

Greg Scharf, *Relational Preaching* (Langham Preaching Resources, 2010)

A couple of things drew me to this book. Firstly, I consider Scharf's *Prepared to Preach* (Mentor, 2005) to be the book most likely to help someone starting out as a biblical preacher. So I was keen to see what his next book would be like. Secondly, since reading his earlier book, Greg and I have become colleagues . . . and this book is the first to be published by Langham Preaching Resources, the organisation with whom I serve.

Relational Preaching took me back to that statement from John Stott about the secret is not so much in mastering certain techniques, but being mastered by certain convictions. Theology is more important than methodology . . . and yet the majority of books on preaching deal with methodology. This book redresses the balance. It is about theology. It works away at those convictions which need to master us as preachers. Scharf calls it a scriptural theology of preaching (xv). I think it might be more than this, if that is possible. In probing the attitudes we have and the responses we make, it is also a spiritual theology of preaching.

The focus in the book is not on the preacher as much as it is the three relationships in which the preacher is engaged: with God, with scripture, and with listeners. These relationships are opened up, one by one, with a series of brief meditations, deliberately laden with biblical quotations. Our Relationship with God receives 49 meditations . . . divided into truths about God and then the way we should respond to him. Our Relationship with Scripture receives 28 meditations, while Our Relationship with Listeners is covered in 27 meditations. The book is only 200 pages . . . so these are very short meditations. It struck me that they are best read aloud, with it important not to fast-forward through the biblical passages, savouring and soaking in what is being written . . . either personally, or at a regular gathering of pastor-preachers. Not much by way of handy hints here . . . but lots of mature and seasoned wisdom to shape those all-important attitudes and convictions. I like the book. It is different. It is needed.

It helped me that I know the author. I have had my feet under his dining room table and participated with him & Ruth in their devotional routine. I have watched him in action with people and this breathes an authenticity into the spirituality expressed in his writing.

The sections I find most helpful are God the Giver (Day 14-19, pp35-45); God the Holy Spirit (Day 20-29, pp46-62); and the Nature of the Bible (Day 62-70, pp123-139) . . . each probing away at weaknesses in the way preaching is commonly understood in NZ today. Scharf also has a flair for finding simple, everyday illustrations . . . a model for us all.

Maybe one day I can engage Greg in conversation about the second edition(!) because I did have a few ideas as I found myself absorbed in these meditations. While it might be contrary to his purposes, an index of biblical passages would be helpful. And what about a single sentence prayer to close each meditation . . . much in the way Donald Coggan is known to do with some of his books on preaching? I also wondered whether the book finished as strongly as it started. For example, not all those final meditations incorporate a biblical text. Because he had done this so well earlier, I found myself missing that biblical anchor to the meditation. And is there another relationship to consider . . . the one with the wider world around us, beyond the church, expressed in that Stottian challenge of the preacher as bridge-builder? Issues of culture and worldview are touched upon . . . but to save us from a preaching that slips into an acculturated message, might this relationship need to be confronted more directly as well?

This book is that little bit different and herein lies its value. It is easy to imagine a pastor-preacher reading through these meditations aloud . . . maybe two a day, morning and evening . . . and experiencing the refreshment of the Spirit as they do so.

Paul Windsor