

What's Wrong With Preaching Today?

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First of all I want to say that I regret the negative way in which this topic has been attacked. I think most of us have enough sense of logic to reason from the topic to ourselves what is wrong with preaching today. I am preaching today, therefore, what is wrong with my preaching? I could have wished that the title had been something a little bit more positive, perhaps hints to improve our preaching. But this is the project that has been assigned to me and so I shall seek to move within that framework.

By way of introduction let me say something about the sources of my observation. One would have to be omniscient to make final and absolute pronouncements as to what is wrong with preaching today. It would demand, of course, that he be exposed to all preaching and on that basis, collecting his data make some official and very pompous pronouncements.

Well, of course, I make no claim to omniscience and I can't even make claim to 40 years of observation such as the esteemed Dr. Lloyd-Jones can do. So the source of my information may be rather limited, but I trust at least the observations made from that limited source will be valid.

It was my privilege to spend some five years engaged full time in an itinerant ministry getting some understanding of the spectrum of our evangelical life here in the United States and a little bit in Canada. And then during these past five years in the pastorate it has been my privilege to be out a number of weeks during the year in outside ministries in a number of different denominations and fellowships.

So the sources of my observation are things I have tried to learn by observation over the past 10 years as a pastor and primarily as one in an itinerant ministry.

And then the standard of comparison, I think I ought to say something about this. For something is good or bad in terms of its proximity to an absolute standard. Well, of course in the realm of what is effective, good preaching there is no absolute standard, but I do believe we can gain from the Scriptures some measure of an absolute standard as to what good preaching is as we read the preaching of the prophets and the apostles and of our Lord Jesus Christ and then in the history of great preachers. And when I use the term great preachers I am not thinking of men who are known for their ability to embellish the

truth of God with great rhetorical effects or were known for their proficiency in the art of elocution, but men who were instruments of God to move other men godward. And in that class I would place such men as Whitefield, McCheyne, Spurgeon, Edwards, Owen, Baxter, Bunyan, the Tennants and Nettleton here in the States. And so taking their sermons and the effect of their ministries as somewhat of a standard, I hope we can make some valid comparisons between their ministries which were marked by great preaching and the great paucity of the same in our own day.

So much then by way of introduction. Now how shall we approach the subject?

Well, all failures in preaching are basically the failure either of the man who preaches or of the message in terms of content and manner of delivery that he preaches. And we can't separate the two, the man and the message.

As we heard yesterday so clearly from Dr. Lloyd-Jones, preaching involves both. You can't isolate the man from the message he communicates, for there is this fusion of the man and the message in the context of preaching. And so we are going to approach it from that standpoint and assume that it is a valid basis of approach and consider what is wrong with preaching today, first of all, in terms of the man who preaches and then, secondly, in terms of the message he communicates.

Now let's consider together for some time this matter of what is wrong with preaching in terms of the man who preaches. I want to state a principle. I want to see it illustrated from the Scriptures and then I want to apply it in some specific areas.

The principle is this, that unless we would degrade preaching to a mere elocutionary art, we must never forget that the soil out of which powerful preaching grows is the preacher's own life. This is what makes the art of preaching different from all the other arts of communication.

Take a well known actress who may be known for her moral escapades. She may live like a common harlot and yet she can enter the theater at eight o'clock on a Wednesday night and play Joan of Arc and move you and me to tears so that the way she lives has no direct relationship with the performance of her art, no relationship whatsoever.

You take a man equally profligate in his own life, put him in the stage to play Martin Luther in such a way that will send shivers up and down your spine and mine and send us out of there determined to be better men. But there is no direct relationship with how he lives and acted and thought prior to his entrance upon the stage and his performance upon the stage.

Now, granted, that the Scripture teaches there are times when men have great ministerial gifts who are devoid of sanctifying grace, granted that that is taught and that in the history of the Church there are men who were used sovereignly by God in the exercise of ministerial gifts who ultimately proved to be utterly devoid of sanctifying grace. We

know that is true. Our Lord said in the day of judgment there will be many who say, “Did we not preach in thy name?”

And he will profess unto them, “Depart from me. I never knew you.”

But this, I believe, would be primarily the problem of those engaged in a kind of ministry where they weren't around long enough for their lives to either add or detract from their ministry. And so limiting this to the context of pastoral preaching, I believe it is a valid rule with some few exceptions that powerful preaching is rooted in the soil of the preacher's own life.

As has been often said, a minister's life is the life of his ministry. If preaching is, as we heard yesterday, the communication of truth through a human instrument, that truth thus communicated is either augmented or reduced in its effect by the life through which it comes.

The secret of the power of Whitefield and McCheyne and these men I have mentioned is not primarily in the content of their sermons or in the manner of their delivery. There have been men, if not of equal eloquence or exceeding eloquence, certainly of equal eloquence, men whose sermons analyzed in terms of structure, in terms of content and form were equal to or far surpass the sermons of McCheyne and Whitefield. But the secret of their power was not in these realms, but in that life that was so clothed with power and lived in vital communion with God that truth became a living principle when it came to that vessel.

And it was that anointed life that was the soil of the anointed ministry. And particularly is this true in the pastor's life. The more you and I are known by our people, the more weighty is our influence or the less weighty is our influence amongst them.

Now that is the principle that I set before you. Now, I must be selective in turning to the Scriptures to show this principle illustrated. And let me suggest several passages not by way of detailed exegesis. Time will not permit. But I hope we catch the overriding impact of these passages.

The apostle Paul declared in 1 Thessalonians one in writing to the Thessalonian Church which he was privileged to found in his ministry among them, “Knowing, brethren beloved of God, your election, for our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance even as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sakes.”

You see, there was a direct relationship between the gospel coming in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance and the kind of men who preached it. This is how our gospel came even as you know this is what we were in our manner of living.

You find that same thought developed in the second chapter when he says in chapter two and verse 10, “Ye are witnesses and God also how holily and justly and unblameably we

behaved ourselves among you that believe as ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged you as a father does his children.”

Then he says in verse 13, “For this cause thank we God without ceasing because when ye received the Word of God which ye heard of us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God which effectually worketh also in you that believe.”

There is a relationship between these two things. He says, “You know how we conducted ourselves. We know how you received the Word.”

And these two things are not to be isolated. For it is as Paul and his companions stood as living embodiments of the power of the Word of God that when they spoke that word it came with added authority. And he does not shrink to use the manner of his living as witness to the validity of his preaching ministry.

Now you find in Titus chapter two where Paul is giving some detailed instruction as to what Titus should preach and teach and encourage others to teach and preach, he says in verse seven, “In all of these things showing thyself a pattern of good works.”

You are not only to proclaim these things by precept, you are to embody them in example.

In all of these things which I [?] to tell others, show thyself a pattern of good works.

Then, of course, that classic passage in 1 Timothy four verses 16 and 17.

“Take heed to thyself, Timothy. Take heed to thyself.”

That is your first responsibility.

“And to thy teaching. Continue in them for in doing so thou shalt save both thyself and those that hear you. But, Timothy, carelessness in your own personal life will result in some measure in shoddiness in the discharge of your responsibility to the souls over whom the Holy Ghost has made you an overseer.”

Failure to take heed to yourself will in some measure result in failure to see the saving purpose of God wrought in the hearts of those to whom you minister. And I say that with equal conviction of Paul’s statements of truth concerning the immutability of the purpose of God, of the surety of the salvation of all of his elect. Yet we must not leave out that passage, its obvious implication that Timothy will not be that instrument of God that he could be unless he took heed to himself and then to his teaching.

It is interesting that in the requirement for the teaching elder as set forth in 1 Timothy three beginning with verse one and in Titus one beginning with verse six the first requirement for the teaching elder is not doctrinal, but experimental.

“If a man desire the office of a bishop, he seeketh a good work. A bishop therefore must be...” What is the first word? Blameless, blameless, blameless.

Titus you have the same thing.

“I told you to ordain elders in every city. If a man be blameless.”

Later on he speaks of holding the faithful Word from the first requirement set out is in the realm of the minister’s life.

For Paul knew and lived and ministered under this conviction that the life of a man’s ministry was the minister’s life itself.

Now I believe these passages suffice and there are many others to support the principle that I have enunciated. Now let us consider together some areas in which by personal observation of my own weakness and the weakness of my brethren in the ministry I believe preaching today is defective because of a failure to watch these areas.

First of all, the area of the personal devotional life. I said that some of these conclusions were based upon my observation going from church to church for a number of years. And one of the most shocking things that came to me as a very young man engaged in this itinerant ministry was to find that over a period of five years I did not find in evangelical churches, mind you, a dozen ministers who had systematically personal devotional habits. I would have pastor after pastor admit to me when we would meet together to pray and to begin to share each other’s needs and concerns and try to take down that cursed façade of professionalism, be honest and confess our sins one to another and pray, the complaint again and again that the Word of God had ceased to be a living book of devotional relationship to Christ and had become the official manual in the administration of professional duty.

Not a dozen men.

Is it no wonder that there was doctrinal imbalance? Is it no wonder that there was a cold heart? Is it no wonder that there was no close searching application of the Scripture when the great majority of the men that I have met when they are honest in this thing admit that here is no systematic exposure to the book of God for the purpose of personal illumination and sanctification.

2 Timothy chapter three, the passage that we love to quote when we are demonstrating the truth of the inspiration authority of the Scripture. There is a word spoken to us as the servants of God that is most searching, where the apostle Paul says to Timothy in verse 15, ““That from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures.”

He is addressing his remarks to Timothy. “From a child you have known the holy Scriptures.” And this is their first function, “Which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

“Timothy, the Scriptures have performed their first and primary intention in your life. They have led you to faith in Jesus Christ and on to the salvation that is in him. But, Timothy, that is not the only function of the Scripture. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine or teaching, for reproof or correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

Now notice verse 17. That not the people of God in general, but, “That the man of God in particular might be perfect or mature, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

He is speaking of the inspiration, the authority and the function of the holy Scriptures with a primary reference to that function in the preacher.

Then in chapter four he speaks of the Scriptures in their function as the basis of his preachments.

“Preach the Word, reprove, rebuke, exhort.”

But the latter part of this chapter says that the Word of God is to do its profitable work of instruction, reproof, correction with this end in view that the man of God, that particular term that he uses for Timothy.

“But thou, oh man of God, flee these things. Lay hold on eternal of life.... That the man of God may be perfect.”

This has to do with his life furnished unto good works.

I am not furnished to preach simply by an analysis of the text and by the ability lay it out. If that Word has not, first of all, been the instrument of my own personal indoctrination and instruction and in sanctification, I am not fit to declare it to others. This is its function in my life and this function must always be primary for I am first of all a Christian and secondly a Christian minister. And that order must never be reversed.

I am to take head to myself and to my body. I am to save myself and those that hear me.

Jeremiah said, “Thy words were found and I did eat them and thy words were unto me the joy and the rejoicing of my heart.”

Too often we must make the confession, “They words were found and I did examine them and thy words were unto me the form and substance of the sermon in my head.”

Jeremiah says, “They words were found and I did assimilate them to myself personally. I experienced their exhilarating power within my own life.”

That is what Paul is telling Timothy. “Let that Word teach you. Get your doctrinal instruction on your knees with an open book so that they come not as icy propositions

merely resting on the surface of the mind, but they come as warm, [?] living truths [?] the fibers of the heart. Let it teach you, Timothy. Let it reprove you.”

Strong word. [?]

“Let it whip you. Let it correct you. Let it instruct you in the way of holiness that you may be thoroughly furnished unto good works.”

My own heart is smitten again and again when I think of our Lord’s word to the Church at Ephesus. He gave it the word of commendation, “I know thy works.” Speaks of their doctrinal correctness and of their administration of discipline.

“Thou hast tried those that say they are apostles and are not and has found them false and put them out of your midst.”

And then he says, “You have had patience and you have borne for my name’s sake. Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee because thou hast left thy first love. Remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen and repent and do the first works or else I will come and remove thy candlestick out of its place.”

You see, the head was correct and the hands were busy, but the heart had become cold and the Lord Jesus said that just as surely as the maintenance of correct doctrine in the head and God directed activity in the hand are necessary to be an effective witness, so is the maintenance of the burning heart.

Nothing had been defective in the head or the hands, but in the heart and the Lord Jesus spoke to that issue and said, “Unless this is corrected, I will remove thy candlestick out of its place.”

The area of our own personal devotional life the Word of God, dear brethren, must be to us, first of all, that book that we relish because here we see the face of the God whom we love who has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ. We long to know his will. We long to be worshippers. We long to have our service and all that we do and are shaped and molded by the living Words of the living God.

And this is equally true of the matter of secret prayer. I should break all the rules and read from a book. And this most excellent and helpful book, Spurgeon’s lectures to his students, a book that I try to read periodically. In it he says on the chapter on the preacher’s private prayer, “It may scarcely be needful to commend to you the sweet uses of private devotion. Yet I cannot forbear. To you as the ambassadors of God the mercy seat has a virtue beyond all estimate. The more familiar you are with the court of heaven the better shall you discharge your heavenly trust. Among all the formative influences which go to make up a man honored of God in the ministry, I know of none more mighty than his familiarity with the mercy seat.”

Of all the influences, think of them. Intellectual, social, genetic, what God put into him when he made him, all of these he said, “I know of none, none more influential than familiarity with the mercy seat.”

All that a college course can do for a student is course and external compared with the spiritual and delicate refinement obtained by communion with God. While the unformed minister is revolving upon the wheel of preparation, prayer is the tool of the great potter by which he molds the vessel.

All our libraries—and this man had one and he used it and knew what was in them—and our studies are mere emptiness compared with our closets. We grow. We wax mighty when we prevail in prayer.

Prayer will singularly assist you in the delivery of your sermon. In fact, nothing can so gloriously fit you to preach as descending fresh from the mount of communion with God to speak with men. None are so able to plead with men as those who have been wrestling with God on their behalf.

It is said of Joseph Allein, he poured out his very heart in prayer and preaching. His supplications and exhortations were so affectionate, so full of holy zeal, life and vigor that they quite overcame his hearers. He melted them so that he thought and mollified and sometimes dissolved the hardest of hearts.

Prayer may not make you eloquent after the human mold, but it will make you so truly eloquent, for you will speak out of the heart. And isn't that the meaning of the word eloquence? It will bring fire from heaven upon your sacrifice and, thus, prove that it is acceptable to the Lord.

As fresh springs of thought will frequently break you during preparation in answer to prayer, so will it be in the delivery of the sermon. Most preachers who depend upon God's Spirit will tell you that their freshest and best thoughts are not those which were premeditated, but ideas which came to them, flying as on the wings of angels, unexpected treasures brought by a sudden celestial hand, seeds of the flowers of paradise wafted from the mountains of myrrh.

That is what the doctor was talking about yesterday.

When that divine [?] comes upon the servant of God and all his mental faculties seem augmented and his powers of expression and his capacity to feel for the truth of God and the God of truth and the people to whom he speaks, he becomes another man when clothed by the Spirit. That Spirit who in a way that is mysterious to me in his operations and mighty annointings is precipitated in answer to prayer.

But the promise of our Lord has never been negated. He gives the Spirit to those who ask him.

As Paul declared in Philippians one. “This shall turn to my salvation or deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.”

It is in the context of secret prayer that eternal verities which we give assent to become living realities.

I find—and this is somewhat of a confession as well as an exhortation—I find my own words mock me too often when I preach. When I can say the word hell and not feel the horror, when I can speak of heaven and not be warmed with a holy glow that this is the place my Lord is preparing for me. And I find no answer to that problem. But to do as I often do, I get on my knees and take the passages that speak of hell before I go to the pulpit to preach and read them over and ask God the Holy Ghost to burn into my heart the people that I look at who are going to hear those words.

“Depart from me.”

People whose voices will say to me at the door, “Thank you for the sermon, pastor,” are voices that will one day be honoring those cries and groans of the damned.

God help me to believe it. Help me to preach to them so that they will know I believe it.

And the truth that burned on Sunday can be icy cold by Monday. Truths received in the crucible of waiting upon God can only be maintained in their warmth in that same context. And if I read aright the biographies of the great men of God, I find that this is their unanimous testimony.

Whitefield, Spurgeon, McCheyne, all with one accord declare that if there was any secret to their ministries it was this. It was the manner and therefore I submit to you the proposition that as we consider what is wrong with preaching today, this is the root of the problem. How can men teach some of the things they teach in the name of orthodoxy who are on their knees pouring over the Scriptures.

No, they are not on their knees pouring over the Scriptures. They are simply parroting what their peers have said. How can we who say we believe the biblical doctrines speak of them in such a perfunctory way. If we are receiving those truths on our knees we shall speak of them with the glow and the fire of heaven upon our souls.

And so the problem with preaching today lies in the man who preaches specifically in the area of the personal devotional life, secondly in the area of practical piety. And, again, I refer to what I observed in the itinerant ministry.

Many a church and its pulpit ministry is being terribly hampered by the absence of practical piety in the life of the teaching elder. It is interesting that 1 Timothy three, having mentioned that the man must be blameless immediately moves to a specific area. And you know what it is and so do I, his home life.

“If any man be blameless, the husband of one wife, having children not accused of riot or unruly, for if a man rule not his own house, how shall he rule the house of God?”

And I say not censoriously but with a—I trust—a true concern that many a time I realize that the pulpit ministry of some precious servants of God was negated by the failure of practical piety in realm of the home life. I know of a situation that came to my attention recently where a minister was actually asked to resign by his church because of the wagging tongue of his wife. The problem was not basically the man, his message or his ministry, but his failure to rule his own house and even to bring his wife into line in the area of her wagging tongue.

How can we call upon others, brethren, to be obedient to the Word of God if we are disobedient? And God so clearly says that to qualify for the teaching elders position our own houses must be ruled well. It does not say perfectly. It does not say if we have power to infuse grace into the souls of our children. But if we do not have sufficient principle and our own lives are not sufficiently weighty by their own godly example as to rule our houses, how can we rule the house of God?

That is the question. It is my own personal conviction that if a man fails to meet that requirement he has no more right to remain in the ministry than if he fails on one of the other requirement for it says, “Not accused of riot or unruly.”

Brethren, I do not pronounce on individual cases for God alone is the Lord of the conscience. But certainly it cannot be of God that in church after church there is no pulpit power because the life is so shoddy in the area of practical piety, specifically in the home life, in the realm of our speech.

A dear servant of God once said to me, and I shall never forget it, he said, “You cannot be a clown and a prophet both. You have got to make the choice.”

I hope I have made the right choice. This does not mean we will not be truly human and that we shall feel there is something sinful in the natural ability and exhilaration that comes from a hearty laugh, but this study [?] to always be funny amongst our people. They somehow can't make the transition from the clown to the prophet.

And this seriousness, not fleshly somberness, but true seriousness is not the mark of our lives in light amongst our people, let us not expect that when we ascend the pulpit some kind of magical process will immediately make them sit trembling before the words of God. They will rather think that we are play actors. If they never see us serious regarding the issues of eternity in their presence individually, we shall not experience the power of the sobriety of these [?] as we communicate them when we meet together collectively.

The problem with our preaching, brethren, so often, is the shoddiness of our lives in the realm of practical piety. Our home life, our speech and let me mention another area. The use of our time.

Let your people suspect you of laziness and you can have all night prayer meetings praying for power and it won't be there. Let your people suspect you of laziness, let them suspect me of laziness and the respect that is a part of pulpit power will be gone.

Then let me mention a third area briefly. In the realm of the man, not only should we be concerned about our personal devotional lives if we would see our preaching power augmented, the realm of practical piety, but in the area of the purity of our motivation how often when I have gone into churches have pastors come, but very apologetically because I think they realize their slip was showing when they said it and they would come to meet together to pray with me and would say, "Now, brother, so glad you are here this week and there are a couple of situations that if the Lord gives you liberty I would love to have you just preach on this and maybe touch on that and maybe you could say this and we have got some young people who sit in the back row and fool around and I haven't just ever said anything to them. Maybe you might be able..."

And on and on they go cowering before their people.

Oh, brethren how we need purity of motivation if we would experience power in the pulpit. And let me suggest three areas of that motivation. First and primary the fear of God. The best definition I know of the fear of God is found in John Brown's commentary of 1 Peter where he has 18 pages on the little phrase, "Fear God," in that setting in chapter two. Fear God, honor the king. Eighteen pages on the fear of God.

And he summarizes it in this way. "The fear of God is that attitude, walking in that attitude and disposition in which we regard the smile of God as our greatest delight, our primary aim and we regard the frown of God as the greatest thing to be dreaded."

You see, a man who walks in the fear of God walks amongst men as a servant of men but with an eye single to the smile of the frown of God.

God said to Jeremiah in Jeremiah one, a passage that brings great comfort, one that I had [?] this morning to get any measure of confidence to approach you men today.

"Be not afraid of their faces lest I confound thee before them. They shall fight against thee. They shall not prevail against thee. For I am with thee saith the Lord, to deliver thee. Ah, but I am a child. Who in God's name am I to quote to stand before many of my fathers in the faith in experience, in knowledge?"

And God said to Jeremiah, "Say not I am a child, for to whomsoever I shall send thee, thou shalt go and whatsoever I command thee, thou shalt speak."

"Jeremiah, this is not a matter of your experience, your age. But I want a vessel that will be where I put him and will say what I tell it. Will you be that?"

And Jeremiah said, "Yes."

That is what God wants, a vessel that will go where God sends and will say what God does.

And he says, “Don’t look at their faces. If you do, I will confound you.”

That is one verse I don’t want to prove experimentally.

What would it be to have God confound me? I want to take that verse by faith. I believe it is true. I don’t want to prove it in experience.

The apostle Paul declared a very clear way, 2 Corinthians 4:1, then, again, in 2 Corinthians 2:17, “Speaking as of God in the sight of God. We speak in Christ.”

1 Thessalonians 2:3, “As we were allowed of God to be entrusted with the gospel even so we speak not as pleasing men, but God who triumphed our hearts.”

“The fear of man bringeth a snare.”

One of the elements of powerful preaching is preaching from a vessel that is liberated. Liberated from what? From the ensnaring effects of the fear of man. I am never free to [?] men unless I am freed from their smiles and their frowns.

You see people know when you can be bought by their smiles and bought by their frowns. But it doesn’t take them long to discern whether or not you are a man who is not affected either by their smiles or their frowns. That is a free man in Christ. The fear of man bringing a snare. It will snare your tongue. And when those flashes of light come in the pulpit and there are applications that you know may sting and wound some choice member of the church, you see, if your eye is to the fear of God and to the fear of men, you stumble, you fumble, you can’t give utterance to that which you know you ought to. But when you are free from your people, now you are at liberty to bless them, but only then.

And so I submit that if there is to be an increased power in the pulpit there must be a return to purity of motivation, the fear of God.

Secondly, the love of the truth. The love of the truth. We are called upon to declare the whole counsel of God, Acts 20 and verse 26. And Paul says only as he did was he pure from the blood of all men. He declared the whole spectrum of divine revelation.

There is only one reason why we preach that men are lost, bound in their sins under the condemnation of God. God declares it and we love his truth. Whether it is palatable or unpalatable truth our love of the truth is such that we want the whole world to know all that God has revealed.

But the third area in this matter of motivation, love to men.

I am convinced, brethren, that this is what will bribe us to [?] preaching.

Such a love for men that we can't stand to see them slumber in our ministries, such a love that will enable us to be faithful to them.

McCheyne said the man who loves you most is the man who tells you the most truth about yourself.

2 Corinthians seven Paul says, "Am I sorry that I made you sorry?"

No, sir.

He said, "I am glad I made you sorry because your sorrow led to your salvation."

In another place he said, "Am I loved the less because I tell you the truth?" He said, "I am sorry, but I am going to love you anyway and continue to tell you the truth even if you don't love me."

You see, what hinders us in being faithful to men is really a form of self love. We love our own feelings so much and we want to preserve them, we are not going to run the risk of offending somebody and getting them mad at us.

Oh, they may go to hell, but that is all right just so long as they perish loving us.

I have heard people say, "Well, boy, that fellow preached such a fearless way."

That ought to be said of every true preacher of the gospel because his love to men is such that he is willing to communicate the truth that they may not relish, but which is for their good and for their salvation.

What is wrong with preaching today? Some of the failure, I am convinced, is in the realm of impurity of motivation. And now let us for the time remaining consider something of the message. For there is a direct relationship between the man and the message.

Will you try to picture with me a rather grotesque situation. Here is Mickey Mantle with all his aches and pains, but still his tremendous ability. The Yanks are behind three runs, last of the ninth, bases loaded and up comes Mickey Mantle. He moves up to the plate and he has got a lead pencil in his hands for a bat.

Well, you say, "How in the world is he ever going to knock it out of the ball part with a lead pencil in his hand?"

You see the problem is not with the man, but the problem is with the thing with which he is trying to deliver it. It just doesn't have it. And it is possible that there can be the measure of personal piety and purity of motivation and practical godliness and devotional

warmth that a man may know and experience. But he may be trying to deliver the goods with a lead pencil.

You see, what you say has some great measure of importance in terms of the effect and the result attained. And the apostle mentioned that. He puts the two together in 2 Corinthians 4:1-2.

He says, "Seeing as we have received this ministry, we faint not, but having renounced the hidden things of darkness," personal piety, not walking in craftiness, there is the realm of motivation, not being sneaking about this." Then he goes on to say, "Nor handling the Word of God deceitfully. There comes the manner, the content of his preaching. "But by the manifestation of the truth, the full display of the truth commending ourselves," there is the man again. "To every man's conscience in the sight of God."

And you see those two things woven together. He vindicates. He says, "My motives were pure. My attitudes, my life and my message. And he joins the two in those two very weighty verses.

Now in the area of the matter of our preaching what is wrong with preaching today? Well, much of it, of course. I trust this doesn't apply to us as much as it does to men who would be found concentrated, perhaps, other than at a reformed ministers fellowship, is that much of the preaching of our day lacks real biblical content.

One of the unique things about the ministry of Dr. Lloyd-Jones, regardless of what you may feel about it, is this. You are gripped by the sheer weight and power of the Scriptures.

Now I have a number of his sermons on tape. Some of them I have listened to over and over again. And as I have tried to analyze it I said, "Now, look. He doesn't even use metaphorical language, very few similes, very few metaphors, very few illustrations. And many times not even a very clearly discernible outline."

Well, what is it that gives it its power? Here is the element. It is packed full of solid biblical substance so that you feel standing between you and that preacher is a wall of divine truth. And the issue is not with you and that man, but with you and the Word of God and the God of the Word. That is what men ought to sense when they hear us preach.

And, of course, much of the problem of preaching today is it lacks biblical content because men are defective in their own devotional life. Their minds and souls are not saturated with the Scriptures so that the Holy Spirit can't bring to remembrance something out of a vacuum. But it is as the mind and soul are steeped in the Word of God devotionally that in the context of exposition and preaching there is something to be drawn up so that an illusion, an illustration as much as possible comes in a biblical setting and in the very words of holy Scripture.

Much preaching today in terms of matter lacks any real doctrinal substance. Again I say I trust this is not... is true of us by the grace of God as it may be true of other fellowships, other circles.

And then in the third area that I think may be more true of us, much preaching today lacks in practical application. There may be solid biblical content, solid doctrinal substance, but so little practical application so that men know how to adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.

Now as sort of a sub heading of that, may I suggest three areas in which if I have observed at all correctly we are most weak in our reformed circles? Those of us who hold without embarrassment to the system of doctrine set forth in the great creeds that came out of the Reformation, our preaching is weak because of its failure, first of all, to spell out the necessity and the nature of evangelical repentance.

In our reaction against some kind of a works salvation and in our reaction against Arminian activism I think some of us have fallen under the philosophical pinch of thinking how can I preach man's responsibility when I know he has no ability to do this?

Well, this problem didn't bother the apostle Paul. He spoke clearly of man's inability to do anything spiritually good and yet he spoke most clearly of man's responsibility repent. And he reviews his ministry to the Ephesians elders he says in Acts 20:21, "I testified to you publicly and from house to house that men should repent and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

In Acts 26 and verse 20 he says the same thing that at Damascus and Judea and to all the Gentiles he preached that men should repent and turn to God and do works meet for repentance.

Now I make this conclusion because I have had the unhappy experience and very embarrassing experience to be in churches that have repentance on the creed and in the confession and in the catechisms, but when I would preach a three or four message series on the subject and simply doing what a Bible school student could do, taking a concordance, finding all the references, trying to organize them under some system and preach on the soil of repentance, the grace of God, the roots of repentance, conviction of sin and the revelation of the cross of Christ, the substance of repentance, a change of mind, the sin that God, the righteousness, the fruits of repentance, holiness, obedience, to have people sit there and then come up afterward and say, "I never heard this."

Now it isn't that they didn't hear the word repentance. Sure they heard it. But it was not spelled out so that the necessity and the nature of evangelical repentance hit them and they were convinced unless I repent and I bring forth the fruit of repentance I shall perish even though my head may be packed full of objective and correct orthodoxy.

It has been the mark, again, of the men whom God has used, those names I have mentioned earlier that they all without exception spelled out the necessity, the nature and the fruit of evangelical repentance.

Secondly, in the matter of our content, there should be a clear presentation of the whole Christ to the whole man.

I hear that we have returned to a Romish concept of faith in our circles. You remember the great issue that the Reformers brought into focus that faith was something more than [?], a mere nodding of the head to the body of truth presented by the Church as the faith. They brought back into focus that faith was [?]. There was trust. There was commitment. There was involvement of the whole man with the truth that was believed and with Christ who is the focus of that truth.

And I believe we need to spell this out clearly in categorical statements so that people realize that a mere nodding of assent to the doctrines that they are exposed to is not the essence of saving faith, but that saving faith involves the commitment of the whole man to the Christ, the whole Christ, prophet, priest and king who is set forth in the gospel.

Then we shall not see people talking about believing, but not surrendering, knowing Christ as Savior, but not as Lord. All that will disappear if there is a clear preaching of the whole Christ to the whole man.

And then there is a third area that is a very sensitive area and yet I am convinced a very necessary area and one which I have observed we are weak in reformed circles. And that is a setting forth of the distinguishing traits of a true believer. And involved in that is setting out the difference between the grounds of salvation and the assurance of salvation.

I have found in my brief experience of moving in these circles that the moment a few people begin to do some Scriptural self examination. They just begin to obey 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourself, prove yourself whether you be in the faith." And somebody hears about it, why you would think it was the next thing to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

People looked upon doubt as the most terrible thing in the world. Somebody is doubting. Somebody is troubled. Somebody is searching his heart.

That isn't a terrible thing. That might be the best thing that ever happened. Whereas I have said on other occasions in the hearing of some that doubts will never damn a man, but presumption will. And as long as the Scripture says, again and again, let no man deceive you, let no man deceive himself. Be not deceived. What are those exhortations for if self deception is not a very real possibility and an actuality? Then why is the Bible filled with exhortations be not deceived?

I mean all of this becomes meaningless gibberish if it is merely talking about a hypothetical possibility. And if people can come in to the pale of the external church

and be deceived under the ministry of the apostles so that they felt it necessary to say, “Brethren, make your calling and your election sure,” they not only have a few deceived people coming in under our pea shooting ministries.

And that we need to echo out again let us make our calling and election sure and then spell out and set before them the Scriptural distinction between a true believer and a spurious believer.

I have found in my own experience that this never harmed the true child of God. The most searching applicatory preaching in this area will serve to bring the true child of God to a more solid assurance. And I found it again and again and again.

There is only one thing that stands to be harmed by close examination, that is the counterfeit. If I had two 20 dollar bills, I don't, but if I did and I went to my bank and I said, “Now I want to deposit these in my checking account,” and the teller takes them. he says, “Hey, wait a minute, Martin. I think there might be a counterfeit here.”

Now if those bills are genuine they stand to lose nothing by close scrutiny. In fact, they gain something. If he takes them back and puts them under a magnifying glass and takes a genuine 20 and compares them, if they are genuine, if every I was confident that they are the real thing when he comes back and says, “Mr. Martin, I have put them under the magnifying glass. I have examined them closely. They are the real thing. Sorry I disturbed you.”

If ever I had two 20 dollar bills that I am sure are the real thing, these two I am sure because they have undergone close scrutiny and they have come away bearing the marks of the genuine.

The only thing that stands to lose anything and it ought to lose something is the counterfeit. And this is true in this kind of preaching. The only one that stands to lose anything under a scriptural setting forth of the distinguishing traits of a true believer is the spurious believer. And he ought to be disturbed now while the day of salvation is still upon us.

Now if we make unscriptural distinctions and I have said repeatedly that this was one of the problems of second generation Puritanism where you make all five distinctions that are not found in the Bible, a plague on that. But, brethren, where the Bible gives us explicit statements, “They who are my sheep hear my voice and they follow me,” let us not fear to tell our people, if you are not hearing and following you have no grounds to claim you are his sheep.

Though you may know all about the fact that he had sheep upon his heart from eternity in the covenant of redemption, though you may know all the facts of how he died for his sheep with a particular intention, his death and how the Holy Spirit effectually calls his sheep. You may know all of that, but are you hearing his voice? Are you following?

And press that issue. Press the issue of 1 John.

“These things are written that ye may know.”

What things?

“Hereby do we know if we love the brethren, if we keep his commandments,” and all of those tests of life.

What is wrong with our preaching? People are being lulled to sleep beneath it, brethren. The conscience needs to be wounded and stabbed. And then might ask the question, “Am I truly in the faith?”

And now in the five minutes that remain I want to touch briefly on the matter of the manner of the message. And I will give you the three things I had hoped to expand, but time will not permit: urgency, orderliness and directness.

Genuine urgency is the mother of true eloquence. You are over there in the dormitory and some fellow two o'clock in the morning starts walking down the hall saying, “Hey, fellows, I think maybe this place might be on fire. You ought to do something about it.”

You kind of wake up and you say, “What did that guy say? Oh, he is walking in his sleep mumbling something about the place might be on fire.”

You are not going to do much.

You let somebody who is convinced the place is on fire and wants to get you out of there start moving down the hall at two o'clock and the urgency of the reality of the danger will move him to a [?] eloquence. He may be very quiet, very retiring, very diffident by nature, but he is going to go down that hall banging on doors.

“Brethren, brethren, this place is on fire. Get up and get out.”

And you wake up from your sleep and you hear him and you say, “Hey, there is a note of urgency in that fellow’s voice. I don’t smell any smoke, but he must know what he is talking about. I better get.”

Now the urgency in some because of personality, because of temperament, because of inbuilt microphones may come out loud. In others it may come out softly, but it will have those overtones of urgency.

When you have made a wonderful discovery you will say, “You know, I have found a nice thing today. Some time at your convenience to... maybe you would like to come see it.”

No. [?] what I saw today. Oh, you have got to come with me. I saw something beautiful.

Hey, maybe that is worth going to.

Now this is what I am talking about, urgency. This is what will make us work in this matter of audience contact. We haven't come just to deliver our oration. We have come to communicate truth with people. And if we see we don't have somebody, somebody is looking around, Spurgeon said this. When you see a little fellow on the front row who wasn't listening [?]

So he would drop out a little something special for little boys until he got his eyes again.

What? He was urgent. He believed what he had to say was a matter of life and death for his hearers and so he would do anything legitimate to make sure he had their ears.

He couldn't make the truth go to the heart. Only the Holy Ghost could do that. But his job was to get it into their ears. And if he didn't have their ears, he did everything to get their ears.

That is my job, get their ears.

God alone can get it into the heart.

Peter did that. "Hearken, brethren."

Yes, sir.

Then he preached.

Then it says the Holy Ghost stabbed them to the heart. But if they hadn't hearkened they wouldn't have been stabbed.

And so that sense of urgency will make us work on audience contact. It will make us work in the area of communication. We use a word and people give us that long ago and far away look we know it hasn't registered. We will be sensitive to this. We will use a different word.

I remember my experience in England a few weeks ago. It was traumatic. I had used a... I didn't realize how much I used... well, I just this matter of Mickey Mantle and the bat. That would mean nothing to an Englishman. You don't even have strikes or outs in cricket and I said something about a situation where you have got two strikes against you and I got this blank stare.

Well, you see, recognizing that, I had to change my figure, my metaphor, my analogy. But, you see, if there is a sense of urgency your sensitive to whether or not you are communicating.

In the area of contact, in the area of understanding and the area of specific application.

I am convinced, brethren, this is what will drive us to work in applicatory preaching.

If you were a doctor, you went into a community and because of what you knew as a doctor, you were convinced that that whole community was suffering from a certain disease that six months from now would kill them all but the symptoms were not such that they knew it, you wouldn't just go in and make a general pronouncement, "You are all going to die in six months. You have got a bad disease."

They would look at you [?]. Something wrong with you. We are not sick.

But if you are convinced of it, you will then set out to set before them the symptoms of this disease to convince them. You just won't make a general pronouncement and go your way and hope a few of them will catch on. You will work at this matter until they are convinced and know what you know and what you are convinced of.

This is what will make us work at application.

Then this matter of reasonable orderliness. The mind I like to look at as a figurative sponge. You want to. I don't know what figure you want to use, but there they are sitting before me with this capacity to embrace certain truths. What I want to do is drive a couple of sharp stakes into that sponge and then hang some [?] of truth on those stakes so that when they go home the stake there and a stake here and some truth hanging on there, you see? That is the necessity of some form of orderliness. The mind can't receive truth in some kind of a big glob. It has got to come with some reasonable orderliness.

Mr. Adams dealt with some of this.

And then, last of all, the matter of directness. And at this point I want to close reading a quotation. I have had many other quotations I wanted to read, but I have problems with the clock.

The Bridges book which, by the way, is being reprinted again by the Banner of Truth and if you don't have it I commend it for your reading, Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, the section on preaching the gospel is excellent. And he says this in the area of directness.

"For this end we must show them from first to last that we are not merely saying good things in their presence, but directing what we say to them personally as a matter which concerns them beyond expression."

And then you read in the great sermons of the great preachers how there was this directness. You feel even now hundreds of years after the sermons were preached and written, when you read them you feel as though that sermon is boxing you up in the corner to where you have got to do something with the truth that you are confronting.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones mentioned the use of questions. Joseph Allein's *Alarm to the Unconverted* is a classic illustration of this where he backs the sinner against the wall, as it were, with questions causing him to reflect upon his own way, upon his own state before God. Are you at peace? Show me upon what grounds your peace is maintained. Is it Scripture peace? Can you show the distinguishing marks of a sound believer? Can you evidence you are something more than any hypocrite in the world ever had?

If not, fear this peace more than any trouble and know that a carnal peace commonly proves the most mortal enemy of the soul whilst it kisses and smiles fairly yet fatally smites, as it were, under the fifth rib.

Now conscience do your work. Speak out.

And then he goes on to press the issue in directness to his hearers.

May God deliver us from simply saying good things in the presence of some people and enable us to so preach that men know we are saying weighty things to them personally.

What is wrong with preaching today?

Well, I am sure many of the faults are exemplified in my life and ministry as much as in others, but I suggest that together we consider the problem with preaching today is the problem of the man in the area of personal devotional experience, in the realm of practical piety, in the purity of motivation. What is wrong with preaching today? Some of the problems in the message, the matter that is being preached and in the manner in which it is being communicated.

May God grant that where any of these things legitimately apply to us that we may suffer the word of exhortation and by the grace of God be more effective communicators of the truth of the Scripture.