

# The Pastor

**William Still**

Minister of Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen

Under the general title of "The Doctrine of the Church" I was asked to discuss the booklet of mine which has been extant for almost twenty years, *The Work of the Pastor*. The booklet consists of two sets of addresses delivered at the New Years of 1964/65 at Swanwick, and 1965/66 at Larne, N. Ireland. The Irish men had asked me simply to repeat the first set at their Conference the following year, but since the last word had not been spoken on the subject – *my* last word, then or now – I made a fresh start. You will not want me to "cough up" these addresses now, nor large tracts of them, but rather discuss their implications – the background being the ministry of systematic Bible teaching, which is now proliferating in Scotland and beyond, in face – it must be confessed – of much prejudice.

The thesis of the addresses, prepared after twenty years' experience, is that the work of the pastor is to feed the sheep with the Word, the finest of the wheat – by which is meant not a distilled essence of biblical theology (I don't know what kind of liquor wheat produces), but expounding the whole of the Scriptures with their variegated but unfolding truth with a view to building up the Church in rounded Christian character. When this is done the Spirit who gave the Word in the first place sets the members of the Church to work for the Lord, and in time the same effect is reproduced in other places, applying its character-building principles to the congregational or local situation in a variety of ways, kerygmatic, didactic, or social, even political!

The man who pooh-poohed these principles in a broadcast some years ago as leading merely to holy huddles, did not know what a survey of his members' outreach to the community, and a survey of ours, showed that we had an overwhelming advantage in the number of evangelical people serving the community in some form of social or community service. And his was *the* church of the city!

After twenty years in the ministry, then, with a good deal of Christian experience before it, it was plain to me that the teaching of the Word produced a character which sought unself-consciously to reproduce itself by the same means. After nearly twice twenty years in the ministry now, there is sufficient evidence that this is true – at home and abroad – to convince all but the cynics.

Speculating on how this particular practice started in Scotland, and why it has proliferated, it was necessary first to look into the history of Bible exposition, and its fruits through the ages, and I am indebted to James Philip for some research which he began recently into the history of systematic Bible ministry. If one thing is clear about the Old Testament it is that Israel was most herself when, at different stages in her career, she was expounding and seeking to live by the Torah of God – if not always systematically, yet applying it to her current situation, often with great thoroughness. You have the same application in the shorter history of the New Testament, as Luke remarked to Theophilus when he said that since many had sought to set down an account of the things most surely believed among the Christians, he also sought to write down an orderly account of them.

Indeed, looking back to the Old Testament as it is interpreted in the Acts of the Apostles, amid the primitive kerygma we have from Peter, Stephen and Paul remarkably systematic expositions of Old Testament doctrine leading up to the event of Christ. These are not "Gospel" sermons in the evangelistic sense, but teaching sermons. However, as James Philip points out, "The high dignity of the systematic pattern of ministry was often but indifferently maintained in the Christian church subsequently, and for long periods was obscured and even lost altogether, especially in the 100 years or so following the close of the New Testament era." May I interject here a recollection of my astonishment as a younger minister reading a sentence in Tom Torrance's Preface to his doctoral thesis, that it was his "firm conviction that the misunderstanding of the Gospel took place . . . as easily as in the second century."

Concerning the 100 years following the close of the New Testament era, James Philip goes on: "Homily took the place of exposition, as it has done since so often. Then came Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, the latter in particular, and much later, Chrysostom and Augustine. Following them there was an ebb tide, and even during the succeeding dark centuries where the Latin church revived, the preaching was far removed from expository." James Philip blames this partly on Christianity becoming the official Church of Rome with Constantine. I wonder myself how the Celtic church would compare with that general stricture. But, he goes on, "the Reformation with antecedents such as Wycliffe soon changed that situation with what has been called a 'wave of mighty Reformation preaching'. That expository preaching for which Calvin is famous, as also Swingli and Bullinger, and Luther perhaps less so, did not last long, for by the 17th century, and through the 18th, and certainly among the evangelicals of the 19th century, systematic expository preaching was hardly known. It was preaching by texts."

I would simply comment on that, that although Andrew Bonar's commentary on Leviticus suggests that a more

systematic pattern was at least present in his mind, yet he does not seem to have adopted it in the pulpit. Nor did McCheyne. Of course, many men through these centuries would occasionally resort to systematic Bible exposition of a book or two – it would be more than amazing if this were not so; but there seems to me little discernible trend towards sustained systematic teaching of the Bible within our ken until a man called Campbell Morgan of Westminster Chapel sought to engage in it to some extent, and much more his successor the good Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones. I myself had the privilege, seemingly by chance, of attending the service in the Chapel at which the old man, Campbell Morgan, in a flowing white beard handed over responsibility for that teaching ministry to Dr Lloyd-Jones. I felt then that history was in the making.

However, I need to interject that although the Puritans were largely preachers from texts rather than systematic Bible expositors, they certainly cover the ground of Biblical teaching in depth, and, as some of us believe, amplified and clarified Reformation insights. Surely few would deny that, whether they agree with all their insights or not. Some might even think that their contribution was too abysmally deep for them!

As to Dr Lloyd-Jones' ministry, although you could say of him that he covered with more than adequacy the teaching of the whole Bible, it was not by going through the Bible book by book, for I wonder how many or how few books of the Bible he taught systematically in 30 years: the Sermon on the Mount, Romans, Ephesians, and others. Of course, it was true of him – as we can see from his volumes – that he was able to walk through whole tracts of the Scriptures from the point of a text of even one word; yet it was not the same as covering the Bible book by book. And although his method was undoubtedly a *tour de force* to ransack almost every biblical implication and nuance of a text or word, yet it seems to me that it would have been better to have expounded the Scriptures in their own contexts, traversing the whole territory of Scripture itself, rather than scaling a few of its great heights and viewing the whole field from these. I wonder what you think.

That is not meant to be a crude criticism of a great man's work, from which many of us have greatly benefited, but an observation from experience. Surely it takes the whole of Scripture, rightly divided of course, to produce a whole man in Christ, a rounded Christian character; as I discovered many years ago after shying from the teaching of the book of Proverbs because I was not sure how to tackle it in the pulpit, or even in Bible Study. I found that to my amazement we never had such full attendances at mid-week Bible Study as when we read and studied Proverbs. People were fascinated by its practicalities and benefited from them enormously. Later on it was possible to sermonise one's way through the book on Sundays with great help from Derek Kinder's commentary. Since then one has gone through the book of Job similarly, on three occasions.

It is astonishing to discover that the whole Bible is so eminently preachable and teachable, despite one's many floundering mistakes. It is this which enhances one's estimate of the Holy volume as the very Word of God, to be treated with the profoundest reverence, not in a bibliolatrous sense, but as a living book working its beneficent will within us when the Spirit who inspired it is permitted to illuminate its pages and reveal its saving and edifying truth to crucify hearts and minds. In fact the difficulties one encounters in such a ministry are so few and so comparatively trivial that one can devote practically the whole of one's time to turning the Word into bread for men's souls. This is to be a pastor, a feeder of the sheep.

Of course we may get on our high horse and seek to know everything, not least to get the better of our critics, but when we have resisted the temptation to do aught but feed men's souls, even the beginnings of the fruit of it in individual lives, and in domestic situations, and in the general life of the congregation, are very marked.

But I have to tell you how I came to adopt a systematic expository ministry. It is perhaps almost shocking to have to admit that so far from having traced the fitful history of such preaching and having seen it as a good and excellent thing, I am afraid the truth is that I stumbled on it in innocence and ignorance. As I see it now, it was an inevitable stumble, which can only redound to the glory of God and His kindness in showing it to me, who am the least of the brethren, something which has been taken up and used in our land and beyond in an increasingly fruitful way.

I have only the vaguest recollection of how it started. I used to think it began in 1947 when daily Bible Reading Notes were first issued, prayer begun in earnest in our congregation, and the message turned from one of largely evangelistic emphasis to one of teaching the Word to young Christians, of whom there were many. I found, however, that it was as natural for people to be converted in a teaching meeting as in one specifically designed to the conviction and conversion of souls. It was the livingness of the Word when it was let through to men's consciences without quibbles and dilution that gripped them, and I discovered that the Holy Spirit was more than willing to bless every portion of the Word, provided one did one's home-work, and found out what the Word was saying exegetically, and what one was called upon by the Spirit to say to it expositively.

At that time (1947) I began tentatively a series of messages on the Letter of James, Galatians, Romans chapters 1 to 8, and Hebrews. As one preached week by week, the succeeding passage of each Letter followed in natural sequence; it seemed the right and inevitable thing to do, especially as the doctrine of salvation unfolded in Romans chapters 1 to 8. It was only later that I found to my astonishment that this way of preaching was regarded as unusual enough to be commented upon and severely criticised as an intolerably heavy way of

ministering the Word – a practice that ought to be reserved only for Bible commentators.

But on looking back through my history, I see that at Cowdenbeath in June 1946, only a year after the beginning of the ministry in Gilcomston – in the thick of a fiercely evangelistic assault on what was then a benighted town – when thirty of us (now scattered by the Lord to the four corners of the globe) descended on the community, I swept through Romans chapters 3 to 5 one night “on being justified”, and chapters 7 and 8 (I don’t know where the vital chapter 6 got to!) the next evening. These could hardly have been systematic expositions of these chapters in two nights, but seemed a necessary part of a Gospel mission. Yet at home, we were already going through books of the Bible systematically in mid-week study, and I should think that that was common then, where there was such a thing in a congregation, the former mid-week service (as the prayer meeting of the United Free Church of Scotland came to be known) having died out in the early 1920’s. Our mid-week Bible Study commenced three weeks after I was inducted in the month of July, and included our holiday week, and it has never stopped.

However, the matter of greatest significance to me between 1946 when Billy Graham started our Youth for Christ in Aberdeen, and 1947 when we really got down to feeding the many converts who were around, is that from the time the systematic ministry began numbers which until then were overflowing (since I began on the upsurge of interest following the end of the Second World War on two fronts, May and August 1945) suddenly grew smaller, and the light-hearted evangelistics fled! Incidentally (and paradoxically) our offerings greatly increased, and young converts began to seek the Lord’s will for their lives until at one point during the first ten years of the ministry we had about ten of our members on the mission field of Nigeria alone. Actions speak louder than words!

This is why I politely refused to listen to the criticisms of people who, for all they may have to show in other directions, have little or nothing to show in the lives of men. It is “by their fruits”, not their roots, that true servants of the Lord are known. This would be my criterion for retiring. When I feel that the Word of God as spoken by me has lost its grip on men’s minds, hearts, consciences and wills, and therefore on their practical lives, then I ought to stop, and leave the task to those far better equipped spiritually, as well as otherwise, to undertake it.

What I would like to say a word about now is not methods of covering the biblical ground, fascinated as I would be to discuss that, but rather what it is in essence in the Word which truly feeds souls – as distinct from merely informing their minds of scriptural facts. I suppose that the more one ranges through and through the Word, seeking to extract its practical essence to feed souls, the more one becomes aware of what is the essence of the essence, if I may put it like that. It is this (and I use a man who has recently meant quite a lot to me, Geerhardus Vos, formerly of Princeton, to say it for me). He says: “the death and resurrection of Christ constitutes the focal point of all biblical revelation”. I suppose that may seem axiomatic, and obvious, to you, but to have seen the truth of it in preaching through the Bible several times one appreciates the statement as a wonderful crystallization of the truth discovered. And I would go further and say that the essence of the truth which has made all the difference to the calibre of the Christians one has seen grow up and go out into service is that which centres in Romans chapter 6, and indeed in that one crucial and critical verse 11, “Reckon therefore yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, and alive unto God in Jesus Christ”.

I believe that even where there has been a whole system of Bible exposition, but not the faithful use of the surgeon’s knife (the sword of the Spirit) in the teaching of sanctification, we have merely theoretic Christians, who prove to be of little or no earthly or indeed heavenly use at all. But I would nevertheless maintain that you cannot know the essence of the truth until you have extracted it from the totality of its body in the whole Word. Vos says also: “The pervasive meaning of Scripture should be brought to bear on any single portion”. These two statements by Vos are complementary and comprehensive. Hence the double emphasis on both the sweep of biblical truth, and yet concentration on the core of it.

One other summation of the truth which I find helpful in feeding, for example, my 3 to 7 year old infants, is the truth about the Trinity. You can give the profoundest theology to these infants and get an intelligent response from them too, if you go about it the right way and scale down the concepts to the simple domesticity of the Trinity which they can understand.

I must confess that I am never far away from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in my preaching, nor from the dimension of evil, personal and imperial, and never far away from some aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity.

How Bible teaching can be boring, with all the fascination of these impenetrable yet magnetic and satisfying truths, I do not know. And yet I do know. At the heart of the problem, whatever else can be said about it, must be the spiritual state of the preacher or teacher, namely that self and sin have not been consistently and progressively slain, and his heart made to burn with the livingness of the truth, especially that of the death and resurrection of Christ, the dimension of evil, and the Trinity. Which subjects, of course, encompass the whole range of Christian doctrine, and take the whole Bible to be fully understood.

Then there is the hard work necessary before one comes before one's people with balanced meals, not necessarily manigificently garnished, as by a professional chef, but soundly, solidly, fully prepared, although that is a task far from easy. But it is paramount for the true pastor, for he, like the inexperienced mother of her first child, who must lay all aside, even the clamant needs of her perhaps thoughtless young husband, in order to attend to her baby, the pastor must feed his flock. No trouble is too great for the young mother to go to to feed and otherwise attend to her child, in order to see it grow. The nurse or doctor at the clinic will expect to see that the child is growing, and will want to know the reason why, if it does not. The same here. We must see people grow. Some may grow away, alas, but some will grow up and into the fellowship. If none do so there is surely something wrong, and it is ours to find out what it is, if no one is growing, including ourselves.

I don't mean by this that we must necessarily expect speedy results, but some results, straws in the wind at least, else we must ask ourselves serious questions when we have such dynamic material in our hands. We must of course trust the Book, and the Book's living laws, and devote ourselves to the same with all our might, being distracted neither to the right hand nor to the left.

I sometimes think that many pastors have too many irons in the fire. I know it is not easy to concentrate sufficiently to specialise on the preaching of the Word when there are so many demands upon us, but when our priorities are right we simply must put our pastoral work first, and that is primarily preaching, from which what we often call 'pastoral work' ought largely to emerge. Otherwise, we will diffuse our energies so widely and superficially that much of our effort will come to nothing, except one kind of exhaustion or another. It is imperative for the building of Christ's church that the people be fed with food convenient and nourishing, and it is ours to find out that food in the Word and distinguish it from more technical considerations. For it is so easy to be preoccupied with defending the Word of God (and someone must do it for us pastors) that we neglect to let it loose among the people to make its own mighty impact. There is one thing sure: what you say about the Word of God will neither save souls nor edify them, but the Word itself, even read without expounding it, if the preacher is right, and it is watered by prayer, will undoubtedly do its own work. Nonetheless, we must see that in expounding the Word we do not depart so far from its own terms and usages and ethos to rob it of its inherent power and anaesthetise its saving energy. Of course the Word may take its time, like the growth of the oak tree which took many years to split the old Cathedral wall, but the action is inevitable once the seed is planted.

Of the many things I would discuss concerning the practicalities of gathering and upbuilding Christ's church, one I must mention assumes ever greater significance to me the longer I live. It is that the Church has failed to take hold of the covenant of Grace and teach it and apply it to ensure a future for Christ's church among its own children. How few today bring up their children within the Covenant!

I heard one of Iain MacKenzie's late Sunday evening programmes on T.V. in which he exposed what was supposed to be the life of an intumed Calvinistic community somewhere in the Highlands. The whole emphasis was upon adult conversion to Christ after profound repentance and self-loathing, thereafter apparently to live the narrowest kind of life conceivable. I had never believed that these remote areas were so devoid of understanding of the Covenant in respect of their children until an elder from the Highlands said that he and his wife had never heard the Covenant of Grace in respect of children expounded as a practical possibility, until they came to the Lowlands. He confessed that formerly they would have waited to see how their children would develop and whether they would "decide" for Christ on reaching years of understanding and discretion. Fortunately his young children were then told that their infant baptism by the deliberate act of their parents' faith meant that they were being "claimed" for Christ, and would be brought up in the Lord. Since then these children and many others have grown up straight and tall in Christ, not without difficulties, but none that believing and loving parents could not handle. Indeed, the faith of these youngsters develops so early that by the age of five and six they are not only conscious of their love for Christ but are amazingly responsive to the Word and are eager to partake of the Lord's Supper.

In view of the church's unwillingness to implement the obligation of the Covenant in respect of her children, I was shocked to come across this in Andrew Bonar's diary: "Lord, my children are long in seeking Thee" Considering our experience during the last twenty years I found this difficult to understand, and would cite David Searle's article in the April issue of *Life & Work* on "The Kirk's 'vanishing' children", to whose insights on this matter I have before paid tribute.

As far as our congregation is concerned, the practice is that all our children except the very youngest are twice in church on Sundays with their parents. The little ones are present on Sunday mornings for half an hour when their diet is generally some simplified form of the message to be given to the adults. This leads to a continuity which promises to provide church members and office-bearers in the future, and that promise has already been sufficiently fulfilled to afford confidence that this will be so. All this stems from the frequent promise in the Pentateuch that God's Israel will perpetrate from generation to generation, with the most striking reference that in Deut. 7.9, that those who remain faithful to the faithful God and love Him and keep His commandments

will go on "to a thousand generations".

This is a radically different concept from that of ministers frantically flying all over the place to evangelise other people's youngsters while the children of their own flock are in the wilderness and lost to the cause. Even travelling evangelists and Bible teachers may have sad and sorry situations in their own homes. It is a truly biblical principle that charity begins at home, for if the church builds truly Christian homes then the church will not only survive, but grow and reach out to the uttermost ends of the earth, and this is what we all earnestly desire to see developing in Scotland. There is great need for it.

I add this: the growth in the Lord of families in Christian fellowship soon turns the church into one large family, and if those families avoid the temptations to become cliquish and inturbed because they are grounded in the whole Word of God and know their responsibility for friend and neighbour, then that family of families is able to provide a warm and friendly environment in which to bring susceptible and perhaps even unsusceptible people, and introduce them into what a Christian church really is.

I recall my friend George Patterson (who with Geoffrey Bull and George Bell went to China as a missionary had to flee to India via Tibet with the Communist take-over) telling me that he was sure the groups of the Little Flock in China would survive because they had no organisation that the Communists could find and object to. Recent statistics from China have proved his point. I think it was during the Kennedy/Cuban crisis in the early 1960's when Khrushchev banged ever over-run by the Communists, the only kind of Christian community that could possibly survive would be one so simple, domestic, unorganised, and so little regimented or structured that it would not be found other than in simple gatherings for worship, study and prayer, and then individual Christians living the life wisely amongst their fellows.

If we could achieve something like that in Scotland without the fearsome stimulus of Russian or other invasion, in time – but I stress, in time – not only our church but our nation would be transformed. I have no illusions as to how long it takes to teach this to a congregation. We at home are only learning it after 37 years. I know that if we had been better Christians it would have taken a shorter time, but not much shorter.

In some places, a whole generation, maybe more than a generation, may need to be replaced before such a creative and constructive simplicity can be achieved. Many older people simply refuse to learn, and would die, and do die – if not in their sins certainly in blissful ignorance of what it takes to form a real Christian church. I know that God can do it suddenly by overwhelming revival. We are surely hardly against that, if that is His will; but short of it, and I pray for it with all my heart, the task is to roll up our sleeves and get down to it with the co-operation of the Lord's slower dynamical power.