

CHURCH SOCIETY CONFERENCE REPORT 2005

David Meager

Church Society met for its annual conference at High Leigh Conference Centre in Hertfordshire from 17-19th of May. The theme of the conference was 'Preaching Christ - A conference for Christians eager to proclaim Christ in an age of apostasy and political correctness.' A variety of people attended and we enjoyed three days of prayer, bible teaching, talks and fellowship.

John Cheeseman (Vicar of Holy Trinity, Eastbourne) started the proceedings with a talk on Preaching Christ: reaching unbelievers. John spoke from John 6 v37 and explained that people become believers because the Father gives those predestined to Jesus. God draws people to himself, even though this does not negate man's responsibility. We were then exhorted to tell the gospel to those around us with boldness, patience and prayerfulness because God will save those he has chosen. Specifically, we should be spending time with unbelievers as Jesus called us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We must be able to give a reason for the hope we have, the Great Commission begins in our homes and with our neighbours. Because of what God has done for us we should be eager to tell others.

After refreshments Ian Hamilton (Minister of Cambridge Presbyterian Church) gave his first of three expositions on Preaching Christ from the Bible. Preaching Christ brings sinners in and builds saints up. God through the preacher speaks to His world (Romans 10 v14), the voice of Jesus goes into the world through the preacher, we are 'ambassadors of Christ.' Even though we are weak, because we are God's mouthpiece, we should be clear and confident in our preaching, not dull or complacent. Preaching Christ is to preach grace, if we struggle with obedience then we have not been gripped by the wonder of Christ.

After a break for dinner, David Phillips (General Secretary) led the first of two 'Open Sessions' discussing possible courses of action evangelicals in the Church of England could take if women are appointed as bishops. David gave some background to the issue of women bishops by outlining the reasons why we are Anglican and the advantages of establishment: because traditional Anglicanism is reformed and establishment theoretically should lead to doctrinal stability and be a witness to the nation. After this background information David then outlined some of the possible courses of action evangelicals could take if women become bishops, these ranged from living with the consequences but attempting to reform the church to seeking alternative Episcopal oversight, or leaving the Church of England. There was then time for questions, the day ended in prayer.

Day 2 started with united prayer and after breakfast Nigel Atkinson (Vicar of Knutsford Parish Church) spoke on 'Preaching Christ: the Christ we preach.' Explaining from the book of Acts (6 v7 & 11 v19) that the message preached about Jesus' death and resurrection was a fact rooted in history. Jesus really was nailed to a wooden cross and did rise from the dead with a physical body, he ate real food and was seen by more than five hundred people. He will come back again to judge the living and the dead and we must repent and believe the gospel. This message was doctrinal and specific, not vague and uncertain, and this caused offence in the New Testament era, but also led to real growth and unity. We were exhorted to hold on to and preach this doctrinal and specific truth today, even though much of Anglicanism is uncertain about truth preferring unity and dialogue with the hope of arriving at the truth. Society today has reverted back to Epicurean philosophy whereby people no longer believe in ultimate truth but instead live for pleasure. We must proclaim this truth

to a sceptical society, in the way that the apostles did. The fact of Jesus' death and resurrection is the only thing that can meet the needs of our hearts and give us hope in the face of death.

After refreshments, Andrew Cornes (Vicar of Crowborough Parish Church) spoke about Preaching Christ in pastorally sensitive situations. Using John 4 v1-42 (the Samaritan women at the well) Andrew talked about how we should use Jesus' example in engaging with unbelievers and also with believers who have relationship problems. Jesus started with her need, raised the sensitive issue and then preached about himself. When we talk to people who have personal problems do we show patience and compassion to them and talk to them about Christ or are we insensitive and condemning?

After lunch Ian Hamilton gave his second exposition about preaching Christ, this time from the Old Testament, with particular reference to Jesus' words in Luke 24 v27 'what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.' Ian expounded John 2 v19, 6 v31, 6 v45, 13 v18, 15 v1 & v25 as examples of where Jesus said that he was spoken of in the Old Testament. For example, John chapter 2 v19 the temple in the Old Testament pointed to Jesus. In 6 v31 Jesus says he is the bread of life rather than the bread in the wilderness. In chapter 15 Jesus is the true vine in comparison to Israel who failed to bear good fruit. Do we handle the Old Testament Christologically? Jesus is not just the application of the Old Testament but the substance and content of it.

Later on in the afternoon Ian Barter, Chairman of the Banner of Truth Trust, spoke about Charles Simeon. At the time of his ordination to Holy Trinity Cambridge in 1782, evangelicalism was virtually extinct in Cambridge. He was minister of Holy Trinity for 54 years and during his time there he faced severe opposition from the people of Cambridge (including the University). He was called a madman, hypocrite and fanatic and university students were told not to speak to him. Simeon was a man of prayer (he got up at 4am every day and prayed for 4 hours before family prayers) he was also an excellent preacher who preached Christ fearlessly. By the end of his ministry 54 years later, Simeon was revered as one of the most respected men in the country, his church was full and everyone (including undergraduates) wanted to hear him. Simeon's example should encourage evangelical Anglicans today to preach Christ faithfully because the gospel is the power of God for salvation.

After dinner we had Open Session 2 where the discussion from the evening before about women bishops was carried on, with David Phillips answering questions from the delegates. The day ended in prayer.

Day three began with united prayer then after breakfast Gerald Bray (Anglican Professor of Divinity at Samford University) spoke on preaching Christ in an age of religious pluralism with reference to Acts 17 v16. The great challenge we face is religious pluralism which has had a subtle impact on our society. For example, politicians may call themselves Christian but they act independently from God. Gerald then talked about some of the cultural and political similarities which both the New Testament church and the church in Britain face today. For example, the church now is in a minority surrounded by a great deal of ignorance. The Roman Empire established peace which enabled the early Christians to preach the gospel, today Christians in Britain largely live in peace. Roman society had a great ability to absorb many religions and there was religious freedom as long as they did not interfere with the Empire. Today we are allowed our own spirituality as long as we don't speak against other people's religion. Like the Roman empire the modern state now has religious trappings but has no real direction, all it can do is try and stay in power and provide 'food and circuses' for the people. We have stability but no vision.

Gerald then talked about some of the differences between the state in New Testament times and modern Britain. When Paul first preached he was preaching something totally new. Paul did not

have to face organised religion, only paganism. Today we face other religious groups with their own identity such as Islam. Britain has had the gospel preached to it before (unlike the Roman Empire in the days of the apostles), although many are largely ignorant of it.

Gerald then described how Paul reasoned with the philosophers in Athens, he explained to them that God was the creator of the world who will judge it through Jesus who was resurrected from the dead. At this some scoffed at the idea of the resurrection. Likewise people today scoff at the resurrection because of their sinful hearts. Consequently unbelievers have no real direction in their lives and no eternal hope. Christians have purpose and meaning in their lives because as Jesus was resurrected from the dead we too can look forward to eternal life and face death with confidence.

After a break, Ian Hamilton gave his final talk about seeing Christ in all the Scriptures. This was to be done through two interpretive keys. First, the relationship between promise and fulfilment. The whole of the Bible can be seen in light of God's promise in Genesis 3 v15. Christ's bruising of Satan's head and Satan's striking of his heel applies to all of redemptive history. Secondly, the relationship between type and antitype. Certain events and people in the Old Testament bear a relationship in the New Testament, for example, in Romans 5 v14 Adam is a type of Christ, and in Matthew 2 the Exodus constitutes a pattern to be used for all the people of God. Overall there are 2,000 quotes of the Old Testament in the New Testament. Ian then used the account of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 as an example of this. David's victory was Israel's victory, Jesus' victory is our victory. David was the representative head of the people, Christ is our representative head. David goes forth in frail humanity to defeat God's enemies, dependent on God. Likewise Jesus defeated the enemy in his humanity dependent on the Father. This does not deny the narrative of the story, Jesus lights the whole revelation of God.

The conference ended at lunch time on Thursday. Judging by the comments received the conference was a great encouragement and help to those who attended. There was a sense of unity as we heard good expository preaching, stimulating talks and discussions and were able to have time for prayer and fellowship with each other. Next year the conference will be from Monday 22nd to Wednesday 24th of May 2006 at High Leigh Conference Centre.

David Meager is on the staff of Church Society