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The Perils of Preaching: Strong Sermons

Ian Breward

Given the theological importance attached by Protestants to the preaching of the Word, the lack of research and publication on 19th and 20th century preaching in Australia is surprising. Perry Miller's study of Puritan preaching in The New England Mind has no counterpart here, though a study of F.W. Boreham's preaching has begun. Writing a study of the Australian mind on the basis of sermons would be regarded by many as an impossible task, for they would argue that sermons have no serious intellectual content and focus largely on moral exhortation and pious edification. Indeed, deep-seated cultural changes have made preaching marginal as a means of cultural communication, because of the profound ways in which the electronic media have changed modes of address based on print and major speeches. Though there are still some large Protestant congregations, preaching is often subsumed within more visual and entertaining modes of communication. Few preachers exist who have the capacity to hold a large audience. Many of their hearers are so used to soundbytes that they find it hard to concentrate for more than five minutes. Queues to hear popular preachers such as Gordon Powell, or even respected local preachers, have disappeared in the 21st century.

Charles Strong, the talented minister of Scots' Church in Melbourne, was not a powerful preacher whose utterances stirred the emotions.. To an' Argus' reporter on 17 June, 1876, "his reading of the sermon could not be called eloquent. …There was a harshness and dryness of delivery … but the matter of the sermon was everything." Despite the dryness, Strong had a fine mind, read widely and was determined to present Jesus' message in a way which connected with contemporary concerns, rather than repeating doctrinal formulae from previous generations. He was convinced that this method underlay the transforming proclamation of previous generations. His congregation valued his approach and paid him a stipend double that of a university professor.
Regular congregations numbered around a thousand. His sermons were regularly reported in the daily papers and were also separately published at 3d a copy, so that they could be read and pondered. They still read very well, are finely crafted and have a poetic quality about them, which carried the doctrinal message very memorably. He was also skilled at suggesting striking new readings of biblical passages, based on his acceptance of the critical method.

Influential Presbyterian colleagues were increasingly alarmed at the effect of his preaching and influence in the colony and attempted to rein him in by challenging his theological position and attempting to prove that he was not orthodox. That culminated in the dissolution of the pastoral tie with his congregation and refusal to grant him a certificate of good standing when he returned to Scotland, because he refused to accept a doubtfully legal ultimatum to 'explain' his position to the Assembly, preferring instead to attend a farewell from a large number of admirers on the eve of his departure for Scotland. Strong returned to Melbourne in 1885, formed the Australian Church and remained its minister till his death in 1942. He saw the task

of the preacher as an opportunity to contextualize the eternal truths of the Gospel. This was done in his book of sermons 'Christianity reinterpreted' (1894). He was convinced that a new reformation was forcing itself upon religious people of all denominations.

At the root of this change was acceptance of the historical method ,for Strong was adamant that it was not enough to rationalize myths into modern prose. It was vital to go back to the childish ages, 'and live over again in imagination the childlike life of early peoples' (3). The Kingdom of God was not something we hold but something that holds us, for Christianity has to be reincarnated in us. 'It must be readapted and reapplied to the age in which, and the conditions under which we live' (4). In this way he sought to give appropriate value to the great truths of the past without simply adopting them unchanged. Strong pointed out that this renewal of earlier truth had occurred again and again in church history. Historic forms 'were but wayside houses built over the stream of living water, each claiming to have a monopoly of the sacred river' (6). This method teaches us to distinguish between the real Jesus and the Jesus of the reporters of the story of that great life. This drives us out of ecclesiastical fortresses into the broad fields of God. 'We seem to see emerging a new Church which shall be neither Roman Catholic nor Protestant, but - embracing the truth as emphasized by both – a Church of the Holy Spirit of God, and Christ, and man' (7). Such was the door to new spheres of progress and the living inspiration of the strongest and most noble hearts and hands in modern times. Strong also drew heavily on poetry to reinforce his insights. Tennyson was especially important, because he expressed this new philosophy of life so admirably. 'Tennyson is one, at least, of the poets and prophets of this revolution, lifting us above the materialism and pessimism of his century into the inspiring air of spiritual ideals and deathless hopes, and evolving universe. Let us learn from him what he has to teach us, even though we may not regard his message as the full and final Gospel' (Religion in Poetry 1902, p. 12).

Such views needed to recognize that authority within the churches could no longer be exercised in ancient ways, because there was now manhood suffrage in the church. A better quality of education was needed and more ecclesiastical liberty was demanded. Office-bearers needed to be given more space to explore new ideas with integrity. 'If they felt that the only thing that would bring disgrace upon them would be unfaithfulness to the law of truth and love, neglect of Christian duty, bigotry or dishonest judgment', the churches' office bearers would be liberated (Present troubles in troubles in the church, 1879, p. 8). Another forceful statement of his position appeared in 'Had Jesus a creed'? (1901, based on the story of Jesus' anointing with precious ointments. The woman made no confession of faith. Bathing Christ's feet with tears and wiping them with her hair was her confession of faith. Jesus made no test of her doctrinal orthodoxy. 'Why this extraordinary silence, when a few words would have saved centuries of controversy and division, and have given us a guide for all time – an infallible and authoritative declaration as what it is necessary above all things that' whosoever will be saved must believe? 'The only true answer to this question, my friends, I submit, is Jesus had no creed' (6). Creeds were a much later development. We are exhorted to an unlimited faith, leading to a serene and noble life, for there is no question as to a metaphysical belief. Jesus does not even teach a dogma of the atonement despite what Strong's opponents asserted.

Jesus' religion lay not in a creed about God, but in loving faith and fidelity and in this religion which brought Jesus peace and serenity, he called others to sharehis experience. In the light of history, people needed to recognize that philosophy and creeds had their place, but they must not be substituted for trust in God as Father. There is therefore no place for the imposition of creeds upon each other, for they bring only endless division. 'What a weight is thus lifted from many minds; what a mountain of division between us and fellow- Christians is at once removed; what a pile of ecclesiastical pretension is, in a moment, levelled to the ground? And with what brighter lustre and simple beauty does faith shine forth, when we realize the truth that Jesus had no creed and imposes no creed upon his followers. What richer, warmer meaning is breathed into the fine old phrase 'the unity of the faith'? No longer does it stand for a mechanical uniformity of belief or word but for the brotherhood and sisterhood of hearts and wills in every age, united in the effort to realize the ideal incarnate in Jesus and ever beckoning man onward and upward to a life at once human and divine'. (12-13). This was a frontal challenge to more conservative Presbyterians, reiterating what was set out in the Basis of Union of the , and love towards God and man and a common endeavour after Christian life and practice, untrammeled by a final dogmatic theological creed.' Strong was insistent that this would not destroy the Church. 'Our aim is not the destruction of the Church but the enlargement and strengthening of it as the noblest and widest form of human society' (The Relation of the Australian Church to Creed and Dogma, 1896, p. 14).

The same emphasis were made in 1925 when he preached on The rebirth of Christianity, arguing that mankind is still in the making, with the old landmarks disappearing beneath a receding horizon. History is a process of constant change and, since religion is the deepest stratum of our being, it is inevitably affected by the whole experience of mankind. 'If there is to be a new world, the World's Religion must be made new. All religions must be influenced by expanding knowledge, fresh experience and conditions of life, for they must change in the future as they have changed in the past. Christianity is unchanging in that it is continually reborn. 'It must be reborn in you and me and our contemporaries, it must be readapted and reapplied to the age in which and the conditions under which we live' (4). Christianity needs to be reborn intellectually, socially and spiritually. That will lift us above the bondage of our old theological creeds and absurd divisions, for we cannot stand still if Christianity is to retain its social hold. True religion is not belief in a number of unverifiable assertions. It is trust which lifts the mind and soul into higher regions .

Striving together for such goals creates vibrant unity, which transforms Protestant individualism. "Only in and through a society, a church, can the individual find the truest personal freedom and the highest religious life." (Christian Missions, 1896, p 2) Where this spirit was lost, Christians fell into proselytism and fanatical zeal for particular isms, rather than inspiring "a trustful, filial, brotherly spirit, as the only key with which to let God's kingdom enter the world." (3) Multiplying services, scattering Bibles and abolishing religious robes will not convert the churches to the gospel of the divine humanity. "It matters little that our Presbyterian brethren, for instance, should leave tbeir churches and address congregations on a hillside, or Yarra Bank, or in a theatre, if they carry with them the Gospel according to the Westminster Confession of Faith." (3) Strong had considerable sympathy for Socialism, seeing it as a secular parallel to the brotherhood and justice enjoined by the Scriptures. He prophesied that

the dispute between Individualism and would eclipse all the old theological controversies. (Christianity reinterpreted, 92)

In 'Religion and the home', Strong noted important connections between experience of family life and theological insight. He noted the presence of the divine feminine in other religions ,which was partly present in the cult of the blessed Virgin Mary, though in a purer form than in ancient cults. "The religion of Jesus, we Protestants think, was and is the religion of Divine Fatherhood, including all that is best and noblest in Motherhood."(4) Tragically ideas of fatherhood have historically been corrupted by monarchical ideas , which represent Jesus saving us from God, instead of drawing us to God as our Home. In this way Protestants have deepened and spiritualized the family idea of the relation between God and men. "The purer, holier, more unselfish and loving the Home becomes, the higher does religion become. Low thoughts of God come from low thoughts of the Home. Unloving, selfish Homes must breed unloving selfish religion. (6) Tragically, a variety of forces have loosened family ties, so that the realities described in Burns'The Cottars Saturday Night' are rarely found. Where they still exist, the home becomes a haven "opening out into the great ocean of human life, sympathy and love." (11)

Such themes were given a fresh context in an undated and incomplete sermon for Hospital Sunday, entitled 'Brotherhood and health.' Strong's optimism about the world moving inexorably towards unity is clearly displayed, because the spirit of goodwill draws into its service science, art, ethics, personality, the person and the collective, and then makes of the many, one. Hospital Sunday was a sign of the religion of the future,"where all religions will melt into the Religion of Goodwill, as the streaks of dawn merge into morning and noonday." It is not enough to fight disease. Christians must be committed to health. "What sunshine and the mountain air or the sea breeze are to the body, friendship, fellowship, communion of mind with mind and heart with heart, are to the spirit, and through the spirit, they invigorate the body.". To establish health for all mankind means a world religion of humanity, for much sickness and suffering is is due to violation of the gravitational law of goodwill and devotion to selfish individualism, which means many live and die in disgraceful conditions.

By this stage, Strong was an old man, recycling long-held ideas and no longer commanding the public attention which he had in his heyday. Nevertheless he demonstrated that a thoughtful preacher, unafraid to suggest new readings of biblical passages and to give doctrine a historical context could appeal to a wide range of thoughtful Melbournians from varied denominational and religious backgrounds. His preaching showed the appeal of an unsectarian and liberal Protestantism, connected to many of the influential new movements of his times. He was not only a preacher, but was active in reform movements for better housing, offering new opportunities for victims of the 1890s crash by his partnership with Father Tucker in creating settlements and being a determined opponent of jingoism and uncritical support for war as a solution to deep rooted injustices in the international order.

His appeal to the message of Jesus and the great prophets as the best criterion for reforming Protestantism, his optimism about human possibilities and his belief that the old forms of denominational loyalty were inappropriate in a young nation was an ambitious vision. Though it did not lead to a network of Australian Churches, his

ideas undoubtedly contributed to the liberalization of Victorian Protestantism. This study uses only a small selection of his sermons, based on those held in the State Library and in the Uniting Church Archives of Victoria, most of which were preached in the Australian Church. A much wider study of his earlier sermons and those which were printed in the Church's magazine might demonstrate additional themes and developments in his technique. The breadth of his reading in British and European theologians enabled him to speak with authority about current religious trends, developments in biblical and historical scholarship and about the theological implications of contemporary poetry and prose. Nor did he ignore writing in other relevant disciplines for the mission of the church.

He was utterly persuaded of the essential simplicity of Christian faith and its ethical imperatives. His last surviving sermon in 1942 was entitled 'Prophetic religion'. Indeed there was something of the prophet about him, typified in his willingness to hold to fundamental principles, even if it lost him significant supporters. Christian faith must be submitted to the same critical examination which proved so fruitful in other fields of learning. His philosophical commitment to the Idealism of the Cairds, which he absorbed as a student at Glasgow University, opened up a fresh vision of how eternal truths and historical realities could fruitfully interact, movingly demonstrated in his tribute to a beloved friend entitled'The speaking dead', preached in Scotland in 1884. While some of sermons were polemical, or contained polemical elements, the dominant theme in his preaching was positive commendation of the truth and an invitation to responsible freedom of choice, without ignoring human capacity for folly and sin. Study of his preaching opens many windows into the tensions in the Victorian churches and community and suggests that examination of the sermons of other notable preachers might throw considerable light on the dynamics of 19th and 20th century church life.