

# UNIT NINE

## HEARING GOD'S WORD

- The Reformation rediscovered the central importance of God's Word to public worship — not just establishing the primacy of biblical preaching, but removing anything that got in the way.
- There are different ways in which the Word of God can be at the heart of our church services, but there is also the danger that it can be diminished in contemporary services.
- Too much attention may be given to singing or to rituals and ceremonial activities.
- Evangelical churches may be caught in the middle, and also forget what is essential to their Reformation heritage.

## DIFFERENT WAYS OF SHARING GOD'S WORD

- Reading Scripture Aloud
  - The reading aloud of Scripture and its exposition should be at the centre of our meetings, as Paul instructed Timothy (1 Tim. 4:13).
  - Archbishop Cranmer's chief aim in constructing the services of Morning and Evening Prayer was to give central place to the reading of a chapter from the Old Testament and a chapter from the New Testament.
  - In the 1549 Prayer Book, Scripture was virtually the whole content of the service — the reading of lessons was central.
  - In Evangelical churches today however, it is common to hear only one brief reading, and systematic reading is rare unless the preacher has chosen to do a series of sermons on one book.
  - Some have suggested that the systematic reading of Scripture can be boring or unintelligible, but this should not be the case.
  - Important though preaching is, it should not be elevated to a position of higher importance than the reading of Scripture.
  - Verses from Scripture may be read at appropriate points in a service apart from the lessons of the day — they may highlight the theme of the day or call people to confess their sins.

- Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs
  - Early Christian worship featured the use of psalms for congregational prayer and praise, as well as for instruction.
  - Reading and singing psalms and singing songs that are truly scriptural can be a way for the Word of God to be heard in a congregational gathering.
  - It has to be decided how a psalm will be said during a service — the key issue is finding the best way to convey the message of the psalm.
  - Sometimes the omission of difficult verses from psalms is recommended in Prayer Books, but congregations need to be instructed about the meaning of these texts and how to apply them from a Christian viewpoint.
- Mutual Exhortation on the Basis of Scripture
  - Hebrews notes the importance of mutual exhortation in Christian gatherings — involving warning or encouragement on the basis of scriptural teaching.
  - Although Paul does not allow women to have an official teaching role, he does encourage them to pray and prophesy - with some appropriate recognition of the headship of their husbands in the culture of the time.
  - Paul is concerned that nothing should happen which hinders the proper expression of the marriage relationship.
  - Prophecy can include various forms of communication, inspired by the Holy Spirit — Paul indicates that his authority as an apostle of Christ gives him the right to challenge and correct the congregational prophets at Corinth.
  - The writings of the apostles in the New Testament must be the means of assessing the genuineness of any other ‘prophetic’ revelations.
  - God will not reveal anything to individuals today which contradicts what he has already revealed for all people in every age through the canon of Scripture.
  - Some liturgies allow time during services for people to reflect on or enquire about the Scriptures which have been read — this could involve questions, discussions and mutual encouragement or warning, based on the sermon and the readings.

## **BIBLICAL PREACHING**

- Although many Christians acknowledge the importance of biblical preaching, their experiences can unfortunately lead them to question its validity and its prominence.
- Appropriate content should be the main concern — if the Word of God is faithfully applied it will have its own appeal and power.
- Genuinely Biblical Preaching
  - Not everything that claims to be biblical preaching genuinely is — a sermon may be about a moral or social issue with little to do with the passage.

- Genuinely biblical preaching will expose the message or teaching of a passage from the Bible and let it speak for itself.
  - Relevant preaching occurs when the unique message of the Bible intersects with the unique situation of the people addressed — a minister is not preaching the Word of God in a general and abstract way but to a particular congregation in a particular situation.
- Proclamation, Teaching and Exhortation
  - The Greek word most commonly translated ‘to preach’ always carried the meaning ‘to cry aloud’, ‘to proclaim’, ‘to declare’ or ‘to announce’ — the related term ‘to evangelise’ also conveys the sense of announcing news.
  - Jesus announced the Kingdom of God, offering salvation through his preaching to those who responded with repentance and faith.
  - Jesus used an amazing array of teaching techniques as part of his preaching, but the two can not just be simply equated — teaching is not always preaching, but preaching will normally involve teaching of some kind.
  - The ‘Kingdom of God’ was used as a shorthand to summarise the message proclaimed by the disciples, but more commonly they preached about Jesus and his resurrection as the fulfilment of God’s kingdom plan.
  - Teaching about the way Scripture has been fulfilled was an important part of the apostolic proclamation about Jesus — frequently their preaching involved ‘proving’ certain matters or ‘arguing’ from the Scriptures.
  - There is an appropriateness and significance to the activity of proclamation itself — the subject matter of the gospel is what God has done through Christ and the aim of gospel preaching is to encourage people to receive what God offers us in Christ.
  - The last dimension to the process of Christian communication is exhortation — Paul commands Timothy to do this (1 Tim. 4:13).
  - There is an urgency about the message which necessitates some persuasion of the listeners.
  - Effective biblical preaching will have a dimension of urgent appeal and exhortation, rather than simply recounting Bible stories or teaching doctrine.
- Different Types of Biblical Preaching
  - Topical Preaching
    - This involves an examination of a theological theme or an ethical issue from a biblical point of view, usually employing a collection of texts from different contexts.
    - It can be popular because it tackles matters which are of concern to congregation, but brings the danger of using the Bible selectively and taking verses out of context.

- There is also the danger of confusing the audience with too many different texts — the problems can be overcome by carefully selecting key texts over several weeks.
- Textual Preaching
  - This involves the explanation and application of one or two verses, allowing for in-depth treatment of important doctrines or themes.
  - This is a good way to introduce people to biblical preaching and show them how to interpret texts, but also brings the danger of taking verses out of context.
  - This method can lead preachers regularly back to their favourite passages and to use them to expound their own ideas, and can also fail to give people a broad enough knowledge of the Bible.
- Systematic Exposition of Passages
  - This overcomes many of the difficulties of the other methods — moving through a book of the Bible allows Scripture itself to set the agenda and forces us to look at topics we may otherwise ignore.
  - Preachers are forced to engage in serious Bible study as part of their preparation, there is less chance of verses being taken out of context and each sermon builds up a greater understanding of the book.
  - Members of the congregation can prepare themselves at home, and study can be integrated into a programme for home groups.
  - There are also problems with this approach — there is a danger of trying to tackle too much Scripture in one sermon, with time only to explain the text and not to apply it.
  - Expository sermons can become very predictable and heavy — the preacher must consider the best way to interest the congregation in the subject and involve them in the learning process.
  - Preaching for too long on a particular area of Scripture could become boring for the congregation — a series of sermons could be split to bring more variety, possibly through a preaching programme for the whole year.