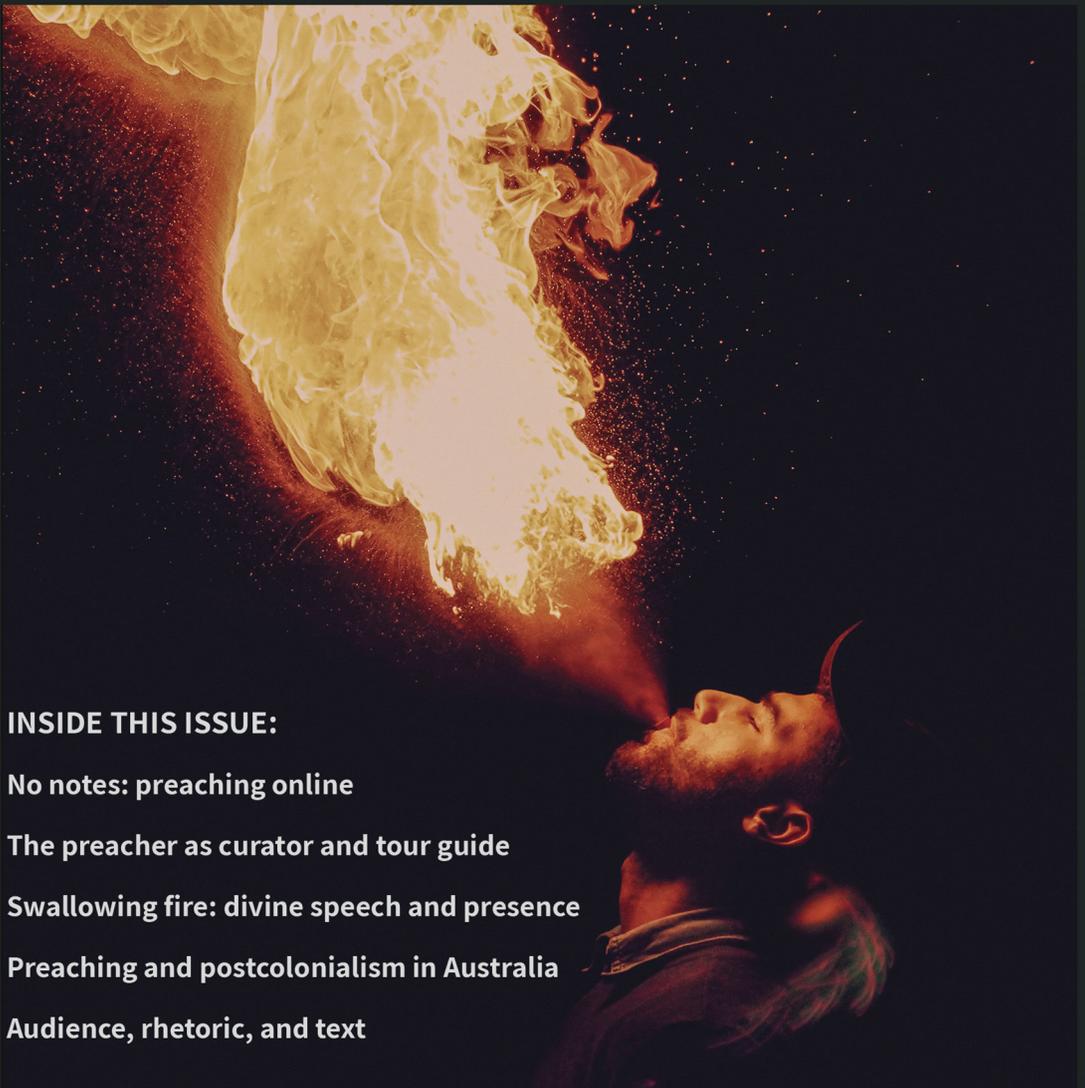




## Preaching in contemporary Australia



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Audience, rhetoric, and text

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# St Mark's Review

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# Editorial

This number of *St Mark's Review* had its genesis in *Preachfest!*, a three-day “festival” of preaching held at St Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra and United Theological College in Sydney during 1–3 June 2021. Drawing on the wisdom and expertise of a range of Australian and international preachers, the aim of *Preachfest!* was to inspire and enliven the art and vocation of preaching across churches in Australia (a second festival is planned for May/June 2023). A similar aim imbues this number of *St Mark's Review*, the theme of which is the best practice and theology of preaching in contemporary Australia.

Several of the contributors to this number were notable Australian contributors to *Preachfest!* with literally hundreds of years of collective experience in both preaching and training others to preach. They offer hard-won insights and wisdom for both preachers and their audiences. All contributors are also Australian preachers, representing some of the major Protestant preaching traditions in Australia: Anglican, Baptist, Reformed, and Uniting Church. And while these essays certainly speak to an Australian context, they inevitably touch on perennial questions that are relevant to the preaching task in any place. They are, as Mike Raiter notes in his article, “generic enough to benefit those whose style and convictions may differ from my own.”

The high calling of Christian preaching is to interpret the biblical text to discern its key message and then to contextualise that message, making clear its relevance for its intended audience.<sup>1</sup> While there is a strong emphasis here on the practical craft of exegesis, preaching and preparation, there are also insights gleaned from the disciplines of theology and church history. The first two articles are contributed by leading Australian Anglican preachers with around 90 years of preaching experience between them, in addition to decades of experience training and coaching fledgling preachers. Mike Raiter's article focuses on a vital issue that has received insufficient attention in homiletics: the relationship between the preacher and the people, and the impact of that on the content and delivery of the sermon. As experienced public speakers will testify, the first consideration in any public speech is not the message itself but rather the audience to whom it will be spoken. Although the Bible shapes the theme, content, and tone of the sermon, as Raiter points out, the preacher should

proclaim the authoritative word as “a shepherd of this flock who addresses this people at this particular place and time.”

Simon Manchester observes that good preaching can move a listener from the “winter of despair” to the “spring of hope.” Likewise, he provides suggestions to help the busy or beleaguered preacher undergo a similar shift from despair to hope. Manchester’s article considers two key issues: first, how to tackle the text (getting the passage “right”); and second, how to craft its delivery (getting it “across”).

Tim Macbride, a Baptist pastor and lecturer at Morling College, Sydney, draws on his expertise in the study of rhetoric to consider the preacher as a “curator” and “tour guide” of the biblical text. His aim is to help preachers become more effective “tour guides” in terms of how the Bible is read aloud in gatherings; in terms of how preachers might engage with the text in their preaching in a manner that brings it to life for their congregations; and in terms of how preachers might creatively bridge the world of the text and the world of their hearers.

Marc Rader, senior pastor of Gynea Baptist Church and also a lecturer at Morling, reconsiders preaching practice in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasingly common practice of live-streaming sermons. In addition, he observes that modes of public speech and its consumption are being shaped by the pervasive presence of YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and other online face-to-camera platforms, each of which has its own conventions and best practices to enable audience connection. In these new contexts, argues Rader, there is a need to break down the distance created by the camera and the audience, making maximum eye contact and direct connection with the audience crucial. The best way to do this, he contends, is by “ditching the manuscript” and preaching without notes, direct to camera. To that end, the substance of Rader’s article is a set of practical suggestions for how this might be done well, with particular emphasis on careful and thoughtful preparation.

Ockert Meyer, a Uniting Church minister and homiletics lecturer at United Theological College, Sydney, turns aside from matters of practice and rhetoric to articulate a robust theology of preaching. True Christian preaching, argues Meyer, is not characterised by vapid “reflections” or audiences who play the role of impartial observers. Instead, he contends, true preaching is like swallowing fire—not a fire that is ignited by the rhetorical skill, brilliant content, or “experience” of the preacher, but a fire that

comes from the same embers that have burned, glowing bright  
in the dark since the preaching of the prophets and apostles.  
The voice that speaks in Christian preaching, the only voice

that can raise the dead, is the living voice of God's Holy Spirit that animates and enlivens the voice and the person of the preacher. When the Spirit speaks into the life and the voice of the preacher, detachment or distance (or "reflecting") is simply not an option.

Meyer's article unpacks this proposition through a wide-ranging conversation that spans western and Reformed theological traditions, with interlocutors including Augustine of Hippo, Heinrich Bullinger, Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Dutch Reformed theologian K. H. Miskotte. The article concludes with a practical theology of preaching that seeks the Spirit to breathe life into the preachers' words—not automatically, or at the preacher's behest, but according to the freedom and grace of the God who has already become incarnated in a human person once, and wills to be "incarnated in the human voice of a preacher every time of the Body of Christ is gathered in the Name of God."

Christine Redwood, lead pastor at Seaforth Baptist Church and adjunct lecturer at Morling, reflects on what it means to be a preacher in an Australia that has a postcolonial backstory and context. She views preaching in Australia through a postcolonial lens, drawing on insights gleaned from postcolonial theology that are framed in terms of preacher, listener, and text. Here Redwood discerns voices and stories often missing in contemporary preaching as well as new questions to ask of the biblical text.

Finally, historian Baden Stace suggests the value of a historical perspective on preaching in Australia. His specific focus is on what can be learned from the theological, rhetorical, and homiletical art of one of Australia's most influential and dynamic preacher-evangelists, the Anglican John C. Chapman (1930–2012). Chapman, or "Chappo" as he was better known both in Australian and internationally, has been described by one commentator as "the Australian Billy Graham." As Stace demonstrates, Chapman emphasised the missiological dimension of preaching. He united this with an "expository plain-style" of preaching (where the theology of a biblical unit—a passage, theme or book—is condensed under a "lead" idea and expounded using a three- or four-point rhetorical structure) and a unique capacity to delight, move, and persuade audiences.

Several themes and emerge from these essays: the crucial importance for preachers of careful preparation, both in terms of exegeting the biblical text and in considering the audience (whether the local congregation, outsiders, or a broader Australian cultural context); the cultivation and practice of the best rhetorical tools and strategies; the value of expository styles of preaching; a great

deal of helpful advice on how *not* to preach; the necessity of humble reliance on the agency and power of God's mighty Spirit; and, finally, the value of studying the great preachers of the past to learn from their theological, rhetorical, and homiletical art (for more on this topic, see *St Mark's Review* no. 230, December 2014, a special issue on the history of Australian preaching and sermons since 1788).

Taken together, the following articles offer practical wisdom, profound theological reflection, and inspiration for those who are called to the vital task of preaching, whether ordained or lay. At the same time, these essays will be of benefit to those who listen to preachers week in and week out, helping them to be more discerning hearers—and hopefully doers—of the preached word that comes to them. I commend these timely essays to the readers of *St Mark's Review*.

Michael Gladwin  
December 2021

### **Endnotes**

- 1 Ian Hussey (ed.), *Preaching with an Accent: Biblical Genres for Australian Congregations* (Sydney: Morling Press, 2019).