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1

BIBLICAL PREACHING AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

Prophetic preaching does not just happen. It does not come automatically with a seminary degree, nor with the ordination to the ministry, nor with the call to the pastorate. It is not by intellectual might nor by ecstatic emotion but by the Spirit of God when He lays hold upon a preacher to deliver a life and death message to men. (Roland Leavell, *Prophetic Preaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963])

The quality of preaching always declines when the conception of preaching is removed from primary to secondary stage. However, the history of Christianity from the middle of the second century to the Reformation shows that nothing, not even elaborate ritual or ornate buildings, will suffice for the Word of God's being preached with power and reality.

We have two options. We can "curse the darkness" and let preaching stay in the swampland of mediocrity. Or we can revitalize our preaching so that God's message will get through to mankind.

Biblical preaching is still that unique method by which God through His chosen messenger reaches down into the human family and brings persons into fellowship with Himself. It employs spoken communication of divine truth for the purpose of persuasion. "With preaching Christianity stands or falls prolonging and declaring itself."¹

The Bible is clear on the priority of preaching. The Old Testament prophets were heralds of God, declaring judgment and future hope. The New Testament uses six Greek words for preaching. John the Baptist came heralding and proclaiming (Matt. 3:1). In 1 Corinthians 5:1, Paul uses a word that means to tell good news. Other Greek words for preaching refer to bearing witness, discoursing, conversing with another, and teaching. The Great Commission

commands us to go into all the world and preach the good news (Mark 16:15).

The early representatives of the Christian "Way" were not content with a religion that merely added polish to the exterior of a man. They had a religion that gave men a new heart, a new view of God, of Christ, and of their fellows, which entered every fiber of their being and colored their whole outlook on life. They believed profoundly, because they themselves knew Him, in a God who was able to turn a man round in his tracks, in fact, to *convert* him. They knew that Paul was right when he said: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Four tests for a great speech have come down to us from classical rhetoric. The Sophists, who were the first paid public speaking teachers, trained speakers to defend their position in the land courts of the island of Sicily. They believed that a speech was worthy of high commendation providing it gained results. Plato revolted against the position of the Sophists and emphasized the fact that a speech could only be considered great if it had great truth content. Quintillian stressed the inherent quality of the life of the speaker. A speech could only be termed a great speech providing it was delivered by a good man. The Aristotelian trademark of a great speech was that it be *well organized*. It is my feeling that all four of these emphases are worthy of recognition as we try to evaluate a sermon. We trust that through the guidance of the Holy Spirit it will be used to produce constructive results. It certainly should convey truth. It should be presented by a man whose life is worthy. It is the fourth qualification to which this particular chapter is devoted. An effective biblical sermon should be marked by logical organization.

James Stewart takes a positive approach to preaching when he says,

Do not listen to the foolish talk which suggests that, for this twentieth century, the preaching of the Word is an anachronism, and that the pulpit, having served its purpose, must now be displayed by press or radio, discussion group or Brain Trust, and finally vanish from the scene. As long as God sets His image on the soul, and men are restless till they rest in Him, so long will the preacher's task persist and his voice be heard throughout all the clamour of the world.²

Why is preaching, applauded by historians and exalted in Scripture, now fighting for its life? Perhaps because our practice of preaching has not been established on sound philosophical and theological foundations. Preaching is the art of which homiletics is the science and the sermon is the product. Preaching, like all other arts and sciences, must have philosophical foundations. An educa-

tional maxim declares that philosophy governs both material and methods. That is to say, we must determine the purposes of preaching, its definitions and qualifications, before we select the material to be preached and the method to be used. Our parishioners stand in desperate need of a word from God. The revitalization of preaching can come only as we clarify and reestablish our purposes for preaching and by delineating the preacher's qualifications.

PREACH WITH PURPOSE LIKE A HERALD

As a marksman aims at his target and its bull's eye and at nothing less, so the preacher must have a definite point before him that he must hit. Effective biblical preaching must be purposeful. One's philosophy, aim, or goal will govern the material that he will use and the method that he will employ. The rule is to begin with one's purpose and not with one's plan.

The present-day preacher is often guilty of preaching on small themes and temporary topics. Many of the sermons are intelligent but irrelevant. The purpose of preaching should be to meet human needs with divine power. The preacher with the aid of the Holy Spirit should aim at kindling the mind and energizing the will. He must dare to be simple but never seem shallow.

G. C. Morgan quotes Rousseau's recipe for a love letter as a recipe to be avoided in sermonizing. The recipe says: "You will begin without knowing what you are going to say and end without knowing what you have said." A sermon must in contrast to this be designed with purpose. It must be unique in its message, unique in its spirit, and must aim at godly living.

Preaching does not exist for the propagating of personal views, opinions, and social ideals. Preaching exists for the proclamation of the authoritative Word of God. The purpose of preaching is not to catch the spirit of the age but by the eternal truth and power of God to correct it. Preaching is a sacred trust, a solemn responsibility, and a divine call. The preacher must serve as a thermostat rather than a thermometer. He must have a part in setting the temperature, not merely recording it. The preacher proclaims like a herald the mighty deeds of redemption that have been accomplished and the full counsel of the divine Word that has been committed to his stewardship.

Charles Koller, who for many years was one of America's highly respected teachers of preachers, said that the preacher should so present Jesus Christ that people will come to know Him, love Him, serve Him, and yield their lives to Him.

Charles Simeon (1759-1836), one of the greatest preachers of all time, had a threefold objective in communicating the gospel. He

sought with the help of the Holy Spirit to humble the sinner, to exalt the Savior, and to promote holiness in the life of the believer. Preaching that does not display divine authority both in its content and in its presentation is not the substance but only the shadow of the real thing.

To preach evangelically is an art not to be learned from books, or lectures, or inward meditation. It comes from above. It is imparted by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. To preach Christ is not merely to speak of Him but to speak as a prophet from Him. It is not by might nor by power, but by His Spirit that we are enabled to preach.

The work of the Holy Spirit in preaching may be summarized by stating that He helps the preacher in the following ways:

He guides in finding the proper topics and Scripture passages upon which to preach.

He aids in preparation by giving illumination, insight, and discernment; He aids the memory to recall parallel passages, illustrations, and ideas; He leads the preacher to find the right material.

He strengthens and inspires for writing the outline.

He gives additional ideas and insights to the preacher as he thinks over his message between completing the preparation and delivery of the sermon.

He gives boldness and confidence at the time of delivery.

He gives new thoughts and ideas, and helps forget and omit other prepared material, during delivery.

He applies the Word in both expected and unexpected ways to the hearts and minds of the hearers.

He unifies the audience and creates attentiveness.

He convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment and creates faith in those who hear the Word.

He fixes the Word in the minds and memories of hearers, follows it up, and causes it to develop.

The early preaching was a joyous thing. Therein lay its infectiousness. The early preachers spoke with a kind of awed surprise. They could never get used to the wonder of the gospel or of the church. The joy of the early preachers sprang from the conviction that theirs was a task that taxed them to the limit and sent them back to God. It was a superhuman task and one that called for all the initiative, all the physical, mental, and spiritual discipline and stamina they could summon. The early preaching came from men who knew the meaning of the love of God.

“Who is a great preacher?” Many great preachers have been great in *one* particular aspect of the preaching task. Few have been great in many areas. If we are considering *oratory*, then we might list

Robert Hall, Thomas Guthrie, George Whitefield, Thomas Chalmers, or Charles Haddon Spurgeon. If we are considering *exposition*, we might refer to Alexander Maclaren or Sir W. Robertson Nicoll. In respect to *depth of thought*, we might name Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Hopkins, or J. H. Newman. If we are looking for great preachers in terms of their *teaching ability*, then we might note Charles Simeon of Cambridge, Frederick William Robertson of Brighton, or John Duncan of New College, Edinburgh. Great preachers from the standpoint of being great Reformers might include the names of John Knox, Andrew Melville, or Thomas Boston. We might list as one of the great preachers one who was raised in a gypsy tent, who as an unlettered lad of seventeen preached his first sermon to a group of Sunday afternoon holiday makers. He became an itinerant evangelist. He preached before kings and queens before his death in 1947 at the age of eighty-seven. Five countries have wanted to claim him as their own. He was only a converted gypsy. They called him Gypsy Smith.

PREACH WITH DIGNITY LIKE AN AMBASSADOR

We cannot separate the preacher from his preaching. A sermon that has become incarnated in a preacher who has paid the price of knowing his Bible and knowing his people can stand up to the challenge people demand of it. The preacher must show in his life that which he expounds with his lips. The Archbishop of Canterbury once asked Thomas Betterton (1635-1710) why actors seem to have no difficulty in making an impression on their audiences, whereas preachers frequently leave them cold. The famous actor replied: "Actors speak of things imaginary as if they were real, while you preachers too often speak of things real as if they were imaginary." The preacher must be a competent person in a good emotional state with a wholesome attitude toward himself, his audience, and his God.

It was Matthew Simpson, in his lectures on preaching, who stated that preaching is not merely the delivering of a message, but it is the delivery of a message by a man who professes to have felt its power and testifies to its truth in his own experience. Preaching to people is an expression of concern for them and of love for them. Love going out finds love in return.

An examination of Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 12 will highlight some conclusions regarding the total task of the Christian minister:

As an apostle he is to challenge the will;
as a prophet he is to probe the conscience;

as an evangelist he is to woo the heart;
as a pastor he is to care for the soul;
as a teacher he is to inform the mind.³

The total task of the ministry demands the dedication of the total man. Preaching is not a minor matter. It is a matter of major proportions.

The Bible contains no finer characterization of the exalted nature of the minister's vocation than that of being an ambassador of Jesus Christ. As an ambassador, he is an official envoy, a diplomatic agent of the highest rank, and a resident representative of his sovereign Lord.

The biblical preacher has an appointment from God to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ. This appointment is commonly referred to as a call to preach. A firm conviction of divine call is essential to the office and gift of preaching. Such a call may be manifested in various ways but must always include the influence of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus does not ask for volunteers. He appoints His ambassadors.

The appointed ambassador has been entrusted with the inerrant Word of God. His task is to bring people into agreement with Jesus Christ. Many of the ones to whom we preach are biblical illiterates. They may be well educated and sophisticated, but they need help in getting to know what the Bible says and, more especially, in coming to see how it applies to their daily living. The preacher's citizenship is not in the land where he proclaims his message but is in his heavenly homeland (Phil. 3:20).

The preacher will measure his ministry in terms of eternity rather than time (2 Cor. 5:1-4). Like the prophets of God before him, he will often sigh with anxiety but will even then take courage, for he knows that in God's good time his labor will bring its reward. When the race has been finished, the King will call the faithful runner up into the stands, and he will there receive the victor's crown.

He will measure his ministry in terms of the down payment of the Spirit of God, which he has already received (2 Cor. 5:5). Success in ministry does not come automatically with a seminary degree, ordination, or a call to a church. It comes only when the Spirit of God lays hold upon a preacher to deliver a life-and-death message to mankind.

The motivation for an effective biblical preaching ministry is twofold. On the one hand, the preacher is motivated by the desire that his ministry be acceptable to the One who has appointed him to preach. He makes it his aim to please Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:9b). On the other hand, he is motivated by his accountability. He recognizes that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ and

give an accounting of that which we have done (2 Cor. 5:10).

The preacher proclaims God's message of reconciliation. He becomes an umpire between God and listeners (Job 9:33). The preacher has a commission to bring the two parties together. The process of this reconciliation involved God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not counting the sins of people against them. The purpose is clear. Christ was made sin so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Donald E. Demaray closes his illuminating book *Pulpit Giants* with some summary statements about the major characteristics held in common by the twenty-five master preachers he has discussed. Among those characteristics Demaray listed were these:

- An utter seriousness about the call to preach
- A passion to communicate
- A readiness to be individual
- An eagerness to study, learn, and use the learning
- A sensitive concern for persons
- An ability to concentrate meaningfully and faithfully on their given tasks
- A healthy discontent with their own spiritual progress and ministerial success
- An honorable view of preaching as the most important activity in which they could be involved⁴

Expertness for the ministry, however, involves more than mere information. It also involves understanding: understanding people, understanding situations in which people find themselves, and understanding the relation of the biblical witness to both.

The preacher must present the gospel with boldness (1 Thess. 2:2). He must be sincere in motive so that it will be evident that he preaches to please God and not men (1 Thess. 2:3-6). When Hugh Latimer was preaching once before Henry VIII, he was overheard to say to himself as he mounted the pulpit stairs: "Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! You must take care what you say, for the great King Henry VIII is here!" Then for a moment he paused and was heard to add, "Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! You must take care what you say, for the King of kings is here!"

The preacher must be gentle in his action even as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her child (1 Thess. 2:7-9). When James Stewart of Edinburgh preached in North Morningside, the church was always filled. The people knew that the preacher loved them. The effectiveness of preaching declines when a gulf develops between the preacher and his people. His life must be marked by holiness so that he will be a good example to others (1 Thess. 2:10-

12). In his *Lectures on Preaching* Phillips Brooks said, "And first among the elements of power which make success, I must put the supreme importance of character of personal uprightness and purity impressing themselves upon the men who witness them."

Quintilian was right. The good speaker must be a good man. Saint Francis of Assisi made the same point clear when he said, "No use to go anywhere to preach unless we preach while we go."

PREACH WITH CARE LIKE A PASTOR

One of the major tests of an effective sermon centers on what happens to the individual in the pew. There should be something in every sermon for every person in the pews. No one should be sent away from church empty. The sermon is the meeting place of the soul with God. Preaching is part of the pastoral care of souls.

The pastoral precedes the prophetic. The preacher earns his right to be a prophet by faithful fulfillment of the pastoral office. The sermon must be personal to the preacher. He must speak from experience.

Preaching is divine truth voiced by a chosen personality to meet human needs. It was Charles Spurgeon who said that the sermon really begins when the application begins. A preacher who delivers a sermon without an application is like a doctor who gives a sick man a lecture on health but sends him out of the office without a prescription.

Effective biblical preaching must be characterized by being personal. Ian MacPherson has well said, "To us as sermon artists our hearers are both canvas and patrons, at once the materials on which our paintings are executed, and the public who inspect and appraise them. Hence for a double reason the people deserve our close concern."⁵

J. M. Reu wrote that "preaching is fundamentally a part of the care of souls, and the care of souls involves a thorough understanding of the congregation. The Preacher . . . must be a faithful pastor."⁶ That which comes from the heart is most likely to go to the heart. Power in the pulpit comes partly through the preacher's being able to speak from experience.

Jack D. Sanford gives the essentials for a preacher as being:

The preacher's own sure knowledge of personal salvation and holy calling in his own life

A truly deep devotional life for himself

A constant contact with men in their work-a-day world

The spirit of self-giving and self-sacrifice

The preacher cannot change lives by eloquent hearsay. He cannot share what he does not possess or reveal what he has not seen.

Biblical truth must be preached in terms of the living experience of the listeners. A sermon involves exposition plus application. The preacher must present his message with a minimum of principles and a maximum of illustration. Effective use of visual aids, audience participation, facts, details, and examples will enhance his effectiveness with the believing listeners. He must keep his language simple and understandable.

The most effective way of getting people to do what you want them to do is to communicate your genuine love for them. A young man went to Horatius Bonar one day saying, "Dr. Bonar, I love to preach, but nothing happens when I preach." Dr. Bonar is reported to have turned and said to the young man, "But, young man, do you love people?"

Reuel Howe lists six complaints by laymen concerning preaching:

Sermons often contain too many complex ideas.

Sermons have too much analysis and too little answers.

Sermons are too formal and too impersonal.

Sermons use too much theological jargon.

Sermons are too propositional, with too little illustration.

Too many sermons simply reach a dead end and give no guidance to commitment and action.⁸

PREACH WITH POWER LIKE A PROPHET

A. J. Gordon was asked to explain the decline in the effectiveness of preaching in his day. He replied: "This decline is due, we believe, more than anything else to an ignoring of the Holy Spirit as the supreme inspirer in preaching. . . . The true preacher does not simply use the Spirit, he is used by the Spirit."⁹

The work of the Holy Spirit in preaching encompasses four stages. The first of these is the conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment. The second stage is illumination, whereby the Spirit opens the eyes of the understanding to see Christ, the only and all-sufficient Savior. The third stage is that of regeneration, or the imparting of new life in the soul. The fourth stage is sanctification, which involves a setting apart from sin and a setting apart unto God.

Four analogies referring to the work of the Holy Spirit summarize His role in our preaching. In John 3, He is compared to wind that stirs. Acts 2 employs the analogy of fire that purifies. Isaiah 61

compares His work to oil that invigorates. The analogy in Revelation 22 compares His work to water that refreshes. Modern preaching needs the stirring, purifying, invigorating, and refreshing that come through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. It needs the flashing eye, the pulsating song, and the vibrant enthusiasm that marked the apostles' preaching in the Spirit-filled church at Pentecost.

The way of prayer is the way of power. One who would preach with power must learn to pray alone and to pray together with others. The preacher must be known not only for his consistency, but also for his persistency, in prayer.

I stood in the evening darkness at the foot of Glacier Point in Yosemite National Park. The lights had been turned out, and I was waiting in the darkness for the avalanche of burning coals to fall from the high cliff down along the side of the valley. A voice broke the stillness of the night and cried out in the darkness, "Let the fire fall." Another voice came back through the darkness, "The fire falls." I watched the avalanche of burning fire. I will never forget the amazing sight of seeing the fire fall. I will say today as I did that night, "O God, in the darkness of our night, let the fire fall."

After a visit to the Alps, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote: "Mountains are great apostles of nature whose sermons are avalanches, and whose voice is that of one crying in the wilderness."

Preacher, let's go back with our people to the mountains with the Master. Let's climb the mount of temptation in Matthew 4 and realize the importance of the Book of God. Let's take our place on the mount of teaching in Matthew 5 and find the true nature of blessedness. Let's climb the mount of transfiguration in Matthew 17 and behold the dazzling glory of Christ. Let's go out to the mount of crucifixion in Matthew 27 and grasp the importance of the blood of Christ. Let's climb the mount of triumph in Acts 1 and catch the wonder of the blessed hope. Preaching, God's method of witnessing to the world, must be revitalized. Preach with purpose as an ambassador of Christ. Preach to people in the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

George W. Truett, speaking at the C. H. Spurgeon Centenary, reminded those assembled for that occasion of an essential truth that Spurgeon believed. "[Spurgeon believed there was] no substitute for the Christian pulpit. Not the press with all its triumphs; nor the schools with all their learning; nor the amazing triumphs of science can take the place of Christ's preacher. 'For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.' "

Truett went on to say:

Nor will history let us forget that the halcyon days of Christianity have always been the days of great preachers and faithful preaching. It was so in the days of Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine, and Ambrose. It was so in the days of Luther, Calvin, Latimer, and Jonathan Edwards. It was so in the days of Spurgeon. The dry bones of the valley have ever lived and been clothed with flesh and blood when the right kind of man with the right kind of message has stood in the Christian pulpit. The moral and spiritual safety of a nation and of a world is largely within the keeping of the Christian pulpit. The Thermopylae of Christianity is the pulpit.¹⁰

Following a systematic method for constructing a sermon does not rule out nor does it limit the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Orderliness, not confusion, is the evidence of the leading of the Holy Spirit.

NOTES

1. P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 5.
2. James Stewart, *Heralds of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), p. 55.
3. Ian MacPherson, *The Burden of the Lord* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1957), p. 75.
4. Donald E. Demaray, *Pulpit Giants* (Chicago: Moody, 1973), pp. 165-74.
5. Ian MacPherson, *The Art of Illustrating Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), p. 186.
6. J. M. Reu, *Homiletics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), p. 129.
7. Jack D. Sanford, *Make Your Preaching Relevant* (Nashville: Broadman, 1963), pp. 79-80.
8. Reuel Howe, *Partners in Preaching* (New York: Seabury, 1967), pp. 26-33.
9. Faris D. Whitesell, *Power in Expository Preaching* (Westwood, N. J.: Revell, 1963), p. 141.
10. George W. Truett, *The Inspiration of Ideals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), pp. 157-58.

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