

The emergence of expository preaching in Sydney Anglican churches

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Australian historian Ian Breward has contended that ‘[f]ew preachers exist who have the capacity to hold a large audience ... Queues to hear popular preachers ... or even respected local preachers, have disappeared in the 21st century.’¹ However, a visit to any Katoomba Christian Convention—an annual event that has been running since 1903—will suggest otherwise. Many preachers do hold their audience in that large auditorium. And while some are from overseas, even local preachers have seen queues forming before their sermons. Underlying this growth in attendance at Katoomba Christian Convention events is the practice of expository preaching, which, since the 1960s, has become the dominant preaching style among Sydney Anglican clergy. And the story of the beginnings of expository preaching in Sydney lies behind the impact of the ministry of Katoomba Christian Conventions.²

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It is the contention of this article that two developments in the 1950s and 1960s were crucial to the emergence of the expository preaching tradition that has been so influential across the Anglican parishes of the diocese of Sydney. These two developments shall be called 'the fuel' and 'the spark'. The fuel included a view of preaching as proclamation of God's saving activity in Jesus, the development of a framework of Biblical Theology, evangelical engagement in scholarly biblical studies, and a habit among Australian evangelicals of looking to England for leadership. The spark, as we shall see, was the visit of evangelical leader and statesman John Stott to the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Summer School in 1965.

What is expository preaching?

Before we begin, however, a definition of expository preaching is in order. Haddon Robinson, Professor of Preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, provides a useful, if somewhat wordy, definition:

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.³

It may also help to mark out the ground and clear away misconceptions by indicating what expository preaching is not:

- (1) expository preaching is not a mere verse by verse commentary, such as might be found in the scholarly and technical publications, this is to ignore the emphasis on the need to apply the Biblical concept to the preacher and the hearers.
- (2) expository preaching is not about reducing all scripture to propositions, because the literary shape of the text should shape the sermon.
- (3) expository preaching is not a lecture designed to bore the congregation and induce comatose Christianity. We cannot remove the preacher and their personality from the act of preaching.

The longer historical context

The expository preaching tradition which emerged in the diocese of Sydney was not entirely new. An example of this style of preaching can be found as far back as the celebrated preacher and church father, John Chrysostom (349–407), in his departure from the allegorical methodology of his contemporaries.⁴ The Reformation is also typically nominated as a period which witnessed the flowering of expository preaching, especially in the ministry of John Calvin.⁵ Other preachers from later church history include Richard Baxter and John Owen in the English Puritan tradition.⁶ In more recent history famous names such as JC Ryle have made prominent the expository style of preaching. Thus expository preaching was not some new-fangled invention of Sydney Anglicans, nor was it foreign to the Christian church throughout its history.

Some historians have observed a decline of expository preaching in the years since the nineteenth century. Horton Davies, Professor of Religion at Princeton (1956–1984), has discussed the causes of decline by the middle of the twentieth century, identifying key three factors: a decay in Bible reading; a lessening of the authority of the Bible for many clergy trained in a higher critical approach; and the demand, during that time, for briefer sermons.⁷ The assessment of Hughes Old rings true for the situation in Sydney Anglican Churches:

By the middle of the twentieth century classic expository preaching as it had been defined by John Chrysostom and John Calvin had all but died out ... One did not often hear the *lectio continua* preached [the practice of reading the Bible by continuing the next passage from the place where the previous one ended].⁸

Sydney preaching styles before the change

In speaking of the Anglican diocese of Sydney's evangelical character, the adjective 'evangelical' comes with strong and familiar connotations. Historian David Bebbington has influentially described evangelicalism as a Protestant movement arising out of the Reformation and, although changing over time, retains four core characteristics of conversionism, Biblicism, activism, and crucicentrism (the doctrinal centrality of atoning work of Christ through the

cross). The second characteristic of Biblicism—a high view of the authority of Scripture—features significantly in the emergence of expository preaching.

Traditional evangelical strength in the diocese of Sydney meant that by the mid-twentieth century a commitment to the Bible as the Word of God and an accompanying focus on preaching during the weekly time of public worship was already widespread in the parishes.⁹ But what kind of preaching was being done? Peter Jensen, former archbishop of Sydney, commented in an online post about the preaching he grew up hearing:

The Biblical preaching of my youth would start characteristically from a verse, sometimes taken out of context and used as a starting point for an extended Christian homily with exhortation.¹⁰

In a similar vein, the prominent Sydney Anglican evangelist John Chapman reflected on his own manner of preaching before 1965 and his subsequent adoption of an expository model:

Prior to that, I had tended to get an idea from a passage and leap all over the Bible supporting the idea from other parts so that the people I taught knew the ‘idea’ but not the passage from which it came or how that passage fitted into some overall argument from the Scriptures.¹¹

John Stott, perhaps the most famous exponent of expository preaching in the modern period, argued that the length of the passage was not the crucial aspect in defining the heart of expository preaching.¹² Thus it was possible that these single-verse-as-text sermons could still be truly expository. As the observations of Jensen and Chapman show, however, the tendency was to give meaning to the sentence of Scripture without due attention to the context in which it was found.

The fuel

It is possible to identify four factors, present at the time, which coalesced to transform the preaching style in Sydney Anglican Churches.

Theology of the Word of God and preaching

The first was a ‘theology of the Word of God and Preaching’. During the first decades of the twentieth century, when evangelical preaching had

risked being reduced to little more than moralism or a form of counselling, English New Testament scholar CH Dodd had a profound impact through the publication of his study of *The Apostolic Preaching and its developments* (1936). In the book Dodd argued that the New Testament word for preaching, *kerygma*, did not refer to moral instruction, but rather to proclaiming the good news of God's saving activity in Jesus Christ.¹³ Not only was there renewed teaching about the nature of what preaching ought be, but there was also, typically for evangelicals, a high estimation of the authority of Scripture. As Michael Jensen observes:

The preference for expository preaching [among Sydney Anglicans] is based on the conviction that the Bible is the inspired word of God and that to hear the Bible is to hear the voice of God himself. The expository sermon thus has the grand, even heroic, task of mediating the divine voice to the present day hearer.¹⁴

The key channel for these theological views was the instruction of clergy at Moore Theological College, especially through the leadership and teaching of Broughton Knox, principal at the time, and Donald Robinson, then vice principal and senior lecturer. Historian Stuart Piggin links the theological views of Knox and Robinson with the preparation for ministry they provided, suggesting that Sydney Anglican clergy were trained to believe that 'the chief work of ministry was to teach the Bible where alone God reveals himself', an emphasis that 'has fashioned Sydney Anglicanism more than any other single influence.'¹⁵

The acceptance and development of a Biblical Theology framework

A second significant factor was the acceptance and development of a Biblical Theology framework among Sydney Anglican clergy. Reid presents Donald Robinson as the crucial contributor in the introduction and development of Biblical Theology at Moore Theological College.¹⁶ Robinson's presence on staff began in 1952, continuing until his consecration as Bishop of Parramatta in 1973.¹⁷ This significant work in providing a unifying framework for understanding the Bible through the approach of Biblical Theology, as introduced and developed by Robinson during his time at Moore College, was seen as a necessary balance to the tendency of expository preaching to be overly 'atomistic'. Michael Jensen comments that expository preaching was often

better at explaining the parts than relating the parts to the whole. This is where Biblical Theology has been a great asset to preaching, because it enables the preacher to show how each text both speaks with its own voice *and* contributes to the whole message of the Bible.¹⁸

The development and use of Biblical Theology was a tool for clergy seeking to strike a balance between scholarly rigour and relevance to life. As Otis Edwards notes in his *History of Preaching*:

the reason for scholars to study the Bible was to discover the theology that had been revealed in history ... but this theology was not to be remote and academic. It should be concerned with the life of the church in the world and have its most important expression in preaching.¹⁹

Evangelical engagement with scholarly Biblical studies

A third feature of this period was growth in evangelical engagement with scholarly biblical studies. This overlaps with the previous features of a particular theology of preaching and the adoption of a biblical-theological framework. Working together, they strengthened evangelical attitudes toward Scripture, preaching and Biblical Theology. Piggin remarks of the 1950s that there was

a decline in liberalism, the rebirth of Biblical Theology, and the coming to life of evangelical scholarship. Out of this academic revival, modern Australian evangelicalism has been constructed. Indeed, the Australian experience was part of a worldwide renaissance of evangelicalism ...²⁰

Andrew Reid, lead pastor of Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Doncaster supports this view in his discussion of Donald Robinson and his contemporaries:

These young people represented an intellectual evangelicalism which, although owing much to a previous generation, was quite distinct from it. For example, it retained the deep piety of that generation while being willing to read more broadly theologically.²¹

At this same time a new set of Bible commentaries was being released which aimed to foster awareness of scholarly debates while remaining accessible for dedicated Bible readers.²² From 1956 to 1974 successive volumes in the Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series were published by Tyndale Press, the publishing arm of the Intervarsity Fellowship, a significant evangelical university movement.²³ With the previously noted features of a focus on the Knox/Robinson view of preaching and the growth in acceptance of Biblical Theology, this emerging scholarly tradition contributed to a growing sense of confidence in the serious study of the Bible, alongside theological methods that emphasized the unity of the Scriptures.

The habit of looking to England for leadership

The fourth and final combustible fuel for the expository fire was the continuing habit of Anglican Australians to look to England for leadership, both theologically and with regard to the pressing question of who would replace the long serving Archbishop Mowll in providing leadership for the diocese of Sydney. Historians Stephen Judd and Ken Cable describe it this way:

With the dearth of experienced leadership, there was no obvious answer to the question of who would succeed Archbishop Mowll. The Archbishop and others sought to provide some possible answers by inviting English clergymen to Australia so that they might see and be seen for future reference: Bishop Hugh Gough of Barking, who visited Sydney in 1957 to address a Clergy School, and the Rev. John Stott of All Soul's Langham Place, London, who conducted a Mission at Sydney University in 1958, were two such English invitees.²⁴

Gough was later called to succeed Mowll as the Archbishop of Sydney. However, it is the second name that Judd and Cable mention by way of example, to which we now pay more careful attention.

The spark

John Stott's visit to Sydney

The short-hand account of the spark that lit the fuel is well summarised by Bishop Trevor Edwards:

Stott ... visited a CMS Summer School at Katoomba ... and ... inspired John Chapman ... this was the catalyst for the formation of the College of Preachers which helped to reshape pulpit ministry in Sydney Diocese.²⁵

Passing mention of this version of events is made in *John Stott: a Portrait by his Friends*.²⁶ And it is also the story that Michael Jensen tells in a recent book chapter entitled 'The Romance of Preaching and the Sydney Sermon.'²⁷ Jensen pin-points 1958 as the year of Stott's crucial visit to the January conference, although offers no reference to support his use of this date. An apparently credible source which may have been used by Jensen to confirm 1958 as the year that John Stott preached from 2 Corinthians at a CMS Summer School is Michael Orpwood's biography of John Chapman. Since John Chapman is a crucial link in the chain of events, Orpwood mentions the same short-hand version of events and offers the same year, 1958, again without reference.²⁸

Dudley-Smith's two volume biography of John Stott has the preacher in Australia in 1958, but records the visit as taking place during June and July. Stott had come (at the invitation of the Australian Intersarsity Fellowship) to be the main speaker at university missions in Sydney and Melbourne.²⁹ Archbishop Marcus Loane recalled Stott staying with him for this first visit to Australia.³⁰ Given that the June–July 1958 visit by Stott to Australia was his first, it is hard to see how he could have been the speaker at the 1958 CMS Summer School event which was held in January. This evidence casts doubt on 1958 as the year in which Stott catalysed the diocese regarding expository preaching. It does go someway, however, towards explaining why that date has come to be commonly cited. The significant impact of that mission, and the first visit of Stott to Sydney, has possibly become conflated with the sermons from 2 Corinthians at Katoomba which so inspired John Chapman. Minutes from the Summer School Committee of the CMS's NSW branch clarify the timing of John Stott's visit and teaching on 2 Corinthians at the 1965 CMS Summer School.³¹ Having clarified the timing of Stott's visit, a second question needs answering: Why was Stott the spark?

The key aspect of Stott's style: Transferability

Although John Stott shared with the Sydney Anglican diocese many evangelical assumptions regarding the doctrine of Scripture and the place of preaching in ministry, the key aspect of his preaching that allowed him to be credited with influencing Anglican clergy across Sydney was the

transferability of his expository style.³² Orpwood cites John Chapman's response to Stott's method:

I heard only one of those Bible studies but I was so taken by the way he stuck to the text and stayed with it. He could show you the logic of the argument in the Scriptures ... It is to John Stott that I owe what ability I have to expound the Bible. He provided a model for expository preaching that I could copy and make my own. I needed time to practice.³³

Michael Jensen likewise observes that Stott:

modelled a preaching style which others could use as well. He was not the great orator who can only be admired but never emulated. He was a servant of the word [who] showed what can be done by faithful attention to the text of scripture. Obviously few had his intellectual and theological skills; nonetheless we could aspire to use his model.³⁴

In a diocese that stressed the importance of training preachers, a transferable model that could be taught and practiced was ideal. It became foundational content for the College of Preachers (formally established by a resolution of the Sydney Diocesan Synod of 1970). John Chapman, so inspired by Stott's example, co-founded the college, and its content was later incorporated into training at Moore College. To extend our metaphor of the fuel and the spark, this College of Preachers might be viewed as the fireplace where the preaching fire could be fed and kept burning.

Further work to be done

There are further avenues for research not covered in this article which would bear fruit if given further attention. Relatively little is known, for example, about the formation and work of the College of Preachers, and why their method of training attracted so much interest so quickly. Consideration might also be given to how Stott came to be invited to the Summer School of 1965, as well as an analysis of those sermons and a comparison with other speakers of the time. Further study might also illuminate the role of events taking place nationally amongst the Anglican dioceses in Australia, including debates around the new constitution which led to the foundation of the Anglican Church of Australia in 1962. More could also be said about

the subsequent overflow of expository preaching as graduates from Moore College have left the diocese, and some account given for the presence of expository preaching among other denominations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence of expository preaching in Sydney Anglican Churches may be attributed to the presence of both a fuel and a spark. When John Stott preached at the 1965 CMS Summer School on 2 Corinthians he inspired John Chapman, among others, to emulate his expository style. Preconditions that enabled the adoption of this expository style were a high view of preaching as proclamation of God's saving activity in Jesus, the development of a Biblical Theology framework for preaching, evangelical engagement in scholarly biblical studies, and a continuing propensity to look to England for leadership.

The transformation in the style of preaching from a single-verse-as-text to the more systematic *lectio continua* has had a lasting impact in the Anglican parishes in Sydney and beyond them through the Katoomba Christian conventions. If Michael Jensen is right in describing the Sydney Anglican evangelical relationship with expository preaching as a romance, then this article is an account of the origins of that homiletical fire that burned in preachers' hearts.

Endnotes

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