

# Re-imagining Preaching and Leading Worship

Written, curated and edited by  
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## Acknowledgements

There are a great many people to whom thanks is due for their contributions – be they solicited or unsolicited – to this book. Indeed, they’re so numerous – and disparate – that it’s impossible to mention all of them, by name, here. First, though, I believe that thanks is due to my Hertfordshire Fellowship of Baptist Preachers’ colleague, Megan Thompson, for having the idea of the Fellowship running some courses on preaching skills. That idea set me the challenge of providing some basic information about preaching – and that led to producing this book. The task turned out to be a great deal more complex and more time-consuming than I’d ever imagined. The result is, also, not quite what I thought it would be – but I’m grateful for the opportunity to research this topic, then write and edit the text that it’s provided. In the process, I’ve learned lots about preaching, and about different people’s approaches to preaching, which, otherwise, I wouldn’t have discovered.

Special thanks are due to those of my colleagues from the Hertfordshire Fellowship of Baptist Preachers who took the time and trouble to contribute some personal insights and practical advice on many aspects of conducting worship and preaching. These appear in Chapter Eleven of this book. So, “thank you” to Bill Allan, David Burden, Carolyn Kirk, Chamindra Leeniyagoda, Harold Liberty, Brian Pratt, Hilary Taylor and the Rev Ray Thomas as well as Megan Thompson (again). Thanks, too, to the Rev Arderne Gillies, whose talk to the Fellowship members in July 2019 survived in note-form and is well worth reproducing in this book.

Thanks, too, to all those involved with the production of this book. They include Daniel Griffiths for his inspired visualisation of the cover artwork and the infographic on page 87; Danny Smith and Paul Brooks, of the Hertfordshire Fellowship of Baptist Preachers, for their advice and encouragement; Carl French, Morgana Evans and the rest of The Endless Bookcase team, who’ve published this book, and to my wife, Helen, whose long-suffering support and encouragement is invaluable.

Thanks are also due to the many not-specifically-named authors of the books used as source materials for Chapters One to Ten inclusive, as well

as the Appendices. The names of many of these appear – along with others – in this book’s Bibliography. The names of others – notably those who produced the “HFBP: Lay ministers’ assessment form” in Appendix Two – are ‘lost in the mists of time’. So, “thanks” to all those anonymous people who’ve also, unwittingly, contributed to this book.

## About the Author

Since September 2013, Robert (also known as Bob) Little has been Chairman of the Hertfordshire Fellowship of Baptist Preachers (HFBP), having joined the Fellowship's predecessor body in the late 1970s. This Fellowship is the current form of an association, dating from at least 1903, which caters for Baptist lay ministers in Hertfordshire.



The HFBP aims to advance the Christian faith according to the principles of the Baptist denomination. Its prime functions are the recognition and honing of preaching skills in helping to advance the Christian faith in line with Baptist principles. One of its key activities is to encourage those who feel they may have a gift for preaching and leading worship to test that gift – and, indeed, to test their call to ministry. That call is affirmed through an approval process that involves the recommendation and support of a person's local church fellowship, along with assessments from the HFBP's Committee members. Of course, becoming a member of the Fellowship is only the start of a process of continuous professional development (CPD).

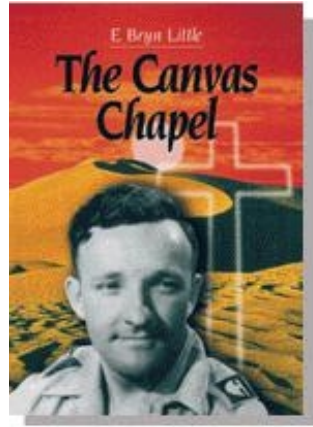
My path to this voluntary post has been neither straightforward nor predictable but, perhaps, is understandable in hindsight. In this regard, my career path is similar to many – if not most – people's.

I was born in a Baptist Manse in Halesowen – a town that was then in Worcestershire, for a while in 'Hereford and Worcester' and is now firmly ensconced in the West Midlands. The Baptist minister in Halesowen at that time was my father, the Rev E Bryn Little MM. He was a Welshman who, after serving as a driver in the Royal Army Service Corps in World War II, trained for the Baptist ministry at Rawdon College, in Leeds. His story is told in the book, 'The Canvas Chapel' – available from me via The Endless Bookcase, if you're interested.

When I was four years old, I moved with my father (Bryn) and mother (Muriel) to Kings Langley, in Hertfordshire, when Bryn became the Baptist minister there. Life in a Baptist Manse was almost all I knew in my formative years. I was broadly supportive – but no more – of church

life, having known little else.

The next nudge towards a more active interest in the Christian religion and talking (preaching) about it came when I gained a place at University College, Cardiff (part of the University of Wales), to read economics. Unfortunately (or not, as it turned out), I waited until the offer of the place at Cardiff was confirmed before looking for accommodation in the city. By that time, all the student accommodation had been ‘taken’ and things looked bleak for me.



Then my father remembered an old college colleague of his – the Rev Trevor Thorn – who was then the Baptist minister at Albany Road Baptist Church, Cardiff. Trevor’s advice was to try the South Wales Baptist College (SWBC), in Richmond Road, Cardiff, because, sometimes, it had ‘spare’ rooms in its student hostel once all the students who were studying theology had been catered for. This proved to be the case and I went to live there – in ‘Room 5’ – in the student hostel.

Thinking that I ought to repay the kindness of my hosts (in offering me a place to stay) by attending ‘College Prayers’ each weekday, from 7am to 7.30am, I became a fairly regular, if sleepy, attender – at the expense of an extra half hour or so in bed. At that time, one of the new students – Janet Davies, from Llanelli – decided that the life of a Baptist minister was not for her and so she left the college.

This posed a problem for the College Principal, the Rev Dr Dafydd G Davies. Many Baptist churches up and down the South Wales valleys relied on students from the SWBC to conduct services for them on Sundays – and Mr Davies had planned each student’s preaching activities for the forthcoming term. Consequently, with Janet’s departure, he was one preacher short.

The first thing I knew of this issue was when I had a visit to my study/bedroom, one morning, from my next-door neighbour, John Farrington. John, a gentle giant at six feet four inches (193cm) tall and some 26 stones (165 kilos) in weight and who was formerly an apprentice

electrician from Abercarn before responding to the call to the Baptist ministry, said bluntly and with all the persuasive physical presence and forcefulness of his 26 stones, “We’ve seen you coming to College Prayers and we think you ought to go preaching ‘for the College’.”



*The South Wales Baptist College, summer 1976.*

In the circumstances, I felt it would be ungracious to refuse so, the next Sunday – 28th October 1973 – found me catching a bus from Cardiff to go ‘up the valleys’ to Hendreforgan (a village between Tonyrefail and Gifach Goch) in the Rhondda Valley. The Baptist church there worshipped through the medium of Welsh and, thankfully, my command of the Welsh language was just enough for me to conduct most of the service via Welsh – although preaching in Welsh was beyond me. There were 11 people in the congregation and, appropriately for a first sermon I thought, I preached on Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 [*for those who’re interested, the main headings of the sermon were: Genesis is a book of beginnings; a book of failures, and a book of hope*].

I returned to Cardiff, pleased that things had gone smoothly enough. On the following Monday, the College received a report about me from the church – and, apparently, it was sufficiently positive for me to be asked

to conduct **two** services (morning and evening) the next Sunday (at English Baptist Chapel, Abercarn). I agreed. This time, the services were to be wholly in English (a language with which I felt more ‘at home’) and, in conducting them, I became the third generation of my family to conduct services in that chapel, after my father (Bryn) and my grandfather (William Little).

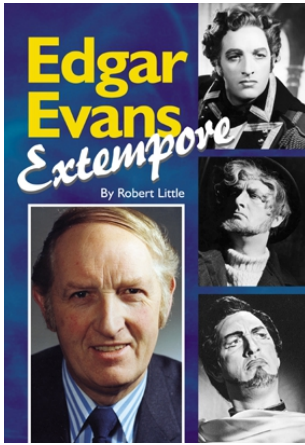
Again, things went well and the church asked me to return to conduct some further services – which I did. For the three years in which I lived at the SWBC while I completed my degree in economics, I found myself increasingly engaged on Sundays, conducting services in chapels around the South Wales valleys – mostly preaching on behalf of the College but, sometimes, preaching on behalf of the college tutors who found themselves ‘double booked’ or who were otherwise unable to fulfil a preaching commitment. Indeed, I soon found myself preaching on most Sundays during term time. However, this seeming popularity was put into a context when I conducted the services at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Blaenavon. After the evening service, the church secretary said to me, “Thank you so much for coming to us. We’ve had a great day, today. If ever you’re in the area and would like to take a service for us, please let me know.”

Before I could bask too much in this praise for my teenaged preaching style and content, he continued, with commendable childlike candour, “Well, you see, it’s difficult to get anybody to preach these days.” My inflated ego quickly returned to normal.

When my time in Cardiff was coming to an end, the SWBC asked me to consider joining the College as a theological student but the experience I’d had of seeing a Baptist minister’s life at very close hand had convinced me that it was not the life for me.

Nonetheless, having ‘cut my preaching teeth’ in the chapels in the South Wales valleys, I felt that I should continue to develop my ‘worship-leading/preaching skills’, so I embarked on the Baptist Union of Great Britain’s Diploma in Religious Knowledge – via the distance learning option. At the same time, hoping to pursue a career as an opera singer, I came to the London area to study singing at the Royal College of Music, with Edgar Evans who had recently retired after 40 years as a principal





tenor with the Royal Opera. His story is told in the book, ‘Edgar Evans – Extempore’ – available via The Endless Bookcase, if you’re interested.

I completed the Diploma in Religious Knowledge in two years rather than the three years allotted for study – much to the disapproval of my allotted tutor, the Rev Noel Pepper, who kept sending me messages, which I ignored, asking me to take more time over submitting my completed assignments because they were arriving too quickly and he didn’t have time to mark them. I was officially ‘recognised’ by the Baptist Union of Great Britain at the Union’s Annual Assembly in London in the spring of 1979. By then, I’d been a member of the HFBP for some two years – having joined the Fellowship on leaving Cardiff for the London area.

Importantly, the odd, convoluted career path described here has been travelled while the rest of my life has been going on in parallel. To date, this life path has embraced, among other things: a couple of (full-time) professional careers, latterly as a writer and publicist; a continuing career as a semi-professional singer in the classical tradition; some serious dalliance with playing cricket (my great sporting love), a soupçon of radio (but also some television) broadcasting and, of course, married and family life. I have never been – nor did I ever want to be – a ‘professional Christian’, earning my living as a member of the clergy. However, the various opportunities I’ve been given have meant that I’ve developed, unintentionally, into something of a dedicated ‘semi-professional’ in church terms with a keen interest in theology.

Over the years since 1973, so far, I’ve conducted over 1,200 services in nearly 90 churches of various denominations around the country – and in one or two other places as well.

**Robert Little, 2024**

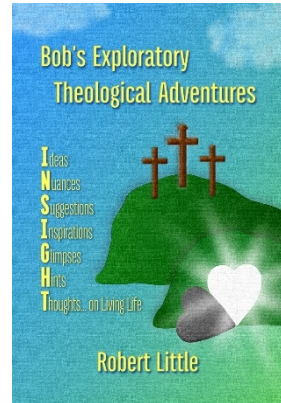


## Also by this author

### **Bob's Exploratory Theological Adventures**

(The Endless Bookcase; ISBN: 9781914151378)  
– a collection of 144 short essays containing non-prescriptive insights intended to provoke thought.

They're intended to provide ideas, nuances, suggestions, inspirations, glimpses, hints and thoughts (insights) on issues relating to living life from a perspective of Christian theology.



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## Foreword

While this book could be subtitled “Almost all I’ve learned about preaching and leading worship in a preaching career of just over 50 years”, much of that learning has been gained not merely through the experience of preaching and leading worship regularly but also from speaking, advising other people on how to speak and watching others speak in the world of business – as well as being a singer, performing as a soloist in concerts and operas around the UK.

Over the years, I’ve been surprised at how little cross-application there is between ‘presentation skills’ in the commercial world and the same skills in the world of Christianity. Perhaps professional presenters in the Christian world (clergy) focus on the **content** of their presentations/preaching while playing down the importance of its **conduct**. If so, they’re missing out on some excellent tips and techniques from the business world about how to engage and keep an audience (congregation)’s attention – and motivate that audience to put into practice what they hear and see. Missing out on this opportunity – particularly in the face of increased competition for people’s attention and affection from an increasingly wide range of sophisticated media manipulators – would seem to be unduly handicapping both the professional and semi-professional clergy. That, alone, makes this book worth at least a cursory glance from those who want their preaching ministry (or any other type of public speaking) to be effective – as well as, perhaps, to be memorable and popular.

However, we might begin with a note of caution. By the time you’re reading this book, its contents – along with all the many other books on preaching and public speaking – could be outdated and irrelevant.

I fervently hope this is **not** the case – but the development of artificial intelligence (AI) could enable a relative few, highly regarded, ‘super-performer’ preachers to produce virtual ‘clones’ of themselves. Their eye movement motion can be captured on camera by the subject looking at points round the clock; then head movements – again getting the subject to look at points round the clock – and then doing the same with

gestures. The preacher's voice can be cloned by reading and recording in a separate sound studio. Then, all the preacher has to do is type out a sermon and the clone speaks the words to camera, with impressive lip-synchronisation. The clone may even be able to appear as a 3D image.

In that case, a relative few super-preachers can supply sermons to any and every church (presumably for a fee). The churches can build up libraries of these sermons and play these recordings to their congregations. This would mean that the need for relatively large numbers of preachers to serve the many churches in this and other countries will be a thing of the past. Skills – of sermon research, composition, preparation and delivery – will be lost to all but a few and we'll all be the poorer for that.

Moreover, why stop there? With church music and even prayers currently available via various technology platforms, why not completely automate entire services – and make them available online so that people don't even have to go to places of worship and interact with others? Maybe the worship of God could be so automated that no one needs to actually be present for an act of worship – and we could all get on with living the rest of our lives without the inconvenience of having to think about God and interact with other God-minded people.

There are lots of really good reasons why such strategies are a very bad idea indeed. I hope, strongly, that this dystopian view of religious life **never** happens, even if the technology exists to facilitate it. That's one reason why I've written this book. I believe it's important to perpetuate the many skills relating to preaching (especially in the context of the free churches that I've been serving, as a preacher, for over 50 years). If this book can help provide a few shortcuts for those who would, otherwise, have taken many years to learn their skills purely by the experience route, then it'll have been worthwhile.

The other key reason for this book is a suggestion – from Megan Thompson, a colleague in the Hertfordshire Fellowship of Baptist Preachers – that those who've developed some skills in preaching and leading worship should try to impart these to others via a series of practical workshops. The more I thought about this excellent idea, the more I thought that those attending these sessions needed to have some background ideas about preaching and worship leading – so that the

practical tips and techniques being explored in the sessions will have some ‘context’ and, therefore, relevance.

This book attempts to provide much of this background and context. If it appears ‘sizeable’, that’s because there’s a lot of background and context to convey – and, perhaps, it testifies to my having learned quite a lot of things about preaching and related skills over the last half a century or so. Some of the book (notably the book’s Appendices) may appear less relevant to certain readers but, hopefully, all of it will be relevant to at least one reader – not least because it’s been relevant to me and, in my dealings over the years with churches of all sizes, I’ve found it worth knowing and, at times, exceptionally helpful.

**Robert Little**





# Introduction

Go into any church and, if you didn't already know, you should be able to make a good guess at that church's theological and even denominational background.

Non-conformist churches – including those of the Baptist denomination, of which I'm a member – will tend to give prominence to the pulpit and/or lectern. Traditionally, Baptist church architecture reflected an emphasis on preaching – with the pulpit (or 'place for the preacher') placed centrally (in contrast to, say, a typical Anglican, Roman Catholic or Orthodox church – where the altar is central and the pulpit is placed at the side). Furthermore, Anglican churches almost always have a central aisle (which allows ease of movement for congregants to go forwards for Communion), while many Baptist churches have their pews/chairs in the centre to emphasise that the congregation has come to hear and, hopefully, be inspired by the Word of God.

Preaching is central to any Baptist worship service. Baptists emphasise the sermon and congregations will expect the sermon to be Bible-based (although not necessarily expository in nature), to illuminate the Biblical text (that is, the sermon needs to provide an element of 'teaching') and to apply that teaching to contemporary life. Since the sermon is the centrepiece of most Baptist worship services, a church looking for a new minister will ask the candidate to 'preach with a view' (to the pastorate). So, it could be said that Baptist ministers stand or fall by their preaching skills.

Yet, while preaching is important for Baptists, Scripture reading may not be as prominent as it is in, say, the more liturgical churches. While these churches will often have three Scripture readings in a service (from the Old Testament, the gospels and the epistles) in addition to (singing) a psalm or two, many Baptist churches opt for only one Scripture reading, while other Baptist churches indulge in a reading from the Old Testament as well as one from the New Testament.

With its emphasis on preaching, Baptist worship has produced responses to God stimulated primarily by words. Baptist buildings have therefore

tended to be plain – although modern Baptist churches seem happy to embrace such aids as banners, Advent wreaths, Christmas trees and even, at times, candles.

## **Why this book is like it is**

Whether you're contemplating becoming a preacher and want to know something about what you're letting yourself in for or you're a preacher who wants to hone and extend your preaching skills, the chances are that you'll be – or you've already been – thrown in at the deep end. Preaching – and leading worship – is one of those activities which, however much you think you know about it and however meticulously you've prepared, is very likely to catch you out whenever you do it 'for real'. Hopefully, if you're a fledgling preacher, you're a fast learner.

There's lots of theory to absorb – about such things as:

- the tradition of the Christian denomination whose members you'll be addressing
- the worship style preferences of the particular congregation you'll be addressing
- how to research and craft a sermon
- what type of sermon to prepare
- how to prepare yourself – by learning presentation techniques

There are lots of practical things to consider too – including:

- how to make a good impression on the congregation
- how to make the most effective use of aids, such as slides, to augment and enhance the sermon

This book employs a technique of ancient rhetoric known as 'amplification'. In other words, it tries to set out relatively few, core, ideas – and cycles through these ideas repeatedly. Each time the book deals with a particular idea it offers a slightly different angle and emphasis, using hyperbole and universal images. In some ways, this approach to the subject of preaching is similar to the content of preachers' sermons. If they're to remain true to Jesus' teachings, preachers have nothing 'new' to say – because there is nothing new to say. The only thing they can do is present the same gospel in new, interesting and motivating ways.

So, this book, read in a ‘traditional’, linear way, may appear disordered and confusing at first sight. However, much of the practical aspect of preaching and leading worship depends on, and is heavily influenced by, the theory and tradition of the denomination and specific church where you’re doing these things – making it even more confusing to separate, for example, the theory from the practical. Read (and re-read) carefully – bearing in mind both the theory and practical aspects involved – this book should reveal its secrets.

In this context, try not to disregard the book’s various Appendices. They, too, offer a wealth of insights into both the theoretical as well as practical knowledge and skills you’ll need as a successful preacher and worship leader – especially in a non-conformist setting.

## **Why call this book ‘Re-imagining Preaching and Leading Worship’?**

Finally, we need to address the rationale behind this book’s title. There are very many books on preaching – and a number of the more helpful ones are listed in this book’s Bibliography. Indeed, this book has borrowed much from them, especially when it comes to explaining the tradition and the theory about preaching, as well as offering tips and techniques for leading worship. While this book (and author) would want to support strongly this tradition and theory, it also recognises that modern life is developing and, subtly or not, ‘old ways’ are changing. Modern life, culture and societal preferences are being influenced by advancing technology. This not only is providing greater opportunities for the current technological craze of PowerPoint slides to accompany a sermon but it’s also providing opportunities to broadcast or narrowcast preachers’ endeavours. In a church context, we also need to consider the implications on preaching and worship leading of technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) – as has been mentioned in this book’s Foreword. A modern audience – increasingly influenced by the slick presentation techniques of secular society’s producers and presenters, advertisers and advocates – may be less likely to be excited, engaged, influenced, challenged, motivated and energised by sermons that bear the time-honoured hallmarks of being ‘traditionally’ prepared and presented.

Without throwing away the tradition and theory – which have a timeless value – the practical side of preaching needs to be ‘re-imagined’ for an

increasingly sophisticated, technology-savvy audience. This audience could fail to appreciate the value of sermons and worship leading if these things aren't done with the same attention to accepted modern presentation techniques and technologies that are prevalent in the secular world. In this way, the value and effect of these activities should be enhanced, rather than relegated to cultural backwaters – or lost altogether.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### You want to be a preacher?

The first – and, in a way, the biggest – question that any of us given the opportunity to preach can ask is, “**Should I do this?**” There are all sorts of excellent reasons why we shouldn’t – not least inertia, apathy and an unwillingness to ‘put ourselves out’ just so we can appear in front of a probably critical audience. These reasons include the effort involved in doing some extra preparatory work and then presenting what we’ve produced. On the other hand, we may feel the hand of God upon us and, like Isaiah in the Temple, hear his voice saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” (*Isaiah 6: 8*). At that point, we need to remember the words of Dr Martin Stephen, a former headmaster of Manchester Grammar School, who once said, “The greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.”

That’s when we complete the quotation from Isaiah, and respond, “Here am I. Send me!”

Our next issues should involve such things as:

- **Overcome the urge to procrastinate.** One of the greatest skills human beings possess is that of being able to procrastinate. For example, in reality, this book has been many years in preparation. It needed the pressure of a deadline to ‘call it into existence’. Millions of extremely creative and successful people never had the careers they warranted because they were so successful at procrastinating.
- **The Call.** There’ll be more about ‘the Call’ later but to be – and to survive as – a preacher, you first have to feel a call by God to preach. Alternatively, you need to have that call pointed out to you by others (as happened to me). You then need the good fortune to succeed in making a fair attempt at leading worship/preaching the first time you try it. Hopefully, you’ll receive some encouragement to continue honing your skills – and be given opportunities to do so.
- **Aptitude and skills.** The Australian cricketer, acclaimed captain and, later, even more acclaimed commentator, Richie Benaud, once

said that successful cricket captaincy was “90 per cent luck and ten per cent skill.” He went on to add, “But don’t try it if you haven’t got the ten per cent.” Something similar could be said of preaching – and, probably, of many other skills.

- **Home or Away?** In practice, you may not have a choice of venue in which to begin your preaching ministry but I believe it helps if you begin that ministry away from the over-critical eyes and ears of your family and those in your home church. That was certainly the way I embarked on a preaching career – and I’m grateful for being able to make the (inevitable) mistakes of the young and inexperienced preacher many miles from my home (and, sometimes, in a language with which I wasn’t entirely familiar). I’m always extremely impressed by those who insist on beginning their preaching careers in their home church. That calls for nerves of steel that I’m not sure I have even now, after many years of preaching and conducting worship. I’ve long suspected that if, as a teenager, I’d been given a chance in my (then) home church to ‘test my calling’ as a preacher, I’d have been too scared to accept – and would never have thought again about preaching.
- **Quality.** As we’ve already noted, if you have the opportunity to preach – and you consider that opportunity seriously – there are any number of ‘good reasons’ why you shouldn’t take up the opportunity. Yet, if you do agree to ‘test your calling’, you should bear in mind that your first workout will be, at best, ‘not good’. Your first speech will be bad. Your first podcast will be bad. Your first video will be bad. Your first anything will be bad. But you can’t make your 100<sup>th</sup> – or 1000<sup>th</sup> – without making your first. So, put your ego aside and start. Then, try to keep improving (for ever).
- **Further questions.** The next questions include, how am I going to set about preaching – and how will I acquire the knowledge and learn the skills necessary to be a successful (however that’s measured) preacher? Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘I keep six honest serving men’ might be able to help here. It says:

I keep six honest serving-men

(They taught me all I knew);

Their names are What and Why and When

## And How and Where and Who...

These six questioning words – what, why, when, how, where, who – are great words to use when embarking on any career, including that of a preacher.

### **What to preach....**

Preachers aren't meant to be entertainers. Those who think otherwise may become 'popular' but, unless they're extremely careful – and clever in what they do – they're missing the point of their calling. Preachers are meant to be people of God's Word – a word which, as we know, endures forever (*see Isaiah 40: 6 – 8 and 1 Peter 1: 23 – 25*) and wasn't necessarily crafted for its entertainment value alone.

Even if you take this point so seriously that you carefully eliminate all elements of 'fun' and 'enjoyment' when you lead worship (incidentally, that's not a strategy to be recommended), it's also a mistake to focus entirely on preaching what could be called 'the simple gospel' – focusing on a few key facts (wonderful though they are) until the last person in your congregation(s) is converted. What will the rest of the congregation have for spiritual sustenance in the meantime?

When the Galileans made it clear that they wanted the fruits of Christ's Kingdom in healing for their bodies but they weren't so keen on his teaching about the nature of that Kingdom, Jesus went up a mountain – to teach (spiritually feed) his disciples. It's to feed people on the truth that people are called to preach – even if those people don't seem to want to be fed.

Preachers need to preach the whole Word of God – not merely the bits they (or their congregations) like or feel comfortable exploring. There are various ways of ensuring that the whole Word of God is explored in preaching. It could mean following a Lectionary. It could mean setting yourself a challenge to preach from each of the books of the Bible. It could mean keeping records of the sermons you've preached, noting their key themes – and looking to see if any gaps emerge. It also means keeping in very close touch with the Holy Spirit, prayerfully letting him guide you in the passages and topics on which you choose to preach.

It's easy for preachers to become attracted to certain passages of Scripture or certain topics and then focus on those. In my younger days, I heard many sermons by a minister who had a well-developed social conscience and who also liked to 'shock' congregations. As a result, at the end of each service it was possible to rate the sermon – in terms of a football score – noting how many times two particular topics occurred: Amnesty International (x) v Sex (x).

While God's Word is eternal, it's also contemporary. It should be a Word for today's issues, problems, challenges and so on.

### **Why to preach....**

Ask any – or, at least, almost any – preacher and they'll tell you they never set out to be a preacher. Preachers should always feel God's call to preach – and find a God-given confidence to do so. Ezekiel's call is an excellent example in this respect (*see Ezekiel 1: 1 – 6*).

When God's call comes, it's hard to refuse – and attempts to elude that call tend to fail. When God calls, we should obey – as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9: 16 – 17. But, if God **doesn't** send, we dare not go.

Being a preacher is to be God's messenger. It's a great privilege – but also a great responsibility. A messenger is no-one special: just a servant who has a message to give. The messenger has a responsibility to convey that message faithfully and truthfully. The messenger mustn't change the message or its meaning.

Rather like John the Baptist – the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus – the preacher must 'prepare the way of the Lord', going in front to prepare hearers to encounter someone far more important. Having done that, the messenger must get out of the way and let God, through his Spirit, do what he's planned to do. As Paul says, we're Christ's ambassadors (*see 2 Corinthians 5: 20*).

### **How to preach...**

The application of the general principles of rhetoric to the specific art of public preaching is known as 'homiletics'. According to the principles of homiletics, there are four types of sermons:



- **Expository Sermons:** sermons in which an extended portion of Scripture is interpreted in relation to one theme or subject.
- **Textual Sermons:** sermons in which the main divisions are derived from a verse of Scripture or a small portion of Scripture.
- **Topical Sermons:** sermons in which the main divisions are derived from a topic or subject.
- **Narrative Sermons:** sermons in which the main divisions are derived from a story or narrative.

Sermons are discussed further in a later part of this book and there are many books and websites (for example, <https://www.sermoninfo.com/what-are-the-different-types-of-sermons.html>) that discuss homiletics.

Some general observations – regardless of the type of sermon you choose to preach – are:

- **If you aim at nothing, you're sure to hit it.** From the outset of research into any sermon, you need a plan – even if it's only a vague one and even if it changes as your research prompts further thought – to give you a 'goal' for the sermon, at which you can aim.
- **Determine your target – and then hit it forcefully.** My paternal grandfather (William Little) often said of a preacher he'd found ineffectual and uninspiring, "It was like throwing a lot of pebbles against a barn door." Random thoughts offered haphazardly aren't going to be as effective in a sermon as a key thought, introduced at the beginning of the sermon and developed to a – hopefully 'telling' – conclusion. The former British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, used to tell the story that, when he first entered Parliament, the then British elder statesman, David Lloyd George, said to him, "When you're a back-bencher, you can make a speech in Parliament that has only one point. When you become a Minister of the Crown, you can make a speech with two points but only when you become Prime Minister can you make a speech with three points." Harold Macmillan said that this was valuable advice and helped him crystallise his thoughts to become an effective speaker – and he always obeyed Lloyd George's advice. Preachers may be allowed to make up to three points in their sermons – but those three points should be complementary to the (one) theme of the sermon.

- **If it's not in the Bible, you can't say it.** Your message should only explain and illuminate God's Word. So, it's best to be guided in what you preach by finding and being able to quote Biblical ideas and precedents to support what you're saying.

## **When to preach...**

Sometimes, preachers – especially those who operate a lay, often itinerant, ministry (including members of the Hertfordshire Fellowship of Baptist Preachers) – ask about their expected on-going commitment to conduct services. The 'traditional' answer was that, if it's at all possible, preachers should agree to conduct any and every service they're asked to conduct. The demands of modern family life place great strains on that sort of commitment. So, the Fellowship's current advice to its members is to accept as many invitations as they feel able to accept – bearing in mind their other commitments as well as the time they'll take to prepare as well as deliver the service(s) that they're invited to conduct.

## **What...?**

So, **what** are the characteristics of preachers? These might be summarised as having:

- **A sense of God's greatness and reality.** Unless we feel in our hearts as well as know with our minds the greatness and reality of the living God, our messages will carry no conviction. At the start of their ministry, Isaiah (*Isaiah 6: 1 – 8*), Ezekiel (*Ezekiel 1*) and Daniel (*Daniel 10: 2 – 9*) had their visions of God.
- **A sense of helplessness apart from God's enabling.** Those who've known the greatness and reality of God don't speak of such a thing lightly. They know that, without Christ's help, they can do nothing (*see John 15: 5*). Preachers can't bring God's Word to others unless and until they've first taken the time to listen to what God's saying.
- **Responsibility to make the message part of themselves.** When he was commissioned to speak for God, Ezekiel was told to eat whatever God gave him to eat (*see Ezekiel 2: 8*). God gave him a scroll followed with words of 'lament, mourning and woe'. It was a message no one was keen to proclaim but, when Ezekiel 'ate' this

message it tasted sweet to him. This story illustrates that before they can speak God's message, preachers have to hear and ingest it.

- **Courage to express the message God's given them.** Jeremiah was warned not to worry about his youthfulness (*Jeremiah 1: 6 – 8*) nor to be dismayed by the reactions to his preaching (*Jeremiah 1: 17 – 19*). Eli, the priest, warned the youthful Samuel not to keep to himself the message God had given him (*see 1 Samuel 3: 17 – 18*). Courage can easily be confused with bigotry. So, courage needs to be tempered with humility and genuine concern. Nonetheless, courage is a genuine requirement for a preacher.
- **Willingness to learn and obey God's Word.** Along with the preacher's hearers, the preacher must sit 'under the Word of God' with them (*see also Chapter Three: The preacher as listener*). Being a preacher doesn't mean being placed, in any way, above God's Word. After all, the preacher's message may have as much to say to the preacher as it has to say to the preacher's hearers.
- **Focus on the truths of the faith.** Paul told Timothy to concentrate on the truths of the faith and have nothing to do with godless myths (*see 1 Timothy 4: 11*).
- **A genuine desire to understand and meet hearers' needs.** Preachers – whether they spend their preaching careers in one church or maintain an itinerant ministry, covering a number of churches – need to get to know the people to whom they preach. God's Word doesn't change from generation to generation, although fashions about its effective presentation come and go. This means that God's Word needs to be applied afresh to its hearers in ways they can appreciate and understand. Ezekiel had to spend time among the exiles before he could begin his ministry (*see Ezekiel 3: 15*). Even Jesus had to spend years growing up in Israelite culture before he could preach to them effectively. Similarly, preachers need regular contact with the people to whom they minister – taking time to understand their thoughts, hopes, fears and wishes. This understanding isn't used to make God's message more popular. Rather, it's so that God's message can be made relevant to the hearers and their particular situation – to meet their needs (rather than their wants).

## **What characterises your ministry?**

Having embarked on a preaching career – however embryonic – you need to be aware of what characterises your ministry.

At the beginning of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, we find him defending his record as a pastor and preacher. The Corinthians were upset with him for planning a visit to them and then changing his plans. It’s something that could – and does – happen to any preacher.

This led some of the people in the church in Corinth to conclude that Paul was dishonest and that the motives for his ministry were mixed. As Paul defends himself, setting out an argument for his ministry, we see him sketch elements of what genuine Christian ministry looks like. In particular, it’s worth noticing that – whether that’s a full-time pastoral-and-preaching ministry or an itinerant lay ministry – genuine Christian ministry:

- Boasts in God, not in self (*see 2 Corinthians 1: 12 – 14*)
- Is about God working in and through us – not about the strengths and talents of the minister (*see 2 Corinthians 1: 12 – 14*)
- Is theocentric: it focuses on what God is doing (*see 2 Corinthians 1: 19 – 20*)
- Is Christocentric: it focuses on Jesus (*see 2 Corinthians 1: 19 – 20*)
- Is led and empowered by the Holy Spirit (*see 2 Corinthians 1: 21 – 22*)

When we consider our own ministries and the ministries of others around us, these five points are worth bearing in mind. Do we always measure what counts? And do we always measure up to what counts?

## **Six principles for preachers**

As you continue on the preaching path, you should remember at least six principles:

### **1. Keep learning**

Preachers can’t teach others what they’re not learning to live out in their own lives. Their growth and development is crucial to the growth and development of their ministry – and, as a result, the growth and maturity of the congregations to whom they preach. This means that preachers need to be constantly learning – not just developing their preaching skills

(in studying the Bible for source material; researching more widely to bring a modern context and application to that Bible study, and developing the communication and social skills needed to be ever more successful in preaching) but also developing their life skills and, naturally, their relationship with Jesus.

## **2. Practise what you preach**

Paul stresses this in 1 Corinthians 9: 27. Similarly, Paul encourages Timothy to keep going so that he'll receive the Lord's award, given when Jesus returns (*see 2 Timothy 4: 7 – 8*). It's important – for the sake of their congregational credibility and their ultimate destiny (*see below*) – that preachers live out, in deeds, the words they preach. Paul advised the Corinthians about this (*see 1 Corinthians 9: 26 – 27*) and the Philippians (*see Philippians 4: 9*). Paul speaks of the self-disciplined journey that we must all take if we're to participate fully in the gospel's promises. Preachers do untold damage to other people and their faith if they don't walk carefully and set an example of living in the light.

## **3. Consider your destiny**

It's vital that preachers keep in mind God's destiny for their lives – so they don't jeopardise their calling for the sake of instant gratification, as Esau lost his birthright merely for some 'stew' (*see Genesis 25: 29 -34*). As with the lives of (King) Saul and David, a good beginning doesn't guarantee a good ending. The difference between Saul and David was that David, although he made mistakes, had a teachable spirit. Saul was so insecure he was unwilling to face prophetic correction and, so, he prevented God's purpose being fulfilled in his and other people's lives. David learned hard lessons on his journey through life and accepted the prophetic correction and encouragement along the way. This shaped the person he was becoming. Saul didn't – and, so, had to be 'let go'.

## **4. 'ABC': Attitude, Busyness – and Complexes**

Preachers – like pastors – need to be aware of their complexes, particularly an inferiority complex which can't cope with rivals. That was the primary reason why God rejected Saul. He couldn't cope with any rival; so he couldn't delegate authority or hold the reins of leadership loosely, for fear of what might go wrong. These attitudes block the purposes of God's Kingdom. Realising who we are and what gifts God has given us are crucial to building up and equipping the body of Christ