

The Pastor as... Preacher!

Fulfilling the Charge to Preach the Word

Pastor Brian Robinson

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The preacher was droning on long past twelve. Some stirred restlessly while a few headed for the door. The sermon was so bad, in fact, that I was tempted to follow, but only one thing held me back: I was the preacher.

That I have been assigned, *The Pastor as Preacher*, must be an irony not lost in heaven. The movie *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* could be a movie about my life--*Honey, I Shrunk the Preacher*. I have a dear old lady in my congregation who never fails to remind me how she loves the preaching of John Hagee. On every visit, I hear the refrain, "Now Pastor, that John Hagee, he can preach." She says her comment with such wistfulness so as to be sure that I am fully apprised of her sentiments.

After forty years in the pulpit, I know less than when I started and have a greater sense of what an awesome thing it is to speak to others in the name of the Lord.

Week after week, I look down from the pulpit on the flock God has assigned to me, and I am amazed that they return Sunday after Sunday. Their faithfulness attests to the resilience of God's people and their ability to bear, with much patience,

the pulpit crimes I have committed in His name.

I take up this task of *Pastor as Preacher* as one who offers himself not as an example, unless something can be learned by him of not this way but that way, if you please.

What is Wrong with Preaching Today?

I am not omniscient nor omnipresent, so frankly I do not know the answer to the previous question. Al Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, shares in his book *He is not Silent* the statement of an emerging church pastor who claimed that his church is a welcoming place for *pre-Christians* because the church has removed the *cringe factor* found in other church worship services. That example started me to thinking about whether the God who hears every sermon ever preached ever cringes at the abuse of His Word? Does the preaching set His teeth on edge so to speak? James White in his aptly named work *Pulpit Crimes* writes,

Sadly, pulpit crimes have multiple victims. Crimes against God's truth are crimes against God Himself.

In this case God is both the aggrieved as well as the judge (a particularly bad situation for the accused). However, the people of God are most assuredly the most obvious victims of the pulpit crime wave. The sheep of God's flock are the ones who suffer most when the shepherds violate His law. The ones who are supposed to be nurtured, edified, matured, protected, fed, and encouraged, are the true victims of pulpit skullduggery (8).

I suppose though the question facing us is even deeper than that. The question before us is "Should we even preach at all?" Is the pulpiter a thing of the past? In our post-modern age, Truth itself has been challenged. The idea that there is one truth with a capital "T" is anathema, even to some who claim to be brothers in the Lord. Rather, we are voices crying in the wilderness where other voices have the same legitimacy as our own. As one post-modernist preacher puts it, "The preacher should seriously ask himself whether he should continue to serve up monologue in a dialogical world" (Mohler, 71).

Is preaching in a world of images, fast paced movies, and sound bites still a valid method of communicating the gospel? Is "dinging the blad," as Spurgeon put it, a relic of a bygone era, and have we who enter the pulpit for forty-five minutes in the morning and again in the evening become like the last dinosaurs who walked the earth? Is the time spent in careful exposition of the Word well spent, or could the time be better spent elsewhere?

Clearly, to boldly stand in the pulpit and deliver a message that is based solely on the Word of God flies in the face of the movers and shakers of this age. David Wells, in *The Courage to be a Protestant*, has a chapter entitled "Christianity for Sale" in which he puts his finger on the pulse of Protestantism today:

Market-savvy pastors, sensing this, back off. They lift demands and expectations, making Christianity light and easy. They hire new staff who specialize in knowing how to make worship fun, not to mention funny. Polls and soundings are taken each week, just as they are by major retailers, to see if things are 'on target.' Poor things. If only they knew that their congregations, too, have become stickup artists! Or, to change the picture, what is happening here is that the individual has invested his or her desires with a kind of sovereign authority that runs roughshod over everything else,

including the Word of God (38-39).

The pressure put upon the pastor, especially young pastors, to be "market-savvy" becomes almost intolerable because the pastor is called upon to make the

service as relaxing as television; to stay clear of doctrine; to make the sermon short and snappy, nothing too difficult; and above everything else, to not sound churchy. So the question remains: "Is there still a place in the church for the preacher?" Let us turn to God's Word,

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and let the Lord speak to the question and to our hearts.

The Charge

In 2 Timothy 4:1, Paul gives this charge to his protégé Timothy: "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge..." Wow! I think I just felt the earth tremble. Is this not the Christ whose, "eyes were like blazing fire, [whose] feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace" (Revelation 1:14-15)? When I was in my youth, I did not read that charge. No one taught me to tremble before God's awesome command. Had I read the charge, I would have taken the next trip from Joppa to a place called Tarshish, and only if vomited ashore by a great whale, would I have ever headed for Nineveh! "God has called me to the ministry," the young man says. Then, let me ask, do you have an Aaron that will go in your stead? Do you cry with Jeremiah, but "I am just a child" (Jeremiah 1:6); or with Isaiah, "woe is me" (Isaiah 6:5a) or with Ezekiel, "The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the LORD upon me" (Ezekiel 3:14)? Charles Bridges, in *The Christian Ministry*, offers this assessment:

The will of man must be in subservience--not in forwardness--on a point so deeply connected with the interests of the Church, and where the will of God should govern the sole and ultimate decision... Happy that person, who can say with the Apostle, that it is 'through the will of God,' and not through his own, or that

of his parents, that he is in the sacred Ministry (93).

I say these words not to be entirely too negative. Resisting a call by the Sovereign of the universe to prophesy in His name could prove fatal. John MacArthur gives this account of his call to the ministry:

When I was eighteen, the Lord threw me out of a car traveling seventy miles an hour. I landed on my backside and slid 110 yards on the pavement. By the grace of God I wasn't killed. As I stood up on the highway, having never lost consciousness, I committed my life to serving Christ. I told Him I would no longer resist what He wanted me to do, which was to preach His Word (xvii).

If the whale swallows, you go, and fear not as to your insufficiency, for He who has called is sufficient for all our needs.

Preach the Word

But having said that, I must be careful not to commit a pulpit crime of my own. The charge is given to all who are now in the ministry. What is their chief task, their primary occupation, their *raison d'être*? Is it not what Paul commands: "Preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:2a)? Not just to *preach* but to *preach the Word!* We are to do just the opposite of what many are telling us to do today. In fact, we are under divine obligation, indeed, under pain of judgement; we are to preach the Word! We are not in the pulpit to preach ourselves, our fears or our doubts. We are not in the pulpit to offer opinions or to read into

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Scripture what the text does not teach. And we are not in the pulpit as therapists to find everyone's itch and scratch it (2 Timothy 4:3). No, we are in the pulpit to preach *up* Christ, and believe it or not, to preach *down* men. To quote one of my favourite authors, David Wells,

What is of first importance to the church is not that it learn to mimic the culture but that it learn to think God's thoughts after him. The people of God are here on earth to learn how to re-center him, as it were, to see him in the place that he actually occupies, to worship him accordingly, and to live before him day after day. To live before him, not as we want to think about him because we are post-moderns, but before him as he really is. This is the way--indeed, the only way--the church can be faithful to him in its own time and context (98).

And this is our task as preachers, and the tool we use is the sword, the hammer, and the fire that is the Word of God!

The Word of God is God-centred and Christ-centred, so then why are we man-centred? Why is the emphasis on man's opinion, or how man feels, or man's felt needs, and not on the God who alone can meet all our needs? In fact, God is our need.

A man came to my study who wanted his wife back and wanted me to tell him how to get her back. I had spoken to the wife, who did not want him back. So I

started with this thought. I said, "You have a problem. But your problem is not what you think it is. You have a theological problem. That is, you are in rebellion against God and under God's judgment. You need to get off your high horse, humble yourself before God, repent of your sins and ask God to have mercy on your soul for Jesus' sake. "Then," I said, "with a changed life you can go back to your wife as a new man in Christ and confess all the rotten things you did as a husband and beg her forgiveness. Then, she may take you back or she may not but at least your sins will be forgiven, and you begin on a new foundation, which is Christ." Needless to say, he thought I was mad. He was

not that awful husband I made him out to be, and she had her faults etc., etc., and he left.

I met him some months later when passing out literature in the apartments next to the church. He solved

his problem by moving in with another woman. But I do not feel I was amiss in my solemn warning to him. His real need is to know God, and, until that happens, all else is a band-aid.

The Word is not peripheral to worship; it is central! The Word is not a ten minute add-on to the real thing because, without the Word, worship has not taken place. Mohler complains with justification,

Do those who come to our services of worship come face-to-face with the reality of God? Or do they go away with a vision of some lesser God, some dehydrated deity?... I am haunted by the thought that in the average evangelical church, the God of the Bible would never be

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known by watching us worship. Instead, what we have in so many churches is “McWorship” of a “McDeity.” But what kind of God is that superficial, that weightless, and that insignificant? Would an observer have any idea of the God of the Bible from our worship?(31)

And is our “McWorship” of a “McDeity” not due to the reason that we have cluttered our services with everything but the Word of God? The Word is no longer the warp and woof of our worship but peripheral to the concerns of, and the felt needs of, our man-centred self-love. When the Word is not central, then God is not worshipped nor has the congregation been exposed to worship, no matter how funny, how musical, or how entertained they may feel.

Be Prepared

Paul says “be prepared” (2 Timothy 4:2b). The verb *ephistemi* means to stand by or, as we would say, be on your toes. The verb has the sense of readiness or even urgency. J.C. Ryle tells (I forget the context) of a general who, wherever he travelled, considered the topography and how best to fight a battle if fought there. Like this general, we are always to be in the mode of preparation. Even in moments of relaxation and family times, we are on the lookout for human experiences and illustration. All, as we say, becomes grist for the mill. We are to prepare our minds by the exercise of the brain.

I recall a pastor who was selling off his library in preparation for retirement in five years. I found that appalling. Should we ever lose our love for learning, our love of increasing our understanding, or our joy of eyes opened wide? Martin Luther

commented that if he knew Christ was coming tomorrow, he would plant a tree today. If we are on our death bed, should we not have a copy of *The Institutes* in our hands? We need to prepare our hearts so that the embers of dullness are fanned into zeal for Christ’s cause and our wills are disciplined into submissive obedience, to his Word and to his precepts (see Psalm 19).

If we, ourselves, are not entranced by the scriptures, will our congregation rise above us? If the Word becomes wearisome, is it not because we are less in the scriptures, than more? I read of Hudson Taylor who often after a hard day’s work in the Kingdom could be found turning the pages of God’s blessed treasure long after others had fallen asleep.

Haddon Robinson in *Biblical Preaching* quotes William Barclay who states,

He does not grow because the Holy Spirit has nothing

to feed him. The more a man allows his mind to grow slack and lazy and flabby, the less the Holy Spirit can say to him. True preaching comes when the loving heart and the disciplined mind are laid at the disposal of the Holy Spirit. *Ultimately God is more interested in developing messengers than messages*, and since the Holy Spirit confronts men primarily through the Bible, a preacher must learn to listen to God before he speaks for Him (25-26; italics mine).

I recognize that as a congregation grows, a pastor’s life can become terribly hectic as he seeks to round up the straying, soothe the malcontent, carry the weak, and separate the contentious. We all need to learn what I never learned in my forty years in

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the pulpit: the little word “No.” Without this word you cannot be a pulpit.

Assuredly, some weeks are so busy with family, funerals, weddings, or whatever else duty requires that a sermon is done in haste. God has blessed, in His sovereign grace, some of my most ill-prepared efforts. At other times, He has left me like the deflated gorilla on the roof of the Lube shop, for all the world to see my ignominy. He exposed me as the fraud I am, and He was right in doing so. (The deflated gorilla analogy is not copyrighted, but if you use the expression, please identify me as the source). We need to be prepared, to labour as if we are speaking to thousands even if there are only ten. At least the angels who watch might wing their flight home with a joyous report to the Sovereign who sent them that Christ was honoured and their God and ours was glorified.

In Season and out of Season

Would it not be accurate to say that we are preaching in what might be designated as “out of season”? Robinson writes in *Biblical Preaching* that “This is a book about expository preaching, but it may have been written for a depressed market. Not everyone agrees that expository preaching--or any sort of preaching, for that matter--is an urgent need of the church. The word is out in some circles that preaching should be abandoned (15).”

We may, indeed, long for the good old days when people sat and listened to sermons. We may even wish that our people thought as highly of the Word preached as we believe they ought to think. We may be

depressed that we seem to be in hunting gear, but it is not the season for shooting ducks. But if we are to preach “in season” and “out of season,” then, in God’s mind, there is no time when preaching is not essential and proper.

I am reminded of ignoring whether the gospel is in or out season in my daily conversation with anyone who may cross my path. Sometimes an opportunity unexpectedly arises to share my love for Jesus and I think “Ah, blessed in season.” But at

other times, the landscape seems arid and barren, and I say to myself this is not the time; it is “out of season.” In fact, we have to learn that the Word of God is for all seasons! That is, the Scriptures are never out of place, and we are never wrong to speak a word, to challenge, or to confront. In fact, if we wait for opportunities when the lights go dim and soft music accompanies us, we will

do very little witnessing. I am sure John the Baptist found it “out of season” to preach a sermon on marital faithfulness the very morning Herod was present, but if spoken in faithfulness and though costing us our head, so be it.

Yet, because we are committed to preaching the Word of God, we must know what we are about. Truthfully, our people will have difficulties being enthusiastic about preaching if the sermon is a sloppy exegesis delivered indifferently and without urgency.

Further, good preaching is not a monologue in a dialogical world. Good preaching engages our congregation to think with us so that together we all arrive at the truth of the Scriptures. Good preaching

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engages the whole person in mind, heart, and will. The congregation leave feeling that their questions have been answered and the Word of God has profoundly changed the way they act or think. If we might stick with the seasons theme, it was Henry Ward Beecher who said, "A sermon is not like a firecracker to be fired off for the noise it makes. It is a hunter's gun, and at every discharge he should look to see his game fall" (as quoted in Robinson 108).

Nevertheless, a word of caution to those who labour to preach well. In the book of Zechariah chapter seven, a delegation comes to the prophet and asks if they should continue to fast as they have done for seventy years during Israel's exile. The reply

from the Lord is most surprising, for He says, "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?"

What a wake up call! How easy to feel sorry for ourselves: "Lord, I am being faithful to your Word, but my congregation remains small. See the pastor down the road using every gimmick in the book and is growing beyond their church walls!" And the Lord may well reply, "Is it for me that you are preaching?"

Vain glory is a nagging constant and so is the longing for praise of men and to be well spoken of. But God will not share His glory, and thus we need to ask and pray that Christ might have the preeminence, that we stand in the pulpit and publish his name. The previous example is not suggesting that we may be small due to vain glory, but that we remain faithful no matter what the cost.

Urgent Preaching

The phrase *to be prepared in season and out of season* carries with it the connotation of urgency. How do we maintain our sense of urgency? A sense that we have something to say that is so important we dare not leave it unsaid?

Last month, my son David mentioned how he gets excited about what he is preaching. He can hardly wait to get into the pulpit, like an athlete in the starting blocks waiting for the starters pistol (11am-Let me at 'em). Let me suggest how we

might maintain that sense of urgency. To preach the word is to preach it in an expository manner. That is, we go to the scriptures not to read in a message but to read the message out of

the Word. The simplest and best explanation is found in Haddon Robinson's *Biblical Preaching*:

An expositor thinks in three areas: First, as an *exegete* he struggles with the meanings of the biblical writer. Then as a *man of God* he wrestles with how God wants to change him personally. Finally, as a *preacher* he ponders what God wants to say to his congregation (26).

The second stage is where the urgency and the desire to share arises. The Word has blessed us; encouraged us; rebuked and corrected us; exposed our idolatry; and brought us to confession, repentance and renewal. The pastor then enters the pulpit with a message underlined by his own personal experience. Like Jeremiah in 20:9 who determined no longer to "speak anymore in his name." But that did not last very long for he goes on, "His word is in

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my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones, I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot." Let the fire first burn in your own heart and then you will be fire in the pulpit. Martyn Lloyd-Jones enjoins the following,

In the midst of life we are in death. If the preacher does not suggest this sense of urgency, that he is there between God and men, speaking between time and eternity he has no business to be in the pulpit. There is no place for calm, cool, scientific detachment in these matters. That may possibly be all right in a philosopher, but it is unthinkable in a preacher because of the whole situation in which he is involved (91).

No, not all of us are shouters, or hand wavers, or foot stompers but whether in earthquake, or fire, or a still small voice, the intensity will be felt and your hearers will know that you are dead earnest and not simply dead in the pulpit.

Another motivator for a sense of urgency and not simply reading a laundry list of texts is Jesus Christ our Lord. Is He most precious to your soul and mine? Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Do I have the same resolve?

Edmund P. Clowney in his essay "Preaching Christ from all the Scriptures" has this word of exhortation for those of us who preach the gospel:

The Scriptures are full of moral instruction and ethical exhortation, but the ground and motivation of all is found in the mercy of Jesus Christ. We are to preach all the riches of Scripture, but unless the centre holds all the bits and pieces of our pulpit counselling, of our

thundering at social sins, of our positive or negative thinking - all fly off in the Sunday morning air... Let others develop the pulpit fads of the passing seasons. Specialize in preaching Christ (191)!

I recall preaching through the Ten Commandments and coming down on theft in all its forms. A Christian Reformed lady in the congregation left furious and never returned. I asked myself, "What did I do? Didn't I preach the text?" But looking back now, I realize there was no Christ in my message and no source whereby, we all being thieves, might be absolved and forgiven.

Recently, I have been preaching through 1 Timothy with my congregation on Sunday mornings. I came to the sixteen verses in chapter five where Paul discusses an early church problem dealing with the widows in the congregation. How then to preach Christ from this passage about a problem facing the early church?

Well, I reasoned, they are Christian widows, so they are redeemed; therefore, I can touch on redemption, and if they are redeemed, they are justified, so that is good for a paragraph or two, and they must be sanctified and why not glorified? By which means I made a beeline to preach Christ and Him crucified. Then I could conclude with a stern warning to look after the widows in the congregation or else God will not look after you. Of course, I did *not* actually do this!

If you are going to preach redemption, then go to the text that talks specifically on redemption and not 1 Timothy 5:1-16. *Preach the text.* Tell the congregation the early church problems and how they differ from today yet, in some ways, are similar to problems faced by widows today. How as a church are we to take special care of the weak and vulnerable amongst us?

But what is a widow? Is she not alone, vulnerable and perhaps lonely? In our sinful state, we may have felt all of those things when *widowed* from God, but those who call upon the Lord become the bride of Christ and have become ever wedded to the Lord. He is our companion and lover and security, even our husband presenting us, without spot or blemish, to his Father. If we rest our weight entirely upon him and remain united and faithful to him, we are blessed where we were once alienated from God we are now united in Christ.

Whether I got the application right or not, I leave to your judgement, but the question remains: "Do the parts of the whole find its centre in Christ?" As C.H. Spurgeon shared with his students,

I would sooner pluck one single brand from the burning than explain all mysteries. To win a soul from going down into the pit is a more glorious achievement that to be crowned in the arena of theological controversy as Doctor Sufficiantissimus; to have faithfully unveiled the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will be in the final judgment accounted worthier service than to solved the problems of the religious Sphinx, or to have cut the Gordian knot of Apocalyptic difficulty. Blessed is the ministry of which CHRIST IS ALL (80).

I hold that a wise preacher can preach more of Christ from Joshua than an unwise from the Gospels.

A Relevant Proclamation

As preachers, we want to be relevant. The fear of being out of touch or behind the times haunts some like the spectres of Scrooge. The truth is the Truth and is never irrelevant. Those who are most relevant today are those who have stood their ground and, Sunday by Sunday, preached the Word without compromise as opposed to those who have opted to entertain the masses.

In *The Courage to be Protestant*, David Wells warns about a false modesty in addressing the needs of the present day:

What we hear from many of the emergent church leaders who are most aware of the (post)modern ethos, therefore, is a studied uncertainty: "We do not know." "We cannot know for sure." "No one can know certainly." "We should not make judgments." "Knowing beyond doubt is not what Christianity is about." "We need to be more modest." "We need to be more honest." "Christianity is about the spiritual journey, not about arriving." They forget that Scripture is divine *revelation*. It is not a collection of opinions of how different people see things that tells us more about the people than the things.

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No. It gives us God's perfect knowledge of himself and of all reality. It is given to us in a form we can understand. The reason God gave it to us is that he wants us to know. Not to guess. Not to have vague impression. And certainly not to be misled. He wants us to *know*. It is

not immodest, nor arrogant, to claim that we know, when what we know is what God has given us to know through his Word (77-78).

The truth is that without the Truth, we become irrelevant, just another voice adding his or her opinion to the thousands of voices clamouring for attention in the maze of modern life. To know is not to claim omniscience, but is to be able to say, "Thus saith the Lord." A student visited a church where he claimed that, while a Christian, he believed in re-incarnation. When the pastor pointed out that the Bible teaches it is appointed unto men once to die and then the judgement (Hebrews 9:27), the student's response was "That is your interpretation." He was thoroughly post-modern and a thoroughly deceived individual.

In *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry* MacArthur quotes Charles Jefferson at length:

We sometimes hear it said of a minister: "He is a good pastor, but he cannot preach." The sentence is self-contradictory. No man can be a good pastor who cannot preach, any more than a man can be a good shepherd and still fail to feed his flock. A part of shepherding is feeding, and an indispensable part. Some of the finest and most effective of all a minister's pastoral work is done in his sermon. In a sermon he can warn, protect, guide, heal, rescue, and nourish. The shepherd in him comes to lofty stature in the pulpit... A shepherd who is

skilled in his work never fails to feed his flock (251).

Indeed, proper preaching lessons the load of private counselling as Sunday by Sunday expository preaching answers questions and sets forth biblical ways of problem-solving. In 2 Timothy 4 Paul mentions three foundation-

directions that every sermon needs to bear witness to.

Correction

If God's word is to be profitable, then it must aim at something. What do I want my auditors to do? What direction should they and we ourselves be headed in? What is the main idea of the text,

and how can I hammer it home from every angle the text allows. Some complain that a sermon has too many ideas. Not likely! Our problem is just the opposite. A sermon fails when it has too many unrelated ideas. When we preach, we preach to correct, to replace false doctrine with right doctrine or false thinking with right thinking. We seek to make our congregation a discerning congregation. One of the nicest compliments I ever received was an off-handed one when a stranger to the grace of God said to me, "Your people really know what they believe."

We know the difficulty of trying to find something in the dark and how helpful shining a light on the object becomes. In like manner, people come to the church in the dark, and our job is to see they go out in the light. Jesus is the light of the world and in His light we see light; thus we aim at nothing less than discerning believers, those who know the truth, love the truth and are willing to die for the truth. Correc-

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tion means we preach as those who believe in the reality of the antithesis that *A* cannot be *B* at the same time. If *this* is right, then *that* is wrong, based not on surmising or opinion but on the clear teaching of the text in front of them and us. Indeed, we depend on the listeners' assent to the infallibility of the Word and its authority over their lives, but to those who reject the principle of infallibility, we are called to defend the principle, the truth of inerrancy. Furthermore, by persuasion, we seek their submission to God's Word and His absolute claim on their lives.

Rebuke

Our generation is not at home with the word rebuke. Our whole educational system is built on the false premise that to rebuke a person is to undermine their self-esteem. Self-esteem is a psychological booby-trap that undermines genuine character and cripples those caught in the web of self-pity and victimhood. I heard recently that report cards are sent home with the instruction from educators that the students must hear positive reinforcement even when they are skipping classes. Proverbs tells us that, "He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise" (Proverbs 15:31).

We fail in preaching if we are only positive. To ignore sin in ourselves, in the congregation, and in the world and to preach only "uplifting sermons" is to be derelict in our duty.

In fact, a rebuke properly given and at the opportune moment can be most uplifting and salutary. Again in Proverbs 13:14, "The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death." Granted, a rebuke done harshly and self-righteously, as though you and I

would not step in the same mud pie, can undermine the good we intended. But a well thought-out rebuke, such as the prophet Nathan when he confronted David and said, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7), leaves the sinner nowhere to go but to the Lord.

Do you preach the doctrines of grace; that there is a Heaven and a Hell; that you must "Turn or Burn" (not my sermon title but Spurgeon's); do you preach on the sins of our age even if our courts in their folly call it "hate crimes" and even though you may suffer persecution and prosecution for standing on the Word of God?

In his book, Mohler asks,

People come to the church in the dark and it is our job to see they go out in the light.

What does it mean to admonish? Put starkly, it means to get in one's face. With our current ideas of personal privacy and personal autonomy, most of us

today feel that no one has the right to tell us what to believe, how to act, or what we must correct in our behavior or thinking or actions. ... That is hardly the pattern of the New Testament, however. When the Word of God is authentically preached, it is also applied. I do not mean the preacher searches for some way to make the text relevant. I mean rather that the text must be directly addressed to persons in the congregation: "This is what you must do. This is way you must think. This is who you must be" (85).

While preaching in 1 Timothy, I have been convicted by the instructions Paul gives to Timothy in confronting situations in the congregation: "He must manage his own family well" (3:4); "their wives are to be worthy of respect" (3:11); "you will know

how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household" (3:15); "Command and teach these things" (4:11); "exhort him as if he were your father" (5:1); "Command those who are rich in this present world" (6:17); "Command them to do good" (6:18). Do these commands sound like the pattern of churches you know? Or have we become appeasers like Chamberlain of old while the wolves ravage the flock?

Speaking for myself and the coward I am, I confess that too often I walked in *slipperd* silence when an "in your face" approach was justifiably required. I am not thinking of personal affronts but of needed corrections that affect the body of Christ as a whole.

Encouragement

Good preaching is encouraging preaching, true enough. John R.W. Stott comments on 2 Timothy 4 in this fashion: "He must use argument, reproof, and appeal (NEB), which is almost a classification of three approaches: intellectual, moral and emotional. For some people are tormented by doubts and need to be convinced by arguments. Others have fallen into sin, and need to be rebuked. Others are haunted by fears, and need to be encouraged. God's word does all this and more" (108).

Isaiah the prophet receives this commission from the Lord, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD'S hand double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:1-2).

We read in Acts 13:15, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak." And again in Acts 20:2, "He travelled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months."

God's flock are often hard-pressed, weary, and downcast. They face temptation from without and weakness from within. Oh, to encourage them with emphasis on the finished work of Christ, the precious promises scattered on every page of Holy Writ, the grace and mercy of our God, the doctrines of grace that both humble and exalt, the indwelling of the Spirit, the forgiveness of sins and a perfect righteousness in Him who lived it for us, and the hope of glory, the promise of the resurrection, the day when God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Should not every sermon end on a note of encouragement even when the theme might be strong medicine?

I recall reading a revival in America where the preacher was whipping the people with a heavy dose of the law. Finally, a fellow pastor cried out, "Friend is there no balm in Gilead?" The preacher immediately changed his discourse and poured on the balm to the blessing and salvation of many present. His is a question we also need to ask ourselves as we prepare our sermons: "Is there no balm in Gilead?" And the answer is, "Yes, praise God, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ through whose name alone is salvation to be found." If the law has done its work then surely the *balm* is to be applied lavishly.

With Great Patience and Careful Instruction

The Sower went forth to sow. Unfortunately, seed must first germinate, take root, grow a stalk, and then bear fruit. All of this takes time, and while we pray and watch for the fruit eagerly, we may be tempted to force the results. Moreover, we are working with people who are often intransigent and wayward. Much effort is put into visitation, sermon preparation, and weary nights by the bedside of the sick. Perhaps we quickly feel that we are not sufficiently

appreciated or loved, and we begin to resent any criticism of our efforts. "We find the sins of the sheep inconvenient, irritating, persistent," writes Walter Chantry in *Caution in Church Discipline*. "But," Chantry adds, "are not our ministerial frustrations with the sheep a form of quarrelling with God's providence?" (194).

Like Moses of old, we strike the rock and cry "Listen, you rebels" (Exodus 20: 10-11) and fail to sanctify God before their eyes. Moses took the rebuke personally when he should have taken the complaint to the Lord. The pulpit must never become a place where we justify ourselves or seek to intimidate our members. Assuredly, we are to speak as dying men to dying men, but we must also speak as rebels to rebels. Far from perfect ourselves, we have to ask "Would I put as much effort into the church and Christ's Kingdom if I were not paid to do so?" For the "Lord's servant must be kind to everyone... Forebearing, and correcting his opponents with gentleness" (2 Timothy 2:24-25).

Not surprisingly, then, is patience linked to careful instruction. Teaching is line upon line and precept upon precept. Lessons are gone over and lessons are repeated (2 Peter 2: 12-13). We must give a careful study of the Scriptures as a meta-narrative, the Book as it is found in the meta-narrative, and the text as it is found in the Book. We need to be as precise as possible in our doctrinal presentation, exposing error and refuting, with a careful exegesis, of the passages wrong interpretations.

For over forty years (I cannot believe how fast the time has flown by), I have struggled to preach a perfect sermon, a sermon that is true to the text and is applied with precision to the heart. I have

failed in all my attempts. I have missed the bull's eye again and again, but should I cease from trying? If we aim for less, we will certainly miss the mark more widely. Yes, I could have and should have studied more, been less slothful, majored in the majors and not the minors, but this one thing I believed with all my heart: that preaching is God's ordained way of building His Kingdom. There may be other ways, but this is the chief way. "Preach the Word," Paul writes, "in season and out of season," for when the church abandons the pulpit and seeks other ways to evangelize the world, the church always loses its focus and eventually its way.

Assuredly, we are to speak as dying men to dying men, but we must also speak as rebels to rebels.

Conclusion

Many years ago, as a young boy, I heard a sermon by a Shanty-man in my home church in Dryden. What I remember of that sermon was the power, the sense that God was present in a pro-

found and meaningful way. He was a rather illiterate man if I can put it that way. His speech and vocabulary was rather rustic and repetitive, but he spoke from the heart and with conviction. And the thing was, he was preaching on a subject few of us touch on today: Hell. Mohler comments on this lack when he writes,

Every so often I hear someone remark, "You know, I am tired of all this preaching about sin and judgment and hell." Frankly, I would like to know where these people are going to church, because I find that kind of biblical preaching far too rare. In all too many pulpits, God has become our next-door neighbor, our great cosmic companion, or the divine leader of our small group, rather than the holy

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Perhaps the lack of urgency in so much preaching today comes from a lack of understanding about humanity's awful predicament. The greatest problem we human beings face is not a shortage of self-esteem. It is that we have rebelled against God, and, in His holiness God will one day hold us to horrible account for our sin. (137-8)

But before I interrupt myself (an example of a cluttered mind), I have thought often about that Shanty-man, long since gone to glory, and asked myself wherein lay the power? And I have also asked myself that if I have a choice between a good sermon and one that does good, which would I choose? If I have a choice between showing off my learning or being a fool for Jesus, which way will I lean? If I have a choice between giving glory to God or glory to self, which place will I fall?

Some of you know this story, but I give it to you as I know you are always seeking illustrations for sermons of the future:

At the University of Chicago Divinity School each year they have what is called "Baptist Day." On this day each one is to bring a lunch to be eaten outdoors in a grassy picnic area. Every "Baptist Day" the school would invite one of the greatest minds to lecture in the theological education centre.

One year they invited Dr. Tillich. Dr. Tillich spoke for two and one-half hours proving that the resurrection of Jesus was false. He quoted scholar after scholar and book after book. He concluded that since there was no such thing as the historical resurrection, the religious tradition of the church was groundless, emotional mum-

bo-jumbo, because it was based on a relationship with a risen Jesus, who, in fact, never rose from the dead in any literal sense. He then asked if there were questions.

After about thirty seconds, an old, black preacher with a head of short-cropped, woolly white hair stood up in the back of the auditorium. "Docta Tillich, I got one question," he said as all eyes turned toward him. He reached into his sack lunch and pulled out an apple and

began eating it. "Docta Tillich... CRUNCH, MUNCH... My question is a simple question... CRUNCH, MUNCH... Now, I ain't never read them books you read... CRUNCH, MUNCH... and I can't recite the Scriptures in the original Greek... CRUNCH, MUNCH... I don't know anything about Niebuhr and

Heidegger... CRUNCH MUNCH..." He finished his apple and said, "All I wanna know is: This apple I just ate... Was it bitter or sweet?" Dr. Tillich paused for a moment and answered in exemplary scholarly fashion, "I cannot possibly answer that question, for I haven't tasted your apple."

The white-haired preacher dropped the core of his apple into his crumpled paper bag, looked up at Dr. Tillich and said calmly, "Neither have you tasted my Jesus."

The thousand plus in attendance could not contain themselves. The auditorium erupted with applause and cheers.

What is the secret to good preaching? What conclusion can we draw from our study today? The answer is simple: Have you tasted Jesus? Do you love your Lord? Is He your all and all, and all you want? Yes, some men may be more gifted and have better learning and are quick of mind, but as Spurgeon's grandfather put it, "He

If I had a choice between a good sermon and a sermon that does good, which would I choose?

may preach the gospel better than I can, but he cannot preach a better gospel.”

The Last Word

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan has this wonderful portrait of the pastor:

The man whose picture that is, is one of a thousand. He can beget children, travail in birth with children, and nurse them himself when they are born. And wheras thou seest him with his eyes lifted up to heaven, the best of books in his hand, and the law of truth writ on his lips, it is to show thee that his work is to know and unfold dark things to sinners, even as also thou seest him stand as if he pleaded with men. And whereas thou seest the world as cast behind him, and that a crown hangs over his head, that is to show thee, that, slighting and despising the things that are present for the love he hath to his Master's service, he is sure, in the world that comes next to have glory for his reward. Now, said the Interpreter, I have showed thee this picture first, because the man whose picture this is, is the only man whom the Lord of the place whither thou are going hath authorized to be thy guide in all difficult places thou mayest meet with in the way; wherefore take good heed to what I have showed thee, and heed to what I have showed thee, and bear well in thy mind what thou hast seen, lest in thy journey thou meet with some that pretend to lead thee right, but their way goes down to death.

It is Sunday night in Toronto. A motley crew straggle through the doors of one of the few churches open on Sunday evening.

As we would imagine, there are not many wise, not many noble and not many rich. A lady fidgets with her hat and looks anxious. An old man, his head bent with age, shuffles to his seat. A mother and father weighed down with grief over a prodigal daughter sit with head bowed. A bored teenager is sitting next to a father who wonders if he will have a job tomorrow. A husband and a wife smarting from a spat of no consequence leave space between the usual tender touch. A young man comes with grave doubts due to a faith that has been challenged by professors at the local university while some children fidget restlessly under the watchful eye of distracted parents. The twenty-five or so stagger wearily to their feet and sing a few hymns, without musical accompaniment, while the sinking sun adds to the seeming gloom of the moment. Somewhere in the background a siren wails.

In time, the preacher approaches the pulpit and offers a prayer to God on his behalf and on behalf of the congregation. Someone glances at their watch while the teenage girl yawns and fidgets with a Blackberry. The lights grow dim as the preacher announces his text for the evening and, with a little hesitation in the beginning, stumbles through a paragraph or two. If demons attend, they see nothing about this service to concern them, and they wander away to some den of iniquity.

But as the text unfolds, it grips the preacher's heart. He who was walking, now begins to run and then mounts up on eagle's wings. The glories of God are unfolded, with divine presence assistance, a Holy Spirit power falls like evening dew on the few. He leads his little flock into green pastures and by still waters. He unfold before them paths of righteousness, and as they pass through the valley of death, the touch of his staff removes the fear lurking in the sad lady who learned that week she has cancer. He set before

them the table of the Lord filled with all manner of good things in the presence of their enemies.

And as he pleads, the heavenly choir sings the Hallelujah chorus. Those who have run before begin to cheer. Heaven opens and the angels rejoice over a silent prayer of repentance and a returning to the Lord. And then the eyes of all see Jesus the Lamb slain, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, seated on the throne. For a moment, time stops and eternity breaks in on the little, weary Christian band. Something like *The Wind in the Willows*, by Kenneth Grahame, describing what happened to the Mole and the Rat:

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror--indeed, he felt it was Awe that smote him and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean some August presence was very, very near him.

With difficulty, he turned to look at his friend, and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches; and still the light grew and grew.

"Rat," he found breath to whisper, shaking. "Are you afraid?"

"Afraid?" murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. "Afraid! of Him? O never, never! And yet--and yet--O, Mole, I am afraid!"

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth bowed their heads and worshipped.

The temporal falls away in light of that which is substantial. The problems they entered with lose some of their grip as they sense underneath the everlasting arms of the everlasting God. The service closes with a hymn and a prayer. The congregation begins to talk. Someone laughs while others put away the hymn books. And the Dawkinses of this world scoff and claim nothing happened here tonight to these poor deluded souls; "We atheists have nothing to fear if this is all the church has to offer." But imperceptibly there has been a change. The pews empty but the congregation now has renewed hope to face fears, doubts and anxiety; have renewed strength to live for God and give Him the glory! We, the Rat and the Mole, have worshipped the living God, and somehow have become less rat-like and less mole-like.

Brothers, do not lose heart! "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction." For surely the Lord of heaven and earth will not allow his Word to return to Him without the purposes for which He planned it.

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