
Preaching that understands the world

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I am grateful that the title of this chapter is not 'Preaching that Attempts to be Relevant'. To put the subject that way tends, in our culture of the immediate, to raise 'relevance' beyond its proper pragmatic importance to the place where it exercises a controlling veto; if something in a sermon is not perceived to be relevant, it must be excised. Part of the problem with such an approach is that 'relevance' is often confused with 'what is perceived to be relevant'. After all, something may be extremely relevant but not be perceived to be so by many people. On the other hand, if some truths in a sermon are by biblical and theological standards extremely relevant to those who are listening even while those who are listening doubt their relevance, it is the preacher's responsibility to help the hearers see and feel the relevance, and thus diminish the gap between relevance and perceived relevance.

Clearly the 'relevance' category may quickly become very confusing. But if there are dangers lurking for preachers who try so hard to be relevant that they soon degenerate to the trendy, the cutesy, and the

shockingly unbiblical, other dangers lie in wait for preachers who think they are above such matters. They simply want to be 'biblical'; they are going to spoon out the truth in dollops of firm propositions, honourably and boldly, without garnish.

The sad truth of the matter is that often these offenders are graduates of our better seminaries and theological colleges. There they have devoted countless hours to mastering the rudiments of responsible exegesis and informed theological reflection, but most of them have thought little about culture. Fellow students in the missions department will take courses on cross-cultural communication, and thus be forced to wrestle with what it means to understand and to communicate with a world other than their own. But many a preacher has given little thought to such matters, and therefore lines up with the principal offenders.

The challenge is becoming more urgent as western cultures change and diversify so quickly. Preachers may think they are addressing their own culture because, after all, this is where they were brought up, these are the people they know – all the while failing to recognize that they have retreated into a much smaller Christian subculture largely at odds with the surrounding oceans of culture. Not only the rapidity of the change but also the diversity of what is on offer in even one small country multiplies the hurdles. In America, graduates of the institution where I teach will be called upon to preach the gospel and plant churches in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where they may find it difficult to find many people who will admit to not being a Christian, and in New England towns with prestigious universities, where the majority of students are utterly biblically illiterate and simultaneously convinced that Christianity is to be dismissed as one form of religious bigotry. In the United Kingdom, preachers are called upon to proclaim the whole counsel of God in run-down parts of East London, in Oxford and in other university towns, in traditional churches in Suffolk, in posh areas of Sussex, to blue-collar workers in industrial centres, in towns once renowned for coal-mining but now primarily characterized by unemployment and sullen resentments, in Scottish cities that combine the most remarkable mix of noble theological heritage and committed secularism, in the Principality of Wales where nationalism inevitably plays some part in all cultural values, in racially mixed Leicester, and in Ulster where 'the Troubles' still constitute a backdrop one can never quite ignore. The sheer diversity is staggering.

The sermon is not an art form to be admired. 'Preaching is *not* speaking about truth before the congregation, but rather *speaking truth to the congregation*.'¹ That means we can never afford to be careless about how well what we say is understood. Stephen Neill is not far off the mark with this metaphor: 'Preaching is like weaving. There are the two

factors of the warp and the woof. There is the fixed, unalterable element, which for us is the Word of God, and there is the variable element, which enables the weaver to change and vary the pattern at his will. For us that variable element is the constantly changing pattern of people and of situations.'² What, then, are some of the elements that preachers need to bear in mind as they wrestle with this component of their task? I shall mention five things.

1. The primacy of a biblical understanding of the world

The importance of this point cannot be too greatly stressed. The Bible demands that we look at the world, that we understand it, in certain ways. We shall shortly see that this leaves plenty of scope for sensitivity to an assortment of variable features, but this first element is foundational to the preacher's task.

The place we must begin in our attempt to understand the world from the Bible's perspective is with the large-scale features in the Bible's plot-line. To clarify this point, three comments may be useful.

1. By 'plot-line' or 'story-line' I am not suggesting that the Bible's developing 'story' should be compared with the developing 'story' of, say, a nineteenth-century novel (*i.e.* a work of fiction). Rather, I am merely pointing out that, in addition to a rich plethora of psalms, wisdom sayings, laments, oracles, proverbs, discourses, apocalyptic descriptions, and other genres, the Bible as a whole provides a coherent narrative account. It tells a story, the plot unfolding from creation to consummated new creation.

2. By 'large-scale features' in the Bible's plot-line, I am referring to those elements of such importance that they are picked up again and again by later biblical writers, and without which the Bible's 'story' loses its coherence. For example, one may quibble about the precise canonical contribution of, say, Micaiah's prophecy (as important as it is for certain topics; 1 Ki. 22; 2 Ch. 18), but one must not duck the strategic contribution of the fall (Gn. 3). To put the matter another way, one could comfortably summarize the Bible's story-line in half an hour, and choose to omit the account of Micaiah, not because it is unimportant for all purposes but because the main contours of the Bible's plot-line would not lose their coherence if the Micaiah account were not included. But one could not responsibly summarize the Bible's plot-line in half an hour and omit the fall. To lose the fall, and all the biblical reflection that flows from it (*e.g.* Rom. 1:18 – 3:20), would be to lose what is wrong with the human race, and therefore the necessary background to what salvation consists in, and how it is achieved.

3. Obviously this sort of approach presupposes that the Bible does in

fact embrace a coherent story-line. For those who think that the Bible contains no more than an interesting mixture of religious experiences, some of which are mutually incompatible, there is little point in trying to discern a coherent plot-line. Discussion must begin farther back, with the nature of revelation, with the nature of the personal/transcendent God who talks and discloses himself. For those who think that the Bible should be read primarily as a handbook of case studies,³ there will be little attempt to integrate its various parts along the backbone of its story-line. At issue, then, is not only the Bible's authority, but how it is to be read.

There is no space here to justify the primacy of reading the Bible as a unified book with a coherent story-line. I am merely affirming such primacy, insisting that the way we understand the world must be decisively shaped by the theology that emerges from the development of the Bible's plot-line.

An example may bring this point into focus. The western world has gone through successive waves of the nature/nurture debate. Are people primarily determined in their conduct by their nature (now commonly tied to genetics) or by the ways in which they were brought up, shaped by family and surrounding subculture? As long as the Freudian model was regnant, appeal was commonly made to human *nature* as pre-eminently sexual, and to human *nurture* in terms of childhood and later experiences of sexuality. The rise of behaviourism, whether the fairly ruthless form of B. F. Skinner or something more moderated, plus the influence of cultural anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, heavily emphasized the 'nurture' side: behaviour is culturally determined. During the last decade and a half, however, the mushrooming developments in the field of genetics have increasingly tilted the argument towards 'nature'. Scientists have tried to discover statistical alignments between many kinds of behaviour and peculiar genes or neural structures.

In neither model does the nature of sin as an offence against the personal/transcendent God who made us feature prominently. Biblically faithful Christianity leaves place for cultural influence: the sins of the fathers are visited on the children (ask anyone who has dealt with sexual abuse), and the sowing of the wind issues in the reaping of the whirlwind. Similarly, biblically faithful Christianity leaves place for genetics, even for flawed genes: we are body/spirit beings, not mere shells for vitalism, and the curse we have attracted means that our bodies, like our spirits, break down in complex and horrible ways. But at its heart, Christianity will always want to insist that what makes sin evil is its defiance of the Creator God; that the thing to fear most about sin is not the social consequences, as awful as they may be, but the certain judgment of God ('fear him who can destroy body and soul in

hell', Mt. 10:29); that what we need most is reconciliation to this God; that God himself has provided this reconciliation in the death and resurrection of his Son; and much more along the same lines.

In other words, the Christian charge is that most contemporary analyses of the human dilemma are shallow and reductionistic, because they do not take into account the real nature of sin and of objective guilt. The human dilemma, understood in modern secular categories, can be repaired by judicious social tinkering, psychological insight and counselling, guilt-free self-understanding, humanistic education, and a great deal of government money. Not for a moment do I think that nothing good can come of such ventures. But they are, finally, too shallow; they are not sufficiently radical, they do not go to the *radix*, the root, of the problem. They do not deal with the real guilt we incur before God; they do not take seriously enough the nature of evil and its effects.

Far from being a detour, this somewhat abstract discussion is critical for preachers who want to understand the world. We will not be seduced by the trendy visions of the world that come and go, if we have already adopted without reservation what the Bible has to say about the fall and about sin. In this century we have at various points been told that education and largesse would reform all the world and bring it into line with 'civilized' humanism; that the First World War was the war to end all wars; that with the decline of totalitarian Marxism we are entering a new order of relative peace; that we can trust the wisdom and goodness of the American (or British or Canadian or whatever) people. We seem to forget that the founders of the American republic (to go no further) were nervous about too much democracy, precisely because they believed in the propensity of human beings to be selfish and evil. That is why they established a system of checks and balances: never let any one group enjoy too much unchecked power. At the personal level, we are regularly told, explicitly or implicitly, that our problems are invariably societal and not personal; that self-fulfilment is the highest good; that the person who acquires the most wins.

Into this construction of reality strides the preacher who believes what the Bible says about sin. He believes that it is honourable to strive for peace, but he holds that until Jesus returns there will be wars and rumours of wars: he is not seduced by 'new order' speeches or announcements that we have just fought the war to end wars. Although he values a good education, he recognizes that educated sinners are still sinners, possibly very clever sinners. With Churchill, he believes that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others – that is, he does not think of democracy as being strong or right or fair because of the essential goodness of the citizens and of their corporate judgment, but because it seems like the best way to limit any one group

from becoming so powerful that evil becomes formidably institutionalized. While trying to understand the complex nature of sin, never does he minimize personal responsibility. The suggestion that self-fulfilment is the *summum bonum* he dismisses as idolatrous twaddle: he remembers that Jesus taught that only those who deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him find life.

This means that the Christian preacher will never look at the world exactly the way non-Christians will. Moreover, this one area, how one thinks about sin, is interlocked with so many others. One remembers the biting words of the poetess Phyllis McGinley, describing her creation, the Reverend Doctor Harcourt:

And in the pulpit eloquently speaks
On divers matters with both wit and clarity:
Art, Education, God, the Early Greeks,
Psychiatry, Saint Paul, true Christian charity,
Vestry repairs that must shortly begin –
All things but Sin. He seldom mentions Sin.⁴

And if there is no mention of sin, what need of a Saviour? If sin is transmuted to social disorder or personal want of integration, what need for reconciliation with the God who made us? Worse, if we *think* there is no odious sin, no objective guilt, no judgment to be averted, *while these realities continue unrecognized*, not only do we entertain massively distorted visions of the world, but we are in the utmost danger.

In these last few paragraphs I have been describing one small but crucial element in the Bible's plot-line which, if believed, shapes the preacher's understanding of the world. But there are many others. Creation establishes the relation between creature and Creator; what the Bible says about being made in the image of God demands that we think of human beings in certain ways and not in others; the judgment of the flood illuminates what God thinks of our rebellion, and anticipates the judgment still to come; and so forth. A profound grasp of the Bible's story-line from creation to the new heaven and the new earth must not be viewed as useful information that nicely explains the nature of personal salvation, and nothing more. It provides an *essential* way of looking at the world. *It is impossible to remain faithful to the apostolic gospel unless we remain faithful to the biblical understanding of the world.*

2. The importance of understanding a particular culture

Notwithstanding what I have said about the critical importance of a fundamentally biblical understanding of the world, it is essential for

preachers to integrate with their general Christian understanding of the world an acute and accurate understanding of the particular culture where they minister. I shall restrict myself to six comments.

1. Cultures differ from one another.⁵ The construals of reality in the pantheistic branches of Hinduism, in the frankly atheistic strands of Buddhism, in the rising secularization characteristic of modern Deism, and in a providential view of history that is tied to robust theism, are all very different. On a much smaller scale, socially formed values vary enormously: one's sense of humour, the role of the extended family, one's view of the importance of time, the value placed on the tribe or the nation, the level of education, acceptable forms of social interaction, and much more. I have not mentioned differences in language, and of course every language is a cultural phenomenon. An Australian aboriginal will not meet your gaze, because he is being polite and treating you with respect, and you think him shifty-eyed. An American tourist in Europe talks loudly of his possessions and accomplishments, and we think him arrogant and boorish, while he thinks of himself as frank, open, candid. An Englishman visits Rio and his reserve is interpreted as haughtiness and coldness. Cultures are different.

2. Although cultures must be learned if competent communication is to take place, for most preachers such learning is simply part of their own enculturation. In other words, where a preacher really has been part of his own culture, and has reflected deeply upon it, he may be able to address it quite easily without ever formally studying it. If he is among his own people, he is in a situation quite different from that of the cross-cultural preacher.

That is one of the reasons some preachers prove largely unacceptable in cultures outside their own. I know a preacher with a dismal record in New England who proved remarkably fruitful in California – and the difference in fruitfulness was not to be explained purely on the grounds of different receptivity of the soils, for some preachers are fruitful in New England. A preacher in old England may prove singularly unsuitable in Wales – and *vice versa* – even when there is scarcely a scrap of theological difference between the two. Other preachers are more transportable: one thinks, for instance, of the wide-scale influence of a Lloyd-Jones. In many instances there is peculiar unction on their lives. But part of the issue lies in the fact that such preachers are not so narrowly tied to their home culture that they seem idiosyncratic and even odd to others.

Moreover, if someone is asked to speak in another culture, it is often the mark of courtesy and love to learn something of that culture. This is the more urgent where the sermons are to be preached to unbelievers. A largely Christian congregation may make more allowances than a non-Christian audience. When I have first gone to a

country that is new to me, and where at least part of my assignment has been to preach evangelistically, I have almost always perused at least half a dozen or a dozen books on that country's history, social matrix, values, customs, heritage, and so forth, as part of my preparation.

3. Cultures change. They are not static. Implicitly we recognize this when we hear elderly people reminisce about the good old days. Very often a substantial component of what they are saying is that the culture they had thought of as their own has so changed that they now feel alien and isolated. Owing to a number of factors, cultures in the western world are changing at an accelerating pace. In addition, most western countries now boast far more empirical pluralism than they did a generation ago. This makes the challenge of reaching out with the gospel to these new subcultures more of what has traditionally been thought of as a missionary enterprise – *i.e.* in some measure it demands the skills of cross-cultural communication. We work at such matters when we go to a foreign land; for some of us, it is harder to work at them when they are demanded in the land of our birth.

4. Understanding a particular culture is not exactly the same thing as taking on board what the people of that culture think of themselves. Nor is it exactly the same thing as reading the latest sociology reports analysing that culture. We must of course grasp what people think of themselves, and we do well to understand social trends. But at this point my first and second headings meet: while trying to understand a culture, we must still be trying to think biblically and theologically.

This means we shall be obliged to decide what cultural elements are largely neutral, what are to be opposed and reformed by the gospel, what are the fruit of common grace and therefore to be espoused and cherished. Latin Americans like to reduce the distance between two people to about eighteen inches; Anglos are more comfortable with about a yard. To Anglos, Latins are pushy; to Latins, Anglos are aloof and cold. There is nothing moral or divinely sanctioned about thirty-six inches as opposed to eighteen. The preacher of the gospel learns to flex, learns the communication signals endemic to the culture. But when he confronts, say, the cargo cults that flourish in the Melanesian islands, sooner or later he must challenge them, expose the underlying covetousness (often unwittingly fostered by expatriates) as idolatry, and seek to bring men and women to a better treasure. Doubtless it is helpful to learn the characteristic outlooks of baby-boomers and baby-busters, but the preacher will also want to think through what characteristics of, say, baby-busters, are so drenched in myopic self-ishness that repentance and reformation are called for. And if for reasons of communication a preacher *begins* with the self-perceived interests and needs of his people, sooner or later he must establish links between these and the Bible's agenda, or he should stay out of the pulpit.

5. The purpose of such growing understanding of the culture in which God has placed the preacher is not only to praise God for the diversity of gifts and peoples he has placed upon the earth (however much they are corroded by sin), but to learn better how to communicate the gospel to the peoples of these diverse cultures.

This can usefully be seen as a two-step process. The student of Scripture must try to understand the Bible on its own terms, within the cultures in which it was first given, and then learn to transport and apply its truth into his or her own world. The Bible is not an abstract manual, stripped of all cultural elements: to his glory, God has disclosed himself to real men and women, and ultimately in a real Man – and that necessarily means at peculiar times and places and in peculiar cultures and languages. Faithful biblical exegesis demands sufficient hermeneutical awareness that we recognize the difficulties of understanding a text that is two thousand and more years old, and written in languages not our own. We seek the Spirit's help, while recognizing that the burden of responsibility falls upon us as we wrestle with the responsibility and privilege of interpretation. Thus we traverse the cultural barriers that separate biblical times from our own. But then in our tasks as preachers, we may have to cross another cultural barrier – the one to our audiences. For most preachers in the western world, this does not involve a language barrier, but there may be several others. Our hearers may be biblically illiterate, or steeped in New Age categories, or entirely out of sympathy with biblical absolutes, or swamped by vague notions of spirituality that drown the biblical message in sentimentalism. Now our task is to articulate the message of Scripture across these new cultural barriers. We seek the Spirit's help, while recognizing that the burden of responsibility and privilege in heralding the gospel accurately and comprehensibly falls on us.

As western culture progressively drifts away from its Judeo-Christian heritage, new challenges to accurate and forceful communication are erected. It is sometimes helpful to think in terms of 'plausibility structures'. A plausibility structure is a social structure of ideas that is widely taken for granted without argument, and dissent from which is regarded as heresy. For a long time the plausibility structures of our culture were in large measure Christian. It was widely accepted, without debate, that there was a difference between right and wrong and between truth and error; that human beings have been made by God and for God, who will one day be our Judge; that God sets the rules; that he sent his son Jesus. Even if people were a little fuzzy as to who Jesus was or what he did, these were among the 'givens'. Today, however, as empirical pluralism develops, there are fewer and fewer plausibility structures in most western nations, but the ones that remain are tenaciously held. And these are anything but Christian: no religion

is superior to any other religion; God exists primarily for my satisfaction and fulfilment; God is so much a God of love it is unthinkable that he could be angry; all religions say much the same thing anyway; religion is not a matter of objective truth but of subjective faith.

The changes in western plausibility structures mean that the task of the preacher to communicate the faith 'once delivered to the saints' is becoming more challenging. Understanding the world in which we live is a first step; the faithful proclamation of the gospel is the primary motivation.

6. In some measure these perspectives are already mirrored in the pages of the New Testament. In Luke's witness, Paul does not approach people in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in exactly the same way that he approaches people in pagan Athens. This is not because his gospel changes; it is because his audience has changed. In the context of the synagogue, Paul assumes that his hearers are more or less biblically literate, and have adopted plausibility structures in line with the old-covenant Scriptures. He therefore seeks to persuade them that Jesus fulfils the promises that God made in those Scriptures. In Athens, where most of his hearers would not so much as have heard of the Bible, much less read it, and where the plausibility structures were shaped by one branch or another of Greek paganism, Paul had to begin farther back – with the personal/transcendent God, God's aseity, the doctrine of creation, the ground of human responsibility, the prospect of judgment, divine providence, teleology in history, and more – before he even introduces Jesus Christ. The reason, of course, is that if he had introduced Jesus first, all that he said about him would have been misunderstood. The worldview had to change; the plausibility structures had to change. And Paul, gifted preacher that he was, understood such matters, and shaped his preaching accordingly.

3. The challenge of understanding a particular culture

The difficulties are many; I mention only a few.

1. Many Christians in the western world, including Christian preachers, feel betrayed. The Judeo-Christian heritage they called their own has, they feel, come unstuck, and those who are responsible are the enemy. If you want to sell a book in the Christian press today, one sure way of doing it is to write a volume of pure negativism – all the things that are wrong in education, politics, bioethics, marriages, child-rearing, values, or whatever. God knows there is enough around us to criticize. But one wonders if some of the popularity of such books stems not from their prophetic stance, but from the fact that many people feel fed

up and betrayed by the changes, and these books allow them to vent their spleen vicariously. Seldom do these books point the way forward; they simply keep our disgust fresh. Preachers may buy into such negativism, adopting a 'them *versus* us' stance that is so strong there are almost no incentives for genuinely understanding what the world is saying.

2. As western culture is progressively de-Christianized,⁶ Christians tend to regroup into holy huddles. Their friends are Christians, and in these Christian crowds there is a kind of sanctified discourse that excludes outsiders. If Christians, not least Christian preachers, spend all their time in such circles, it becomes harder and harder to communicate effectively with unbelievers.

For this reason preachers need to seek out unbelievers, hostile audiences, evangelistic opportunities. They need to do so not only because those who hear need to listen to the gospel, but because they themselves need to study the minds of unbelievers if they are going to proclaim the gospel to the people of the prevailing culture, and not only to those of the confessing church.

3. The sheer speed of the changes proves daunting for some. A preacher who exercised fruitful ministry among university students twenty-five years ago may find a university crowd distinctly alien today, if he has not laboured in that environment in the interval. In that period we have moved from modernism to postmodernism, from Marxist rhetoric to radical feminism, from the new criticism to deconstruction, from scepticism about religion to radical philosophical pluralism. Similar changes have afflicted the larger culture, though not quite so quickly or extensively.

4. Some of us, quite frankly, are short of compassion, of Christ-like love. We see the evils, and we denounce them – quite rightly; but we lack the response of Jesus, who, looking on crowds of men and women, sees sheep without a shepherd, and is moved with compassion. Jesus denounces, but he weeps over the city. Where such love is operative, it will find a way to understand the culture, so as to be able the better to apply the whole counsel of God to as many people as possible. Practically speaking, this means time and energy devoted to an empathetic understanding of the people to whom the Lord has sent us, to an imaginative grasp of how their lives appear to them.

4. Some large-scale cultural elements in the western world

I have hinted at some of these; elsewhere I have discussed them at length.⁷ It is enough here to mention a handful, more by way of example than as a responsible representation.

1. On the whole, the intellectual world in the West has shifted from modernism to postmodernism. The former period (roughly 1600–1970) was characterized by brimming confidence in human reason to uncover absolute truth, by rising commitment to philosophical naturalism, to nice distinctions between the ‘facts’ of science and the opinions of ‘faith’. Postmodernity, having bought into one form or another of radical hermeneutics, holds that all ‘knowledge’ is either a personal or a social construct, is never absolute, and is conditioned by just about everything (language, heritage, presuppositions, what side of the bed you got out of this morning). The only heresy left is the heresy that there is such a thing as heresy. Modernism had its critics, of course, and so now does postmodernism. Thoughtful Christians will not want to buy into either package, while still recognizing some valid points in both worldviews. But they do see the change that has come about. It is exemplified in the way people respond to, say, a sermon with a firm argument for the resurrection of Jesus. Three decades ago, such a sermon might have provoked an argument about the evidence; today, one is far more likely to hear, ‘I’m so glad you have found your faith helpful to you. But what about all the Muslims who don’t believe that Jesus rose from the dead?’

Especially those preachers who minister to university students must devote some thought to the challenges of postmodernity, including deconstruction, radical pluralism, shifting positions on the nature of ‘truth’, and revised epistemologies.

2. Rising biblical illiteracy means that fewer and fewer people have many mental ‘pegs’ on which to hang what you say. This means that responsible biblical preaching must spend more time recounting the basic biblical story-line and its principal theological lesson – not unlike Paul in Athens in Acts 17. In evangelistic work today I assume that people do not know that the Bible has two Testaments, that for them ‘sin’ is a naughty snicker-word without a trace of real odium, that ‘God’ is a plastic word with who knows what content, and so forth.

3. With the dilution of the Judeo-Christian heritage, fewer and fewer people feel shame when they sin. That means that responsible preaching must not only proclaim the gospel but explicate the need for the gospel – and that means a return to the doctrine of God, the nature of law, the inevitability of judgment, along with the wonders of grace. At the same time, most preachers with long memories are facing far more broken homes, abused women, children of alcoholic parents, emotional teenagers in adult bodies, than they did twenty-five years ago. That spells a need for expository preaching on how to live. Paul is concerned that his readers remember not only his doctrine, but his way of life; our concern must be no narrower.

4. Intoxicated by the media, more and more people think they have

the right to be entertained. They never have to think; they are never alone, since they can always switch on the television or the CD-player or the home computer. Some Christian leaders simply denounce the trend; others try to make the ‘worship experience’ more entertaining (not least the sermon), and thus provide a little competition.

This is one of the most sensitive issues in churches in the western world. Certainly there is no intrinsic merit in being boring; on the other hand, the liveliness generated by excitement is not necessarily a sign of spiritual vitality. On the long haul, the way forward is, on the one hand, to understand the diversity of cultural expressions of genuine worship and praise, and, on the other, to insist that services and sermons bend constantly toward the goal of glorifying God and knowing and enjoying him, by God’s grace generating a people who refuse to be squeezed into the world’s mould.

5. Modern fuzzy notions of ‘spirituality’ demand clarity of thought and proclamation about what is truly ‘spiritual’ in the light of Christ’s cross-work and of the Spirit whom he bequeathed.

6. The pressures on our schedules, derived from many expectations imposed by ourselves or others, strip us of the time and energy needed to read, think, meditate, study, pray. This is the stuff of all vital preaching. Where it is slashed back, whatever time remains for sermon preparation tends to get shoved into one task: understanding the text. Certainly that is a necessary task, but it is not the only one. We must devote adequate time to understanding the world in which God has placed us, if we are to minister tellingly to the men and women to whom God has sent us.

5. Some practical suggestions

1. Most preachers ought to devote more time to reading, to reading widely. It is never right to skimp in Bible study, theology, church history, or excellent biography; but in addition, we must read books and journals and news magazines that help us understand our own age and culture. In his book on preaching, John Stott provides a list of titles he has found helpful.⁸ The list is now a little dated. Without here taking the space to provide my own list, perhaps I may mention several of the principles that govern my own reading (outside Scripture, commentaries, theology, *etc.*). First, I try to read material from competing perspectives. I may subscribe for two or three years to the left-of-centre *New York Review of Books* and *Sojourners*, and then cancel the subscriptions and subscribe for a while to right-of-centre *Chronicles*. Secondly, certain authors I regularly skim: Os Guinness, George Marsden, Thomas Sowell, James Davison Hunter, Peter Berger, and others – not because I agree with all they say, but because they are

trying to understand the culture. Thirdly, occasionally I read 'blockbuster' books, simply because so many people are reading them that I think I must find out what is shaping the minds of many fellow citizens. Fourthly, occasionally I devote a block of time – six months, say, or a year – to try to get inside some new movement. For instance, I devoted a considerable block to reading the primary authors in the various schools of deconstruction. Fifthly, I have sometimes subscribed for a period of time to a first-class literary journal such as *Granta*. Sixthly, I occasionally subscribe to reports from the reputable pollsters, to discover drifts and trends in the nation – Gallup, Yankelovich, and others.

Not everyone reads at the same rate; not everyone's ministry requires the same extent of reading. Some manage far more than I. At no time should such reading ever squeeze out the primary importance of understanding the Word of God. But selective rapid reading of many sources can help preachers better understand the world in which they serve.

2. Discussion with friends and colleagues with similar interests is a great help. This may be formal, for instance an agreed evening once a month to discuss book X or film Y in the light of Christian commitments; it may be informal, depending, of course, on the structures and friendships of one's life. No-one understands everything; thoughtful, widely read and devout friends are to be cherished and nourished.

3. Nowadays there are some good tapes. I sometimes drive substantial distances, but never without tapes. The *Mars Hill Tapes* offer good value for money. In addition, many ministries today are recorded, and preachers do well to listen to other preachers who are particularly gifted in the handling of the Word and in applying it to life.

4. It is essential to talk with non-Christians, whether one on one, in small groups, or to large crowds. There is no more important avenue toward understanding our world.

And when all is done, return again to Scripture, and remember my first point.

Notes

1. John Bettler, 'Application', in Samuel T. Logan Jr (ed.), *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1986), p. 333 (emphasis his).

2. Stephen Neill, *On the Ministry* (London: SCM, 1952), p. 74.

3. E.g. Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1980).

4. Phyllis McGinley, *Times Three* (New York: Viking, 1961), pp. 134–135.

5. The term 'culture' is notoriously difficult to define. This is typical: 'It is that entire body of received information: ideas, opinions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and experiences that constitute a particular social and historical moment or epoch and are appropriated by an individual and community as the common life of humanity within prescribed boundaries' (so John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, p. 136). Perhaps this definition is too narrowly conceptual, insufficiently behavioural and relational; certainly culture includes not less than what is stated here.

6. I am aware of statistics that say that in some western countries (e.g. the US) the number of people who say they go to church at least once a month has been stable, within about 15%, for a century. But such statistics are misleading. Some researchers have questioned whether or not people are doing what they say they are doing (how many check to see if people really do go to church?). More importantly, the pressures of secularization squeeze religion to the periphery, so that mere church-attendance figures say little about the importance of religion in the life of an individual or in the life of the nation.

7. See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

8. John R. W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), pp. 194ff.