

The Art of Preaching (Stephen McQuoid)

Lecture 1

The Biblical & Historical Basis for Preaching

Preaching is no new phenomenon. Not only has preaching played a major role in church history, it also features heavily in the pages of scripture.

Preaching in the Old Testament

Preaching, which is the job of declaring the Word of God, can be found as early as Old Testament times. Some of the early leaders of the Old Testament believing community were preachers and they unashamedly declared God's word to the people (Deut.32 ; Josh.23-24). Even Moses, who felt utterly unable to speak, became a preacher (Ex.4:10-16). His protests on the issue were met with the reply that God would enable him to speak and teach him what to say. Despite his unwillingness, Moses became God's mouthpiece to the people¹.

The Old Testament prophets carried on this mantle (Jer.11:6 ; Amos 7:14,15). Their sermons are different from today's in the sense that God was speaking through them in a particular way, inspiring them so that their words became scripture. But there are also similarities between them and modern preachers. Firstly, they considered their job to be that of declaring God's word, and all true preachers today do the same. As they spoke they conveyed what God was saying to his people and that is the essence of the job of preaching, whether it was done in 2,000 BC or being done in 2,000 AD. Secondly, they challenged their audience to respond to God's Word, and encouraged them into a life of obedience. All true preaching makes this same appeal.

Though the words of the prophets became part of the canon of scripture, and though the canon of scripture is now closed, preaching today is based on scripture. The bible is our source of truth and is authoritative for all matters of faith and practice.

Preaching in the New Testament

The New Testament is also full of preaching. Without question the greatest preacher in the New Testament was Jesus himself. It is equally beyond doubt that preaching formed a crucial part of the ministry of Christ. Jesus seems to have begun his ministry by preaching in the open air (Mark 1:14) while in Galilee². He then called his Disciples, began his ministry of healing, and again Mark comments that Jesus continued in the ministry of preaching (Mk.1:39). Luke tells us that Jesus saw preaching as his mission in life (Lu.4:43), it was for this reason that he was sent. We also read that he frequented synagogues (Mtt.9:35) again with the express purpose of preaching. It has been pointed out that synagogue addresses encouraged debate and even heated discussion and were therefore different in their presentation from much of contemporary preaching³. Never the less this was preaching in the true sense of the word.

Jesus did not see preaching as his work alone. He also wanted his followers to begin declaring the word of God. In Mark 3:14 he appointed the twelve so that he could send them out to preach. Later on we read that they then went out and preached everywhere (Mk.16:20). His burden and vision to convey God's word to the world was being passed on to them.

It was clear from the very outset of the Christian church that preaching was seen as a crucial aspect of Christian living. In Acts 6:2-4 the Apostles recognised that they were becoming so involved in practical caring for the church that the preaching of the Word was being neglected. They took action to ensure that this would not happen. It was not that they considered the work of caring for widows to be unimportant, quite the reverse, but they had such a high view of preaching that they considered it to be essential in the life of the church.

Paul was also a great champion of preaching. His ministry was full of it (Acts 15:35 ; 28:31). Like Jesus before him, Paul encouraged others to take up the responsibility of declaring God's word. He told Timothy to find faithful men and train them up so they in turn would pass on God's message to others. He also left Timothy with the awesome responsibility to, '*preach the word ... in season and out of season*' (2Tim.4:1,2). Timothy was to commit himself to this ministry under all circumstances, whether it was convenient to do so or not⁴. Once again the priority of preaching was underlined.

The Church Fathers

Once we go beyond the end of the Canon of scripture we note that preaching continued to be an essential component of church life. In the second century Justin Martyr wrote his *First Apology* in defence of Christianity, addressing it to the Emperor. He described a typical Sunday service and made the point that preaching was an essential part of this Christian gathering. He states that during a service, '*the memoirs of the apostles or writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.*'⁵.

Two centuries later Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, described the activities of the church from its inception. He mentioned the centrality of preaching in the life and experience of the church, describing the early Christians as people whose hearts were, '*smitten by the word of God*' and who were, '*ambitious to preach to those who had never yet heard the message*'⁶. Towards the end of the fourth century a giant of a preacher called John Chrysostom (lit. golden-mouth) emerged. John Stott notes that Chrysostom's preaching was characterised by its biblical content, its straightforward interpretation, its practical application and its fearlessness⁷. Chrysostom, who was the Bishop of Constantinople, said that preaching was the only thing that would cure diseases in the body of Christ.

The Reformation

When we come to the Reformation once again Preaching features greatly. Luther, the great German reformer became convinced not only of the primacy of scripture but of the need for it to be preached. In his church in Wittenberg, there were three services every Sunday and several during the week. Each of these included preaching within the programme. Luther himself had a heavy preaching ministry. His biographer, Roland Bainton, notes that, '*He (Luther) spoke often four times on Sundays and quarterly undertook a two week series four days a week on the catechism. The sum of his extant sermons is 2,300. The highest count is for the year 1528, for which there are 195 sermons distributed over 145 days*'⁸. Luther also gave advice on preaching which included the need to be willing to preach even in the face of great opposition and ridicule. There can be no doubt that

Luther's preaching as well as his writings brought about the German Reformation.

Calvin demonstrated an equal commitment to preaching. In his *Institutes of Christian Religion* he endeavoured to sum up what it was that constituted a true church. His conclusion was that '*Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached...it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists*'⁹. He repeated this assertion again stating that wherever a Christian gathering *has the ministry of the Word and honours it...it deserves without doubt to be held and considered a church*'¹⁰.

This emphasis that the Reformers had on preaching has prompted man to comment that the pulpit was higher than the alter¹¹. Preaching was without doubt a central pillar of the Reformation.

The Puritans and Beyond

The Puritans too were people who believed in preaching. Indeed they considered the sermon to be the climax of a worship service, something that was deeply honouring to God⁸. For them a sermon was not something to be rushed, so brevity was not a feature for which they were noted. They were methodical in their preaching, working hard at sermon preparation, often writing out the whole sermon word for word. Their sermons were expository in nature, full of doctrine and very orderly. This did not mean, however, that Puritan preaching was dull and stodgy. Far from it! Their preaching was passionate, full of illustrations and they constantly applied the message to the lives of their hearers¹².

One leading Puritan, Richard Baxter, wrote a book entitled '*The Reformed Pastor*'. In it he encouraged his fellow ministers to preach faithfully. He lamented the fact that, '*few ministers do preach with all their might*' and urged his readers to, '*awaken your own hearts, before you go to the pulpit, that you may be fit to awaken the hearts of sinners*'¹³.

Following on from the Puritans came two men whose names are readily associated with preaching, John Wesley and George Whitefield. They were used powerfully to reach many for Christ and to build up the church. Both were passionate preachers and both saw preaching as fundamental to the work of God.

Whitefield, with his legendary energy managed to preach twenty sermons per week in a ministry that lasted more than thirty years. John Pollock recounts an amusing occasion when an old man fell asleep while Whitefield was preaching in a New Jersey meeting-house. Incensed Whitefield clapped his hands loudly and stamped his foot to wake the man up and declared, '*I have come to you in the name of the Lord God of Hosts and I must and I will be heard*'¹⁴. Such stories demonstrate the seriousness with which men like Whitefield took the ministry of preaching. A ministry so powerful that people were literally felled under its influence as the Holy Spirit used the spoken word¹⁵.

The Modern Era

Our modern era has also witnessed great preaching. Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones, an assistant to Lord Thomas Horder, left his Harley Street practice to take up a pastorate at a small church in his native South Wales. Preaching was the great emphasis of his ministry and through preaching he saw the congregation grow from eighty worshippers to over five hundred¹⁶. From there he went to Westminster Chapel, London, where his preaching influenced literally thousands of people.

Billy Graham has also been used uniquely, particularly as an evangelistic preacher. Huge numbers of people have been drawn into a living relationship with Jesus Christ through his ministry. Many Christian leaders today point to the great influence that Billy Graham's preaching ministry has had, not only on their own lives, but on the spiritual tone of whole nations.

All this must convey a powerful lesson for churches today. Preaching is biblical, and it is a means by which God has spoken since Old Testament times. God has used preaching to win countless millions of souls for Christ. God has also used preaching to encourage, correct and stimulate his church over the ages, so that Christians from all cultures and walks of life are spiritually enriched and activated for service.

Lecture 2

Preaching under siege

Despite the biblical injunction to 'preach the word' and the fact that preaching has been used of God throughout the ages to challenge and encourage the church and society, preaching is never the less an aspect of church life that is under siege.

The challenges to good preaching in today's church come from many different directions, both inside and outside the Christian community:

The TV Generation

Probably the most obvious challenge that confronts the modern preacher is that of the TV generation. Vary rarely can we look back in church history and say that those who have gone before have not experienced what we are now experiencing. When it comes to the issue of the media, however, we can make this assertion with confidence. Never before have preachers had to face such a media saturated society. There has never been a time like the present, when the preacher has had to deal with an audience that has been fed on a diet of sound bites and instant images.

Thirty years ago televisions were a status symbol and most, but by no means all households, had one. Today it is not hard to find a household without at least two T.V.'s, a DVD, a sophisticated stereo system, a range of computer games and a link with the Internet. An increasing amount of time is being spent watching television and videos, playing on a games console or surfing the net. What kind of people will this produce?

1. A short attention span. Most television commercials last only a few seconds, yet they communicate sufficiently to sell their produces. Any documentary, film or even news bulletin will change camera angle and move swiftly from one item to the next to keep the viewers

attention. People are accustomed to concentrating on something for just a few minutes at the most. This makes the job of the preacher harder as he essentially stands and talks for a protracted period of time.

2. An uncritical attitude to what we take in. Television has an educational value, but it is mostly used for entertainment. This in itself is not wrong, but it does mean that viewers get into the habit of just absorbing information without dialogue, response, or critical evaluation. Today's preacher needs to communicate in such a way as to make his audience think about the message and evaluate it.

Individualism

Another significant barrier that challenges the modern preacher is that of individualism. We live in a society where people are used to doing what they want, where autonomy is seen as a virtue and conformism is sneered at. The job of the preacher is to declare 'thus saith the Lord'. What we preach is not a matter of opinion, neither is it something that can be negotiated with. This will of course mean that the preaching of the word of God will come up against the individuals desire for self determination. Such a clash can provoke a response and make preaching unpopular.

Concept of Truth

A third barrier that the preacher faces is the erosion of the concept of truth in post-modern society. For Christians the truth of the word of God is absolute and irrevocable. It is not something that can be compromised, neither is it just true for some people. Rather it is true for all people in every culture. Preaching is the declaration of this truth to all who listen. But in preaching in this way we come into conflict with a world view that says that truth is personal, subjective and certainly not universal.

The Instant Word

Yet another challenge facing the preacher is that of the 'instant word'. With the resurgence of the use of spiritual gifts in the life of the church over the past few decades, the potential for imbalance and extremes has arisen. We should be thankful to God for the renewed vigour with which many Christians and churches are exercising their spiritual gifts. At the

same time some churches have been guilty of over emphasizing some gifts at the expense of others. One of the most neglected gifts, in my judgment, is that of preaching.

In particular it has been a feature of some churches to show a preference for the instant word from God rather than the exposition of scripture. To prefer prophecy to preaching. Preaching may involve hard work and discipline, but it must be the staple diet of a local church.

As we use the spiritual gifts that God has given us, we must have a balanced approach, unlike the Corinthians who were told by Paul to grow up (1Cor.14:20). If this balance is to be maintained, preaching must be at the very centre of all that we do. The lynch pin of the church programme. Without it our church life will rapidly become unhinged.

Marginalization of the Sermon in Church Life

Yet another obstacle which the modern preacher faces is the marginalization of the sermon in the life of the church. In reality few churches want to get rid of preaching altogether lest they be accused of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Many churches, however, are squeezing the sermon into an increasingly limited time slot so that it becomes an appendix to the church service rather than a focal point.

Church services are often busy events. Worship has become an increasingly important feature and this is evidenced by the huge number of praise songs which are being penned by contemporary song writers. Drama and children's items are also very common. All these innovations are both good and helpful and have their place, but not at the expense of preaching. In reality, however, the sermon is often a lower priority than almost anything else. This must be resisted because even if the members of a congregation do not recognise that they need to hear the word of God expounded, they do! Without preaching they will suffer from spiritual malnutrition.

The Monster of Laziness

One final obstacle which all preachers need to do battle with is the monster of laziness. Good preaching is the result of very hard work. It is five

percent inspiration and ninety five percent perspiration. We are all tempted to take shortcuts and church life can be very pressurized. Those preachers who also hold down secular jobs find the burden of preaching particularly heavy to bear. On top of a career which relentlessly demands more and more of their time and energy, they must summon the strength to prepare for the fast approaching Sunday service.

Preparing little and preaching light has often been considered an option, but it must not. Such is the importance of good preaching that every effort must be made to ensure its quality. The preacher must put in the hours, make the effort, and like the apostles, prioritize, so that the declaration of the word of God is not devoured by anything, not even the ferocious monster of laziness.

Lecture 3

In Defence of Preaching

In the previous lecture we noted some of the obstacles that the contemporary preacher has to face. But there is another threat which the preacher faces and this one comes from within the ranks of the Christian community. Some would argue that although the word of God does need to be declared, there are more efficient ways of doing it than by preaching. They suggest that a monologue approach, which is typical in preaching, is rather outdated. That preaching is simply not a relevant form of communication in today's world. For many, conversational bible studies and group discussions are a much better way of communicating divine truth. Preaching, they will say, has had its day and should go gracefully into retirement.

This objection arises as a result of listening to preaching at its worst. Certainly the church will not be helped by a stodgy diet of forty five minute monologues devoid of character and interest. We do need to remember the short attention span which our audience will have. We also need different styles and at times even an interactive approach which encourages a measure of audience participation. It is important to study and use good communication techniques in our preaching. But before we become too dismissive about preaching, its benefits need to be pointed out.

No better way of communicating to the whole church

Firstly, there is no better way of communicating to the whole church than

by preaching. The beauty of a sermon is that it can be delivered to a large audience and this ensures that the whole church can learn at the same time. While home groups and study groups have their place, they are by their very nature, exclusive to the membership of the small group that meets.

Not so with preaching! Every one can be included and the church as a whole can experience and hear the voice of God. In this way church members can learn together and grow together as a whole body. Preaching therefore has a unifying effect as the whole church is brought under the sound of God's word.

No better way of communicating the depths of scripture to the church

A second benefit that preaching offers is that it can make available to the church some of the deep truths of scripture. The bible is a sizable book with many themes, literary genre and historical contexts. Reading is beneficial but detailed study will bear even more fruit. While it is true that a child can understand much of scripture and that the Holy Spirit ministers in the lives of Christians so that they can understand what they read, yet there will always be more to discover.

Any preacher worth his salt will be someone who studies the bible in depth and communicates that depth to his audience. His audience will therefore benefit from the hours spent in the study, praying and in preparation. Invigorating discussions in small Bible study groups are of great benefit, but they should not be at the expense of listening to a gifted preacher who has studied the passage in depth and thought about it at length. Preaching is not just sharing an opinion, however biblically based it might be, it is declaring what God has said so that the audience can understand its rich implications. Good preaching will deliver an insight into the scriptures which will otherwise be inaccessible to most of our church members.

No better way of communicating the spirit of a text

A third benefit of preaching is that it can communicate not only the meaning of a text, but the spirit of a text as well. The bible is a very dramatic book full of strongly expressed emotions. Imagine the tension which must have existed between Amos and Amaziah as they stood together in Bethel deliberating over Amos' pronouncements of judgement

(Amos 7:10-17). Picture the faces of the crowd who looked with amazement as Jesus delivered the radical Sermon on the Mount. Try and capture how Paul felt as he penned the moving words of the letter to the Philippians from his prison cell. This is high drama indeed.

There is a very real sense in which preaching is a performance. Not that the preacher is looking for adulation or an Oscar. But it is a performance in the sense that the preacher needs to create an atmosphere in which the audience can understand not only what the biblical writers wrote, but why they wrote, and the emotions they felt at the time. There is no better way of recreating the drama and thrust of a biblical passage than to preach it with passion.

No better way of motivating a church into action

A fourth benefit of preaching is its motivational quality. There are few things in the Christian life more stirring than an impassioned sermon. A sermon is a rallying cry motivating the church to obey and serve God. It appeals for action and a changed life. It always anticipates that the hearer will respond and it points in the direction that the hearer should go. Every good sermon will give God's comment on any given situation and demonstrate God's answer. Good preaching will therefore keep a church on its toes and prevent spiritual complacency from sneaking in.

Lecture 4

Defining the Job

Having defended preaching, it is now important to define what the role of a preacher is. Definition always gives focus and without it we will never be able to do justice to the job. Many preachers are less effective than they should be simply because they have not thought carefully about what their job entails. Given the importance of the job of preaching this is a tragedy.

Perhaps the best way of defining the job of a preacher is to begin by stating what a preacher's job is not. This will make us aware of the pitfalls which we need to avoid and provide a framework into which we can place a definition.

Not an Entertainer

Firstly, it must be stress that a preacher is not an entertainer. Perhaps this point does not need to be made, but timely reminders of possible errors are never out of place.

Humour in the pulpit can be very effective. A witty comment can often make a powerful point. It can also make a preacher increasingly listen able

which is no bad thing. That being said, however, the primary role of a preacher is not to be funny. It is not even to be interesting! Hopefully most preachers are interesting and are able to use humour appropriately. But that is not their job! Preachers are not primarily in the business of providing entertainment or amusing their congregation with a good night out each Sunday.

Not a Scratcher

Secondly, a preacher is not there to scratch peoples backs (or ears) simply telling them what they want to hear. This was the error that Paul warned Timothy against (2 Tim.4:3). It may well be that when we preach we often say things that are encouraging and make our audience feel good. Nothing is worse than a preacher who is always negative. But sermons are not primarily about the 'feel good' factor. That should only be the outcome if the passage we are dealing with is meant to have that effect. This however is not the main function of preaching.

Not a Story teller

Thirdly, preaching is not just about telling stories. The bible of course is full of stories and they are great to listen to. Some are intriguing, some funny, some profoundly moving and some are even terrifying. Sometimes when illustrating a point you will also have to tell stories of your own. This is simply good communication. But if the stories take over, then the content of your sermon can be drowned in the flood of analogy. This is not what preaching is about. Preaching involves stories, but it is not just about storytelling.

If these words of caution provide a framework within which we can place a definition of preaching, then what should that definition be? The simplest, and one of the best definitions states that preaching is **DECLARING THE WORD OF GOD TO MEN**. This definition does not sound very grand, but in a nut shell it encapsulates the essence of what preaching is all about. There are three points to note in this definition. Firstly preaching involves the word of God. Without the bible there would be no preaching, for we would have no message to preach about. Preaching therefore must be based on scripture. To leave the bible out is to make the sermon null-and-void, a mere reciting of powerless words.

Secondly the definition involves declaration. We do not apologise for what the bible says. Neither do we attempt to negotiate with it in order to get a better deal. What God says is what we declare. It is absolute truth, it is a message from God. The job of the preacher is to declare it and to do so in a way that demands a response. If those we are preaching to refuse to obey, that is between them and God. Our job as preachers is to declare what God is saying through His word and urge a response of obedience.

Thirdly, preaching is aimed at people. Some of our preaching may be evangelistic and aimed at those who have not made any commitment to the person of Jesus Christ. Much of our preaching will be aimed at Christians. But all preaching is aimed at people, and is intended to be a communication from God to them, eliciting a response.

Expository Preaching

Having provided a basic definition of preaching, we now need to think a little more closely about what is actually involved in declaring God's word to men. This leads us to an important word, 'expository'. Some would argue that the only kind of preaching is expository preaching. Certainly preaching in its purest and best form is expository. The best definition I have come across for expository preaching comes from Haddon Robinson.

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers. ¹

This definition gives us more to chew on. It also demonstrates why expository preaching is the best way of communicating what God is saying through his word.

The expository method ensures that the passage of scripture itself determines the content of the sermon. I have heard preachers who have read a bible passage and then preached a sermon that only superficially touches on what the passage says. Clearly they had something that they wanted to say and then looked for a passage to justify their ideas or give

them credibility. The content of their sermons were controlled, not by what the bible says, but by what they wanted their audiences to hear. I have also heard preachers who randomly take verses out of their context for much the same reason. With this methodology bible verses can easily be taken out of context and used to prove anything.

Expository preaching does not function like that. An expository sermon will investigate a biblical passage and express what the bible actually says. The passage will therefore determine what is preached and the preacher will have no freedom to incorporate anything that is not clearly stated in the passage. Exposition also requires the preacher to interpret the passage properly taking into consideration the literary and historical background and the specifics of the grammar. In this way the accurate meaning of the passage is discovered through diligent study.

This obviously involves a great deal of work. It is much easier just to read the occasional verse and interlace it with all kinds of stories and illustrations to keep the audiences attention. But if the bible really is the word of God, and if every word is inspired and there for a purpose, it must be taken seriously. As preachers we have a responsibility to God to accurately communicate what he is saying to mankind, and a responsibility to men to tell them what God has already said to them. Expository preaching is therefore the best kind of preaching as it fulfills these obligations.

Preaching through Bible Books

The most obvious way of preaching a series of expository sermons is to take a bible book and work systematically through it covering every verse. This has many advantages. To begin with the individual books of the bible came as a whole. Paul did not write a few isolated verses to the churches in Rome or Corinth. He wrote whole books. What is more, there is a logical progression of thought through each book and the thought flow is intrinsic to the meaning of the book. When the historical books of the Old Testament were penned they were not presented as a collection of short stories, but rather an historical account of God's consistent involvement in the lives of his people. Preaching through a book, therefore, will capture this continuity and greatly aid our understanding.

Preaching through a book will also enable us to cover some difficult subjects in a natural way. If I were to launch into a sermon on gossiping next Sunday, most of the people in my church would assume that there was some huge problem that I was trying urgently to address. Indeed it my sermon would cause a great deal of gossip in the church as everyone would openly speculate as to who was guilty of gossip. If, on the other hand, I was preaching through the book of James, the issue of gossiping would emerge very naturally as part of the series and would not cause such a problem.

Preaching about Bible Characters

Clearly preaching through a bible book is extremely beneficial and should be the norm for a church teaching programme. But there are other useful expository subjects. Preaching on the life of a bible character, for instance. Biblical characters provide us with examples of how God deals with individuals. People find bible characters easy to identify with and when preaching about the life of a biblical character we can point out not only their successes, but their failures also.

Biblical characters are vivid and the bible makes no attempt to gloss over their faults and shortcomings. Solomon is pictured as a wise fool, and David, the man after God's own heart, as someone who could fall into the sin of adultery. Abraham, the friend of God, also knew doubt while Peter was in the habit of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. These are all real people who endeavoured to serve God despite their limitations and sinfulness. Their lives provide us with inspiration and lessons for living.

Preaching a Theme

It can also be useful to preach through a theme. The bible is full of vital themes for the Christian life. Preaching through a theme will enable you to deal with relevant issues which your church needs to be aware of.

Preaching through a Key Passage

There is value too in preaching through some of the key passages of the bible. All of scripture is inspired and profitable, but there are some passages which are particularly important and helpful, and these need to be

emphasized. Again such a series can adapt to the needs of the church at any given time.

There are many other key passages that merit inclusion in this list of great passages of the bible. The creation accounts of Genesis chapters one to three are hugely important to modern Christians who are in danger of forgetting the sanctity of life (especially human life) and the importance of God's role as creator of all things. The great passage on faith (Hebrews 11) and the wonderful passage on love (1 Corinthians 13) are also worthy candidates. The Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 1-3) are very helpful as is the chapter on the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). Each of these key passages, and many others, would make an excellent series of sermons that would benefit any church.

Whether you are preaching through a book, a theme, the life of a biblical character or a great passage, remember always to make your sermon expository. The passage must be seen in its context. The grammar, type of literature and historical background must be taken into consideration. You must also remember that your job is not so much to give an opinion on a particular issue, but to declare what God says and apply this to your audience.

Preaching the Whole Bible

It is also important to state that preachers have the responsibility to bring the whole of God's word to their congregation. It is a sad fact that many a church preaching syllabus ignores a great deal of the bible. Whatever the reason, many preachers choose to ignore large chunks of the bible, preferring to stick to a few favourite books. This is always a mistake. God has given us his word so we can learn about him and his work. If we ignore any biblical book, we ignore part of God's message to us. It seems only reasonable that every church should cover the whole bible in its preaching programme. Some churches that systematically preach through the whole bible every ten years. Such a feat takes courage, determination and a confidence in all of scripture. It will, however, bear much fruit in the long run.

Courage, Humility and Consistency

Up until this point have focussed on the mechanics of a preachers job. But there is more to preaching than just the exposition of scripture. Every good preacher not only needs the technical ability to understand and communicate scripture, he also needs integrity to give his ministry credibility. No definition of a preachers job would be complete without mentioning the kind of qualities which this kind of ministry requires.

There are three qualities a preacher will need if his ministry is to be effective. The first of these is courage. Declaring God's word has never be an easy business. Amos discovered this while preaching to the crowds at Bethel. He quickly found himself under attack from Amaziah (Amos 7:10-17). Today's preachers might not have to face the same vocal barrage, but opposition can never the less be real.

People don't always like the truth. Even Christians struggle to cope with truth when it confronts them. This is particularly the case when they are convicted by it. Sometimes this conviction leads to repentance, but sometimes not. Many preachers have found themselves under attack from people in their own church because of what they have said from the pulpit. There have no doubt been times when some preachers have deserved criticism because they have said things in an offensive way or because what they have said has simply been wrong. However, I know of many situations where godly preachers have correctly declared the word of God in an appropriate way and as a result have been severely criticised.

It is easy to become discouraged as a preacher. The pulpit is a vulnerable and lonely place to be. Hard messages are always hard to preach, but they need to be heard. Proper preaching, which involves declaring what God is saying through his word, is therefore something which requires great courage. Without courage and the willingness to preach the bible honestly, without ducking difficult issues, a preacher will never be able to fulfil his obligations.

The second essential quality which all preachers need is humility. As well as the criticisms, there are the complements. Most churches are appreciative of the preaching they receive. This is nice, but generous remarks can also flatter the ego and give the preacher a swollen head.

Preaching by its very nature is public and high profile. Preachers are often

held in high esteem within their churches. In many churches the preacher(s) will have a great deal of influence, perhaps even power. None of this can be avoided and it is entirely in order that those who minister the word of God are honoured (1 Tim.5:17). Better the honour that the criticism. But in order to handle this, preachers need to have their feet firmly on the ground and in particular they need to be humble.

There is nothing more objectionable than a preacher who is full of his own self importance. Pride in the pulpit is not only unpleasant, it destroys a ministry. It prevents us from being all that we could be for God. Preachers who are proud tend to focus their audiences attention on themselves rather than on Christ. In the long run this will leave the audience empty and suffering from spiritual malnutrition. Humility, on the other hand, enables a preacher to lead his audience to the person of Christ and there they find spiritual strength.

The third essential quality of a good preacher is consistence in his personal life. The old adage says, 'you should always practice what you preach'. This is never more true than when it comes to those who preach the word of God. Paul tells us that those who deem to teach will be judged more harshly (James 3:1). This is quite true. It is utter hypocrisy to demand a certain standard of conduct from the members of your church or any group of Christians if you are not prepared to live up to those standards yourself. Such hypocrisy is worthy of judgement indeed!

It is not that preachers are or can be perfect. None of us are paragons of virtue. Frankly it is impossible for any preacher to live a faultless life. After all we do have feet of clay. However, glaring inconsistencies in the life of a preacher will utterly destroy his credibility and consequently his ministry. If he does not endeavour to live up to what he preaches, one of two things will happen. Either his congregation will come to the conclusion that if the preacher himself cannot do it no one can, or they will simply ignore all that he says for he shows no evidence of it in his own life. Either way his sermons will be utterly ineffective.

This then is the job of the preacher. To declare God's word by giving his congregation an exposition of scripture. This is to be done with courage and humility and the preacher is has not just to preach the word of God, but live it also.

Lecture 5
ANCIENT TEXT MODERN SETTING
The Art of Reading the Bible

Having a desire to preach is one thing, being able to do so is quite another. God wishes to speak through the preacher to his church, but the preacher must first understand what God is saying. This brings us to the issue of bible study. Before we can preach from the bible, we need to have a grasp of its content.

A book as ancient and varied as the Bible needs to be studied carefully. It is also vital that we apply principles of biblical interpretation to our study. Without interpreting what we read, the bible will make little sense. The discipline of interpretation is known as hermeneutics. This word comes

from the Greek *hermeneia* which means 'to explain, or to interpret'.

An Old Book

There are obvious reasons as to why applying hermeneutics to, our bible study is essential to our understanding of the bible. Firstly there is a distance in time between different events described in the bible as well as a distance in time between the completion of the bible and the present day. The bible itself spans centuries and about two thousand years have passed since the bible was completed. The most recent situations mentioned in the bible are therefore two thousand years old while others are thousands of years older.

The world my grandparents live in seems very remote to me as it is a very different from the one I now inhabit. When I watch period dramas set in the seventeenth century or read history books which cover the medieval period I am even more struck by that changes that have taken place in society over the centuries. The biblical world is more ancient still and clearly very much more different again. This difference needs to be understood in order for the message of the bible to be understood.

Different Culture

As well as time distance separating us from the events of the bible, there are also huge cultural distances separating biblical times from the modern day. The world of the bible knows nothing about information technology, cars, newspapers, industrial pollution or democratic forms of government. It is a world based around agriculture where landowners hold sway over the lives of the people who work on their farms. A world where travel is slow and dangerous and where neither medication nor education were taken for granted as they are in many countries today.

Different Language

There are also language differences separating us from the words of scripture. Modern day English is very different from biblical Hebrew or Greek. Hebrew is Semitic in origin and paints vivid word pictures to compensate for the limitations of its imprecise and sparse vocabulary. Biblical Greek does not recognise the chronological sentence structures

which governs English. An understanding of how these languages work is therefore essential to understanding the content of biblical passages.

Who Needs Hermeneutics

For all of these reasons we need to apply our minds to interpreting the bible. Unless we do so we will never understand what God is saying. We need to be able to differentiate between the voice of God in a passage and the voice of human culture. The bible talks about polygamy, the evil of lending money and kissing fellow Christians. We need to be able to decide whether God wants us to be polygamous, to ban banking and to kiss every church member we meet, or whether these are cultural issues which are not universally binding. Only a proper system of hermeneutics will enable us to do this.

God has spoken, but he has chosen to do so within a specific cultural, linguistic and historical framework. The job of the interpreter is to find the principles which govern how scripture works and then use those principles to determine how scripture can be applied to a contemporary situation.

The Discipline of Reading

The very first thing we need to do in order to understand a passage of scripture is to read it carefully. I have often had to correct myself for rushing into the preparation of a sermon without really getting to grips with the passage. Pressures of time and an inbuilt laziness will always be a problem, but time spent repeatedly reading a passage is never wasted. It is good not just to read the immediate passage that you are studying, but the whole book as well. Most books in the bible can be read in less than an hour, and reading the whole book in one sitting will give you an idea of the thought flow that the author had in mind.

Question the text

As you read it is also good to ask yourself a few questions about the passage. Who are the principal characters (if any) in this passage? Why is it being written? What does it teach me about God? What does it teach me about myself? Is it warning me about anything? Is there a command that should be followed? Is there an example for me to imitate? In what ways

does this passage encourage me? All your answers to these questions and your reflections should be written down.

As well as asking all the necessary questions, try to identify key words. These key words embody the meaning of the text and so are vital. As all scripture is inspired by God each word is there deliberately and is important. It is useful to note these key words down on paper so you can look at them further. You may also want to underline them in your bible. He is an example of the kind of key words that should be picked out of a passage:

Consider it pure joy my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask of God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. This man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does ¹.

As you pick out these words, make a mental note as to whether they are verbs, adjectives, adverbs or nouns. This is basic grammar, but if precision is what you are looking for, then it is very important to your understanding of the passage. The verbs will tell you what is being done, the adverbs will fill in the details of the action, the nouns will tell you what people, places or things are involved and the adjectives will describe those people, places or things. It is also good to look for the prepositions. These are words like *on*, *at*, *in*, and *after* which express the relationship between a noun and the other words in the sentence.

When you think about the individual words within a passage and their relationship with each other, you begin to see more clearly exactly what is being said.

Looking at the Context

After thinking about the passage itself, it is important to think about the

wider context. Always think in paragraphs and sections, never be tempted to take any one verse out of context. This could lead to all kinds of problems. For example if you were to read Habakkuk 1:5 by itself where God says, 'I am raising up the Babylonians', and you did not look at the wider context, you could get the distinct impression that the evil Babylonians are enjoying God's favour and they are being blessed by God. The context, however, tells a different story.

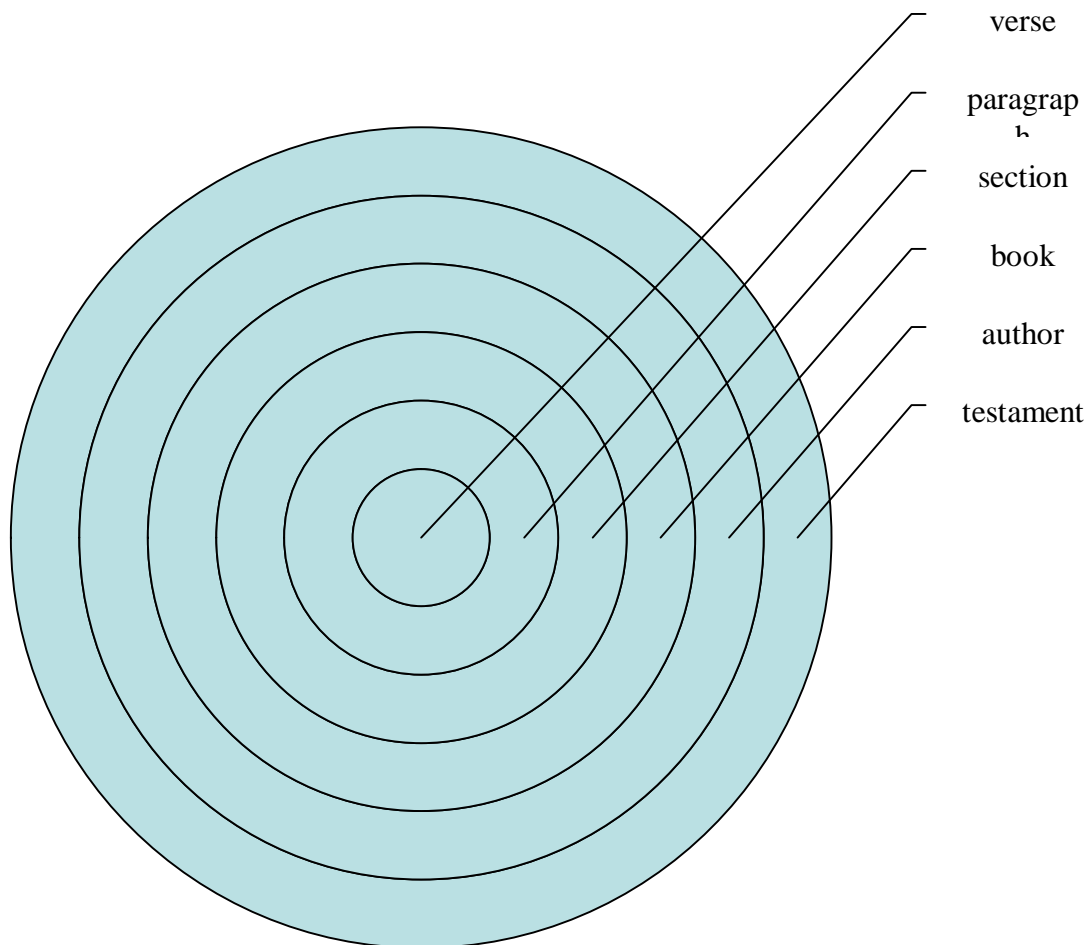
Although the chapter divisions in the bible are not part of the original text, they can be a useful guide, but don't adhere too slavishly to them. Think about the whole chapter and ask yourself in what way the passage you are thinking about relates to the whole chapter.

You will also need to think about the book as a whole. Where does this passage come in relation to the whole book and how does it contribute to the message of the book? At what point does it come in the argument and why? Remember that Paul never intended the churches just to read sections of his letters in isolation. Neither did any of the other biblical writers intend for us to look at just one little part of their work. The whole context is therefore of great importance.

Even at this point you cannot stop. You need to compare what you have learned in this passage with the other writings of the same author (if there are any), and then with the whole testament, and the whole Bible. The bible has sixty six different books written by many different authors, but it is one complete message. There will be no contradiction between your passage and any other in the bible, but there will be many other passages that will shed light on the passage that you are studying. These other passages will give balance to your understanding. Bear in mind also that each biblical author will have his own distinct emphasis. The book of Romans deals with the issue of faith in a different way to the book of James. Both are inspired and therefore your understanding of the issue of faith will be enriched by reading both what James and Paul have to say about it.

All of this sounds like a great deal of hard work. It is hard work! But time must be invested in reading and study if a passage is to be understood.

Diagram 1 Thinking in Context



Lecture 6

Language, History & Culture

Having thoroughly read the passage, it is now time to go one stage further and look at the language and history behind the passage. At this point you can give more attention to those key words that you have noted down. You will need to think about their meaning and ask yourself why that particular word was used in this way. It will be useful at this stage to use some

resources in your study.

In dealing with specific words and phrases it is important to be reminded that the languages of the bible are very different to contemporary English. Indeed languages in general will differ from each other in their ability to communicate precise ideas as well as having their own vocabulary and internal rules. The difference is amplified when dealing with the biblical languages as they are so ancient, and in the case of Hebrew because it is Semitic rather than European.

Key Words

As you begin to look at the key words you have noted, there are a number of issues that you will need to be aware of. Firstly, most words have a range of meanings. Some refer to this as a field of meaning.

The English word 'hand' is a good example. It can be used to mean different things in different expressions:

- 'shake your hand'
- 'give you a hand'
- 'give a big hand'

When it comes to many biblical words, there is also a range of meanings and this is determined, for the most part, by the context. It is important, therefore, to locate the precise meaning of the word within its context. If you fail to do this, you may misinterpret the passage.

To further complicate matters words overlap. The same word can refer to two distinct areas of life.

The word 'runner', can refer to:

- the world of athletics
- the world of horticulture

Within each world there will be other words that have the same basic meaning, but with slightly different variations. For example the word 'runner', when used in the world of athletics, has the same basic meaning as 'jogger' or 'sprinter'.

If we were to take the word peace (the Greek word for peace is *eirene*) as an example, we would notice that this word belongs to two different semantic fields ¹. On the one hand, it can refer to the absence of trouble and therefore share meanings with other words within that semantic field. On the other, it can refer to a state of mind in which the person is free of anxiety. So when we come across this word peace in the bible (Rom.12:18 ; Phil.4:7) we need to make up our minds as to which of these semantic fields we should opt for. Then we discover whereabouts in the semantic field it belongs.

A second thing that you will have to bear in mind is that words change their meaning over a period of time. The word 'gay' in Victorian England suggested happiness, today its meaning is different. The word fantastic in Victorian times meant grotesque or freakish, again today its meaning is different.

When it comes to biblical vocabulary, the same applies. There are some words which have changed their meaning over time and so when they are found in the biblical text, the meaning that was intended at the time of writing needs to be found. One example for this is the word *martus* which in Revelation 2:13 is translated 'witness'. The word *martus* began its career referring to someone who gave evidence, possibly in a court of law. It went on to refer to a person who gave witness to their beliefs. Later it referred to a person who witnessed to their faith even under threat, and finally to someone who was willing to die for their cause, thus becoming a martyr ². If an interpreter were to translate the word *martus* in Revelation 2:13 as martyr, he would most likely be wrong ³. Even though Antipas did die for his faith, the word *martus* probably did not refer to martyrdom at this stage, but rather to someone who witnessed to their faith even under pressure.

A third thing to bear in mind is that words can have meanings other than the most obvious. The extra meaning may be figurative, and the interpreter will need to decide if the word should be interpreted literally or in a figurative way. I can remember on one occasion referring to one of my teachers as a 'battle-axe'. Clearly on that occasion the use of the word was not literal. She was not a weapon of war. She did, however, have the kind of personality which made the figurative use of the word appropriate.

Paul does exactly this as he attacks the Jews in Philippians 3:2 by describing them as ‘dogs’. In the ancient world dogs were rarely treated as household pets. If they were used domestically, it was as guard dogs. Often dogs wandered the streets as scavengers, eating filth and rubbish. It was this uncleanness that Paul was hinting at as he attacked these Jews who saw themselves as being a cut above the rest 4 .

Bearing all these issues in mind, how do we go about a study of the key words that we have identified. The process is two fold. First you need to determine what that range of meaning of that word was at the time when the author penned it. You are asking the question, what could this word possibly have meant as the writer was putting pen to paper? Your intention is to get as much information as possible about the use of vocabulary at that time.

In order to help you determine this you will need to use a lexicon. It will tell you the possible range of meanings throughout a given period of history. They do this by utilising information culled from a variety of literary sources within that time frame. Their sources include scripture but also a wider body of literature. In addition to a lexicon you will find bible dictionaries, bible encyclopaedias and theological dictionaries an invaluable source of information. This may involve a lot of work, but the benefits of discovering the meanings of the word in question far outweigh the sacrifice of time and energy.

Once you have found all the possible meanings for the word, the second step is to discover which meaning best fits the passage. This is done by looking at the context. It may well be that the general subject matter of the passage strongly and obviously suggests one of the meanings you have discovered. If that is the case you have easily arrived at the conclusion. If not you may well need to look for further clues in order to determine the meaning. These clues may involve looking at how the same writer uses the same word in other passages or even how other writers dealing with the same subject use that kind of vocabulary.

Grammar and Structure

Having done all this, you now need to discover how the word you are

looking at fits into the overall structure of the sentence. This takes you into the discipline of grammar and structure. There are two aspects to grammar, morphology and syntax⁵. Morphology is about the form of a word. If you add the letter *s* to the end of a word it becomes plural. Thus *car* becomes *cars*. In Hebrew, letters are also added to the end of words to make them plural. Greek is slightly different in that it adds letters at the end of words, but also links this with endings that denote if the word is nominative, genitive or dative.

Syntax, on the other hand, describes the grammatical arrangement of words and their relationship to each other. In English word order determines the relationship between words in a sentence. If I say that 'Billy stabbed Mark and Paul', Billy is clearly the culprit with Mark and Paul being the victims. If, on the other hand, I say that 'Paul stabbed Mark and Billy', then Paul becomes the culprit. In Greek and Hebrew word order is not as important, but both languages do demonstrate the relationship words have with each other.

Clearly it is important to understand both the form of the words you are studying and how they relate to the other words in the sentence. This will add to your understanding of the passage as a whole and enable you to make a more accurate interpretation. Obviously a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek will help you in this process. If you do not have any knowledge of these languages you will be at a slight disadvantage. But however little or much you know of the original languages, a good commentary will be of enormous help. You will, however, need one which is sufficiently detailed that it deals with these linguistic technicalities.

History & Culture

Now that you know the meanings of key words in the text and understand their relationship to the sentences in which they appear, it is time to think of their historical and cultural location. Writing cannot be done in a vacuum. We all come from a background that influences the way we see the world.

This, of course, includes the bible. In much the same way as a newspaper needs to be interpreted in the light of its historical and cultural situation, so does the bible. The issue is however more complex than this. To begin with it is entirely possible for a newspaper to lie, or to communicate a

message that is irrelevant and unimportant. The bible, on the other hand, is the word of God and therefore of utmost importance. It still requires interpretation but the stakes are higher as the meaning is crucial.

What is more we are eyes dropping on the biblical text. As you read a newspaper you are aware that you are the intended recipient of the message. The journalist, who shares your culture and lives in the same era as you, is writing directly to you. Not so with the bible. As we read we are listening in to a communication between people who lived over two thousand years ago in a different era and from a completely different culture. Their setting is a world away from ours. The mind set of the author will also be different. He will not think in the same way as you do and his expressions will be different from yours.

All of this makes interpretation very much more difficult as you are trying to discover what a particular verse or biblical statement meant to the person who wrote it. What did Amos mean when he referred to the Israelite women as 'cows of Bashan' (Amos 4:1)? And what did Jesus mean when he referred to the Pharisees as 'whitewashed tombs' (Mtt.23:27)? Clearly an understanding of the mind set of the biblical writers is crucial.

Transporting the Text

Of course, going back into the world of the biblical author is only half the job. You then have to bring the meaning back to the present day, otherwise people living now will have no idea what the message is all about. This process is sometimes referred to as contextualization ⁶. It is a bit like using a time machine and going back centuries to the world of the bible, picking up a meaning, and then returning to the present day in the time machine so that meaning can be grasped by your contemporaries.

I spent my early childhood in Ethiopia where people (speaking a different language) used expressions that would be alien to anyone from the United Kingdom. One expression that Ethiopians used was *te fitfit achu feet*, which literally reads 'not the food but the face'. To a British person this is meaningless but to an Ethiopian it is full of meaning. For them it says that when a person goes to the house of a friend, the quality of food is not the thing that makes him feel welcome, but the smiling face and warmth of his host. I could not use this expression in conversation with my friends in this country, even if I translated it. In order for them to understand the

significance of what I am saying I need to contextualize the sentiment of the expression, transporting it into contemporary English parlance.

In much the same way we need to transport the biblical meaning into our modern society by putting it into an intelligible form. Without doing so the meaning of the text will remain disguised and we will miss the point of what is being said.

Steps to Understanding

How do we go about this process of understanding the historical context of a passage and making it intelligible to modern hearers? The key is to look at the background and build up a picture of the times in which the biblical events took place.

This process begins by looking at the general background of the book as a whole. Again it is important to ask all kinds of questions. Who was the author? Where did he come from? When did he write this book? What were the circumstances of his life when he wrote it? What was his purpose in writing the book? Who comprised his original audience? As each of these questions is answered, a basic picture begins to emerge of the setting.

You may also wish to ask questions about what was happening in the wider world at the time of writing. Who was the word superpower at that time? Was Israel under the domination of an empire and if so which one? How did the wider political scene impact upon life in Israel? What was it like to be a devoted follower of God, or a Christian at this time?

Many of these questions will be answered within the text itself, however, it will be essential to make use of the extensive range of study material which is available to us. For example, you will find an Old Testament Survey or New Testament Survey to be of great help. You will also benefit from books that describe the history of the Old and New Testaments. Good commentaries will again come in useful, particularly in their introductory studies, and bible dictionaries will also pay dividends. There is an extensive range of excellent books which look at the background to many of the biblical events, peoples and places. Read all you can and get as much information as you can.

Having looked at the background of the book, you will then need to look in more detail at the background of the specific passage you are studying. Again you need to ask more questions, but this time you are trying to discover what the writer meant by what he wrote. In other words, in the light of the circumstances in which the author was writing, what is the most likely interpretation of the passage.

Depending on the content of the passage, you may have to ask some very specific questions. For example, what were the social customs that governed the authors life and environment? What were the roles of men, women and children in his society? How was worship typically conducted in that day? What kind of theology or religious ideas confronted the author. What were the economic structures of the day? What were the prevailing world views of the day?

Once again the books mentioned above will be helpful. Your goal is to look at all the available evidence and construct a picture within which you can fit the passage so that it makes sense. The more background information you can get the more accurately you will understand the passage and the better equipped you will be to interpret it correctly.

Lecture 7

Understanding Genre

Even when you have understood the language used in a particular passage of scripture and have built up a picture of the historical and cultural context in which that passage emerges, your job is still not complete. There remains one last vital stage in the process of correctly interpreting scripture. I refer to the issue of understanding the type of literature used in any given passage.

The bible is a fascinating and complex book in which we find many different types of literature, or genre. Common sense will tell you that you would not read the poems of Wilfred Owen in the same way as you read your daily newspaper. Neither would you treat a chemistry text book in the same way as you would a science fiction novel. These different genre need to be understood in the light of the laws that govern them. They can only be understood if these laws are applied.

The same principles must apply to our reading and study of the bible. In the bible we find a variety of literary genre including narrative, poetry, apocalyptic and epistle. Only when we correctly understand the inner workings of these genre can we hope to understand their meaning.

1. Narrative

The first type of literature we need to consider is narrative. Narrative is the most common genre found within the bible ¹. In the Old Testament alone Narrative occupies approximately 40% of the text. Narrative could be defined as 'a spoken or written account of connected events in order of happening' ². In other words, this form of literature deals with a storyline and describes the experiences which the people in that storyline had. It enables the reader to take part in what is happening and sense the occasion.

That being the case, if the reader really wants to get the most from a section of narrative, he needs to try and visualise it for himself. To a degree this involves using a certain amount of imagination. But just as you might enjoy a good novel if you actually picture yourself in the shoes of one of the characters, or if you imagine that you are actually at the scene of an event that you are reading, so biblical narrative encourages us to enter into the

story. By doing so we will not only enjoy the story more, we will understand it much better.

The Characters

But how do stories work? In what way are we meant to read and understand them? Firstly we need to recognise that at the centre of every story there are the people involved. These characters will be the main attraction. We learn about them in a variety of ways. The writer may give us a description of a particular character (1 Sam.2:13). The characters themselves may tell us what they are like (Gen.39:8,9). We can also learn a great deal about the character from what they say (1 Kg.3:7-9). Their actions might portray a great deal about the kind of people they are (Ezra 7:10). We can also learn about them from the way others relate to them in the story (Gen.31:31).

Once all this information has been put together it gives us a useful profile of the people within the story. This is the first stage and the basic foundation block for understanding what the story is about.

The Plot

The second feature of a story is the plot itself. I have often told my students that a story cannot be a story unless it is a story. This is quite true. There will be a storyline woven throughout the text of a narrative. Sometimes it will be complex and intriguing, other times fairly uneventful, but always important.

A prominent feature in much of biblical narrative is the struggle that some of the biblical characters have as they go through life. David faced struggles in his conflicts with Goliath, king Saul and the Philistines. Joseph faced struggles in his relationship with his brothers and in the false accusations made against him by Potiphar's wife. It is important not only to follow the storyline but also to observe in detail how these struggles arise and are subsequently solved.

Sometimes there can be more than one storyline running side by side. There will be some connection between these yet this is not necessarily apparent at the beginning of the stories. The life of Abraham is a good

example of this. On the one hand there is an account of a man who is called by God to leave his home and go to the place where God would call him. On the other is there is the story of a man who longs for a son but is unable to father one. Ultimately there is a connection, but until these threads are brought together, the different storylines have their own lives and purpose in the narrative.

The Setting

The third feature that we need to note in any story is the setting. The stories that we find in biblical narrative are actual historical events. There is nothing fictitious about them. They are real accounts of God's dealings with men. That being the case, these are stories that take place in real geographical and physical settings at an actual time in history. Understanding the story, therefore, requires a little background information and research to obtain an accurate idea of the world in which the story occurs.

Once you get a picture of the setting of a story, it becomes vivid and alive. If you can grasp the awful dank and dreary setting of the prison cell in Acts 16, then the story of the imprisonment of Paul and his companions in Philippi becomes all too real. Or if you can imagine how terrifying it must have been to look across a ravine and see a giant challenging anyone to a representative battle then you have some concept of how David must have felt as he went to face Goliath. Once the setting is comprehended and the characters and storyline are understood, then the meaning of the narrative can be explored.

Tips on Preaching from Narrative

How is narrative to be interpreted? What lessons are we to learn from this type of literature? And specifically, how are we to preach narrative passages?

As narratives are stories, they will need to be told as stories. This will involve a dramatic presentation and the use of imagination. A good storyteller knows the background of the story, the main characters and is able to create the atmosphere in which the story becomes compelling. Part of the presentation will involve answering questions necessary for an

understanding of the passage. Who are the main people involved? Why are they behaving as they are? What is the main purpose of the story? The answer to each of these questions will be an essential part of the sermon.

As we approach narrative, we need to bear in mind that as God revealed himself and his will to us, he did not do so using only a series of statements and demands. Indeed there are relatively few direct statements about what God is like and even fewer specific demands. He did, however, frequently reveal himself by inference. In other words, as we read a biblical passage there are clear principles implicit in the storyline from which we can learn about God and his will.

Never is this more so than in narrative passages. As we read about people and events in these narrative passages, we draw lessons for our lives. Of course much of our general learning in life is done this way. A child will learn about the kind of people his parents are by observing how they behave. He will also learn how to behave by how they react to whatever he does. If he does something positive, they will tell him so and give him a hug (or a sweet). If he is naughty he will end up with a sore bottom. In much the same way we can learn from narrative by observation.

When a narrative is preached there are three ways of drawing lessons or applications for the audience. Firstly, we can learn from the good or bad examples of the characters involved. If I were preaching on the narrative of David's battle with Goliath I would point out that this was a young man who was concerned to defend the honour of God and was not afraid to do battle with the giant because of his trust in God (1 Sam.16:26). The application would encourage the audience to be concerned for God's honour in their lives and to live courageously, knowing that God was with them.

Secondly, we can learn lessons from the way in which God dealt with people in the narrative. In the story of Lot's wife, she turned back to look at the cities that were being destroyed (Gen.19:26). As a consequence she was turned into a pillar of salt. This passage teaches the seriousness of disobedience and the danger of not making a clean break with our sinful past.

Thirdly, we can learn lessons from what people in the passage discovered

about their actions. In the story of Samson, the hero led an irresponsible life and the consequences came back to haunt him. Ultimately it took an action from God to vindicate him and make his life useful again.

Samson's story teaches us that our lifestyle has an impact on our usefulness to God and that we can end up wasting our lives engaging in futile pursuits.

As these lessons emerge from the narrative, they can be preached with confidence for these biblical stories contain lessons by inferences which are just as powerful a guide as direct commands.

B. Poetry

Another important genre in the bible is that of poetry. Some of the biblical books are entirely poetry, such as the Psalms, Song of Solomon, Proverbs and Lamentations. Others, such as Job, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Hosea and Joel, contain substantial sections of poetry. Some scholars have even argued that there is no book in the bible that does not require the reader to have some knowledge of how to interpret poetry³. Though biblical poetry is unique within the world of poetry in that it is inspired and authoritative, it is not the only poetry to come from the ancient Near East. Indeed Israel benefited from a well developed literary tradition within the ancient Near East some of which dated all the way back to 3,200 BC⁴.

Parallelism

When we think of biblical poetry we must not confuse it with our modern English poetry. English poetry is based on rhyme so that the final words in a line sound similar. Hebrew poetry, though it does sometimes make some use of sounds, is much more dependant on parallelism. Parallelism is a literary device that reinforces or develops an idea by repeating it in a slightly different way in the succeeding line or lines⁵. It brings a sharper focus on the message being communicated.

Some scholars have argued that there are just three different types of parallelism⁶. This, however, is certainly an underestimation⁷. Each type of parallelism is trying to achieve a particular effect. The most common of these is called *Synonymous parallelism*. This is the repetition of the same thought using closely related but slightly differing sets of words. A good

example of this is found in Psalm 103:10:

He does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities

Another type is *Antithetic parallelism*. This type of parallelism functions in much the same way as does synonymous parallelism. It communicates the same idea in a different way in the second line, but this time it does it by using words that are opposite of the first words expressed. This usage of opposites is known as using antonyms. Tall is the opposite (or antonym) of short. Dark the opposite of light. By using an opposite set of words, the writer can emphasize his point by making this contrast. An example of this type of parallelism is found in Psalm 37:21:

The wicked borrow and do not repay,
but the righteous give generously

There is also the *climactic parallelism*. That is a repetitions parallelism which brings the reader to a crescendo by emphasizing a point in slightly different ways and developing the idea. Usually several lines or phrases are used in this type of parallelism. If read properly, the reader will feel a growing sense of excitement with each line. An example of this is found in Psalm 29:1:

Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord glory due to his name;
worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness.

Then there are *emblematic parallelisms*. These add to the richness of a thought by using an analogy. Something is compared to another thing from a completely different sphere of life. For example, God might be compared to a rock. This analogy enables the reader to see the richness of the person or thing that the writer is referring to, by taking note of the characteristics of the thing to which the subject is being compared. Here are a couple of examples taken from Psalm 42:1 and Psalm 72:6:

As the deer pants for streams of water,

so my soul pants for you, O God.

He will be like rain falling on a mown field,
like showers watering the earth.

There are also *pivot parallelisms* in Hebrew poetry. In this case the pivot is a word which links both phrases in a parallelism. Some translations obscure these pivot words so they are difficult to identify. In the original Hebrew, however, they can be clearly seen. An example of this can be seen in Psalm 98:2 with 'to the nations' being the pivotal word.

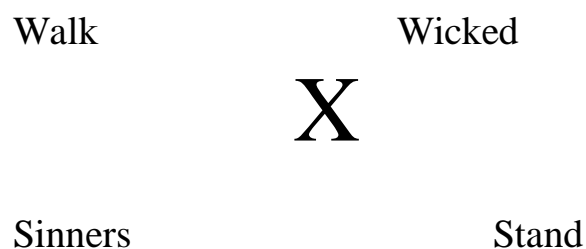
The Lord has made his salvation known
to the nations
and revealed his righteousness

Finally there is a *chiasm*. In a chiasm an idea is put forward and is followed by two more ideas which relate to each other. Finally there is a fourth idea which relates to the first one. A well known example of a chiasm is found in Psalm 1:1:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the council of the wicked
or in the way of sinners stand

This type of parallelism can best be demonstrated by using the letter X. In the case of the example we have mentioned, diagrammatically the psalm would look like this:

Diagram 3



It is important when reading the psalms to pick out the parallelisms. Not

every verse of poetry contains parallelisms. Many do not, but those that do, contain them for a purpose and therefore they must be taken seriously. They are an integral part of the poetry and therefore will help us to identify its meaning. As you read these parallelisms you need to identify in what way the writer has changed the phrases in order to create a parallelism. That will reveal to you his emphasis and thought flow and will prove vital for interpreting the poetry.

Imagery

In addition to parallelism, biblical poetry also has rich imagery. This imagery not only makes the poetry interesting by bringing it to life, it is also highly instructive. By paying attention to the images, we can learn a great deal about what the writer wants to say about the subject. In one sense the poet is an artist who paints pictures for us using words so that we can visualise his thoughts.

There are two types of imagery, similes and metaphors⁸. A simile is where two things are being compared to each other using the words 'like' or 'as'. If I were feeling romantic I could say that my wife is 'like a rose in full bloom'. In this way I compare her to a flower that has reached the height of its beauty.

A metaphor also compares two things but does so in a much more overt way. The words 'like' or 'as' are not used. If I were describing my wife using a metaphor I would say 'she is a rose in full bloom'. The metaphor evokes an even stronger response from the reader.

Metaphors and similes are very common in biblical poetry, particularly in relation to God. The psalmist, for example, describes God as a rock, a fortress and a good shepherd.

Types of Psalms

One final thing that needs to be said about biblical poetry, is that it comes in different forms or types⁹. Some poetry is in the form of a hymn in which people are enthusiastically called upon to worship God. But there is also the lament in which the writer is crying out in distress. Then there are thanksgiving poems and poems of confidence in which the writer is ether

expressing thanks to God for His goodness, or recognising reasons why God can be trusted. There are remembrance poems which recall God's goodness to Israel in the past and wisdom poems where different ways of living are contrasted and the results described. Again the type of poem needs to be considered as it will reveal the mind set of the writer and lead to a proper interpretation of the poetry.

Tips on Preaching from Poetry

We now need to think about how we preach poetic material. The first thing a preacher will need to do is to think about the experience that lies behind the passage of poetry. If you take some of the Psalms as an example, you will often be able to identify the situation which prompted the writer to pen that particular Psalm. Psalm 51 is an excellent example. This was written after David committed the sin of adultery with Bathsheba and then covered it up by having her husband killed. This psalm is profoundly moving and it expresses the deep seated guilt that brought David to a point of confession and repentance. Discovering the experience enables the preacher to see why the psalm was written and that gives the backdrop to the sermon. A sermon on psalm 51 would describe how a Christian must approach God after sinning.

A second step would be to identify and structure within a poem and use that for the structure of the sermon. Even at a first glance it is possible to see that many biblical poems are made up of stanzas. These help to break up the poem so that the reader can see where it is going. Take Psalm 1 as an example. The first three verses relate to those who follow God while the next three describe those who are wicked and do not. In each section the writer deals with the consequences of each respective lifestyle. A sermon of psalm 1 would begin by describing the consequences of following God and would conclude by describing the fate of those who do not. In this case the structure of the psalm would indicate the necessary structure of the sermon.

Another pointer would be to identify any difficulty which the writer may be facing and then see how this difficulty is solved. Your sermon could question whether or not the writers problems were self inflicted and in what way he found help in God. In Psalm 3, for example, David found himself surrounded by many enemies. He dealt with this issue by realising that

God was his shield and would protect him no matter what the difficulty 10. A sermon of Psalm 3 would deal with the issue of discovering God's help in the midst of difficult situations.

One last thing that needs to be mentioned is that a bridge needs to be built between the experiences of the biblical characters and that of the contemporary audience. Your audience may not have found themselves embroiled in the sins of adultery and murder as David did, but there are many sins that we commit which put a strain on our relationship with God and require the kind of repentance that is described in Psalm 51. The link needs to be discovered so that the biblical poems can have a direct application in the lives of the audience.

3. Prophetic

Another common biblical genre is that of prophecy. In the Old Testament, God sent men to bring his word to the people when they had fallen away from their faith. The words and writings of these men form the prophetic literature of the bible. These men lived in the same cultural context as their contemporaries, and they spoke in a language that their audience could understand, but their messages were revelations direct from God 11.

Biblical prophecy does have a predictive element in that future events are foretold, but this is not always or even usually the case. Much of biblical prophecy addresses the situation at the time when the prophets spoke. They were speaking directly into a given situation.

Within the genre of prophecy there are a number of different types of prophetic literature 12. The most common type is the *prophecy of disaster*. These were delivered to individuals in some instances, but to whole nations in others. The prophets brought a message to people who were sinning and it contained a threat of immanent disaster. The prophecy would contain a description of what the sins of the people were and often graphic language would be used to communicate the severity of the judgment. Jeremiah 28:12-14 is one typical example.

Another way of announcing doom was in the form of a *woe speech*. These are easy to identify as they begin with the phrase *Woe to you*. Again the sins of those who were being addressed are detailed. There is also a

prediction of what will happen to these wicked people because of their sinfulness. A good example of a woe speech is in Amos 5:18-27.

Doom is also pronounced in the form of a *funeral dirge*. This type of prophecy was usually directed towards Israel and she was pictured as a corpse awaiting burial. Again the purpose is to pass on judgment to the nation. Once a person is dead there is little the mourners can do except lament the departure of their loved one. In much the same way the funeral dirge in prophetic literature emphasizes the perilous condition of the nation and the certainty of divine judgment. Amos 5:1-3 is an example of a funeral dirge.

One of the most interesting forms of prophetic literature is that of the *prophetic lawsuit*. Here the prophet re-enacts a trial with Israel in the dock. Witnesses are called upon to give testimony against Israel, the nation has been summoned to the trial, and is duly indicted as a result of the charges. Often these prophecies make reference to the covenant between God and His people. The implication is clear. God has kept His side of the agreement, but Israel has failed. Therefore the judge must pass sentence on the nation. A typical lawsuit can be found in Hosea 4:1-3.

Not all prophecies were negative in content. Some were a clarion call to the nation to serve God faithfully while others predicted salvation and hope. The *prophetic hymns* are an example of prophecies which called on the nation to follow God. They exalted God and were an expression of thankfulness for all that God had done for the nation (Isa.42:10-13). Salvation was predicted in *salvation prophecies*. Here the prophets assured both individuals and nations that God would act for their benefit (Amos 9:11-15).

It is important to understand how biblical prophecies which are predictive in nature are fulfilled. In many cases biblical prophecies were literally fulfilled in precisely the manner in which the prophecy described. At other times, however, the prophecies were fulfilled figuratively. There were occasions when prophecies were fulfilled both literally and spiritually. In some cases there have even been a multiple fulfillments. Take for example Daniels prophecy dealing with the abomination of desolation (Dan.9:27 ; 11:31 ; 12:11). It was first fulfilled when Antiochus Epiphanes made the Jews sacrifice pigs within the Holy of Holies in the Temple in 167BC. It

was then fulfilled again at the destruction of Jerusalem and will be fulfilled a third time according to Mark 13:14¹³.

Tips on Preaching from the Prophets

How are the prophetic books and writings to be preached? What do we need to be aware of when we prepare sermons based on prophetic texts? The first thing to note is the vocabulary that the prophet employs. In observing the vocabulary we must include proper nouns, for example Elam, Media, Babylon and Arabia (mentioned in Isaiah 21). We must not presume that these places are the same as those found on a modern atlas. The term Arabia, for example, is used of different places and these do not necessarily correspond to the modern nation of Arabia¹⁴.

It is also very important to discover the circumstances in which the prophet ministered. If he was speaking God's message into a particular situation, then it is unlikely that we will fully appreciate the meaning of his prophecy unless we understand that particular situation. This investigation must be methodical and systematic. You need to discover how the people mentioned were living, in what ways they were falling short of God's standards and any good or bad points that the prophet makes about them. This background information will enable you to see the relevance of the prophetic message and the current situations in which the message can be applied today.

When preaching through prophetic literature it is important also to pay close attention to the symbolisms which the prophets use. In the same way that poetry is brought to life and made more descriptive through imagery, so prophetic literature is made more powerful by the use of symbolism. Jeremiah uses the symbol of a potter to demonstrate that God wants His people to be malleable and willing to be moulded by a divine hand (Jer.18:4). Amos uses the symbolism of a lion, a bear and a snake to demonstrate the inevitability of God's judgment (Amos 5:19). Ezekiel uses the symbolism of eating books to show that he was bringing God's message to the people (Ezek.3:1-3). These symbols will be key points in the sermon as they are the highlight of what the prophet is saying.

You must also look out for the reasons stated in the text for the judgment which is about to be dished out. This will also be a key factor in the

interpretation. In Haggai the people were being judged because they were living in comfort while the Temple was in ruins (Haggai 1:4). In Habakkuk judgment was immanent because the people were living unholy lives (Hab.1:3,4). These explanations will help to make the judgment understandable and will provide you with principles for living which can be applied to the audience.

4. Wisdom

Wisdom literature is possibly the most fascinating, and certainly the most philosophical genre in scripture. It does not contain the kind of blunt commands as seen in the Ten Commandments (Ex.20) or the decisive voice of prophecy stating, 'Thus saith the Lord'. Rather it contains the cool and thoughtful comments of a wise teacher, struggling with the difficult questions and urging us to think long and hard about life 15.

The great benefit of Wisdom Literature is that it goes further and deeper into the recesses of our minds, even though it ultimately leaves many questions unanswered 16. Though the wisdom books of the Old Testament are part of scripture, they are not unique in the world of wisdom literature as many of the ancient peoples had their wisdom tradition. But within the biblical wisdom books, God has revealed divine truth through this medium so that we can ponder the 'deeper truths' of life from a Christian perspective.

Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are very different books, even though they all come under the umbrella of wisdom writings. Job, for example, deals with the basic issue of suffering and does so by focussing on the specific sufferings of one man, Job himself. Despite his Godliness he suffers physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. The book is structured around Job's conversations with his 'friends' who offer advice that is neither helpful nor theologically correct. Job could be described as a theodicy, that is a justification of God's work in the world 17.

The book of Proverbs is quite different, dealing with the general issue of wisdom applied to every day life. Longman and Dillard note that in Proverbs there are 'no references to the great acts of redemption or to the covenant, and there is very little explicit talk about God' 18. The first part of the book (chapters 1-9) contain extended wisdom discourses while the

second part (chapters 10-31) comprises a series of short pithy sayings which take the fore of proverbs. There is undoubtedly a connection between these parts. Chapters 1-9 give us the principles of wisdom and this establishes the groundwork which makes the rest of the book, which deals with the out working of these principles, meaningful.

Ecclesiastes is different again. It expresses a skepticism which sounds familiar in the modern world. The author goes by the pseudonym of Qohelet¹⁹. The book is unusual among the books of the Old Testament in that it seems to convey a very negative message of pessimism. This, however, appears to be a bit of reverse psychology. It is not that we are to accept Qohelet's message on face value. Rather it is a warning from a father to his son (Eccl.12:12) to be careful about the influences in his life.

Tips on Preaching Wisdom Literature

When it comes to preaching wisdom literature, we must take great care. This is not an easy genre to unpack, not least because it is so deep. Despite this, the benefits of dealing with some of the profound questions which are raised by these books are immense.

It is important to bear in mind as you deal with wisdom literature, that it raises more questions than it answers. It is not always possible to get neatly packaged messages which leave the audience feeling satisfied. More often than not these books leave us up in the air. Any attempt to make wisdom sermons more positive and affirming will sound trite. We need to deal with the issues honestly and not try to make light of them. Issues like suffering and death and meaning are dealt with and we need to sense the enormity of these topics and allow these books to give us an insight into the issues and hear their tentative response.

We must also bear in mind that in these wisdom books we are looking in on an open debate. Every word is inspired, but that does not mean that everything that is said by the characters is true. Job's friends, for instance, waxed eloquent about sin and its effects, making a superficial and ultimately incorrect assessment about the reasons for Job's sufferings. The truth needs to be sorted out from the incorrect notions.

We also need to listen to every word of true wisdom which these books

highlight. There are many important lessons, especially in Proverbs, that are practical and deal with every day issues. Ultimately success in life will be determined by the extent to which we live according to wisdom. This wisdom must therefore be identified and communicated.

5. Gospels

At first glance the gospels appear to be no more than just narratives. They are however unique in their subject matter and contain some complex literary forms as well as definite theological nuances, so they merit a category of their own. The gospels give the appearance of biographies of Jesus, and yet as such they are incomplete. Neither John nor Mark mention the birth of Christ while the order of events in the life of Christ differ according to which gospel you read.

Within the gospels there are also some parables which need to be interpreted separately from the rest of the gospel material. The parables of Jesus have suffered from a number of erroneous interpretations over the years. Perhaps the best way of interpreting them is to see them as narrative fiction ²⁰. That is, they are short stories that communicate meaning when studying the perspective of the main characters. This must be done in conjunction with a little allegorising ²¹. For example, in the parable of the sower, the sower must be an allegory of Christ in order to make any sense.

If we were to take the parable of the lost son as an example (Lu.15:11-32) we would note that each of the characters have something important to communicate. The son himself teaches us that the best way forward in a situation where rebellion has led to trouble and heartache is to repent. The father in the story teaches us something about the love of God while the older brother tells us something about a begrudging attitude towards God's blessing of others. 21

Tips on Preaching the Gospels

When preaching the gospels there are a number of important pointers that we need to be aware of. Firstly you need to know the general historical context of the gospels. We read about groups like the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The gospels mention King Herod, but also Roman governors

who exercised great power. We are introduced to a variety of people from tax collectors to terrorists, all of whom contribute to our understanding of the political landscape in Roman controlled Palestine. There are numerous mentions of local customs as well as hints of the kind of mind set which the people of that day had. All of this information will be necessary for a proper understanding of the gospel accounts.

Secondly it is also important to discover the motivation of each of the gospel writers as they penned their words. Even a cursory glance would reveal that each gospel is distinctly different and intended for a particular audience. Luke=s account is methodical and he tells Theophilus, the recipient of the book that he is trying to put together an orderly account (Lu.1:1-3). John=s account is deeply theological and is intended to convince all who read it that Jesus is the son of God and to bring them to faith (Jn.20:31). Matthew is aiming at Jewish readers and so includes an extensive genealogy of the line of Christ, which would impress his readership (Mtt.1:1-16). Mark is action-packed and conveyed a dynamic Jesus who is also a suffering servant, and this in turn is linked with discipleship. Once you have discovered the motivation of each writer, their gospel will begin to make sense.

It is also worthwhile contrasting the gospels as they have a great deal of material in common. The benefit of this is that as we compare the same account in different gospels we see what makes each distinctive. This will greatly assist our interpretation.

Thirdly we need to see the theme of the Kingdom of God woven throughout the gospel accounts. Most Jews in Jesus day believed they lived on the very brink of time when God would step into human history and usher in a new and better age ²². This messianic age would be a time when God would rule, and there would be peace and righteousness (Isa.2:2-4 ; 11:4-5). This rule of God was often referred to as the Kingdom of God. The study of the end times is known as eschatology, and it was an issue that weighed heavily on peoples minds, especially as they were living in times of Roman oppression.

When Jesus began his public ministry he announced that the kingdom was at hand (Mk.1:14,15) and he proved it by his miracles (Lu.11:20). All eyes were upon him as people wondered if this really was the messiah, but then

he was crucified. After his resurrection there were those who then wondered if he would usher in the kingdom (Ac.1:6). This did not happen, but he did send the Holy Spirit to help the Christians live out kingdom values in their own lives. The ministry of Christ was therefore not the end of the age, but it was the beginning of the end. The final end will come with his second coming, but in the meantime, in one sense, we do live in the kingdom age.

As far as the gospels are concerned, we therefore have this tension. The kingdom has begun and all the ethical teaching in the gospels demand that we live according to the principles of the kingdom. But it has not been consummated, so we still live in a fallen world where we struggle with sin. We need to keep this tension in the back of our minds as we preach the gospels, and that will enable us to see how the implications of the material can be worked out in our lives.

6. Epistles

The epistles provide us with some of the most theologically compact texts in the whole of scripture. They dominate the New Testament and combine for us both private material and material that was intended for public reading.

Although the various writers of the New Testament epistles had their own distinctive style and theology, they followed a general literary pattern which was consistent with the letter writing convention of their day. This contained five main parts:

1. Opening greeting
2. Thanksgiving (for the memory and well being of the recipients)
3. Main content of the letter
4. Moral exhortations
5. Closing comments

These letters were intended to be read as a whole, and the thought flow or logic of the argument is crucial. Each paragraph builds on the previous one and will lead coherently to the next. They are, however, not detached from the readers as they were also written to address specific people and situations. As we read the epistles we get an insight into what was

happening in the early church and what God was saying about it.

Preaching the Epistles

There are a number of pointers that we need to bear in mind when preaching on the epistles. Firstly, we need to take careful note of the verbs and tenses which the writer employs. New Testament Greek is a much more accurate language than contemporary English and is therefore capable of conveying subtle nuances in the text²³. There are many instances where identifying the correct tense of a verb will have a profound effect on how we read a verse. In Ephesians 5:18, for example, Paul tells the Christians in Ephesus to be 'filled with the Spirit'. In this instance Paul is not referring to a one off event. The particular tense (present imperative) tells us that this is an activity which must be continuous in our lives.

It is also important that we know the circumstances of the person or people to whom the letter is addressed. As the letters were written to address specific situations, their meaning will be bound up with what those situations are. In a very real sense we as readers are looking over the shoulders of the writer as he pens his message to his intended audience.

Reading an epistle is a bit like reading a postcard that someone else sent to their friend. Only when we know a little of the authors situation, and that of his friend, can we judge what the message is all about. Some time ago I got a postcard from a friend which went like this:

Dear Stephen,

It makes a real change to be basking in sunshine. It is also nice to be able to relax a little. Next year I might not be able to get the chance. Hope all goes well in Leeds. Send my love to Debbie.

Phil

Superficially anyone could make sense of this postcard. But knowing a little of the background would reveal much more. Once you realise that Phil comes from Scotland there is a new appreciation of why he is enjoying the sunshine so much. If you were told that he had just finished his finals at university you would understand why he felt under pressure and you

might even guess that he would not have much time to relax in the near future if he got himself a job. Further more, if you realised that I was going the following week to Leeds to speak at a conference and that my wife is called Debbie, the last two sentences would make perfect sense.

In much the same way, the circumstances of the writers of the epistles and that of their intended readership sheds a great deal of light on their content.

It is also good to note both the negative and positive instructions in the epistles. Because of the problems which existed in many of the early churches, Paul had to write some pretty stern things to them. He told the Corinthians to 'grow up' and not be childish about the way they use the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.14:20). He also warned the Thessalonians not to be lazy and hang about for the second coming of Christ (2 Thess.3:10). These negatives contain important principals which contemporary audiences need.

But there are also many positive injunctions in the epistles. In Ephesians 6 Paul tells the Christians in Ephesus to put on the armour of God. Then in Galatians 5:22,23 he urges the Christians there to live out the Fruits of the Spirit. Again these are vital lessons for today and should be identified and emphasized in our sermons.

7. Apocalyptic

One final genre which deserves consideration is that of apocalyptic. This is a form of literature that incorporates vivid and unusual pictures with symbolic meanings. The book of Revelation is a prime example of apocalyptic literature, though not all of the book would contain this genre. The first three chapters, for example, are in the form of epistles written to seven literal churches. These passages need to be treated as epistles. The second part of the book of Daniel is also apocalyptic. Apocalyptic passages cannot be interpreted literally as the ramification of such an interpretation would be absurd ²⁴.

Apocalyptic literature deals with the end of world history and it comes to the writer in the form of visions and dreams. The subject matter often includes God's answer to the dilemmas of the world, which man has been utterly unable to solve. The symbolism is imaginative, and even bizarre,

and it depicts future as well as present events. There is always the battle between good and evil and it is a form of literature designed to encourage people who feel crushed and in need of rescue.

Tips on Preaching Apocalyptic literature

It is important, when approaching apocalyptic literature, to discover whether the symbolism in the passage would have had any significance to the writer in his culture ²⁵. This will demand a great deal of research. The Old Testament itself is a good starting point for some of the symbols in the book of Revelation can be found in Old Testament times ²⁶. It is equally important to see if the passage itself gives an explanation of the symbolism. In Revelation 12:9, for example, the passage clearly states that the dragon is the devil, while in Revelation 5:8 we are told that the bowls of incense are the prayers of the saints.

One must also take care when dealing with numerical symbolism in apocalyptic literature. In Revelation we are told about a period of 1260 days or forty two months (Rev.13:5), and about the 144,000 (Rev.14:1). We also read about the great age of 1,000 years, known as the millennium (Rev.20:4), and the army of 200,000,000 men (Rev.9:16). Certainly these numbers mean something, but they are not necessarily meant to be taken laterally.

Getting Serious with the Genre

Clearly biblical genre is something to be taken seriously. The many genre of scripture are complex as well as fascinating, and great care, work and effort, needs to be taken in trying to understand what the real message of any given passage is. It would be wrong to become scared about approaching scripture, for after all, the Holy Spirit guides us as we study. But it would be equally wrong to be complacent about studying what is the very word of God. Spend time thinking about the particular genre you are working with and utilize the many excellent books that are available on the subject of biblical interpretation. These along with good quality commentaries will assist you in discovering the message that has to be preached.

The over arching principle is to discover what the particular passage must

have meant to its original readership and then relate that message to a contemporary audience.

As you go through this process there are a number of reminders that you will need to put on a check list. These are listed, but not in order of importance:

1. Remember the importance of discovering what the original language says.
2. Allow scripture to interpret scripture.
3. Don't build a doctrine from an illustration or an ambiguous verse taken out of context.
4. Be careful not to spiritualise everything.
5. Always think of the intension of the author.
6. Recognise that revelation is progressive and that the earliest books of the bible will not contain a fully orbbed revelation of God or his purposes.
7. Differentiate between what is said about Israel and what is said about the church
8. Acknowledge that we are sinful and therefore cannot fully comprehend God's revelation.
9. Have the humility to listen to the opinions of mature Christians.

If these guidelines are followed you will be well on the way to understanding the text which you can then be preach with confidence.

Lecture 8

Books – A vital resource

One of the most important resources any preacher will have are his books. We are greatly blessed with the resources available in the English language. There are various categories of books that are worth obtaining as a basic preachers library.

Bible Versions

It is important to study using several versions. Unless you are well acquainted with the original languages in which the Bible was written,

namely Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, you will not always be able to get the best translation of a verse or phrase.

Read whatever passage you are studying in several different versions. The comparison between the versions will give you a more accurate idea of what the passage is saying and will often enable you to identify which parts of the text are particularly difficult to translate. I would tend to use the *New American Standard Version* (NASV), the *New International Version* (NIV) and the *Good News Version* (GNV). These three complement each other well. The NASV is a very literal translation, the NIV tends to use dynamic equivalents while the GNV endeavours to convey the meaning in the kind of language that the average man in the street would use.

As well as having a variety of versions it is useful to have both an Old Testament and New Testament Interlinear. Interlinear Testaments not only provide a translation of each passage but also provide the Greek text with a literal word for word translation underneath. The great benefit is that you will be able to identify the literal translation for each word in the text and this helps to sharpen the focus of the passage. Working alongside these you will do well to have a Lexicon on the Old Testament and one for the New Testament.

Theological Dictionaries

Once you have got to grips with what the passage is saying by repeated reading, it is time to get down to looking at individual words. Each word is a vehicle which conveys meaning. A good theological dictionary will tell you the theological significance of words, what their field of meaning is and how that word is used in other passages of scripture. In short it will be an invaluable asset to your word studies. For the Old Testament I find *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament*, edited by Willem Van Gemeren to be the most helpful and for the New Testament I enjoy Colin Brown's *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Neither of these multi volume sets are cheap, but if you obtain them you will probably not need any other books of this kind as they are so detailed.

Concordances

It is also important to use a concordance in your study. A concordance lists

words according to their alphabetical order and quotes the line in which that word occurs. It will enable you to identify all the references where a particular word or phrase occurs. You may also be aware of some verse which complements the passage you are speaking on but you cannot remember the reference. Again the concordance enables you to discover where that verse can be found.

Most translations have their corresponding concordance so whatever version you use for study, you should obtain the concordance that relates to it. I use the *NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, edited by Godrick and Kohlenberger, as well as the *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. In addition I use the *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* by J. Strong. It is based on the Authorised version of the bible and enables the reader to link specific Greek and Hebrew words to their corresponding English terms.

Bible Dictionaries and Bible Encyclopaedias

Next you will need to use a bible dictionary or encyclopaedia. These books are useful for providing information on biblical places, characters, customs and a wide range of biblical topics. My personal favourite is the three volume *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* edited by J.D. Douglas. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* edited by G. Bromiley is also excellent. It comes in four volumes and is virtually exhaustive.

Bible Atlas

One important discipline in bible study is that of geography. There are many good bible atlases to choose from and this being the case it really does not matter which one you opt for. The one that I have used the most is *The Student Bible Atlas*.

Bible History

If biblical geography is important, then biblical history is even more so. The bible's history takes place over so many years and involves so many events and personalities that the field of biblical history is a massive one. Because of this there are many books on biblical history and so we need to be very selective.

One of the standard volumes on Old Testament history is *A History of Israel* by John Bright. It is excellent though not very conservative so some caution is needed. Another very useful volume is *The History of Israel* by Walter Kaiser. This is more conservative, contemporary and is easy to read, though that fact does not detract from its solidity. When we come to the New Testament, arguably one of the best books is *New Testament History* by FF Bruce. This book begins at the end of the Old Testament period and so brings a continuity to the two testaments.

It is important not to omit the four hundred years which elapsed between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. These are crucial years for our understanding of the nation of Israel as portrayed in the gospel accounts. The best book I have read covering this period is *A History of Israel from Alexander the Great to Bar Kochba*, by H. Jagersma.

Bible Surveys and Bible Introductions

A good bible survey or introduction will note the themes of each book and break it up into its component parts. Probably the standard Old Testament work over the past twenty years has been *Old Testament Introduction* by RK Harrison. It is conservative, detailed and extremely informative. *Old Testament Survey* by Gleason Archer is also a classic. Two more contemporary works which are also excellent are *OT Introduction* LaSour, Hubbard and Bush, and *OT Introduction* by Dillard and Longman . Both are well written and an invaluable resource.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, *New Testament Introduction* by Donald Guthrie has done for the New Testament what Harrison' s work has done for the Old. A more recent book is *New Testament Introduction* by Carson, Moo and Morris is also well worth having.

Biblical and Systematic Theology

As well as being aware of the text, it is important to be aware of the theology of the text when preaching. An excellent book on Old Testament theology is *Themes in Old Testament Theology* by William Dryness. It charts the main theological themes of the Old Testament and delivers a

good overview. Walter Kaiser's *Toward an Old Testament Theology* is also good and it focuses on the theme of God's promise.

For New Testament study Donald Guthrie's *New Testament Theology* has long been a classic and is highly valuable. Also George Eldon Ladd's *A Theology of the New Testament* is excellent. If brevity is what you are looking for then *New Testament Theology* by Leon Morris is the one to choose. It is, of course, not as comprehensive as the other two, but well worth the read.

As far as preaching is concerned systematic theology may well not be as important as biblical theology, but it is important to have some good systematic theologies at hand. My personal favourite is *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem. It is well written, practical as well as scholarly and asks useful questions at the end of each chapter. Other volumes worth noting are *Systematic Theology* by Louis Berkhof and *Know the Truth* by Bruce Milne, though the latter is rather brief. Other good alternatives are the three volume *The Evangelical Faith* by Helmut Thielicke and Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology*.

Background Information

There are also a wide variety of books which give us important background information about the biblical world and the personalities and events within scripture. The *Peoples of the Old Testament World* is an excellent volume which gives background information on many of the peoples mentioned in the Old Testament. Neal Berling's *Giving Goliath his Due* is also excellent and focuses particularly on the Philistines. Christopher Wright's *God's People in God's Land* is valuable as it provides insights into the Jewish world of family and land ownership.

A useful background to New Testament study is Alfred Edersheim's *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*. *Christianity in the Hellenistic World* by Roland Nash looks at the Greek influences in the world of the New Testament and is worth looking at. There is also an excellent book by Ralph Gower on *Manners and Customs of Bible Times*. It is easy to read and very enlightening. There is also an excellent six volume set on the background to the book of Acts which is edited by Bruce Winter. Though geared specifically to the book of Acts, it provides important background

for the whole of the New Testament. All of books will repay reading and are well worth having in your library.

Biblical Interpretation

Every preacher must learn the art of biblical interpretation, so books which deal with this subject are a must. Bernard Ramm 's book *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, is a very good starting place though it is not somewhat dated. *How to Read the Bible as Literature* by Leland Ryken is also very good. More useful than both of these is *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Doug Stewart. It is both clear and precise. But the most complete and best book that I have read on the subject is the excellent *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* by Doctors Klein, Bloomberg and Hubbard. It is a must for every budding preacher. There are a number of books which deal with a particular genre. Included in this category are *How to Read the Psalms* by Tremper Longman , *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Jb & Ecclesiastes* by Derek Kidner , and *Interpreting the Parables* by Craig Bloomberg. Each of these are good and worth obtaining.

Commentaries

No book list would be complete without mentioning commentaries. There are now quite a number of commentary series that cover all or most of the bible. Most commentary series are a mixed bag with some being better than others. However, in most of the major series there are enough good commentaries to give a warm general recommendation.

When choosing commentaries you must bear in mind that different ones aim to do different things. Some are highly technical and detailed and have comparatively little by way of application. Others are more accessible and apply the text extensively, while others are in the middle category. Of the more technical commentaries I find the *Word Biblical Commentaries* to be useful. This set requires some caution as it is broadly evangelical as opposed to conservatively evangelical, but it is a good series. Some are especially good like the magnificent *Ezra & Nehemiah* by Hugh Williamson. The *New International Commentary on the Old Testament* and the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* are also generally very good.

I also very much like the *New International Greek Text* commentary series, though it is far from complete. The volume on Philippians by PT O' Brien is particularly good. This set requires you to have a knowledge of Greek. The *Pillar Commentary* series is very good, though this is also far from complete.

Of the less technical commentaries the *Tyndale Commentary* series is probably the best all round. But the *Bible Speaks Today* series is also excellent and applies the text well. I have also benefited from the *Daily Study Bible* series. The Old Testament volumes are written by different scholars and are generally quite good. The New Testament volumes are written by the late William Barclay and are excellent for preachers. Some caution is needed with some of Barclay's views but he is always readable.

Lecture 9 Putting it all together

Once a passage has been studied, it then needs to be put into a form so that it can be conveyed to others. In short, there needs to be a basic structure to the sermon. This aspect of the preachers job is vitally important. A

preacher may know his bible well and understand all the principles of interpretation, but if he does not know how to convey his knowledge to those who listen, the effectiveness of his ministry is greatly diminished. That is why some of the best biblical scholars are sometimes some of the worst preachers. The job of a preacher is not finished until his message is such that his hearers will understand the content of what he is trying to convey and are challenged to obey.

Many preachers have compared their sermons to house building. In the same way as a house has a foundation, superstructure, front door, windows and a roof so a sermon should contain all of these features. The foundation of any house is essential. Unless a house is built on a firm foundation it will not last and therefore offers no protection or comfort for those who live in it. The foundation of any sermon is the word of God. Without the word being applied, the sermon is of no value to the hearer.

The superstructure of the house is the exposition of the sermon, or the content. This is the major part of the sermon. The central feature to which all other parts point. The front door of the house is the sermon introduction, it gives access to the house. Every house has windows and these are the illustrations that illuminate the points being made in the sermon. A house must also have a roof in order to make it complete. The roof is the conclusion to the sermon. It rounds off everything that has been said so that the package is neat and complete.

It is essential to remember that although introductions, illustrations and conclusions are important, their function is really to highlight the content of the sermon, they in themselves do not constitute the sermon. They are servants and the exposition of the word is master. Only when the preacher puts them into perspective will his sermon have substance.

Chopping off Chunks

Even before you begin shaping the sermon, you will need to know the passage. By the time the background work has been done, the preacher will have a clear idea of what the passage is saying, and how it relates to the book in which it is found and the bible as a whole. Now the sermon begins to take shape.

Choosing a passage

The first thing a preacher needs to do is decide how large a passage to preach on. A number of factors come into play at this point. Firstly you need to consider how much time you will have to deliver the message. It goes without saying that if your allocated time is just thirty minutes, you would never attempt to preach through an entire chapter of a book like Romans.

Secondly, the kind of passage needs to be considered. The epistles of Paul are very compact and filled with theology and detailed argument. It would be suicidal to take on more than a few verses at a time. The passage would never get full justice. If on the other hand you were to preach through the book of 2 Samuel or Esther, you would need to have a much larger passage to cover. You may even cover a couple of chapters in the one sermon. I have found that the more I preach the better I become at selecting an appropriate size of passage.

Finding the Theme

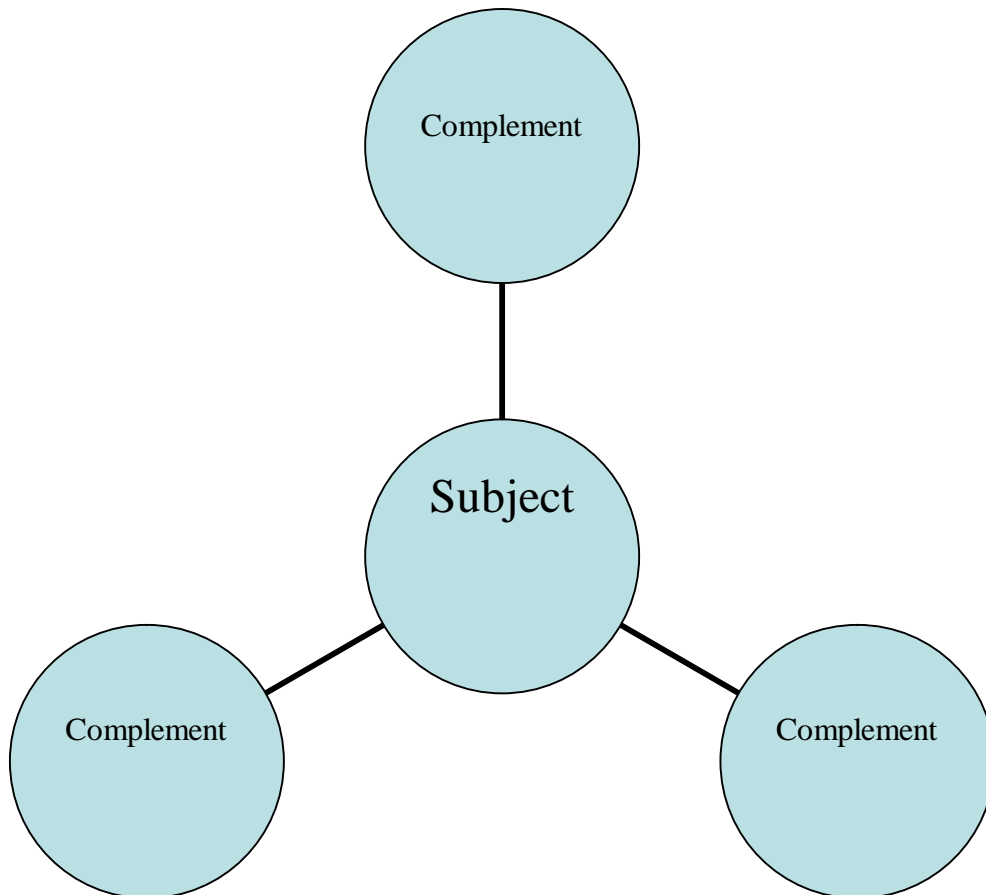
The next thing is to find the main theme of the passage. In other words, what is the passage basically about. Having studied the passage in detail, you will probably already know what the theme is. But it is essential to have the theme clearly in your mind otherwise it will be very difficult to articulate it to an audience. It may well be that the theme which runs through the passage you are studying is the same as the theme which runs through the book as a whole. On the other hand it may be just one of many branches which all make their own distinctive contribution to the broader theme of the book. Which ever of these it is, you will need to have in mind the basic point you want to communicate from this passage.

Identifying the points

Once you have this theme clearly in mind, you need to identify how each verse fits into the theme. The passage will be making a number of points which expand on the theme or add to it in some way. Some preachers call the main theme the Subject, while they call these individual points the Complement. The Subject tells you what the passage is basically about while the Complement fills out the basic structure with some flesh. This

distinction is a useful one.

Diagram 5



Take the example of the following passage:

Therefore since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into his grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

The Subject of this passage is Justification through faith. There are a number of Complements which add flesh to the basic argument. These are: we have peace with God, it is through the Lord Jesus, we have gained access, this is into his grace, and we rejoice in hope.

If you have done your homework well, you will have already asked many questions of the text. You will also have used word study books, bible histories and dictionaries to get specific information on the historical backdrop of the passage and the meanings of all the key words. At this point, now that you have identified the structure of the passage, you will find it useful once more, to use some commentaries in your study. They will ensure that you are going in the right direction, give accuracy to your exposition, correct any mistakes you have made, and perhaps even give you some ways in which you can apply the text.

The Layout

Once all of that is done you need to think about the layout of your message, that is how you will put it across. Some preachers like to state what their main theme or subject is and then deliver a set number of points on that theme. As they deliver each point they apply it to their audience. This is a good, orderly and neat approach.

Others prefer to preach through the passage in the order in which it comes, often verse by verse, applying it as they go along. This layout can also be effective and may well suit particular passages better than the first method.

Still others like to deal with the subject by stating what the passage says and then summing up the lessons we can learn from it at the end. Essentially it is a personal choice. I like using all three methods and usually decide which one I use according to the type of passage I am dealing with.

Application

Of course preaching is much more than just communicating information. I have already alluded to the application of the message, and want to do so again because it is so important to the whole job of preaching.

The end result of any sermon should be changed lives. We should never want people to walk away from a sermon saying, 'that was interesting'. Rather we want people to say 'that message really challenged me to do

something about my life'. Whether the message is a rebuke, an encouragement, a challenge or a call to a deeper walk with God, there must always be that element that demands action.

Sometimes finding the application is the most difficult thing of all. We may know what God is saying through this passage, but in what way does that apply to the lives of our audience? I would want to make two initial comments at this point. Firstly, I ask myself how does this message apply to my life. If It challenges me in an inconsistent area in my life, then it will probably have the same effect in the lives of people I preach to, as I am probably not much different from them. My experience has been that every time I have ever preached, God has spoken powerfully to me while I was preparing the message. Having found the application that suits my situation, I have used the same application in my sermon and found that members of the audience were going through the same struggle as I was.

Know Your Audience

Secondly, the point must be made that the most relevant preachers are the ones who know their audience well. Some preachers do a great deal of itinerant preaching. There is certainly value in this. Indeed sometimes an itinerant preacher is able to say things that the leaders of a particular church are unable to say. There is, however, a serious limitation to this itinerant preaching. The preacher just does not know the people he is addressing! They may have been through some church difficulty the preacher is unaware of. There may be hurting or confused without him knowing. There may be some serious sins being committed by people in the audience, and this is also unknown. This will impede application.

When a preacher preaches in his own church the situation is altogether different. He will know the situations and be able to respond to them, especially if he has done some pastoral visitation. Pastoral work and preaching go hand in hand. As he prepares his message the preacher has to ask himself what the real needs of the congregation?

Note Taking

One last point needs to be made, it concerns note taking. Perhaps the

subject of note taking should be dealt with in conjunction with the issue of the presentation of a sermon. The style of note taking that you use will to a large extent determine what kind of a presentation you will make to your audience. I want to deal with the issue now, however, because it is part of the process of putting the sermon together.

The issue of notes is important because it is very difficult to remember all that you have studied without at least some prompting. I have a friend of mine who prepares his message and then destroys his notes before he gets to the pulpit, so that he can be free from notes to preach more naturally. That is fine if your memory is excellent, or if you are so spontaneous that you can just speak off the cuff. This, though, is very unusual. Most of us need some kind of notes.

It is true, on the other hand, that if a preacher is too tied to his notes, he will be looking down at them constantly, and not at his audience. This is very distracting and a poor way of communicating. The balance must come some where in the middle.

Personally I like to use fairly full notes, I would rather have too many notes than too few. Having said all this, I make sure that I know the message so well that I will not need to look at my notes more than a couple of times per minute, and when I do so it is just a brief glance. I also find that if I have good notes, I have the confidence to be spontaneous when the need arises, and to use them sparingly.

Only when all this has been done can you begin to think about your introduction, illustrations and the conclusion of your message. That is the subject of the next two lectures

Lecture 10 Introduction and Conclusion

As the preacher begins to put his sermon together he must remember that every sermon must also have a point of entry. The front door of a sermon is its introduction.

What does an Introduction Do?

A good introduction should perform four basic tasks. Firstly it should gain the attention of the listener. Secondly, the introduction needs to secure interest. This is more than just the initial act of making the person sit up and listen, the preacher will want the audience to keep listening. They must be convinced that the content of the sermon is important, relevant and useful for them. Thirdly, the introduction must provide a natural path into the subject matter. Fourthly, the introduction must warm the heart and prepare it to obey.

Types of Introduction

It is important to be creative and to use a variety of methods to introduce your sermon. There is a sense in which a preacher should never be predictable. The list below is far from exhaustive, but it may prove helpful:

1. Illustration/story

People love stories, both real life and fictional. They can be funny, dramatic or profoundly moving. A story can set the mind racing and once told, it will often be remembered. Stories can therefore be a useful tools in introducing the sermon.

Once when preaching on the cross, I told the story of a young man who died on the battle field during World War I, fighting to free his country from tyranny. I used this an inroads to talking about the sacrifice of Christ which frees us from sin.

2. Striking Statement

A striking statement can also be powerful as it is startling and it forces people to think about an issue. The statement does not have to be one that you agree with. Sometimes making a statement that is clearly wrong can be useful, provided it is provocative. It can then be unpacked and the sermon itself can demonstrate its flaws.

I remember once preaching on the subject of integrity in the Christian life. My first words were 'All Christians are hypocrites', and then I paused for effect.

3. **Proverb**

There are many pithy sayings and proverbs which sum up an idea succinctly. These can make excellent introductions as they are often wise sayings which comment on human behaviour. I have frequently used a proverb like 'Give a man fish and feed him for a day, teach him how to fish and feed him for a lifetime', to introduce sermons on the need for a personal devotional life.

4. **Question**

Questions also make good introductions. They always get people thinking and they demand an immediate response. The more provocative the better. It can be good to ask personal questions and ones which require a lot of soul searching. A carefully thought out question, followed by a pause for effect, can prepare the audience for the answer which your sermon will present.

I can remember once preaching on James chapter 1 which deals with the issue of how Christians should respond to suffering. I asked two questions as part of my introduction. The first was - 'Why is life so tough for some Christians, even though they love God?', and the second was - 'How do you respond when life involves pain and suffering?'.

5. **Dramatic action**

If used carefully, dramatic actions can also be effective openers to a

sermon. It is important to note that if the action is overly dramatic or in any way inappropriate, it will actually detract from the sermon rather than add to it.

I once preached on the text 'Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him' Ps.37:7. For my introduction I merely stood up in the pulpit and waited silently for a few moments, just looking at the audience. When it was obvious to me that they were getting a little uncomfortable with the silence I said 'It is difficult isn't it, just being quiet with no distractions'.

6. Personal Experience

Our own personal experiences of life can be useful in introducing a sermon. There are many disappointments, happy experiences, and salutary lessons which usefully point to how God has worked in our lives. It is important not to focus too much on ourselves. It is also important not to use this kind of introduction to deprecate ourselves in a way that can appear falsely humble, or to overly flatter ourselves. But with this warning I highly commend this type of introduction.

7. Current Issue

The news also provides us with much material for introductions. The benefit with using news items or current events is that the audience will already be thinking about them and so will immediately feel that what you have to say is relevant and contemporary.

8. Event in History

Someone once said 'History teaches us that history teaches us nothing'. I disagree! There are many lessons in history that have much to teach us if only we are prepared to listen. For this very reason, events in history make good introductions to sermons. Think of some of the great mistakes of history, the heroes and characters of the past, as well as the important developments. All of these provide us with a great deal of material for our sermon introductions.

I preached recently on the text 'If the son shall set you free you will

be free indeed' (Jn.8:36). The point of this passage is that true freedom can be found in Christ. In order to force my audience to think about the preciousness of freedom, and the cost that can sometimes be involved in procuring it, I began with the story of William Wallace, the warrior who fought for the freedom of Scotland. The audience happened to be Scottish so the introduction struck a chord.

Where do Introductions Come From

Good introductions will come from reading. It is important that preachers do read and read widely. There are many books which I have found helpful ranging from the Guinness book of Records to classic novels and Shakespear. I have been helped by books on Philosophy, poetry, history and contemporary life. An active reader will have an active mind and this in turn will help to furnish his sermons with useful introductory material.

It is also useful to read quality newspapers and magazines, watch the news and listen to good radio programmes. This will enable preachers to keep their finger on the pulse and preach sermons which address contemporary questions. We must always bear in mind that the media will be having a profound effect on the minds of our audience.

Another useful source for introductions is human behaviour itself. Some of the best preachers I have heard are keen observers of human life. They observe how people live, what they do with their time, and then they analyse this.

It will be helpful to think about your own life and experiences and draw from this. Life is so varied and eventful that every person, if they took time to think, could recall important lessons they learned from their own experiences of life.

The Hidden Danger of Introduction

I think the first and most obvious danger is that of inaccuracy. I have sometimes heard preachers using introductions which involve a good story, simply because it is interesting and not because it leads naturally into the content of their sermon. This is always dangerous because if the

introduction leads the listener in one direction and the message in a slightly different direction, confusion can set in.

Another danger is that of over packing the introduction. Again I have heard sermon introductions that have been less than effective because they have been too lengthy and detail.

A third danger is the whole issue of time. At a rough estimate, I would say that the introduction should take up approximately 10% of the sermon time. Any flexibility should be towards shortening rather than lengthening this time. Some short introductions can be extremely powerful, but if you take to long, the overall effectiveness of the sermon will be diminished.

And in Conclusion....

This part of the sermon is just as important as the introduction, but its function is very different. Where as the introduction prepares the minds and hearts of the audience to hear the word of God, the conclusion challenges them to put what they have just heard into practice. .

The conclusion of a sermon has three basic functions. Firstly, it should succinctly sum up what has been said so that the audience will remember more easily. Secondly, it should challenge the hearer to respond to the word of God by obeying it. Thirdly, it should remind the hearer that with God ' s help, and only with God ' s help, the content of the message can be lived out.

In much the same way as there are different types of introduction, there are also different types of conclusions:

9. Revision

A simple going over of the content of the material can be very effective. Obviously this should be brief, but it is both a useful reminder and can be a challenge to obedience. A quick summary will keep the words of the preacher imbedded in the minds of his audience.

10. Story

It is sometimes helpful to tell a story which illustrates the points made in the sermon and demonstrates the need for obedience. Stories are interesting to listen to, and they are also easy to remember. If a suitable story is used to illustrate the points made in the sermon, people will tend to remember what you have said.

11. **Poem**

Poems can also make powerful conclusions. Poetry uses vivid language and often expresses ideas in an emotive way. A good poem will stay in the mind and can sum up an issue succinctly.

12. **Prayer**

Prayers can also make good conclusions particularly if they are written rather than off the cuff. The beauty of using a prayer is that it encourages the audience to seek God=s help in putting what they have learned into practice in their lives. As well as the preacher saying a concluding prayer, it is also possible to get the whole audience to say one.

You may not want to use a prayer for the whole of your conclusion, but even if you use some other form of conclusion, it is still of great benefit to conclude all of your remark with prayer.

The Hidden Danger of Conclusion

In much the same way as there are dangers involved in introducing a sermon, there are also dangers in concluding a sermon. It is particularly important that we are aware of these dangers because they can potentially destroy much of the good work that has been done in the sermon.

The first danger is never knowing when to stop. Good sermons have often been spoiled in this way. The preacher will repeat himself over and over again and become boring!

Another danger is taking tangent into another direction. I can remember preaching on a subject and as I was concluding the sermon, another thought

which was not related to my subject came to mind, so I mentioned it. This was a mistake.

A third danger is that of finishing too abruptly. This will inevitably happen if you have not put any work into your conclusion. Any sermon needs to contain an element of appeal. All audiences need to be stimulated into action. Stopping abruptly without bringing some kind of challenge will leave an audience cold and unsatisfied.

Lecture 11 Opening Windows

Every house needs windows. In ancient times before houses had adequate windows built, they were dark and gloomy places. It was difficult to see where you were going. Illustrations are the windows that bring light to the structure of the sermon.

Illustrations in the Bible

It must be noted that illustrations are thoroughly biblical. The psalmist uses the illustration of wild grass to demonstrate the mortality of human existence (Ps.103:15), while Jeremiah uses the illustration of a hammer smashing rocks to describe the impact of his message (Jer 23:29). Jesus himself frequently used illustrations. In Matthew 5:13,14, for example, when talking about the impact he wanted his disciples to make on society he used the illustration of salt and light. Later in 1 Thess 2:7 Paul would use the illustration of a mother caring for her children to illustrate his commitment to the Christians in Thessalonica. In each case the biblical writers considered illustrations to be an essential element in the communication process.

What Should an Illustration do?

An important question that needs to be asked concerns the function of illustrations. What is the purpose of an illustration? What do we want it to do for the sermon?

Firstly, an illustration should bring understanding. Some theological concepts are by their very nature difficult to grasp. The doctrine of God ,

for example, is well beyond the greatest of minds. The mystery of salvation likewise is awesome. The process of sanctification and the act of justification have been the preoccupation of the greatest scholars for centuries. If great minds stagger as they fail to grasp such monumental truths, how do preachers communicate them to audiences where many have not developed razor sharp theological minds?

The truth is that we will never be able to understand all of divine truth, let alone communicate it. But we will be greatly assisted in our task by using illustrations that convey these theological concepts in language that people will readily comprehend. Illustrations will take ideas that are complex and transfer them into word pictures that can be assimilated and appreciated.

Secondly illustrations can bring clarification. It is important that others understand what we are saying. This is particularly so when dealing with the word of God. We need precision so that no ambiguity will exist. Again illustrations can do this. A precise idea can be pinpointed in such a way as the audience can know exactly what the preacher is getting at.

Thirdly, illustrations retain interest. Even the most dynamic and absorbing of speakers will not find it easy to retain an audience's attention span for even half an hour. Those of us who are less absorbing will find the job an even harder struggle. The sermon is a vehicle which conveys God's message, but if illustrations are added, the journey is all the smoother. Good illustrations peppered throughout a sermon will not only ensure people understand, they will also help to keep their attention. Only when people are listening to the sermon, can they benefit from it, so this function of an illustration should not be ignored.

Finally illustrations should also enthuse an audience. The preacher should make his audience excited about the subject matter. He should demonstrate that obeying God's word and living the Christian life is the best thing to do. In order to convey this excitement, he will need not just to make bland statements, but illustrate them also. Illustrations can bring a sermon to life and move the audience.

What Illustrations Shouldn't Do!

Although illustrations are a useful tool, we need to remember that they are

only that. Illustrations are not the message, they merely help the message by making it understandable. There are some dangers that we need to be aware of as we develop our illustrations.

Illustrations that take over

Firstly we need to ensure that our illustrations do not take over the whole message. I have all too frequently made the mistake of using too many illustrations in my preaching, and this has usually happened when I have not done enough work in studying the text. It is a big temptation to have a lot of illustrations, firstly because they take up time and compensate for a lack of preparation, and secondly because they hold peoples attention. If they take over, however, we will end up giving our audience lots of nice stories but very little spiritual food.

I have eventually come to the conclusion that there should be only one illustration for each point in my sermons and a sermon should never have more than seven or eight illustrations. I have also come to the conclusion that if you need lots of stories to make your sermon worth listening to, you should not be a preacher. Too many illustrations provide a poor diet for the church and a poor use of preaching time.

Illustrations that draw the audience away

Secondly we need to watch out for illustrations that take the audience's mind away from the points you are making in the sermon. There are obvious reasons why this happens. A preacher can use an illustration that does not really fit in with the point being made. It is inaccurate and therefore deflects the listeners from the point, or simply confuses them. Make sure you find illustrations that fit the points you are making rather than finding points that fit the illustrations you want to use.

It is also possible that the illustration you chose is so memorable that it is all that the listener can remember. I once preached on sin and was making the point that the bible describes us as prisoners to sin (Gal.3:22). I told a gripping story to illustrate this point and hoped that the message would hit home with great force. Later I discovered that most of the people who were listening to the message could remember the story I told, but had no idea what the point of my message was. Clearly this was a mistake.

Illustrations that are inappropriate

Thirdly we need to be careful not to use illustrations that are inappropriate to our audience. This presupposes that you know your audience and can identify the kind of things that would appeal to them. If the point of an illustration is to communicate, then you need to use illustrations that your audience can readily identify with.

I once heard a preacher use an illustration about the life of a leading dance music DJ. His audience was composed mostly of elderly people and they simply did not understand the point he was making, even though a younger audience would have. The problem was not that it was a bad illustration, but that it was the wrong one for that particular audience. On another occasion a preacher used an illustration taken from the second world war, but as few of the members of his audience were born then, it was lost on them. Always know your audience and chose illustrations that they will be able to identify with.

Where do Illustrations come from?

Again the question needs to be asked, where can good illustrations be found. The answer is, almost everywhere! Stories that you have read, lines from poems, current events, proverbs, all of these can be used to illustrate the points you are making. The bible itself is also full of illustrative material. I have often found myself drawing from the many stories in the Old Testament in my illustrations.

One friend of mine, who is a marvelous preacher, always looks at billboards and advertising hoardings in the hope of finding good illustrations. Indeed, when he and his wife are out in the car, she does the driving while he writes down any useful ideas which he sees on billboards in a note book which he always carries with him. He also sits in front of the television with his notebook noting down ideas from adverts as well as the T.V. programmes themselves. It does not take him all that long to fill a notebook, and he now has dozens of them. These will provide him with a goldmine of illustrations for his sermons.

I have another friend who, whenever she hears an interesting story or some

true life experience, says, 'there is a sermon illustration in that'. She is absolutely right. More often than not these accounts can easily be brought into a sermon to illustrate something. On one occasion another friend of mine had lost his baggage on a trip to an Eastern European country. Though the people he was staying with during his trip were poor, they all donated articles of clothing so that he could have a change of clothes. When I related this story to my friend she immediately remarked, 'there is a sermon illustration in that'. Within days I found myself preaching on Christian love and I used that illustration as part of my talk.

One of the most important habits to get into is that of collecting sermon illustrations. You may, like my friend, want to keep a note book with you at all times, or perhaps have a file at home where you put illustrations that you come across. Once your collection begins to grow you may want to categorise your illustrations under different headings to facilitate easy access. However you collect illustrations, make sure that you do. It will take a certain amount of discipline, for without consciously building up a bank of illustrations, you will never have a ready source. Work hard at it. You may even want to buy one of the many books of illustrations that are now available. Use every available source so that your sermons are enriched.

The important thing to remember is creativity. Never be afraid to use any illustration, provided it doesn't take over, it doesn't draw the audience away and isn't appropriate to your audience. Use your imagination. Pepper your sermons with good illustrations and they will develop life and vitality and clarity.

There are a few final remarks that need to be made about illustrations. Firstly, any illustration that needs extensive explanations should not be used. This may seem an obvious thing to say, but I have often witnessed preachers using an illustration and then saying, 'by that I mean...'. If you need to explain an illustration, then it will hardly assist you in making the passage of scripture clear, so save yourself the hassle and don't use it.

Secondly, be careful about using people that the audience know personally in your illustrations. I know of one situation where a pastor was involved in a counselling situation and used the problem that he was dealing with as his illustration. He attempted to be subtle and used a pseudonym rather

than the person's real name and spoke in a detached way so that his audience would think this issue happened a long time ago in another church. The people he was preaching to were not as stupid as him, however, and they all guessed who he was talking about. The situation was disastrous.

Thirdly, if you use quotations in your illustrations, ensure that you name the person you are quoting from, and try not to quote from people that your audience have never heard of. Naming the person is important because you should never take the credit for another person's wise words. Quoting from people the audience know is important because then the quotation will have greater impact and you will not sound like an intellectual snob.

Fourthly, get your facts right when using illustrations. I once heard a preacher saying that when a person has a disturbing dream, like falling off a tall building and hitting the ground, the dream itself can kill them. He boldly declared that this had been proved from science. Such nonsense is not only laughable, it discredits the whole credibility of the preacher. Be careful not to make too many 'scientific claims' if you do not know your science very well.

Finally, keep your illustrations short and punchy. Jesus told the Parable of the Lost Coin and applied it in just 73 words. We can learn a great deal from the master storyteller!

Lecture 12

Preach the Word

Preaching is not a fashionable thing these days. The truth is that there are so many jokes about preachers circulating in many of our churches, I sometimes get the impression that preachers are looked upon with a little disdain. The sermon too seems to be losing its appeal. In many churches it is squeezed into an ever smaller space within the church service, and the preacher dare not go over his allocated time. It is forgivable if we sing one hymn too many or if the children's item runs a minute or two over. No one will mind if the drama presentation is a little longer than expected. People will tolerate lengthy and rambling announcements. But if the preacher takes too long, there is big trouble!

Perhaps I am overstating things a little, but not by much. I have frequently looked down at my audiences when preaching, and noticed how often people check their watches. On those rare occasions when I have gone over my time, I have monitored the increasing restlessness with every minute that goes by. On one occasion I even had a person walking out during my sermon because I went three minutes over the allocated time. One wonders what urgent business that person had, that forced him to exit so quickly. The reality is that in some churches, the weekly sermon has been relegated

to such a lowly position, it has become barely more important than the coffee break.

This attitude towards both the sermon and the preacher is one which must be challenged at all costs. The exposition of the word of God is so fundamental to the life of a church, that it is simply impossible for a church to remain spiritually healthy without preaching.

The problem is that if both preacher and sermon are undervalued, there will eventually be a shortage of both. Preaching is hard work! There is the toil of preparation, many lonely hours spent digging into scripture to discover what God is saying. This is followed by more hours spent discovering the best way of applying the message to a contemporary audience. Then there is the stress of getting into the pulpit to present the sermon to the church congregation. Exciting certainly, a joy yes, but far from easy. If, at times, the congregation responds with a mixture of indifference and unresponsiveness, then discouragement can set in. It is this discouragement that we need to guard against.

As we enter the pulpit, we become God's heralds, declaring the wonders of his will to all who would listen. This is a great privilege, and a noble task.

When writing to the Galatians Paul declared that God had 'revealed his son to me, that I might preach Him among the gentiles'¹. Being a preacher is a calling. It is a calling to stand firm against all pressure and to declare boldly what God is saying to his people and to the world. It is a calling that requires courage, integrity and a sense of purpose. God's messenger must live out his message as well as preach it. And he must preach it with conviction, knowing that it is the truth. His mandate does not come from a church or denomination, but from God himself. Such is the awesome responsibility that being a preacher entails.

This is a task which will sort out the men from the boys. The true men of God will rise to the task, while those who are boys will shrink from it. This is indeed a test of true Christian character. To preach the word, in season and out of season, is to stand for what is right. When we preach truth in a society that is utterly corrupt, and in a church that will all too easily accommodate the pervasive nature of that society, we declare that God has another way for men to live. We thus engage in a great cultural war. The culture of this world against the counter culture of Christianity. In this

battle, preaching will always have a role, it is the churches most powerful weapon. Through preaching we can confront the churches complicity with the world, and the worlds sinfulness. Preaching will be a double edged sword, and the preacher a warrior for truth. The two will do battle, and by the grace of God will prevail. The word of God, boldly declared, will have its impact, and bring glory to God.

Today the church urgently needs a new generation of preachers! Who will rise to the task?

Class Exercise 1

Practising your Introductions

Imaging you are preaching on the following passages. Try and think of the best way of introducing the subject.

1. John 3:1-16 Jesus conversation with Nicodemus
2. Genesis 39:1-20 The temptation of Joseph
3. Isaiah 40:28-31 Gaining strength from God
4. Ephesians 6:10-20 The Armour of God
5. Daniel 1:1-21 Daniel in captivity

6. Exodus 20:1-16 The Ten Commandments
7. Hosea 11:1-11 The Love of God
8. Hebrews 11:1-12 Faith

Class Exercise 2
Practising your Illustrations

Imaging you are dealing with the following verses in a sermon. Think of the best way of illustrating them.

1. Philippians 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition
2. Ephesians 4:2 Be completely humble
3. Matthew 7:16 By their fruits you will recognise them
4. Psalm 27:1 The Lord is my Light
5. Philippians 2:6 Who, being in very nature God, did not

6. consider equality with God something to be grasped.

7. Proverbs 29:1 A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed without remedy.

8. Genesis 40:23 The chief cupbearer, however, forgot Joseph.

9. Revelation 2:2 I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance.

Preaching Assessment Sheet

The Content and Organisation of a Sermon

Please tick each point if it applies:

1) INTRODUCTION

Did the introduction arrest attention? _____

Was the introduction relevant to the sermon? _____

Was the introduction of reasonable length? _____

2) SUBJECT

Was the subject of the sermon made clear? _____

Was the subject relevant to the audience? _____

3) OUTLINE

Was there a logical sequence of thought? _____
Were the main points distinct? _____

4) DEVELOPMENT

Was there good interpretation of scripture? _____
Was there a smooth transition between points? _____

5) ILLUSTRATIONS

Were points illustrated appropriately? _____
Were illustrations concise and to the point? _____

6) APPLICATION

Was there appropriate application? _____
Was there sufficient application? _____

7) CONCLUSION

Was the sermon summarised well? _____
Was the conclusion a suitable length? _____
Did the conclusion call for a clear response? _____

8) VOICE

Was the voice sufficiently loud? _____
Was there a good variation in tone? _____

9) ENTHUSIASM

Was the presentation enthusiastic? _____
Was there good eye contact? _____
Did the speaker communicate naturally? _____

Closing Comments

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