

Nick & Claire Page



And
now
for my
43rd point

Giving the kiss of life to your sermon or talk

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NICK & CLAIRE PAGE



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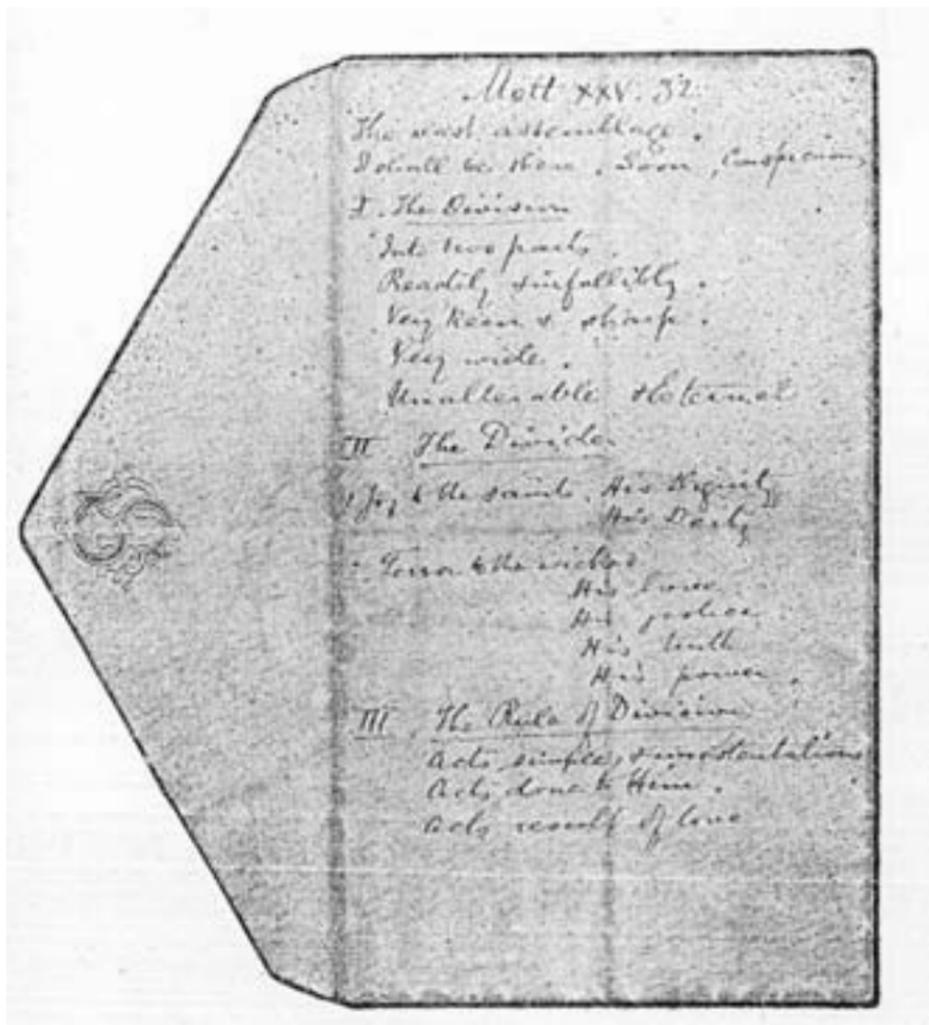
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This book is dedicated to our dearly departed Kenwood Brewmaster
Coffee Maker, which gave its life so that this book might live

Greater love hath no small household appliance

Contents

<i>Preliminary Diagnosis</i>	12
<i>Part 1 Medical History</i>	20
<i>Part 2 Complaints and Remedies</i>	40
<i>Part 3 Alternative Therapies</i>	108
<i>Prescription</i>	143
<i>Appendicitis</i>	
1. <i>X Factor</i>	146
2. <i>Voice Profile</i>	148
3. <i>Checklist</i>	149
<i>Suggested Reading</i>	150
<i>Notes</i>	152



Spurgeon's preaching notes, for a sermon on Matt 25:32.
Yes, it really was 'back of an envelope' stuff .

Before we begin...

Nick: Let me welcome you to the book. I hope you enjoy reading it. It's not easy, two people writing a book together...

Claire: You mean 'Us'.

Nick: What?

Claire: You mean 'Let us welcome you to the book.'

Nick: Yes, but I'm the one writing this preface.

Claire: No, it's both of us.

Nick: Well I could have sworn I was the one typing. Sorry, typing.

Claire: Check the names on the spine, chum. This isn't just your book.

Nick: Which is *exactly* what I was saying. It's not easy, two people writing a book together. And one of the biggest challenges we've had to face here is whether to write from the point of view of 'I' or 'We'.

Claire: I thought we'd agreed that it was going to be 'We'.

Nick: No, *you* agreed that. I was out of the room at the time. And in any case, in some places that just doesn't sound right.

Claire: But the reader's going to be confused if we keep changing it.

Nick: No, they're not – are you?

The Reader: What? Oh, er, sorry, I was nodding off then.

Nick: I was saying...

Claire: *We* were saying.

Nick: *We* were saying you might find it difficult to read this book if we mix our 'I's and our 'We's.

The Reader: Couldn't you just say 'Wii' instead?

Both: We thought of that, but there were trademark issues.

The Reader: Look, I really don't mind...

Nick: Good, because we decided that mostly we would say 'We'...

Claire: But sometimes we say 'I', when it's a personal anecdote...

Nick: Or when we forgot to change it.

The Reader: Fine. Whatever.

Both: Good. I'm glad we've made that clear.

Claire: Oh, and one more thing, we've set up a small website to accompany this book: www.43rdpoint.org.uk. It will have links to articles mentioned in the book, further resources and some extra material.

Nick: Although when you say 'we've' set this up, it's actually me.

Claire: Oh, do shut up.

AND NOW FOR MY 43rd POINT...

**Sermon critically ill in hospital.
Doctors say 'It's not long now.'**

News has just reached us that Henry Sermon, for so long a fixture of the Sunday service, is fighting for his life.

He passed into a coma – much like many of his listeners – during a service at the tiny church of St Botolph the Underwhelmed, aged 1850. The official cause of illness has been given as irrelevance, leading to complete inertia.

'It came as a bit of a shock to us, I can tell you,' said one churchgoer. 'He had just got to the end of point 42 in his sermon on The Role of Dried Fruit in the Levitical Purity Code when he suddenly fell over and started emitting a thin, wheezing sound. We called the emergency services, who whisked him away to theological college.'

Widely Travelled

Henry Sermon was born in the Middle East, some time around the middle of the second century AD. His long and, at times, illustrious career has often been fraught with controversy. Widely travelled, he claims to have been to every part of the known world. Certainly, there isn't a major church or cathedral in the western world where Henry Sermon hasn't been heard.

One of his strengths has been his ability to cross divides. His



Henry Sermon in his usual preaching outfit.

friends and supporters have included not only Martin Luther, John Calvin and all the Reformers, but most of the Popes as well. In his glory years, such as the mid-nineteenth century, crowds of ten thousand people came to see him in action.

Struggling

Like anyone else, he has had his ups and downs. His role in nourishing the church and spreading the gospel has often been acclaimed, while his friends prefer to turn a blind eye to the part he played in launching the crusades. Nevertheless, he was in rude health up until relatively recently, but

recent trends in communication and the decline in churchgoing have left him struggling, and over the past few decades there have been continuous rumours of his decline.

'You could see the old boy was struggling a bit,' said Heinz von Beanztin, Professor of Homiletics at the University of Badenbadenwurtemflugenstaffenberg. 'There were times when he would start to ramble and make no sense. Sometimes he would start off very brightly, but soon lose energy and forget where

he was going. Latterly, indeed, he seemed to lose all sense of identity. It's been quite hard to watch his decline. And even harder to listen to it.'

In recent years, attempts have been made to inject new life into the old boy, with jabs of PowerPoint and frequent use of OHP.

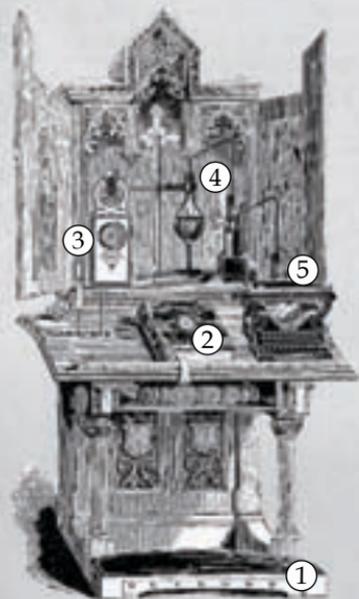
But, if the latest news is correct, it will all be to no avail.

'I will be sad to see him go,' said Professor Beanztin, 'Not least because he always gave me an extra twenty minutes of sleep during the services.'

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Preliminary Diagnosis

The Sermon R.I.P.

There's just one question facing the sermon today. Is it dead?

'Don't be stupid!' say its supporters. 'How can something so fundamental to the life of the Church be dead? Every week, in thousands of churches, the faithful hear a sermon, as they have for centuries. Sure, there are a few local difficulties, but there's no problem with the form itself.'

'Get real!' cry its detractors. 'Society's changed. It's a different world. The ways we learn, the ways we communicate, have been transformed in the past few decades. People are no longer going just to sit and listen to authority figures. They want to have their say.'

So who's right? What is the state of the sermon? Has it finally expired in the 21st century, or is there life in the old dog yet?

It has to be said that in recent years the voices of dissent do seem to be getting louder. And that dissent comes not just from fringe Christians, nor from social churchgoers: the complaints come from the heart of the Church. Emerging church publications and blogs sound the note of dissatisfaction felt by many at a form that to others is pivotal. People openly question the need for a sermon. Preaching books are still poured out, but many of them adopt a notably defensive tone, as if their authors realise, deep down, the game might finally be up. Even its supporters seem to recognise that the sermon is struggling. The preachers have trouble knowing who they're talking to, and the listeners have trouble remembering what they've been told.

Most of all, church attendance is declining. The Church is haemorrhaging people. There are many reasons why people leave church, but there is no doubt that boredom is one of them.

In the course of preparing this book, we asked hundreds of ordinary churchgoers about their experience of sermons. Their comments will be sprinkled throughout this book. But here are a few to start with:

And those were some of the nicer ones.

Sermons are too complicated: too much history, too long, too miserable.

It's boring having the same people saying the same thing each week.

We have lost our congregation. We need to change, relate to another generation.

At least when the sermon starts you know you're on the last leg.

I'm not dead yet

We would be wrong, however, to write off the sermon just yet.

In some churches, Bible teaching is very much alive and well. Animated, down to earth, practical, humorous, inspirational speakers can hold their audience for longer than ten minutes and really connect with the issues that concern them. And theological colleges are still training preachers. Some are still full of energy for the defence of The Preacher – inextricably linked to the defence of the centrality of The Bible, or The Word.

It's not as if the spoken word is out of fashion. There's a revived interest in public speaking. President Obama's speeches have reminded people of the invigorating power of political oratory. Those with something to say still have the capacity to draw crowds. In 2009, Malcolm Gladwell sold out two nights at the Lyceum in London's West End with – wait for it – a

lecture, while the Reith Lectures on the BBC continue to be highly popular as podcasts. (Indeed, the entire podcast culture is a testimony to the power of the spoken word.)

But such signs of strength may be the exception, rather than the norm. In many churches, the sermon is not something to which the congregation looks forward with high hopes. As a communication method, it faces huge challenges, not only from modern media, but also from current methods of education and teaching.

It's the old complaint

Of course, complaints about sermons are nothing new. People have been moaning about dull sermons for years – centuries even. In the fourth century, Ambrose of Milan noted, 'A tedious sermon arouses wrath.' His pupil Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, lamented the poor turn-out in his church on one feast day, had a go at the men in his congregation for being reluctant to attend church, and frequently had to tell his congregation to pay attention to him. Mind you, he did seem to be aware of the complaints about the length of his sermons. After one particularly long set of readings from Scripture, he said 'We have heard many inspired readings and I don't have the stamina to give you a sermon to equal them in length, and you couldn't take it, even if I did!'¹

Sleeping in church has a long historical precedent. Hugh Latimer, the great Elizabethan preacher, told a story of a woman who met her neighbour and asked her where she was going. 'Marry,' she replied, 'I am going to St Thomas of Acres to the sermon. I could not sleep all this last night and I am now going hither. I never failed of a good nap there.' On 17 November, 1661, Samuel Pepys wrote in his diary that he had 'slept the best part of the sermon'.

In Elizabethan England, congregations would amuse themselves during boring sermons by spitting, telling jokes, taunting and ridiculing the preacher or simply sitting there, doing their knitting.*

So boring, irrelevant sermons are nothing new. Here's Anthony Trollope in *Barchester Towers*:

There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilised and free countries than the necessity of listening

* Actually that's not a bad idea. The knitting, that is, not the spitting.

to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has, in these realms, the power of compelling audiences to sit silent, and be tormented. No one but a preaching clergyman can revel in platitudes, truisms, and untruths [sic] and yet receive, as his undisputed privilege, the same respectful demeanour as though words of impassioned eloquence, or persuasive logic, fell from his lips...

While in modern times, Fred Craddock has written that ‘week after week [people] return to their hard chairs before dull pulpits to hear a preacher thrash about in a limbo of words relating vaguely to some topic snatched desperately on Saturday night from the minister’s own twilight zone.’²



Nothing changes. William Hogarth's 1736 engraving The Sleepy Congregation delights in the detail. The hourglass has emptied, but the preacher continues. And his text? 'Come unto me all ye that Labour and are Heavy Laden and I will give you Rest.'

The difference between Craddock, writing in the twentieth century, and Trollope, in the nineteenth, is that, today, church going is no longer a social convention. The preacher in Trollope could drone on, safe in the knowledge that everyone would still be there next week. Not so today. Today, people have a choice.

ALWAYS celebrate and proclaim good news
– because Jesus IS good news

Those who are there want to be there, which means the complaints are coming from people who care. Very few preaching books seem to take account of this. Most assume that those who complain about sermons have an axe to grind or simply lack the ability to listen. But the critics are not unintelligent. They are often theologically informed and passionately concerned about the proclamation of their faith. Their judgments cannot be dismissed as minority criticism. These are fans, family, friends. They deserve to be listened to.

Greetings, earthlings, we come in peace

The same is true of us. This is not an anti-preaching book. Both of us are active in teaching and preaching – and, indeed, in the teaching of preaching. We understand the difficulties and delights of being a preacher. We're not here to have a go at you, really we're not.

Preaching the gospel and teaching discipleship are part of the DNA of the Church: as much a part as prayer, giving and sharing the bread and wine. They are what the Early Church did from day one. But the issue which we want to explore in this book is whether the method of preaching and teaching most frequently used – the monologue sermon – is necessarily the best. What we're questioning is the received wisdom that the sermon is the *only* way of doing things. More, that the sermon, as typified by the twenty-minute monologue – is *God's* way of doing things – the sanctified, ordained way of teaching in the Church, unassailable and inviolable.

Too many books on preaching start from this assumption. They start from the core belief that The Sermon is the ordained will of God and his method for saving all humankind. The Sermon is sacrosanct, as sanctified

a part of the service as, say, the Eucharist. The argument of this book is that is simply not true. As we hope to show, the sermon itself – certainly in the form to which we are accustomed – has not always been a part of the teaching of the church. The twenty minute monologue is not biblically ordained.

‘Hold on a minute’, you say, ‘Jesus preached sermons, didn’t he? And Peter and Paul. Not to mention all those prophets.’

Hmmm. Let’s start with a bit of history.