

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)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

CALVINISM AND PREACHING¹

In the opening lecture of this course it was argued that Holy Scripture is for us an abiding word of God, and as such is the object of the Christian's faith. The second lecture explained and defended the Calvinist's belief that all interpretation of Holy Scripture must never forget that it contains a living message from a living God to His chosen people. This third lecture will present preaching as a process in which God speaks in His word to His ministers and through them to His people. The preacher therefore can repeat with full realisation of their meaning, Miss Havergal's beautiful lines :

Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
 In living echoes of Thy tone ;
 As Thou hast sought, so let me seek
 Thy erring children lost and lone.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach
 The precious things Thou dost impart ;
 And wing my words, that they may reach
 The hidden depths of many a heart.

But manifestly much preaching does not conform to the ideal implied by these statements. Many a preacher complains that he does not know what to preach, and that all his attempts but serve to deepen his discouragement.² There is an impatient weariness of the homiletical portion of public worship, and responsible church committees recommend that the sermon be made an inconspicuous ingredient of the Lord's Day service or even eliminated in favour of music, vocal and instrumental, responsive reading, prayer, mystic silence, and the like.

These present sermonic discontents may be variously interpreted. Some find in them an evident proof that the real essence of religion is feeling, or the non-rational, and that therefore there is in worship no proper place for the instructional, the intellectual, the rational, that is to say for the sermon, since

¹ The third of five lectures on the L. P. Stone Foundation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1931, dealing with Calvinism and Modern Problems. The first lecture, *What is the Religious Object?* was printed in this *QUARTERLY*, October, 1930; the second, *Calvinism and Interpretation*, was published in the number for April, 1932.

² This, of course, is no new thing. In the series, *Altchristliche Städte und Landschaften : Antiocheia*, Dr. Victor Schultze quotes Chrysostom as complaining of the poor church attendance, that the hearers want to be entertained as at a theatre or concert, that they approve when pleased, otherwise they yawn and fall asleep; one finds the sermon too short, another too long; one wants to hear something new, another only what he is accustomed to, etc. And this was the city where the disciples were first called Christians!

these are included in its content. But others think that the weariness mentioned is not so much of preaching *per se*, but of preaching of a certain sort—of preaching that remains within the boundaries of the kingdom of man. It may be convincingly argued that no worship is felt to be genuine unless in it men are brought into the presence of God. But the preaching that confines itself to ethical culture and social amelioration, to literary criticism and æsthetic appreciation, no matter how valuable these may be in their own universes, does not conduct us into the secret of *His* presence, and notwithstanding the fact that it may be bright, witty, lively, interesting, simply does not satisfy the thirst of the soul for the living God when it presents itself in God's earthly sanctuary. Therefore, urges the Calvinist, if the preacher could by any possibility base his homiletic practice on a convinced faith that in the word which by the Gospel is preached unto us there is a real and abiding and ever available presence of God, much of the contemporary impatience and weariness of the sermon would disappear, while in place of advising the curtailment or elimination of the sermon, the aforementioned church committees would counsel that it be made as of old the central feature of every service, since through it the worshippers become near unto God.

Preaching thus defined was a major activity of the sixteenth century Calvinists. Let us acquaint ourselves with their theory and practice by examining first Andreas Gerhard's *De formandis concionibus sacris*, published in 1553, and second the sermons of John Calvin delivered between the summer of 1549 and the autumn of 1560.

Andreas Gerhard, better known as Hyperius, a name which he took from his birthplace, Ypres, began the study of Greek and Hebrew at the tender age of eleven, and later wandered from one university to another as was the custom of the time, in search of a broad humanistic culture. While a student at Paris in the famous Trilingual College of Francis the First, he gained a personal knowledge of the Gospel as the Reformers proclaimed it, and became so interested that when he had finished his course of study he visited the leaders of the Reformation in their home cities in order to learn more about their doctrine at first hand. That he openly accepted the Reformed faith is attested by the fact that he was refused a teaching position in Ypres, his home town, because suspected of adherence to the new beliefs. Going

to England, he spent four years mostly at Oxford or Cambridge, but when persecution broke out against the evangelicals he returned to the Continent and, on June 15th, 1541, was in Marburg with a letter of recommendation to Martin Butzer asking his aid in securing a teaching place. He was successful and soon occupied the chair of theology and continued to fill it until his death in 1564. All the biographical notices we possess agree in depicting Hyperius as a most excellent man, faithful and diligent in every good work, intellectually able and possessed of extensive information, a splendid teacher and ready in co-operation with every uplifting enterprise, while his pure and exemplary character made him with his other gifts the leading spiritual force in the Marburg of his generation.

Hyperius was, of course, not the first among the Reformers to compose a treatise on preaching, but there is justification for the claim that his was the first compend to embody the Calvinistic view of the matter. In 1535, eighteen years before Hyperius published his book, Erasmus had issued his *Ecclesiastes*, but it was and still is recognised that in this work the preacher's task is conceived not from the ecclesiastical but from the humanistic viewpoint. Hyperius, on the contrary, regarded the theological bearings of the sermon above the humanistic and, influenced as he was by Martin Butzer, is to be reckoned a sincere and convinced Calvinist, as is further evidenced by his joining of practice and theory. His practice was to make his pupils good preachers by assigning them texts, having them preach the sermons they composed on these texts before him and the members of the class, and then giving them the benefit of his criticism of content and form and the use of the voice and gestures in the delivery. His theory is to be inferred from his textbook, which in the best sense of the term is Calvinistic.¹

This treatise bears the alternative title, *Popular Interpretation of Sacred Scripture*, and in the dedicatory epistle Hyperius gives his view of the Bible as the necessary and sufficient guide of what we are to believe, so that we and all men everywhere can find in it something useful for our highest welfare. He then arranges his material into two parts: sermons in general in Book I and sermons in particular in Book II. The contents of Book I are briefly as follows: Two methods of Scripture interpretation are

¹ In the preparation of this section on Hyperius I have used the article by C. Chr. Achelis in *P.R.E.* and K. F. Müller, *Andreas Hyperius, Ein Beitrag zu seiner Charakteristik*, 1895.

in vogue, one in the schools and one in the churches, of which the latter was the procedure of our Lord and His disciples and should be ours, as ministers of the word. Holy Scripture highly exalts this office and terms those who fulfil it fellow labourers with God. If the preacher is worthily to do his work, he must possess at least three characteristics: knowledge of theology, pure morality, and teaching ability, while his aim must ever be to promote what pertains to salvation and reconciliation with God. The preacher and the secular orator have some things in common, but more in which they differ. Common to both is the formal technique of speech composition and delivery; peculiar to the preacher is that the content of his sermons must be drawn from Holy Scripture and adapted to the salvation needs of his hearers. This adaptation is secured by mastery of the five sorts of sermons recognised in Holy Scripture. 2 Timothy iii. 16 mentions sermons that deal with (1) doctrine, (2) reproof or refutation of false teachings, (3) correction or rebuke of bad actions and habits, (4) instruction in righteousness or what is required to be known for correct action; and Romans xv. 4 adds (5) consolation, a kind of sermon exceedingly necessary, since the evils and griefs of life are many. The order of the preaching service should be first the reading of the Scriptures, second the invocation of divine help, and third the discourse. Book II exemplifies in detail the five classes of sermons mentioned in Book I.

The contribution of Hyperius to the theory and art of preaching may be summarised as follows:

(1) He made a clear distinction between the sermon and the forensic speech. The place of the sermon is the church; that of the forensic address is the law court; the sermon is addressed to a congregation of believers, not to a judge and jury; the atmosphere of the sermon is the peace of the Holy Spirit; that of the forensic is the strife of litigation.

(2) He was the first to frame a treatise on homiletics from the distinctively evangelical viewpoint.

(3) He asserted that all preaching should be founded exclusively upon Holy Scripture and should expound it *popularly*.

(4) He advised that the preacher should take as his models the prophets and the apostles.

(5) He taught that since preaching aims to invite men to become reconciled to God, it should therefore make the way of

life plain in a winning manner and persuade the listeners to receive and rest upon Jesus Christ for salvation.

(6) He laid stress on the fact that while the preacher can learn from the rhetorician the use of the voice, the method of arrangement, how to train the memory, and the acceptable pronunciation of words, yet the secular orator has nothing of value to give the sacred speaker so far as the *inventio* or content is concerned.

(7) He proposed to include the following in the sermon: *Lectio, Invocatio, Exordium, Propositio seu Divisio, Confirmatio, Confutatio, Conclusio*, but he did not hold that all should necessarily be in every sermon without exception.

(8) He abandoned the three-fold division of rhetoric, *genus demonstrativum, deliberativum, et judiciale*, in favour of the five kinds of sermons already mentioned, which for ease of remembering he further reduced to the three, doctrinal, practical and consolatory.

This book of Hyperius went through many editions, and its material has been incorporated into countless manuals of preaching, so that today what he wrote seems quite conventional to the homiletically inclined student. Yet he was not followed by many of his contemporaries, and the present generation of Protestant preachers largely neglects much that he taught. Nevertheless, the specifically Calvinistic way of regarding the sermon is still valid, and when duly translated into practice vindicates its worth as an instrument of the Holy Spirit to convert sinners from the evil of their ways and to edify believers in their most holy faith. It can do now what it did more than three centuries ago in the preaching work of its first and foremost exemplar, John Calvin himself.

As already noted, Calvin's activity as preacher extended from the summer of 1549 to the autumn of 1560,¹ and that we have so many of the sermons delivered during this period in their *ipsissima verba* is due to Denis Raguenaу, a Frenchman who with his family took refuge in Geneva from the religious persecutions of his own country. Work had to be found for him and, since he was expert in shorthand, he was directed, in part return for his support, to take down as delivered the sermons of Calvin. In ten years and a half Calvin preached about two thousand sermons,

¹ Much of the following material is derived, in addition to what may be learned in the usual sources, from Erwin Mülhaupt, *Die Predigt Calvins, ihre Geschichte, ihre Form und ihre religiösen Grundgedanken*, 1931, a work which is especially valuable because of its citations of the actual words of Calvin's sermons as contained in the *Corpus Reformatorum*.

of which hundreds have been preserved for posterity because of the work of the industrious Denis, and from which it is possible to form an excellent estimate of the homiletic ability of the great Reformer of Geneva. The indisputable impression remains that here was one of the royal line of those who from the days of the apostles have been able to bring to the hungering children of men bread and salt from the word of God.

Usually Calvin preached twice on Sundays, at dawn and at three in the afternoon, and on weekdays once every two weeks. The entire service occupied about one hour, and since it included prayer and psalm, the sermon must have been delivered with great rapidity of utterance in order to keep within the time. Calvin's custom was to prepare all his sermons with great care by earnest Scripture study and extended meditation, but he made no notes nor usually did he write out what he planned to say, but habituated himself to carry the results of his intensive thinking in his excellent memory. He considered it the minister's duty to explain in the pulpit the entire word of God, but he made no effort to divide the time between the two Testaments. On Sundays he based his discourse on the New Testament with some of his best loved psalms, and on weekdays he drew his texts usually from the Old Testament, but he was not bound by any rigid rules—he selected freely to meet the need of the Church.

It is of human interest to learn that Calvin's preaching did not please everyone. Some were cold and indifferent, and some were outspoken in their criticisms and openly hostile. He complained that the crying of children was a distraction, and that the attention of his audience was diverted by the noise of revellers discharging firearms. He noted with displeasure that some passed the open door of the church without entering, so eager were they to go to breakfast, that some who entered soon fell asleep, and that others who remained awake were evidently there for other than interest in the worship of God and desire to hear the preached word. He forgot that the fires of consecrated intellectuality and devotion did not blaze in all with an intensity equal to that which he felt burning within himself. But he pressed forward his appointed work, and it is profitable for us to learn what his contribution really was to the preacher's art. This we may summarise as follows :

(1) He thought of his work not as that of a priest, but of a *minister of the word*. "Priest is a sacred name, and yet it would

be better to hang on the gallows, than to be a papist priest.”¹ In calling himself minister, however, he intended to convey the thought that he was not the servant of the congregation but of the Lord, and that this latter fact did not give him the right to be the master of the congregation. “Has the Lord wished that I should be here in the pulpit to be regarded by men as their superior? Indeed no. But to be the Lord’s trumpet to summon His to Himself that they may obey Him. In other respects I am one of the flock like the rest.”² Accordingly he preached what he conceived God in His word would have him preach, not what the whimsies of his hearers might wish for the pleasure of the moment. He thought of the sincere believer, saying, “We have not come to the preaching merely to hear what we do not know, but to be incited to do our duty,”³ and under this conviction he made no parade of his extensive historical knowledge nor of his great exegetical virtuosity, nor did he ever save incidentally call attention to the beauties of Holy Scripture. “St. Paul . . . to prove to us that we should hold Scripture undoubtedly true, never said, ‘Moses was an excellent man, and Isaiah had an admirable eloquence.’ He said nothing of the personal worth of men, but only that they were the organs of the Holy Spirit.”⁴ Thus we learn that Calvin believed that it was the duty of the preacher not to suit his message to human likings or dislikings, but always to ascertain and to proclaim some “Thus saith the Lord.”

(2) This that the Lord said, Calvin found in the Holy Scriptures, and because of this fact the Bible was not to him a collection of accidentally surviving documents to be explained like other writings of antiquity, but the organ of a *living will*. Therefore in his preaching Scripture became as living speech from person to person. “We preach as if God were here present; as if a secretary were speaking before a prince, . . . as if we were an organ of Him who has sovereign authority,”⁵ and “All who preach can in truth solemnly say, Jesus Christ speaks through us.”⁶ The “as if” in the citations must not, however, be interpreted as meaning some make-believe on Calvin’s part. It is not the “as if” of fiction, but of fact, because God wishes fellowship with the world through His Word in order to save it, and He does not wait for it to come to Him, but He

¹ C.R., 82, 412.

² C.R., 81, 219.

³ C.R., 79, 783.

⁴ C.R., 82, 286.

⁵ C.R., 82, 146.

⁶ C.R., 81, 7.

Himself goes out to seek it in His preached word; wherein He says hard things sometimes, but more often soft things, both, however, with one and the same purpose, that of winning men to Himself. With this conviction, Calvin in his preaching does not hesitate to do extraordinary things in order to adapt the message to the audience. "Here," he says, "God uses baby talk and lisps to us like a mother to her nursing child," and repeatedly he turns what the Scripture says by way of reference merely into direct personal discourse. Thus his sermons give the impression that in them, as in the prophets, a supreme divine being is making use of an earthly instrument to convey His will for man's salvation. Herein is one secret of effective preaching.

(3) In his preaching Calvin appealed primarily to the will of his hearers. All exegesis in the pulpit if designed to inform the intellect merely seemed to him so much frigid theorising. "If a man . . . in the pulpit expounds the Holy Scripture only, and if he has no regard for what is savingly profitable to those to whom he speaks, it is but a dead thing, and has no utility,"¹ and "If God stood there like a philosopher commending to our attention certain virtues, and advising us that it would be well for us to exemplify them, how pitifully cold that would be, and in addition how useless, because in us there is no power to comply, but only what is contrary to the righteousness of God,² but in His word God does not do this, but tells us how much He loves us, begs us to come to Him . . . and persuades us to have the courage to present ourselves before Him." Thus Calvin aimed at conversion primarily in his preaching work, and herein is another secret of effective sermons.

(4) While it is all true that it is the duty of the preacher to proclaim the word of God, that this word is contained in Holy Scripture, and that the purpose is practical conversion of will, not mere information of intellect, it must not be forgotten that Calvin was an intense student of the Bible in the original tongues, as was shown in the preceding lecture, and an equally diligent student of his audience and of his time. He studied the Scriptures because in them God spoke to him in order that through him the Church might be reached. He freely confessed that there were passages that he did not understand and he always encouraged his listeners to read the Bible for themselves and to ascertain what God had to say to them individually.³ He

¹ *C.R.*, 77, 614.

² *C.R.*, 60, 654.

³ *C.R.*, 74, 480.

studied his congregation because he wanted to win them for Christ. He made use of similes and illustrations adapted to their comprehension; he employed effectively the vernacular tongue, he did not disdain the use of homely proverbs and trite sayings, nor did he hesitate at times to introduce humour,¹ while always he was a master in the use of the consolations of the Gospel, for which, as we all know, sympathetic acquaintance with Scripture and hearer is absolutely necessary. Finally, he studied his time and knew well its complicated problems. He was well aware of the customs of the town and the tastes of the age; the recrudescence of the old paganism and the errors of the Romanists, and he bent every effort to fit his preaching to combat them. Herein are other secrets of a successful and victorious ministry of the word of God.

We must now add a word concerning two doctrines without which no exposition of the Calvinistic view of preaching would be complete: predestination and the witness of the Holy Spirit to the Scriptures.

The doctrine of predestination has to many of our contemporaries such a harsh and forbidding sound that either they ignore it or reject it entirely. But this is because men either identify it with the pagan doctrine of fate, or else push their knowledge of it by human analogy and anthropomorphic speculations beyond the boundaries of Scriptural revelation concerning it. Certainly the doctrine as it was experienced by the Calvinists of the sixteenth century had a far different aspect from what it acquired, and as may be argued mistakenly, in the meditations of some of the theologians of the succeeding centuries. To quote from A. Vigié,² "One will never understand the piety, valour, heroism of the sixteenth century, unless one remembers its view of predestination—living, optimistic, overflowing with sentiment in the individual consciousness. These men are of God; they feel Him, and they belong to Him. They wish to do nothing but His will, and God guides them, impels them, makes them speak and act. They are His, His friends and His chosen ones. Thence is derived their joyful exaltation of soul. God is in them, and He it is Who speaks to them, moves them

¹ *C.R.*, 74, 767, for one instance. To many who agree with the mythical statement with which Hamack is said to have begun his lecture on John Calvin, "We now come to a man who never smiled," etc., this will seem incredible, but it is nevertheless true.

² *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du Protestantisme français*, Tom. 31, 1882, p. 506f.

and does His work through them. There you have predestination—but living and optimistic, God's presence with man for good and salvation. And this is the doctrine that later hardened into a despairing and icy fatalism! But in the sixteenth century it was the profound expression of an intense union between the sinner saved from his sins and the omnipotent God." These fervid words express a general truth, but need correction at two points. The "despairing and icy fatalism" of a later age was no legitimate development of the original doctrine of predestination, but its perversion. Again, the experienced predestination of the sixteenth century Calvinist was no mystic assurance, but an acceptance of the witness of the Scripture as to the keeping power of Jesus Christ over those who accepted the divine offers of mercy and forgiveness made in Him. Here is where the doctrine is of immense importance for preaching. God has His elect people everywhere in the world. They are waiting for the call to live, and this call is extended to them through the word as preached. Preaching is, therefore, the means whereby the saving love of God comes home to the consciousness of the individual upon whom that love is set, or it is, so to speak, the instrumental link between the seeking love of God and the responding love of the chosen individual, and this love is an everlasting and undying love. This fact made preaching for the sixteenth century Calvinist one of the sublimest activities in which by grace anyone could participate, and thus his belief in predestination made his sermons glow and sparkle with a heavenly radiance.

Semper huic verbo, confessed the Calvinist of the first age, *adest praesens Spiritus Sanctus*. This meant that when the preacher faced his audience there was present a third being, the Holy Spirit who, according to promise, was to supply on the side of the preacher the gift of understanding the word and the hearers, and on the side of the hearers the gift of understanding the word and the preacher. This effect was not understood as inevitable, as *ex opere operato*, but as dependent on desire and preparation. The sermon must not be that which costs nought, but derived from serious, meditative, prayerful study of the Holy Scriptures; and the hearing ear and the understanding heart of the congregation are not gained without effort and prayer. But granted that all has been done, then the Spirit exercises His gracious power and there is produced that *rapport*

between minister and people wherein the individualising, electing grace of God has its perfect work in the increase of faith and the sanctification of life. This fact also made preaching for the sixteenth century Calvinist an activity which by the power of the Holy Spirit could be freighted with heavenly power and so bring to pass the most surprising and delightful results.

If this is, as I believe it is, a fair presentation of the Calvinistic ideal for preaching, it will be immediately evident that modern theory and practice seriously differ with it. There is much discussion as to the relative merits of the two views, but perhaps the debate can be made to centre on the one question, How can man's word of preaching be God's word ?

The answer of Karl Barth may be studied in his *Dogmatik*, Par. 23, *Gott in der Predigt*, where three topics are discussed : (1) God's word and man's word in Christian preaching ; (2) Pure doctrine as *Aufgabe* ; and (3) The utility of dogmatics. The sense of the argument seems to be as follows. All through the centuries since Christ, preaching has been going on. Preaching exists in the form of an activity now in this place at this time, now in that place at that time. It is, if Christian preaching, about God, or rather about the word of God or the revelation that God has made about Himself chiefly in Christ. The New Testament, we take it, is for Barth the first form of this preaching and is only to be distinguished from the later preaching in having the first place in the time series. The problem is how to make a revelation like that through Christ which came in the early age of the Church a present revelation, and how to relate to it the preaching of the Church. Undoubtedly the Church has the authority to make known to men the revelation of God, and just as undoubtedly the message of the Church tends to harden into rigid dogmas. On the other hand, the individual has freedom to express the revelation as he individually sees fit in view of his place in time. Preaching is somewhere between the rigidity of ecclesiastical authoritarianism and individual liberty of judgment. It is an attempt to speak about God in man's words and, of course, is foredoomed to fail of its purpose in view of the Barthian dogma of the transcendence of God. Yet God in some mysterious way can use even man's failures to make Himself known. How can this be ? Revelation is revelation, Scripture or the first proclamation of revelation is Scripture, preaching is preaching, and the three are neither to be separated

nor identified. Perhaps the best way to put it is that if our preaching is to succeed, God Himself must work therewith in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Like every human activity, Christian preaching may be done in a better or a worse way. What, then, is its norm? Not public authority, nor intellectual culture, nor æsthetic criticism, but pure doctrine. This does not mean orthodox doctrine, as we might interpret it, but pure in the sense that the earthly vessel in which we have our heavenly treasure may become more and more permeable to the light of the divine Logos. The function of dogmatics is to aid purity in the sense defined. Dogmatics is not to be thought of as a system of formulas, the strange error into which the older Protestantism fell when in its decadence it took Scripture to be an inspired letter from which dogmas were to be extracted by logical processes. But revelation is never product, and preaching is preaching only when it takes place. Let us think of preaching, then, as a doing, not as something done, and pure doctrine as an ideal never to be solved by paper and pen, but for which all that is put on paper can serve only as encouragement. The preacher must draw from the well of pure doctrine, and dogmatics helps us to find the well. Or, to change the figure, dogmatics is the science which treats of the norms of Christian speaking.

It must be recognised that, with all its suggestiveness in details, this view is not a development of the older Calvinism, but its contradiction. It invalidates the Calvinistic view of Holy Scripture as the word of God in the unique sense; it makes God so transcendent that any human assertion concerning Him is *ipso facto* bound to be wrong; it makes preaching a proclamation concerning a God Who by definition is unknown and unknowable. Preaching in this sense is analogous to the elevation of the Host, the exhibition of a mystery not to be comprehended by the worshipping multitude, but contemplated only that the devout may lose themselves in wonder, love and praise. Of course, it must be acknowledged that all attempts to describe the divine essence must be inadequate; and all human efforts to think the thoughts of God must fall short of reality, but this for the sixteenth century Calvinist was not the essential element in preaching, which was to recite what God had done, and to call men to repentance and faith, to address the will of man and to demand action. After all, what is the verdict of Holy Scripture itself on the issue between the

older Calvinism and the new? Put the question to the Lord and His apostles and decide in view of their plain teaching on the relation between preaching and Scripture, between the work and aim of the preacher and the work and aim of the Holy Spirit. We are confident that the verdict would support the Calvinism of the founders, and that, whether the Neo-Calvinist is the logical successor or not of his sixteenth century predecessors, the latter are the legitimate heritors of the homiletic practice and theory of the Master and His disciples.

GEORGE JOHNSON.

Lincoln University, Pa.