you write a book about it?' At that time I didn't think there was enough material for a book, but for a number of years I did a lecture on the subject at Cornhill. More recently I returned to the idea and a number of people encouraged me to explore it further and this book is the result.

Much of what is said here is what I have been thinking and teaching and trying to exemplify over four decades in a range of contexts. My ministry began in a tough and unproductive situation in Bannockburn, Scotland, where the response was largely negative. After a few years, by a series of circumstances which I did not initiate, I went to Durham, England, initially to teach Old Testament at Cranmer Hall, St John's College. Later this became a joint ministry with what was then Claypath Church (now Christchurch) where a large student ministry developed. The teaching of the Bible in both contexts was very stimulating and rewarding as well as exhausting. Thereafter I became Director of Rutherford House (now Rutherford Centre for Reformed Theology) and preached widely as well as running preaching and other classes. Most recently I became Senior Tutor at the newly-formed Cornhill

Scotland and Associate Minister at the Tron Church, Glasgow. Thus for many years, I not only preached but was involved in training preachers. I also spoke at Christian Unions and other conferences. These twin emphases remain at the heart of my ministry in retirement. Preaching and theology belong together and their separation is detrimental, indeed destructive to both.

Underlying this book is the conviction that expository preaching is not only one of many good things for a church but the lifeblood of a healthy fellowship. Without it, other things, which may be good in themselves, can go badly wrong and fail to build anything of lasting worth. It is hard work and, particularly when results appear to be meagre, there is the temptation to try what seems to be more attractive and rewarding. This book is an attempt to encourage all of us to stick to the task and to be the best that we can be.

I hope to encourage preachers at all stages. Those just setting out need to be realistic and expect hard work, and often hard knocks, and I trust that they will find help here to keep going. Those longer on the road also need encouragement to keep pressing on believing that it is the proclamation of the Word of God which builds up the Church and reaches the world. Those, like me, who have retired from full-time ministry, need to keep on believing that in the Lord our labour has not been in vain, and to continue as opportunity and strength allow to carry on the work of the ministry and encourage younger people.

A number of friends and colleagues have read much of this book in draft and I am grateful for their support and helpful comments. They are Willie Philip (whom I also thank for the Introduction), David Jackman, Philip Stewart, Phil Copeland, Rupert Hunt Taylor, Garry Brotherston and Terry McCutcheon. I also thank Dick Lucas for suggesting the book and Christian Focus for agreeing to publish it. No words can express my thanks to my dear wife Thelma for her constant love, encouragement and support not only as I wrote this book but for all our years together.

## PREFACE

As well as the people mentioned above, a book like this, drawing on my preaching and teaching over the years, has profited from sermons and talks listened to, books read and conversations recent and long ago. I have tried always to acknowledge the source of quotations and ideas from others. However, there are probably many times when comments or ideas have become so much part of my own thinking that I have forgotten the source. I apologise to anyone I have not acknowledged and am very grateful for the wealth of resources available to us (see especially Chapter 2). Ultimately, the Lord whom we all serve is the source of whatever is valuable in what we say or write. To God be the glory.

Bob Fyall  
Glasgow  
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## Chapter I

### A brittle crazie glass

Preaching does not always enjoy a good reputation and indeed the word is often used in a derogatory sense of pompous and boring speech. On the other hand, some have praised it in startling terms. C. H. Spurgeon said to his students, 'If God calls you to be a preacher, I would hate to see you stoop to be a king.' Others have spoken of preaching as the highest calling which anyone can be privileged to undertake. While agreeing with the latter statements, I suggest that they contain a danger. The danger is of over-valuing the preacher rather than preaching, the messenger more than the message. That, in our celebrity culture, can lead to the elevating of gurus whose every utterance is treated with reverence. Thus personality cults develop which honour humans more than God and place preachers on impossibly high pedestals.

That is why I have chosen the title 'A brittle crazie glass' from the sonnet 'The Windows' by the seventeenth-century preacher/poet George Herbert which shows both the weakness of the preacher and his utter dependence on the power of God as he is totally reliant on the light shining through him. In

Herbert's time, the word 'crazie'<sup>1</sup> did not mean exactly what it means now. Rather it develops the word 'brittle' as it means something like 'fragmented' or 'broken' (in contemporary English the nuance is still present in the term 'crazy paving'). It is through a fragile and broken vessel that the light comes. That is surely the same idea as in Paul's words, 'we have this treasure in jars of clay' (2 Cor. 4:7). These words, then as now, remain a challenge to the 'super apostles' he deals with later in the letter. The image of the glass in Herbert's poem refers particularly to a stained-glass window, dark in itself but glorious when the sun shines through it.

So we are brittle, feeble and broken to avoid thinking too highly of ourselves and yet be the channels of the grace of God. This theology of preaching flows from the fact that God is a speaking God whose words bring life (Gen.1). This Word is never empty, but like the seed, brings life and indeed ultimately leads to a new creation. Study Isaiah 55:10-13, a passage to which we shall return. What is truly amazing is that God has chosen humans to speak words which also do not return empty. A striking example of this is Acts 10 where Peter preaches to the Roman centurion Cornelius and others. 'While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.' Notice the careful language. The Word of the Lord is not collapsed into the words of Peter, but the apostle's words are a necessary part of how the divine Word comes to those assembled. That is a picture of what happens when the Spirit takes our human words, uses them faithfully to unfold the written word and so leads us to the living Word, the Lord Christ Himself. Thus every sermon becomes an event when we meet the Lord.

The purpose of this book is to encourage brittle crazie glasses like myself to become confident in the God-given task while conscious of our own inadequacies. In a later chapter we will look at the preacher's personality and how this relates to our work. But it is worth asking, why are sermons often non-

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1. I've kept the original spelling and also in the complete poem which can be found at the end of the chapter.

events and frankly often boring? Here are some suggestions; probably you can think of others yourself.

*Why are sermons often non-events?*

The first is the 'overloaded' sermon. Later we'll look at the necessary study and hard work, but that does not mean that we simply unload all we have discovered; there needs to be careful sifting of our material to make sure we have not obscured our main point by unnecessary detail. For sermons, on say the Old Testament history books, some background information is necessary but that is to be strictly subordinated to the message. In preaching on the later chapters of 2 Kings, for example, we will need to talk about Assyria and Babylon, but we should not give a potted history of both empires.

The next is the 'truncated' sermon which is the mirror image of the above. This is the kind of sermon where we know how we got from start to finish but everyone else doesn't have a clue. We must remember that the listeners will not have studied the text in the way we have and will need guidance.

Another type of sermon which can misfire is, 'I've done my theological training and I know the biblical languages.' Training is essential and we need to show the fruits of study but not parade them. Sometimes we will talk about possible alternative translations to the one we are using, but we need to be careful that we do not cause people to wonder if the translation they are using can be trusted.

Then there is the exegetical sermon which is content to 'explain' the passage without applying it. Incidentally, never say that you or someone else is going to explain the passage as if that were the whole act of preaching. We begin there, but there is so much else, and when we are dealing with poetry or apocalypse it is not even a helpful phrase. How do you 'explain' Isaiah 24, Song of Songs or Revelation 12?

An opposite of the above is, 'I say what's on my heart'; well, I hope we all do. But often that is an excuse for blessed thoughts strung together with anecdotes. Often that type of sermon is weak on exegesis and sloppy in application. The

other thing is that that kind of sermon can often be produced with the bare minimum of preparation.

Another wrong method is taking passages out of context and saying things which may well be true but do not come from the passage. If we ignore context we can say anything we like. I recall a sermon on 2 Kings 4:8-10 where a rich woman in Shunem provides the prophet Elisha with a room at the top of her house. The sermon was called 'Upper storey living'. She provided a bed which speaks of rest; a table which suggests fellowship; a lamp which is the Word of God; and a chair to sit on to study it. Oh dear! The ministry of Elisha is ignored, and a few platitudes offered which have nothing to do with the context and trivialise the passage.

We shall explore how these and other inadequate models can be avoided. They all contain part of the truth: the need to pray and study and the vital importance of genuine engagement with the text and its application. However, it is important to set out some principles which underlie all our efforts and which flow from the Bible itself. These often are about bringing together things too often divorced and over-emphasising part of the truth at the expense of corresponding truth.

### *Diligent study and prayer*

The first principle is that good preaching will be the result of careful study under the guidance of the Spirit. There is no contradiction between detailed study of commentaries and prayer asking for the Spirit's help. We all pray for such help in the actual service, but prayer must begin at a far earlier stage in the process. We can no more prepare a sermon without such help than we can preach it unaided. Nor should we imagine that prayer without study is all that is needed (illegitimately using such phrases as 'do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say,' Mark 13:11). If we are called to preach and have time and resources to study, the Spirit will help us in our weakness but not in our laziness. It is not that we do part of the work and the Spirit supplements this, but that our work



is the sign that the Spirit is working. There will inevitably be times when we are not able to prepare as we would want, but we must never make exceptions into normal practice.

*The whole Bible is profitable*

The second principle is that the whole Bible is profitable and preachable. There is often a fear that unless we preach on a fairly narrow range of texts we will not be preaching the gospel. The whole Bible is the gospel and all of it leads to Christ. A ministry which majors on evangelistic addresses seldom either builds up believers or leads to conversions. Obviously, people must repent and believe, but not everyone begins that journey at the same point. A girl, who was brought to church by a Christian friend, was probably hoping for an evangelistic talk focussing on two ways to live. In fact, what she got was a sermon on Nahum. It was that which began her journey to faith. She came from a nominal churchgoing family where God was a cosy visitor at Christmas, perhaps also at Easter and harvest. That evening she confronted the God who created and is the Lord of history bringing about the rise and fall of nations. At some point later she believed that He was also her Saviour and Lord, but it was the initial contact with the Bible which the Spirit used to set her on the road.

Another way of putting the above is to allow the Bible to be the Bible, the written word which so fully and faithfully reveals the living Word. We do not have to make the Bible relevant; it is relevant, and our task is to show its relevance. This means moving from the 'what' to the 'so what?' Again this is easier in some passages than others. Sometimes this is because we have a limited idea of relevance confined to what we would *do* differently as a result. But often it is more of a question of how we would *be* different. Much of the Bible is about changing of attitudes which will lead to changed and Christlike behaviour. 'Be transformed by the renewal of your mind' (Rom.12:2) is far more than changing certain outward ways of behaving which is relatively easy.

*Pastors and teachers*

A third principle is that the pastor must be a teacher and the teacher must be a pastor. Ephesians 4:11 makes it plain that these are parts of one gift and not two separate gifts. Sometimes we hear that someone is not much of a preacher but is a great pastor. That won't do because preaching, feeding the flock, is at the heart of the pastor's ministry. It is equally true that if someone has the reputation of being a great preacher in terms of oratorical skills and yet does not care for people then he will not move hearts or change lives. This is true not only of preachers who lead a particular congregation but of all who preach whether regularly or occasionally. Indeed, having taught at theological college, I believe that the teacher in that setting is only truly effective when there is pastoral concern for students.

*We must believe in our hearts what we are preaching*

That leads to a fourth principle, perhaps the most important of all which is that the preacher must believe, in the fullest sense of the word, what he is preaching. This means preaching to ourselves. It is not a question of a religious expert giving instruction to inferiors but the bringing of the Word of God to both preachers and hearers for both to respond. Later we shall explore the preacher's personality and style because not everyone expresses themselves in the same way and different kinds of people show emotion in different styles. In the eighteenth century, George Whitefield was well known for his oratorical gifts and dramatic style which impressed many who did not believe his message. The great Shakespearian actor/manager, David Garrick, often heard Whitefield and said, 'I would give a hundred guineas to be able to say "O" the way that Mr Whitefield does.' Perhaps even more surprising was the experience of David Hume, the Scottish sceptic and philosopher. One evening a friend met him as he was hurrying over London Bridge and asked where he was going; 'To hear Whitefield,' Hume replied. 'But you don't believe any of that,' said the friend. 'No,' Hume said, 'but Whitefield does.' That

is so impressive, Whitefield does. We are not Whitefield, but in our own situations and personalities what is needed is a conviction and certainty which cannot be denied.

*Keep reading the Bible*

All of these principles assume an increasing familiarity with the Bible. One thing which is all too easy for preachers and teachers is to use the Bible only as a quarry for sermons, lectures and writing. Over twenty years ago I realised that I was not reading the Bible. That sounds nonsense. At that time I had a joint appointment as pastor of a church and lecturer at a theological college and I was studying, teaching and preaching daily. The trouble was that I was not reading the Bible except to prepare sermons and lectures and books. I have since then used the Bible reading plan first devised by Robert Murray McCheyne and have found that to be at the centre of my spiritual life. So, preachers, read the Bible. The particular method does not matter as long as you explore the whole biblical landscape regularly. That does not mean that your regular preparation for preaching is less important, but it roots that in regular Bible reading habits. Indeed much of good preaching flows from reading the Bible with regard to its genres and emphases.

*A good model : Ecclesiastes 12:9-14<sup>2</sup>*

Since this book is about encouraging good preaching, it is structured around the portrait of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 12:9-14, a concise but remarkably comprehensive picture of

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2. 'Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

'The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

'The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14).

both the style and content of preaching. The next chapter will be a survey of how we are where we are. My own ministry has been in Scotland and England, and I do not have first-hand experience of the situation elsewhere, but I hope that it will be of interest to those in different situations. After all, once we have made the necessary adjustments for different times and places, the Word of God in its eternal truth presents the same challenges as it always did. The spirit in which we approach our work is expressed beautifully in the Collect for the second Sunday of Advent in the Book of Common Prayer:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Here is the complete poem by George Herbert:

*The Windows*

*LORD, how can man preach thy eternal word?  
He is a brittle crazie glass:  
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford  
This glorious and transcendent place,  
To be a window, through thy grace.  
But when thou dost anneal in glass thy storie,  
Making thy life to shine within  
The holy Preachers; then the light and glorie  
Most rev'rend grows and more doth win:  
Which else shows watrish, bleak and thin.  
Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one  
When they combine and mingle, bring  
A strong regard and awe: but speech alone  
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,  
And in the eare, not conscience ring.*