

'Preaching outcomes'

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Introduction

Increasingly, in a wide range of activities, questions are being asked about 'outcomes'—a word which has steadily gained its own status if not notoriety in this decade. The language of outcomes implies rigorous goalsetting with evaluation of results and consequences. Not only within commercial organizations, but also within schools, doctors' surgeries and hospitals hard questions are being asked about outcomes. Since the activity of Christian preaching involves a prodigious number of hours and a considerable amount of effort each week from thousands of preachers and tens of thousands of listeners in churches, it seems almost unavoidable that we should ask about the 'outcomes' of contemporary preaching.

'Anyone entering the preaching ministry needs to ponder the fundamental question of what one wants to happen during and after a sermon', claims the homiletician F.B. Craddock.¹ He suggests various possibilities. For example, some preachers have a strong hesitation about being instrumental in changing the life of others in the belief that 'Truth is its own evangelist' and that all that they have to do is transmit information. Other preachers unconsciously have such rhetorical timidity that they may design sermons to say absolutely nothing that might make a difference, or to be so boring that apathy is virtually guaranteed.

Frequently the only gauge of preaching is the often embarrassing collection of comments after worship, parodied in the line: 'Nice sermon, vicar!' All preachers know how difficult it is to cope with fulsome praise, faint praise, criticism and silence. Within certain traditions there are tougher criteria regarding the effectiveness of any particular preaching event. The Welsh Nonconformist tradition encouraged the participation of the congregation after the service to 'test' the sermon. Questions were raised about its biblical and doctrinal content as well as the effectiveness of its delivery. Within Southern Baptist circles it is common after every preaching occasion, which is expected to be evangelistic, for the preacher to give an appeal so that hearers can indicate their response by 'walking the aisle'. Salvation Army preaching is particularly associated with the 'repentance bench'. More recently, in some charismatic churches, preaching concludes with 'ministry' where

individuals are encouraged to receive prayer support. However, even the most committed practitioner within these traditions would be unlikely to claim that the numbers of comments made or of people 'who came to the front' accurately sum up the 'preaching outcomes'.

We must avoid both the extremes of over-precision and of nil expectation. Regarding the first we should state the obvious that accurate quantification is highly inappropriate theologically. Preaching is a complex event dependent upon unique factors associated with an individual preacher in a particular context. Most importantly, it is a dynamic spiritual activity. Only God can bring about genuine spiritual consequences through preaching. These may be immediate or long term and are often not open to evaluation. Preaching is a spiritual activity subject to God's sovereign working which cannot by definition be open to exacting human scrutiny.

An example of unwarranted attempts at accuracy is found in the work of cognitive psychologists who have experimented with listeners to sermons. It was predicted by Pargament and DeRosa² that retention of memory for religious messages would increase as a function of several variables: verbal ability, interest in the message, religiosity, and the consistency of the message with the religious beliefs of the subject. They worked with 350 college students who listened to three sermons with similar structure but different content. 'In spite of the short nature of these messages and the encouragement of subjects to attend to them, only one third to one half of the material was retained.' When the listener was in agreement with the sermon and it was shorter, with a few points well made, there was a greater likelihood of remembering. Less popular messages were not only remembered less well, but distorted more frequently. The conclusions were therefore unsurprisingly that 'preaching to the converted' who are also educated, and had verbal ability, produces the best results in terms of retention and learning. Interesting though such experiments may be, we should expect the impact of preaching to be much more holistic and complex than can be judged by memory retention alone.

Just as it is possible to over-analyse outcomes, so there is a danger at the other extreme of expecting little or nothing to happen. Uneventfulness in preaching

should be a contradiction in terms. Paul Scott Wilson³ makes a plea for a perspective which he sees missing in recent homiletics literature, namely a focus on the 'purpose of preaching'. He wishes to start at the end of the sermon, as listeners meditate on the purpose of what they have heard. '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. When we use the word *event* in this way, we mean an action, an occurrence, something that happens in a moment of time in the lives of the hearers. When we say that this is a divine event, we acknowledge that through preaching, God chooses to be encountered.' Preacher and people should live together differently because of preaching. As in 1 John 1:3: 'What we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life, that life which we share with the Father and his son Jesus Christ.'⁴

Urgent reasons

There are at least four reasons why, while avoiding the extremes, some attempt should be made to look at outcomes. First, there are articulate critics of preaching, who gather particularly within the church and who need to be heard.

One such critic of contemporary preaching is Norrington.⁵ He finds no evidence in Scripture for the practice of contemporary preaching and argues that sermons owe their origins to pagan rhetoric with all the consequent dangers of creating egotistical primadonnas intent on making their listeners dependent on them. Far from doing good sermons can seriously damage the health of the congregation. Norrington describes them as 'deskilling agents' which fail to develop maturity in Christians but rather make for passive and thoughtless listeners.

Second, a growing number of people, while not openly hostile, are unconvinced of the effectiveness of preaching in the light of the communications revolution and current cultural shifts. In their concern about the ways people 'learn' they view sermons as inefficient ways of communicating and argue for more satisfactory ways by which congregations learn and develop.

Third, any analysis of outcomes is vital to sharpen issues within the theology of preaching. Any use of the language of 'eventfulness', or acceptance of something approaching a sacramental understanding of preaching which many would hold (such as P.T. Forsyth, H.H. Farmer, D. Coggan, F. Craddock, D. Schlafer, P. Wilson)⁶, begs questions about what kinds of impact we might expect preaching to make. Inevitably, the more we probe about preaching outcomes the more we raise

fundamental questions about what we think preaching is and what it should be doing. We earlier noted the plea of Paul Scott Wilson. There is little doubt that to start at the conclusion of the sermon sharpens issues regarding the theology of preaching.

Fourth, there is a pressing practical need for preachers to be supported and encouraged in the preaching task by thoughtful mentors who together with the preacher expect certain things to happen and encourage evaluations of the whole preaching event.

New Testament outcomes

It is instructive to note how often preaching in the New Testament is accompanied by clear outcomes in the short term as well as long term. It is now widely accepted that Dodd's attempt to define different kinds of preaching by categorising various NT words made too rigid a distinction between *kerussein* (with *kerygma*) outside the church and *didaskein* (with *didache*) inside the church. There appear to be no such straightforward distinctions intended within the NT. Some 33 different Greek words⁷ are used to describe a wide range of communication, including such aspects as: heralding, persuading, arguing, teaching, spreading the word around. Nor can we find particularly strong word associations about different outcomes though there are some suggestive connections. We note in particular the occurrences of an emphatically strong response explicit in the use of *ekplesso* 'to be greatly struck' and its direct relationship with *didaskein* in Matthew 7:28; 13:54; 22:33; Mark 1:22, 6:2, 11:18; Luke 4:32, and interestingly regarding *didaskein* in Paul's ministry (Acts 13:12).

What is undisputed is the role of proclamation in the development of the church. Its founding occasion was a direct outcome of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost which resulted in a huge response from an amazed and convicted crowd as about three thousand were 'added to their number that day.' (Acts 2:41). At key breakthroughs in mission, preaching is essential as in Samaria (Acts 9:14f.) or with Cornelius (Acts 10:44). The missionary preaching of Paul makes dramatic impact wherever he goes, with the unfortunate exception of Eutychus who fell asleep (Acts 20:9). We should note that the actual word used in Acts 20:9 is *dialegomai*—to discourse and argue. Its occurrence throughout the latter part of Acts (see 17:2,15; 19:8; 24:25; 20:7) is associated with a common pattern of astonishing people with good news as well as antagonising religious leaders.

Though there is inevitably much evidence of the immediate impact of preaching in the NT missionary situation there is also the longer term significance of preaching in the nurturing of new churches. 1 Cor.

14:3 appears to contain a checklist of outcomes for prophesying within the Corinthian church. Some have equated such prophesying with biblical preaching: 'Paul speaks of prophesying, but we may take it in the general sense of an interpretation of God's message, a preaching ministry'.⁸ There is some evidence for this relationship between prophesying and preaching, especially in the contrast which Paul makes between 'prophesying' and 'speaking in a tongue'. Prophesying is intelligible speech which strengthens fellow members of the church (verses 3,12). For the unbeliever, or someone who does not understand, it is by hearing prophesying (verse 24) that 'he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner'. Paul did not despise *glossolalia* (verse 18) but stated a preference for words that are understood: 'I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct (catechize) others than ten thousand words in a tongue.'

Because of this importance of intelligible words it is appropriate to see the outcomes of prophecy as listed in 1 Cor. 14:3 as a helpful inventory for preachers. In particular three aspects with marked similarities are identified. Prophesying 'speaks to men for strengthening'—*oikodomeo* has a root meaning to *build* and is frequently translated *edify*. The one who prophesies edifies the church (verse 4). In developing key metaphors for the church, preaching is held to be an essential element used by the Spirit in 'bonding together' stones within a building (Eph. 2:21), and 'knitting together' parts of body (Eph. 4:16). Recently, Peter Adam in his definition of preaching has been particularly concerned to include the edification of the body (Eph. 4:11f) as an outcome. He consequently defines preaching as 'the explanation and application of the Word to the congregation of Christ in order to produce corporate preparation for serving, unity of faith, maturity, growth and up building'.⁹

Preaching also speaks to people for encouragement—*paraclesis* comes from the same root as Paraclete and emphasizes how the work of the Spirit as Advocate and 'Stimulator'¹⁰ is part of the entire process of energizing listeners. Further, preaching comforts. *Paramythia* emphasizes a persuasiveness which can both excite and also calm the listeners. In 2 Tim. 4:2 there are further outcomes of regular preaching ('in every season'). Such preaching should convict, reprove, rebuke *epitemeson* and encourage, *parakaleson*.

Astonishment, antagonism, conviction, conversion, strengthening, encouraging, comforting are some of the range of responses. In the New Testament some preaching bears immediate fruit, whereas other preaching brings long-term results in the formation of congregational life.

The determinative factor for contemporary outcomes

Contemporary preaching should arguably be manifesting a similar range of outcomes. Inevitably it is easier to reflect on short term outcomes because these are more readily assessable and indeed they will receive attention in the final section of this paper. However, it must not be forgotten that is the longer term effects of preaching that remain even more significant as individuals and communities within a particular context are shaped by the word of God. These more profound outcomes in worship and mission are less susceptible to analysis but provide the ultimate rationale for the worthwhileness of consistent preaching.

Whether we consider short or long term outcomes it is vital to locate their prime cause in the content and form of the Scripture text to which the preacher goes. 'A preacher goes to a biblical text seeking to hear a word for the life of the church and indeed, expecting to hear such a word . . . Biblical texts say things that *do* things, and the sermon is to say and do those things too.'¹¹ In this way when biblical texts are preached they should shape Christian identity.

This concern to hear what Scripture does as well as what it says is the key to all eventfulness for biblical preaching. T.G. Long calls these two aspects the function of the text in its doing and the focus of the text in its saying. He goes on to comment helpfully about the different sorts of outcomes in shaping Christian identity. 'Some texts form Christian identity through the transmission of doctrine, others render biblical characters powerfully "present" through narration, some evoke wonder or provoke memory, and still others issue ethical demands. The list could go on, of course, since texts are multifaceted, and every text possesses its own unique and complex set of intentionalities.'¹²

Whenever preachers respond personally to a biblical text in their preparation there should be a concern about what should happen when the text is preached. Does this text so function that there will be strengthening, encouragement, comfort, conviction, or rebuke as it is preached? To put it bluntly, does a sermon for example on 'Be strong and courageous' (Josh. 1:6) actually strengthen and encourage? Long suggests that each preacher should write out a formal *focus statement* which sums up what the sermon is about, and a *function statement* to describe 'what the preacher hopes the sermon will create or cause to happen for the hearers. Sermons make demands upon the hearers, which is another way of saying that they provoke change in the hearers (even if the change is a deepening of something already present).'¹³ These two statements should grow directly out of exegesis, should be related to each other as a matched pair and should be clear.

Long gives several examples. Using John 5:1-18,¹⁴

the story of Jesus healing of a lame man on the Sabbath, he explains how a preacher should sharpen focus and function. One possible sermon might be summarised:

Focus: Jesus unsettles our comfortable illnesses with the disturbing question 'Do you *really* want to be healed?'

Function: To enable hearers to become aware of Christ's continuing challenge to sometimes comfortable complacency.

However it might be:

Focus: When people are healed in the power of Christ opposition often comes ironically from good people who mistake their religious traditions for the will of God.

Function: To enable hearers to perceive how our allegiance to religious traditions can sometimes stand in the way of the saving and healing work of God in our midst.

It is the eventfulness of 'saying/doing Scripture' that leads to 'saying/doing sermons' and though much more may happen in preaching through the activity of the Holy Spirit, about which the preacher must never presume, both elements are essential for biblical preaching.

A practical need

It therefore seems appropriate in this concluding section to accept as a fair question to be asked after any preaching event: 'What difference did that sermon make to me/us?/' Different preached texts will have different functions in humble dependence upon God. If preachers are able to identify a relevant function statement and declare some anticipated goals of a preaching event then some kinds of evaluations can be made.

It was Ritschl's important book, *A Theology of Proclamation* (1960) that argued for the role of the community of believers within which each believer has responsibility for the edification of the church (Rom. 12:4). 'If the whole Church participates in the ministry of Christ, and if it is therefore the whole Church that has the office of proclamation, then it must very definitely be said that the preacher cannot be left alone with his sermon preparation.' In practical terms this means a process which is concerned about both preparation and outcomes and which was partly developed by Coggan in his *New Day for Preaching* (1996). 'Ideally . . . preaching should be followed by discussion when further truth will be teased out, and preacher and people will *both* be enriched.'¹⁵

This is a continuous process which Coggan says combines proclamation with dialogue. For him the word dialogue is vital for he defines it as involving 'an opportunity for conversation between the preacher and

members of the congregation who have heard the sermon; discussion in some depth; an open exchange of views; the opportunity for the listeners to question the preacher; and a chance for them to make positive contributions *both* to what has been said in the pulpit on a specific occasion *and* to the whole preaching ministry of the church in that particular place'.¹⁶ He develops a word study of *dialogomai* (encountered earlier in this paper) within the apostle Paul's preaching which reveals engagement in discussion both in the synagogues and in non-Jewish circles. Lively comeback is essential, for each member of the congregation should have a contribution to make. In a two-way relationship there may be a sharing of experiences of God's grace or gifting or the relating of the sermon to the world of people and business. Such involvement of members of the church should safeguard against irrelevance of content or language. In practical ways Coggan argues for interchange between preacher and listeners which is both retrospective and prospective.

On the one hand retrospective dialogue looks back to the sermon of the previous Sunday, or reflects over a longer period. Coggan suggests that where possible the playing back of a cassette recording will refresh memories and enable responses so that preacher and people can reflect together. On the other hand prospective dialogue looks forward, through shared discussion in which subjects may be suggested, preaching points may be developed, and the weaknesses and strengths of previous sermons may be built upon. Coggan mentions a friend who after the first draft brought in a group of others to criticize and make suggestions, and he provides other practical details about how often such meetings might take place ranging from once a week to once a month.

'The purpose of the meetings is, first and last, the sharing of the gifts of the members of the group for the building up of the Body of Christ. Preacher and members of the congregation meet to ensure that that part of the weekly worship which is preaching shall steadily become a worthier offering to Almighty God.'¹⁷ Coggan goes on to suggest that the success of such dialogue can be more readily measured if that group becomes united, prayerful and provides a source of strength for the preacher.

In the list of reasons provided earlier about why there is a need to review outcomes the fourth raised the practical need for preachers to be supported and encouraged. It is as well to finish on this practical note. If, as has been argued, each sermon should have a function statement, with an expectation that things will happen, it is vital that preachers should at the very least have one other person who can help to reflect on the outcomes of the preaching event. At best such a person might become a 'mentor' who is skilful in listening and able to help the preacher to develop. Sometimes the preacher

may be fortunate enough to operate within a ministry team or have a group of willing listeners so that the prospective and retrospective tasks can be formalized. When this happens preaching can only develop in strength and relevance.

The ultimate test of effective preaching is to be found in the long term response of preacher and listeners. It is to be expected that the cumulative impact of consistent biblical preaching over many years should help to form Bible-shaped people and communities. Positive outcomes for a preacher should not only comprise some over generous words from members of a congregation afterwards, nor even the considered responses of a mentor or a listening group. Rather preachers should rejoice to recognize those enduring marks, developed through lengthier experience of living under God's word, which are clearly expressed in the quality of a congregation's understanding, worship and mission—all for the sake and glory of God.

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Footnotes

- 1 F.B. Craddock in *Preaching on the Brink*, ed M.J. Simmons, 1996.
- 2 K.I. Pargament, D.V. DeRosa: 'What was that

sermon about?' *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion*, 24 (1985) pp. 119-236

- 3 Paul Scott Wilson: *The Practice of Preaching*, p. 20.
- 4 Translation in Coggan, *Preaching for a new day*.
- 5 D.C. Norrington: *To preach or not to preach?* (1996).
- 6 This is a representative spread of authors who consciously use the language of sacrament to describe the preaching event: P.T. Forsyth, *Preaching to the modern mind* (1907); H.H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (1949); F. Craddock, *As One without Authority* (1971); D. Coggan, *The Sacrament of the Word* (1987); D.J. Schlafer, *Surviving the Sermon* (1992); P.S. Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (1995).
- 7 Friedrich.
- 8 D. Coggan, *New Day for Preaching* (1996), p. 45.
- 9 P. Adam, *Speaking God's words* (1996), p. 71.
- 10 D. Coggan's preferred description for Paraclete in his *New Day for Preaching*.
- 11 T.G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, p. 84.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 15 D. Coggan, *New Day for Preaching*, p. 5.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 34.