

# Preaching, the Bible and the Renewal of the Church

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## Introduction

Preaching has always been the lifeblood of the Methodist movement. Without preaching – and the fellowship which is its essential corollary – we are nothing. There will be no renewal of the Church without the renewal of preaching. And there will be no such renewal unless preaching is biblical.

Alongside this manifesto, we need another. Preaching must change if it is to be heard. And if it is to be really biblical, preachers must preach as the Bible preaches,<sup>2</sup> deep enough to reach human hearts untouched by mere moralizing and exhortation. Finally, to reverse what I have just written, preaching cannot be renewed unless the Church is renewed. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two; they thrive together, or they die together. A vibrant Christian community is the necessary context of effective preaching.

## Preaching: the lifeblood of the Church

How often does the average churchgoer in Britain today hear a substantial sermon? By ‘substantial’ I mean a sermon which nourishes the soul and strengthens discipleship, or one which awakens faith in the hearts of at least some of those who hear. Few people go to church twice on Sundays these days. So it is unlikely that many hear a substantial sermon more than once a week. But many, for all kinds of reasons, do not go to church every Sunday. When they do go, the service may be all-age worship, or another kind of ‘special’. All-age worship can be effective, even powerful, with or without a sermon. But what the preacher says, and for how long, depends a great deal on the age of the children. The older the children, the more substantial the address, or addresses, can be. Understandably, all-age worship often caters for (a telling expression, this) the youngest. Yet children aged 10 and upwards, and sometimes even younger ones, are capable of receiving much more than they are given credit for, as a quick glance in the direction of the internet, their television programmes and their school curriculum would confirm.

Other alternatives to the ‘traditional’ sermon occur. The minister takes the opportunity to unveil future plans for the church. Or members

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of a house-group lead a different kind of service. The major festivals of Christmas and Easter frequently pass without a substantial sermon. How many people could give a 'reason for the faith that is in them' based on Christmas and Easter sermons they have heard? Variety in worship may be good for jaded palates. But a substantial sermon, let us say, every other Sunday, or even less often, is thin fare indeed. The Chilean miners survived on thin fare in the early days of their subterranean incarceration. Children of light deserve better. They need more.

Preaching is the lifeblood of the Church. We may do other things. But, like the celebration of Holy Communion, visiting the sick and praying for the world, preaching is not an optional add-on: we must preach. We cannot put the gospel on PowerPoint. What the Psalmist calls 'the wonderful deeds of the Lord' cannot be reproduced in pictorial form, even if pictures sometimes assist both our preaching and our prayers. (The witnessing Christian as an 'icon' of the gospel is another matter.)

None of us can say what miracles of conversion and transformation may be wrought in an apparently lifeless church through a powerful, effective sermon. But it remains true that the renewal of preaching and of the Church belong together. Relationships, too, are the lifeblood of the Church: not only our relationship with God, but also our relationships with each other. As the Bible teaches again and again, the two cannot be separated. Those relationships need far more attention than, for example, restructuring, necessary though that may be. 'Fresh Expressions' will become stale unless relationships are kept in good repair. But the main focus of this article is preaching and the Bible, and to that I now turn.

### **Preaching as the Bible preaches**

Just as the Church perishes without preaching, so preaching becomes shallow or eccentric or both unless it is biblical. Occasional exceptions may be warranted. But biblical preaching is the norm. Why so? Because only the Bible provides the depth, variety, truth and power which preaching needs if it is to be effective.

But preachers must preach as the Bible preaches. It is well worth our while studying what biblical writers do. They tell their story with inspired skill, in countless varied ways and with imagination; they recognize that God is the ultimate source, guide and goal of the story they tell, and they bridge the gap between the past, however sacred, and the present, however unpromising. They do more, but this is enough to be going on with.

They show inspired skill. We cannot manufacture inspiration, but continual prayer undoubtedly helps. But whereas we tend to take the inspira-

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tion of biblical writers for granted, (even if we differ about its meaning), we don't always notice their skill. Even St Mark, we have learned, for all his rough-hewn Greek, put his Gospel together with consummate artistry. Artistry and simplicity are not, like St Paul's 'flesh' and 'spirit', in conflict; they serve each other. Words are precious, and we must use them well. If our prevailing culture uses words carelessly, manipulatively and boringly, Christian preachers must not follow suit. If 15 minutes is all I have on Sunday morning, I shall make every word count – as St Luke did in writing up the Parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

Biblical writers not only communicate with inspired skill; they do so in an extraordinary variety of ways. The Bible contains not only different genres – myths, fables, parables, history, poetry and more – but also a rich kaleidoscope of metaphors, images and figures of speech culled from an equally rich variety of sources. Canaanite motifs get 'baptized' into Old Testament Yahwism, Graeco-Roman epistolary conventions are baptized into Christ, and so on. We do not serve the gospel if we reduce it, Sunday after Sunday, to the mantra 'God loves you'. Even glorious truths lose their shine if endlessly and unimaginatively repeated. Allow your conviction that the almighty God cares to be enriched by the imagery of, for example, Psalm 56.8, 'You have noted my grief; store my tears in your flask' (REB translation). And let us give as much attention to the form, structure and style of our sermons; all three matter, as the writers of our scriptures testify.

One literary characteristic of much of the Bible deserves special attention: the prominence of dialogue, including, particularly in the Old Testament, questions and protests directed to God. But to preach as the Bible preaches does not necessarily mean posting two people at different lecterns for a dialogue or a question-and-answer session. We have seriously under-estimated the dialogical character of 'traditional' preaching; it is, or should be, the outcome of many dialogues in which the preacher will have been engaged: with fellow-preachers, with members of the congregation, with many others in the world at large.<sup>3</sup> One of the ways to preach as the Bible does is to articulate the questions – especially the critical questions – which people are asking. St Paul does this in Rom. 9–11; the Psalmist does so frequently.

A moment's reflection should be sufficient to convince us that biblical writers wrote not only with great skill and in richly varied ways; they wrote with imagination. Had we not been so obsessed with the Bible's historical accuracy, and mistakenly thought that that is a barometer of biblical authority, we should have realized this long ago. Instead, if we let the imaginative, soaring majesty of the first chapter of Genesis (for example)

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lead us by the hand into its depth and truth, we should be far more relaxed about Richard Dawkins et al. And why should not a detail in Matthew or Luke but not in Mark sometimes – not always – be the product of their inspired imagination? We have retold biblical stories to our children with imagination; why not credit them with the same God-given faculty?

It needs to be said that some modern translations do not serve us well here. The skill, imagination and literary wealth of biblical writers do not always come through in the GNB and the CEV, well-meaning and necessary though they may be. There is no easy solution, and I am not advocating a return to the literary riches of the Authorized Version, even in this, its four-hundredth year. But we need to acknowledge, value and exploit the literary wealth of the Bible as an integral part of its divine revelation. Even if we can't tell a story with the skill of St Luke, or articulate a dialogue (*diatribe* was the technical Greek term) with the rigour of St Paul, we can at least sit at their feet.

Two other fundamental points need to be made if I am even to begin to do justice to the theme of preaching as the Bible preaches. First, we need, sometimes at least, to reverse sentences in which we are the subject, the Bible the object. Biblical narratives address us. We are called to locate ourselves in them and to be immersed in the biblical world – or rather, to see that that world is really our world, (and all this without subscribing to ancient cosmology, demonology etc). We are invited, not only to immerse ourselves in the Bible, but to live, breathe and be transformed by it.

We do not always do this. We make the Bible an object to be analyzed, a problem to be solved, an enigma to be interpreted. Of course, the Bible presents itself as all these things – and more. (Think of St John's difficult language about 'the Jews'.) But the sentence in which the Bible is the object needs to be reversed, so that the Bible becomes the subject. The preacher's business is not to 'apply' the Bible, or make it relevant. What an impertinence! The dead hand of the relevance-mongers spreads everywhere: making worship relevant, making God relevant . . . It is like a married man or woman seeking to make their partner relevant. The whole 'relevance' project is deeply flawed, because it implies a human- and church-centred perspective. (A comparable criticism has been made about our use of the word 'environment', another word which implies an anthropocentric standpoint.) We are the irrelevant ones: irrelevant to the kingdom of God, unless God gives us *metanoia*, 'repentance', the transformation of our whole outlook. The relevance of Scripture, as Bonhoeffer argued, is axiomatic; when it addresses us, we know.

Similarly, if we preach as the Bible preaches, God will be the subject

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much more often than God tends to be in our church-centred, moralizing sermons. It is a striking fact that, in the New Testament, the word ‘God’, *theos*, is very rarely in the accusative case – i.e. the direct object of a verb. So, whilst there may be a place for telling our Methodist story, as seems to be the fashion at present, what a travesty it would be if that ever displaced God as subject.

A final point about preaching as the Bible preaches. Such preaching will elide the distinction between then and now. What we think of as biblical preaching easily becomes the rehearsal of something which happened to the people of the Bible, but not something which is happening to us now. Understood literally, that may be true, of course. But we need to dig deeper. Similarly, we appeal to their faith and experience, not to our own. But ‘a community that ceases to *be* the revelation of God cannot hope to *understand* that revelation . . .’<sup>4</sup> Contrast what biblical writers do; they incorporate the changing and developing experience of the believing community into the tradition. Material is constantly ‘recycled’: the Deuteronomist reworks some of the traditions in Exodus, Luke and Matthew edit Mark, the writer of the Pastoral Epistles ‘updates’ Paul, and so on. The dark depths of the current Babylonian exile *and* the theological foundations of Israel’s faith are expressed in Deutero-Isaiah, with the promise ‘You are my witnesses’ (e.g. Isa. 43.10). Not only is material recycled, and new experiences incorporated. Testimonies are worked in as well. So the earliest tradition about Jesus attracts a list of testimonies of people who have ‘seen the Lord’, including the latest addition, Paul himself (1 Cor. 15.3–11). The point is this: the list of testimonies is open-ended, because the Church cannot witness to the resurrection unless it has experienced it.

This is so fundamental to what I am calling true biblical preaching – preaching as the Bible preaches – that it is worth looking at further examples. Again, our obsession with history, or a rather narrow view of historical authenticity, has muddied the waters. But some of the teaching of Jesus includes early Christian experience and conviction. Morna Hooker, commenting on the two parables of the (old) cloak and wineskins (Mk. 2.21–2), writes: ‘The different versions of these two parables in the Synoptic Gospels probably reflect the debate which went on in the early Christian communities regarding the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.’<sup>5</sup> The longer version of the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6.9–13, plus, in some manuscripts, the concluding doxology) is another example. What better expression of Christian faith could there be than the affirmation, in the light of the cross and resurrection, ‘Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory’?

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My late colleague, Henry McKeating, Old Testament scholar and man of wisdom, once proposed this essay title: ‘Do the gains brought about by modern biblical scholarship outweigh the losses?’ It is an interesting question. The gains are clear: biblical scholarship has been, and continues to be, liberating and enlightening. But sometimes it is possible to feel, in the phrase of Wordsworth’s great Ode, ‘there hath passed away a glory . . .’. It need not be so. To preach as the Bible preaches does not mean setting academic scholarship on one side. But that scholarship does not, and should not, mean analyzing the Bible to death. Through that scholarship we work towards what Paul Ricoeur called a ‘second naiveté’. In our ‘first naiveté’ we may have assumed that everything narrated in the Bible happened exactly as described. Our ‘second naiveté’ cannot possibly involve returning to that. To do so would be obscurantist or simplistic. Instead, we allow biblical scholarship to help us into a deeper immersion in Scripture, so that, for those of us who preach, we may preach as the Bible preaches.

### **Preaching must change**

This and the previous section belong together. Preaching cannot be truly biblical and not change. We cannot preach as the Bible preaches, and continue to preach as we have always preached. As we have seen, the work of those who composed and edited the books of the Bible is a testimony to development and adaptability. The message and style of ‘Deutero-Isaiah’ was very different from those of Isaiah of Jerusalem; John wrote a Gospel different from Mark’s; the list could go on. But we are in danger today of looking anywhere but the Bible when we ask ourselves anxiously whether preaching has had its day, or, if it hasn’t, in what ways it should change. Of course, it is necessary to look at and listen to the world around us as prayerfully and discerningly as we can if we are to preach effectively. We may safely assume that the apostles and prophets did that, too.

It is too easy, and too superficial, to dismiss ‘traditional’ preaching as 20-minute ‘three-pointers’ delivered from a pulpit, ‘six feet above contradiction’. There is a case to be made for (slightly) shorter sermons. (‘If you haven’t found oil after 15 minutes, stop boring.’) But we should also heed the warning of a former Bishop of Salisbury: ‘sermonettes make Christianettes’. Authentic, fresh preaching can still belie the gloomy comparisons with television market research about people’s limited attention spans. It may also be better to preach from somewhere other than the pulpit. But we do not need to make too much of this, either. A decision should depend on what best serves the listener,<sup>6</sup> not on what the preacher prefers. What matters is that the sermon is delivered as effectively as possible.

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Why stay out of the pulpit if, in doing so, the preacher cannot be seen by some members of the congregation?

To preach as the Bible preaches also means that a sermon will not necessarily have three points at all. Most of the parables of Jesus had one point, even if, sometimes, they had subsidiary ones as well. An iconic story such as the Transfiguration requires one central point: 'This is my Son; hear him.' Nor should this be thought of as a 'monologue', even if the preacher is the only one who speaks for the duration of the sermon. (It might, however, be good for us all if more sermons were interrupted by questions and even protests – that's biblical, too!) The lively, enormously varied styles of the biblical writings frequently incorporate dialogues, but, as I suggested earlier, preaching is essentially dialogical. If the preacher is prayerfully and wholeheartedly immersed in the life of the world as a faithful disciple of Jesus, listening to the heartbeat of that world, her preaching will respond accordingly – and therefore change.

But there are two particular ways, it seems to me, in which preaching must change. Both these ways are biblically-based, and so are really a continuation of our theme of preaching as the Bible preaches. Firstly, for a long time now, we have grown too used to the idea of a preacher working in a kind of splendid isolation. He (it has usually been 'he', at least until recently) studies the Bible on his own, thinks about his sermon in the quiet of his study (if he has that luxury), and delivers the message which is the end-product of his solitary reflection and prayer. I do not wish to criticize this isolation which, actually, may be more common in other Christian traditions and less common in Methodism, with its strong traditions of fellowship and collegiality. But is it biblical?

At first sight, the preacher on his own delivering a 'monologue' does seem biblical: Peter at Pentecost and Paul at Athens are well-known examples. But when we look more closely at Acts, it is clear that something else is going on. Paul engaged in many conversations, out of doors (e.g. Acts 17.16) and indoors (e.g. Acts 19.8–10). We can also safely assume that, in cultures and societies much less private and individualistic than ours, conversations and co-operation of all kinds lie behind apostolic preaching and, perhaps, the prophecies of the Old Testament. Certainly most of Paul's letters, if the opening preambles are anything to go by, (e.g. the first verses of 1 and 2 Corinthians), were co-operative efforts, even if we find it hard to imagine Paul letting Timothy and the others get a word in edgeways. In a culture much more oral than ours, 'sermons' are likely to have been talked through and discussed before and after delivery – and, no doubt, during it as well.

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We cannot and probably should not adopt the practices of another culture. That would be artificial and misguided. But we may learn from them. I am suggesting that an important step towards preaching which is more biblical, is to question the traditional picture of the preacher preparing on his or her own, and to modify our practice accordingly.

My second point is an ecumenical one. This, too, has a biblical foundation. One of the many remarkable characteristics of the early Christian movement as we see it portrayed in the pages of the New Testament is its unity and diversity. (The two, properly understood, go together.) The turn to the Gentiles, in particular, suggests that the Christian Church only really becomes 'catholic' as it embraces people who are very different, even uncomfortably different, from the original 'members'. Such diversity is seldom comfortable, as several passages of Paul's writings show. (The presence of an erstwhile tax-collector amongst the 12 disciples is another instance.)

We do not know what Peter and Paul discussed when Paul stayed with Peter in Jerusalem for a fortnight (Gal. 1.18). It can hardly have been the weather. Nor do we do know what the issues at Corinth were which prompted Paul's enigmatic remarks about Apollos (e.g. 1 Cor. 3.4–7 and 4.6). But the uncompromising Paul of Galatians should not lead us to overlook the collaborative Paul of other epistles. Details such as these, reflecting not only collegiality, but also – within the parameters of apostolic tradition – diversity, point us to the essentially ecumenical ministry of preaching.

This has been a strange oversight of the modern ecumenical movement. Christians have increasingly affirmed one Lord, one Church, one faith. Why not also one order of preachers? No doubt the fact that preachers, ordained and lay alike, are trained, by and large, within their own tradition, and mostly exercise their ministry of preaching within their own Church, has obscured this important fact. Of course, all of us might, if we were so minded, try to score points by questioning or criticizing the content and practice of preaching in another Church. But would that serve the Gospel? None of us preaches the 'pure' gospel – and what would that be anyway? There is an extraordinary generosity of spirit in Paul's remarks in Philipians – and, again, we can only guess at the background: 'Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill . . . What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true, and in that I rejoice' (Phil. 1.15, 18).

This is one of the great undeveloped ecumenical tasks of our time. We have affirmed and celebrated the truths which unite us, and that has been

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good. We have explored and discussed the differences which continue to divide us and that, too, has probably been necessary and good. But what of the task, which we all share, of preaching the gospel to a world desperately in need of it? To embark on such an ecumenical enterprise would be to preach as the Bible preaches.

It would not, of course, be without its conflict and controversy. There is plenty of that in the New Testament. But some conflict is necessary: not the petty squabbles at Corinth about who was the best apostle (1 Corinthians 1.12), but equivalents of the Judaizing controversy (Galatians and Acts 15), which serve to discover the true dimensions of the gospel, and the appropriate 'admission requirements' into the Christian Church.

To conclude this section: the Bible offers not only a mandate for continuity – *apostolic* preaching – it also offers a mandate for change. Preaching which is faithful to the Bible will change – but always in ways which serve the listeners, and therefore serve the gospel as well.

A final theological point may serve to underline why change is integral to biblical preaching. The Bible is a deeply human collection of writings. The whole of human life is there. (*Humani nil a me alienum . . .*)<sup>7</sup>. Of course, we must also affirm the divinity (if such a word is not too unhelpful) of its revelation. But there is a parallel to be drawn here with Christology. Christians all too easily veer in one of two directions: we emphasize the humanity of Jesus at the expense of his divinity, or we do the opposite. His *full* humanity and divinity is a mystery to be affirmed, rather than a conundrum to be explained. Something similar needs to be affirmed about the Bible.

In this context, however, I am emphasizing the change which is integral to the unfolding human stories of Scripture. We must not lose the liveliness and vitality of the Bible by coating it with the bland emulsion of docetism.<sup>8</sup> Should Jeremiah have been as rude to God as he was? ('Truly you are to me like a deceitful brook . . .' 15.18; compare 20.7). Was St Paul right to be so sarcastic towards the Christians of Corinth (1 Cor. 4.8)? Should he have said what he did in Galatians (5.6)? Recovering the liveliness of the Bible is an important component in the renewal of preaching, and in helping preaching to change to 'serve the present age'.

### **Towards the renewal of biblical preaching: some practical suggestions**

I must preface this section with an apology and a disclaimer. The disclaimer first: 'Not that I have already . . . reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own . . .' (Phil. 3.12). The apology goes closely with the

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disclaimer: I apologize if what follows is ‘carrying coals to Newcastle’.

a. Agendas of ministerial staff and Local Preachers’ meetings these days become so crowded and pressing. Yet few things can be more important or rewarding than studying the Scriptures together, particularly passages in the lectionary. When, in Leeds, my Anglican colleague rang up to suggest such a thing, the shared study was invaluable. ‘For where two or three meet together in my name, I am there among them’ (Matt. 18.20). The relevance of that text seems all the greater in the light of a similar saying in Jewish rabbinic literature: ‘If two sit together and the word of the Law (is spoken) between them, the divine Presence rests between them.’<sup>9</sup>

b. We – and by ‘we’ I mean all of us in the Church – need help from each other in reading the Bible as reflectively and prayerfully as possible. The speed, complexity and noise of contemporary life are not conducive to reflection, and it would not be surprising if reading the Scriptures reflectively has become harder. Such prayerful reading must not decline into a pietistic docetism which doesn’t engage seriously with the human grittiness of the Bible. Reflectiveness and attentiveness to the text belong together. *Noticing the words* is one of the first tests of a good reader of the Bible.

Such attentive reading is important in church Bible study groups. I have often noticed how, in such groups, some look at their Bibles whilst the passage is being read at the beginning of the discussion, but hardly again thereafter. So the passage becomes the hors d’oeuvres of the evening instead of the main course.

c. The task of recovering the Bible is a continual obligation upon the Church – like rediscovering orthodoxy. It will not do to genuflect in the direction of Scripture in this ‘Year of the Bible’, and then go back to church-centred business thereafter. Back in 1975, designated a ‘Year of Evangelism’, an undergraduate remarked to me: ‘Isn’t it a bit like asking butchers’ shops to sell meat this year?’

d. Sustained attention to continuing training for all preachers, lay and ordained, has become urgent in the demanding context in which we now find ourselves. If there are preachers who have never been to a study day or training course since they were ordained or received on to full plan, they should, to coin a phrase, ‘consider their position’. Preaching is a professional, as well as a deeply personal, vocation. It is simply bad theology for lay preachers to regard themselves as the amateurs, the ordained as professionals. The stipend is not the decisive factor. Preaching is not like passing your driving test. In what other profession today is further training an optional extra?

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e. My final point is etched deeply into the Bible, the Old Testament, as well as the New.<sup>10</sup> To preach as the Bible preaches will be costly. There are easier, and less costly, ways of preaching, whether to God's gathered people or to those further afield, but the Bible consistently condemns them (e.g. Jer. 23. 16–18, 2 Cor. 2.17). Christian preaching is cruciform; whether the cross is the explicit content of the sermon or not, the preacher in her or his own person, is an icon of it. (And, lest that be misunderstood, a lugubrious preacher, too, is a contradiction in terms; the cross and resurrection belong together.) Of course, some sermons are easier to prepare than others; some congregations will be more receptive than others. But there is no escaping the personal cost of preaching, not least in the prayer which precedes and accompanies it. The cost is implied in words of Paul which underline the thoroughly God-centred nature of authentic preaching:

‘Who is sufficient for these things? . . . We speak as transparent people, sent by God, standing in God's presence, in Christ’ (2 Cor. 2.17).<sup>11</sup>

### NOTES

- 1 Neil G Richardson is a New Testament Scholar and former president of the British Methodist Conference.
- 2 Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, Calver, Sheffield: Cliff College Publishing 1995, p. 65.
- 3 On the dialogical character of preaching, see now *Sustaining Preachers and Preaching. A Practical Guide*, by George Lovell and Neil G. Richardson, Continuum 2011, chapter 2. The book as a whole argues for ‘a new culture’ of preaching.
- 4 Sebastian Moore, *God is a New Language*, DLT 1967, p. 151.
- 5 M.D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, A. & C. Black 1991, p. 100.
- 6 An emphatic theme in Craddock, *Overhearing*, e.g. pp. 128 and 132, and discussed in *Sustaining Preachers*, pp. 96–7.
- 7 Literally, ‘Nothing that is (of )human(ity) do I regard as alien to me.’ This saying of Terence, the second- century B.C. Roman playwright, has long seemed to me a good description of the human quality of the Bible.
- 8 The word derives from the Greek *dokeo*, meaning to ‘appear’ or ‘seem’, and is sometimes used of early Christological heresies which taught that Jesus – especially the crucified Jesus – merely *seemed* human.
- 9 Quoted in *Sustaining Preachers and Preaching*, p. 26. I have also drawn on Chapter 13 of this book, especially pp. 212–13, elsewhere in this article.
- 10 I have in mind not only the once-influential book by H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Cross in the Old Testament*, but also Bonhoeffer's remark ‘. . . in the Old (sc. Testament) the blessing also includes the cross, and in the New the cross also includes the blessing’ (*Letters and Papers From Prison*, Fontana Books, 1957, p. 127).
- 11 My own translation.