

The Embers of Preaching and the Flames of Piety

Peter Sanlon

'Fan into flame the gift of God' 2 Timothy 1:6

Evangelicals are known for holding to the necessity of a strong preaching ministry—but how strong is the ministry of preaching today? We know that there are those in the history of Christianity who are peculiarly gifted at preaching, and we know the ministry of preaching has been at times strong, and at other times weak. It must be a legitimate question to ask—how strong is the ministry of preaching in our present day?

The question could be asked in more personal ways—when was the last time a sermon gave you a deeper experience of the wonderful grace and love of God? Does your church tend to provide sermons that naturally enrich your relationship with God, or do you struggle to find useful things that you can put into practice?

There are reasons to suspect that the ministry of preaching within evangelical circles is presently rather weak. It was anecdotal evidence that initially started the author thinking about this topic—but when starting to analyse cultural trends that are current (rather than more distant historical trends), anecdotal evidence is often the main stimulus one is presented with. A hypothesis can then tentatively be explored in a more analytical fashion and found useful or wanting. This article shall seek to present such reasoning.

The anecdotal evidence that was the germ seed of this article was simply the large numbers of people from within evangelical circles who express dissatisfaction with preaching. From Ireland, England, America and Australia, I have heard a large number of faithful, enthusiastic and biblically literate Christians complain that they find the preaching they listen to regularly, to be of a poor standard and not very helpful to them in their relationship with God. After hearing a number of people talk about this I began to notice common threads in the complaints. Again and again people complained of a 'dryness' and a 'patronising tone'. There are many who feel frustrated that every week

they hear a simple issue preached about ‘as if it is a complex issue’. Numerous people are exasperated that they are constantly told the preaching in their church is of a high quality but no matter how attentively it is listened to, God still appears to be distant and cold. Others are told by a friend that the sermon was ‘excellent’ but when they are asked what was so good about it, no meaningful answer can be given. One person put it well, ‘The preacher tells me life is about a personal relationship with God, but then he seems to just give me impersonal facts.’ One can dismiss such complaints as the general ungratefulness of the uneducated, or view it with glee as the inevitable rejection that comes from being faithful. However when the comments are so frequent, so similar and when they come from well respected mature Christians—could it be worth pausing for a moment and asking ourselves that question again—How strong is our preaching in this present day?

As I have thought about this question I have tentatively come to the following conclusion—**Our preaching ministry has been weakened by victories within evangelicalism.**

Our generation has been bequeathed great gifts by God. There have been wonderful victories and advances won in the arena of preaching over the past fifty years. To read the history books and see what the state of the churches was like a few generations ago is a sobering affair—God has graciously done a great work and changed the situation dramatically. There is no room for vain pride as there is much to be done, but that should not blunt the truth that in the last fifty years, perhaps even in the last twenty years, huge advances have been made within evangelicalism to strengthen the ministry of preaching.

However, it could be possible that the wonderful victories won are bringing with them problems that are sapping the vitality of preaching from our churches. It is a well-worn truth that our greatest strengths are also our weaknesses. This adage could prove to be the key to analysing the recurrent complaints about preaching in the present day. The gift of biblical preaching is a gift given by God to his church; it should be fanned into flame. In recent years Evangelicals have dug up the gift of preaching in an astonishingly impressive way. It would be sad if it turned out that future generations review our agendas and conclude that the very soil we dug up was thrown on the glowing embers of our preaching ministry.

As a means of testing the thesis that some of our greatest advances have brought with them the side effect of weakening our preaching, this article will mention nine great advances made by evangelicals, and suggest ways in which these good victories have contained within them hidden seeds that threaten to undermine our ministry of preaching. We need to be deeply thankful for the advances listed below—but also more aware of the subtle dangers these advances pose to powerful and God-glorifying preaching.

Great Evangelical Advances that have weakened Preaching

1. The Tools of Exposition are widely taught

Charles Simeon learned from Claude's 'Essay on the Composition of a Sermon' that it was possible to teach men principles for expositing a text. Teaching the tools of exposition has advanced dramatically in recent years. The principles are outlined in numerous books and modelled by many preachers. We must be very thankful for this great advance.

However the seed of a problem resides in this advance, in that there is the danger of assuming that understanding and using the tools of exposition is the key to being a good preacher. They are important, but it could be that preachers who worked before they were widely known were actually better preachers than many who use them today with ease. Is there not something more to being a preacher than handling the Bible well? Is it possible that we have become satisfied with a rarefied, formulaic adherence to tools that were always intended to be tools, not masters?

2. Clarity and Simplicity is encouraged

If you have ever suffered the experience of listening to a rambling, confused and technical sermon, you will know that we should be grateful there is now a general acceptance that sermons ought to be clear and simple enough to understand! J. C. Ryle modelled this by preaching his sermons to his servant girl before speaking to his more educated audience. Clarity and simplicity are wonderful advances.

There may be two problems that have developed as a result of the drive for clarity. Firstly, there can be the unspoken assumption that making things clear is the principle task of a preacher. The preacher can then spend a lot of time trying to explain issues in the passage—such a focus tends to produce a

patronising tone. People are quick to notice this! Secondly, our desire for simplicity has led to many definitions and phrases becoming accepted jargon in preaching. The phrases have developed as simple explanations of key ideas in Christianity; such a thing is desirable. However many of these are simple to the point of ignoring rich and deep insights of previous generations of Bible teachers. This problem is all the more serious as the areas of theology that have been summarised by these catchphrases are naturally the ones most central to explaining the gospel. To take one example; ‘Faith’ is explained simply as being ‘trust’. To trust in Jesus is to ‘submit to his kingship in all areas of my life’. This is a common way of explaining the idea of Faith in the Bible, and is true in so far as it goes. However it ignores to its peril other ways of viewing faith. So for example many theologians have understood faith to be closely related to love, as John Calvin wrote—

We are united to Jesus by a faith which is not reigned, but which springs from sincere affection, which he describes by the name of love; for no man believes purely in Christ who does not cordially embrace him, and, therefore, by this word he has well expressed the power and nature of faith.¹

We today would not think to explore the idea that the word ‘love’ well expresses the power and nature of faith. On that view, faith would be an experience of being moved by the wonder of the beauty of Jesus and caring passionately for Him. This conjures up very different ideas to the more normal explanation of submitting to Jesus’ kingship.

Many other simplifying phrases could be explored, such as the use of the word ‘judgement’ to summarise the Bible’s teaching on wrath and hell. Our achievement of clarity and simplicity could have inadvertently led to modern evangelical preachers ignoring huge insights to the Christian life, and as a result presenting a one sided picture of Christianity that while containing much truth, is also at odds with much the Bible says.

3. Unbelievers are welcomed in Church

Not that long ago unbelievers would find attending a church service a very uncomfortable experience! It is a wonderful advance that church is done in a way that is welcoming to outsiders—and has led to many people embracing the gospel for the first time.

It could be that some of the assumptions present in this advance have caused evangelicals to develop a patronising tone in preaching. Church leaders often have little contact with non-Christians in their daily lives, and tend to forget that they are used to analysing subtle issues in life and are often highly intelligent! Making things welcoming to outsiders is a matter of being warm and friendly, not assuming that they are not clever enough to understand our supposedly intellectual teaching. Outsiders notice when evangelicals feel awkward about issues such as the Lord's Supper, financial giving, hell or teaching topics that clash with modern secularism. There is no need to feel awkward about these issues—unbelievers know they are coming to the church as opposed to some other gathering such as the cinema. As soon as we start to try and gloss over the distinctive nature of our meetings, for the sake of outsiders, we unwittingly develop a patronising tone in preaching that non-Christians are very quick to comment on.

4. Emotional excesses are avoided

There are areas of Christianity where emotional excess dominates the agenda. Modern evangelicalism has avoided this problem and in so doing made a great advance.

Sadly the desire to avoid the charge of emotionalism may have led preachers to fall into the ditch that lies on the other side of the path— not emotional excess but dry explanation of facts. This problem of rejecting the Biblical balance in favour of an opposite extreme to a real problem is not new. Jonathan Edwards was frustrated by preachers who were dry and rejected affectionate preaching due to the emotional excesses of other groups—

We may learn how great their error is, who are for discarding all religious affections, as having nothing solid or substantial in them. There seems to be too much of a disposition this way, prevailing in this land at this time. Because many who, in the late extraordinary season, appeared to have great religious affections, did not manifest a right temper of mind, and ran into many errors, in the time of their affections, and the heat of their zeal; raised and swallowed up with joy and zeal, seem to have returned like the dog to his vomit; hence religious affections in general are grown out of credit with great numbers, as though true religion did not at all consist in them. Thus we easily and naturally run from one extreme to

another....The devil sees it to be for his interest to go another way to work, and to propagate and establish a persuasion, that all affections and sensible emotions of the mind, in things of religion, are nothing at all to be regarded, but are rather to be avoided, and carefully guarded against, as things of a pernicious tendency. This he knows is the way to bring all religion to a mere lifeless formality, and effectively shut out the power of godliness, and everything which is spiritual, and to have all true Christianity turned out of doors. For although to true religion there must indeed be something else besides affection; yet true religion consists so much in the affections, that there can be no true religion without them. He who has no religious affection, is in a state of spiritual death, and is wholly destitute of the powerful, quickening, saving influences of the Spirit of God upon his heart. As there is no true religion where there is nothing else but affection, so there is no true religion where there is no religious affection. As on the one hand there must be light in the understanding, as well as an affected fervent heart; where there is a kind of light without heat, a head stored with notions and speculations, with a cold and unaffected heart, there can be nothing divine in that light, that knowledge is no true spiritual knowledge of divine things.²

Thus the debate has been worked through before. Edwards knew of emotional excess and rejected it. But he looked on the preachers who guarded against affectionate passions and urged them to consider that in going from one extreme to another they had lost the very essence of true Christianity. Could it be that the accusation of ‘dryness’ and the lack of personal relational warmth in modern preaching flows from our generation falling into the same trap the devil sprang in New England during the 1700’s?

5. There is a Drive to Train Gospel Workers

It is a wonderful blessing to have networks, conferences and teaching on the recruitment of gospel workers. There are many schemes in which people can be trained in ministry skills and Bible handling. This is a great advance.

The possible danger that lurks beneath the surface of this advance is a preoccupation with intellectual ability and a neglect of other relational skills. As we seek to train and educate, it is easy to forget that ministers need to have a love for three things — Jesus, the Bible and people. Evangelicalism has not

been very strong on exploring what it means to love people in ways that are genuine and relational. This point is hardly dealt with by saying that the most loving thing to do for a person is to tell them the gospel. Thinking that approach solves the problem leads to a preaching that turns people off the gospel, rather than winning them to it. It could be that in our drive to educate and train gospel workers, we have inadvertently underplayed the human relational aspect of preaching and ministry.

6. The Passage must be Applied

We know that God's Word is meant to change lives. The truth of a passage should not be left to float endlessly round the listeners' heads—a preacher must apply the text. It is a great advance that we know this is a key principle of preaching.

This advance may have led to an unexpected problem—there is an overwhelming tendency to focus on external activities in application. The application turns out to be an invitation to come to a prayer meeting, Bible study or encouragement to do evangelism. This focus on the external is harmful as it ignores the deeper and prior internal aspect. We ought to recognise that the internal desires and attitudes are the foundational aspect of a person, and it is to these the arrows of application need to be shot. Aiming for the external only results in a superficial change, not the deep heart change the Spirit brings about. Focusing on the external application of a passage also tends to produce a heavy handed shepherding approach, where the preacher gives the impression that he knows what is best for other people's lives, when in actual fact the situation may be more complex. Listeners begin to feel squeezed and pressurised into doing the applications. Once they give in and do the activities suggested they are given a false assurance that they are experiencing genuine relationship with God. In actual fact they may merely be ticking external check lists, while the deeper internal reality of a relationship with God starves and shrivels up.

7. Bible Study Groups are commonplace

The Bible is a rich revelation of God, and there are many ways to proclaim its riches. Church used to be focused on pulpit preaching in a way that marginalised other methods of word ministry. It is a great advance that Bible study groups are now established as a core ministry of almost all evangelical churches. As a different method to preaching, they bring many distinctive strengths.

However, a side effect of this advance may have been to undermine the strengths and centrality of pulpit preaching. Only in preaching is the church family gathered to grow together. As the most authoritative method of proclamation, preaching displays the glorious authority of the gospel to command all to repent and cast their hopes on Jesus Christ. The gospel is not up for debate, it is not an idea to be played with—it is God declaring that he is God and in Christ has conquered sin, wrath and death. The power and majesty of the Gospel is exhibited by pulpit preaching in a way that it cannot be by other methods. People can be exhorted, moved, threatened and affected by preaching in a way very conducive to awakening genuine faith and love in Jesus. That is not to deny the distinctive strengths of study groups, it is just to affirm the central and valuable contribution the pulpit makes.

It could be that the growth of study groups has diminished our appreciation of pulpit preaching. There may even be a tendency to try and turn preaching into a study group type experience, which leads to deep confusion as people wonder why bother with the preaching at all! Preachers need to recover the sense of the worth of pulpit preaching, and engage in it with the enthusiasm demanded by the task.

8. Strategic thinking on Church Planting is valued

In the past church growth has been determined mostly by outmoded ecclesiastical structures. Thankfully advances have been made and a lot of thought now goes into strategic planning of church planting.

The danger with this is that it has consistently been the case down the last two thousand years that once church leaders turn to thinking about strategy they tend to drift into relying on the strategy and organisation rather than the proclamation of the gospel. God's work appears to be done, but it is done in the strength of man rather than God. The living, energising preaching that sparked the initial growth of the movement becomes rarefied as its strength is assumed, and attention is turned to more organisational matters.

Strategic thinking is good, but it should flow from growth arising from preaching. There are indications that things could begin to develop the other way round- strategic planning causing growth. One ominous sign of this problem is the way many principles being discussed by evangelicals are actually

the same ones taught by the American Church Growth movement fifteen years ago. The result of that movement was the decline of preaching and spread of management oriented churches. While we pursue strategic thinking, we will have to be very careful that preaching remains central and not assumed. Once that subtle shift occurs it is inevitable that preaching will decline in power.

9. There are strong Evangelical networks

The Bible commends friendships and relationships between different church families. It is a wonderful advance that modern evangelicalism is marked by a genuine networking between like minded churches—nationally and globally. Evangelical networks are strengthened by visits, internet communication and conferences. For all this we ought to be thankful.

The negative side effect of this strong network appears to be a certain inward looking tendency. We have developed an unwillingness to seriously engage with and learn from those not thought to be in our network. People who have not yet grasped the things we value in one area of ministry, are assumed to have nothing to contribute in other areas, in which they may actually be more biblical than us. People would rather read an evangelical summary of a controversy than the writings of people who are on the other side of a debate. This inward looking tendency has a number of effects. Firstly, people can be caricatured and misrepresented unfairly. Secondly, a smugness and self-satisfaction develops among those within the network. Thirdly, those who speak for the accepted network are given an unduly uncritical hearing. All this leads to ignoring the lessons and writings of church history where we find many riches and treasures we neglect to our peril. Our own thinking becomes unsubtle and narrow, often affected by the spirit of our age more than we care to admit.

The focusing on our present network to the exclusion of past teachers who ran the race before us is all the more ironic as many of the things we are facing in our generation have already been dealt with by men of greater insight than us. We would benefit from pondering their insights. Perhaps some of the problems with our preaching today would have been avoided if we had listened more carefully to men such as Augustine, Athanasius, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Francis Schaeffer, Charles Spurgeon and Puritans such as Jeremiah Burroughs, John Owen, Thomas Brooks, Ebenezer Erskine, John Flavel and Richard Sibbes, to name but a few.

Conclusion

The Embers of Preaching and the Flames of Piety

The Christian life is one of feeling deeply thankful to God for his gracious gifts and mourning with sadness our weaknesses and failures. As we weep for our sin we are caught up in the depth of love for God that arises from realising that it is at our precise point of sin that he meets us with forgiveness that cost him on the cross. A Christian who is too ashamed of failure to bring it to God, is somebody who has forgotten the power of the gospel and needs to contemplate again the reason God became a man. The gospel liberates us to admit that we make mistakes, and offers us reason to seek out ways to improve our service to God.

It would be easy for us, as evangelicals, to rejoice in achievements, and forget to be deeply thankful to God for them. It would also be perfectly in line with our fallen nature to assume that we have made no mistakes and to ignore the critiques raised by this paper. To do so would seem incongruous with the tenor of the gospel life. The analysis of this paper may be flawed, but if it is even partly true then it gives us a wonderful opportunity to repent and say sorry to God for things left undone. Pondering how to improve our preaching can only bring glory to God and more Christ-like service to his people.

So in a spirit of humility and charity, with a desire to better serve the church, the central thesis of this article has been that our preaching ministry has been weakened by victories within evangelicalism. To help us seek a way to improve our preaching, can any theological reflection help us see why these particular victories have unexpectedly resulted in the negative side effects detailed? Is there an underlying theological weakness in contemporary evangelicalism which could be addressed to help us keep hold of the advances while correcting the weaknesses?

The tentative suggestion of the author is that the underlying problem which has been at work over the past years is a loss of the 'affective theology' taught by men such as John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and many of the Puritans. This is not the place to go into a detailed history of the affective tradition—why and when it has been excluded from contemporary conservative evangelical circles. The history is complex and the reasons even more so. Suffice to say that the affectionate teaching of Jonathan Edwards is little more than an explanation of

what it really means to have a relationship with God. He argued that facts were necessary for a relationship, but the foundational and crucial thing in a relationship is more to do with feeling the passion of love, the joy of thankfulness, the sadness of sin, the eager hunger for heaven and the zeal to win people to Christ. Talking about the activities that may accompany such passions is no substitute for stirring up the passions. We step back from that tradition for many reasons—culture, other groups’ excesses and our own culpable sinfulness. Sermons end up becoming explanations of facts within a passage because fundamentally we feel more comfortable with such cold lifeless things than we do with the immensity of a God of passion and power. People complain that sermons do not seem to be an experience of hearing God speak—because we have shifted the agenda to such an extent that hearing God speak is no longer the aim of a sermon. We are too scared to hear God speak, so we preach our non relational framework instead. This should not surprise us—for it is exactly the kind of thing our sinful nature tends to cause. It is the essence of sin that it creates a desire within us to avoid genuine relationship with God. Unless we actively guard against the influence of sin in this area it will bear fruit.

When God speaks he stirs up a deep love and trust in Jesus Christ. Our sermons are weak because we have forgotten that love requires more than facts, and the passion of love for Christ is set alight only by preaching that is not scared of relational engagement with the text, God and people. As John Calvin wrote—

Doctrine is not an affair of the tongue, but of the life; it is not apprehended by the intellect and memory merely, like other branches of learning; but is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds its seat of habitation in the inmost recesses of the heart...the spiritual commencement of a good life is when the internal affections are sincerely devoted to God.³

While most evangelicals would agree with this theoretically, we have somehow allowed our preaching to develop in ways that are not shaped by this priority and nature of an internal relationship. The Bible story is designed to stir up the affections for God, but we shy away from this very goal of Scripture. The result is a loss of what the reformers called piety. John Calvin talks about piety as follows—

Properly speaking, we cannot say that God is known where there is no religion or piety...although our mind cannot conceive of God, without rendering some worship to him, it will not, however, be sufficient simply to hold that he is the only being whom all ought to worship and adore, unless we are also persuaded that he is the fountain of all goodness, and that we must seek everything in him, and in none but him. My meaning is: we must be persuaded not only that as he once formed the world, so he sustains it by his boundless power, governs it by his wisdom, preserves it by his goodness, in particular, rules the human race with justice and judgment, bears with them in mercy, shields them by his protection; but also that not a particle of light, or wisdom, or justice, or power, or rectitude, or genuine truth, will anywhere be found, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause; in this way we must learn to expect and ask all things from him, and thankfully ascribe to him whatever we receive. For this sense of the divine perfections is the proper master to teach us piety, out of which religion springs. By piety I mean that union of reverence and love to God which the knowledge of his benefits inspires. For, until men feel that they owe everything to God, that they are cherished by his paternal care, and that he is the author of all their blessings, so that nought is to be looked for away from him, they will never submit to him in voluntary obedience; nay, unless they place their entire happiness in him, they will never yield up their whole selves to him in truth and sincerity.⁴

Calvin was not satisfied with an accurate explanation of the facts of the Gospel—he realised that the whole point of preaching was to stir up a ‘sense of’ God’s wonder, to make men ‘feel’ the reality of their dependence on God—in short to place their entire ‘happiness’ in God. Piety was the word Calvin used to denote this warm, experiential, heart felt depth of personal relationship which is the fruit of the gospel. We have all seen and admired piety in other Christians. When we do not get fed with preaching that aids the growth of piety in ourselves we feel starved of the spiritual food our souls need. Piety is nothing more than a real relationship with God; our preaching ought always to tend towards the stirring up of piety. Dealing with the matters of the heart should be our default position; it should naturally arise from our sermons, not be found despite them. To the extent that our preaching has lost the affectionate relational aspect of the gospel, our lives let the vitality of true piety

seep out, leaving behind a cold mechanistic life style. To put it bluntly—a sermon that does not stir up a deeper love for Jesus is not a Christian sermon. It may have many excellent features and could possibly be a good lecture, but it is nonetheless a failure as a sermon.⁵

The gospel is a fire that should set the world alight with passion for God. God has graciously preserved the embers of preaching in our day. This paper has highlighted many wonderful advances for which we should be more grateful than we often are. However, in so far as these advances have brought side effects that have smothered the relational affective aspect of Christianity, we have great need to seek God's forgiveness and help. It should surely be our desire to fan the flames of the gift of preaching, so that the joy of true piety can be felt once more in our lives, and the lives of those we preach to.

PETER SANLON is from N. Ireland and is now at Cambridge doing postgraduate study on Augustine.

ENDNOTES

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on John's Gospel*, John 16:27.
2. Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, Part 1, Section III. www.jonathanedwards.com
3. John Calvin, *Institutes* III.vi.4, 5. Translation by Beveridge.
4. John Calvin, *Institutes* I.2.ii, Translation by Battles.
5. This love is, of course, as rich and varied as the character of God and the Bible story line themselves. Such a statement in no way implies a simplistic repetitive form of preaching — it rather flows from the recognition that the love of God is the essence of the matter.