

Editorial

Keywords: mission, ministry, preaching

A new feature on the London skyline is the Millennium Dome which symbolises people's fascination with the approach of a new millennium. How the spiritual dimension will be handled in the Dome still remains to be seen, but it is clear that a new millennium raises its own set of challenges for the churches. In what ways will Christians respond to a world which is changing at an ever increasing rate?

The post-modern, post-Christian context facing churches in the West already, underlines the need for leaders who can inspire and enable churches to move from maintenance to mission. Whatever fresh challenges the year 2000 may bring will simply make that call to mission ever more urgent.

It is against that mission background that this edition of *Evangel* offers some reflections upon preaching.

Few are surprised when people outside the church are critical of preaching, partly because a society which prizes tolerance and pluralism is inevitably suspicious of preachers claiming a direct line to God. However the disturbing questions do not come from that source alone. Unease about preaching also exists within the church among those disciples who are wholeheartedly committed to the church's mission mandate. Questions must be asked. If the mission needs are so vast, and the resources are so limited, then why waste time and energy with such an old fashioned form of communication? A visual age where people have limited attention spans surely calls for more imagination and creativity and fewer sermons?

Questions such as these need to be faced and answered. Within the last three decades there has been

a lot of serious thinking and fresh writing about the theology and practice of preaching, especially in North America. Far from being in terminal decline, homiletics appears to be alive and well.

Over many years *Spurgeon's College* and *The College of Preachers* have both been in the business of encouraging biblical proclamation. The articles in this edition arise from that concern and touch on a wide range of contemporary issues in preaching. Inevitably it has only been possible to look at some important topics. The articles face some of the critics' questions and raise other issues too. Hopefully there is enough here to whet your appetite to find out more about preaching effectively.

Paul Scott Wilson suggests that preaching is important because 'in the finest sermons we feel renewed hope, stronger faith, and recommitment to mission. More simply stated, we experience God. For this reason we claim that preaching is an event in which the congregation meets the living God.'¹ If preaching has something of that nature then any move from maintenance to mission will require a renewed commitment to relevant, biblical preaching. These articles offer some indication of what such a rediscovery of preaching might involve.

Footnotes

1. Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp 21-22.

Professionalism and ministry (some insights from 1 Thessalonians 2.1-12)

John Proctor

Keywords: ministry, Paul, Thessalonians, orator, philosopher, community, integrity

1. 'Before ordination, I worked for a living'

What relationship has the ministry to other occupations—and what relationship ought it to have? What

sorts of comparisons and what standards are appropriate, when we consider what Christian ministers do and how they conduct themselves and carry out their duties? Ought they to be compared with the ways that other people work, or are they entirely a race apart?

An initial answer comes from the New Testament. St Paul compares the minister to a soldier, an athlete and a farmer (2 Tim. 2:3–6). He himself is a gardener and a builder (1 Cor. 3:6–10), a slave and an envoy (Rom. 1:1), a priest with a gift to bring to God (Rom. 15:16). The world of work is a rich source of comparison and metaphor, and its virtues are affirmed in numerous different ways. Ministry, it seems, can legitimately be likened to other occupations.

Of course Paul is referring to his own social context. What he says needs to be illustrated, and indeed 'translated' from his context to ours. That translation must be a double-edged activity. On the one hand we try to understand the tasks of which Paul was writing: farming, for instance. How did first century farmers work, and what features of their life is he stressing? Conversely, when we look at our own context, what milestones and measures can we use to assess what we do for God? When people look at us and make comparisons, which of these should we accept, and which should we rebut? Will twenty-first century ministers be looked on as gardeners and athletes? Or shall we be more often perceived as something like teachers, social workers, small business managers, or sales personnel? Does that matter, and what should we do about it?

By what standards, and in what guise, do we present ourselves and seek to be appraised? To what extent are we indebted to other occupations in understanding our own task, and how fully should we keep aware of their striving for excellence, in what we do ourselves? These questions—along with the recognition that they do not have a simple answer—seem to have occurred to Paul.¹

At least that is the impression given by some recent work on 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12. Two possible grids of interpretation have emerged. Each one connects Paul's description of the missionary work that he and his companions had done, to the language and outlook of another field of work. Paul, it seems, is using the standards and categories of another profession to describe his own ministry. The points he makes certainly help us to reflect on ministry itself. But more specifically they address the particular question of how gospel ministry relates to other kinds of work. Some possible answers appear, suggesting how and why the minister is—and is not—suitably characterized as a professional.

2. Memories of a mission

The substance of the memories

The first chapter of 1 Thessalonians strikes a lively note of thanksgiving, speaking of the strong positive impact made by the gospel in Thessalonica (1:5f.) and of the swift progress shown by the new Christians there, of their vigour, joyful commitment and steadfastness in adversity (1:7f.). The second chapter then recalls how

that impact had come about, remembering the missionary work that Paul and his companions undertook in Thessalonica, and telling of how they had behaved. It speaks of the missionaries' arrival in Thessalonica (2:1–2), of their motivation (3–4), activity (5–6) and pastoral relationships (7–8), of their self-support (9) and upright conduct (10), of the future expectation that inspired them (11–12) and the positive outcome of their mission (13f).

The verses tell of integrity, purpose, character and service. Paul speaks well of himself, and does so at some length. Why does he do this? He could be trying to distance himself from other itinerant teachers of the period—but there is still the question of purpose. The Thessalonian church does not seem to be threatened by strange teachers; their problems are very local. So why does Paul write as he does? Various reasons have been suggested.

Had the pressure on the church after his departure (3:3) included attacks on his integrity? Indeed had his own hasty leaving of the city (Acts 17:10) led to misunderstanding and criticism, both within the church and in the wider local community? That sort of scenario could have evoked a personal apologetic of the kind given here. Nonetheless, I think the best explanation is more direct. Paul is establishing the pastoral credibility to issue some firm instruction later on, and giving some guidance in Christian conduct as he does so.

The setting of the memories

In structure I Thessalonians matches the pattern of Greek argument known as epideictic rhetoric.² This style of argument deals in praise and blame, pointing out (*epideixis*) the right and wrong, in order to lead the reader or hearer into proper paths of conduct. The ethical and moral instruction is not predominantly direct and persuasive (that style is called deliberative rhetoric), but arises indirectly from the matters chosen for praise and blame. So in this letter Paul praises the Thessalonians' own faith and behaviour (1:2f., 6–10; 2:13f; 3:6–8; 4:1, 9–12; 5:4, 11), and his affirmations serve to encourage and instruct. Likewise the references in Chapter 2 to his own work have a similar purpose—they forge a bond of affection, and instruct by example.

Firstly, these verses aim to bond. The tenses oscillate in 2:1–12: verses 1f., 5–7, and 9–12a are past, 3f. are present, and 12b looks to the future.³ The impression is given (and surely intentionally) that the commitment Paul showed earlier remains alive. As he has cared in the past, he still cares. As they have trusted him before, they can trust him now. His love and commitment for the church are still there, as strong as they ever were. This is surely a sincere outpouring of affection and concern—but it is also a formal and purposeful part of the letter, a necessary basis for the instruction to be given in

the chapters ahead. The trust established here will provide a solid footing for the advice and pastoral teaching to come.

Then, secondly, this passage functions as a model. Both Paul's conduct during his visit, and the readers' own response, display the kinds of behaviour he wants to commend now. The commitment they showed before was good, and he wants them to continue in that vein. His own care, too, was a pattern for them to follow, in their care for one another. For he believes in imitation (1:6), in copying good role models. He is aware of leadership in this new church, and he writes about care (5:12-14). Surely what he says about his own caring is intended to be exemplary. This is a template for leaders to copy (1:6).⁴

3. Two background interpretations:

Two recent studies have examined Paul's use of words and themes in these verses, against a background of contemporary culture. Bruce Winter has looked at the reputation of Greco-Roman orators, and Abraham Malherbe at philosophical movements in the classical period. Each of them has found significant parallels between what Paul writes here, and other literature of the time. We summarize them both—Winter first.

A. Winter: a special sort of speaker⁵

The first clue that links text and background is the word *eisodos* (entrance) in 2:1. 'Our coming to you was not in vain', says Paul, repeating the word he used in 1:9, 'the welcome we had among you'.⁶ Paul had spoken boldly and directly when he came to Thessalonica (2:2) even though he had suffered badly for such preaching in his last port of call, Philippi. As a result his coming was not 'in vain' (2:1), no empty or fruitless arrival: indeed there were those who turned decisively from idolatry to God (1:9) and this point is taken up again by Paul in 2:13.

Similarly, a prominent orator of the period, who earned his living by travelling from place to place, would be concerned about the initial impact he would make in a town. He would plan his coming, his *eisodos*, and use the occasion to the fullest advantage he could. He would praise himself and his audience, win their confidence and respect, and—if all went well—would gain some profitable work: youths to educate, or legal cases to plead, or even offers of hospitality. The first impression was critical; it would be planned in an intricate and deliberate way.

Winter has found references to this sort of professional *eisodos* in literature of the age, and he argues that Paul adopts the term deliberately. Paul presents

himself in a manner analogous to a professional speaker, but then goes on to develop a contrasting profile for himself, to accentuate the differences between his own work and that of an itinerant orator. The contrast comes through the many negatives in verses 3-6.

The apostles' motives are not 'deceitful, impure or devious' (3); their object is not to 'please people' (4), but God; they do not use words 'to flatter, or to cloak and serve greed' (5); nor are they 'striving for human praise' (6). All this can be explained, says Winter, from the public profile of orators of the time. Whatever may have been true of individuals, the profession as a whole had acquired a dubious and tainted public image. They were underhand and deceitful, it was said, speaking always to their hearers' pleasure and prejudice, concerned chiefly for money-making, driven too often by the vanity of public praise and honour. A certain notoriety had gathered around this calling.

So Paul starts to describe his ministry in a way that invites comparison. His *eisodos* was important, and indeed effective; it made quite an impact. In that sense he is like a travelling orator. Yet once that connection is made, the negatives he uses distance him from the unsavoury public image of the rhetorical profession. Having invited the comparison, he then shows just how great a contrast there actually is. In motive, method and aim, he goes about things in quite a different way.

Thus Winter's interpretation makes much of the negative comparisons between Paul and his culture. Paul is setting himself well apart from contemporary rhetoricians. A rather different picture, with more positive connections, has been offered by Malherbe. . . .

B. Malherbe: theory and therapy

Many people today think of philosophy as a remote quest, not much involved with the mundane normality of daily living. It was not so, says Malherbe, in the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome. Intellectual work was concerned about the dealings of daily life. Philosophers were practical people, seeking to win adherents—not to communicate ideas alone, but to influence their hearers' whole lives for good. A philosophy was not just a kind of thinking, but a whole way of living.

To serve this aim there developed a philosophic tradition of pastoral care. Philosophers wanted to nurture their hearers in discipleship. So their writings attend to ways of doing this, and discuss the personal style a philosopher must adopt, if he is to attract and influence followers for good.⁷ Malherbe finds many parallels to this philosophical pastoral vocabulary in Paul's writings—and the parallels are closest and most frequent in 1 Thessalonians 2.⁸

For example the 'opposition' faced at Thessalonica (2) is the Greek word *agon*—a battle or struggle. Some

Cynic philosophers looked on life as a 'battle', and the man who feared the 'insult' (2) of the crowd would shrink from the contest. In the face of such insult it is creditable to be 'direct and bold in speech' (2).⁹ Some people's speech is empty but Paul's was 'not in vain' (1).

It was reckoned important for philosophers to be 'pure' and 'guileless' (3). 'Flattery' and 'greed' (5) were characteristics the best would try to avoid. 'Hardness' (7, one English translation is 'burdensome' but among the philosophers the term denoted a toughness in pastoral style) was a method Paul avoided; he favoured 'gentleness' (7).¹⁰ Indeed the picture of pastoral care as 'motherly nursing' (7), a role both of protection and nourishment, is a philosophical one.

Thus there are a host of common terms. Malherbe then considers why so many of Paul's words and ideas are also found in philosophy. He argues that Paul is drawing on ideals and patterns of nurture within his culture. Paul may use the philosophical traditions somewhat unreflectively and instinctively, but he uses them with purpose. He speaks of his Christian activity and vision in ways that echo the academic and pastoral discourse of his time. He believes that his work as a Christian pastor 'corresponds to the best standards in moral education in the Greco-Roman world'.¹¹ His substance derives from the gospel, but his description of his work connects with wider perceptions of good educational practice, with the best canons of moral formation in the surrounding society.

Malherbe is not trying to recast Paul as a philosopher. His point is rather that Paul discusses Christian work in terms that invoke high and recognized standards of philosophical practice. Paul compares himself, by the language he uses, with the aspirations and excellence of a parallel vocation.

C. Orators and philosophers: chalk and cheese?

So we have two grids of interpretation. According to Winter Paul uses the public reputation of the travelling orators in a predominantly negative way, and—apart from his positive use of the term *eisodos*—discusses his own ministry in contrast to theirs. For Malherbe, Paul's comparisons are chiefly positive, and his counterpoint is in the pastoral methods of the philosophical schools.

How distinct are these two interpretations? Does one set aside the other, as Winter argues?¹² I tend to think them related to one another, and am disinclined to press Winter's objection. Indeed Winter argues elsewhere that the object of Dio Chrysostom's attacks (in a passage which both he and Malherbe have discussed) are the sophists of Alexandria: these men constituted 'a specific group of public orators', but they also presently 'stood in the place of the traditional leaders of the polis,

namely the philosophers'.¹³ Thus there was a succession through time, within a common tradition. Certain orators were doing badly what the great philosophers might have done well. (One might hear a very similar argument if an adherent of, say, a political cause were to praise its ideals and founders, while lamenting the miserable torch-bearers of his or her own day.)

So Paul might—with all consistency—have referred positively to the best of the philosophical tradition, while implicitly distancing himself from certain current practitioners. Indeed both of those allusions, the affirmative and the critical, could help him to explain and defend his own work. Perhaps he is writing with a broad reference, on the one hand claiming to follow the best ideals of the Greco-Roman intellectual tradition, and on the other distancing himself from the worst of present practice. In which case both Malherbe and Winter offer helpful insight into 1 Thessalonians.

4. An apostle apart¹⁴

Notwithstanding all the above, it is pretty clear that some of Paul's perspectives on ministry cannot be paralleled in the philosophical writings. His Christian understanding and commitment lead him in directions that are quite distinct.¹⁵

His positive appeal to his own example (1:5f.), within a pattern of imitation that links the whole Christian family (2:14), and comes ultimately from Jesus Christ (1:6), shows both a confidence and a network of template and example that surpass much in philosophy. His commitment to hard work and self-support (2:9) might have been honoured as virtuous by many of the philosophical thinkers—but few of them seem to have taken this way themselves. Like philosophers, he was bold in speech, but he did not attribute this to his own intrinsic freedom or personal attainment; rather he drew courage from God (2:2). In the face of opposition he sees no place for an abrasive response, as some philosophers occasionally did; he does not feel the need to match insult with severity or denunciation.

Paul's commitment to community is distinctive. The Stoic philosophers' slogan was 'self-sufficiency', and the Cynics' concern was freedom; both of these emphases allow quite an individual interpretation. Whereas Paul wanted to foster communal life, a life that bound people tightly together in Christ. He uses family language, rather than the vocabulary of friendship, to describe Christian relationships (2:11, 17; 4:6 9f., 13; 5:1, 12, 14, 25, 26, 27),¹⁶ and he derives this, at root, from the Fatherhood of God by which the Christian community lives (1:1). His appeal to God as witness of his actions and inner motives (2:5, 10) is more Jewish than Greek.¹⁷

Finally his eschatological horizon is a vital part of the

way he thinks and cares. He is a man of the resurrection, shaped by Easter and looking forward to fuller participation in its triumph (4:17). The call of God to kingdom glory (2:12), the summons to holiness on the journey (4:7), and the prospect of sharing heaven's joy with the people he has won to faith (2:19f.; 4:17), motivate him in ways that go beyond the scope of available comparisons in secular literature.

5. *Just the job*

So 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 describes ministers' work and how they do it, in ways that invite comparison with the work of others. Which of Paul's points apply to us? Some suggestions . . .

A. *Standing*

Paul recalls his work in the past, in order to create trust in the present. He earns his credibility by what he has done. We too live with this link, between past and present. People judge ministers by their experience of ministers. Often we ourselves benefit from this, when trust which others have earned is transferred to us. Sometimes the reverse applies, and we get saddled with blame and ill-will that colleagues have generated (whether justifiably or not) long before our time. In due course we establish our own trust, as Paul had to in Thessalonica. People weigh up what they see in us, of commitment and care, of insight and integrity, and they trust us, or withhold their trust, by what they have found.

B. *Standards*

Paul expounds his personal care in relationship to the best of philosophic practice. He wants to be seen as competent and committed by the best available standards of society. Are we seen to be competent in our manner of work? For example . . .

What do school-teachers in the congregation think of the way we talk to children in church? What would an actor or speech therapist have to say about how we use our voice? How would an accountant judge our stewardship and record-keeping with any church money we have to handle? Compared with social work standards, are we careful in the ways we deal with people, and with their confidences? Do our church activities for young people follow the best practice for child protection? If we interview and employ people in the church, do we ensure fairness and impartiality in a defensible way?

Of course we don't want to swallow secular methods and ideologies hook, line and sinker. And we can't excel

in every area, as if we were specialists. But we ought to do the best we reasonably can. If we don't meet normal secular expectations in some of our dealings with people, is that because of genuinely different conviction (which would be fair enough), or because we don't take the trouble to learn? If people find us slack in matters they understand, will they think of us as careless all round? And shall we lose some credibility across the whole range of our ministry? To aim for recognizable competence seems to me both a biblical value, and a continuing call.

C. *Separation*

Paul took pains to set himself apart from the worst examples of bad professional practice. His concerns were integrity, openness, straightforwardness and sincerity. We too live in a sceptical age. Heroes and stars are not all they seem. People are unwilling to believe the best about public figures, and perhaps the ministry has been caught hard by that scepticism—harder than some other occupations.¹⁸ It may take time for people—especially people new to Christian things—to believe in our integrity, and we ought always to think carefully about whether, where and how we are likely to be misunderstood. While the detail of that will often depend on local and personal factors, we must surely be careful to conduct all our dealings, wherever we are and whoever we are with, in ways that indicate honesty and foster trust.

D. *Scrutiny*

Paul is a man under inspection. 'We have been tested and approved by God,' he says. 'God tests our hearts' (2:4). The Greek word *dokimazo*, used twice in v. 4, is about a quality control process. It means 'to prove by testing, to check and find good'. Quality control is a movement of our times; the principle of inspection is gaining ground in many occupations and spheres of life. The church has been, in some respects, a pioneer in this field: the pastoral oversight of congregations by area leadership is a healthy feature of various denominations. But the ideal is not always assiduously practised, nor warmly welcomed¹⁹ Ministers in particular often seem to be rugged individuals who certainly don't need anyone telling us what to do.

There is, of course, good reason for some hesitancy. Paul stresses accountability to God in this verse, not to human authority, and the application to human testing is not direct. But perhaps the wider point he makes, that the church is not ashamed to be compared with good professional standards of the day, should cause us to think seriously about how we use appraisal. Indeed Paul's apparent freedom from human authority may

have been more appropriate to a context of pioneer mission, scattered churches and slow communication, than it would be in a pastoral setting now. I doubt whether 1 Thessalonians 2:4 is a real get-out clause.

E. Stipend

In some churches stipendiary and non-stipendiary ministers work side by side, and occasionally the NSM is made to feel the poor relation. Paul seems to think that, in a missionary situation at least, the non-stipendiary style has certain advantages; the gospel can be shared without any immediate need for the converts to support the preacher. He would have little time for anyone who thought (as some Corinthians seem to have done [1 Cor. 9:12; 2 Cor. 11:7–11]) that unpaid ministry is second-rate. So far as he is concerned, a volunteer for the gospel can be as effective a representative of Christ as someone who earns a living from the faith. Money does not (of itself) make ministry.

F. Beyond professionalism

With Paul, ministry was fuller than any professional comparison could properly express, and it remains so today. The language of family—brothers and sisters in Christ—still applies. You can change your friends, and detach yourself from your professional commitments, but you never cease to belong to your family. Of course responsibilities in a family can be reassigned, and blessed indeed is the minister who can move on or step aside when the time comes. Nonetheless, the work we do for Christ and his church arises from an intimate and profound relationship, which we have chosen but not created, and which we cannot deny or desert. That, I think, takes us deeper than any professional relationship is likely to do. It gives opportunities and demands, and problems too. Our identity is involved, not merely our ability or personality.

Finally (in both senses) the future dimension is vital. The work of the ministry has an eternal horizon and purpose. So, rightly understood, does the vocation of any Christian person, but that arises in most cases from the faith brought to it rather than from the profession's own expectations. Whereas Christian pastoral care is necessarily carried out in a spirit of hope. That supplies an urgency and a note of expectancy. Every moment and every encounter is an element in a larger picture. Nothing is really small, and no single incident need be overwhelmingly great.

Professional ministers? Yes, if we mean that a certain trust goes with the office, that we strive for competences which bear comparison to proper standards elsewhere, that we are careful to sustain a personal profile

above reproach, and that we are willing to be tested. But a professional understanding falls short at some important points: finance, family and the future. Money does not make a ministry. The people we serve are our brothers and sisters, and claim us as people, not merely as experts. Our work is set against the backdrop of eternity, towards which we move in patience and hope. As God calls the church into his kingdom and glory (2:12, the brothers and sisters whom we look forward to meeting there may surely be our glory and joy, here and now (2:20).

Bibliography

R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

Footnotes

1 The suggestion that Silas or Timothy contributed to the content, and not just to the address (1:1) of 1 Thessalonians, seems to me quite sensible, although not proven. However, that question is not very important for this piece, and I shall simply write 'Paul', to refer to the author or authors of the letter.

2 See Wanamaker, pp. 46–52. Jewett's analysis (pp. 71–78) is similar, though not identical in every detail.

3 The verbal form *eudokoumen* (8) could be either present or past imperfect, and we cannot be certain which it is. The imperfect seems to fit the context better—but would be somewhat anomalous, since all the other past tenses in this paragraph are aorist. If *eudokoumen* is present, then there is a double oscillation in the passage, from past, to present (3f.), to past, to present (8), and back to past. If *eudokoumen* is imperfect the passage only once oscillates, but the main point, about the purpose and effect of the oscillation, still stands.

4 More fully in Malherbe, 'Pastoral Care' in the Thessalonian Church'.

5 Winter, 'The Entrance and Ethics of Orators and Paul'.

6 The quotations are from the RSV; in this version the two words that render *eisodos* differ, so that the repetition in the Greek is lost. The NEB has 'visit' in both verses, which catches the repetition, but loses the sense of 'arrival'.

7 Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*, Chapters 3–5, particularly Chapter 5. Also Malherbe, 'Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament', pp. 301–304.

8 Many of the parallels that follow are drawn

from Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*, Chapter 3. Malherbe attends particularly to Stoic and Cynic philosophy. A heavily cited source is Dio Chrysostom (c. AD 40–120), Discourse 32.

9 The Greek word *parresia* implies speech uninhibited by fear, partiality or cryptic allusion; it is frank, direct, open and (where necessary) bold.

10 This understanding arises if we read ‘gentle’ (*epioi*) rather than ‘children’ (*nepioi*) in 2:7. A great many ancient manuscripts, although admittedly not the most ancient, read *epioi*, and it seems more natural in context. Wanamaker, p. 100, discusses this matter well.

11 The quote is from Wanamaker, p. 108.

12 Winter suggests (‘Entrance and Ethics’) that Malherbe’s work should be re-evaluated. Recent work on Dio Chrysostom and the subject matter of his discourses points to a rhetorical comparison rather than a philosophical one, and thereby excludes the need for a philosophical link of the kind Malherbe offers.

13 B.W. Winter, *Phiho and Paul among the Sophists*, pp. 58f.

14 Several points in this section come from

Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*, Chapter 4.

15 Indeed Malherbe suggests that Paul used his leather and tent-making workshop as a regular preaching station (*Paul and the Thessalonians*, pp. 17–20). Meggitt, in *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, argues that Paul and the great majority of his converts lived in grinding poverty, as did almost everyone in the Roman Empire, so that his daily work was gruelling labour for subsistence pay. He should not be seen as a leisured teacher.

16 Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*, Chapter 4, points out that friendship is a prominent theme in writings of the classical period.

17 So Wanamaker, p. 97, citing Job 16:19 and Ps. 89:37.

18 I am told that a recent national opinion poll, asking people to whom they looked as trustworthy, found that only 25% saw the clergy in that light—a major drop from a few years ago.

19 I once had to greet a congregation with, ‘We are here for a quinquennial visitation. The last one here was carried out thirteen years ago.’

‘Putting the Gospel back into preaching’

CHRIS VOKE

Keywords: sermon, gospel, exhortation, grace, Saviour, discipleship, law, Scripture, preacher, church

One colleague turned to the other at the end of the service and said, ‘Did he mention Christ at all in that sermon?’ They agreed he had not except once in passing in the introduction. A well constructed, doctrinally secure, excellently illustrated teaching sermon had just been delivered in a Christian church to a very large congregation—but it would have gone down without offence in the local synagogue.

This is an extreme case of a disease infecting much preaching today; it is preaching without gospel. As a pastor I rarely sat in the pews. In the last two years I have probably sat and listened to more sermons than in all the previous twenty years. Present duties mean that I am obliged to listen to preaching regularly and the view I have formed is that the disease of gospel deficiency is well advanced. Not only does the diagnosis apply to student preachers or beginners, but in many cases to experienced and well-versed individuals. This observation has also been made in the United States by David

Wells¹ who asks about ‘the prevailing Geist in today’s pulpit. Is it anthropocentric or theocentric?’ From one study of sermon content he found that 80 percent of sermons were anthropocentric, ‘less than half were explicitly biblical and a significant number not discernibly Christian at all’.²

Lost preaching

In arguing for putting the gospel back into preaching I am not referring to preaching in the ‘seeker service’ or another evangelistic context. There is thankfully plenty of that and it is no doubt rightly full of gospel themes, declarations of salvation in Christ and calls to faith. I am speaking of preaching in the normal course of Sunday worship; the teaching or preaching of the minister in the local church to the assembled believers and others. It is here the disease seems to infect us.