

GRACE PASTORS' FELLOWSHIP

POWER IN PREACHING

January, 12, 2015

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When Benjamin Franklin expressed his desire to print George Whitefield's sermons, the latter is supposed to have said something along these lines: "I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder."¹ Should someone wish to print *our* sermons, would such a comment even occur to us? I think not! Such is the dearth of powerful preaching in our day. Stuart Olyott writes about sitting under the powerful preaching of Hywel Griffiths. *"The preacher's sermons were quite lengthy, filled with word pictures and delivered with obvious love and deep emotion. But there was something else. They were accompanied by an indefinable influence. As (he) preached, heaven came to earth. The invisible world was more real than the visible one. There was a touch of glory. Christ was more precious than anything or anyone else in the universe. The Word came over with a self-authenticating force that was irresistible....After each sermon the congregation sat in stunned silence, overcome by the sheer power of the Word. Sometimes the silence was followed by spontaneous prayer. Some came to Christ. Many others like me, who were already believers, were changed forever. We had experience a small taste of what happens in revival, and we all knew now what 'unction' was."*² There was lightning and there was thunder from the throne. I believe that such preaching is rare in our day.³ I confess that it is rare in my ministry. I understand why Dr. Lloyd-Jones said: *"I have a feeling that I have really only preached twice in my life, and on both occasions I was dreaming."* Powerful preaching is like wisdom; *"we have heard a report about it with our ears"* (Job 28:22), but no one has seen it! We have read about it in our history books; but few of us have experienced it. And so we listen wistfully to stories about powerful preaching, and we write about it with longing in our hearts. But we do not do so with hopelessness, for we do believe that the Sovereign God who so mightily used Paul, Chrysostom, Luther, Rowland, Spurgeon, can use us, when He so pleases, and we come to this study of powerful preaching in the hopes that as we consider, study, prepare, and pray, we shall see days of refreshing and reviving, days when the preaching of the church is again marked by lightning and thunder, days when the preaching cannot be put down on paper because there is too much of heaven in it.

We are going to consider Paul and his powerful ministry in Corinth as described in I Corinthians 2:1-5. We shall ask the question: what is involved in powerful preaching, such as took place in Corinth around 52 AD?

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1971), page 58.

² Stuart Olyott, *Preaching – Pure and Simple*, (Bryntirion, Bridgend: Bryntirion Press, 2005), page 158.

³ We are not alone! "Mr. Cecil has remarked – 'There is a manifest want of spiritual influence in the ministry of the present day. I feel it in my own case, and I see it in that of others.'" Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), page 78.

Powerful Preaching Involves the Word

Powerful preaching is the preaching of the Word. You can have powerful orators; you can have powerful lecturers; and you can even feel the power of an Adolf Hitler speech without understanding what he said! But powerful preaching is a different animal. Powerful preaching by definition involves the use of the Word of God. This is what Paul did in Corinth – he ministered the word and it was powerful. For 18 months he taught the Word of God (Acts 18:11). He came and declared the “*testimony of God*” (I Cor 2:1), and to that intimidating, corrupt society, he presented “*Christ and Him crucified*” (I Cor 2:2)! This is key! Some preachers today are “*powerful*” and they have a tremendous impact on the audience, and they are able to produce tremendous results – but it is not powerful preaching. It is powerful personality, it is powerful manipulation, it is the powerful presentation of incentives, but it is not powerful preaching because it does not really involve the Word. What Paul did in Corinth was powerful preaching and it was a ministry of the Word.

We ought to recognize that what happened in Corinth was part of a pattern. It was typical of what was happening in the first century, as the church grew and expanded. What was happening in the first century (as described in Acts) was that the Word was running rampant over the empire. II Thessalonians 3:1 was happening, and the Word was “spreading rapidly” (NASB), “speeding ahead” (ESV). Really, the story of Acts is the story of how the Word powerfully spread through the empire – 6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20 – the Word was spreading like wildfire and now in Acts 18, Paul unleashes the word on Corinth! No wonder he would later command succeeding generations to do the same (II Timothy 4:1, 2).

If you want powerful preaching, unleash the Word. Let it loose on the congregation. Banish pet peeves from your sermons, eradicate feel good stories, keep yourself and your sterling personality hidden, and preach the Word! Let go of the puppets, let rhythmic dancers be gone, and let the Word reign supreme in your worship service! Tell people who visit, and let it be an accurate assessment of your church, that you do one thing, you teach and preach the Word. You are a “*one trick pony*”.

There will be no powerful preaching if you don't preach the Word. It may take years for the Word to do its work (remember missionaries like Judson or Carey!), but we know that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16), that the Word will accomplish God's purposes (Isaiah 55:11), and so we will preach the Word with confidence and trust God to empower it to the saving and sanctifying of our hearers! God spare our churches from what Steve Lawson describes: “*...spiritual junk food, sadly, has become the main entree for many emaciated congregations. The result is that countless churches are left weak, worldly, and worse, unconverted. When preaching sinks to the low level of being little more than trendy talks*”

about temporal trivialities, the spiritual life of the congregation is in triage. The people stand in desperate need of being rushed to the emergency room and put on life support.”⁴ There may be a famine of the hearing of the words of the Lord in our land (Amos 8:11), but let it not be so in our churches.

In connection with this, when we actually and accurately preach the Word, we will necessarily focus on the Lord Jesus Christ! This also is a non-negotiable for powerful preaching! Paul “determined” (v 2) – “to judge in a solemn judicial manner” – that He would preach Christ! He rendered this verdict, he passed this sentence, that he would preach Christ! He was steadfastly resolved and firmly anchored in this.⁵ He was not interested in the wisdom of the world (v 1, 3), the novel ideas that fascinate every succeeding generation (Acts 17:21), but took as his God-given charge, the privilege of preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ (Ephesians 3:8). Now let this be the hallmark of our preaching. “A sermon without Christ, it is an awful thing, a horrible thing. It is an empty well; it is a cloud without rain; it is a tree twice dead, plucked up by the roots. It is an abominable thing to give men stones for bread and scorpions for eggs, yet they do so who preach not Jesus. A sermon without Christ! As well talk of a loaf of bread without flour in it. How can it feed the soul? Men die and perish because Christ is not there.” So let Him always be there in our sermons. Let us follow Luther: “I preach as though Christ were crucified yesterday, rose from the dead today, and is coming back to earth again tomorrow”! And let us feel the weight of his admonition: “The preachers have no other office than to preach the clear Son, Christ. Let them take care that they preach thus, or let them be silent.”⁶

So I beg all preachers to preach the Word. And remember that “the exhortation to preach the Word can best be fulfilled by the expository method, that is, preaching systematically through books of the Bible.....it is the most obvious and natural way of preaching and will impart the greatest knowledge to the hearers, as well as to the minister himself....(and) it is also the most interesting method of preaching; it is the rare minister who can make it dull”!⁷

Powerful Preaching Involves Renunciation of Human Ability

Paul did not come to Corinth and “wow” them with “excellence of speech” (v 1 - speech that communicates with the use of lofty words or high-sounding rhetoric⁸). He did not rely on “persuasive words” (v 4 – similar to “excellence of speech”). “For the citizens of Corinth, public

⁴ Steven J. Lawson, *The Kind of Preaching God Blesses*, (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2013), pages 35, 36.

⁵ Ibid, page 58.

⁶ Ibid., pages 61, 62.

⁷ Samuel Logan, editor, *The Preacher and Preaching*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), page 374.

⁸ Lawson, *The Kind of Preaching God Blesses*, page 39.

rhetoric was something lofty and noble, something almost godlike. It was a refined form of artistic expression that replaced the savage violence of gladiatorial fights and barbaric sports. The craft of public speaking intentionally sought to secure a specific and desired response from the audience. This was the world in which the Corinthians had been raised. And this was what they insisted upon from the pulpit."⁹ Perhaps the "super apostles" in Corinth would heap abuse on Paul for this (II Corinthians 10:10), but he would not play their game and refused to perform, and determined not to impress his hearers with great rhetorical flourishes. That would take attention away from the Word of God, and Paul would not have that! (I recall reading somewhere that Dr. Lloyd-Jones made a concerted effort to restrain what he knew to be his own natural gift for eloquence, for the same purpose. Thankfully, we probably need not expend as much energy as the Doctor did.) Now this does not mean that Paul was a terrible preacher. Indeed, Paul may well have been "*a powerful and persuasive natural speaker who refused to adopt the unnatural standards of a particular rhetorical style. Such standards come and go; and while they are 'in', they are dangerous insofar as they detract attention from the content. Saying things in the approved, clever way may suddenly become more important than what you say.*"¹⁰ Philip Hughes contrasts rhetoric and preaching: "*the former is superficial, artificial, formal, ephemeral, attractive to the ears, but unrelated to the depth of human need; the latter is direct, serious, earnest, directed to the heart and mind and will, related to eternal issues, concerned with the message rather than with the method of its utterance. The former is applauded, for it conduces to human adulation; the latter is un-applauded, for it brings men face to face with God.*"¹¹ Have people ever applauded during your preaching? If so, was that powerful preaching? Or were they just impressed?

Paul renounced any reliance on the ability of the speaker. He eschewed any dependence on the eloquence of the man. So should we.¹² Now I believe that oratory is not a great danger in North America, for oratorical skill is rare, but slick showmanship is common and the slippery techniques of the snake oil salesman is the stock in trade of even some reformed preachers – and this *is* a great danger and can lead to superstar preachers whose personal pizzazz detracts from the message. *Personality* may be the new rhetoric, the modern equivalent of old world eloquence.

Now, does this mean that we should not try to improve as preachers? Should we abandon efforts to be better organized and more skilled at illustrating? Should we give up trying to expand our vocabulary and seeking to find the right word to express theological truth? Is it

⁹ Ibid., page 36.

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity: An Exposition of II Corinthians 10-13*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1988), page 92.

¹¹ Philip E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1962), page 382.

¹² We should similarly eschew the word "eschew". Preaching should be simple and clear.

pointless to have introductions so gripping that the sermon quickly takes flight and conclusions so succinct that the landing seems effortless? By no means! No preacher worth his salt is satisfied with the mediocrity that characterizes most of our preaching. No, he will do his work *“heartily, as to the Lord”* (Col 3:23) and that will mean making every effort to preach well.¹³ BUT: he will not **trust** in that! He will know that his best efforts are failing efforts. He will know that the most skilled preacher is still utterly unable to do the work he is called to do, and has no more hope of touching the soul than he has of raising the dead. Zechariah 4:6 will be his motto text! An illustration can press this home: remember the young preacher who rushes up to the pulpit brimming with confidence, assured that his skill level is sufficient, his preparation is flawless, and his theology is impeccable. He proceeds to crash and burn, and limps disconsolately down from the platform. A contemporary Barnabas offers this counsel to him: *“if you had gone up the way you came down, you would have come down the way you went up.”* History presses this home as well. William Wilberforce, an ardent evangelist, took his dear friend William Pitt to hear Richard Cecil, a celebrated preacher, in the hope that Pitt might see the light. After the sermon, as Wilberforce reveled in the message, Pitt expressed that he had no idea what the man was talking about. Not by might; nor by power; nor by eloquence; nor by apologetics or finely crafted, well organized, brilliantly illustrated, and earnestly delivered sermons.

Powerful Preaching involves Dependence on the Spirit

Paul’s preaching in Corinth was powerful because the Spirit was at work. That had been his hope and that proved to be the case (v 4, 5; Acts 18:8-10). The same thing happened in Thessalonica. When he preached there, the word went forth *“in power and in the Holy Spirit”* (I Thessalonians 1:5).

How do we manifest dependence on the Spirit? Paul manifested his dependence by consciously and vehemently refusing to have any confidence in human ability. He also manifested his dependence by regularly and fervently urging believers to pray for the ministry of the Word

- Ephesians 6:19, 20 – pray *“for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel”*;
- II Thessalonians 3:1, 2 – *“pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified”*;
- Colossians 4:3 – pray for us *“that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ”*.

¹³ See T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach*, (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2009) for a scintillating discussion of the downgrade in homiletical skill that marks the modern preacher. Refusal to rely on human ability does not demand poor communication skills.

How do we manifest dependence on the Spirit? Repudiate self-reliance! Pray! Now I wonder if self-reliance is a particular struggle for preachers of a Calvinistic bent. Such preachers tend to be serious students. They're not lazy, they prepare well, they prize orthodoxy, they preach the word, and unwittingly, because they are doing the right thing and trying to do it well, they feel (more than think) that results *should* come. If self-reliance is a besetting sin for those who believe in sovereignty, how ironic would that be?!

How do we discern the power of the Spirit? If the Spirit of God is powerfully at work, how do we know it? Well, we know the wind is powerful when we see the trees bend. We know preaching is powerful when we see the will bend. Powerful preaching means results. The results are that some people are saved and some people are sanctified.

Sometimes we identify powerful preaching with the following types of phenomena: you can hear a pin drop; you can almost watch yourself as you preach; you express yourself in a way you normally cannot; you feel a sense of authority that is unusual; there are manifestations in the congregation such as weeping, solemn attentiveness, and the like (I would not include barking in that list). These are rare and wonderful times and so memorable that we long for repetitions of these experiences.¹⁴ But, when we long for powerful preaching, I believe that we are longing for more than these types of experiences, Spirit born though they may well be. What we are looking for and longing for are actual results, people being saved and people being sanctified. It seems to me that when the Bible speaks about powerful preaching this is what it is referring to. Consider I Corinthians 2:1-5 – Paul preached in dependence on the Spirit, the Spirit worked, and the result was that their faith was genuine and rested in the power of God (v 5) The same is true in I Thessalonians 1:5 - the power of the Spirit was manifested, and then we see the result in verse 6, “*and you became followers*”. That was the manifestation that showed that the preaching was powerful.

I am *not* saying that the other manifestations are not evidences of power. By no means! In fact, in some cases, when God shows His power like that in a service, these experiences will prove to be a judgement on those who are present who refuse to believe (or ultimately show that they did not believe) – see II Corinthians 2:14-16 and Hebrews 6:4, 5. I *am* saying that when we talk about powerful preaching we are really talking about seeing sinners saved and saints sanctified. Now, do we appreciate the absolutely nothing of that sort gets done without the sovereign work of the Spirit? I think we do, to some degree. But I also think that faithful, diligent, hard-working preachers will inevitably take too much on themselves and blame themselves for lack of fruit. And so I believe that it is in order for us to be reminded that “nothing gets done

¹⁴ See Dr. Lloyd-Jones' almost wistful description of such times in the final chapter of *Preaching and Preachers*, particularly pages 324, 325.

without the sovereign work of the Spirit". We must learn "*that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead*" (II Corinthians 1:9).

John MacArthur writes: "*Powerful preaching occurs only when a Spirit-illuminated man of God expounds clearly and compellingly God's Spirit-inspired revelation in Scripture to a Spirit-illuminated congregation.*"¹⁵ The work of the Spirit is essential.

The title of one section in Bridge's *The Christian Ministry* is: "*The withholding of divine influence, the main cause of the lack of ministerial success*" – see John 6:44, 65 – this is why they don't come! This is not to justify sloppy preparation and or to excuse the spiritually intransigent. This is simply to say that salvation and sanctification are sovereign works. Parents often blame themselves when their children are not converted and we counsel them by saying that salvation is a sovereign work and their best efforts cannot accomplish their cherished goal. However, when we fail to convert through our ministry we assume that we have, necessarily, done something wrong!

Dr. Lloyd-Jones writes: "*I am certain.....that nothing but a return of this power of the Spirit on our preaching is going to avail us anything. This makes true preaching, and it is the greatest need of all today – never more so. Nothing can substitute for this.....This 'unction', this 'anointing', is the supreme thing. Seek it until you have it; be content with nothing less. Go on until you can say, 'And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.' He is still able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think.*"¹⁶ The work of the Spirit is essential. He brings the lightning and the thunder. He opens the eyes (II Corinthians 4:4). And if the Spirit empowered Jesus to preach (Isaiah 61:1), then we must seek that same empowering.

We should be Calvinists worthy of the name and not imagine *our* particular labours to be the linchpin of our ministerial success. The *Spirit's* power is the one non-negotiable in preaching.

This, then, is what makes preaching so exciting. The work of the Spirit is what produces what the Doctor called the "romance of the Christian life". You just never know where the wind is going to blow! "Nowhere does one experience (this romance) more than in the Christian pulpit. There is certainly romance in preaching. I often say that the most romantic place on earth is the pulpit. I ascend the pulpit stairs on Sunday after Sunday; I never know what is going to happen. I confess that sometimes for various reasons I come expecting nothing; but suddenly the power

¹⁵ John MacArthur and the Master's Seminary Faculty, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992), page 103.

¹⁶ Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching*, page 325.

is given. At other times I think I have a great deal because of my preparation; but, alas, I find there is no power in it. Thank God it is like that.”¹⁷

This, then, is also why Christians must pray. Any preacher worth his salt knows that if power comes from the Spirit, and that that is non-negotiable, then people must pray! This is why Paul was always asking for and urging prayer (Ephesians 6:18f; I Thessalonians 3:1f; and so on). This is why prayer meetings are so important. For the life of me I will never understand why Calvinists, of all Christians, don't go to prayer meeting! Spurgeon was concerned first of all *“that his people learn truly to pray.....He knew that God's power was manifested in the services in proportion as God's people truly prayed, and that in such proportion also souls were brought under conviction and drawn to Christ.....When someone once asked Spurgeon the secret of his success, he replied, 'My people pray for me.'”*¹⁸ Well, we too ought to be concerned that our people learn to pray. We must tell them how vital it is. We must let them know how truly interactive preaching is, and how they can influence what happens on Sundays by what they do on Wednesdays, and all through the week. We must let them know that clarity comes to us in the study when prayer ascends to God from their homes. We must assure them that power descends from on high on Sundays in answer to their prayers through the week! We must do all we can to make prayer meetings a vital part of church life – and we must do this because the work of the Spirit is *the* non-negotiable in the work of God, and God would have us ask for power!

Powerful Preaching Involves a Certain Invisibility

I believe that it is very difficult for us to know whether preaching is powerful or not. Dr. Lloyd-Jones asks: “how do we recognize when that (power) happens?” His answer: *“The first indication is in the preacher's own consciousness.....(In Thessalonica, Paul) knew something was happening, he was aware of it. You cannot be filled with the Spirit without knowing it.”*¹⁹ But now this happens: I preach and it makes me shudder because it is, to my knowledge, so awful. And then a few people say that it has proven useful in their lives. Was that powerful preaching? What about this: someone comes to me and says, “that was a terrible sermon and you didn't preach Christ”. Someone else comes and says (about the same sermon, mind you), “that was a wonderful sermon and Christ was made more precious to me”. Was that powerful preaching? Or was it pathetic preaching? On Monday morning, only the negative comment will be remembered and you will be tempted to pull out your letter of resignation (version 6.2).

¹⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), pages 299, 300.

¹⁸ Arnold Dallimore, Spurgeon, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), pages 48, 49.

¹⁹ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, page 324.

Let me make some suggestions which I trust will encourage pastors who wrestle with this.

First, *“we are not always the best judges of the results of our ministry.”* We need to get this point firmly fixed in our minds. *“Mr. Scott thus encourages a clergyman from his own ministerial experience: ‘My prevalent opinion is that you are useful, but do not see the effect. Even at Ravenstone, I remember complaining in a New Year’s sermon, that for a whole twelvemonth I had seen no fruit of my preaching; yet it appeared within the course of the next twelvemonth, that not less than ten or twelve had been brought to “consider their ways” during that discouraging year; besides others, I trust, that I did not know of.’”*²⁰ Indeed, Paul tells us that we should not grow weary, for *“in due season we shall reap”* (Galatians 6:9). *“Due season”*, more often than not, is eternity! To be sure, we see evidence of fruit every now and then, and *“something is graciously brought out for our encouragement, yet much more probably is concealed to exercise our diligence, and from a wise and tender regard to our besetting temptations.”*²¹ Preaching, then, may be powerful and God may be in the process of using our preaching for the saving of souls and the sanctifying of saints, and we are unaware of it. We need then to walk by faith!

Second, visible success is various. Results are largely invisible, but when they are visible those results are *“various”*. Some plant and some water (I Corinthians 3:5-17). *“Success is not limited to the work of conversion. Where therefore the ministry fails to convert, we may still be assured that it convinces, reprovcs, exhorts, enlightens, or consoles, someone in some measure at all times. It never ‘returns to God void’, when delivered in the simplicity of faith; nor will it, under the most unpromising circumstances, fail of accomplishing His unchangeable purpose.”*²²

Third, *“symptoms of success are...frequently mistaken. They are at best doubtful signs”*²³ People may flock to hear you, but there may be little real progress taking place. On the other hand, you may see or hear nothing, but God is at work. *“Often the kingdom of God may be established in real ‘power’, yet with little outward ‘observation’. The complaint of inefficiency may therefore sometimes be unwarranted”*.²⁴

Fourth, we will not sow and reap in a single day. *“Ministerial success must be viewed as extending beyond present appearances.....It has been admirably observed on this subject – ‘In order to prevent perpetual disappointment, we must learn to extend our views. To seek for the*

²⁰ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, pages 73, 74. I am greatly indebted to Bridges here, and the best thoughts in this section are his.

²¹ *Ibid.*, page 74.

²² *Ibid.*, page 73.

²³ *Ibid.*, page 74.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, page 74.

real harvest produced by spiritual labours only in the immediate and visible results, would be not less absurd, than to take our measure of infinite space from that limited prospect which the mortal eye can reach; or to estimate the never ending ages of eternity by a transitory moment of present time. Often it happens that God withholds His blessing for a time, in order that, when the net is cast in 'on the right side', it may be clearly seen that the 'multitude of fish' inclosed are of the Lord's giving.....Our plain and cheering duty is therefore to go forward – to scatter the seed – to believe and wait.”²⁵

Sometimes we are separated from the results of our ministry by time. For instance, let me tell you about Luke Short. We learn about him from Robert Murray M'Cheyne who, in a sermon, related what happened to Short under the ministry of John Flavel (1627-1691). One Sunday, Flavel preached on these words: *“If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed”* (1 Corinthians 16:22). *“The discourse was unusually solemn....(and) when Mr. Flavel rose to pronounce the blessing, he paused and said: ‘How shall I bless this whole assembly, when every person in it who loves not the Lord Jesus is anathema?’ The solemnity of this address deeply affected the audience.”* (This was powerful preaching!) A fifteen year-old boy named Luke Short refused to believe. (This was not powerful preaching?) He eventually left Dartmouth, England and sailed for America where he lived out the rest of his natural life, a carnal and careless sinner. When he was one hundred years old, still a vigorous man, he was sitting in a field, and began to reflect on his life. He remembered Flavel's sermon and the words spoken so long ago came to him with power and he was wonderfully converted. (That **must** have been powerful preaching!) He lived another fifteen years and gave unmistakable evidence of being genuinely converted. And that through a sermon preached 85 years before!²⁶

Sometimes we are separated from the results of our ministry by eternity. Let me tell you now about John Grimshaw, the prodigal son of godly William Grimshaw. When the latter died, John inherited from his father *“the sturdy white horse that had carried the evangelist of Yorkshire on his ceaseless travels, preaching wherever he went. Every time John rode it he would say, ‘Once you carried a saint but now you carry a devil.’”* In the mercy of God, John was converted and then three years after his father's passing, he himself lay on his death-bed. *“One who came in to pray with him reported that John had indeed found the mercy and forgiveness of God, and John himself exclaimed just before he died, ‘What will my father say when he sees me in heaven.’”²⁷* And how you too will rejoice when you see all the fruit of your labour – sermons that in time you had wept over and written off as failures, but in eternity you understood to

²⁵ Ibid., page 75, 76.

²⁶ The account can be read at the following website: <http://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2008/john-flavel/>

²⁷ Faith Cook, *William Grimshaw of Haworth*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), page 295.

have been useful in the mysterious purposes of God! In the grand scheme of things, those sermons were, in fact, powerful – and God will one day make that plain!

Now in all of this I have no intention of seeking to dull our passion, take the edge off our longing for the salvation of souls and the sanctifying of saints! We must still cry, “*O rend the heavens and come down, and make a thousand hearts your own*”; we must still labour fervently and preach passionately. We must not work like dullards, shrugging our shoulders with blasé nonchalance when we see no fruit. No – my point is simply this: as we labour passionately, we labour by faith. We preach by faith, and trust the Lord for the fruit.

We preach by faith!

We believe that God’s gospel is powerful (Romans 1:16).

We believe that God’s Spirit is omnipotent (Zechariah 4:6).

We believe that God’s word fulfills its purpose (Isaiah 55:11).

We believe that preaching the Word is God’s way (II Timothy 4:1, 2).

We believe that God will build His church (Matthew 16:18).

We believe that God will use His Word to do this (The Book of Acts).

We believe that God will use us to do this (The Book of Acts).

We also believe that He rarely shows us the full extent of His powerful working (Galatians 6:9). He shows us enough to encourage us – but He demands that we work and trust Him, that we toss the seed into the ground and then go back to the farmhouse and go to sleep, trusting Him to cause the seed to grow (Mark 4:26-29). We preach by faith!

This invisibility also means that we must not lean on our feelings. I’m not sure that Dr. Lloyd-Jones was right. I believe that we can be powerfully used, and be unaware of it. Did Jonah experience, as he preached to Nineveh, the same kinds of feelings that Paul experienced, as he preached to Thessalonica? I suspect not. And Jonah had greater “success”!

By the same token, *feeling* as if I had hit a home run doesn’t guarantee anything either. Such feelings, though, are easier to bear than feeling that I had struck out, but such feelings may well be equally unrelated to reality. In fact, I suspect that if I feel as if I had hit a home run, I probably didn’t, since God resists the proud (I Peter 5:5). Alistair Begg tells the story of a Sunday when he felt that he had, in fact, hit a home run! As he and his wife drove home he said to her something along these lines: “I wonder how many preachers in Cleveland preached a sermon like that today?” His wife’s response: “Probably one fewer than you think.”

So then: realizing that powerful preaching involves a *certain invisibility* demands that I walk/preach by faith (II Corinthians 5:7). And when I walk by faith, waiting for that day, trusting

that God will bless, it will make my Mondays more bearable and will preserve my equilibrium when fruit is scarce.

Powerful Preaching is well-prepared preaching.

We see from I Corinthians 2:1-5 that the non-negotiable in powerful preaching is the sovereign work of the Spirit of God. It is clear from I Corinthians 2:1-5 that Paul was not relying on human ability to communicate. Nonetheless that same Paul urges us: *“be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”* (II Timothy 2:15). *“Careful preparation and the unction of the Holy Spirit must never be regarded as alternatives but as complimentary to each other,”* writes perhaps the preeminent preacher of the 20th Century.²⁸ So then, what kind of preparation will compliment the work of the Spirit and adorn the gospel we preach? Preparation that produces good sermons! We should be good preachers! *“It is a sin to bore people,”* said R. S. Sproul.²⁹ Our sermons should be marked by: exegetical accuracy, doctrinal substance, clear structure, vivid illustration, pointed application, helpful delivery, supernatural authority (what we have referred to as the work of the Spirit).³⁰ All of these points could be elaborated on at great length. Let me settle for simply making a few points about preparing the man, and the message.

Prepare the Man

- *Heart:* Consider I Timothy 4:16 and remember the words of M’Cheyne – *“in great measure, according to the purity and perfection of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents which God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful instrument in the hand of God.”* So, he says, *“forget not the culture of the inner man – I mean, the heart”!*³¹
- *Love:* Love those to whom you preach, saint and sinner alike! John Newton wrote that *“his congregation would take almost anything from him, however painful, because they knew ‘I meant to do them good’”.*³²
- *Pride:* There is no place for it in the pulpit. *“....a man who feels that he is competent, and that he can do this easily, and so rushes to preach without any sense of fear or trembling (see I Corinthians 2:3)....is a man who is proclaiming that he has never been*

²⁸ Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching*, page 111.

²⁹ Byron Forrest Yawn, *Well Driven Nails: The Power of Finding Your Own Voice*, (Greenville, South Carolina: Ambassador International, 2010), page 97.

³⁰ Olyott, *Preaching Pure and Simple*, these are the chapter headings.

³¹ Logan, *The Preacher and Preaching*, page 63.

³² Sinclair Ferguson, an article entitled: *“A Preacher’s Decalogue”*, found at the following website: <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/a-preachers-decalogue>

called to be a preacher".³³ Pride produces self-sufficiency. This is anathema. Pride promotes self and sets self before the congregation. This also is anathema. Someone has said: no one can bear witness to Christ and to himself at the same time! Let us preach Christ!

- *Voice*: Find your own voice! That is, preach as yourself, not your homiletical hero.³⁴ If students leave Toronto Baptist Seminary sounding like Wellum, or Constant, or Edwards, or Haykin, then they will not only invite giggles from members of their congregation familiar with these aforementioned preachers, but they will drastically hinder the effectiveness of their messages!

Prepare the Message

You have done all the heavy lifting. You have read and re-read, you have dug into the grammar, explored the language, engaged in exegesis, and now you know what the text says and you have an unruly, amorphous mass of material. Now what?

- *Organize*: I set before you a call, an impassioned cry, for organization, for headings, and the occasional sub-heading, and, if you can manage it, even alliteration! Just please make it as easy as possible for me to follow you!
- *Simple*: speak simply. As Olyott says, preaching, pure and simple.³⁵ Calculations of 10 selected sermons of Billy Graham show that on average, 76% of his words were one syllable. There is a lesson to be learned there. What Dr. Graham lacked in theological precision he made up for in the ability to communicate and hold an audience! Remember also that speaking simply does not negate utilizing the beauty of the language. Master the language; increase your vocabulary; find just the right word; use synonyms. Gordon laments: "*Today, we have become a culture of telephone babblers, unskilled at the most basic questions of composition; and it is simply too much to expect that a typical member of such a culture can be quickly trained to deliver well-composed, thoughtful sermons.*"³⁶ Let us set "*well-composed*" sermons before our listeners. Note

³³ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, page 107.

³⁴ See Byron Yawn, *Well-Driven Nails: The Power of Finding Your Own Voice*. Unfortunate name for a pastor; good books for a preacher.

³⁵ Olyott, *Preaching: Pure and Simple*; see also an article by Thomas Lindberg, "The Power of Simplicity in Spirit Filled Preaching", found at the following site:

http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200801/200801_000_powersimplicity.cfm

³⁶ Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, page 67.

that it was said of Jonathan Edwards: *“His weak points appear to have been in voice, gesture and rhythm; his power was in his masterful use of language.”*³⁷

- *Passion: “If I were asked what in a Christian minister is the most essential quality for securing success in the winning of souls for Christ? I should reply ‘earnestness’”.*³⁸ Preaching, said Lloyd-Jones, is theology coming through a man who is on fire!³⁹ John Bunyan said somewhere: *“I preached what I did feel, what I smartingly did feel.”* Are we like that? *“Many sermons today are as monotonous as the tolling of a funeral bell. The content is satisfactory, but the heart of the preacher is never seen. There is no risk that such preachers will ever be accused of false fire or fanaticism because there is no evidence that any sort of flame is burning inside them. Where is the zeal and impassioned pleading of Biblical preaching? Where is the weeping of the prophets and apostles? How many modern preachers could honestly say, ‘I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears’ (Acts 20:31).”*⁴⁰ Passion! Daniel Rowlands preached *“as if on fire”!*⁴¹ Earnestness! John Broadus spoke of Richard Baxter’s *“tremendous earthshaking earnestness”!* Baxter – the man who said, *“I preached as never to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men!”* But he also said this: *“I marvel how I can preach....slightly or coldly, how I can let men alone in their sins, and that I do not go to them and beseech them for the Lord’s sake to repent, however they take it, and whatever pains or trouble it should cost me. I seldom come out of the pulpit but my conscience smites me that I have be no more serious and fervent”!*⁴² Earnestness, passion, fervency! I suppose then that I did well to toss into the trash bin the advertisement that came to our church mailbox recently, commending to us a certain preacher/comedian! Baxter again: *“You cannot break men’s hearts by jesting with them”.*
- *Illustrated:* Let us follow our Master, and illustrate truth! Illustrations explain truth, make truth attractive and memorable.⁴³
- *Applied:* Do we apply the Scriptures? See how Paul applies truth to his hearers in the epistles! Listen to Geoff Thomas: *“Preaching that lacks application is the bane of the modern reformed pulpit”;* *“The sermons should be the greatest period of participation in the church’s assemblies”;* *“There is no more common cause of ineffective ministry*

³⁷ John Hannah, “Jonathan Edwards and the Art of Effective Communication”, an article in *Reformation and Revival: A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*, Volume 10, Number 1, Winter 2001, page 114.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, page 97.

³⁹ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, page 97.

⁴⁰ Olyott, *Preaching, Pure and Simple*, page 153

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, page 152.

⁴² John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, ((Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans), page 277, 278.

⁴³ Olyott, *Preaching, Pure and Simple*, chapter 4.

than a failure in applicatory preaching."⁴⁴ My pastor taught me that what separates the men from the boys when it comes to preaching is, application! Let us be men!

Well, we could go on and on, but let us stop there. Get out your old homiletics notes and review them. And let me conclude my point by reminding you that for all the need for preparation which I have sought to emphasize, I must come back again to the indispensable, non-negotiable necessity of the work of the Spirit, and impress this on you with the words of Richard Cecil (1748-1810): *"I once said to myself in the foolishness of my heart, 'what sort of sermon must that have been which was preached by St. Peter, when three thousand souls were converted at once!' What sort of sermon! Such as other sermons. There is nothing to be found in it extraordinary. The effect was not produced by his eloquence (or the excellence of his preparation, we might add), but by the mighty power of God present with His word. It is in vain to attend one minister after another and to have sermon after sermon, unless we pray that the Holy Spirit may accompany His word."*⁴⁵ Let us walk next to Spurgeon as he climbs those fifteen steps up to his pulpit, and say with him, on each step, "I believe in the Holy Spirit!"⁴⁶ For we know that *"'until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high', the wilderness, notwithstanding the most diligent cultivation, must remain a wilderness still."*⁴⁷

Preaching Involves All Kinds of Men

Have you ever had the kind of experience Richard Bewe's had? He had preached on Isaiah 6. *"I have given my all"*, he says. Later, after the service, he discovered a piece of paper sticking up out of a pew Bible. *"I pulled it out; it was a Filofax page containing notes that someone had written on my exposition of Isaiah's dramatic call! I have the page in front of me now. There are a few lines of writing, then they tail off into a line sketch of a mouse, a snail, and an elephant. Slightly humbling!"*⁴⁸ If the wind has similarly been taken out of your sails, I have wonderful news for you!

The wonderful news is that God can make a powerful preacher of anyone! He used the pioneer Paul, the eloquent Apollos, the timid Timothy, the boisterous Peter, and he can use you! Of lasting comfort to me has been the discovery that God was even able to use Balaam's donkey to communicate a message! So I close my paper with a reminder that God can use anyone and I illustrate that point with two stories.

⁴⁴ Logan, *The Preacher and Preaching*, page 380.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, page 155, 156.

⁴⁶ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, page 334.

⁴⁷ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, page 81.

⁴⁸ Richard Bewes, *Speaking in Public Effectively*, (Ross-shire, England: Christian Focus, 2005), page 61.

First, I remind you of the Reverend William Haslam, ordained into the Church of England ministry in 1842. He was not a Christian. Nine years after his ordination, while he himself was preaching on the text, *“What think ye of Christ?”*, he was converted under his own ministry. The eccentric preacher Billy Bray, who happened to be in the congregation, was so thrilled that he picked Haslam up and carted him around the room, crying out: “Glory, glory, the parson’s converted!”⁴⁹ God can use anyone!

Then I remind you of the Reverend David Morgan, who served during the 1859 Revival in Wales. One night he was profoundly affected as he sat under the ministry of another preacher. He would later write: *“I went to bed that night just David Morgan as usual. I woke up the next morning feeling like a lion, feeling that I was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.”* Lloyd-Jones comments: *“He was always a good man, not outstanding – in fact, just an ordinary preacher. Nothing much happened as a result of his preaching. But he woke up that next morning feeling like a lion, and began to preach with such power that people were convicted and converted in large numbers followed by rejoicing; and additions to the churches followed.”* This went on for two years. Morgan says that after two years, *“I went to bed one night still feeling like a lion, filled with this strange power that I had enjoyed for two years. I woke up the next morning and found that I had become David Morgan once more.”* He lived for fifteen more years and exercised an ordinary ministry.⁵⁰ God can use anybody in any way He wants. The power is His and He moves where He wills.

⁴⁹ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, page 263.

⁵⁰ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, pages 322, 323.

WORTH A READ ON THIS SUBJECT.....

Stuart Olyott, *Preaching, Pure and Simple*, Bryntirion Press, chapter 7 on “supernatural authority”.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, Zondervan, chapter 16, on “demonstration of the Spirit and of power”.

Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, Banner of Truth, Part II, on “General Causes of the Want of Success in the Christian Ministry”.

Samuel Logan, Editor, *The Preacher and Preaching*, P&R, chapter 14, by Geoff Thomas, on “powerful preaching”.

AND FINALLY.....

“His (Whitefield’s) effectiveness lay not in his eloquence or his zeal. As we look back from our present standpoint we see that God’s chosen time to ‘arise and have mercy on Zion....yea, the set time (had) come’, and that in raising up Whitefield, He had granted upon him and his ministry a ‘mighty effusion of the Holy Spirit, and it was this, the Divine power, which was the first secret of his success.”

Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Volume I, page 117.

“The power that is in the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher, otherwise men would be converters of souls. Nor does it lie in the preacher’s learning, otherwise it would consist in the wisdom of men. We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were mysterious power going with it – the Holy Spirit changing the will of men.”

Charles Spurgeon, quoted in John R. W. Stott, *The Preacher’s Portrait*, page 118.

“On one occasion I had tea with Martyn Lloyd-Jones in Ealing, London, and decided to ask him a question that concerned me. ‘Dr. Lloyd-Jones,’ I said, ‘how can I tell whether I am preaching in the energy of the flesh or in the power of the Spirit?’ ‘That is very easy,’ Lloyd-Jones replied, as I shriveled. ‘If you are preaching in the energy of the flesh, you will feel exalted and lifted up. If you are preaching in the power of the Spirit, you will feel awe and humility.’”

Edmund Clowney

<http://dogmadoxa.blogspot.ca/2010/09/preaching-in-power-of-spirit.html>