



## Some Research on Preaching in the Presbyterian Church of Victoria

*By David Cook*

In March each year the Presbyterian Theological Centre in Victoria runs a Pastors' conference to encourage faithful and engaging expository preaching in our churches. This year the speakers were David Jones on Hosea; Peter Adam on 2 Timothy; and Jenny Salt on what women wished their Pastors knew about women. I presented an audit report on preaching in Presbyterian churches in Victoria.

In conducting the audit I listened online to 40 preachers, with at least one from each of the 13 Presbyteries in the state. The preachers included students for the ministry, ministers and lecturers. Age-wise, about one-third were in their 20's and 30's; another one-third in their 40's and 50's and the final one-third over 60. I tried to listen to the sermons as close to the first Sunday in November as I could.

In terms of style and genre, 36 of the 40 were in expository series, 11 came from the Old Testament, with 25 New Testament. The remaining 4 were in doctrinal series and each of these was expository in method. By expository I mean that the explanation of a passage of Scripture and its application to life was the method of the preacher.

The average length was 25 to 30 minutes, the longest was 40 minutes the shortest, 17 minutes. When I was converted in 1967 I was told that if ever I was travelling on a Sunday, always go to a Baptist Church because then I would hear the gospel. That could not be said of the Presbyterian denomination back then, but with great thanks to God I believe it can be said of the Presbyterians today, at least on the basis of my hearing of these sermons.

Every sermon was faithful to the Scripture and therefore true.

All preachers of the Old Testament showed an awareness of Biblical Theology, so the Lord Jesus was preached from the Old Testament. Yet I also appreciated that the Old Testament characters were not despatched too quickly. Indeed, they were described fully in their own setting before showing how they foreshadowed Jesus. How wonderful it was to hear the text explained and applied. These were not lectures in theology, they were sermons, showing how the truth is to be lived out in our lives, even what repentance is to mean to us.

I noticed a recurring theme of living as Christians in an increasingly antagonistic state. The sermons showed an understanding of the Bible and a realistic understanding of daily life. I detected neither a robotic uniformity – preachers did not sound like each other – nor did I detect a flippancy or superficiality which can sometimes mark and mar our preaching.

Preachers were not constipated by the Law, and the Confession of Faith was kept in its place as the subordinate standard. I would count it a privilege to listen to such preaching on a weekly basis! However, every sermon can be improved, and in my opinion here are some suggested improvements:

1. Get to the text. Some sermons were a third complete before we got to the text of Scripture. Remember our authority is in the text, so get to the point. Some introductions were far too long.
2. Educators tell us that we remember far more of what we see and hear than of what we merely hear, so the preacher must drive me to the text. I need to see it. In other words, if you are expounding, make it patently clear that you are saying only what the text says.
3. Do not give a long list of cross references, I cannot follow

them up. Remember this is a sermon to be heard, not an essay to be read! If I am reading I can follow through on footnotes, I cannot do that in a sermon.

4 Work harder on beginnings and endings, as these are vital. The beginning must show me the question which the text is going to answer, but market that question to me, so that I am hungry for the answer. I recently heard of a sermon being preached on 'Why Luke wrote Acts'. Now that is an important question to answer for an essay in College, but I fail to see its relevance for my daily life, so market the question which the text answers.

5. Remember as you exhort the congregation that God never tells His people what to do without telling them why to do it. As T. David Gordon said: "Ethical exhortation must never be divorced from its redemptive environment".

6. Intentionally preach the Cross of Jesus, for it is there that we

meet God and it is there that we understand life. Billy Graham always preached the first sermon of every campaign on John 3:16, because he wanted to begin the campaign focused on the Cross. 7. Remember you are preparing a sermon to be heard, so preach it; it is not an essay to be read. PTC does us a great service offering these conferences every year. Next year's conference is on 3 – 5 March. The theme will be Preaching John's gospel. Speakers will be: Nigel Styles, the Principal of Cornhill Preaching School in London; and Richard Borgonon from One to One ministries in the UK; while Peter Adam and I will be speaking on various aspects of John for the preacher.

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