

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Epworth Review* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_epworth-review-01.php

Giving Voice to the Word

Reflections on the College of Preachers 1960-2005

Stephen Wright

1. The story in brief

The College of Preachers was founded in 1960. It came from the vision of a small group of Anglicans concerned about the quality of preaching in their Church, and the need to provide its clergy with ongoing help in this vital area of ministry. Douglas Cleverley Ford became the first director, continuing in this role until 1974 while remaining in parish ministry. He ran residential courses for clergy and edited regular 'papers' for those who became members of the College, offering encouragement and sermon ideas. He also produced many collections of sermons and other books. The College has never had its own building; this has enabled it to 'travel light' and respond flexibly to current needs.

Anecdotal evidence from some who attended one or more of the early courses testifies to their impact. The personal influence of Ford and Donald Coggan (the guiding spirit and first chairman of the College) was clearly considerable. There was a sense that the College was sharing expertise in an aspect of ministry for which clergy were, on the whole, inadequately prepared in their normal training. More than that, it helped sustain a vision of the importance of the preaching ministry in an era of theological and social ferment.

We can identify four key areas of development in the College over its lifetime.

Lay and ordained preachers

First, the range of those reached by courses, conferences and the Journal (as the 'papers' became) has widened considerably, especially through the extension of the College's ministry to lay as well as ordained preachers. This started to happen early in the College's life; now, on many courses, lay preachers outnumber the ordained. This may reflect the fact that on the whole ordained ministers are better prepared for the preaching ministry than previously. College events continue to be received enthusiastically, though, by both lay and ordained preachers,

Giving Voice to the Word

and a biennial national conference for 150-200 participants has become an established highlight.

Ecumenical ethos

Second, the College has branched out from its Anglican roots to be fully ecumenical in its embrace. Again, the first steps in this development were taken quite early, but it is only in the last decade or so that this has been seriously reflected in the makeup of the team of tutors and the ethos of activities. Since 2004, the College has had its first non-Anglican chairman, the Methodist Lord (Leslie) Griffiths.

The ecumenical ethos of the College contributes enormously to our advocacy of the preaching ministry, for it is clear that we are not promoting one particular style of preaching, but something more fundamental – a continuing ministry of the word which can take shape in a great variety of forms. It also opens up possibilities for rich cross-fertilization between one preaching tradition and another.

In the early days, Anglican participants commented on the strong sense of fellowship on the courses, transcending all awareness of churchmanship differences. On a wider interdenominational plane this continues to be a vital dimension of our gatherings. This is not achieved by evading profound differences and just concentrating on the practicalities of ‘how’ to preach (an impossibility anyway, given the variety of purposes and contexts of preaching in the different churches). Rather, within a commitment to a generous scriptural orthodoxy, we seek to foster a sense of openness to the word of God through whatever mouth it may come; a recognition that through and beyond forms of expression shaped by tradition, the living God may have a fresh word to speak for us today.

One of the most valued parts of recent conferences has been the opportunity for participants to reflect back to a preacher, after an interval, what they have *heard* – not to pass judgement, nor interrogate, but to continue the ‘sacred conversation’ begun in the sermon.¹ It is *through* that attentive, corporate, theocentric route, which respects the freedom of God, the diversity of his spokespeople and the variety of ways in which even a single sermon may be heard, that practical wisdom about preaching can emerge.

Teamwork in training

A third development has been from training provided largely in a ‘top-down’ fashion by the director and a few assistants, to training provided by a team of tutors with a range of backgrounds and skills and

using a variety of methods. Partly, of course, this has been an inevitable consequence of expansion. But it also reflects changes in dominant models of teaching and learning, and awareness of the variety of learning styles.

From the early days there was an important element of practical learning, in that course participants were required to preach sermons and have them critiqued. Now nearly all events contain a wider mixture of input from tutors and interactive learning of various types. There is a perception that not only do different tutors have distinctive gifts to bring, but participants will also learn a lot from each other. As with the ecumenical dimension, this approach preserves us from the heresy that there is 'only one way to do it', and from the danger of producing (even accidentally) embarrassing 'clones' of a particular practitioner. It enables the development of skills to be rooted in the actual experience of individual preachers, resourced by the learning, insight and experience of the tutor, rather than limited to generalized instruction from 'on high'.

This changed learning ethos is seen not only in events but also in the Journal, which now offers sermons from a wide range of preachers, as well as articles and book reviews. This reflects the fact that there are now far more printed and web-based aids for the preacher; so what the College is in a unique position to offer is not so much basic theological-exegetical assistance as a wealth of *models* of actual contemporary preaching, and ideas about it, which will stimulate preachers in the creative pursuit of their calling.

Academic accreditation

The final key area of development is that of academic accreditation. Several of the founders of the College were distinguished academics; the early 'papers' and subsequent Journals show serious engagement with theological issues. It is only in recent times, however, that the College has lived up to the academic aspect of its name by offering university-accredited courses. Since 1999, it has offered open-learning programmes in preaching at Certificate and Masters level, in partnership with Spurgeon's College, London, and validated by the University of Wales.

This development must not be misconstrued as a departure from the original vision of offering practical help to serving ministers. Rather, it is a welcome sign that the study of preaching – 'homiletics' – is recognized as a discipline in its own right, rather than being a mere adjunct of one or more theological fields – biblical studies, hermeneutics, Christian doctrine, liturgical studies. Although close connection with these and other disciplines is the lifeblood of homiletics, there is ample evidence to

Giving Voice to the Word

suggest that preachers flounder without specific attention being paid, in initial and continuing training, to the act of preaching itself.

The Certificate course is designed for those who are testing out a vocation, but is also suitable for some who have been lay preachers in various denominations for some years, but feel that their equipment for this task has been inadequate. The Masters course enables established preachers to reflect on their preaching at depth in the light of theological principles and social/intellectual currents. It is already functioning to equip gifted practitioners in their training and encouragement of others. Our move into academic accreditation has strengthened our foundations, while fuelling our programme of non-accredited courses and publications with ideas and freshly-enthused practitioners.

2. Issues we live with

The College's existence has coincided with a time of upheaval and uncertainty in the United Kingdom and its churches. Aspects of this have direct bearing on the preaching ministry, and the College has been involved in debate on the way in which preachers should respond. We can summarize the issues raised under three headings.

Sociological: why have so many of our listeners gone, and who's left?

The haemorrhaging of people from the British churches since the early 1960s is now well documented. Preachers, above all, must ask themselves searching questions about this, since they have been the public face and voice of institutions now being abandoned in droves.

It would be simplistic either to exculpate preachers, as if it were all a matter of sociological trends that we were powerless to alter, or make sermons the chief culprit, as if poor preaching were the main reason for declining numbers. But the statistics do compel us to ask whether our ex-listeners were simply unspiritual types who preferred to run away from the sound of the gospel or – at least in some cases – deeply hungry spiritually, and unsatisfied with what we were offering.

The question prompts close attention to those who remain. We need to know who our hearers are and discover their needs, longings, and stories. This is not so that we can preach a merely comfortable message that will keep them within the walls of the church. It is so that we will be able to share the gospel with them in such a way that *both* its goodness *and* its challenge can be understood.

The College in its early days saw the need to raise the level of practical competence in preaching. But it is clear now, as it could not be

then, that far more than this is required. We are in the middle of a considerable cultural shift which requires a searching examination of the dynamics of preaching and the way it is received.

Ecclesiological: what and who are the Church and its gatherings for?

Declining numbers have reminded the churches that they exist for the mission of God, not for their own self-perpetuation. No longer is it possible to maintain the illusion that the Church plays a key role in the life of the nation's inhabitants. We are a minority group in a vast and complex mission field.

In the debates about the churches' response to this reality it has been recognized that preaching must change, insofar as it has been partly an expression of Christian hegemony, a mere bolstering of institutional dominance. The sermon must concentrate on equipping Christians for their mission in the world. That mission is carried forward along many other avenues apart from conventional 'preaching'. The Alpha course, for instance, epitomizes a new model of proclamation built around small groups, opportunity for open discussion, and hospitality (though it should be noted that there is still an important element of 'talking from the front').

Two other ecclesiological shifts are worth noting. The first is the liturgical renewal movement. By the 1960s in the Church of England the Parish Communion was becoming well established as the central act of weekly worship. The sermon was seen as part of the overall liturgical drama, rather than an event in its own right.² Its aim was to enable worshippers to enter fully into the enactment of the central events of redemption. The movement has also been influential in some of the Free Churches. Meanwhile the Roman Catholic Church, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, has emphasized the importance of the ministry of the word alongside the eucharistic act. There has thus been an interesting convergence of preaching traditions with a focus on the context of liturgical celebration. 'Liturgical' preaching's great strength is its integration with the whole drama of worship; the drawback is that it may not allow enough time for the induction of less biblically-literate congregations into the great truths of faith.

However, many evangelical and charismatic churches have not been so affected by this liturgical renewal movement. Here the sermon remains more of a climactic event in the service. Sermon series are the normal pattern and the use of common lectionary readings (increasingly widespread in 'liturgical renewal' churches of all denominations) less frequent. These churches bear witness to the importance of a *teaching* as

Giving Voice to the Word

well as proclamation ministry, though it may be argued that as a 'teaching' vehicle the sermon is inadequate.

The second shift is the rise in 'all-age worship'. This prompts decisions about the ministry of the word. Will there be a sermon, accessible on different levels by a wide range of hearers? Will there be a sermon for adults while the children are engaged in some other activity? Or will there be no recognizable 'sermon' at all, but a highly participative, interactive service through which, it is hoped, people of all ages will be able to encounter God? Different patterns are likely to work best in different settings and traditions. It is clear that there is the potential both for a wonderful inclusivity, and for trivializing holy things in the name of accessibility to the young.

Against this background of rich variety in the ministry of the word the College promotes serious thought about the function and purpose of each service and the place of any 'word' ministry within it. We seek to equip preachers to exercise their ministry in a way that is fitting to their local context and their church's mission.

Communicational: what and how do we hear?

The third issue which the College and all preachers have to note is the 'communications revolution'. In 1960 television was a comparative novelty. Since then cassette and video tapes have come in and are now on the way out. CDs, DVDs, personal computing, the internet, e-mail, mobile phones, satellite and digital broadcasting have become part of the fabric of life. Society is 'media-saturated', with aggressive visual advertising and an availability of sheer information the like of which humanity has never seen. All this is bound to have an effect on the way in which our hearers receive any communication.

Here there is a divergence of views on a fitting Christian response. Some would argue that communicators of the gospel must avail themselves of all contemporary media possible, perhaps sometimes abandoning the 'sermon' in favour of a multi-media presentation. At the other extreme, some would suspect all such tactics as pandering to the spirit of the age and sacrificing clarity of proclamation to entertainment value. In the middle are those who recognize the importance of other elements, such as the visual, alongside the spoken word – but still disagree among themselves whether such aids as PowerPoint® enhance a sermon or detract from it by splitting the consciousness of the worshipper between speaker and screen.

The College wishes to foster this debate. One productive notion, the subject of a recent conference, is that of 'embodying' the word. A paradoxical result of the speed and facility of so much 'communication' today is a loss of the sense of the value of personal, face-to-face contact between people, of time spent actually being in the presence of those with whom one is conversing. And this is precisely what preaching, traditionally, is: someone speaking directly in others' presence. As our past Chairman, Bishop James Jones, used to comment, nothing can replace the power of seeing and hearing the effect of the word of God in the life of a preacher. 'Embodying' the word is an idea evoking the humility of the incarnation. It is also an invitation to let ourselves be so caught up with the message we speak that its communication will be touched with life and fire. That kind of preaching surely has a future, whatever other electronic or visual aids may play their part.

3. Where we are going

The first people to attend College courses in the 1960s were clergy selected and sponsored by their diocesan bishops. (Of the grounds on which the selection was made, I am not sure!) Those who went through the courses were recognized as 'members' of the College. In recent times, however, the College has been seen more as a 'provider of services' which people can buy into, whether as individuals (becoming members – we currently have around 1700 – and receiving the Journal) or training officers (arranging local training events).

This and other pressures have left us, to some extent, vulnerable to the financial buffetings of the Christian 'marketplace' in which ever more organizations offering attractive 'resources' of many kinds compete for the limited funds of the institutional churches and individual ministers. Those who will give large or small amounts simply 'for the good of the cause' are few. Thus we are seeking ways of playing a more central role in the provision of training in preaching, in co-operation with the various central church structures and agencies. It is a time of upheaval in the ministerial training world, for the Anglican, Methodist and URC denominations in particular, in the wake of the Hind report into the future of ministerial training;³ this gives an opportunity for new partnerships to be forged.

We recognize, too, the strategic importance of further developing the College's website. The internet has considerable potential to foster a sense of mutual support among preachers, and to provide up-to-date material on topical issues to feed their ministry. We have good links with

Giving Voice to the Word

those concerned with preaching in both North America and continental Europe which will enrich what we can offer, but we recognize the importance of providing a distinctively British service addressing the needs of our own setting. This will be a major area of development for us in the coming years if the human and financial resources can be found.

In short, we give thanks to God for this time of great opportunity, not only to strengthen the competency of preachers, ordained and lay, but also to remind the churches of the continuing crucial importance of the ministry of the word, and foster constructive discussion about how it is to be effectively discharged.

For more information about the College, and to become a member, please contact:

The Administrator,
14A North Street, Bourne, Lincolnshire PE10 9AB
Tel. 01778 422929.
E-mail administrator@collegeofpreachers.org.uk
or visit our website www.collegeofpreachers.org.uk

NOTES

1. I owe the phrase 'sacred conversation' to David J. Schlafer, preaching author and consultant in the USA, an important influence on the College and on recent preaching training in the UK. See his recent book *Playing with Fire: Preaching Work as Kindling Art*, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2004.
2. This was by no means a new perception of preaching in the history of the Church; but it was given careful expression at this time by R.H. Fuller in his book *What is Liturgical Preaching?*, London: SCM, 1957.
3. *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church: The structure and function of ordination training*, London: Church House Publishing, 2003.