

## T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* (P&R, 2009)

It is just 108 pages . but it packs a punch. The author wrote the book while he was receiving treatment for cancer and this %concentrated my mind wonderfully+(9). His view of contemporary preaching is dire, to say the least and %before I die, I must express my opinion on this subject+(13). It is his contention that preaching is %ordinarily poor+(17) with %less than 30% of those who are ordained to the Christian ministry can preach an even mediocre sermon+(11). Pretty bleak stuff.

What is it that determines a good sermon? Rather surprisingly, he reaches all the way back to 1870 and the tests, or %requisitesq developed by Robert Lewis Dabney (in *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric*) as the criteria for evaluating sermons: textual fidelity, unity, evangelical tone, instructiveness, movement, point, and order. Useful . very useful! But that is a long way to go back to get something useful and this contributes to that whiff of a %head-in-the-sandqtone which I overhear in this book.

What can be done about the situation? Basically %Johnny+(who figured in the title of some key books in education and Gordon is just using the same template for effect) needs to make time to read, to write, and to reflect. In fact the author has three specific suggestions:

- a. An annual review of preaching performance even though %ministers are terrified that they will discover that they are failing+(99). It is simply unprofessional not to have a regular review. Get over yourselves!
- b. Cultivate the sensibility of reading texts closely . with a particular focus on poetry and verse from a previous generation before poetry took on %an almost perversely iconoclastic character, as though the severest obscurity were the highest attainment+(102). Preachers need to read %broadly and intensely+(107). We need to rediscover the art of being careful and close readers of texts - to read %at the pace of the tongue and the ear, not at the pace of the mindq ability (or the eyeq?) to grasp information+(51). The author reckons we need to push back on the influence of %electronic mediaq and not just accept the way it makes us impatient, fills us with the insignificant and with %the buzz of the inconsequentialq
- c. Cultivate the sensibility of composed communication, with a particular focus on writing handwritten letters (for which %there is no %deleteqkey and there are no emoticons to compensate for lack of clarity+(103). Here he targets the telephone where conversation lacks unity, order or movement . %we have become a culture of telephone babblers, unskilled at the most basic questions of composition; and it is simply too much to expect that a typical member of such a culture can be quickly trained to deliver well-composed, thoughtful sermons+(67). Starting a personal journal is probably the best rehabilitative option today.

I warmed to his dismissive approach to the short attention span issue. I hear this all the time and have never been convinced. Furthermore those preachers who go on about it already seem on the way to brief and boring preaching. %When something is well done, we do not complain about its length+(28) and this can be true of the sermon. He suggests that sermon length not be measured in terms of minutes, but in %minutes-beyond-interest, in the amount of time the minister %continues to preach after he has lost the interest of his hearers" (31).

In a chapter entitled %A Few Thoughts on Content+he makes a plea for Christological preaching. He is particularly critical of moralistic preaching, full as it is of %must+s and %how-

to-~~s~~ and good advice on good works. I like the case he makes for preaching the good *news* thoroughly and how that will drive people, inherently, towards the consequences of such a gospel . namely, a life of good works properly motivated.

There is a passing comment on the rise of the emerging church and its critique of traditional churches, considered to be %moribund+. True enough . but there is a deep resonance for me with his response. These so-called moribund churches are not so much doing the wrong things . just the right things incompetently. This has always been my view about preaching in New Zealand. It has not been tried (really, truly, fully) and found wanting . it is desperately wanted and not (really, truly, fully) been tried!

It did not surprise me that the book is dedicated to David Wells. I hear him behind quite a few comments and that suggests to me the strengths and weaknesses of the book. I love Wells's books, regularly using sections as required readings in classes because they irritate the status quo in so many churches . but he can also seem a bit stuck in the past and lack some spaciousness in dealing with the challenges of the present. This book is similar. But it is well worth reading and at 108 pages and triple-spaced, it will not take too long.

The author is threatening a book called *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns*. I hope his cancer remains in remission...

*Paul Windsor*