

An Invaluable Hint for Preachers Drawn from the UK Courtroom

Someone involved in a UK court case might well use a lawyer; or, rather, two lawyers – a solicitor and a barrister. Over-simplifying the system, the solicitor, by drawing up the legal argument, prepares the case before it reaches the courtroom, while the barrister, inside the courtroom, using the solicitor’s work, pleads the case; that is, he argues it before the court, advocates his client’s cause, doing all he can to secure a favourable outcome for him.

Now, lurking within this legal nicety, there is an invaluable hint for preachers,¹ one which, in my experience, is badly needed. Too many preachers, it seems to me, think their responsibility begins and virtually ends with setting out a case, presenting it in clinical detail as clearly and as thoroughly as they can, and that is about all – perhaps with a token amount of application (usually in the muted terms of ‘we’ and ‘us’) at the end. If I am right, then they have sadly mistaken their duty.² Of course, a preacher must explain and expound the words of Scripture in their context, and, yes, of course, he must set out its spiritual logic; all that is true, yes. But that’s far from the finish of it. Indeed, his real business has only just begun when he has got that far. As a preacher, he ought to know that his work is to plead with men, press them for a verdict, urge them to make the right choice on the basis of the

¹ In this article, when I speak about ‘preachers’, I am thinking of ‘men who are engaged in pulpit work’. As I repeatedly try to make clear in my works, all believers are ministers (see, for instance, my *Priesthood of all Believers: Slogan or Substance?*); nevertheless, as I say, in this article I concentrate on ‘preaching’ in the usually-accepted, but too-limited, sense of the word. Such preaching has an important role to play in the spread of the gospel; getting it wrong spells disaster. Having said that, the principles set out here apply across the board, to all gospel ministry, private as well as public.

² See my *Preaching Today: Food for Action as Well as Thought*.

scriptural argument which he has put before them. He wants a verdict, and a favourable verdict at that. And, I would add, he wants it now.

The point is that the preacher is not merely a solicitor, preparing and presenting a case; he is a barrister, pleading a suit. Indeed, he is like a barrister in a capital case,³ one who knows that the life or death of his client hangs on what he says and how he says it. The barrister, consequently, does all he can to move the jury to decide in his client's favour. He longs for it, and he aims for it, concentrating all his powers on that one end. *And he leaves nobody in any doubt about it.*

This is how it should be with the preacher. He must want his hearers – believers and unbelievers – to feel and act in accordance with the scriptural argument he is proclaiming. And shouldn't he always bear in mind that at least some of his hearers might be unbelievers?

Consider, then, the preacher addressing unbelievers. Does he not want them to be converted? Does he not want them to know it? I recall that it was said of Robert Murray M'Cheyne that 'you felt he was a'dying to have you converted'. That's the point!

Or, as Richard Baxter famously vowed:

*I preached as never sure to preach again,
And as a dying man to dying men.*

That quotation comes from Baxter's *Poetical Fragments*. The thought of imminent death (and, of course, judgment to come) – not least, his own – struck him so forcibly that he penned verses to express his feelings, including the making of the following vow to God:

*This called me out to work while it was day;
And warn poor souls to turn without delay:
Resolving speedily your word to preach;*

³ I am using the phrase to mean the possibility of a death sentence for the guilty.

With Ambrose,⁴ I at once did learn and teach.
 Still thinking I had little time to live,
 My fervent heart to win men's souls did strive.
 I preached, as never sure to preach again,
 And as a dying man to dying men!
 O how should preachers men's repenting crave,
 Who see how near the church is to the grave?⁵
 And see that while we preach and hear, we die,
 Rapt by swift time to vast eternity!
 What statues, or what hypocrites are they,
 Who between sleep and wake to preach and pray?
 As if they feared awakening the dead!
 Or were but lighting sinners to their bed!
 Who speak of heaven and hell as on a stage!
 And make the pulpit but a parrot's cage?
 Who teach as men that care not much who learns;
 And preach in jest to men that sin in earnest.⁶
 Surely God's messenger, if any man,
 Should speak with all the seriousness he can;
 Who treats in the name of the Most High,
 About the matters of eternity!
 Who must prevail with sinners **Now** or **Never**,
 As those that must be saved **Now**, if **Ever**:
 When sinners' endless joy or misery,
 On the success of his endeavours lie!
 Though God be free, he works by instruments,
 And wisely fits them to his intents;
 A proud unhumbl'd preacher is unmeet
 To lay proud sinners humbled at Christ's feet:
 So are the blind to tell man what God says,
 And faithless e'en to propagate the faith.
 The dead are unfit means to raise the dead;
 And enemies to give the children bread:
 And utter strangers to the life to come,
 Are not the best conductors to our home:
 They that yet never learned to **Live** and **Die**,
 Will scarcely teach it others feelingly:
 Or if they should preach others to salvation,
 Unhappy men that preach their own damnation.

⁴ Ambrose was the 4th century bishop of Milan.

⁵ I prefer: 'Who see how near are sinners to the grave?'

⁶ I prefer: 'And preach in jest to men that earnest sin'.

Now there's a solemn thought for any – and every – preacher.

But let Paul bring this article to a close. We know what he did, and why, when he was addressing unbelievers:

Therefore, knowing the terror [or, the fear] of the Lord, we persuade others (2 Cor. 5:11).

And:

The love of Christ constrains us (2 Cor. 5:14).

Briefly (keeping this article in bounds), the apostle knew that he would have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and account for his life – including his gospel ministry: 'For we must all [that is, we believers, all of us, must] appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil' (2 Cor. 5:10). He also knew that the unbelievers he was addressing would have to face judgment (Acts 17:31; Heb. 9:27) and suffer God's eternal wrath (John 3:18,36; Rom. 1:18; 2:5,8; 5:9; 9:22; Eph. 2:3; 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:16; 5:9; Rev. 6:16-17; 11:18; 14:8-19; 15:1,7; 19:15). In addition, he was moved by the love of Christ; that is, either (probably) the sense of Christ's love to him, or his love for Christ in return; or both, of course. This is what drove Paul when addressing unbelievers.

As for the way he went about it, Paul knew that he had to persuade men; that is, he had to seek to persuade them, persuade them to repent of their sin, and turn in saving trust to Christ (Acts 13:43; 18:4,13; 19:26; 20:21; 26:28). And it was more than a duty; it was his passion, his heart's desire. He was a driven man. We know how he felt about the Jews:

I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit – that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh... My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved (Rom. 9:1-3;10:1).

Can there be any doubt that he felt the same about the Gentiles? See, for instance, Acts 13:46-47; Romans 1:14; 3:29; 2 Timothy 1:11.

‘What ifs’ are tempting, but always fraught. Even so, in light of the above, I am convinced that if Paul were alive today, he would not be wasting his time polishing a PowerPoint presentation and titivating some hand-out notes so that he might deliver an impeccable gospel-lecture! Nothing of the kind! Driven by that sense of accountability and love which he spoke of, he would do the same today as he did two thousand years ago – passionately and urgently pleading with sinners for their salvation:

God... gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore [beg] you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God... We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain... Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry... (2 Cor. 5:15 – 6:3).

We should not rest until we can say the same.