

HOW LONG FOR A SERMON?

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‘Talk about God and talk about 20 minutes’ used to be the rule of thumb for Baptist preachers. And a good rule, it was too. I shall never forget FF Bruce once wryly commenting to me: “Preachers who’ve got nothing to say need 40 minutes, those with something to say need only 20 minutes”. I know that in some churches 40 minutes is the norm, but I sometimes wonder to what extent the preachers of such sermons have truly prepared their sermon. In this respect a remark of Mark Twain comes to mind when he sent a long letter to a friend: he apologized for the length and said it would have been shorter, but he didn’t have time. The fact is that longer does not mean better. Indeed, one Roman Catholic bishop advised his clergy that when they had finished preparing their usual-length sermon, they should cut it in half. It may involve minor re-writing, but he said, what’s left is the very best material. Certainly, I think that if preachers were to go to the trouble of writing out their sermons in full – rather than simply use headings – they might well find that their sermons would be clearer, deeper, and shorter. But, of course, when it comes to the length of the sermon, there are other factors at play. There is, for instance, the attention span of the congregation – most people are not used to sitting still and listening to a 20 minutes monologue. I confess that on more than one occasion I have fallen asleep when the preacher has gone on – and on! Then, there is the issue of ensuring that there is the issue of balance in a service. For people do not simply come to church to listen to the preacher: there needs to be time for worship, for prayer, for reading the Scriptures, for celebrating around the Table. My experience of churches where longer sermons are the norm is that the prayers of intercession are squeezed out, and the reading of the Scriptures is truncated, while the Lord’s Supper is often regarded as an addendum. But there is yet another issue, which is not often recognised, and that concerns the children, who in most of our churches tend to go to their classes after the first 20 minutes or so of worship. The fact is that there is a limit as to how long untrained teachers (and many people working in our Sunday Schools are understandably not professional teachers) can look after their charges. Here I have in mind the difficulties posed by the unruly or even disturbed child: 50 minutes is a long time to care for such a child – and the danger is that the longer the service goes on, the more likely it is that one day the patience of one of the untrained teachers will snap, and then all the forces of child protection come into play. Preachers of long sermons are not being fair to their Sunday School staff. So let’s ensure that 20 (or if need be 25) minutes remains the norm!

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