

## CAN AND SHOULD THE SERMON HELP FILL THE TEACHING VACUUM?

### Introduction: The (Reformed) Primacy of the Word

The Westminster Confession of Faith states:

*"VII. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."*

### (Biblical) knowledge in the 21st Century Church

#### Decline in 'Sunday Schools'

In 2000, the number of children attending had halved in the past 20 years, continuing a decline throughout the last century, which saw attendance fall from 56% in 1905 down to the current level of 4%. In 2000, 700,000 children under the age of 15 attended, compared to 1.4 million in 1979. [Peter Brierley, MARC Europe]

The Methodist 'Class' System has also declined as a source of in-church learning, although attempts are being made to reinvigorate it in a kind of cell church approach.

[<http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/disc-new-resurrecting-the-classes-180610.pdf>]

#### Church membership preparation

Anecdotally there is reason to believe that such classes now focus more on church organisation and core beliefs than on imparting Biblical knowledge.

#### Variability of Christian teaching in secular schools

There is no National Curriculum for Religious Education in England. In England and Wales, the content of the Syllabus is agreed by Local Authorities, with the ratification of a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) comprising members of different religious groups, teachers and local councillors.

### What are teaching and preaching?

A simplistic view:

Teaching tends to be indicative (telling us what is)
(evangelistic) Preaching tends to be imperative (telling us what we're supposed to do)

[R.C. Sproul Jr. Ligonier Ministries]

Teaching tends to be interactive (a dialogue)

Preaching classically tends to be one-way (didactic)

The reality is that the two cannot be rigidly separated.

- What is taught (and how) depends on the starting knowledge base.
- What is preached (and less so, how) depends on the authority claimed, implying some degree of acceptance of the Gospel (about which there has to be some hearers' knowledge).

### The New Testament pattern

C. H. Dodd argues that *"The Christian religion, like Judaism (to take another example), is an ethical religion in the specific sense that it recognises no ultimate separation between the service of God and social behaviour."*

He notes that some of the Pauline Epistles (e.g. Romans, Galatians, Colossians, Ephesians) are divided into two main parts. The first part deals with specifically religious themes - deals with them, in the main, in the reflective manner which constitutes theology - and the second part consists mainly of ethical precepts and admonitions.

*"They are presenting Christianity as an ethical religion in which ethics are directly related to a certain set of convictions about God, [humanity], and the world, a set of convictions religious in their subject matter and theological in their expression."*

In the gospels there is a similar duality of structure. The ethical materials in gospels and epistles alike have a general similarity of form and content, but in the epistles they are related to theological doctrine, while in the gospels they are related to a narrative of events.

He concludes: *"The ethical teaching of the New Testament is embedded in a context which consists of a report of historical facts and an explanation of their religious significance."*

[C. H. Dodd, *Preaching and Teaching in the Early Church*]

### **A structure for public worship**

#### **WE APPROACH GOD:**

Call to Worship; hymn of praise; Prayer of approach & Lord's Prayer

#### **WE HEAR GOD'S WORD:**

Introduction to theme; Bible Reading; hymn for young folk; Bible Reading; hymn of preparation;  
Sermon

#### **WE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD:**

hymn of response; Prayers of intercession and thanksgiving; Offering & Prayer of dedication

#### **WE GO OUT TO SERVE GOD:**

hymn of discipleship; Blessing

### **Contextualisation - a possible strategy for the dilemma**

#### **WE HEAR GOD'S WORD:**

- Introduction to theme;
- Introduction to reading (historical context and surrounding Scriptural context);
- Bible Reading;
- hymn for young folk;
- Introduction to reading (historical context and surrounding Scriptural context);
- Bible Reading;
- hymn of preparation;
- Sermon e.g.
  - Reflection on relationship between the readings
  - Comparing and contrasting historical and 21<sup>st</sup> century contexts
  - Demonstrating and promoting resulting implications for discipleship
  - Summary: 'So God's Word for today is .....

## SHORT PRESENTATION: CAN AND SHOULD THE SERMON HELP FILL THE TEACHING VACUUM?

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### (Biblical) knowledge in the 21st Century Church

- ▶ Decline in 'Sunday Schools'
- ▶ Church membership preparation
- ▶ The Methodist 'Class' System
- ▶ Variability of Christian teaching in secular schools

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C. H. Dodd [*Preaching and Teaching in the Early Church*] argues that *"The Christian religion, like Judaism... is an ethical religion in the specific sense that it recognises no ultimate separation between the service of God and social behaviour."*

Some of the Pauline Epistles have two main parts, firstly dealing with specifically religious themes in a reflective manner which constitutes theology, and secondly ethical precepts and admonitions.

In the gospels the religious themes are related to a narrative of events.

Dodd concludes: *"The ethical teaching of the New Testament is embedded in a context which consists of a report of historical facts and an explanation of their religious significance."*

### A structure for public worship

WE APPROACH GOD:

Call to Worship; hymn of praise; Prayer of approach & Lord's Prayer

WE HEAR GOD'S WORD:

Introduction to theme; Bible Readings and hymn(s), Sermon

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD:

hymn of response; Prayers of intercession and thanksgiving; Offering & Prayer of dedication

WE GO OUT TO SERVE GOD:

hymn of discipleship; Blessing

### Contextualisation - a possible strategy for the dilemma

WE HEAR GOD'S WORD:

- Introduction to theme;
- **Introduction to reading** (historical context and surrounding Scriptural context);
- Bible Reading and hymn for young folk;
- **Introduction to reading** (historical context and surrounding Scriptural context);
- Bible Reading and hymn of preparation;
- Sermon e.g.

**Reflection on relationship between the readings**

**Comparing and contrasting historical and 21<sup>st</sup> century contexts**

**Demonstrating and promoting resulting implications for discipleship**

Summary: 'So God's Word for today is .....