

Walter W. Bryden on the Theology of Preaching

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At the 137th Convocation of The Presbyterian College, Montreal, in May 2004, on the occasion of his retirement, Professor Frederik Wisse delivered an address on the theme "The Privilege and the Pleasure of Preaching." This article examines the theology of preaching in the thought of Walter W. Bryden, who some seventy-five years earlier, in 1929, also delivered an address on preaching to the Spring Convocation of The Presbyterian College, Montreal.

“There is nothing more arresting and impressive than hearing a true preacher of God preaching God’s Word truly.”¹ In this pithy comment from the Scottish Reformed theologian, James Denney, cited by the Canadian Presbyterian clergy-professor Walter W. Bryden, lies both the complexity and the goal of Christian preaching. Preaching, for Denney and Bryden, involves at least two crucial elements. First, it involves a preacher described as “a true preacher of God,” someone apprehended by the power of the Christian message and committed to its proclamation. Secondly, Denney and Bryden believed that Christian preaching is an act characterized by speech which can be, when grounded in and arising from an authoritative, God-given message, identified as “God’s Word.” The truth of preaching for them, it seems, lies somewhere between the experience of the preacher and the event of preaching. In this brief article I examine how these elements in preaching are related in the theology of Walter W. Bryden, noting how Bryden’s theology of preaching was influenced by the early reception of Karl Barth’s theology in Canada.²

First, a few words about Walter Bryden and his significance for Canadian Protestantism. Walter Williamson Bryden’s theology and practice of preaching was forged in the midst of a career as a pastor and theological educator within the Presbyterian Church in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century. Born in 1883, Bryden served congregations in Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan before assuming the chairs of church history and the history and philosophy of religion

at Knox College, Toronto, in 1925, serving as principal of the college from 1945 until his death in 1952. His influence upon the continuing Presbyterian Church following the formation of the United Church of Canada in 1925 was immense. As a professor and a principal, Bryden taught the theological students of a church that had gone through a major crisis. Noted as one of the earliest interpreters of Karl Barth's theology in Canada, Bryden's theology reflected the theological movement that came to be known, for better or worse, as neo-orthodoxy. His particular emphasis on a confessional theology of Word and Spirit, shaped by the neo-orthodox protest against the domestication of revelation, provided a post-union rationale for many continuing Canadian Presbyterians. His books included *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul* (1925), *Why I Am A Presbyterian* (1934), *The Presbyterian Conception of the Word of God* (1935), *The Christian's Knowledge of God* (1940), *The Significance of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (1943), and an unpublished manuscript titled *After Modernism, What?* (no date).

Bryden's real legacy, however, lies in the influence he exercised over a whole generation of theological students who were preparing for the preaching ministry. James D. Smart, who studied under Bryden's direction, noted that "a future historian who attempts to understand and evaluate the development of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in the half-century following 1925 will be clearly confronted with the fact of Walter W. Bryden," who "moved the Church at the level of its faith and deepest thinking" in a profound manner.³ While they appreciated his scholarship, Bryden is remembered by his students as being, above all, a preacher. With a prophetic "flame-like" quality, Bryden rarely lectured. Rather, he preached his lectures, "and sometimes with such power that the students forgot to take notes, and listened raptly to his handling of the subject."⁴ Above all, as a preacher and a theologian Bryden proceeded on the assumption that "the possibility of a Christian theology is specifically conditioned by the fact that there is Christian speech." "There can be no Christian theology except through the task, the necessity in fact, and indeed through the recognition of the utter impossibility of Christian preaching." Theology is secondary "to something which is more compelling, namely: the necessity laid upon the preacher to preach."⁵ This is the theme to be explored in what follows: the connection made by Bryden between the faith of the preacher and the message of preaching.

The Preacher's Knowledge of God

In the years immediately following World War I, Bryden found his theological and practical difficulties as an active minister in a congregation coming to a focus. Confronted by the weekly challenge of the sermon, he increasingly came to realize that the modern critical and theological thought into which he had been baptized as a student seemed essentially unrelated to his task as a preacher. He had, by his own estimation, achieved average success in the Christian ministry by the employment of religious pedagogical methods in vogue in the first part of the twentieth century. The shift towards practical theology in theological education, while placing a much needed emphasis on practical training, did not, Bryden concluded, provide a truly theological rationale for preaching. The preoccupation of the modern church with method and expediency did not, indeed could not, create a true allegiance to the things of Christ.⁶ Preaching had been reduced to the art of communication, and preachers were to be satisfied if they informed the mind and energized the soul with moral and spiritual ideals, or, if they supplied rational supports to shore up Christian beliefs that were increasingly considered obsolete.⁷ The purpose of preaching was to Christianize, which had become equivalent to "civilize," and the task of the preacher seemed to be to advance the cause of western civilization.

The result was Bryden's first book, which he wrote while serving as the minister of a Presbyterian congregation in western Canada, exploring Paul's religious experience through a study of the Corinthian correspondence. In *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul* Bryden takes the experience of the early church, specifically the experience of Paul the Apostle, and the experience of the modern church, specifically his own experience as a Christian minister, as the starting point for theological reflection. The connection between Jesus and Paul, as Bryden conceived it, that made this starting point possible was Paul's identification of the Holy Spirit with Jesus, i.e. the Spirit of Jesus, as the power and presence of God. Paul was able to preach, Bryden argued, because Paul believed in the reality of God, that God was for him the most real factor in life through the power and presence of the Spirit of Jesus in his life. The Spirit of Jesus who inspired Paul's preaching is the same Spirit of Jesus at work in the ministry of preaching today. If any effectiveness was to be attributed to Paul's preaching,

it was not the result of rhetorical style, rational argumentation, or even the appeal of the content. The condition of preaching which made Paul's preaching persuasive was a certain attitude of the soul to God which seemed to release the powers of God.⁸ Arising out of faith, a faith created by an encounter with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, true Christian preaching, Bryden argued, is a possibility when, in freedom and love, God graciously creates and re-creates, out of nothing, a knowledge of God in the preacher which becomes the means through which God's word is mediated. Preaching, therefore, could be a form of the Word of God, an act of God, an encounter with God in revelation, the greatest of all sacraments, "for it is God speaking through new born, surrendered, dedicated personality; and there can be no higher medium in the world than that."⁹

In short, the task of preaching could not be achieved by "any kind of pedagogical instruction, however skillfully employed." It is a matter of the Spirit of God who reveals this efficacy in the preaching of a person "who is genuinely conscious of his/her own bankruptcy in those things which matter to people." The freedom of the preacher is to be found, therefore, in the preacher's own self-abandonment. This freedom of the soul creates the occasion for a preacher to speak to the souls of other people in the very realities of the soul's innermost life.¹⁰

Bryden developed this conviction further in a 1929 convocation address, "The Triumph of Reality," delivered at The Presbyterian College, Montreal, in which he chose to speak about "those few things which have increasingly appealed to me in the course of my own ministry, as the essentials toward which one ought to strive" in order to make one's preaching effective.¹¹ Bryden admitted that one might treat the subject of preaching from various aspects such as "the technique of preaching," "the joy of preaching," "creative or prophetic preaching," and, most important, "preaching Christ and what that means," but he chose to confine himself to what he considered a simpler necessity, namely, "the need of first finding ourselves and then being steadfastly true to our highest selves at any sacrifice in all this work of preaching . . ."¹² This had been Bryden's own experience:

. . . I have to confess that my particular ministry has been a fairly limited and modest one and perhaps a little unusual. I have never for instance had the privilege of being the minister of what is known as an influential city pulpit. For nearly half of the sixteen or seventeen years I spent in active congregational work, I was

employed in what they call "spade work" in Western Canada. The other portion was spent in a quiet little village in the heart of Old Ontario. I am persuaded, however, that this kind of ministerial career has its advantages and compensations. You get to know real life as other men do not know it, and your own life is tested by the inwardness of things rather than by the outwardness of conventions which after all do not matter. Besides, you are not so likely to be encompassed by exacting church duties and if you have the will, you may train your mind and heart on those far greater things."¹³

Out of this experience, "true preaching," Bryden argued, "may be described as the unveiling of one's soul as that soul in the course of life is being touched by God." Preaching is to be characterized not by arguments and accents, but by thinking which has passed through the fire of the preacher's own experience, as preachers search their own faith to see what they truly believe. Preachers ought not to take for granted "those things which caused the greatest souls in history to stand in wonder and in awe."¹⁴ Acknowledging that preaching ought not to arise from any uncertainty in belief, Bryden nevertheless contended that preaching that arose from a far too easy belief posed the greater danger. True preaching is characterized by authentic critical thinking, not dogmatic proclamations, but a thinking that has passed through experience. "It is some touch in your prayer or sermon, a thing of voice or accent where you *yourself*, as it were, step out from behind the veil of words, ideas, and thoughts, and tell us in a kind of simple, direct, soul language what you know of God and man that awakens the souls of those who hear you."¹⁵

Such a posture in preaching, Bryden believed, could never be manufactured by homiletical skill or technique. It arises from the preacher's knowledge of God, itself a gift of God, never at the disposal of the preacher. "True beliefs are the issue of one's whole being as wrought upon by circumstance and God, and they ripen into great, final confessions."¹⁶ Appealing to Barth, whom he described as the stern new prophet of Europe, and whose theology he described as real Calvinism in modern dress, Bryden argued that the preacher must be a person of authentic Christian faith who "recognizes God." "It is easy," Barth says, "to say 'recognize,' but recognizing is an ability won only in fierce, inner, personal conflict. It is a task beside which, all cultural, moral and patriotic duties, all efforts in applied religion are child's play. For here, one must give himself up in order to give himself

over to God, that God's will may be done. To do His will, however, means to begin with Him anew. He will not be a corrected continuation of our own. It approaches ours as *wholly other*."¹⁷ This is the insight, Bryden argued, that made preaching in the Reformed tradition truly Reformed. The heart and soul of Calvinism is that the great Christian truths are not at our command, an approach to religious faith held in common, Bryden maintains, by Calvin, Schleiermacher, and Barth.

This was the point about preaching that Bryden thought he could rescue from the critique of modernity. Preaching, to be sure, could no longer proceed along the lines of dogmatic and traditional thinking. Preachers who refused to acknowledge the intellectual challenges of the modern world, who refused to be honest with themselves or with those they led, may have had a gospel to preach, but it was not *their* gospel, never having passed through the fires of their own experience, never having been refined by the agonies of their own doubts. However, in response to this challenge, preaching in the nineteenth century took a decidedly psychological turn, transforming theology into anthropology. Preachers were now supposed to provide rational insights into human nature and experience, and preaching became the art of communication. Such free and liberal thinking in the pulpit, Bryden argued, gave preachers something to preach, but it was not the gospel. True preaching, Bryden concluded, "is the unveiling of that growing soul which can be satisfied with nothing less than the truth, a soul which has a gospel that can fearlessly and honestly face the facts of life, of history, and of truth from any sphere whatever."¹⁸ In short, preaching is made possible by the preacher's knowledge of God, a knowledge of God which is truly *the preacher's*, and a knowledge which is truly *of God*.

Preaching as a Form of The Judging-Saving Word

While Bryden believed that a truth was worthless, either for preachers or their people, except as it had become truth to them through personal insight and spiritual perception, he also assumed, of course, that there was indeed a truth for preachers to preach.¹⁹ If the preacher must have a truth to preach, and if that truth must be the preacher's own truth, what is it? And in what sense is it a form of the Word of God? In order to get at this, Bryden's theology of preaching has to be seen in relation to his theology of revelation. Revelation, he

believed, is an act of God, the act of a free and divine subject, the self-disclosure and self-giving of a God who shares divine self-knowledge with human subjects. In love and freedom God elects to share this divine self-knowledge in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the Word, the divine *Logos*. For Bryden, "the Word of God is Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, with nothing to be added or subtracted from simply that."²⁰ Operating with a dialectical, christocentric conception of the Word centered in the cross of Christ, Bryden named this God's "Judging-Saving Word," and understood preaching as the event used by the Holy Spirit in and through which men and women might encounter Jesus Christ as a dialectical presence in the midst of life. Preaching may be a participation in the revelation of God insofar as the preacher points to the presence of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Preaching is marked by a dialectical and paradoxical character (i.e. it contains both an affirmation—a word of salvation, and a negation—a word of judgement), and by the crisis it creates when the same Spirit who has touched the soul of the preacher testifies to the Word in the souls of the hearers. As such, preaching may be a form of the Judging-Saving Word of God, an event in which faith and life are created again and again by God, an event for which there is no prior basis in the creature. God is God, wholly other, and God's freedom is bound by neither the human agency of the preacher nor the correspondence of the human hearer. The truth of preaching, to borrow Brunner's phrase, is truth as encounter.

When the Judging-Saving Word is truly preached, the proclaimed Word of God in Jesus Christ encounters us as that which completely disillusion us, calling into question the freedom in which we think we live. This is the judgement of the Word, questioning whether we have experienced the new life inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and his reign over all things in heaven and earth. When and where faith is created, it is in the first instance experienced as utter negation, an experience of being judged, questioned, and even destroyed. "In some essential sense an Absolute must negate, if it is to prove itself such, i.e. if it is to authenticate itself. The truth is, man in his entire life's experience, is never encountered by that which truly negates him except in that event when God comes personally and establishes a relationship with him."²¹ God negates before God affirms, God excludes before God embraces. The paradox of preaching is that the Absolute known to faith is a personal-Absolute who is

proved to be such when men and women hear the message that they are alienated from the Absolute. This experience of negation is what the Bible describes as death to self, that which occurs before resurrection to new life in the reign of God. The preaching of the gospel allows men and women to see their lives in terms of God's crucified Messiah, confirming that God is God and that human beings are human beings, making them know that as frail and fallen creatures they are "sinners," enemies of God and alienated from God's reign. The judgement of the Word reminds us that nothing on the human side makes possible the reality and reception of God's grace. In this sense, from a human perspective, preaching is an utter impossibility. More than that, it is offense, a scandal, to the modern mind. At the same time, from the perspective of faith, preaching is an absolute necessity, and the assurance, the only assurance, given to those called to preach is that God has chosen the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe (1 Cor 1:21). A genuine realization of the "absolute necessity" of preaching, on the one hand, and its "utter impossibility," on the other hand, constitutes the one condition by which the preaching of God's Word is effected.²²

When the proclamation of the Judging-Saving Word is efficacious, notwithstanding its necessarily negative and ambiguous character, it is accompanied by assurance of grace and an affirmation of human existence in Jesus Christ. The same Word who stands over us is also at work in us, creating new life in union with Christ. The preaching of the Word affirms life precisely because it negates it. In the midst of utter negation, a human being cries out for deliverance, for salvation, since then and only then does a person know that God is truly concerned about his/her life. The paradox of preaching is that it delivers at one and the same time a message that is world-denying and world-affirming. The preaching of the Word denies a world which imagines itself as a place of human flourishing apart from God, and it affirms the reality and significance and freedom of human life in a world where the Word became flesh. When a person responds by faith to such preaching there cannot be a preparation for this experience cobbled together from that which already exists. When preaching is truly a form of the Judging-Saving Word of God, God creates out of nothing, God brings existence out of non-existence, life out of death. God judges the non-existence and death of the old person, and brings existence and life to the new person, whose life is now hidden with

God in Christ. There is only one authentic response to such preaching: repentance, accompanied by faith and obedience.

Preachers, Preaching, and the Church

A number of observations and critical reflections may be offered on the basis of this summary exposition of Walter Bryden's theology of preaching. First, Bryden operates within the Reformed tradition, most notably in his emphasis on a theology of the Word. His critique of modern preaching presupposes that a recovery of the sixteenth-century Reformation conception of revelation, as he understood it, was both possible and necessary. "It is not too much to hold," he argues, that it was "a completely fresh and living apprehension of the Word of God which constituted the primal inspiration of the Reformation movement as a whole,"²³ and for Calvin in particular. Such a conception of revelation was at the heart of preaching in the Reformed tradition. Bryden's emphasis on the preaching of the Word, however, raises questions about the way in which the sacraments tend to be subordinated to the Word in Reformed theology. The Reformed churches recognized that the true church possessed two marks, namely "the preaching of the Word," and "the true Sacraments." Bryden makes it clear that he believes that "the preaching came first, as it should, for it really embodies the latter. The Word of God was for the Reformers the greatest reality in the world. All praise, doxology, gratitude, love, faith and hope, and therefore all theology, are primarily therefore matters which are the consequence of 'Christian speech.'"²⁴ If the paradigm of revelation is divine speech, it stands to reason that preaching as Christian speech would be given priority. At the same time, Bryden noted the sacramental character of preaching:

There is nothing greater for the enquiring soul than . . . preaching in which there is an unmistakable suggestion of something more and other than the preacher himself, the account of a person who has known, and accepted, in God, a confirmation from afar to the deep hungering of the human soul, a judging in which the hearer has no disposition whatever to turn to a neighbour to say: "Thou art the man." Herein is the greatest of all sacraments: for it is God speaking through new born, surrendered, dedicated personality; and there can be no higher medium in the world than that.²⁵

Secondly, Bryden's theology of preaching represents an early Canadian reception of Karl Barth's early theology. By the late 1920s Bryden was sounding the themes that were to signal his lifelong engagement with Barth. Like the early Barth and many of the neo-orthodox theologians, Bryden emphasized the negative pole of the Judging-Saving Word as a critical tool against the domestication of revelation in culture Protestantism. Bryden was also indebted to Barth for the insight that Christian theology existed because there is Christian speech, and that Christian dogmatics is precisely a concern about Christian speech, which was in existence prior to and still occurs apart from theology. Without preaching, theology is empty, and without theology, preaching is blind. Barth also reminded him that the truth of Christian proclamation exists in the Word which God has spoken, and still speaks to human beings. But here we also come upon a difference between Barth and Bryden, at least in emphasis. Like Barth, Bryden stands as a theologian in the service of preaching. Both conceived of preaching as a form of the Word of God, as an event that may participate in the revelation of God, creating occasions for encounters with God. Preaching, as Bryden conceived it, however, is an event which takes place between a preacher whose soul has been touched by God and hearers for whom God's Judging-Saving Word may become a reality. For Barth, the preacher's authority does not rest in the authenticity of a personal experience of God, but in the preacher's call as a faithful hearer of the gospel to proclaim that message to others. Barth grounded the event of preaching in the biblical texts, and in the preacher's role as one who delivers a message or sounds a trumpet, whereas Bryden seemed to emphasize the personal experience of the preacher as a human being of authentic Christian faith whose personality is recreated in the encounter with God. And herein may lie a critical weakness in Bryden's theology of preaching: it did not seem to produce a generation of preachers committed to the kind of biblical exegesis and exposition characteristic of the Reformed tradition at its best.

Given the insights and the limitations of Bryden's theology of preaching, what then, if anything, is the legacy he left the church? Simply this: he helped a generation of Presbyterian preachers find its voice at a critical moment in Canadian Protestantism. He steered his students away from what he considered to be two equally unhelpful approaches to preaching. On the one hand, he urged them to realize

that preaching consisted of more than the effective communication of moral and spiritual ideals, as seemed to be the case in liberal Protestantism (i.e. Modernism). On the other hand, he warned them against the reduction of preaching to rational arguments in support of doctrinal systems and propositional truths, which seemed to him to be the emphasis in conservative Protestantism (i.e. Rational Orthodoxy). In its place, he proposed a practice of preaching rooted in the preacher's encounter with God and the preacher's participation in the Word of God. This made Christian preaching at one and the same time "the most dangerous and the most satisfying responsibility—dangerous because its Gospel is always an offence to the natural man, no matter under what name he may go, and satisfying because it has to do with things eternal."²⁶ As a theologian of preaching, Bryden's single-minded emphasis on the Judging-Saving Word "marks him as one who conveys a spirit, a way of doing theology, rather than a content, a system of doctrine."²⁷ And as a theologian of preaching in the twentieth century, Bryden anticipated many of the concerns that have continued to bedevil the theology and practice of preaching in the Reformed tradition, especially in the postmodern context, namely the relationship between the person of the preacher, the nature of the message, and the reception of the message by its hearers. Most importantly, Bryden's theology stands as a constant reminder that there is a certain mystery to preaching which belongs to the freedom and love of God: "No art, no method, no pedagogy will ever, in itself, either comprehend or reveal what the servant of God is called upon to do, when commissioned to declare the Word of the Living God."²⁸

Notes

1. James Denney in Walter W. Bryden, *After Modernism, What?* (Unpublished manuscript, no date), 185.
2. I am indebted to an earlier article co-authored with my colleague W.J. Clyde Ervine for some of the emphases in this article. W.J. Clyde Ervine and John A. Vissers, "True Preachers Preaching Truly: The Goal of Preaching in the Reformed Tradition," *Didaskalia* (Fall 2003): 29–46.
3. James D. Smart, "The Evangelist as Theologian," *Separated Unto the Gospel*, Edited by Donald V. Wade (Toronto: Burns & MacEachern, 1956) vii.

4. Robert K. Anderson, "Bryden on Preaching," *Channels* 17.3 (Summer/Fall 2001): <http://renewalfellowship.presbyterian.ca/channels/r01173-2.html>
5. W. W. Bryden, *After Modernism, What?* 179.
6. *Ibid.*, 182.
7. *Ibid.*, 184.
8. W. W. Bryden, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul* (London: Clarke, 1925), 81.
9. W. W. Bryden, *After Modernism, What?* 185.
10. *Ibid.*, 182.
11. W. W. Bryden, "The Triumph of Reality," *Separated Unto the Gospel*. (Toronto: Burns & MacEachern, 1956), 131.
12. *Ibid.*, 133.
13. *Ibid.*, 131.
14. *Ibid.*, 133.
15. *Ibid.*, 134.
16. *Ibid.*, 135.
17. Karl Barth, cited by Bryden, "The Triumph of Reality," 135.
18. *Ibid.*, 140.
19. W. W. Bryden, *Why I Am A Presbyterian*. (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1934), 97.
20. W. W. Bryden, *The Christian's Knowledge of God*. (Toronto: Thorn Press, 1940), 173.
21. *Ibid.*, 132–33.
22. *After Modernism, What?* 186.
23. Bryden, "The Presbyterian Conception of the Word of God," *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 179.
24. *After Modernism, What?* 185.
25. *Ibid.*, 185.
26. *The Christian's Knowledge of God*, xi.
27. Joseph C. McLelland, "Walter W. Bryden: 'By Circumstance and God,'" in *Called to Witness*, vol. 2, ed. W. Stanford Reid (Hamilton, ON: The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Committee on History, 1980), 125.
28. *After Modernism, What?* 186.