Passionate preaching

by Thomas G. Long in the December 2, 1998 issue

By Hughes Oliphant Old, The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church (Vol. 1: The Biblical Period; Vol. 2: The Ancient Church). *(Eerdman, Vol. 1: 346 pp., Vol 2: 480 pp.)*

A colleague and I share an admiration for the sermons of the late George Buttrick. Although I know his sermons only from books and manuscripts, my colleague experienced them firsthand in his graduate student days when he sat weekly among the packed pews of Harvard's Memorial Church. We both marvel over the way Buttrick's sermons crackle with intellectual energy and humor, bristle with insights from the Bible, theology and literature, and engage the urgent intellectual issues of the day. Buttrick's mind ranges quickly and with ease from Paul to Sartre, from Isaiah to Camus.

We have wondered though--given the many changes in American society and the decline of mainline Protestantism--if Buttrick would get the welcome hearing today that he did in the middle years of this century. Would his preaching connect to hearers in today's culture as it once did, or was it the product of time and place, a happy meeting of pulpit skill and cultural receptivity?

After some debate, we agreed that Buttrick's brand of intelligent, pertinent, theologically engaging preaching would find a hearing in every generation. This is not to say that Buttrick would fill a football stadium--the cultural tides do rise and fall, after all--but that there is always a sea of need and spiritual hunger that is ready for imaginative and faithful proclamation.

The first two volumes of *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures* lend support to this idea. Like Buttrick in this century, effective preachers have arisen in every age. Hughes Oliphant Old, a highly regarded liturgical historian (author of *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*), seems intent on identifying all of them in what will eventually be a massive seven-volume treatment of the entire span of Christian preaching, from its roots in the Old Testament all the way to the present. Having spent most of his career in the Presbyterian pastorate, Old left

an Indiana college-town parish several years ago to become a member of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton and to begin work on this project. When historian of worship Horton Davies inquired about Old's work, Old replied that he was writing on the history of preaching. "What period?" asked Davies. "From Moses to the present," said Old. To which Davies responded, "Oh dear, how audacious!"

Old is a man on a mission. This is not a dispassionate, academic survey of homiletical history, but a lament for a lost art and a trumpet blast for renewal. Old holds the view, shared by many, that preaching has fallen on evil days. "There are plenty of pulpits but few preachers up to filling them," he sighs. "There are plenty of ministers but few who seem able to hold a congregation. . . . What has happened to preaching?"

One thing that has happened, Old argues, is that mischievous liturgists have been playing tricks on the church. Some of the devotees of liturgical reform are "all too eager to replace preaching with 'liturgy,' as though the two were in some kind of opposition to each other." The result is that preaching becomes neglected, trivial, insubstantial. Irritated by this "tastes great, less filling" approach to worship, Old criticizes any mode of worship that downgrades preaching, and attempts to show that pitting liturgy against preaching is, historically speaking, without warrant. He is convinced that preaching itself is worship and not preliminary or extraneous to worship, and that across the great span of the history of God's people, from Moses to the present, worship has always included the reading and expounding of the scriptures. Old painstakingly combs through historical documents, searching not only for evidence to support his convictions but also for the resources needed to perform CPR on a stricken and enfeebled American pulpit.

Old's Calvinist tradition strengthens his work. He is deeply attuned to the role of scriptural interpretation in forming faithful communities and to the themes of grace, covenant, doxology and the glory of God as expressed in the early centuries of preaching.

Old's Calvinist tilt also leads him to some fascinating and refreshing contrarian views. For example, he finds the doxological emphasis of the *Second Epistle of Clement* (circa 125), which is commonly viewed as the oldest extant Christian sermon, to be theologically agreeable. He describes it as "a classic statement of a covenantal theology of worship" and a sign that "there must have been some excellent preaching in the second century." This is in contrast to other students of

homiletics who view this sermon as one the great yawners of sermonic history, a plodding little homily more notable for its age than its virtue.

While the *Second Epistle of Clement* wins praise from Old, the currently fashionable third-century church leader Hippolytus earns Old's scorn. Hippolytus's writings on worship are widely viewed as central to ecumenical reform of the liturgy. But Old regards him as a sloppy theologian and weak preacher, a kind of chancel prancer, the sort of liturgical interior decorator careless about the sermon because he is "overly concerned with how cheese, olives and oil are to be blessed at the Eucharist and how the evening lamps are to be lit at vespers."

Occasionally, however, Old is too eager to find biblical and patristic support for a Reformed understanding of the centrality of the preached Word in worship. The great march of preachers he presents (over 60 in these two volumes) sometimes looks vaguely like a parade of precocious Presbyterians. For example, Old imagines the prophet Jeremiah participating in a later dispute, saying that the weeping prophet "would certainly have disagreed" with Anglican high-churchman John Henry Newman about the idea that preaching is only preparation for worship. When Old talks about Jesus preaching at Nazareth, it is not enough to claim that Jesus preached a biblical sermon; Old insists that he preached an expository sermon to his hometown congregation.

Old is disheartened that some today would question the Reformed claim that "preaching the Word of God is the Word of God," and settle for the weaker view that preaching is a human word that contains, at most, divine truth. But would eighth-century prophet Amos really have judged any departure from the Reformed notion of the sermon as the word of God as "an attempt of sinners to evade the full force of the message"?

Old succeeds in offering inspiration for and insight into contemporary pulpit fare. Preachers today look out at congregations that suffer from theological amnesia, having forgotten what they once knew about scripture, doctrine or the critical issues of the faith. Today's preaching takes place in a culture where religious impulses hover between new "spiritualities" and the corrosive acids of secularity.

How did earlier Christian preachers respond in similar times when they lacked inherent authority and had to negotiate a hearing every time they preached? How can any preacher communicate the gospel in a culture that is indifferent or hostile to

it? The church has always seemed to have a divided mind about this, and one can trace the contrasting threads through Old's discussion.

Observe, for example, two Cyrils of the ancient church: Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-286) and Cyril of Alexandria (c. 375-444). Both were products of the Alexandrian exegetical school but were markedly different as preachers and church leaders. The first Cyril preached in "Old First Church," the mother church in Jerusalem. One would expect to find here a congregation long on apostolic tradition and steeped in doctrine. But this was not so. Old tells us that by Cyril's day, Jerusalem, totally destroyed in the year 70, was largely a rebuilt gentile town roiling with newcomers who were far more fascinated by the mystical murmurings of the Greek mystery religions than by the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.

In short, fourth-century Jerusalem was full of "seekers," and Cyril responded by creating a version of the seeker-sensitive church. Facing a congregation of *Celestine Prophecy* types, he preached in a cultural vocabulary familiar to his listeners. They were fond of mysteries and initiation rites, so he preached of Christian baptism as a secret initiation ceremony, a mystery not to be shared with outsiders. They wanted a religion that could work wonders, so Cyril flirted dangerously with the magical when he preached that the oil of baptism, properly invoked in God's name, had the power to overcome demonic influence. He recognized that worship needed to be more dramatic, so he turned Jerusalem into a theater of holy sites and spectacles with dramatic Holy Week pageants, vivid vigils and colorful processions that attracted throngs.

Cyril was keenly aware of what he was doing, fully intentional about his methods. This was evangelism with the throttle wide open. At the outset of his series of sermons preparing people for baptism, he candidly acknowledged that most of the candidates were joining the church for wrongheaded and worldly reasons. "I accept this bait for the hook," he told them, "and welcome you . . . Maybe you do not know where you have come or in what kind of net you have been taken. You have come within the church's net. Be taken alive; do not flee. Jesus is fishing for you."

On the other side was Cyril the patriarch of Alexandria. He too preached in a time of theological uncertainty, spiritual crosswinds and christological confusion, but this Cyril parceled out careful biblical exegesis in daily sermons that marched steadily, book by book, through the Bible. If, for evangelistic reasons, Cyril of Jerusalem shaved the corners of the gospel to fit it into the categories of his hearers, Cyril of

Alexandria chose to fit his hearers carefully into the categories of the faith, teaching them the new and difficult but profound vocabulary of trinitarian orthodoxy. The first Cyril's Easter pageants moved visitors to tears; the second Cyril's sermons on the incarnation moved them to lucid confession of the apostolic faith. The first Cyril ran down the road toward a prodigal culture; the second Cyril stayed at home and prepared the fatted calf of theological truth so that all might make merry praising God.

The latter Cyril caught the approving eye of Calvin, who thought him second only to Chrysostom among Greek exegetes. Not surprisingly, Old takes the same side. He sees Cyril of Alexandria as a superb exegete, theologian and teacher, while he calls Cyril of Jerusalem a believer in "salvation by ceremony." In his zeal to evangelize via his hearers' vocabulary, Cyril "communicated but he also confused." Old echoes contemporary criticism of seeker-sensitive worship by wondering "whether Cyril's converts were really converted." He knows that in a television age, the heavy drumbeat of biblical and doctrinal preaching is a hard sell compared with electric, multimedia "worship experiences" like those engineered by Cyril of Jerusalem. He is hopeful that this will change. In another time, he says, we "will probably recognize this prejudice as a rather peculiar form of pietistic agnosticism. The history of preaching is filled with examples of great doctrinal preachers who drew enthusiastic, thoughtful and, indeed, large congregations."

The history of preaching is also filled with preachers who did not see "culturally open" evangelism and thoughtful, theologically attuned, biblical preaching as mutually exclusive. Old reminds us of John Chrysostom, a preacher of theological sophistication and expository skill who had the courage and rhetorical gifts to stand in the public glare and galvanize Antioch with his sermons during the violent taxation disturbance of 386, a social crisis as unsettling as the Los Angeles riots or the Oklahoma City bombing. He tells us of the nearly forgotten preachers of the old Syriac church, pulpit masters like Ephrem of Nisibis, who preached in metrical verse--a sort of biblical hip-hop, resulting in imaginative sermons in rap that delighted hearers and were supported by a women's choir that Ephrem trained. Old spends pages on Augustine, noting how he preached theologically profound, scriptural sermons marked by simplicity of language, dialogue with his hearers and attention to the perennial questions of the human heart--qualities that give his preaching a surprisingly contemporary and joyful feel.

All these preachers passionately join a creative treatment of scripture to skilled rhetoric. In fact, the importance of rhetoric is a recurring theme in Old's account. Karl Barth warned a generation of young preachers away from rhetoric. He was fearful of hubris, the blasphemy of human beings fiddling with the gospel and trying to render it more palatable by manipulating the rhetorical rheostats in the sanctuary. Finally, though, good preaching depends upon rhetoric made captive to the task of proclamation. No one would have accused George Buttrick of polished oratory (nor would that have been said of Paul), but there was nonetheless powerful art in his preaching--words fitly chosen and rightly said. It comes as news--but not a surprise--to learn from Old that Libanius, a great teacher of classical rhetoric who was not a Christian, taught three of the finest preachers in the history of the church: Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom (the patron saint of preachers). Today in a time of failing quality in public discourse, where will preachers learn the art of speaking?

Old's historical survey of preaching is itself a kind sermonic exercise, a seven-volume sermon series on the text "preaching is worshipful service of God's glory." Five more volumes are yet to come, and one already senses, as Old does, that the contemporary period will test him the most. What has happened to preaching in our day? Good preaching has not disappeared, as Old fears. There are still prominent pulpits and highly visible preaching places. But for the most part the grand old palaces of the pulpit princes are vacant, tired or changed in mission. The sort of faithful, imaginative, energetic preaching of the gospel that has marked homiletical excellence throughout the church's history has become more local. In pulpits famous only to the congregations that gather around them every week, women and men stand before people they love and with creativity and grace perform the difficult and urgent task of preaching the gospel to an anguished age.

Describing the preaching of Augustine, Old comments: "One cannot help but notice . . . that here is a preacher who takes great delight in preaching." Indeed, there are many preachers out there today who, though they do not always find preaching to be fun, do find it to be a great delight. I hope that Old finds them and brings them to visibility.

One rough measure of the effectiveness of a sermon series is when visitors pump the preacher's hand and announce, "I'll be back!" Having learned much and benefited greatly from Old's first two volumes, I'll be back for more.