

The Use of the Bible in Evangelical Preaching Today

Charles Cameron

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Ernest Best was professor of New Testament at the University of Glasgow. Robert Davidson was professor of Old Testament at the University of Glasgow. The late George Macleod was the founder of the Iona Community. Each of these men has exerted a significant influence on the ministry of the church of Scotland. Comments made by Best, Davidson and Macleod provide an appropriate point of departure for this short study concerning contemporary preaching. In his book, *From Text to Sermon* Best writes, 'The preacher ... ought to avoid merely using a text as a jumping-off for what he wants to say.'¹ When invited to introduce a former student—Rev. Fraser Aitken—to his first charge, Neilston Parish Church, Davidson preached from Ephesians 3:8, concerning Paul's description of his ministry in terms of preaching 'the unsearchable riches of Christ'. Macleod's book, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, contains this arresting remark concerning 'preaching' which, though it 'may be without doctrinal error hardly stirs a soul'.²

Taken together, these three comments highlight three essential features which must surely characterize evangelical preaching in every generation. Our preaching should be grounded in Scripture, centred on Christ and empowered by the Spirit. The Scriptures, the Saviour and the Spirit—here we have a 'threefold cord' that cannot be broken. By stressing the importance of the Bible for contemporary preaching we are not simply being 'traditional'. We ground our preaching in Scripture because we find Christ in the Scriptures (Lk. 24:27; Jn. 5:40; 2 Tim. 3:15). We do not base our preaching on Scripture simply because we wish to be 'Biblicists'. We preach from Scripture because the Spirit points us to the Son through the Scriptures (Lk. 24:2; Rom. 10:17). This 'threefold cord', the Scriptures, the Saviour and the Spirit, must be preserved if contemporary preaching is to be truly evangelical.

Today's preachers are, like Paul, called to 'preach the unsearchable riches of Christ'. Our situation is not however precisely the same as Paul's. We are to preach the Word of God 'as addressed to modern man'.³ This application of the gospel to the situation of modern man requires to be handled in a careful and sensitive manner. We dare not remain locked in the past if we are to speak a word which has genuine relevance for the present day. On the other hand, the threat of 'modernism' is real. We can be so easily 'squeezed into the mould of the world's way of thinking', rather than allowing our minds to be renewed by 'the living and abiding world of God (cf. Rom. 12:1-2 J. B. Phillips; 1 Pet. 1:23). Where modern thinking is accorded an undue importance, the gospel can be seriously distorted. This kind of distortion takes place in the theologies offered to us by Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich. Commenting on Bultmann theology, G. C. Berkower writes, 'The fact that he proceeds from a pastoral and missionary motive—namely, to preserve modern man from rejecting the New Testament

¹ The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, (1978), p. 100.

² SCM Press, London, (1936), p. 30.

³ A. Richardson (citing G. Ebeling) 'Hermeneutics' in A. Richardson (ed.) *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, SCM Press, (1969), p. 154 (emphasis original).

because of its mythical structure—do not diminish by one iota the theological presumption of this undertaking.⁴ K. Hamilton describes Tillich theology thus: '*Jesus Christ and the biblical revelatic have been fitted into a structure already complex without them.*'⁵

One particularly serious consequence of this type theological reductionism is selectivity in the use Scripture. This may be illustrated with particular reference to the theology of Bultmann. Discussing Bultmann's exegetical procedure, N. J. Young offers penetrating analysis. Bultmann's norm for understanding the New Testament is the theology of Paul and

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John as interpreted by Bultmann. Those parts of the New Testament which do not accord with Bultmann are not given careful attention. Paul and John, as well as the rest of the New Testament, are treated in this way.⁶ This method of exegesis, 'in which a variety of views are acknowledged, but only one selected for attention, leaving the others virtually ignored'⁷ is particularly noticeable when he discusses Paul's eschatology. He acknowledges that there is evidence that Paul does have an 'apocalyptic eschatology with its expectation of a cosmic catastrophe'.⁸ Nevertheless, Bultmann pays no further attention to this aspect of Paul's eschatology.

What are we to make of this approach to the New Testament? This is what Young says: 'If some parts of the New Testament prove to be impervious to a particular hermeneutical approach ... it may be because the hermeneutical approach is not adequate for the task, not because it claims too much.'⁹

Young contends that there is a better way than Bultmann's way. 'A proper recognition of the diversity of the New Testament witness... makes unnecessary Bultmann's attempt to achieve harmony by silencing those voices which appear to him to be off-key.'¹⁰

Best makes this point more positively—without any direct reference to Bultmann's theology. 'Christ is greater than any single description of him, and we need the variety we have in the New Testament.'¹¹ What relevance does this discussion of Bultmann's selective exegesis have for the preacher? N. Weeks, clearly alluding to the kind of theology propounded by Bultmann, makes an astute and most important observation: 'The belief that modern man cannot understand biblical concepts becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we believe that men cannot accept such truths, then we will not preach and teach them. Hence they will not be received because faith comes by hearing the word preached.'¹²

⁴ *The Person of Christ*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, (1954), p. 41.

⁵ 'Paul Tillich' in P. E. Hughes (Ed.) *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (Second Revised Edition), (1969), p. 473 (emphasis original).

⁶ *History and Existential Theology*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, (1969), pp. 51-55.

⁷ Young, p. 53.

⁸ Young, p. 53 (citing Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, p. 151).

⁹ p. 54.

¹⁰ p. 55.

¹¹ *From Text to Sermon*, p. 29.

¹² *The Sufficiency of Scripture*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, (1988), pp. 82-83.

If we would preach the 'whole counsel of God' from the pulpit, there must be a thorough searching of the Scriptures in the study. Selective exegesis can never be a real option for those who would seek to ground their preaching in the Scriptures.

To dissociate ourselves from Bultmann's method of reading the New Testament is not to involve us in stepping back from the complexities of biblical interpretation. Rather, we stress that the complex business of biblical interpretation will never permit one particular line of interpretation to take a stranglehold over our thinking. Whenever a particular method of interpretation dominates our thinking, it becomes our authority. Scripture—the authoritative Word of God—is then moulded to fit what we think it should be. The interpretation of Scripture is not to be separated from the authority of Scripture. Divorced from an authoritative word from the Lord, biblical interpretation can become a very confusing business. We are not, however, forced to choose between a real involvement in the complex issues of biblical interpretation and a naive biblicism which refuses to get involved with the difficult questions. It has been said that 'the Bible is like a pool in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim'.¹³ There are many areas where differences of interpretation can leave us quite confused. Nevertheless, we are still able to affirm that Jesus Christ is the centre of the biblical message. We are still able to experience the power of the Holy Spirit as he leads us to Christ through the Scripture.

By refusing to align ourselves with Bultmann's approach to the New Testament we are not dissociating ourselves from his concern with relevance. We are, however, stressing that there is another concern to which we must give careful attention—faithfulness: 'In seeking for relevance we must not renounce faithfulness.'¹⁴ We must not set relevance and faithfulness over against each other, as though we are forced to choose between them—be faithful at the expense of relevance; be relevant at the expense of faithfulness. Relevance and faithfulness belong together. Relevance is not to be divorced from faithfulness but grounded in faithfulness. God's Word is seen to be 'the living and abiding word of God' as God's people believe it to be and proclaim it as 'the living and abiding word of God'. The faithfulness which is ever relevant involves a real commitment to walking in the Spirit as 'ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills but the Spirit gives life' (2. Cor. 3:6). J. Veenhof, expounding the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures, emphasizes that it is the Holy Spirit who binds faithfulness and relevance together. He 'makes it clear that this ancient word never becomes antiquated but is permanently relevant'.¹⁵ This relevance is always a matter of something more than mere words. Our lives as well as our words must be faithful to the Word of the Lord. Faithfulness and relevance do not belong only to the study and the pulpit. There is a life to be lived in the world as well as a sermon to be preached in the church. Our lives are to be a 'letter from Christ', 'known and read by all men' (2 Cor. 3:2).

In the pulpit, faithfulness and relevance are to be held together. In the study authority and interpretation are to be held together. If, in the study, Scripture is not honoured as the authoritative word of God, there will not be faithful preaching from the pulpit. A commitment

¹³ D. A. Carson 'Interpreting the Bible' in *Evangel*, 3:2 (Summer 1985), p. 13.

¹⁴ B. Meeking & J. Stott (eds.) *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, 1977-1984*, The Paternoster Press, Exeter, (1984), p. 21.

¹⁵ 'Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture; in *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Autumn 1986), p. 76.

to faithfulness carries with it a concern for relevance, since God 'is not God of the dead, but of the living' (Matt. 22:32). He is the living God and his word is to be proclaimed as the living word. If we are to speak a word of relevance, we need to interpret God's word for this generation. It is not sufficient to affirm the authority of the Bible, if we do not give serious

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consideration to understanding what God is saying to the world of today. The preacher, who seeks both faithfulness and relevance, will seek to understand the relationship between authority and interpretation. In the preface to his book, *A Theology of the New Testament*, G. E. Ladd writes: 'All theology is a human undertaking and no man's position can be considered final.¹⁶ However strongly we affirm the authority of Scripture, we dare not elevate our own theological understanding to the level of Scripture itself. When we recognize clearly the distinction between authority and interpretation, we will not be afraid of interacting with theological perspectives different from our own. We need openness without a loss of the divine word. We need not make the ideal of 'open-mindedness' so prominent in our thinking that we end up emptyminded, with no clear conviction concerning the divine word. Nevertheless, we must surely welcome the kind of openness described by G. C. Berkouwer in the foreword to his book, *A Half Century of Theology*:

A curiosity that works itself out in passionate study and serious listening to others promises surprises, clearer insight, and deeper understanding—no matter from which direction they came.¹⁷

Our interpretation of the vital relationship between authority and interpretation is directly connected to our understanding of the dual character of Scripture as both the word of God and the words of men. Scripture speaks to us with authority because it speaks to us as the word of God. The study of Scripture involves us in the complex business of interpretation, since it speaks to us as the words of men, words written at various times and places by many writers. E. Schillebeeckx describes the dual character of Scripture in a helpful way:

All human speech about what comes 'from above' ('it has been revealed') is uttered by human beings, i.e. from below ... However human it may be, this language is not an autonomous human initiative.¹⁸

G. C. Berkouwer offers an insightful perspective on Scripture as both word of God and words of men. He describes 'scripture' as 'the human witness empowered by the Spirit'.¹⁹ He stresses the divine origin of this witness:

This witness does not well up from the human heart but from the witness of God in which it finds its foundation and empowering as a human witness ... This Scripture finds its origin in the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ, and witnesses of him through the human witness.²⁰

¹⁶ Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, (1974), p. 5.

¹⁷ Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, (1977), pp. 7-8.

¹⁸ *Christ, the Christian Experience in the Modern World*, SCM Press, London, (1980), p. 46.

¹⁹ *Holy Scripture*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, (1925), p. 167.

²⁰ *Holy Scripture*, pp. 165-166.

Berkouwer emphasizes that this ancient word speaks with relevance to every generation:

These witnesses are not 'lifted out' of their time and milieu, but as living witnesses could interpret in their era what was destined for all times.²¹

He helps us to understand both how we are to approach Scripture and how we are not to approach Scripture:

Believing Scripture does not mean staring at a holy and mysterious book, but hearing the witness concerning Christ.²²

It is within this context of a human yet divine, ancient yet permanently relevant witness concerning Jesus Christ that we are to understand our confession of faith. The Bible is the word of God:

The respect for the concrete words is related to this and the 'is' of the confession points to the mystery of the Spirit, who wants to bind men to Christ through these words, through this witness.²³

The faith with which we are to receive God's word has been well described by Calvin:

The word is not received in faith when it merely flutters in the brain, but when it has taken deep root in the heart.²⁴

From Berkouwer and Calvin the preacher can learn much. Faithful, relevant, authoritative preaching is preaching which focuses upon Christ, preaching which is empowered by the Spirit, preaching which calls for faith that takes deep root in the heart.

With this understanding of preaching, we will take care to hold doctrine and experience together. J. I. Packer emphasizes that 'revelation is ... much more than propositional'.²⁵ E. Schillebeeckx emphasizes that 'the right propositional understanding of revelation ... must be kept in a right relation to the experience with which this propositional language is associated'.²⁶ Developing this theme further, Schillebeeckx describes Scripture as the point of contact between the spiritual experience of the biblical writers and today's readers and hearers who are now being invited by Scripture to enter into the same experience of the living God:

As a testimony to the experience of those who created it Scripture is an offer—a possibility that this experience can be extended to others.²⁷

²¹ *Holy Scripture*, p. 167.

²² *Holy Scripture*, p. 166.

²³ *Holy Scripture*, p. 166.

²⁴ *Institutes*, III.36 (Associated Publishers and Authors Inc., Grand Rapids, p. 304).

²⁵ 'Infallible Scripture in the Role of Hermeneutics' in D. A. Carson & J. D. Woodbridge (eds) *Scripture and Truth*, IVP, Leicester, (1983), p. 35.

²⁶ *Christ, the Christian Experience in the Modern World*, SCM Press, London, (1980), p. 54.

²⁷ *Christ, the Christian Experience in the Modern World*, SCM Press, London, (1980) p. 68.

There is the relationship between the words of Scripture and the power of the Spirit. Rightly understood, the words of Scripture are not mere words. They are words which speak with power. Jesus makes this point within the context of his own ministry.

The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life (Jn. 6:63).

Paul, like Jesus, could not conceive of ministry as a thing of words only. True ministry is ministry empowered by the Spirit:

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My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (1 Cor. 2:4).

Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thess. 1:5).

In our preaching of God's word today we must earnestly pray for this dual ministry of the Spirit:

The Spirit ... opens up the Scripture to us and 'opens' us to the Scripture.²⁸

Being opened up by the Spirit to the Scripture can be an uncomfortable experience. Where the word of God is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, we have the situation described in the letter to the Hebrews:

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword ... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do (4:12-13).

Scripture does not speak of salvation only. It also speaks about sin. Scripture does not speak only of the love of God. It also speaks of the holiness of God. When Jesus spoke of the ministry of the Holy Spirit he said this:

When he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement (Jn. 16:8).

There are uncomfortable truths concerning which the Lord Jesus says, 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

If we should be faithful preachers of God's word, we must preach what people need to hear, and not simply what they want to hear. This is not only the way of faithfulness, it is also the way of relevance. Those who seek relevance at the expense of faithfulness turn out to be irrelevant. Their shallow and superficial preaching turns out to be no real substitute for 'the living and abiding word of God' through which alone the hearers can be 'born anew' (1 Pet. 1:23). Before we can truly appreciate the grace of God in the gospel, we must understand that

²⁸ J. Veenhof, 'Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture', *Scottish Bulletin Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 2, (Autumn 1986).

'there is no human solution to the human problem'.²⁹ This can be a painful experience. We do our hearers no favours if we pay little attention to the uncomfortable truths of God's word. G. C. Berkouwer ends his discussion, 'The Voice of Karl Barth' with these words:

He discovered the powerful witness of the 'tremendous' word that always speaks against us so that we can learn to stop speaking against it.³⁰

To appreciate Barth's emphasis on the centrality of Christ, we must first hear the word speaking against us. Concerning the message of the Bible, Barth writes:

The Bible says all sorts of things certainly; but in all this multiplicity and variety; it says in truth only one thing—just this: the name of Jesus Christ.³¹

In the presence of Jesus Christ we learn that we are sinners, but we learn also that CHRIST loves sinners. Unlike the Pharisees who despised 'sinners' Jesus Christ 'receives sinners' (Lk. 15:2). In the presence of Christ we encounter both perfect holiness and perfect love. In Christ we discover 'an unmerited abundance of love'.³² This love leads us to a special kind of obedience—the obedience of love. 'We love because he first loved us' (1 Jn. 4:19). In Christ we face the claim of love upon our lives. This living presence of Christ inviting us to receive salvation and calling us to embark on the pathway of discipleship is the depth-dimension of preaching. On the face of it, preaching involves a preacher giving an address to a congregation. There is, however, something much deeper than that going on when the word of God is preached. D.G. Miller in an article entitled 'Biblical Theology and Preaching' highlights this depth-dimension of preaching:

In a real sermon ... Christ is the preacher. The preacher speaks through the preacher ... The biblical view of preaching is to confront men with the question, 'What think ye of Christ?' And out of this question, to have the encounter shift into the dimension of a personal confrontation by Christ, who himself asks, 'Who do you say that I am?' This is the unique task of the Christian preacher.³³

Describing further the purpose of preaching, Miller continues:

Preaching must always be for decision. Our aim is not merely to inform the mind, to stimulate the feelings so that men have a rather pleasant emotional experience: it is rather to strike directly at the will with the demand for decision ... until we have confronted men with the issue so that they either have to surrender or rebel further, to accept it or reject, believe or disbelieve.³⁴

This decision concerning Jesus Christ is also a decision concerning the meaning, purpose and direction of our own lives—'Deciding about him is at the same time deciding about ourselves.'³⁵ As we hear the story of Jesus Christ, the word of God tells us the story of our

²⁹ J. McQuarrie, *Studies in Christian Existentialism*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, (1965), p. 8 (italics original).

³⁰ *A Half-Century of Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, (1977), p. 74.

³¹ *Church Dogmatics*, 1.2. T & T Clarke, Edinburgh, (1956), p. 720.

³² E. Schillebeckx, *Christ, The Christian Experience in the Modern World*, SCM (1981).

³³ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Dec. 1958), pp. 393, 395-6.

³⁴ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Dec. 1958), p. 399.

³⁵ N. J. Young, *History and Existential Theology*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, (1969), p. 122.

own lives—what we are and what we can become. The call for decision is a call to leave behind what we are in our sin, and move on to what we can become in Christ.

If evangelical preaching is to make a significant impact on today's world, it dare not rest content with giving theological lectures. Stressing the relevance of

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the Bible to our life today, D. E. Stevenson describes the Bible as 'a hall of mirrors' and offers this advice: 'Look into it properly and you will see yourself.'³⁶ The preacher dare not place himself far above the people, preaching a message which goes over the heads of the people. The preacher, no less than his hearers, must sit under the word of God. If he is to preach a message which is relevant to the life of his hearers he must first find in Scripture a word that is relevant to his own life. This involves much more than being an academic theologian who seeks intellectual stimulation from his study of the Bible. The preacher is not to remain a stranger to the people. He dare not speak as a theologian, proud of his education yet detached from his hearers' life-situation. The preacher is to be a friend to his hearers. He lives among them. He meets them in the streets and at the shops. He visits them in hospital and at home. He teaches their children at school. He hears about and shares the joys and concerns of the community in which he lives. Within this very human context the pulpit must not become an ivory tower of irrelevance. Though not merely human—he is an 'ambassador for Christ', bringing to his hearers 'the message of reconciliation' (2 Cor. 5:19-20)—the preacher must not ignore the very human context in which the word of God is to be preached. In preaching from the Scriptures he proclaims a word which transforms the present and not merely a word that belongs to the past. The preacher who is sensitive to the pastoral relationships which exists between himself and the people will not preach messages which could be preached anywhere and at anytime. He takes account of the particular situation into which he is called to preach God's word. He seeks to hear and to speak the word which God wants to speak to this people at this time. The method of preaching will vary from sermon to sermon, from one series of sermons to another. The manner in which we preach remains constant. It is to be preaching grounded in the Scriptures, centred on Christ and empowered by the Spirit.

Such preaching has relevance, not only for the Church but also for the world. The gospel cannot be kept within the 'four walls' of the Church. Paul described the gospel in this way—'The gospel for which I am suffering and wearing chains like a criminal'. He then went on to say, 'But the word of God is not fettered' (2 Tim. 2:9). Sometimes the preacher will feel like Paul—imprisoned within his circumstances. He may feel imprisoned within a clerical strait-jacket. He may feel imprisoned within the limitations of being only one man, able to do so much and no more. Like Paul, however, the preacher can lift up his eyes to the word of God which is able to break free from such imprisoning limitations. When the word of God is preached, it is not simply a proclamation by one man within the 'four walls' of the Church. It is a proclamation which reaches out into the world. It is carried by the hearers into their life-situations. This fact encourages the preacher to believe that his message preached may be just the spark which gets a fire going. His preaching may be just the spark which sets the Church on fire with a real desire to pass on the good news of Christ's love to the needy world. The

³⁶ D. E. Stevenson, *In the Biblical Preacher's Workshop*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, (1967), p. 93.

possibility of being the spark which lights a fire gives the preacher greater boldness. It assures him that his preaching is not as insignificant and ineffective as he may sometimes feel. There is, however, a humbling factor here. The preacher receives boldness in answer to the prayers of God's people.

Pray ... for me, that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel (Eph. 6:18-19)

There is no true boldness in preaching without the prayers of faithful man and women who call upon God on behalf of the preacher.

With the supporting prayers of God's people, the preacher goes into the pulpit. Through the continuing witness of God's people, the preached word goes beyond the pulpit into the world. The preacher is one among many within the fellowship of the Lord's people. His ministry is significant, but so also is the ministry exercised by others. As we consider the relationship between the pastor and the people we must never forget that the spark which gets the fire going is the power of the Holy Spirit. If there is to be a fire lit in our day, it will not be the work of man but the mighty working of the Spirit. In all the works of ministry—the ministry of the preacher and the ministry of the people—there is something we must never forget:

We are servants of the word and not its masters ... Not only are we servants of the word ... we are unprofitable servants.³⁷

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<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>

³⁷ D. E. Stevenson, *In the Biblical Preacher's Workshop*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, (1967), p. 16.