

Appendix – Part Two

'Addenda' Resources and Bible Workshop Leaders' Notes

Note: The resources in this Appendix are all related to Part Two of the Lay Reader Training Course, concerning the ministry of the word (focusing on preaching). The resources here should be sent to Trainees ahead of time and then discussed on Weeks 1, 4, 7, and 10 as introductory material before showing each of the four videos of the Proclamation Trust workshop. The intervening weeks (2-3; 5-6; 8-9; 11-12) are dedicated to Trainee Presentations. See LEADER'S NOTES: Part Two (pages 11-13) for more information on how to teach this 12-week section.

WEEK 1

1. 'Observation' Exercise. GB Personal File	Page 2
2. "Fling him into his Office..." A modern <i>Apologia</i> for Preachers. Anonymous.	Page 3

WEEK 4

3. "Preparing Sermons". John Stott.	Page 4
Condensed from pp. 211-216 of "Between Two Worlds"	
4. "A Model for Preparing a Sermon". David Watson.	Page 7
Handout for his Lay Readers, c.1980.	

WEEK 7

5. "SERMON REACTION QUESTIONNAIRE".	Page 11
William H. Willimon, Dean of the Chapel, Duke University.	
6. ARTIZO Preparation Rubric; Sermon Evaluation Guidelines	Page 12

WEEK 10

7. 'Interpretation' Exercise - "Do they have a 4th of July in England?" GB Personal File.	Page 15
8. 'Concerning Preaching' Booklet by William J. Phillip. Proclamation Trust Media.	Pages 16-28

Preaching Workshop Leader's Notes (Proclamation Trust) Four Sessions, four pages each....Pages 29-44

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{Clock} + \text{Clock} + \text{Clock} = 21 \\ \text{Calculator} + \text{Calculator} + \text{Calculator} = 30 \\ \text{Lightbulb} + \text{Lightbulb} - \text{Lightbulb} = 15 \\ \text{Clock} + \text{Calculator} \times \text{Lightbulb} = ? \end{array}$$

“OBSERVATION EXERCISE”
(SOLUTION: $(9 + 9) \times (12 + 16 + 16) = 18 \times 44 = 792!$)

Fling him into his office, tear the office sign from the door and nail on the sign 'study'. Take him off all mailing lists. Lock him up with his books, and his typewriter and his bible. Slam him down on his knees before texts and broken hearts and the flick of lives of a superficial flock and a holy God. Force him to be the one man in our surfeited communities who knows about God. Throw him into the ring to box with God until he learns how short his arms are. Engage him to wrestle with God all the night through. And let him come out only when he is bruised and beaten into being a blessing. Shut his mouth forever spouting remarks and stop his tongue forever tripping lightly over every non-essential. Require him to have something to say before he dares breaks the silence, and bend his knees in the lonesome valley of prayer. Burn his eyes with weary study. Wreck his emotional poise with worry for God. And make him exchange his pious stance for a humble walk with God and man. Make him spend and be spent for the glory of God. Rip out his telephone. Burn up his ecclesiastical records. Put water in his fuel tank. Give him a bible and tie him to the pulpit and make him preach the word of the living God. Test him, quiz him, examine him, humiliate him for his ignorance of things divine. Shame him for his good comprehension of finances, game scores and politics. Laugh at his frustrated effort to play psychiatrist. Form a choir and raise a chant, and haunt him with it night and day 'Sir, we would see Jesus'. When at long last he dares assay the pulpit, ask him if he has a word from God. If he doesn't, dismiss him. Tell him you can read the morning paper and digest the television commentaries and think through the days superficial problems and manage the communities weary drives and bless the sordid baked potatoes and green beans add infinitum, better than he can. Command him not to come back until he's read and re-read, written and re-written, until he can stand up worn, and forlorn and say 'Thus saith the Lord'. Break him across the board of his ill-gotten popularity. Smack him hard with his own prestige. Corner him with questions about God. Cover him with demands for celestial wisdom. And give him no escape until he's back against the wall of the word. And sit down before him and listen to the only word he has left: God's word. Let him be totally ignorant of the down street gossip. But give him a chapter and order him to walk around it, camp on it, sup with it, and come at last to speak it backward and forward, until he says about it all things that ring with the truth of eternity. And when he's burned up by the flaming word, when he's consumed at last by the fiery grace blazing through him, and when he's privileged to translate the truth of God to men, and finally transferred from earth to heaven: then bear him away gently and blow a muted trumpet and lay him down softly, place a two-edged sword on his coffin, and raise the tune triumphant. For he was a brave soldier of the word and ere he died he had become a man of God.

Anon.

John Stott, on Preparing Sermons

NOTE: This outline is condensed from John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, pp.211-216

*If elephants can be trained to dance, lions to play, and leopards to hunt,
then surely preachers can be taught to preach.*

Erasmus, "On Preaching", p.323

1. CHOOSE YOUR TEXT

A. It is best to rely on expository book studies for the steady diet of your people, because this ensures they will receive "the whole counsel of God."

B. However, the following may be occasions for special sermons:

1. Special calendar occasions: Christmas, Easter, etc.
2. Special external circumstances which are in the public / parish mind.
3. Special needs discerned by the Church staff, preacher, or others.
4. Truths which have especially-inspired the preacher.

C. Keep a notebook to scribble down ideas for sermons, insights, burdens, illustrations, etc. Record them *immediately* wherever they come to mind: *it is extremely-unlikely that you will be able to recall them later.*

2. MEDITATE ON THE TEXT

A. Whenever possible, plan out texts weeks or months in advance. This gives the advantage of 'subconscious incubation'.

B. Concentrated 'incubation' should begin at least one full week before preaching / teaching. It should involve the following:

1. Read, re-read, and re-read the text, again and again, from several different Bible translations.
2. Be certain you understand what it actually means! Do your own interpretative work. Don't consult commentaries until you have formulated specific, interpretative questions which you've been unable to answer, or until you've completed your interpretive work.
3. Brood longer over how it applies to the original hearers, to yourself, to your audience.
4. Pray, for God to illuminate the text, especially in its application.
5. Scribble down notes of thoughts, ideas, etc.
6. Solicit the insights of others through media, talking with staff, other preachers..

3. ISOLATE THE DOMINANT THOUGHT

(This is actually the purpose of section 2, above)

- A. Your sermon should convey only one major message. All of the details of your sermon should be marshalled to serve your people, to help them grasp that message, and to feel its power.
- B. You should be able to express the dominant thought of the sermon, in one short, clear, vivid sentence of no more than 15 words.

4. ARRANGE YOUR MATERIAL TO SERVE THE DOMINANT THOUGHT.

- A. Chisel and shape your material. *Ruthlessly* discard all material which is irrelevant to the Dominant Thought (DT). Subordinate the remaining material to the DT by using the material to *illuminate* and *reinforce* the DT.
- B. Your sermon should be suited to the text, drawn from its own structure, not artificially-imposed. Avoid construction which is too clever, prominent, or complex.
- C. Decide on your method of preaching for this text: argumentation, categorizing, analogy, listing, etc.
- D. Carefully choose words that are precise, simple, clear, vivid, and honest. Write out in full the key sections (opening, closing, quotations), phrases, and sentences, to help you in your word choice. Stick to short declarative and interrogative sentences, *with few, if any, subordinate clauses*.
- E. Come up with illustrations and examples which will explain, and convict. Employ a wide variety: figures of speech; images; retelling Bible stories in contemporary language; inventing fresh parables; retelling true, historical and / or biographical events, etc. Keep a file of these, especially if they do not come easily to you. Avoid making illustrations and examples so prominent that they detract from the DT. Also, avoid applying them inappropriately, or overhang them. Try not to use the first person singular in your illustrations.

5. ADD THE CONCLUSION AND OPENING

- A. The Introduction should not be elaborate, but enough to arouse curiosity, wet the appetites of your listeners, and introduce the DT. This can be done in a variety of means: explaining the setting of the passage, story, current event, or issue, etc.

A MODEL FOR PREPARING A SERMON

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. {2} For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. {3} And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. {4} My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, {5} so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. - 1Corinthians 2:1-5

INTRODUCTION

Most people are very nervous at the thought of giving a talk, however brief! But most people are quite able to do so. However, a good simple talk does need careful preparation. Mark Twain, who wrote "Tom Sawyer", claimed it took him three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech!

A MODEL FOR SERMON PREPARATION¹

PREPARING A TALK IS LIKE BUILDING A HOUSE:

A) Select the Site

With the 'ground' as the Bible, the 'site' will be some verse/passage.
1Peter 4.11: Our ideas are unimportant; God's Word is vital!

1. PRAY – before you begin any preparation, and throughout your time building your talk.
2. Use common sense. Often a passage is part of a Series.
3. Keep an 'Ideas' Notebook, especially if you are speaking fairly regularly).
4. Know the needs of your hearers, as far as possible. Write this down at the top of your first page of notes!

B) Lay the Foundations

STUDY the verse/passage/theme as thoroughly as you can, until you really know what God is saying in his Word. (Without this, there will be no real confidence in you, nor conviction in your talk, and the whole thing may easily collapse!). We must STUDY, and then STUDY some more, until we can state, from the Passage, *the one, clear, simple thing which God wants our people to hear*. **This step is the hardest to do well.**

1. PRAY
2. Set aside time, *every working day*, to study your passage. You must plan this in advance, and then stick to it!
3. **Use the time of the day when you do your best thinking!**
4. Consult commentaries, but only when you have made your own, simple translation of the text.

¹ Prepared for his Lay Readers by the Rev'd David Watson. York, UK. (c.1980)

prided myself in not referring to my notes, I was surprised to see my listeners thought I looked at my notes too often. So over the following few weeks, I disciplined myself to look less at my notes, and my scores improved.

The questionnaire has also helped me see how different groups within the church react to my preaching. In general, younger respondents like my preaching better than do older respondents, and women are more positive about my preaching than are men. I'm not always able to make changes in my preaching based on what I learn, but knowing how I come across has made me a more sensitive preacher.

a) I've used the questionnaire in a couple of different ways. In one church, I gave the questionnaire to a selected group of laypersons to evaluate my sermons my first two weeks with the congregation. Then, two years later, I gave the same questionnaire to the same laypeople for two more weeks. That helped me gauge my progress over the long term.

b) I've also randomly selected a group of about twenty laypeople, asking them to attend worship every Sunday for five weeks. (That's important because even one absence can skew the scores.) I gave them questionnaires and asked them to fill them out and return them at the end of each service.

After five weeks, I met with all of the respondents and shared the results of the research. Together we looked at individual sermons and the scores they received, and I asked the people to clarify some of their responses. This discussion greatly increased the value of the questionnaire for me.

In either case, the questionnaires are scored by totaling and then averaging the scores on each item and on the questionnaire as a whole.

Some items (3, 5, and 7, for instance) are stated negatively to keep respondents from simply going down the questionnaire and mindlessly checking off the same number on every question. That means, though, when I tally the scores, I need to reverse the scores: for instance, a score of 1 on item 3, "did not inspire me," would be scored as 5. That way all the results "move" in the same direction.

To remain faithful to Christ, sermons are accountable to Scripture and a church's tradition, but they must also to some degree be accountable to the church, and that means the men and women sitting in the pews each Sunday morning. Through this questionnaire such men and women have improved my preaching and strengthened the church.

— William H. Willimon
dean of the chapel
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

SERMON REACTION QUESTIONNAIRE

Do not sign your name.

Supply the following information:

Sex: male ; female

Age: under 20 ; 20-29 ; 30-39 ;
40-49 ; 50-59 ; over 59

Regarding the sermon you just heard, indicate whether you agree or disagree with these statements. Circle 1 if you strongly agree, 2 if you agree, 3 if you're uncertain, 4 if you disagree, 5 if you strongly disagree.

Your honesty and frankness will be appreciated.

1. My interest was maintained. 1 2 3 4 5
2. The sermon was integrated into the service of worship. 1 2 3 4 5
3. I was not inspired. 1 2 3 4 5
4. The preacher's personality came through. 1 2 3 4 5
5. The Scripture text was not used or illuminated. 1 2 3 4 5
6. The preacher used contemporary language. 1 2 3 4 5
7. The preacher did not evidence a personal faith. 1 2 3 4 5
8. The sermon was too long. 1 2 3 4 5
9. I did not understand the sermon well. 1 2 3 4 5
10. The preacher referred to notes too often. 1 2 3 4 5
11. The preacher sounded like he/she loved us. 1 2 3 4 5
12. The sermon spoke to some of my personal needs. 1 2 3 4 5
13. The sermon did not sufficiently emphasize the greatness of Christ. 1 2 3 4 5
14. The preacher showed self-confidence. 1 2 3 4 5
15. The sermon did not make me eager to serve God any more than I'm already serving him. 1 2 3 4 5
16. I identified with the preacher. 1 2 3 4 5
17. The preacher spoke down to us. 1 2 3 4 5
18. The sermon did not have a sufficiently forceful conclusion. 1 2 3 4 5
19. The sermon did not help me encounter God. 1 2 3 4 5
20. I can remember most or all of the sermon's points. 1 2 3 4 5



Preaching Rubric for Preparation, Self-Assessment, and Feedback

	Extending	Proficient	Developing	Emerging
Structure <i>I can create a helpful structure that illuminates the priorities of the text.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Sermon structure illuminates the structure of the passage <input type="checkbox"/> Sermon structure reveals the burden (emphasis) of the passage	<input type="checkbox"/> Sermon structure reflects the structure of the passage to some extent <input type="checkbox"/> Sermon structure reflects the burden of the passage.	<input type="checkbox"/> Sermon structure unsure of relationship with the text <input type="checkbox"/> Sermon structure touches the main burden of the passage, but is not clear.	<input type="checkbox"/> Little to no sermon structure evident <input type="checkbox"/> Sermon structure does not address the burden of the passage.
Context <i>I can place my text in the context of the Bible, book, and series.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Reveals how this text fits into greater argument or purpose <input type="checkbox"/> Leverages text for an understanding of salvation history <input type="checkbox"/> cultural /historical data reveals text's meaning and application	<input type="checkbox"/> Clearly locates this text within the book or series. <input type="checkbox"/> Places text within God's big story <input type="checkbox"/> Provides necessary cultural/historical big	<input type="checkbox"/> Places text within the picture of the book. <input type="checkbox"/> Barely touch the big story of God. <input type="checkbox"/> cultural/historical bkg: unclear or unhelpful	<input type="checkbox"/> No mention of how passage fits in to book or series. <input type="checkbox"/> Fails to anchor passage within God's narrative. <input type="checkbox"/> irrelevant cultural or historical narrative.
Theme <i>I can clearly communicate the main point of the passage.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> The main idea is clear, concise and compelling <input type="checkbox"/> The main idea is illuminated by the supporting points. <input type="checkbox"/> The main idea is easy to retell.	<input type="checkbox"/> The main idea is present but could be more clear, concise, or compelling <input type="checkbox"/> The main idea is mostly illuminated by the supporting points. <input type="checkbox"/> The main idea is retold fairly easily.	<input type="checkbox"/> Main idea is easily missed, lacks clarity, or is boring. <input type="checkbox"/> Some supporting points distract or do not support the main idea. <input type="checkbox"/> The main idea is re-told with difficulty.	<input type="checkbox"/> The main idea is lacking, confusing or, unclear. <input type="checkbox"/> The supporting points do not illuminate the main idea. <input type="checkbox"/> The main idea cannot be understood or re-told.
Aim <i>I can apply the text and its meaning to my readers.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Clear and impactful implications from the passage <input type="checkbox"/> Sermon diagnosis and captures the hearer <input type="checkbox"/> Spot-on application for audience	<input type="checkbox"/> Implications of the passage stated clearly. <input type="checkbox"/> Sermon is culturally relevant, timely, and urgent <input type="checkbox"/> Applies to most of the audience.	<input type="checkbox"/> Implications of passage mentioned without a hook. <input type="checkbox"/> Sermon is occasionally culturally insightful, timely, and urgent <input type="checkbox"/> Deals with very few within audience	<input type="checkbox"/> Implications inappropriate or lacking <input type="checkbox"/> Sermon lacks cultural insight, timeliness, or urgency. <input type="checkbox"/> Sermon has wrong audience in mind
Delivery <i>I can communicate in a clear and compelling manner.</i>	My Delivery is dynamic, gripping, and clear. <input type="checkbox"/> Generous Eye contact <input type="checkbox"/> body language is confident and comfortable <input type="checkbox"/> Appropriate volume variation with compelling articulation <input type="checkbox"/> Commands attention <input type="checkbox"/> Engaging	My Delivery is helpful and engaging, and can be followed. <input type="checkbox"/> Regular Eye Contact <input type="checkbox"/> Helpful gestures, minimal ticks, good posture <input type="checkbox"/> Good volume and clear articulation <input type="checkbox"/> Conveys the message <input type="checkbox"/> Easy to listen to.	My delivery is at times static, and sometimes difficult to follow. <input type="checkbox"/> Low eye Contact <input type="checkbox"/> Unhelpful Gestures or ticks, or posture <input type="checkbox"/> Punctuating volume of speech, distracting articulation <input type="checkbox"/> Limited connection with audience <input type="checkbox"/> Can listen with effort	My Delivery is static, or I am hard to understand. <input type="checkbox"/> No Eye Contact <input type="checkbox"/> Distracting gestures, ticks, or posture <input type="checkbox"/> Inappropriate Volume and Poor Articulation <input type="checkbox"/> No connection with audience. <input type="checkbox"/> Difficult to Listen

Other Comments:



Preparing to Preach or Teach the Bible

1. **Structure:** Write out the text of your passage and find the structure.
How does the structure of the passage shape your message?

2. **Context:** Read the surrounding material carefully.
How does the context influence the meaning of your passage?

3. **Theme:** Observe the key details (repetition, plot, patterns, links, contrasts, surprises)
Is there a main point / direction / meaning / significance in the passage?

4. **Aim:** Articulate the aim (change in audience) the passage/author is working towards.
What do you intend your message to accomplish in the hearts and minds of the listeners?

5. **Communicate:** Identify your cultural context, audience, pedagogy, and time.
How to best communicate what you want to say?

Do they have a 4th of July in England?

How many birthdays does the average man have?

Some months have 31 days; how many have 28?

How many outs are there in an inning?

Is it legal for a man in California to marry his widow's sister?

Divide 30 by 1/2 and add 10. What is the answer?

If there are 3 apples and you take away 2, how many do you have?

A doctor gives you three pills telling you to take one every half hour.
How many minutes would the pills last?

A farmer has 17 sheep, and all but 9 die. How many are left?

How many animals of each sex did Moses take on the ark?

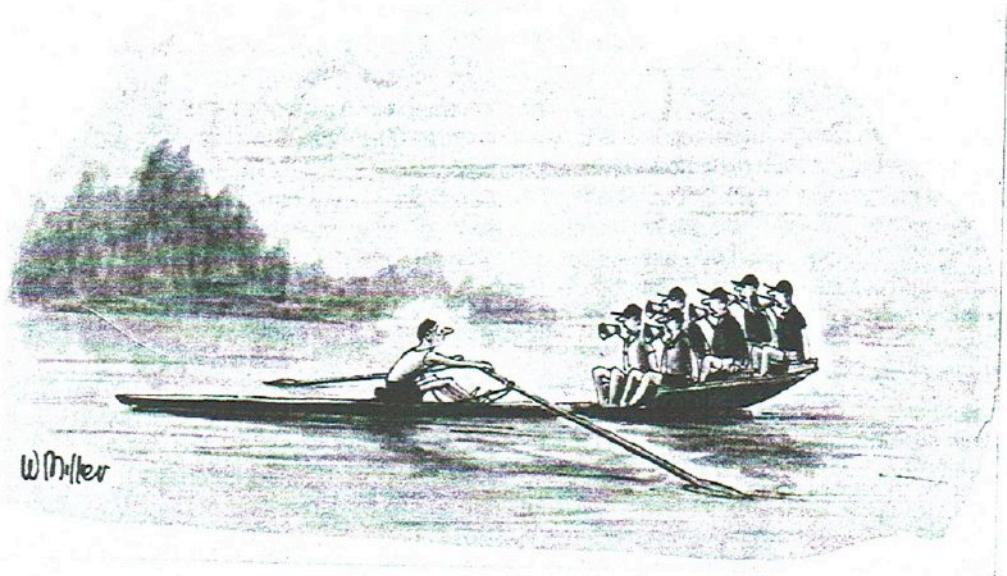
How many two cent stamps are there in a dozen?

1. Name the one sport in which neither the spectators nor the participants know the score or the leader until the contest ends.
2. What famous North American landmark is constantly moving backward?
3. Of all vegetables, only two can live to produce on their own for several growing seasons. All other vegetables must be replanted every year. What are the only two perennial vegetables?
4. What fruit has its seeds on the outside?
5. In many liquor stores you can buy pear brandy, with a real pear inside the bottle. The pear is whole and ripe, and the bottle is genuine; it hasn't been cut in any way. How did the pear get inside the bottle?
6. Only three words in standard English begin with the letters 'dw' and they are all common words. Name two of them.
7. There are 14 punctuation marks in English grammar. Can you name at least half of them?
8. Name the only vegetable or fruit that is never sold frozen, canned, processed, cooked, or in any other form except fresh.
9. Name 6 or more things that you can wear on your feet beginning with the letter 'S.'

Answers To Quiz:

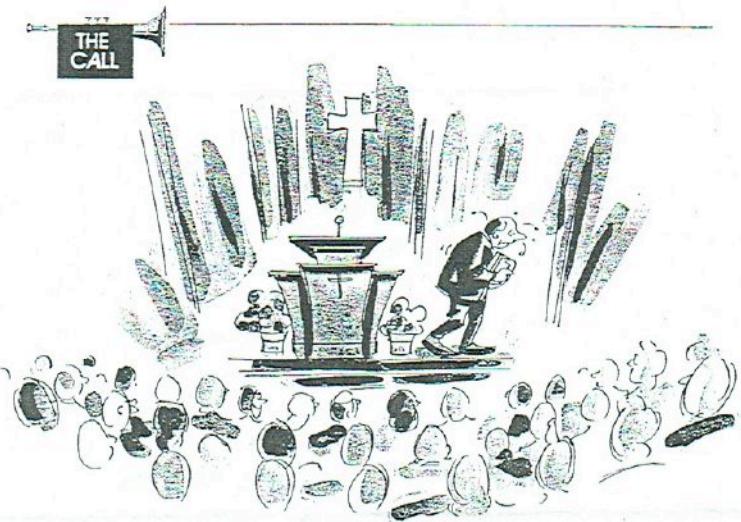
1. The one sport in which neither the spectators nor the participants know the score or the leader until the contest ends **Boxing**
2. North American landmark constantly moving backwards.... **Niagara Falls** (The rim is worn down about two and a half feet each year because of the millions of gallons of water that rush over it every minute.)
- 3.. Only two vegetables that can live to produce on their own for several growing seasons..... **Asparagus and rhubarb.**
4. The fruit with its seeds on the outside ... **Strawberry.**
5. How did the pear get inside the brandy bottle? It grew inside the bottle..... (The bottles are placed over pear buds when they are small, and are wired in place on the tree. The bottle is left in place for the entire growing season.. When the pears are ripe, they are snipped off at the stems.)
6. Three English words beginning with 'dw'..... **Dwarf, dwell and dwindle .**
7. Fourteen punctuation marks in English grammar **Period, comma, colon, semicolon, dash, hyphen, apostrophe, question mark, exclamation point, quotation marks, brackets, parenthesis, braces, and ellipses.**
8. The only vegetable or fruit never sold frozen, canned, processed, cooked, or in any other form but fresh..... **Lettuce.**
9. Six or more things you can wear on your feet beginning with 'S'..... **Shoes, socks, sandals, sneakers, slippers, ~~skis~~, skates, snowshoes, stockings, stilts.**

skis





The Wonder of Ministry



Pastor Humbart discovers that his new monogrammed, zippered, leather-covered Bible looks remarkably similar to his shaving kit.

•••



*"Your sermons are wonderful,
except occasionally they're a bit too religious."*

PT MEDIA PAPER Number 1
CONCERNING
PREACHING

William J U Philip

Could it be that the devil
considers the best strategy to
seduce evangelicals away from
the power of true biblical
proclamation is actually to
focus their attention and
energies on preaching more
and more?

Some
thoughts
on biblical
preaching



Concerning Preaching

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Also available in this series:

*Preaching Christ from the
Old Testament*, Sinclair B Ferguson,
PT Media paper no 2.

I want to share with you some thoughts about preaching which have been occupying my mind recently. During a recent trip that Dick Lucas and I made to the United States (for a number of preaching conferences), something struck me, and it set me thinking about what we really mean in saying that The Proclamation Trust is devoted to the encouragement of biblical preaching. Let me explain.

At one of the conferences, someone from a local college (a good one) had brought a book stall with books appropriate for a conference on preaching. As I browsed this book stall, it struck me that here was a plethora of books on every aspect of what might be called the art or science of biblical preaching. There were books on effective preaching, power preaching, arresting preaching, anointed preaching, Christ-focused preaching, and every other aspect of preaching you could imagine. Many of them, if not all of them, were sound, orthodox, biblical and evangelical, and most of them are probably very helpful books. Nevertheless, as I looked at the books, and pondered these things subsequently, I could not help but feel some disquiet. A gentle ringing of alarm bells began in my mind.

Why should this be? Surely the fact that so many books are appearing on all aspects of preaching must indicate there is a greater appetite for preaching among evangelicals, and we should be encouraged by this. As I reflected on this, however, I began to realise how careful we need to be lest our enemy should take us unawares. The devil is very clever and very subtle, and the truth is that he is more likely to attack us where we think we are strong, than where we know we are weak. In the latter things we are often on our guard and ready to rebuff him; all too often, though, we are found to have trusted our own strengths far more than we ought to. Does Satan really think his best chance of doing damage to gospel preaching among evangelicals is by seeking to turn us away from preaching by blatant means, such as intimidation and ridicule? (Those of us really committed to biblical preaching are alert to this, and we are able to stand together, encouraging one another to resist with strength.) Or could it be that he considers it a better strategy

to seduce us away from the power of true biblical proclamation, paradoxically, by actually focusing our attention and energies on preaching more and more?

That may sound a very odd thing to suggest. But we know that often the most effective way the devil gains a hold is not through out-and-out denial, which is easy to discern and refute, but through surreptitious perversion and distortion of the truth. This may be much more difficult to see, and indeed may masquerade as the genuine article for a long time, so that by the time the real truth is discerned, the damage has been done. The devil loves to masquerade as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). What could be a better and more satisfying tactic for him, then, than to gradually lure away evangelicals committed to expository preaching of the Scriptures, while at the same time making them think that they are really focusing more and more upon preaching, and becoming more committed to the task they believe in? The more I think about this, the more I am convinced there are dangers here that those of us committed to expository preaching need to be aware of, lest we should find ourselves being outwitted by these subtle schemes of our enemy.

SUBTLE SHIFTS OF FOCUS IN WORD MINISTRY

So how could a zealous focus on expository preaching ministry actually lead us astray? I think there are at least three areas where is able, and at first perhaps imperceptible, shifts can take place in our thinking, whereby, unless we are careful, we may find ourselves on a diverging course from healthy, vital, biblical ministry.

1 A shift from content to form

First, there is the danger that the focus moves gradually from the content onto the form of the preaching itself. This may not be blatant, and at first may be quite inconspicuous; indeed, the danger lies in the very fact that it seems to be a wholesome and welcome development. We work hard on our preaching, and we seek to develop the craft of giving better sermons for our people – in terms of handling the text, using helpful

structures, finding the right language and so on – and all of this is of course very good, in and of itself. But the danger is that because we are still sinful people, we are constantly (albeit often unconsciously) caught in drift that seeks to re-orientate our focus away from the Divine and onto the human. As we develop as preachers, the natural tendency is for the emphasis to move away from the text itself and onto us as the preacher, and to drift away from God himself onto what we are doing with the text in the sermon. As we become familiar with handling the Scripture responsibly, we can all too easily begin to focus more on that ‘correct handling’ than on the Scripture itself that is being handled. We can inadvertently find ourselves stepping back from the text, or stepping above the text, talking a lot about ministry, about the gospel, and about the text before us, rather than actually spending our time in the text – and so in the gospel – opening it up, unwrapping it, expounding its meaning, and showing it in all its fullness and richness so that it can be taken in by the heart, not as the words of man, but as it really is, the Word of God.

We must be honest and recognise that this is a real danger. The more we come to preaching conferences, and the more work we do in preaching workshops (vitally important as I believe they are, right at the heart of the work of The Proclamation Trust), the danger is that we could be lulled in to becoming more absorbed in the form and the method of the preaching, than in the content – and purpose – of the actual message.

Is there some evidence of this in the way that some of us seem to relish discussing whether this preacher or that is really a ‘proper’ exponent? More often than not the criteria used to make these judgements are actually to do much more with form than the content of the preaching. For some it may be a particular structure: introduction and points, a measured tone and a calm delivery; for others the ‘right’ criteria may be a ‘free’ structure, different inflection and an (apparently) more vivacious delivery. The same is true when we look for a particular ‘shape’ to the preaching: the criteria being conformity to a particular cherished framework (or ‘big picture’) of systematic or biblical theology. Now do not misunderstand me. These matters are very important; but it is pre-

esely because as evangelical preachers we do take all these things seriously, that we must be careful we are not eventually carried away by them from the heart of the matter. For it is the content of our preaching – the Scriptures themselves – where the focus must always be.

Lessons from history

When we turn to church history, it is chilling to observe this very pattern of drift from content to form being played out. The time of the Reformation was marked by a rediscovery of the Scriptures themselves, which had long since been locked up in a language of the academics and the clergy, and kept out of the reach of ordinary people. The result was an enormous renewed outpouring of expository preaching, with quite dramatic results. One reads, for example, of Ulrich Zwingli starting to minister in the great Minster in Zurich just as the Reformation was beginning in 1519. That huge building was crammed, day after day, week after week, as he started preaching through the Gospel of Matthew, verse by verse, for a whole year. Throughout the continent of Europe during the 16th century the emphasis was the same: all on the content of the preaching, the message of the Scriptures, rather than on the vehicle, the preaching process. However, it must be said that following the period of the Reformation, by the end of the 17th century and into the early 18th century, the attention had moved much more towards the vehicle of preaching itself. There was an increasing emphasis on the 'science' and 'art' of preaching, and little by little the simple homiletic style of the Reformers became lost. Preaching took on more and more of a developed sermonic style, so much so that one historian notes that during the course of the 17th century the sermon became 'almost a province of literature, in so far as conformity to prevailing literary standards was required also from the preacher'.¹

A good case can be made that it was to a very great extent this increasing interest in the form and style of preaching – all of which initially gained momentum through a desire to expound the Scriptures themselves – that led, ultimately, to the formal and arid intellectualism of the

later Puritan period, and to the eventual obscuring of the biblical message altogether, the great gospel of the kingdom of God becoming buried in the moralism and liberalism of the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Constant rediscovery of the Scriptures themselves

During the latter part of the 20th century there was in this country a great rediscovery of the Word of God, and a renewed confidence in that Word proclaimed in preaching. The ministries we share in are the fruit of this, for which we thank God. But there is a real danger for us too, as for any such 'second generation' from those who rediscover the power of the living Word of God, that we also may begin to move on, 'progressing' to the science, the strategy, the practice of preaching, and so gradually to take the substance for granted. In the light of this, I think we need to make it very clear (to ourselves as well as to others) that when we say our chief focus in the work of The Proclamation Trust is on preaching, what we really mean is that our chief focus is on the *Scriptures themselves*.

We must beware of being beguiled. The lessons of history tell us that what we need to do most of all is keep reminding ourselves that our business is, in fact, the constant rediscovery of the Word of God itself, much more than it is a constant focus on the mechanics of the practice of preaching. There is an analogy with the work of the Holy Spirit here. We cannot know Christ apart from the Spirit, and the work of the Spirit is all important therefore; but the evidence of the true work of the Spirit is that all the focus is on Jesus Christ. Just so, we cannot know and discover the Word of God in Scripture without preaching, and preaching is a *sine qua non* ('how can they hear without a preacher?' *Romans 10:14*); but the evidence of a true and right attitude to preaching is that all the focus is on the Scriptures and the living Word, not on the mechanics of the preaching as a vehicle of that Word.

To put it another way: hermeneutics and homiletics, though important, do not work in isolation; but the Word of God does. It is no accident that in describing their life-transforming experience on the road to Emmaus, the two hitherto dejected and dispirited disciples testified 'did not our hearts burn within us while ... he opened to us the *Scriptures*' (*Luke 24:32*). Surely this must have been the most exegetically perfect, theo-

¹ W F Mitchell, *English Pulpit Outlines* (London, 1932), 46.

logically coherent, Christologically focused preaching from the Old Testament on the death and resurrection of Jesus that ever there was! But their response looks straight through the 'preaching' as such, as though it were transparent. All the focus is on the message itself, the living Word, the 'opened Scriptures' – because it is this, and this alone, that causes hearts to burn, to change, to come alive with the glorious hope of the gospel. Was this not John Wesley's experience, in the famous meeting in Aldersgate in 1738? Of the 'preaching' he heard that night he records only that 'one was reading Luther's *Preface to the Epistle to Romans*'. So it was a second hand sermon, and a read sermon – a double anathema to some! – and (significantly?) an anonymous, forgotten preacher. But what he heard, as he listened to Luther's exposition of Romans, was the Scripture 'opened to him' so that his heart, too, burned within him, 'strangely warmed' by the Word of life. The fruit of that transformation was, as we all know, quite incalculable.

Nothing has changed. What the church needs today as much as ever is the Scriptures opened to men and women, so that hearts burn within, and eyes are opened to recognise the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ. In that sense, calling our conferences 'preaching conferences', and focusing on 'preaching workshops' is really something of a misnomer. What we are really doing is seeking to bring one another constantly back to the Word of God, to immerse ourselves together in the Scriptures, to wrestle with them, to ingest them, and by so doing to keep the only true God, the God of these Scriptures (and these only), at the heart of our lives and ministries. The preacher's heart must first be kept burning, if in turn other hearts are to be warmed in response to the opened Word.

2 A shift from vertical to horizontal

A second subtle change that can gradually creep in, at first perhaps unconsciously, among those of us who are committed to expository Word ministry, is a shift from the vertical to the merely horizontal in terms of our understanding of what is actually happening as we open up the Scriptures. That is, we too easily begin to think of Bible 'teaching' and 'learning' as merely mutual edification along the horizontal axis, and forget the vertical axis. We forget the presence of the living God himself,

whose Word is not just being heard as if from a distance, but who is himself present by his Spirit, and breathing out his living Word as the Scriptures are opened up today.

If this were not true, then preaching would be no different from mere lecturing, teaching, arguing or reasoning. I say *met*, because true preaching does of course aim to teach, inform, reason, admonish, rebuke and so on. But it is also much more than this. It is different from any other kind of communication that exists in this world, because its origin is beyond this world. It is revelation from God, and further, it is revelation of God. If this were not true, we would have to concede that men and women could be brought to the new birth as believers through a mere intellectual process, involving learning a series of doctrinal formulations and propositional truths, because people are converted to Christ precisely through what appears to be a process just like this. As they hear and understand the message of the gospel through the Bible they are learning and receiving propositional truth; but through that – in a way which we can only describe as a miraculous breaking in of the life of the world to come into their present earthly existence – they are being brought into a real and vital relationship with the living God. A miracle takes place; as the Scriptures are opened up to them, so they encounter the Christ of the Scriptures.

Creating and sustaining a living relationship

Do not think I am somehow emphasising experience and down-playing the place of the mind. Far from it! Of course the message of the gospel is first to the mind, for it is through the renewal of our minds that the darkness of our godless thinking is transformed, and we are brought to see the light of reality in Christ. But Scripture has an end in view for us; it is designed to bring us, by that very ongoing transformation, into a living relationship of union with Christ, into the state of knowing God through Christ (not just knowing about him). That is the purpose of biblical preaching and teaching – to create this relationship, and then to sustain and nurture believers within it, to feed them with the bread of life, and to nourish them at the table of their beloved.

We know this in theory, which is why we are committed to exposi-

tory Word ministry. But precisely because we are convinced of the primacy of teaching in the pastoral task, and because we want to devote time and effort to our preparation and teaching, there is always the danger that we begin to forget that the very purpose of the revelation of God in Scripture is relational in this way. We so easily focus on 'the teaching ministry' that we forget the whole purpose of that ministry is to be a vehicle of a love relationship, between Christ and his people. The very essence of this ministry has a vertical dimension: the triune God is, through his Word, revealing himself to us, and asking us to respond to him in love and obedience in every part of our beings. We really do meet God in his Word.

Peter Adam reminds us, in his excellent book *Speaking God's Words*², that members of the congregation hear God speaking to them during the preaching because God himself is present in the means he has appointed, the preached Word. He has come down to them, and accommodated himself to their weakness in his Words in Scripture, in the ministry of the preacher, and through the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus the focus of the preacher is supremely on God; he alone has the supremacy in preaching. The preacher is the vehicle by which the Scripture itself is the mouth-piece of God, and part of God's coming down to his people. What faithful, but often frail and struggling, believers need to hear week by week, is not just 'what Romans is about' or 'how the Old Testament points us to Christ' (though these are indeed good things to teach our congregations) but 'this is what the God of all grace is saying to us now, today, in this very place. This is his word to us, just as it was to those first believing hearers, to help us in the fight of faith, to strengthen our weak knees, to renew in our hearts the hope of glory, and to fill us again with the unspeakable joy that is ours in knowing and loving the Saviour we own.'

To know and to love God

God gave the Scriptures, and preserved them for us, that we may know not merely things about him, but that we may know him. If we lose this vertical dimension, we are really pushing the person of Christ out of the

² Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A practical theology of preaching* (Leicester, 1996).

gospel. We are forgetting that ultimately what we need is more than just knowledge about God – even sound, biblical, expository teaching about God – it is God himself. We are also forgetting that all the initiative in the Word comes from God alone. We do not stand over the Scriptures because we are 'Bible Teachers'; nor do we dictate the agenda and goal of our ministry. We must do the hard work and all the necessary study, of course; but not so that we can master the Word, merely to know 'what it is about' and so pass 'it' on and find satisfaction in 'well-taught' congregations. God is the author and the master of his Word; we are only the servants who carry his message of life and power, and we do so for the purpose he has ordained. His purpose is not merely that believers be well-taught; he wants them to be so in order that they may know that they are well loved, and that they may rejoice in his love, respond to it, live in it, and so overflow with this love both one to another and to a world that as yet does not know him. We are servants of this message, ambassadors of a 'vertical' Word from a God who speaks today.

3 A shift from the corporate to the individual

A third danger we must beware of is a shift in focus from the corporate to the individual. In essence, of course, this is just another expression of the general drift from a God-centred, Kingdom-oriented mentality to the man-centred, self-preoccupation that is the hallmark of our natural condition, and to which we constantly naturally regress if left unchecked by the correction of God's Word. It is this same basic root of idolatry, which puts man always to the centre of the picture and pushes God to the circumference, that is behind the two shifts we have discussed already. But in our post-Enlightenment, highly individualised western culture today, it is particularly important that we realise just how easily we have become children of our age. The truth is that even our thinking about preaching and teaching the Word of God has become influenced by categories quite foreign to the New Testament.

Where is the power in preaching?

It is in large measure this individual rather than corporate focus which causes us a great deal of confusion when we try to articulate what it is that makes the proclamation of the Word of God different from other

means of communication. In particular, we struggle to define where it is that the 'power' in preaching resides, and just how it is that this is made manifest in the preaching. But because we focus so much on the individual, we often find ourselves trying to explain this in terms of the preacher alone, and so get into all kinds of difficulties.

For some, the explanation is articulated wholly in terms of a rather indefinable 'something extra' that rests on the preacher, a special unction or anointing possessed by the man, without which 'real' preaching cannot take place. Others recoil from what appears to them to be unhelpful, by mystical language, and reject all such exalted descriptions of preaching. Rather, they insist the preacher's 'gifts' reside merely in the learned technical ability to 'rightly handle' the Scriptures, and in hard work, adequate time set aside for preparation, and clear presentation.

Both points of view are trying to articulate something profoundly true about the biblical concept of preaching, but each is inadequate on its own. The former description wants to preserve the Divine involvement in gospel proclamation, and to emphasise, quite rightly, that it is indeed God who is speaking, and this only because of the miraculous operation of the Holy Spirit. The danger, however, where this emphasis predominates, is that in a quite unwarranted way the preacher himself may become elevated into a rarefied category of his own. His oracular pronouncements are deemed sacred and untouchable, beyond any criticism, and thus he is beyond the (often much needed) help and improvement that could be gained through mutual interaction with discerning brothers and sisters in the fellowship. I have been in churches where fine and able evangelical ministers are clearly failing to attain their potential as preachers precisely for this reason. The aura of the sacrosanct around the pulpit has done nothing to ennoble the Word of God; instead it has simply become a barrier to the pastor's (and congregation's) development. This is not evidence of high spirituality, but of tragedy.

The latter view, on the other hand, rightly insists that there is a clear and vital element of human responsibility in preaching. We hear God's voice as and when his written Word in Scripture is faithfully taught, and this happens when the Bible teacher takes study of the text in context seriously, and learns the disciplines of responsible exposition. The

danger here, though, is a tendency to mechanise the whole process of preaching, believing that once one has learned the 'knack' of the proper expository method, and so long as one 'does the time' in the study, and clearly teaches the Bible to the people, 'the Word will do the work' with guaranteed results. This comes perilously close to ignoring the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit altogether, or at least imagining he will always have to dance to our tune just so long as we 'get the exposition right'. But we are gravely mistaken to think we can so command and control the Lord of Hosts in this way. Neither doctrinal orthodoxy nor faultless methodology guarantees spiritual life. I fear there are evangelical congregations – and preachers – becoming quietly disinterested, their spiritual life-blood draining away, because (albeit unwittingly) the Holy Spirit of God is being grieved away.

The church: God's power among his people

Much of the reason that we become tangled up in this way is precisely because of a failure to consider the overwhelmingly corporate context in which the Bible deals with these matters. We are focussing on the individual, the preacher – on what they possess (in terms of gifting and learning) and what they do (in terms of their preaching). In the New Testament however, the focus is entirely different. It is not on the individual in this way, but on the corporate, not on the Word gifts themselves, but on the sphere of service of these gifts – the whole church – and on the purpose of the gifts, that the one body 'joined and held together' as it is in Christ, might grow into full maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:1-16). The preacher, therefore, can never be thought of as a 'gifted Bible teacher' in view; he is 'given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' and 'so that the church may be built up' (1 Corinthians 12:7, 14:4,5).

John Stott has pointed out³ that the edification Paul is talking about cannot be an individual activity, but is by its very nature a corporate process; it is body growth (hence the 'self edification' of 1 Corinthians 14:4 is really a jarring irony). So, it follows that the whole exercise of

³ In his treatment of 1 Corinthians 12-14 in *Baptism and Fulness* (Ecclesia, 1984).

teaching the Scriptures cannot be an individual thing, but a corporate transaction, involving the whole of the body of Christ. This is the primary purpose of the Scriptures; they are not first for the individual (either teacher or reader) but for the whole church. So too for the teaching gifts; they are not individual, but given for the congregation. This is what explains the simple fact which we as preachers all know to be true: we gain immensely more insight into the Word of God when we study it in order to teach, than when we do so merely for ourselves. This has nothing to do with the fact that we may be expending more time and concentration on our study (which may or may not always be the case!) Our shelves are full of books by scholars (including evangelicals) who have spent decades immersed in study, and yet far too many still seem to have gained precious little insight that is life-giving use to the church. No, the reason that as the preacher in his study meditates and reflects upon the Scriptures, the Lord himself gives him such insights (cf 2 Timothy 2:7), is because we are there doing it for the people of God, not just for ourselves.⁴ The Word of God is for the church of God, and the teaching gifts of the preacher are for the service of the church as a whole. It is never an individual matter, always a corporate one. This is basic to the whole understanding of ecclesiology in the New Testament.

The power of the Holy Spirit's presence

When we take seriously the biblical emphasis on the corporate context for the exercise of teaching gifts, the difficulty we have in giving full weight to both the divine and the human aspects of the preaching task can be resolved much more easily. Take first the place of the Holy Spirit. Is there really something 'extra' happening when the Word is proclaimed by the preacher? Yes indeed! Something very special – indeed miraculous – is happening. We need not hesitate to say this out of fear of enduing the preacher with some mystical power, for the focus is not on him as an individual, but on the congregation as a whole. David Peterson puts it very helpfully: 'The congregation is where the sacred presence of God is to be found'.⁵ When the church is thus assembled the

⁴ David Peterson, *Worship in the New Testament*, 'Worship Adoration and Action', Ed DA Carson (Carlisle, 1993), 78 (italics his).

power of our Lord Jesus is present' (1 Corinthians 5:4), and as the Word is ministered, 'God presences himself in a distinctive way in the Christian meeting through his word and the operation of the Spirit'.⁶ Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25 is precisely that he expects God himself to be encountered by believers – and also by unbelievers⁷ – when the church gathers for the mutual edification that comes through the word preached. The preacher is not doing something miraculous; he is simply expounding the Scriptures. But God is doing something miraculous for his people through the preaching as they gather around his Word so expounded. 'Through the exercise of gifts and ministries, the exalted Christ manifests his presence and encourages and nurtures the faith of his flock'.⁸

The struggles of the preacher

What then of the preacher's task? Is the need for the hard work – the study, the right handling of the text, the constant effort to find 'just the right words' so as to impart knowledge to the people – somehow diminished because of this focus on the powerful sovereign presence of God himself? Indeed not! Is the imperative of the great commission to go and make disciples of all nations in any way diminished by Scripture's clear assertion of the sovereignty of God in election? No! Likewise, the command to the pastor teacher to 'be diligent to present yourself approved to God, an unashamed workman' (2 Timothy 2:15) is not eclipsed, but rather reinforced and intensified, precisely because of this great expectation of the powerful and personal working of the Holy Spirit which attends gospel proclamation. The preacher's motivation is similarly elevated; he is not merely to expect that men and women will 'learn the Bible' but that they will, together, through the diligent ministry of the

⁵ Peterson, *Worship* p. 77.

⁶ This is a very important point: the implication is that unbelievers, even the rank outsider, totally ignorant of spiritual things (Gk *diotes*), will be converted and begin to bow down and worship God in response and faith, in gatherings that are lire, and foremost taking place for the edification of believers through the exercise of the word gifts within the church. In other words, 'teaching meetings' are not seeker unfriendly, but powerful unto salvation, because God himself is present, and may be encountered.

⁷ Peterson, *Worship* 80 (italics mine).

Word, participate in a miraculous encounter with the living God himself, and hear him speak in their midst. Ought not this wonderful prospect to encourage the embattled pastor in his study? If this is really true, will he not also echo Paul's words, 'for this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works in me' (*Colossians 1:29*)? His extraordinary privilege is to play his part, for the sake of the church, in what is ultimately the work of God himself among his people.

The participation of the whole body

A proper corporate focus also liberates us from the wholly mistaken notion that the rest of the congregation are passive in the process of the preaching, merely recipients of Bible teaching, accruing knowledge and information, but not otherwise involved. We can see that nothing could be further from the truth, if we consider what is happening in terms of such a real encounter and engagement with God. Together, we draw near to God, as he draws near to us through the means of his Word.

The writer to the Hebrews in particular makes much of this great theme of 'drawing near'. As New Testament Christians the reality is that we have drawn near to God through Christ, nearer, that is, than even the people of Israel were able to come as Old Covenant people. We have 'drawn near' not the lesser thing of Sinai (with all its undoubted reality and efficacy as a real means of grace for believing people), but to the greater reality, the eschatological reality, to Jesus now unveiled as the great king enthroned in the heavens, to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith (*Hebrews 1:2*). Already we participate in that eschatological community. Nevertheless, even for us there remains a 'not yet' in our experience; we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, but are still looking forward to the approaching Day. In the meantime, how are we to live? How can we realise in our experience the benefits of this reality, this life which is ours now in the heavenly realms? We do so, together, by 'keeping on drawing near'; and as we do so, in our still frail flesh, we find 'mercy and grace to help in time of need' (*Hebrews 4:16*), and our weak and feeble hearts may nevertheless experience 'full assurance of faith' (*Hebrews 10:22-23*). The context makes clear that this ongoing drawing near to God is a corporate experience, one charac-

terised by ministries of mutual edification and gospel exhortation (*Hebrews 3:12ff; 10:19-25*); yet the central focus is nevertheless the God who is speaking and warning us from heaven (12:25). We are warned, therefore, with all seriousness not to 'give up meeting together' in this way, nor to 'refuse him who speaks' (10:25; 12:25).

We should not miss this vital connection – corporate meeting together, and God speaking in the midst. There is a current fashion around for refusing to call congregational gatherings 'services' or 'Worship' in any sense, and an increasing preference for describing these as simply 'meetings'. There may be good and valid reason for this, as a reaction against the near obsession with 'worship' (often meaning merely endless repetitive singing) of so much of present-day evangelism. I would not want to quibble about ecclesiastical nomenclature (though it does make us sound more like Quakers than orthodox evangelicals). But just a warning: it is very easy for reaction to lurch into over-reaction. If, by insisting on 'meeting', we mean nothing more than believers meeting together, we part company altogether with the New Testament understanding of the nature and purpose of such gatherings. Once again, we have erased the vertical dimension, and lost the overwhelming focus on God himself. As Hebrews makes clear, meeting one another is not an end in itself. The goal is always meeting with one another in order to draw near to meet with God himself.

As we meet together with believers here on earth, around his Word, we really do meet together with our Saviour, our great High Priest. We call on him, and he answers us. We hear his voice; we know his presence. He draws near to us as we draw near to him (*James 4:8*). 'There am I in the midst' (Matthew 18:20).

The prayers of the saints

Just as the teacher's struggle in the work of preaching is not nullified by the work of God in the midst, so also the whole people of God have work to do. The corporate context of preaching emphasises the corporate responsibility for prayer. God's promise is that he will be a hearing God who speaks to answer his people's request. 'Call to me and I will answer you', 'ask and it will be given to you; seek and you shall find'.

This great simplicity lies at the very heart of true biblical faith: 'You call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire he is God' (1 Kings 18:24). The prayers of the saints, rising up before the throne of God, are still what brings down the fire of God on behalf of his people (Revelation 8:4-5). The Lord is a God who hears, and speaks in answer, in words of grace and power.

The sovereign God is not controlled by our prayers, but in his abundant grace he seems pleased to accommodate himself to them. When we seek his voice, we shall hear it. This is why in the New Testament prayer, and especially corporate prayer*, is so intimately linked to the ministry of the Word as to be inseparable from it. The ESV rendering of Ephesians 6:17-18 makes this exceptionally clear: 'take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, *praying* at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. You see the logic: the sword, the word of God which is living and active, able to pierce the soul and spirit, to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12ff), is wielded and put to work through prayer. The prayer in view is the corporate prayer of the whole church in that one place, for the world-wide church ('all the saints'), and focused on the proclamation of the Word of God by the preacher in particular situations ('that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel'). This means we must recognise that the pray-ers are as important as the preachers. It is not within the power of the preacher alone to preach with power; all his efforts alone (including his own prayers) cannot wield the sword of the Spirit. There must be the prayers of the saints. I wonder if we take this nearly as seriously as the New Testament does?

God's work and our work

If all this is so, then there is a three-way 'partnership' in effective gospel proclamation. The preacher is involved, struggling in his own weakness

⁸ It is worth noting that virtually every request for prayer (and indeed virtually every command to pray) in the Epistles implies a context of corporate prayer. The loss of the distinction in modern English versions of singular and plural pronouns has tended to encourage our individualistic reading of the New Testament, whereas almost all the imperatives are directed not to the individual, but to the whole congregation.

to faithfully discharge the task of teaching the Scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15; Colossians 1:29 etc). Those wrestling in prayer have a vital part, crying out together in the presence of the listening God. Their prayers focus on the preaching of the Word, seeking clear and bold proclamation, open doors, rapid spread of the message, and honourable reception of the Word of the gospel by the hearers (Ephesians 6: 19-20, Colossians 4:3-4; 2 Thessalonians 3:1 etc.) And above all, the Lord God himself is at work, his mighty Spirit moving in the midst as his voice is heard with power (1 Corinthians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Where we seem to be terribly complicated, the Scriptures are so very practical. Instead of getting bogged down in the morass of unanswerable questions about the mystical or the mechanical, they simply recognise the work of preaching, the work of prayer, and the work of God. They point to the corporate context in which God has chosen to encounter his people, through the supernatural gifts he has given to his church for this purpose, and they call us all to take our own part seriously, whether as teachers, intercessors, or both. Where there is a right understanding among God's people of these things, we should find the whole church involved together in prayer for the proclamation of the Word of the gospel, and sharing the eager expectation for God himself to speak with power, not just locally, but world-wide; we should find pastor-teachers devoted to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching, and we should expect to see evidence of the power of God at work.

Again, Christian history is illuminating. While on holiday some time ago, I happened to be reading (alongside some rather lighter titles!)⁴ a selection of historical accounts of the time of the Great Awakening, and some biographies of that period. I suppose I had expected extraordinary preaching to be one of the outstanding features of these times of true revival, and that the accounts would be full of such descriptions. Of course there were many great men of God at large in those days, and one cannot but be amazed by what the Lord accomplished through the ministries of Whitfield, Wesley and the like. But what struck me, in reading of the happenings on both sides of the Atlantic – particularly in

New England in the mid 1730s, and Cambuslang and Kilsyth, where revival broke out in 1742⁸ – was the distinct lack of any such marked focus on preachers, and preaching oratory, in so many places that were truly transformed by revival. Instead, what impressed me more than anything else was the widespread preoccupation of churches with corporate prayer.

Societies for prayer sprang up everywhere. Their focus was never merely parochial, but overwhelmingly concentrated on mission, both local and international. This was real and tangible partnership in mission; ordinary folk felt wholly involved in gospel work all over the Old and New World. Nor was the prayer vague and non-specific; the special concern of these meetings was always prayer for gospel proclamation. A great transatlantic 'Concert for Prayer' was co-ordinated, with hundreds of meetings for prayer on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings, these times purposely chosen as being nearest to the time of dispensing gospel ordinances throughout the Christian world⁹. In the midst of this, many very ordinary preachers slogged away at their preparation, and climbed the pulpit steps to do their best. They were not free from the trials of pastoral life, but had the same struggles and opposition from within and without that we all face. One of the most astonishing things of all was to read how Jonathan Edwards himself was unmercifully ejected as pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, just a few years following the revival (which just goes to show that revival, wonderful as it may be, is not the answer to every pastor's problems).

These preachers were just like us. Few were great orators; even Edwards is said to have preached in virtual monotone, a cushion under his elbow as he propped his head above the dense script, which he read word for word. But the focus was not on them, or their sermon; it was on God and his voice. Because they rightly understood their work of ⁹I warmly recommend Arthur Fawcett's account, *The Combusting Revival* (Edinburgh: BOT 1996), which has much wider scope than the title suggests, and gives a great insight into the real nation-wide and transatlantic networks of fellowship in mission which marked the period surrounding the Great Awakening

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, Volume 2, 440-1.

preaching and prayer, and God's work of speaking with power in the midst, people gathered with great expectations of God. They eagerly anticipated his presence among them in power through his Word, put to work as it was, through prayer. They earnestly implored him to work similarly among their partners in mission at home and abroad. And the Lord did, with mighty effect.

This reality mirrors what we find in the New Testament. Paul's ministry, as he recounts it to the Roman church, was full of evidence of the power of God at work. He gloried in the way God had led the Gentiles to the obedience of faith 'by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit' (Romans 15: 19). But this had happened as he 'fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ', a preaching ministry of very real and continuous battles, in which he urged all the believers 'by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me' (15:30). The same pattern is everywhere evident in the New Testament, and nothing has changed in gospel ministry since. These three things go together: the power of God, the prayers of the saints, and the struggles of the preacher. Just as we must not forget the vertical element of preaching – God himself speaking – so we cannot ignore the corporate context. God speaks in answer to his people's prayers.

ARRESTING THE DRIFT

The human condition, even among those reborn, is marked by constant drift; we drift to the centre of our world, and God drifts to the periphery. In Christ we have received a new nature, but as long as we remain in the flesh, the desires of the flesh wage war against us, and we drift. We need constant Divine correction, constant reorientation, by the grace of God in the gospel. This is true in our preaching, as it is in every area of our lives, and we must be humble enough to admit it. We must be alert, lest our enemy, the father of deceit and lies, should beguile us and our churches, by causing us to drift, gently unaware, in the very area where we believe our strength lies.

Let us determine to resist him. We shall do so if we consciously

strive in our prayers, resolving not to drift in any of these ways as far as our own ministry as pastor-teachers is concerned. Our focus must be a constant rediscovery of God's own self-revelation in his Word, and our determination must be to think of ourselves only as servants of that Word, never its master. Like John the Baptist we must decrease, that the Word may increase; we must be only 'a voice', our preaching always pointing beyond itself, to that living Word, never within to our own eloquence. Moreover, the stress of our preaching must go beyond merely words about God, to the personal Word, to the reality of the God of the Word himself, and to the Christ who seeks, within an intimate relationship of faith union, to nourish believers whom he loved and gave himself for on the cross at Calvary. And we must never forget that we are not in isolation in the task of preaching, neither can we ever be self-sufficient, or self-reliant. God may have given us gifts, yet they are not gifts for us, but for the church, and their exercise in ministry is part of the mutual ministry by the body, for the edification of the whole church. The congregation must play a full part. Our preaching is not just part of a corporate ministry; it is itself a corporate event, in which God hears and answers the cry of his people, and delights to presence himself among them in power.

God at the centre

If our focus is right, then God will be at the centre; he will be pre-eminent in all things. Our eyes will be all upon him, his person and his glory; our ears open to his Word of life-giving power, and our hearts open to his church, the bride of his Son, whom he gave himself up for, and is now gathering from the ends of the earth to be with him forever.

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The fundamental conviction underlying the work of The Proclamation Trust is that when the Bible is taught God's voice is heard. The main aim of the Trust, therefore, is to teach the Bible to preachers in order that they can in turn teach it to others. A further aim is to provide a fellowship of like-minded evangelicals across denominational lines for encouragement in an exacting work.

WORKSHOP 1

PUTTING THE TEXT INTO CONTEXT LEADER'S NOTES

A

John 20:24-29

Doubting Thomas?

Some key questions

- Is this about honest doubt – or wilful unbelief in the face of apostolic witness?
- What is the context of this passage:
 - in the overall schema of John's Gospel?
 - in the immediate chapter?
- How does that context control the interpretation of this story?
- What is the significance of seeing, hearing, and believing? (vs25, 29, 30-31)

Some key observations

John's Gospel is rich in themes which run throughout the book, and are repeated and developed through the narrative. Three of the most prominent themes are *Evidence (Witness)*, *Faith*, and *Life*. In many ways 20:30-31 sums up John's purpose, and give an interpretative key to all his writing: 'these are written [evidence] that you may believe [faith] ... and have life in his name.'

- So, John has chosen carefully. He wants us to read the text through these spectacles.

Chapter 20 is the great climax of the message about Jesus the Christ. It is all about witness and belief. NB v8: Peter saw and believed; v18: Mary saw and believed; v20: the disciples saw and believed. All the signs bore witness to him, and now the greatest sign bears witness.

The apostles are unique: they saw with their own eyes. But, their testimony (evidence) is written down (v31) in order that others will believe though they themselves have not seen (v29). Future generations would not see with their eyes, but they would have their witness! What they had 'heard'...

seen ... touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life'. (1 John 1:1)

- The point is that there is reliable, convincing and trustworthy evidence of Christ's resurrection, and on this evidence the whole faith stands. Belief is not a leap in the dark.

This authority and reliability of Scripture is essential to our preaching of the faith

So, Thomas is rebuked because he should have believed the apostolic witness. When he *heard* the gospel witness (v25) he should have believed. (Just as on the road to Emmaus, (Luke 24:25ff) Jesus rebuked the two men for not believing the gospel *in the Scriptures*.) So, Thomas is not a doubter, but the great unbeliever (cf also Mark 16:14-15)!

But in God's grace, he allows Thomas to see, and believe – a requirement for apostleship – confessing both Christ's lordship and deity: 'My Lord and my God!

- And so Thomas ends up as the great believer of John's Gospel!!

The message of the apostolic gospel is the path to faith.

Faith comes by hearing... Romans 10:17

B**Mark 3:31-35****True Family****Some key questions**

- Where does this passage come in the flow of the early chapters of Mark?
- What are the dominant themes in these chapters? And what are the surprises in the reactions Jesus receives (eg 2:16-17; 3:6) and in his priorities (1:38; 2:2, 13 etc)?
- How does the immediate context of 3:14-35 help illuminate the significance of vs 31-35? What marks out the 'new family' from the old? (vs21, 32).

Some key observations

The key text in Mark is 1:15: '*The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news!*' The following chapters unfold at pace, with the immediate impact of Jesus' astonishing authority: in teaching, over illness over demons, and even over sin and the law (cf 1:27, 29; 2:10, 18ff). The message of the Kingdom rings louder and louder, and the whole country is awe-struck.

- Yet, Mark shows clearly that none of this is compelling proof. None of this forces people to believe. Indeed, the great irony is that only the demons seem clearly to recognise his true identity (1:34). All around is lack of faith and even bitter opposition (3:5-6).
- **Faith** is therefore Mark's key theme. Personal faith in Jesus' person and his message is the great command (1:15). But, Jesus and his message are *divisive*.

In Chapter 4, the parable of the sower emphasises that although the Good News is proclaimed to all, the need is for an individual response of faith to be made to the word that is proclaimed. That is what really counts. But Jesus gives the grim warning

(4:11ff) that some people insist on seeing, but never really perceiving, and hearing though never understanding. They refuse to have real faith.

- The light of his presence and gospel reveals eternal realities (4:21ff). There is no hiding. The message of the gospel brings it all out into the open, and calls for a definite response. The emphasis is not on the size of the measure, but on the kind of measure.
- Do you receive the message with the measure of *faith*, with the *ears that really hear*, or with the measure of unbelief? That is the really crucial question.

The immediate context of 3:31-35 is therefore crucial. The official religious establishment of Israel rejects Jesus (v22). His natural family reject him (v21). But, he is forming a *new Israel of faith* in the Christ now revealed (hence the significance of twelve apostles vs13-19) and calling to himself a *new family of faith* (vs23, 32-35) – those who gather round him to *listen to him alone*, and to *follow him alone*. The old order has been eclipsed by the new (Galatians 3:23-29).

- Religious credentials, and even family ties with Jesus count for nothing. The only thing that counts is the new birth, the new creation of genuine faith (cf Galatians 5:6; 6:15).

These are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit. Mark 4:20

Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother. Mark 3:35

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:26

C**2 Peter 1:12-15****Repetition or Transmission?****Some key questions**

- What are the main concerns of 2 Peter – and of the immediate context of 1:12-15?
- What is the connection between teaching, maturity, godly living and perseverance?
- What does he see as the vital foundation for the church to stand upon?

Some key observations

The context of 2 Peter is forward looking. The apostle is looking beyond his own lifetime, right up to the last days (3:3), and asking the question 'how will the churches survive in a hostile, godless world?' Who will equip the believers when the apostles are no longer with them? Peter warns of many assaults, and especially of the malignant danger of *false teachers* (2:1ff; 3:3) whose erroneous doctrines will lead to false and ungodly *living* (2:7, 14ff).

- especially vulnerable are those who are still immature in the faith: *those who are untaught* (2:18-20) – easy prey to become entangled again in the world and overcome.

Therefore, Peter's message is it is vital for believers to *hold fast to their calling* (1:10); to *guard themselves from being carried away by error* (3:17); and to make every effort to *live increasingly mature and fruitful lives* (1:8; 3:18) – living now for future glory, so as to be found 'spotless, blameless and at peace with him' at the last (3:14).

- And how are they to ensure this? How are they to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (3:18)? The answer: *by keeping to the one sure and certain word* – the truth that has established them (1:12) and that will keep them from falling to the end (3:17). God has

given us all we need (1:3)!

This sure and certain word is the apostolic gospel, and it is *this* that will empower the church to the very end. Peter's concern all through is to turn the believers back, back, back to the Bible! They are to feed their minds on the *historic word* of the prophets and apostles (3:2), which is the *same word of power* through which God called the world into being and will yet call it to judgement (3:5-7), and is the *same word* now *written as authoritative Scripture* for the church forever.

- So, in 1:12-21, his great concern is to establish the veracity and authority of 'these things' (v15).

Unlike the false teachers, whose stories were mere invention, the gospel came as a direct revelation from God. The New Testament apostles were eyewitnesses (v16) but also ear-witnesses of the *authoritative divine interpretation* (vs17-18). Likewise, Old Testament Scriptures came not from the 'desires of sinful human nature' (2:18) but through the direct revelation to the prophets who were driven to give not their own, but the *Holy Spirit's authoritative interpretation* (v19-21). The Bible is even plus God's own interpretation.

- So, vs12-15 is the message of true apostolic succession – the transmission of their authoritative witness to authoritative Scripture. Hence, 'remind' (v12); 'refresh' (v12); 'remember' (v15) *these things!* (cf Paul's same concern in the pastorals: 2 Timothy 2:2 etc).

We have a sure and certain word today, 'a light shining in a dark place' 2 Peter 1:19

God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. 2 Peter 1:3

Preach the Word... 2 Timothy 4:2

D**John 14:1-6*****Real comfort is through death*****Some key questions**

- How does the flow of John's Gospel, and the particular context of Chapters 13-17 guide here?
- What is the content and context of Jesus' command to trust him?
- What is the significance of coming, going and life?

Some key observations

John's Gospel falls largely into two parts. Chapters 1-12 expound the great signs that bear witness to Jesus as the Christ; yet, though he came to his own, 'his own received him not' (1:11a) – they 'would not believe in him' (12:37). Chapter 12 is the great turning point, where the inevitable and imminent death of Jesus comes into sharp focus, both from his enemies' perspective (12:10, 19), and from his own: 'now is the time for judgement on this world' (12:31ff).

From 13:1 John turns towards the climax of the glory of the 'one and only Son', and to how those who are his true followers will enter into their sonship in Christ: 'those who did believe in his name' to whom 'he gave the right to become children of God' (1:12).

- 'Jesus knew that the time had come...' (31:1). The shadow of the cross is now unmistakably dominant over everything he says and does.

The immediate context of 14:1-6 is the disciples' continuing misunderstanding and weakness, the prediction of Judas' betrayal, and particularly Peter's denial (13:18ff, 36-38). Yet despite this human sin and failure Jesus does not rebuke, but offers assurance of peace 'Let not your hearts be troubled' (v1).

- Trust in Jesus is the answer to human frailty and sin – and it is trust in what he was about to accomplish.

Jesus is talking about a destination, the Father's house, the hope of heaven. He is going to prepare a place, not after his death, but *through* the death itself (v2), and so if that is accomplished they can be absolutely assured that he *will* come again to finally consummate their union with him for eternity (v3). Thus, we have 'a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (1 Peter 1:3); and 'we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure' whatever the depth of our sin and failure (Hebrews 6:19)!

- Hence, the risen Jesus' great message for the disciples: 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20:17), i.e. Your hope is secure!

The disciples know the way already: Jesus has told them in 12:24 that only through death can there be life and fruit. It is in this context – that of his impending death – that he says 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (v6a). In his death alone is the way, the truth and the life. And without sharing in that death, through union with Christ by the Holy Spirit, 'no-one comes to the Father' (v6b).

- 'Let not your heart be troubled' (v1) and 'my peace I leave with you' are words for those who have found peace with God 'through his blood, shed on the cross' (Colossians 1:20).
- True faith in Jesus means to know him in his death and resurrection. To know him is to love him: and the test and content of true believing and loving is obeying! (v15, 23)

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Luke 9:23

WORKSHOP 2

OBSERVATION LEADER'S NOTES

A

Acts 10:42-43

Jesus as Judge and Saviour

Some key questions

- What is expected/unexpected in what Jesus commanded the apostles to preach? What is the testimony of the Old Testament and the New Testament about Christ?
- What is often different in our presentation of the gospel today and in our methods?

Some key observations

The context here is Peter's preaching to the household of Cornelius, following his vision and God's command to him to go and preach the gospel to these (formerly unclean) Gentiles (10:1-33). The aftermath of his preaching then leads to the 'Gentile Pentecost', the Holy Spirit being poured out on Gentile believers just as on the Jewish believers at first (Acts 2) – a sign apparently necessary for the rather 'unbelieving' Jewish believers to finally grasp that the gospel was for all people, Jew and Gentile alike (cf 1 Corinthians 14:22).

- The focus is therefore on the universal scope of God's grace that 'accepts men from every nation' (v34) and upon the universal lordship of Christ (v36) that demands all must, and shall, bow before him as Judge (v42).

Verses 42-43 give a wonderfully condensed summary of the gospel that Jesus himself taught and commissioned the apostles to preach during the forty days prior to his ascension. But the surprise is in both the emphasis and the order of this message. For one thing it totally negates the common misrepresentation that the Old Testament is full of law and judgement, and the New Testament, and Jesus' teaching, by contrast is full of love and forgiveness.

- The primary apostolic testimony is that Jesus is returning, as judge of all: the living and dead (v42).

The certainty of judgement is at the heart of the New Testament message!

- But all the prophets testify to Jesus as saviour – that there is forgiveness through Jesus, by faith (v43). *Justification by faith in Jesus* is the heart of the Old Testament message!

Note that the message of judgement comes first. Judgement is a *certainty* for all men. Without a right understanding of this the need for forgiveness and salvation is meaningless.

- Judgement according to God's holy law is *integral* to the gospel.

'The wrath of God revealed' (Romans 1:18-3:20) precedes the 'but now' of grace and forgiveness (Romans 3:21ff), which is incomprehensible without it. But, the supreme assurance of salvation is that the saviour is the judge: and he who is pardoned by the judge is saved indeed!

- So the gospel message is not 'Come to meet Jesus': but rather 'You shall all, without question, meet Jesus Christ – as judge. But the good news is that he has already come as saviour so that 'everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness in his name'.

Finally, note that it is while Peter was still preaching 'these words' that the Holy Spirit came upon all those who heard 'the word'. God calls people to new birth through the proclamation of the message of Christ. The gospel is about proclaiming God, not appealing to man.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

Romans 1:16

B

James 2:26**Faith and deeds****Some key questions**

- Is the thrust of v26 a command or a question?
- How does the context help illuminate the meaning of the aphorism in v26?
- What is the relation of faith and deeds (cf vs17, 20)

Some key observations

It is all too easy to resort to banal moralism with a verse like this. The message becomes something like 'faith must issue in works: so make sure you do your best to live out your faith.' But, in fact, what James is saying is something much more radical!

- The context is 2:14-26, and the real question at stake is 'how do you tell the difference between real faith and faith that is merely spurious?'

There is 'faith' that claims to be true, but in fact achieves nothing with people (vs15-16) or with God (v19). It is not just weak, it is 'dead' (v17); 'useless' (v20). Even demons can 'believe' in this way, but are left shuddering in fear. True faith, on the other hand, is evidenced by works of obedience to God (vs21-22). It is this kind of faith that justifies and brings into relationship with God: 'he was called God's friend' (v23).

- Real faith is therefore evidenced by works of costly obedience to God (v24)

But obedience to God in the cold light of day means works of costly giving to and for the people of God – really keeping 'the royal law' (v8) without any partiality (vs1, 9). Real faith is visible in the real world! This is the surprising twist of v26, where the body (what people can see) corresponds to faith. And this real faith is revealed to be living, not dead, by its deeds.

- So, for the armchair 'believer' the real thrust of this verse is not an imperative: 'let your faith start to work'; but a rapier-like question: 'do you actually have any real faith at all? Are you really even a Christian?'

How can we know that we are saved? The evidence James seeks is straightforward: *costly obedience to the Word and will of God*. Faith that is real, saving faith is marked by the trust that puts everything on the line for the sake of God and his people:

- like a man willing to sacrifice his very own son for God's sake (v21b)
- like a prostitute putting her very life on the line to protect God's spies
- Faith that is true within is faith that can be proved true without, in our lives

By their fruit you will recognize them. Matthew 7:16

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Matthew 7:21

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith... 2 Corinthians 13:5

C

Colossians 1:29

Struggling with all his energy

Some key questions

- How does Paul relate the work of God and the work of the preacher?
- What is the pastor's purpose?
- What is the real evidence of the power of God?

Some key observations

This is really an exercise in careful observation of biblical grammar. The key observation is the central paradox of the verse's two propositions:

- It is / who labour, struggling
- It is his energy which is working in me, doing this

The context is that Paul is expounding the infinite, cosmic power of the atoning work of Christ. He alone is supreme over all time and eternity; in him alone the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily; through him alone all things in earth and heaven are recreated through the redemption accomplished by his cross. And the power of this mighty gospel is what has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and has become Paul's master (1:15-23).

This same power is at work in the believers at Colosse – the cosmic power of the indwelling Christ himself (v27); and it is the powerful ministry of the Word of Christ, working through Paul, that is transforming the Christians to present them, ultimately, perfect in Christ (v28).

- This is power ministry on a grand scale – the full gospel, and fulness in Christ (cf. 2:10)!

But, notice what the result of such mighty, resurrection power at work is in Paul: 'I labour, struggling (literally, agonising)' (1:29, cf 2:1).

- The evidence that God is at work in mighty power is that we are at work! No spiritual power removes the vital element of our own work for God's kingdom. No belief in the sovereign work of the spirit in evangelism removes the command that we should go and proclaim the gospel to all people.

- The evidence that the resurrection power works through us is that we struggle and agonise in our ministries for our people.

This verse is a great encouragement to all believers, and to ministers in particular. It is the antithesis of any kind of teaching that suggests evidence of the power of God is that our 'flesh life melts away'; and it is the antithesis of any view of 'Spirit-powered ministry' that pretends struggle and tears are the sign of failure.

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Philippians 2:13

For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you. 2 Corinthians 13:4

D**2 Timothy 2:7****Reflecting with God****Some key questions**

- What is the source of Timothy's wisdom to be?
- How are we to know the Lord's mind?

Some key observations

Biblical balance: another exercise in biblical grammar, and in the essential need to hold things that at first sight appear contradictory in tension, for both are true and needful.

- *a.* Timothy is to reflect
- *b.* God will give insight/understanding
- In other words, we are to *think* and use our minds to ponder God's word, but it is he who will *give the thoughts!*

God does not passively infuse truth into our minds, bypassing the faculties that he has given us to enable us to seek understanding and knowledge. Nevertheless, we can still know nothing of the mind of God save for his gracious, miraculous revelation of himself. Only he can unblind the mind and let the light shine (2 Corinthians 4:3ff).

- Consider taking proposition *a* on its own: the idea of human reasoning without God. It is precisely *this* attitude, that exalts the mind of man above all, and ignores the need for seeking understanding through faith in God, that leads to liberalism, to sterile and lifeless cerebralism, and to rationalism.
- Consider proposition *b* on its own: as if divine understanding bypasses the mind. It is precisely *this* that leads to uncontrolled emotionalism, mysticism and fanaticism.

We need to hold both of these truths together side by side, in the same way Paul does here. It is when

we lose our biblical balance that we very quickly come a cropper!

This is a common finding in 2 Timothy, where Paul begins with *extending grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus' to Timothy (1:2)* and yet then *exhorts him to 'be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus' (2:1); He tells him to fan into flame the 'gift of God which is in you' (1:6) but also to 'do your best to present yourself as one approved ... who correctly handles the word of truth' (2:15); and he tells him to 'gently instruct' those who oppose in the hope that 'God will grant them repentance' (2:25).*

Only taken side by side, as both and NOT either or, do we find biblical balance.

Trust in the Lord and do good... Psalm 37:3

A man's mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps. Proverbs 16:9

WORKSHOP 3

THE BIBLE AS INTERPRETATION

LEADER'S NOTES

A

Mark 8:22-26

God alone opens eyes and hearts

Some key questions

- What is the purpose of this story of healing, which only Mark's Gospel includes?
- What is the significance of the context? What is unusual about it?

Some key observations

Mark's Gospel could be said to fall broadly into two parts: Chapters 1:1 – 8:30 asks the question: 'Who is this Jesus?', and answers: 'The Christ, God's chosen King'. Then from 8:31 onwards the question is: 'What kind of King is the Christ?', and the answer: 'One who must suffer rejection and death to accomplish what he came for'.

- So this story falls in a highly significant place – just prior to the climactic verses of Mark's first section, with Peter's great confession 'You are the Christ' (v29).

The immediate context is that of the disciples 'blindness': their complete failure to understand who Jesus really is, and his significance despite all the powerful witness they had been privileged to see. And it is culpable blindness; Jesus rebukes them for their willing unbelief and hardness of heart (v17-18; cf 3:5; 4:13; 40: 6:6, 52).

Note the parallels between vs14-21 and vs27-30: Jesus' question in v15 shows their incomprehension, and vs17-20 paints a picture of their helpless unbelief; v21 asks a question again, but from the fog suddenly a shaft of clear light dawns as Peter's revelation comes. The disciples had seen the world's greatest miracles, and heard the world's greatest teaching – but still they were blind and deaf! So, Peter's insight was truly miraculous.

- ie only the supernatural intervention of God can open minds to the truth about Jesus Christ

(cf 1 Corinthians 2:14). Matthew tells us explicitly 'this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven' (16:17). But Mark is making exactly the same point through the story of the blind beggar here.

- But, what about the shock in v30? Why keep this wonderful news quiet?

This is surely the clue to the unique two stage healing process of vs22-26. Despite Peter's sudden insight into Jesus identity, he was still *half* blind. He had yet to grasp the fact that it was to be glory *through the cross*, and through the cross *alone* for Jesus: 'the Christ must suffer'. He could not grasp that it was through defeat in the eyes of men that he would triumph – defeating Satan, judging the world, and redeeming his own. Hence his rebuke to Jesus (v32), inspired by Satan himself who knew and feared Christ's marked path, and (with his demons) threw every hindrance in his way (cf 1:24-26, 34; 3:22; 5:7ff).

- We must preach this *whole* gospel. 'Jesus is King' (v29b) is not enough. His Lordship is given meaning *only* by the cross. To see him fully is to see him as the crucified Lord.
- And discipleship is *only* by way of the cross. To follow him is to take up *our* cross (8:33ff)

We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block ... and foolishness ... but ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1:22

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.
Mark 8:34

B

John 5: 1-9

Life through the Son

Some key questions

- Why is this story included by John and why here? Is it to demonstrate that even those long disabled can be made whole; or that superstitious cures are not the way; or that if Jesus had power to heal, so we must have power to heal?
- How does the structure of the Gospel, and of this passage help us?

Some key observations

The interpretative key to John's Gospel is 20:30-31: 'these are written [evidence] that you may believe [faith] ...and have life in his name.' (see previous notes on John 20:24-29). Jesus' miracles therefore have a particular purpose for John – to act as *signs*. And his writing is not haphazard, but structured so as to make absolutely plain how we are to interpret these signs.

Typically, John gives a sign, followed by an exposition. The sign acts like a text upon which John then bases his sermon. So, here, the 'sermon' in v16ff expounds the sign story of vs1-15.

- **The sign:** a picture of tragedy and helplessness with no real expectation of help. But, into the picture comes what? – *The voice of the Son of God!* Saying 'Rise up' – the one thing that this man could not do!
- **The significance:** John points us to two things: Firstly the reaction of Jews and secondly Jesus' own words about the work of father and Son in giving life.

1. The inevitable opposition the presence of the Living God (and living faith) evokes in the world – especially the world of dead religion. From the prologue on the gathering dark clouds of the cross (1:11) stalk the unfolding glory (1:14) until they converge and we see this is the supreme glory

(12:20-33; 19:14, 19). 'His own received him not' (1:11).

2. The main significance of the sign is hinted at by Jesus' word in v14: there is a whole dimension of life and eternity far more serious than physical disease and death – *namely spiritual death due to sin*. And the only cure is to hear the voice of the Son and thereby live.

• v8 'Rise' (see RSV/KJV) – v25 'hear and live' – v29 'rise to live'.

- It is all about the *life-giving word of Christ that brings the dead to life* – eternal life.

Its source: Jesus' voice is God's voice. Only God makes cripples walk and the dead live. This is how the new birth by the spirit (3:1ff) comes about – by hearing the word of life, by hearing the voice of the living Christ.

Its power: there is no doubt at all. 'those who hear shall live' (v25,28). Note the present (hear now and live v24-25) and the future (rise then at the judgement and live v28-29). The Word imparts spiritual life now and promises eternal life then. It is assured: 'he has crossed over'.

Its urgency: the time 'has now come!' (v24). Now is the time to hear the voice of Christ and live. But a time is coming when it is too late: then the voice pronounces the verdict upon what response has been made now (v29).

- John's challenge to the reader is clear: '*Hear the voice of the Son of God and live, today, before it is too late.*' If we miss this, we miss his whole point in writing.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Hebrews 4:7

C

Mark 4:13-20***Learning about sowing the Word*****Some key questions**

- How does the context of Chapter 4 explain the significance of these verses?
- How do the preceding chapters help illuminate Jesus particular message to his disciples?

Some key observations

We have already noted the emphasis in the early chapters of Mark on Jesus' authority displayed for all to see, and yet the astonishing lack of faith, and the bitter opposition (see notes on Mark 3:31-35) despite his miracles and his teaching. Jesus commands repentance and belief (1:15), but it must be real, vital, personal faith in Jesus and his message. Outward attachment – even with family ties or religious heritage – are not enough (3:13-35).

- Real faith is faith that does God's will, that commits to real discipleship (3:35).

On one level, then, the parable of the sower is speaking of the need for an individual response of faith to be made to the word that is proclaimed. And faith is proved to be real by its fruit. Joyful reception and great enthusiasm is not enough: it must root. Real disciples are those who not only hear the word, but also 'accept it and bear fruit' (v20).

But, there is a further particular emphasis of this parable to the disciples, whom Jesus is training specially for their own future ministry (v34). Jesus has been constantly emphasising the need to preach the Word of the gospel – to scatter the seed. He has even turned aside from the more glamorous and spectacular miracle ministry to mere preaching (1:38) and, astonishingly, he seems to attach greater importance to this, though by comparison it seems a rather tame activity (1:38,

2:2).

Moreover, preaching – even by Jesus himself – seems to be singularly unfruitful. It seems to expose more unbelief than faith, and drums up opposition more than support (3:5-6).

- So, through this parable Jesus is training his disciples for their apostolic ministry, and indeed all disciples for their ministry of the word in the world.
- And the message is clear: Do not be deceived by what you seem to be seeing now, in the sowing time. Rather, see with the perspective of the reaping time. For the harvest time will come, and then the truth will be revealed (cf vs22, 29, 32). So, keep on sowing!

We are to be absolutely realistic in ministry. There will be every grounds for discouragement, because we are in a spiritual battle for the gospel against the world (v17), the flesh (v19) and the devil (v15) – cf Ephesians 6:12ff.

- It is this kind of discouragement that has led to the downgrading of preaching by so many in our own day: 'no results' they say. But Jesus says, 'Not so!' While there is still soil, there is good soil, so 'preach the Word in season and out of season' (2 Timothy 4:2).

And there are also every grounds for encouragement – in the promise of the Son of God himself of a harvest that will one day beggar belief: thirty, sixty and even an hundredfold!

Those who sow in tears

shall reap in joy!
He who continually goes forth weeping,
bearing seed for sowing,
shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,
bringing his sheaves with him.

Psalm 126:5-6

D**1 Kings 18:36****Knowing the one true God****Some key questions**

- Why is this story here? What is the significance of the context in the history of Israel?
- What does it tell us about the true nature of knowing God?

Some key observations

The context of the famous story is vital. Following the tragic division of the kingdom after Solomon, the kings of both north and south slide into worsening wickedness, the northern ones leading the way until Ahab, who 'did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him'. Not only did he perpetuate the syncretistic idolatry of the high places – the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat – but, in marrying the odious Jezebel, carried the whole nation headlong into the worst kind of rank paganism – Baal worship (16:29-33).

- The people of the Lord, became the people of Baal; the servants of the one true God of Israel had turned wholly to a new master, a new husband (Baal = husband, overlord).

It is into this context, where the kings had failed utterly and had led the nation astray, that suddenly Elijah appears: a prophet carrying the word and the authority of the Lord, to turn the people back again to the living God, and to show that the Lord alone was God in Israel – and in all the nations (the significance of 17:7-24 – where the irony is that true Israelite faith is found not in Israel but in Sidon, the home of Baal and Jezebel – cf Luke 4:27; 7:9!) In fact, throughout the books of 'Kings' the prophets are the most important figures; and Elijah is the great representative of this abiding prophetic office (cf Malachi 4:5; Matthew 11:14; 17:3,12).

- The crucial question for Israel (v21) is the crucial

question for all the world: 'How are we to live our lives? What or who is to be our master? The crux of the encounter on Carmel then is just this: 'Which is the real, living God and how can he be known by men and women?

Verse 24 sets up what is going to be the test. The true God is the one who hears and who speaks in answer. Note the stark contrast in the ways of relating to God: the elaborate, colourful, exciting, frenzy of pagan religion (vs26-29) and the simplicity of true biblical faith (v36). The heavy irony of Elijah's taunts (v27) is amplified by the extremes he goes to in order to scorn Baal's utter impotence and magnify the effortless power of the Lord (vs30-35).

- The answer is clear and unequivocal: 'The Lord – he is God! The Lord – he is God' (v39).
- And he is a God known not through the extravagant religious contrivances of man, but through the humble prayer of faith in response to his own word of self revelation (v36).

When the name of the only God is scorned, when attractive and impressive false prophets and teachers abound, and when men all too readily seek to take to themselves and their methods the credit for the work of the spirit of God (eg 2 Timothy 3:1-5; 2 Peter 2). Elijah's prayer (v36) must be the prayer of all the praying faithful (James 5:17):

- That the true God would be known; that truly God-authenticated ministry would be known; and that the true source of spiritual renewal and power would be known.

If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him 1 Kings 18:21

...choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Joshua 24:15

WORKSHOP 4

THE BIBLE AS PREACHING

LEADER'S NOTES

A

Mark 2: 13-14

Forgiveness

Some key questions

- What is the predominant theme in Mark 2:1-17? What is Jesus priority seen to be?
- How does Mark use the story of Levi to illustrate his message?

Some key observations

The Gospel writers are not merely recording information, but crafting it in such a way that it actually preaches a message to us. As usual, the context gives the clue: it is all about sin and forgiveness (vs5, 10, 15, 16, 17) and Jesus as the great physician—the *sin doctor*.

In the story of the paralytic let down through the roof (vs1-11) Jesus clearly demonstrates that it is the need for forgiveness of sins that is the overwhelming priority in the lives of men and women. *The gospel of forgiveness must come first*. Then, following the encounter with Levi (vs13-14), Jesus answers the Pharisees' denunciation by making absolutely clear that it is precisely to heal the sin-sick that he has come: 'I have not come to call the righteous but sinners' (v17).

- The call of Levi, in the midst of this, is a clear illustration of what forgiveness means.

1. First, forgiveness is a matter of sheer grace. That Christ could call Levi, of all people, was a matter of astonishment to all the religious Jews. We must not be too dismissive of the Pharisees' reaction (v16), for it would no doubt have been the kind of shock that we might feel today were he to gather the child abuser, the wife beater and the drug-addicted burglar as his disciples.

- What did the angels think when God called us? This is sheer, sovereign grace.

2. Forgiveness is a mighty power. Levi is called by Jesus' word into a new and *transformed life* (v14; cf vs5, 11). It is no mere matter of the past sins being dealt with, but something far greater. Forgiveness means a new birth into a wholly new world, a new creation (Galatians 2:20; 6:15), a new existence in union with Christ by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The same word of power that liberated the paralytic into a life of wholeness empowers the forgiven man for a life of liberty where sin's power is no longer the dominant force in his life (Colossians 1:13-14).

- 'Sin shall not be your master for you are not under law, but under grace.' (Romans 6:14)

3. Forgiveness means discipleship. It makes a demand on the life of the forgiven one so that all of him, and all that is his, becomes Christ's. Levi not only followed Jesus, he opened his house to him, and to other saved sinners now in the family of faith (cf John 13:35; Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9).

- The faith that justifies is the faith that binds us to the Lordship of Christ (Romans 6:22)

We must preach the full gospel of forgiveness with all its message of sovereign grace, mighty deliverance and redeeming power. Anything less is not only not the apostolic gospel, it is no gospel at all.

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins ... in accordance with the riches of God's grace. Colossians 1:13-14/ Ephesians 1:7

B

Mark 15:33-39***The message of the cross*****Some key questions**

- How does Mark combine reporting the crucifixion with his interpretation of it?
- What is the significance of the cries (vs34, 37) and the responses to them?

Some key observations

Again, we see Mark 'preaching' his gospel of the cross, not merely telling the story of the cross. Under the Spirit's guidance he is proclaiming the *doctrine of the cross*, as Paul does in his epistles, not simply passing on how it looked to the disciples at the time, prior to the resurrection and to Pentecost. (Remember that the Gospel writers are writing in the light of the apostolic ministry, the exposition of the faith we have through the epistles.)

- Note first the darkness (v33) which focuses attention away from the visual and onto the auditory. In the darkness what was heard? Two cries (vs34a, 37) each followed by an explanation (vs34b, 38) and a response (vs36, 39).

The first 'great cry' (34a) is interpreted by Mark so as to be absolutely clear. By drawing attention to the quotation from Psalm 22 he is making the point that this was God forsaking his Son, banishing him from his presence because he had 'made him who had no sin to be sin for us' (2 Corinthians 5:21). His separation was the separation of man in sin, hence the torment and the agony, and the calling for help as a helpless victim. The response of the onlookers is that he is in terrible agony, and desperately needs help (the wine), and needs a rescuer (Elijah).

The second 'great cry' (37) is the cry of death. But Mark interprets it by clearly linking it in a causative way with the tearing of the curtain from top

(heaven) to bottom (earth). The barrier of sin is removed – from God's side – and 'a new and living way opened up for us through the curtain, that is, his body' (Heb. 10:20). The way to God is opened by Jesus' death which was a death with a purpose: a death 'for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God' (1 Peter 3:18). Mark explicitly frames Jesus death as one of substitutionary atonement.

- And so the response of the centurion is the response of faith that understands the true significance of the cross. Jesus, by dying thus (39b RSV), is the rescuer.

The story of the cross alone does not constitute a gospel of good news. For the first disciples it was no more than tragic bad news. It is the apostolic interpretation of the cross in the light of the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit – and that interpretation alone – that made it a gospel of power, carried by men of conviction, to turn the world upside down (1 Corinthians 15:3).

- The Bible is God preaching. The Scripture is both the text and the message.

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18

C

2 Corinthians 12:9

Power in weakness

Some key questions

- How does this context bring the verse to light – and interpret and apply it?
- What is the crucial message Paul wants to get across about the nature of ministry?

Some key observations

This is a good example of a 'calendar text' which easily loses its force by being removed from its context. But to grasp its full meaning we must read it as it is, earthed in the context of Paul's experience of ministry – which both *illustrates* and *applies* the message with power.

The setting is Paul's defence of his own true, God-given ministry in the face of the false 'super-apostles' whom the Corinthians had become so enamoured with, but who were leading them astray (11:4; 13ff). They appeared to be the epitome of power and influence, and were not slow to boast about their status and abilities (10:12; 11:12 etc), and at the same time pour scorn on the apparent weakness of Paul, who seemed feeble in comparison (11:6ff).

• The crucial issue is the *nature of real power* in Christian ministry and Christian living. Paul is relating his own experience in his missionary ministry to teach the Corinthians what he himself has already learned: the painful paradox of the *power of Christ*.

The immediate context of 12:9 is Paul recalling the extreme torment he has already suffered, and which remains an ongoing personal anguish in his life. Whatever the nature of his 'thorn' (he seems deliberately vague), it was something that had truly seemed to Paul to be beyond his endurance. And he was hardly feeble – in 11:23ff he has already rattled off a list of calamities and afflictions that would have been the end of the toughest of men.

Yet, it is as if he had cried to God 'Prison, beatings, starvation, drowning, floggings, bandits – all this I can stand for the sake of the gospel, Lord, but not this! This is too much. I just *cannot go on any longer* in my ministry!'

- This is how the world's greatest evangelist felt! And he begged God three times to remove this dreadful, distracting, desolating weakness *in order to strengthen his ministry*.

But God's said 'No, I can't, because I *am* making your ministry more and more powerful – it's just that what is power in my eyes looks like weakness in yours; but that is my power! 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'.

- For what could be weaker than a battered, bleeding, naked body on a Roman cross? Yet it was in this very 'weakness' that God was at work reconciling the cosmos to himself.
- And so our weakness in life and ministry is the very thing God uses to save sinners!

This is the opposite of how things seemed to the Corinthians. But, had they forgotten that it was through this very ministry of 'weakness, fear and much trembling' that they had been brought salvation in miraculous 'demonstration of the Spirit's power' (1 Corinthians 2:4)? It is also the opposite of so much facile teaching of the 'x-number of easy steps to victorious Christian living' variety, and the absolute antithesis of much that is lauded in the church today as 'power ministry'. Such may seem impressive in our eyes, but to God it is, in fact, real weakness.

Paul had learned the painful but liberating truth of this great paradox, and learned it so deeply that he could not only *boast*, but also *delight* in his own weakness, knowing that through God's wonderful grace, Christ's power rested on him all the more (cf Romans 5:20).

- Have we learned the truth about weakness and power? The Bible is preaching to us!

For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you 2 Corinthians 13:4

D**2 Timothy 3:16*****The Bible is for preaching!*****Some key questions**

- Is the main focus of this verse descriptive or dynamic?
- What is the context? And who is the 'man of God' of v17?

Some key observations

This verse is classically used as a proof text for the inspiration of Scripture, and it certainly is important in this regard. However, once again it is by taking notice of the particular context in which Paul is writing that we discover the vital thrust of his message.

The context of the Pastoral Epistles is the apostolic succession – the transition from the days of the apostles, who had been the recipients of a 'once and for all delivered' faith (Jude 3), to the subsequent ages of the church that would come after them. The baton was now being passed firmly to 'reliable men' – *men of God* like Timothy – who must 'contend for' and preserve that faith as true and trustworthy *pastor-teachers* through all ages to come (2 Timothy 2:2).

- So the great concern in 2 Timothy is for the pastor-teacher – *the man of God* (3:17; cf 1 Timothy 6:11) – as he faces this vital task for the sake of the very preservation of the church of Jesus Christ.

And the task is a tough one! The reason is that there will be desperate distractions and dangers in these 'last days', since in the face of the pressures of the world around people will constantly be turning their ears away from the truth to error and as a result their lives will drift far from the paths of true Christian living (4:4; cf 1 Timothy 4:1ff; Titus 1:15-16). Every generation of pastors like Timothy need

to know that there is going to be a constant battle, and there will be enduring persecution and hardship for those who are determined to stick to the truth – just as there had been for Paul throughout his ministry (3:10-13).

- In the face of all this, the constant refrain of Paul's message to Timothy is 'But you, man of God, by contrast, must resist and stand firm – thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2:1; 3:10, 14; 4:5; cf 1 Timothy 6:11; Titus 2:1 etc).

But how is the pastor to keep his head, endure all, work at evangelism and *fulfil to the very last* his ministry in these desperate days (4:5)? How is he to follow Paul's example in fighting to finish the race and keep the faith (4:7) without the apostle himself there? And how is he to equip himself and his flock for such a daunting task (3:17)?

- Answer: *by preaching the Bible in all its fulness* (v16) as the means by which God continues to breathe out his Word to his people to equip them for every good work (v17).

So the verse in context is more focused on what pastor-teachers are to *do* with the Bible than on the formation of Bible itself. Nevertheless, the two are vitally and intimately connected. The teacher is to remain rooted in *Paul's teaching* (vs10, 14), and in the *Scriptures* of the Old Testament (v15), which he includes in his summary of *all Scripture* (v16) that is given to strengthen the church. Similarly in 1 Timothy 5:19 he brackets together words of Jesus (Luke 10:7) with Deuteronomy 25:4 as what 'the Scripture says', and elsewhere too the apostles clearly place the NT writings on the same level with the OT Scriptures (2 Thessalonians 3:14, Colossians 4:16, 2 Peter 3:16).

- So, the message is that the whole Bible is for *preaching*, and it is the work of the pastor to do it!

... and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. Ephesians 4:11-12

Unashamed workmen who rightly handle the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15