

Nothing New Under the Sun

It is but to state the obvious when I point out that I am not the first to draw attention to the inadequacy of monologue preaching as *the* teaching tool in the churches. Far from it! Nevertheless, mixing my metaphors, I think I ought to throw my mite into the balance. For the disappointing fact that we have to face is, as David C. Norrington acknowledged in his seminal *To Preach or not to Preach? The Church's Urgent Question*, churches are hard to shift. And that's an understatement if ever there was one! Fully-loaded tankers ploughing through blue water are easier to turn round. Tradition dies hard, and takes its time about it. Christendom is ingrained. Mind you, it is not only in the realm of the gospel and the *ekklēsia* that people are hard to move from pre-conceived or long-adopted ideas or practices. As Norrington explained, by using the words of Max Planck, the Danish physicist in his epigraph:

A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.¹

Sad, but too often true.

Jeremy Thomson was another to confront the issue in hand. He opened his booklet *Preaching as Dialogue: Is the Sermon a Sacred Cow?* thus:

For centuries [monologue] preaching has been integral to church life. Many ministers believe that the preparation and delivery of sermons is one of their most important tasks (if not the *most* important). Christians think of hearing God's word as they read the Bible, and perhaps in other ways – but there is something special about [monologue] preaching. [Such] preaching appears to offer an opportunity of hearing God's word for a specific situation through

¹ Max Planck: *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers*, 1950.

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someone whom God has particularly gifted for the task. It is more than teaching individuals (though that may be one result), it is what one particular gathering of Christians needs to hear – vision, encouragement, consolation, challenge, correction, warning. Yet as I have listened to [monologue] sermons and preached them myself, I have become uneasy about the exalted place the sermon enjoys in Christian estimation. For all the effort of preparing, delivering and listening to sermons, most church members are not as mature as we might expect as a result. Why is this? Of course, there are bad sermons, and there are preachers whose lives are inconsistent with their teaching. But people may listen week by week to the best prepared and presented sermons, given by thoroughly sincere preachers, and yet make little progress in Christian discipleship. Some preachers blame congregations for a lack of expectancy that God will speak, or an inability to listen to a ‘solid exposition’, or even for disobedience to what they hear. But I suspect that there is a more significant factor in the failure rate of the sermon than the quality of the [monologue] preacher or the responsiveness of the hearers.²

Thomson rightly went on to argue that it is the system itself which is the cause of the problem.

Jon Zens was another to make a noteworthy contribution in this field. Norrington, when he wrote his ‘Norrington Responds to Critics’, very helpfully summarised the book he had written. In addition to his own work, Zens rescued Norrington’s invaluable response from oblivion, into which it might well have dropped after Norrington’s death, when, in 2009, he (Zens) most helpfully published it in *Searching Together*.³ Here is part of what Norrington said:

For those who may not be familiar with my book let me begin by providing a summary of its four main points:

² Jeremy Thomson: *Preaching as Dialogue: Is the Sermon a Sacred Cow?*, Grove Books Limited, Cambridge, 1996, p3.

³ David C. Norrington (Zens edition): *To Preach or not to Preach? The Church’s Urgent Question*, Ekklesia Press, Omaha, 1996, x.

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1. Today's custom of making the sermon the 'main attraction' of weekly gatherings has no clear New Testament support, nor was it the norm for church gatherings of the first two centuries.
2. The regular weekly sermon did not become such a featured part of church life until about the third century – along with other non-biblical practices including the acquisition of elaborate buildings and the adoption of hierarchical forms of leadership. Sadly, it was also about this time that many true New Testament patterns based on 'one another' ministry were abandoned.
3. The New Testament paradigm was community oriented with a *mutual* effort to develop and exercise everyone's gifts and skills – most of the group life taking place in homes without the benefit (or distraction) of a professional clergy.
4. The traditional 'sermon' is actually a poor teaching method, and does little to foster spiritual growth among God's people.⁴

As Zens succinctly put it:

David [Norrington] illustrates just how ineffective the monologue sermon is as a means to promote the expression of Christ through his body.⁵

Well, this is what I see as the problem I have delineated. What about the cure? Where shall we find it? If the answer to that is not self-evident, I despair!

⁴ Norrington (Zens edition) p185.

⁵ Norrington (Zens edition) x.