PREACHING FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT[1]

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Introduction

I greatly welcome the privilege of being able to give this Finlayson Lecture because it gives me the opportunity publicly to pay my own tribute to the memory of an outstanding Christians. My first acquaintance with the Christian witness of R. A. Finlayson was when he came to Aberdeen to speak at conventions organised by the Aberdeen Evangelistic Association somewhere around 1950. Thereafter I heard him on numerous occasions, both at the Keswick Convention and in various meetings of the Aberdeen University Evangelical Union and IVF conferences. His profound knowledge of Scripture and his lucidity in exposition made a great impression on me. He was doubtless not a popular preacher, for he assumed that his audience would pay heed to him without needing any devices to hold their attention, and with him every word counted. There was also a problem for hearers who could not cope with a strong West Highland accent. But the content was pure gold, and I would certainly rank him as the best Scottish preacher that I have ever heard. And, if I may with Paul descend to boasting and putting things in human terms, the best of Scottish preachers will stand comparison with the best from anywhere else.

It is, then, primarily as a preacher that I think of R. A. Finlayson, and it is therefore appropriate that I should use this occasion to say something about preaching, although whether he would approve of all that I am about to say is one of those questions that cannot be answered.

There are of course many discussions of preaching and how to do it. When I first began to preach myself, I longed for books that would help me with the actual task of constructing and writing sermons. It was one thing to see that a text or passage could be recognised as the spine of a possible sermon with three vertebrae; the problem was to put flesh onto those three vertebrae and to avoid putting on the same flesh each time. Eventually I found some help and much inspiration in the writings of W. E. Sangster, who is still unsurpassed in the study of 'how to do it' in terms of presentation,

[1] The Finlayson Memorial Lecture delivered at the annual conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society on Wednesday 10th April, 1991, at the Faith Mission Bible College, Edinburgh. The spoken form has been largely retained in the printed version.

although he tended to discuss how to give variety in sermon structure rather than how to develop the content in detail.[2]

But our question today is the more fundamental one of the content of the sermon in relation to the NT, and it will inevitably be seen from the standpoint of the student of the NT. I am sadly aware that I do not give this topic the attention it deserves in the Divinity Faculty at Aberdeen where many of the students are preachers, but this lecture contains some of the things that I would like to share with them.

The Place of Preaching in the Church Meeting

We start by asking a question about what goes on when a congregation gathers in church. I suggest that there are three activities which go on simultaneously, although the emphasis may be more on any one of them at a given time.[3]

1. Service to God. The most usually used names for what is going on in a church meeting are 'worship' and 'service'. These express what the congregation is doing towards God, and their activity consists in the offering of prayer, praise (often sung) and their self-dedication. The person who is 'leading' the service acts as their spokesperson or representative in this activity. For example, he may say, 'Let us praise God in hymn 123', or he may voice the prayers on behalf of the congregation as a whole.

2. Addressing the congregation. What the term 'worship' does not bring out adequately is that God is also doing something to the congregation. He is communicating himself and his Word to them, words that may be of grace, judgement, encouragement, persuasion, comfort, challenge, instruction and so on. It is this Word to which the congregation responds in their worship and service. And in this activity various people or perhaps a single leader now act on behalf of God. Somebody reads the Word of God in Scripture to the congregation, and then the same person or somebody else delivers a sermon in which what God is saying to the congregation through the Scripture is made plain.

3. Fellowship. Both of these activities take place in the context of what I call fellowship. Fellowship is the mutual bond which arises between people who participate in a common object or concern. In

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[2] W. E. Sangster, *The Craft of the Sermon* (London, 1949); *The Craft of Sermon Illustration* (London, 1946); *Power in Preaching* (London, 1958).

[3] See I. H. Marshall, 'How Far Did the Early Christians Worship God?', in *Churchman* 99 (1985), pp. 216-229; *cf.* D. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester, 1991).

this case, the members of the congregation are united through their common participation in salvation and their common life in Christ. Bonds of love are established and expressed between all the people, and here the leader of the group is, as it were, just one of the congregation.

Now the significance of this brief discussion is to highlight two important facts:

1. The main activity. Since whatever God does is by definition more important than what we do, and since grace is prior to faith, it follows that the most important thing that takes place in the church meeting is the self-communication of God to the people. The reading of Scripture is the central and indispensable element in a Christian meeting. The sermon is a close second. But the fact that the congregational gathering is so often said to be for 'worship' or 'service' has the effect of obscuring this primary element and sometimes lead to rather grotesque efforts to justify the presence of a sermon in a church gathering. Rather, we should think of the church meeting as the occasion when, gathered together in fellowship, we listen to what God has to say to us and then make our response to his Word.

2. The preacher's responsibility. The person or persons leading the meeting have the difficult task of acting in three different capacities, the one which concerns us here being that of speaking on behalf of God as the people who proclaim his Word. This emphasises the great importance of the sermon or whatever we call it, and equally the heavy responsibility of the person who does the proclamation. Therefore 1 Peter 4:11 says, 'If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.' I believe that we can see something of this consciousness on the part of at least some of the New Testament writers, and it is also seen in some of those who spoke in God's name. the preacher today should have this same consciousness.

The Text and the Sermon

It follows from what we have just said that the task of the preacher is to proclaim the Word of God. For evangelical Christians that Word is heard today supremely in the Scriptures; we believe that Scripture is the Word of God. Now if that statement is true in a straightforward sort of way, then it is arguable that it should be quite sufficient for preachers simply to read the Scriptures to people. What more do they need? Why do we persist in preaching, and why do we insist that a service is incomplete if the Word is not preached

(as well as read)?[4] Clearly we need to explore the relation between the Bible and the sermon and ask what we are trying to do.

The basic answer, of course, is that the Word of God needs to be applied to the particular congregation, and the reason why this is so is because the congregation is not identical with the original recipients of the text of Scripture. Preaching is interpretation. And therefore essentially what we must now talk about is interpretation. I shall suggest that there are some five aspects of this in relation to preaching: the selection of the text; explaining the meaning of the text; interpreting the text; presenting the sermon; and applying the message.

1. The Selection of the Text

The first step logically is that the preacher selects a passage of Scripture as the basis of a sermon. Here there seem to be two main approaches.

On the one hand, there is the approach which might be summed up as: 'Is there a word from the Lord for next Sunday morning?' The preacher then has borne in upon his mind a passage of Scripture or a theme which contains what is believed to be the specific word of the Lord for a particular congregation on a particular occasion. From a human point of view this may seem to be an arbitrary, irrational way of selecting a theme. But from a Christian point of view it is a case of submission to the guidance of the Lord. It depends upon the Lord making his mind known through what is experienced as a divine prompting.

On the other hand, there is the approach which works systematically through a particular set of themes which may be short or long in extent. There are two main forms of this approach. First, the preacher may elect to give, say, a series on Mark or Ephesians; this method, then, involves systematic teaching on a biblical book over a period of time. Second, there is the use of a so-called 'lectionary'. This is usually a set of readings devised for a group of churches and often geared to the Christian year; it aims to give a systematic coverage of important themes are areas of Scripture in a way that is less complete than the former approach but which, taken over the whole period, gives a fair coverage of the 'whole counsel of God'.

Broadly speaking, the first method is typical of a more charismatic approach, while the two forms of the second method are typical of a more Reformed approach and a more mainline denominational approach respectively. If you ask me which approach I follow, I must

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[4] Here I note parenthetically that I side firmly with those who insist that you should not have a celebration of the Lord's Supper without including the preached Word.

confess that I am a curious and probably inconsistent mixture at this point. Since I preach for the most part as an occasional preacher rather than a regular one, it is rare for me to be able to give a series to any particular congregation. Therefore what I preach on is a mixture of: 1. Using as a source for material whatever book of the Bible I happen to be working on academically, but not necessarily in a rigid manner.[5] 2. Establishing fairly rationally what I think the congregation needs to hear – based partly on whatever knowledge I have of them and on what I have done on previous occasions. 3. Feeling 'inspired' to tackle a particular topic because it has become alive for me. Whatever route is followed, there needs to be the sense that the topic is a word from the Lord for that occasion. There are times in my experience when topics simply will not glow with life, and I abandon them; unfortunately this is not an easy option when you are faced with the same congregation twice a Sunday every Sunday! I am fairly sure that the average congregation needs a balanced spread of teaching, and therefore I am not tied to the view that only one topic can possibly be right on a given occasion. I think that the Lord gives us a lot of freedom.

It should be obvious that the two types of approach are not so very different. For myself I am least happy with the lectionary approach, since I find it difficult to believe that a distant committee can know just what my congregation needs on a particular Sunday, and equally I cannot believe that all congregations everywhere should get the same topic on the same day. Yet I would not want to say that a committee can never ascertain the guidance of the Lord for his teaching in a group of churches.

Even those preachers who insist that we should proclaim the whole counsel of God, and deduce from this that the whole of Scripture should be systematically expounded to a congregation, nevertheless have to choose in what order they shall do so; and even the preacher who tells me that he must preach on Revelation 15 next Sunday morning because he is engaged in a series and expounded Revelation 14 last Sunday has made a decision at some point that it would be Revelation that he tackled next with the congregation and not Philemon or Philippians. So there is an element of choice or seeking for guidance in order to ascertain what a particular part of Scripture is God's Word for a congregation at some particular time. The two approaches which I have labelled charismatic and Reformed run into each other.

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[5] I recommend this as a good discipline for people engaged in academic study to keep them firmly rooted in the real world.

II. Explaining the Meaning of Scripture

The preacher teaches what Scripture says. By this I mean simply that at the very lowest level the preacher is making the congregation acquainted with what Scripture says. By reading the Scripture and telling the story again in his own words, he is making sure that the congregation know what is there.

This is probably the point to ask again what the sermon is trying to do. Here again there may be a very broad and fluid distinction between what I may call the charismatic and the Reformed approaches. For the charismatic, the aim of the sermon may well be primarily to convey a divine message or oracle, some word of Scripture that comes to fresh life as it is made the vehicle of what the Lord wants to say now to this set of people. On this view, the task of the preacher is primarily to let the Lord speak his Word for the present time for the specific people sitting there. For the Reformed, the purpose may be more to teach the congregation what Scripture says, and there may be a more timeless character to such a sermon. The sermon is now more consciously expository. It has the character of teaching.

It will be obvious that this attempt to distinguish two types of sermon is artificial. Rather, the sermon should have both characteristics. It should teach and it should be existentially relevant to the congregation. I can well believe, of course, that the Lord's message for a particular congregation may be a piece of solid teaching today and something of a different character next Sunday. But, even if the sermon is primarily teaching, it will still be presented as teaching that matters and that has an application. I stick to the basic belief that the purpose of preaching is not simply to instruct people but to change them. I emphasise, therefore, the need for a message from the Lord that is firmly based in biblical teaching, and the need for teaching of Scripture that is pointedly directed towards the congregation.

As part of the process of teaching Scripture, the preacher is manifestly also explaining what it means. As I said earlier, it is not enough simply to recite Scripture because our congregation is not the same as the original hearers or readers of the Word, and therefore some things need to be explained to them so that they can be put into the position of the original audience. It is a simple fact that although the message of Scripture is fairly plain, there are difficulties of all kinds in detail in understanding it. The variety of renderings in different translations, the existence of Bible encyclopaedias and commentaries – these all bear testimony to the fact that reading Scripture makes people ask questions about what the text means – what it is trying to say. Exegesis is unavoidable. And this is clearly part of the task of preaching. Much could be said about this if our

primary interest in this lecture was in exegesis, but I confine myself to two comments in this area.

1. The 'text' of the sermon. The Scripture can be approached in several different kinds of unit.

i. The traditional unit is the text, usually a sentence or phrase. But it is inevitable that in discussing such a brief unit one will put it into its larger co-text – *i.e.* the longer passage of which it forms part.[6] But some passages are of such a character that lifting out one brief unit does not make good sense, for the unit of meaning is larger. Thus a story, such as a parable, needs to be considered as a whole because the whole story is the bearer of the meaning rather than just a few words. Hence a paragraph or even a group of paragraphs may be a more appropriate unit for discussion, and the phrase 'expository preaching' is sometimes used in a rather narrow – and, in my view, undesirable – sense to refer to preaching based on a longer passage rather than a single verse.

ii. Even longer units can be profitably made the basis of a sermon. If the letter to the Colossians was written to the church to be read aloud to them in one sitting, then it stands to reason that a good way to preach on it is to examine the message of the letter as a whole. Some of the modern approaches to New Testament study such as narrative criticism and discourse analysis are concerned to demonstrate the light that is shed on familiar material when it is seen as a whole and the development of the whole story or argument is taken into account.

iii. I also want to say a word for other types of approach. There are certain words in Scripture which have acquired a rich theological content, and these are worthy of exploration. In practice this means that the sermon is based on multiple texts. For a simple example, one can learn quite a lot about the nature of Christianity by examining the three occurrences of the word 'Christian', in other words by seeing what is implied about the word and the concept expressed by it in the contexts in which it was used. I think that more can be done with using some of these important words of New Testament theology in our preaching.

2. Explaining the Text. Having defined a sense-unit, the preacher must explain what the original author was saying, so far as it is necessary to do so for the purpose of the sermon. Technical discussions are out, but any difficulties must be explained in the simplest way possible. Background material that may be unfamiliar to the congregation will need to be supplied. Some of this material

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[6] For the useful distinction between 'context' and cotext' see P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London, 1989), p. 16.

may well be interesting in its own right, and may help to secure the interest of the hearers, but it should not be developed simply for its own sake. There will be occasions where a passage can be understood in more than one way, and in such cases the preacher may need either to admit that his explanation is only probable, or to indicate the possible different interpretations. It is manifestly at this level that the preacher must resort to commentaries and other works of reference so that as well founded an explanation of the meaning of the text as is possible can be given. Here the preacher has certainly an important responsibility in being the 'expert' in the congregation whose words are likely to be taken as true, and therefore he must measure up to that responsibility by being utterly fair to the text which he is interpreting. He is not to stand between the text and the congregation in such a way as to be a barrier to the truth getting across, but it is rather to be a channel through which truth that might not otherwise be perceived can be faithfully channelled.[7]

III Interpreting the Scripture

From exegesis we turn to interpretation. By the use of this somewhat ambiguous word I am trying to indicate that the preacher has to determine and convey what Scripture is saying to the people in front of him. What Paul wished to say to the Romans by means of the text that we have in front of us is not necessarily the same as what he wants to say to us, and we have to find what message for us comes out of what he said to them. If, for example, Paul devotes much of chapter 14 of Romans to discussing the problems that arose in the church over those who thought they could eat meat and those who disagreed for reasons connected with the Jewish religion and way of life, then it has to be said that this is not a problem in the average Highland congregation, though it may still be a problem for Christian Jews. Consequently, this is not direct teaching to us, although we may well believe that we can learn something for ourselves from seeing what Paul had to say to the Romans about their problem. But when we make this important move from the direct message of Scripture to the original audience to its indirect message to our contemporary audience, we are doing what I call interpretation.

There are basically two ways in which this may be done, and each of them is a legitimate approach. First, there is the method which begins with a passage of Scripture and proceeds from it to the modern

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[7] For help in this area see G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* (London, 1983), and (a bit more technical) G. D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Philadelphia, 1983).

world. Secondly, there is the method which begins with some modern situation and asks what there is in Scripture which says something to it, and thus goes back to a particular passage or set of passages.[8]

To some extent the issue may be the question of where the preacher begins to prepare for next Sunday. He may begin from Scripture, and because he is dealing with 1 Thessalonians 5 the appropriate question to ask is: on what particular need(s) of a modern congregation has this passage something to say? Or equally appropriately the preacher may begin with a modern situation, let us say, the Christian response to issues that are being fought at an impending election, and ask what scriptural teaching is relevant to these issues. Whether the preacher moves from Scripture to the present-day or in the reverse direction is surely of little consequence in itself. It would be wrong in my opinion always to go in the one direction. I suspect that it is more necessary to go from Scripture to the modern world lest by unconscious selectivity we muzzle the Scriptures and do not hear what they have to say on issues that left to ourselves we were in danger of overlooking. But at the same time, if the preacher did not deal with subjects that are not tackled in Scripture – one thinks, inevitably, of problems of medical ethics – then Scripture is again being muzzled in a different kind of way.

I make this remark in the context of preparation for the sermon. It may be necessary to point out that actual delivery of the sermon may begin either with Scripture or the modern world, regardless of where the preacher's starting point in preparation was. Here is one of the places where variety in presentation is needed.

But now we must face the question of what is involved in interpretation. How do we bring out the meaning of a text for today? It is just at this point that the commentaries usually fail us. Some offer us exegesis, but make no attempt to ask what the message might mean for today. Others offer us a message of today that may well consist of sound, pious points but they are really not based on exegesis of the passage; the exegesis is faulty or non-existent. It may sound good, but it is not biblical preaching in the proper sense of the

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[8] I believe that it is also possible to have a sermon which tackles some contemporary topic without necessarily expounding a biblical passage but which is nevertheless faithfully based on biblical teaching and develops that teaching. The preacher is so immersed in the teaching of Scripture and in scriptural ways of thinking and dealing with problems that the sermon will be truly biblical even though no actual text is ever cited. I am sure that we should not exclude that kind of preaching on principle, although it may well be an approach that will be used more rarely.

term. But commentaries which deal with the interpretation of the passage for today, based on careful exegesis, are not so common. Here I want to develop briefly three points which seem to me to be relevant.

1. Universality. Our first question in interpreting a text is whether its message is of universal applicability. Texts which tell us that 'all have sinned' or that 'God so loved the world' are clearly universal in that they apply to all people at all times. Other texts may not be universal in their reference. They may apply to a limited group, *e.g.* 'Husbands, love your wives', or they may apply to groups that do not exist today, *e.g.* 'Slaves, obey your masters'. In such cases, we have to treat the material in a different kind of way. Equally, the teaching or the commands may be universally true in that they could apply to every kind of person, but the actual content of the commands may be material which is applicable only in certain circumstances or times. Some material is given the form of narrative, and it may be a question whether the narrative is a form of authoritative teaching; this question arises for example with some of the accounts of the giving of the Spirit in Acts, where some Christians insist that a particular pattern there is normative for today. We have to recognise that some biblical material is not universalisable. However, it may still be useful for today. But where the material can be applied directly to all people in all places at all times, the preacher's task is that much easier.

2. Extensibility. Where the material is not immediately universalisable, we must then ask whether the teaching of a text can be extended to cover people and situations not originally envisaged. Philemon is given specific instructions on how to deal with a runaway slave, but surely Paul's teaching can be extended to cover other situations of various kinds. Here we are operating with the concept of analogy, and the argument is that the teaching of Scripture can be extended to deal with analogous persons or situations – but with the recognition that the teaching may require adjustment to cope with the new situation. It is the principle of *mutatis mutandis*. Here, then, we interpret in the sense that we recognise that what Scripture says today is not precisely what it said to its original readers. I should want to affirm that for the most part the message of Scripture comes into the category of what is universalisable. But I must also insist that the task of extending the meaning is often required.

It will be clear that the basic principle here requires that there be a real analogy between the persons originally addressed and the modern audience. An enormous amount of preaching depends upon the use of analogy, and it is essential that the analogy really exists and is not falsely constructed. The early Christians used something like this

principle in their typological understanding of the Old Testament and I believe that this gives us a model to follow in our interpretation of the New Testament. However, very often the interpretation of the text requires us to consider not only the differences in the hearers but also the differences in the actual form of God's Word to them. This brings us to our third principle.

3. Reapplication. In extending the message, we are in effect reapplying the message of the text. The text gives the application to specific readers of certain basic truths, principles or commands. What we have to do is to distinguish these basic concepts from the particular form in which they are presented in the passage to the original readers and then to reapply the basic concepts to the new audience. Thus, if Jesus commands – quite specifically – that his disciples should wash one another's feet, and if we say, 'But that was for an audience of first-century Jews treading dusty roads in bare feet or sandals, for whom the washing of feet was a menial duty done by a slave; but we are different because we walk along comparatively clean streets wearing clothes and shoes that keep our feet clean, and because feet-washing would not have the same symbolic significance today' – then I believe that this justifies us in saying that on the surface the text is not universalisable. In such a case we have a duty to seek out the underlying principle – the readiness to serve one another humbly that Jesus illustrated in this way – and then to press home that principle and apply it in whatever ways are appropriate for ourselves today. That is a fairly obvious stock-example. Let it suffice to make the basic point. It is, however, of wide applicability.

It should be made clear that this is not to suggest that we can burrow beneath the surface of the New Testament to find a few basic principles and then ditch the New Testament in favour of the principles; that would be to place the authority for God's Word somewhere other than in the actual text of the New Testament. Rather, it is to suggest that the New Testament is the authoritative form in which God gave his Word to specific people, and our starting point is always that actual text.

IV The Presentation of the Sermon

We have now reached the point where we ourselves have some idea of what God wants us to say on the basis of a particular text to the congregation. We have not yet produced a sermon! We have still to discuss an important aspect of the process of composing a message which I call – again somewhat ambiguously – presentation. By this phrase I mean that the preacher must find the appropriate ways of expressing the interpreted message of Scripture for the congregation. That is to say, it will not do simply to read out, let us say, the words of a commentary that gets the meaning and the interpretation

of the text right. We have to present the material in a way that will be palatable to our specific audience. We have to employ the tools of rhetoric to present the message well – for example, by devising a structure for our discourse that will be helpful to the hearers. Let me mention four of these.

1. Intelligibility. Here let me return to the example of R. A. Finlayson by repeating that he was probably not the preacher for everybody. It was not just that at the Keswick Convention the unfortunate English had problems with his accent. It was rather than his level of preaching presupposed a certain level of understanding on the part of the congregation. And this points to the important fact that the task of the preacher is to communicate in such a way as to be understood by the specific audience which is being addressed. Therefore the character of the spoken word, which I shall call the sermon, is in large part determined by the character of the congregation. For example, there is not much use in giving expositions of passages of the Bible to people who do not bring their Bibles to church or who do not have the intellectual capacity to cope with an elaborate discussion of a passage. Nor can you give fifty-minute sermons to people with a limited attention span. I ask you to think of a type of situation which I do not find easy, the occasion when you have a company of the Boys Brigade on holiday in your congregation – perhaps totally unexpectedly – and you want to reach them with your message, or when you have to give a brief talk at a youth club, or when you are taking a service in a mental hospital or an old people's home. Your message must be shaped by the nature of the audience so that they will understand what you are saying. Therefore intelligibility is of crucial importance.

2. Interest. But indeed there is something else which is even more important. Possibly your first priority is not to be intelligible but to be interesting. Naturally, if you are interesting you will also be intelligible, but it is possible to be intelligible without being interesting. If you do not attract and hold your audience's interest, then nothing will get across.

My father, who was a good and godly man, had his occasional blind-spots. He was a good speaker to children in his generation and a good preacher, but when he led the prayers in Sunday School, he was not on the wavelength of the children sitting there with heads bowed in front of him. And when we said to him, 'The children won't understand your prayers', his reply was to the effect that he was not praying to them but to God who would understand them, and somehow the idea that he needed to carry the children along with him if he was to speak to God on behalf of them and involve them in the prayer just did not get across to him. Equally, there are preachers who are just dull, be they ever so sound, and one of our problems is

to make orthodoxy interesting. The thing that I want to stress and emphasise is that, if you fail at this hurdle, you need proceed no further, and what you have to say will do your audience no good because you did not grasp and hold their attention in the first place. That is why the textbooks on sermon-making insist that the beginning of the sermon is so important, and offer remarks such as 'If you don't strike oil in the first five minutes, stop boring!'

3. Simplicity and lucidity. This will be achieved by having a structure that is crystal clear and by using language that is on the level of the congregation. I am aware that if you make things too simple and easy you will quickly lose the interest of the congregation. You have to stretch their minds and give them the adventure of thinking. You will have to alter your approach for different types of congregation, for some will come more eager to learn and think than others. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that simplicity is of cardinal importance. Far too often we over-estimate what a congregation is capable of understanding.

4. Variety. It is important to achieve variety both between sermons and within sermons. Do not always present the material in the same way, and do not develop the passage in the same way. To some extent what you are going to do should be unpredictable, so that the congregation are kept wondering what you are going to say next.

V Applying the Message

I nearly called the previous point 'application', because what we are doing is taking the message of Scripture for the congregation and applying it to them in their particular situation. But on second thoughts I decided that this was unwise because there is one element of presentation that needs separate stress. This is the point that the congregation must be persuaded of what the preacher says. Our task is not simply to instruct but to press home the message, to challenge, to rebuke, to comfort – in short to evoke a response in the hearers so that they go away different people from how they came in.

Again, I go back to the New Testament where I find that recent scholars are discovering that much of the material was composed using the methods of the rhetoric of the time. Some of the letters resemble written speeches, and speeches were composed in order to persuade people. Preaching is very definitely speaking in such a way as to change people. And in my experience a very great deal of preaching contains little application. It is such a soft sell that nobody buys the product.

One can readily think of the kind of factors that help to get this point across. There must surely be the *enthusiasm* of the preacher which convinces the audience that he has something to say which is exciting and worth their attention, and which matters supremely.

'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel' (I Cor. 9:16). There is *sincerity*, the fact that the preacher really believes in what he is saying and is not merely going through a form of words which do not matter one way or the other. 'We are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence' (2 Cor. 2:17). There is *passion* where the congregation glimpse the strong feeling that the preacher has about the supreme importance of accepting and heeding the Word. 'I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart' (Rom. 9:1f). And there is *love*, whereby the audience grasp that the preacher is concerned for their eternal welfare and salvation and are stirred emotionally as well as intellectually. I have heard it remarked of R. A. Finlayson that whenever he came to speak of 'grace' there was a new light in his eyes and a fresh fire in his voice. Was not the title of Adam Burnet's book on preaching *Pleading with Men?* 'Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved' (Rom. 10:1). 'We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God' (2 Cor. 6:1). That is an accent that we need to recover. New Testament preaching means recovering the passion and concern that the apostles had to influence and change their audiences. Let us not think of our subject as purely intellectual. It affects our hearts as preachers as well as our minds.

Conclusion

Here, then, are five elements that go into preaching from the New Testament and each one of them is essential. Some of them will be hidden from view in the actual delivery. The hard work done on exegesis – the debates between commentators as to the correct meaning of the text – will not be mentioned, but the preacher should have done his homework faithfully. Equally it is essential that the work of interpretation shall have been carried out with care. How much harm has been done to the church by inappropriate literalism. The presentation and the application are vital in the actual preaching, but we should remember the Latin motto *Ars est celare artem*: the secret of art lies in concealing the art. Or to put it more theologically, the preacher must hide himself but make Jesus as visible as possible. That requires both hard work and the development of a personal relationship with God that is nourished by prayer. My hope is that this occasion may help us all to be more effective in this, the highest – but surely also the humblest – of callings.