



The Importance of Preaching in a Post-Covid World

By David Robertson

I had the privilege of preaching at Scots Presbyterian in Sydney a couple of Sundays ago, and it reminded me of how much I miss the joy of being able to regularly systematically preach the Word to the Lord's people each Sunday. It also set me reflecting upon the place of preaching in the church today.

If there is one thing that Reformed evangelical Christians pride ourselves on, it is preaching. When I went to University, students who were at the Christian Union (UK equivalent of AFES) looked for a church by asking 'Where is the best preaching?' Today they are far more likely to ask, 'Where is the best praise?'

How important is preaching? Do Presbyterian churches deserve our reputation as being centres of excellent preaching? In the post-Covid world where so many have become used to listening to their favourite preachers online, should less well-known pastors realise that our primary task is no longer the preaching of the Word?

Some evangelicals think that in today's world there is even less place for preaching than before. We have other means of communication. I listened to an online service recently which had everything – lots of music, testimonies, prayers, short scripture readings, video clips, poetry etc. It was well presented and yet there was no preaching. Some think this is the way of the future. Especially if church online is to continue. But is this really progress? Is it not a regression to the Dark Ages?

One church leader in the UK wrote:

“Preaching has come to a desperate state where we are now on borrowed time, communicating the gospel isn't dead but the traditional forms may well be. We need to put to death the monologue and be re-inspired with two-way communication.”

“I don't think we have the liberty not to be creative anymore.”

So, what's wrong with this approach? First of all, it completely misunderstands what preaching is. Preaching is not a monologue – it is the voice of God speaking to the hearts and minds of the people, as they engage with and sit under the authority of the Word. Preaching is not one-way communication. Neither is it just two-way communication. Biblical preaching is three-way communication – between the preacher, the congregation and the Holy Spirit. That is why just listening to your favourite preacher on the Internet, including your own pastor, is not the same as being there in person. Three-way communication is much harder through Zoom.

“To explain the Bible badly amounts to the same thing as to understand the Gospel badly,” said Victor Hugo in his introduction to Les Misérables.

Preaching is not a lecture, but it does involve teaching. It is not entertainment, but it should be entertaining. It is not an intellectual exercise, but it should be intellectually stimulating. It is not emotionalism, but it should move the emotions. Mike Reeves in his *Introducing Major Theologians* tells us that Jonathan Edwards argues that God ordains preachers not so that we can have more expositions of the Scriptures that do not move the affections but so that we can be stirred up to think and love more... “Rather, preachers ‘stir up the pure minds of the saints, and quicken their affections’ by setting the things of the gospel before them ‘in their proper colours ... and particularly, to promote those two affections in them ... love and joy.’ This preachers do especially by presenting the cross, for the ‘glory and beauty of the blessed Jehovah ... is there exhibited in the most affecting manner that can be conceived of”.

When preaching is arid and dry, even though it may appear doctrinally sound, yet if it does not move us to love Christ, how can it be so? I wonder if we have become so scared of emotionalism, and so tied to technique, that we have lost something of the very essence of preaching. If biblical preaching is meant to be thrilling – for the congregation as well as the preacher – then perhaps some of us need to have a long hard look at ourselves and ask if the thrill is gone? Dry preaching produces dry Christians. Sermonettes produce Christianettes. Powerless, loveless, preaching produces powerless, loveless Christians.

“For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Robert Murray McCheyne wrote in a letter to his congregation of St Peter’s in Dundee, after a revival broke out when he was away on a six-month fact-finding trip to Israel: “Before I went away, I used to weary you with my preaching, now you weary me!” Such was the renewed demand for the ministry of the Word! In fact, he needed preachers like Malan from Geneva, and the Baptist Haldane brothers, as well as the Bonars and others to

come and assist him. I leave you with his biblical understanding of the importance of preaching Christ.

“The grand work of the minister, in which he is to lay out his strength of body and mind, is preaching. Weak and foolish as it may appear, this is the grand instrument which God has put into our hands, by which sinners are to be saved, and saints fitted for glory. It pleased God, by the foolishness of preaching, to save them that believe. It was to this our blessed Lord devoted the years of his own ministry. Oh, what an honour has He put upon this work, by preaching in the synagogues, in the temple, and by the blue waves of Galilee, under the canopy of heaven! Has He not consecrated this world as preaching ground? This was the grand work of Paul and all the apostles; for this was our Lord’s command: “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel.” Oh! brethren, this is our great work. It is well to visit the sick, and well to educate children and clothe the naked. It is well to attend presbyteries. It is well to write books or read them. But here is the main thing—Preach the Word.”

I miss that.

David Robertson.