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Preach the Word

Compiled from the writings of H. A. Ironside, C. H. Macintosh

It is the business of servants of Christ to proclaim the Word of truth to a lost world. But the mere statement of gospel truth, apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, is not likely to bring many results. It is true that God in His sovereignty may use His Word, no matter who proclaims it, or even if it is found on the printed page; He has often done so effectively.

New Testament Preaching

However, His general method is to empower devoted men to set forth the Word with clearness and the energy of the Holy Spirit. The results are assured. The Lord told His disciples, as recorded in Acts 1:8, "Ye shall receive the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon you, and ye shall be witnesses of Me" (marginal reading). Speaking in the power of the Holy Spirit is something that should never be ignored. To mistake human eloquence or oratory for preaching in the power of the Spirit of God is a great mistake. Someone has well said that, "Preaching is eloquence touched with fire." It was in this way that Paul and his companions proclaimed the gospel as they went from place to place, and the result of such a proclamation was not only that people were led to trust in Christ, but that they also received "much assurance." It is a lamentable fact that a great deal that passes for gospel preaching today would never give assurance of salvation to anyone. Sermons may be theologically correct, but they make no true application to the needs of the hearers, and are, as someone has said, "clear as crystal, but cold as ice." When the Word is preached in simplicity and in the energy of the Holy Spirit, those who believe it receive the full assurance of faith.

New Spirit-Led Preaching

The grand end of preaching is edification. An earnest heart is better than a clever head. A fervent spirit is better than an eloquent tongue. In preaching it is essential to remember the following simple rule, "Do not set about looking for something to say because you have to speak, but speak because you have a message from God." This is very simple. It is a poor thing for a man to be merely collecting information to fill up a certain space of time. This should never be. Let the teacher or preacher attend diligently upon his ministry. Let him cultivate his gift; let him wait on God for guidance, power and blessing; let him live in the spirit of prayer and breathe the atmosphere of Scripture; then he will be always.

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H. A. Ironside
(1876-1951)

“He is so occupied and engrossed with Scripture — so engrossed as almost to forget that he has souls before him. There is no pointed appeal to the heart, no fervent grappling with the conscience, no practical application of the contents of the Book to the souls of the hearers.”

C. H. Mackintosh
(1820-1896)

ready for the Master’s use. Then his words, whether “five or ten thousand,” will assuredly glorify Christ and do good to men. In no case should a man rise to address his congregation without the conviction that God has given him something to say and the desire to say it as to bring blessing.

The Soul and the Book

There are two ingredients that are essential in every minister of the gospel— an accurate acquaintance with the Bible and a due sense of the value of the soul. To possess only one of them will leave a man a thoroughly one-sided minister. I may be deeply read in Scripture; I may have a profound acquaintance with the contents of the Book but if I forget the soul, my ministry will be lamentably defective. It will lack point, pungency, and power. It will be ministry from the Book, but not to the soul. True and beautiful, no doubt, but deficient in usefulness and power. On the other, hand I may have the soul and its needs before me. I may long to be useful. It may be my heart's desire to reach to the heart of my hearer, but if I am not acquainted with my Bible, I shall have nothing to give the soul, nothing with which to reach the heart, nothing of which to convict the conscience. My ministry will prove barren and tiresome. Instead of teaching souls, I shall tease them. Instead of edifying, I shall irritate them. These things are worthy of consideration.

Clear as Crystal and Cold as Ice?

You may sometimes listen to a person preaching the Word who possesses a great knowledge of the Word of God, but never applies it to the heart of the hearer. He is so occupied and engrossed with Scripture — so engrossed as almost to forget that he has souls before him. There is not a pointed and powerful appeal to the heart, no fervent grappling with the conscience, no practical application of the contents of the Book to the souls of the hearers. It is very beautiful, but not as useful as it might be. The minister is deficient in the second quality.

He is more a minister of the Book than a minister to the soul. Then again, you will find some who, in their ministry, seem to be wholly occupied with the soul. They appeal, they exhort, they urge. But from lack of acquaintance and regular occupation with Scripture, souls are absolutely exhausted and worn out under their ministry. True, they ostensibly make the Book the basis of their ministry, but their use of it is so unskillful, their handling of it so awkward, their application of it so unintelligent, that their ministry proves as uninteresting as it is unprofitable.

Now, if we were asked which of the two characteristics of ministry should we prefer, without hesitation we should say the first. If the glories of the Book are unfolded, there is something to interest and affect the heart, and if one is at all earnest and conscientious, he will bless his hearers. Whereas, in the second case, there is nothing but tiresome appeal and scolding exhortation. We long to see an accurate acquaintance with the Bible and a due sense of the value of the soul, combined in each on who stands up to minister to souls. The instruction will not do without the persuasion, or the persuasion without the instruction. Hence, let every minister study the Book and its glories and think of the soul and its needs.

Counsel to Gospel Preachers

This is the order of Scripture: The Word of God is proclaimed, heard or read; the Spirit of God convicts the sinner, bringing him to the place where he desires to be saved, and is ready to receive Christ. Believing the gospel, he is justified by faith.

Let me give a word to those who seek to win souls: Do not try to rush people into confessing Christ; do not try to make them say they are saved. Endeavor to find out if there is any real exercise about their sins, if the Spirit of God has awakened them. The reason a great many people make a profession of Christianity and appear to come out for Christ in revival meetings, and then soon afterward drift back into their former ways, is that there is no real work of God in the soul. They have never been sanctified by the Holy Spirit; they have never known divine conviction. The first consideration is that men might be awakened to see their need of Christ. Then give the gospel to them.

That is the divine order: sanctification by the Spirit which leads to a belief in the truth. The purpose for which God is sending His gospel out into the world is that the Holy Spirit might awaken men and lead them to believe it. When they believe the gospel message, they may be assured of eventually sharing the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. When people have been really born again, they will go on in the Christian life. We hear a great deal about backsliders. But someone has well said that many who are designated as backsliders have never been “frontsliders;” they have never been born again by the Spirit of God.

The Privilege of Preaching

Paul repudiated any selfish motive in his own preaching. There should be no hidden evil, nothing unclean in his life, nothing that grieved the Holy Spirit of God. When ministers preach Christ simply as a means of livelihood, they have missed their path altogether. Paul declared that there was no deceit, no uncleanness, with him and his companions. They were perfectly open about everything; they had no hidden schemes. Paul was very careful about this. He did not go out preaching in order to make money, but to exalt Christ and to win souls. The Lord will support those who faithfully carry on His work, but if they make personal gain their object, their ministry becomes obnoxious to God. There should be a holiness of life that characterizes one who proclaims the message of God.

Paul looked upon the business of gospel preaching as a privilege. He says “As we were allowed of God (permitted by God) to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which tries our hearts”(1 Thess. 2:4). Notice this: they were put in trust with the gospel, and that is the one great message which the servant of Christ has to give to a lost world. We find people suggesting all kinds of themes to ministers on which to preach, but it is his business to preach the gospel and the Word of God. Paul’s object was not to give a political address or a scientific lecture. He had but one object, and that was that men might know the gospel of the grace of God. Paul was so deadly in earnest that he went through real agony of soul if people did not come to Christ; he felt keenly responsible for them. “For I am determined,” he says to the Corinthians, “not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 1:25).

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Thyself and Doctrine

"Take heed unto thyself, and unto doctrine." Observe the order. First, "Take heed unto thyself;" be careful about your own inner and outward life, setting an example to others. Then take heed "unto doctrine." We read of Ezra in the Old Testament, who "prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10). Many people prepare the mind and not the heart, but Ezra prepared the heart first. He desired to know the law of God, and he learned it not only through the head, but also through the heart. Then it says he "prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it." He was not going to teach others what he did not do himself. And so God used and honored a man like Ezra. That is the way He does today. "Take heed unto thyself, and unto doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:16). Paul is exhorting Timothy to be careful to live for God, to be a consistent, earnest minister of Christ. In doing this, he would both save himself from many snares and difficulties, and he would become a blessing instead of a curse to those to whom he ministered.

Conclusion

No one who really wants to count for God can afford to play at Christianity. He must make it the one great business of his life. Whether he is set apart for special ministry, as a missionary who is going to a foreign land or a laborer in the gospel in home fields, or whether he remains in business and seeks to witness for Christ there, he needs to give himself entirely to a life of devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

This article is compiled, edited, and revised from Harry A. Ironside's commentaries on 1 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy, (Loizeaux: Neptune, NJ, 1946) and from C. H. Mackintosh's articles "The Soul and the Book" and "Five Words" found in Short Papers, Vol. 2 (Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf, 1975).