

Reformed Experiential Preaching? - #7

Treasuring the Church

By Dr. Joel Beeke

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Bible Text: 2 Timothy 4:2a; Romans 7:22-8:1

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Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation

540 Crescent St NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Website: www.hnrc.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/hnrc

We turn now to Paul's epistle to the Romans chapter seven, Romans seven verse 14 through eight verse four.

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.¹

Thus far the reading of sacred Scripture.

Dear congregation, we ask your attention this morning for Romans 7:22 through Romans eight verse one and question 54 of Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

¹ Romans 7:14—8:4.

Romans 7:22:

For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.²

And then Lord's Day 21, question 54: What believest thou concerning the holy catholic Church of Christ? That the Son of God from the beginning to the end of the world gathers, defends and preserves to himself by his Spirit and Word out of the whole human race a Church chosen to everlasting life, agreeing in true faith and that I am and forever shall remain a living member thereof.

Now, perhaps you recall that this is now the seventh time we are looking at question 54 of the Heidelberg Catechism because we are taking a more in depth look at the doctrine of the Church which isn't dealt with very much in the catechism. In systematic theology we call that the whole area of Ecclesiology. It is one of the six main branches of theology, the doctrine of the Church. And we have looked, first, at what the Church is. You recall that Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church."³ We took an overview of the Church's status and substance and success.

Then, on the second occasion, we looked at how Christ gathers the Church. We focused on that word "gathered." The Son of God gathers. We saw how he gathers her out of self made darkness into his marvelous light.

And then we focused on defending and preserving the Church, how he does that.

And, fourthly, we looked at that this Church was a chosen Church. We looked at the doctrine of election and saw what a wonderful and positive doctrine it is, not a negative, prohibitive doctrine that pushes people away, but a doctrine that welcomes and draws people because since we are all depraved, without election no one would be saved.

And then, fifthly, we looked at the following words, that this elect Church agrees in true faith. We looked at the unity of the Church all around the world, how the Church is united as one.

² Romans 7:22—8:1.

³ Matthew 16:18.

And then last week Mr. [?] addressed on Christ as protector of the Church, this peculiar Church and how he keeps her and preserves her and maintains her.

Now this morning I want to bring you the first of the last two messages on this question, on the last words of this question that I am and forever shall remain a living member thereof.

Now, what I want to do with you is I want to step back a moment this morning and look at that word “living member” because in many churches today, many evangelical churches today there is just an assumption that everyone is a living member. Well, what makes our church different that way? Why do we examine ourselves?

Well, it is rooted in our distinctive which happily we are not the only church that does this, but it is a rather critical distinctive that we call reformed experiential preaching.

You see, in other words, in the world today there are many evangelical churches that just believe in the basics of the gospel and we are grateful for that. Within the evangelical churches there are a significant number of what we call reformed churches that embrace the doctrines of grace. Within the reformed churches there is a minority—and that is where we are at—that believe in the old paths that these reformed doctrines of grace must be experienced in the soul and that the pulpit is the proper place to also explain how true Christian experience bears itself out in every aspect of a believer’s life, in his personal spiritual life, in his family life, in his church life, his life at work wherever he goes, whatever he does. And so we are known. We are known in this community. We are known around the world as being a church that stresses reformed, experiential preaching.

And that means that we examine ourselves and each other by the marks and fruits of grace recorded in the Scriptures asking ourselves: Are we, indeed, living members of the Church of Jesus Christ?

So what I would like to do this morning is just focus on the question of what is reformed experiential preaching so we understand the background of this true experienced living membership.

And then next time I am called upon to do a catechism sermon, the Lord willing, I want to look at the word “I am a living member,” and what that actually means in terms of very concrete marks of grace. How can we really tell whether we personally are members of the Church of Jesus Christ.

So two more sermons on question 54 and the first this morning is on reformed experiential preaching. I want to give you, first of all, its definition. How do we define it? What is it? And then I want to set forward for you a half a dozen or more characteristics of how we can know it and why it is important today.

Well, let me begin by quoting you something from Francis Wayland. He was actually a 19th century Baptist pastor and he was complaining already in his day when he wrote

these words, 1857, that experiential preaching was on the wane and that people no longer were realizing how important it was even though it was the common way of preaching of Calvin, the Reformers and especially the Puritans and the Dutch further divines and the German pietists and the men of the Great awakening and Jonathan Edwards all the way through the history, all those men that we greatly admire in their preaching already in the 19th century people were beginning to pull away from that.

Now that is why it concerns me a great deal when I hear people in our own circles and even in our own church sometimes say, “Well, we don’t need experiential preaching.”

I am glad I don’t hear that very often. And I am glad that by far the majority of us are convinced that we do. And I do think that perhaps the ones who say we don’t need it don’t understand what it is. And, hence, my need to bring this sermon to you this morning.

But I want you to listen to this full quotation. It is a full paragraph. And this gives you in a nutshell just a glimpse of what experiential preaching is, how important these things are. Here is what Wayland says.

“From the manner in which our ministers used to enter upon their work it is evident that it must have been the prominent object of their lives to convert men to God by the grace of the Holy Spirit. They were remarkable for what was always called experimental preaching.”

Today the word is experiential, but they mean the same thing.

“They told much of the exercises of the human soul under the influence of the truth of the gospel, the feeling of a sinner while under the convicting power of the truth, the various subterfuges to which he resorted when aware of his danger, the successive applications of truth by which he was driven out of all of them, the despair of the soul when it found itself wholly without a refuge, its final submission to God and simple reliance on Christ, the joys of the new birth and the earnestness of the soul to introduce others to the happiness which it has now for the first time experienced, the trials of the soul when it found itself an object of reproach and persecution among those whom it loved best, the process of sanctification, the devices of Satan to lead us into sin, the mode in which the attacks of the adversary may be resisted, the danger of backsliding with all its evidences and the means of recovery from backsliding. These remarks show the tendency of the class of preachers which now seem to be passing away.”

Now that was one long sentence. But in that sentence I think you could get a feel of 15 items or so that preacher’s used to preach about that reflect what we call reformed experiential preaching.

But let’s be more precise now. What exactly do we mean by this? Well, the best way I can explain it is to tell you a story about when I left the active duty of the army and I

have said this story to you before, but I need to bring it in here to illustrate it so you can get a better handle on it.

There was a drill sergeant who said to me, “I hope that if in your subsequent six years of army reserves and meetings and duties and you get called back to active duty, I hope that if you ever fight in a war you will remember three things. The first thing is I want you to remember,” he said to me, “how the war should go. Everything you have learned in your basic training about fighting and war and remember how the war should go. Second, I want you to remember how the war does go. A war never goes as it should go. Wars are messy. Wars are bloody. Wars are problematic. Wars are awful. Wars are a struggle. And, thirdly, I want you to remember the end goal. You are fighting for Uncle Sam. Remember the US flag,” he said to me.

Well, after he said that to me I thought, you know, that is really an experiential definition of fighting. But, really, the Christian life, the whole Christian life is a warfare and experiential Christianity is really definable in those very same categories from a spiritual perspective because what is experiential preaching but explaining to people as best as our limited confines of human vocabulary can do, first of all, how they should live as a Christian, the ideal, the Romans eight which we just began to read, the wonderful things about what the Spirit does in the life and how the Christian should be and living out of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord with no condemnation and feeling the joy of salvation. We must preach that, the glories, the beauties, the fullness, the riches of what the ideal Christian life is so that the believer experientially might stretch out after it, to reach out for beyond what he knows and realize there is more yet to experience, more to know and long to know God better.

But, secondly, experiential preaching also means preaching how matters do go, the Romans seven struggles that I have read to you about, the cry, “O wretched man that I am!”⁴ Because the things I want to do I am not doing. The things I don’t want to do I find myself tempted to do.

And so you must not only present from the pulpit, you see, the ideal, but you must also present the real so that believers know and can identify with what they hear. So what is declared from the pulpit resonates in their soul and in their life experience.

And then you must also preach the end goal, the end goal through which all the struggles and trials and experiences of believer’s lives lead them to is that more and more they are conformed to Jesus Christ and prepared for glory to be with Christ forever.

And so reformed experiential preaching actually seeks to explain in terms of biblical, reformed truth how matters ought to go, how they do go and what is the end goal in the Christian life. If you can remember those three things, you will have a framework in which you can explain to the hundreds and thousands of other people that you get in a lot of religious conversations that will ask you, “Well, what exactly do you mean by

⁴ Romans 7:24.

experiential Christianity?” Because that is what will come up again and again and again when you talk with people.

You say, “Yes, but we need to experience the truth of God. We need experiential Christianity.”

And they will say, “Well, what do you mean by that?”

Now you will be able to tell them, won’t you? You will be able to say, “Well, that is preaching that teaches us how things ought to go, how things do go and what is the end goal.”

And that preaching of divine truth in these three dimensions, then, is applicable through the preaching to the whole range of the believer’s personal experience, his own experience, his experience in his family, in his church and in the world around him.

And so I hope you grasp right away that a traditional old fashioned definition of experiential preaching like this one is far, far, far bigger, wider, better, broader, deeper, higher than the definition that many people in our circle have in their background, at least, in their mind what experiential preaching is.

Sometimes I talk to people and they think experiential preaching just means talking about man’s misery. That is part of it, but it is... yeah, it is an important part, but it is only one part. Experiential preaching is far more than talking about man’s misery. It is talking about the experience of our deliverance, the experience of gratitude, the experience of the whole Christian way of life, the experience of the Christian way of life in every dimension of our lives. It is not just a selfish introspective type of thing. It is an introspective type of thing, yes, but then it spills out beyond me and impacts... well, it impacts everything.

In the *Complete Works of Thomas Halliburton* there is a wonderful introduction by a man named Robert Burns and he gives a definition of experiential preaching in that book, in that introduction. And somewhere in the introduction he says something like this. He says, “So the nutshell of the whole thing is this that the preacher brings the whole range of biblical truth home to the hearer’s business and bosom.”

And what he means is not only does preaching bring all of Christian truth home to your soul and to examine yourself and to your life, but it also brings it to you... the businesses you operate, the business you engage in and your family and your job and everywhere you will go.

So it is this kind of preaching, you see, that the world desperately needs. And when you go to these various conferences around the world and you are with some other experiential preachers, it is absolutely amazing how people resonate with that and the thousands and tens of thousands of people say, “This is what we need. This is what we need in our churches: reformed, experiential preaching.”

And I, for one, am very excited that today around the world there is a growing, growing hunger for it. But I am also very concerned that in our churches where we have had it for so many years we don't take it for granted. Or, worse yet, we don't marginalize it and try to make ourselves like all other churches or most other churches that simply stay in the shallow surface level and just address the Christian truths that come to us mostly from the head or in the mind.

The great need of reformed churches today is that we don't stay only with the mind, but we need the soul involved and the hands involved. We need the whole man preaching, a whole man theology running our lives that impacts head and heart and hands. And, you see, that is why we believe that so many people are leaving reformed churches and going to Pentecostal churches and charismatic churches today because there they speak to the heart. Everything is about the emotion and the feelings and... But the problem there is it is not grounded in the Word of God well so the head, the mind is missing.

Well, we need to maintain the old paths of the Puritans and other who stressed that preaching must address the whole man, mind, soul, hands, everything is involved. And that is what will keep people under preaching, not heart only or head only. But we need the whole man involved.

Now, it is this kind of preaching that Church history and Scripture reveals really transforms people and examines people and leads people deeper into truth. And our forefathers called this vital religion that made people examine themselves and truly be able to say from experience, "I am and forever shall remain a living member of the Church of Jesus Christ."

You see, so much preaching today—and thank God there is more and more experiential preaching—but still so much preaching today is reduced to a lecture or a demonstration or a catering to what people want to hear or some kind of shallow exposition of Scriptural texts. But it fails to explain what the reformers called vital religion, how a sinner is stripped of his self righteousness, how he is driven outside of himself to Christ alone for salvation, how he is led to what Wayland called that simple joy of reliance on Christ. So much preaching today fails to show how a redeemed sinner encounters that plaque of indwelling sin, battles against his backsliding, gains the victory by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is this kind of preaching that Paul calls the power of God unto salvation in Romans 1:16, this kind of preaching that transforms men and nations because it accurately reflects the vital experience of the children of God and it drives them to the Lord Jesus Christ and it explains the marks and fruits of saving grace necessary for a believer, the marks set forward in the Beatitudes in Matthew five or in Galatians 5:22, the fruit of the Spirit. It sets these things before the believer and before the unbeliever to examine them for their eternal futures.

Well, that, then, is what I would call a definition of experiential preaching.

Now, I want to spend the remainder of the time today looking with you at the characteristics of experiential preaching. Let's consider a few of those and we will sing and consider a few more.

The first is this. Experiential, reformed preaching is always Word centered and Christ centered. I repeat. It is always Word centered and Christ centered. It focuses on God's written Word, the Bible and his living Word, Jesus Christ.

How so?

Well, biblical preaching always flows out of the scriptural passage as it is expounded and as it is expounded with sound exegesis and sound principles of interpretation.

Jeremiah 3:15 says that God has given preachers to his people to feed them with knowledge and understanding. So proper preaching does not add an experiential part to the sermon just to say, well, now I have got some experiential part in my sermon. Experiential preaching is an important part of preaching, but it never forces itself into a text.

Experiential preaching always recognizes that other parts of preaching are also important. All preaching must be biblical. Preaching must be doctrinal. Preaching must be practical and it must be experiential. So I am just talking about one aspect of preaching this morning.

And when ministers think that all preaching from beginning to end... or think that their sermon doesn't begin until they get to the experiential part or else try to add the experiential part to their text so that they have to tell how God converts a sinner all over again every single sermon and every sermon sounds the same, this is artificial. This is not biblical preaching. Biblical preaching preaches experientially, yes, but out of the actual text at hand. And that is what gives it such wonderful diversity because the Bible is wonderfully diverse.

You see, according to Isaiah eight verse 20, if we don't speak according to this law and this testimony it is because there is no light in us. So in preaching a minister must expound either the subject at hand in topical preaching as we do in the catechism, or else the individual text given for that particular sermon.

And so the experiential element is always something that is tied to the Scriptures.

In fact, the very word experimental has the word experiment in it which implies an hypothesis. And just as a scientific experiment tests a hypothesis against a body of evidence, so experimental preaching examines experience in the light of the teaching of the Word of God. And it says in Martin Luther, "If you can't find your experience back in the Scriptures, it is probably from the devil and not from God."

So that is first. Experiential preaching is always flowing out of the Scriptures.

But the point I am making is it does flow out of the Scriptures. Preaching is not just to be good, grammatical and historical exegesis. It must be an exegesis that also involves spiritual, practical and experiential applications. That is what Paul stresses in 1 Corinthians 2:10-16 where he keeps stressing how the natural man can't understand the things of the Spirit of God, but that good exegesis is spiritual as well.

And since the Spirit always testifies of Jesus Christ, you see, this good spiritual exegesis will always find Christ in the text. And so it will always be Christ centered. It actually will have Christ be the supreme focus, the prism, the goal through which God reveals himself and, hence, through which the minister must preach.

And so we need to remember what William Perkins, the father of Puritanism, said at the end of his famous book on how to preach which was the classic textbook for all the Puritans. They were trained by it. On the very last page he said, "You want the summary of my whole book? I can say it to you in a few words. Here it is: Preach one Christ by Christ to the praise of Christ."

You see, when Christ is preached in all his theological grandeur, in all his practical vital reality and all its biblicalness, when we go into each text we preach with a flash light to search around for Jesus Christ and—as it were, I say it with reverence—pull him out, placard him before the people, show him in his beauty and his loveliness, his amiability, his approachableness, his suitability and we make him lovely and precious, the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of Christ is delighted to come into such preaching and to take Christ and to apply him experientially to the souls of sinners so that people walk out of church and say, "What a Savior we have."

That is experiential preaching.

You see, experiential preaching isn't only talking about my experience of Romans seven and the struggles I have with sin, but it is also talking about the beauty and the glory of Jesus Christ so that it sets the pathos, it sets the contours in which the experience of the souls of God's people may be drawn out to Jesus and they may experience the glory and the beauty and the joy of salvation in the Lamb of God.

This is what we need to grasp. And that is why when someone says, "Well, I miss experiential preaching," or, "I wish we had more experiential preaching," or, "This is experiential preaching," and you boil it down and all it is is they want to hear more about how man goes lost as if that is all there is, they don't understand experiential preaching.

That is an important part of it. That must be part of the preaching. But experiential preaching is exactly what the Heidelberg Catechism said it was, said it is in question two. How many things are necessary for you to know, that is to experience, shall you live happily and be ready to die happily? And the answer isn't one, by sin and misery. The

answer is three: my sin and misery, deliverance in the Lord Jesus Christ and gratitude, how to live a Christian life of sanctification.

And so all of this, you see, culminates around Jesus, because my sin and misery leads me—if I experience it rightly by the Holy Spirit—it leads me to need the Lord Jesus Christ. The law is a school master to lead me to Christ. Deliverance is all about Christ, of course. And gratitude is what I learned to live a lifestyle of out of Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:30. But he, “Of God is made unto us and righteousness [that is justification], and sanctification [that is gratitude], and redemption [that is a term that embraces it all].”⁵ Jesus Christ, in other words, is everything.

That is why Paul said, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”⁶

And so Cotton Matther, the New England Puritan, said this. “Exhibit as much as you can in your preaching of a glorious Christ that the model upon your whole ministry be Christ is all. Let others develop the pulpit fads that come and go. But let us specialize in preaching our Lord Jesus Christ.”

How well I remember Dr. Sinclair Ferguson saying to us at Westminster in the classroom, Westminster Seminary, “Brothers, spend the best energies of your life striving to preach the Lord Jesus Christ better and better.”

That’s it. That is Pauline. That is biblical. That is experiential.

Charles Bridges in his great book called *The Christian Ministry* said, “Let Christ be the diamond ring that shines in the bosom of your every sermon.”

And so, you see, the focal point of all experiential preaching is Jesus Christ. Preaching must exalt Christ for awakening, for justifying, for sanctifying, for comforting sinners.

John says, “In him was life; and the life was the light of men.”⁷

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”⁸

That is experience. That is the best, the most precious, the most wonderful experience in all the world, to be in this Savior, to know in this way and to behold his glory, to see him full of grace and truth.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:30.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:2.

⁷ John 1:4.

⁸ John 1:14.

Secondly, reformed experiential preaching is always applicatory, that is, it always applies, applies, applies truth to the soul.

The English word for application, by the way, comes from two Latin words the word *ap* which means to and *plico* which means to fold. So the idea is application involves joining something to something else, to fold it into something else.

In applicatory preaching, you see, there is a process of riveting truth so powerfully in people and forming it, as it were, into them and applying it to their daily lives so that they cannot help but see how they must change and how they can be empowered to change.

And that is why experiential preaching is always applicatory and applicatory preaching matches the text to every aspect of a listener's life, promoting by the grace of a spirit of religion that is power and now mere form.

Robert Burns put in that same introduction I mentioned to you this way. "Christianity must not only be known and understood and believed," which in many churches today that is all the further they go and then you are a living member of the church if you just know it, understand it and believe it. That is all there is. And then the preacher says in his prayer, "Lord, if there is anyone in church today who doesn't believe these things, let him believe in Jesus," and implying that maybe there is one in a crowd of 500 that doesn't know true conversion. And their attitude and atmosphere is set that, well, of course we are all Christians. We are all here. We all believe in the Bible from Genesis one to Revelation 22. We believe in the historicity of Adam. We believe. Of course we are Christians.

Well, listen to what Burns says. "Christianity should not only be known and understood and believed, but also felt and enjoyed and practically applied."

It is not just enough, you see, to know the doctrine that Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, intercedes for us. Have we ever enjoyed, have we ever experienced the power of his intercession for our own selves? Have we ever known experientially that he has prayed for us? And what does it mean for us in the Christian life?

You see, that is experiential preaching. It has got to be applied and felt and enjoyed and known personally. And that is why Paul says in to the Thessalonians, "I didn't come to you to bring you the Word only in the gospel, but I came to bring it to you also in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance."

This is truth in the inner man. This is truth known and felt and experienced.

Richard Baxter put it this way. "It would grieve one to the heart to hear what excellent doctrine some ministers have in their hands or yet they let die in their hands that doctrine for the lack of close searching and living application."

That is why the great Puritan Jonathan Edwards said, “All doctrine really is application and all application is doctrine.” You can’t separate the two. When you preach experientially you will see, when you set forth a doctrine you want to know: How do I use this doctrine? How do I experience this doctrine? What do I do with this doctrine?

That is experiential preaching.

Now applicatory preaching, then, must target the spiritual maturity and the condition of the preacher’s audience.

Now there are strong men. There are young men. There are babes in grace who must be fed with milk and not with strong meat. There are backsliding people. There are worldly minded people. There are afflicted people. There are dying believers. There are all sorts of people that need to be ministered to and they don’t all need the same medicine. If doctor gave just one.... Well, the all need Jesus Christ. In a sense they need the same medicine. But there are different aspects of truth that are most suited for people in different frames and conditions of mind and soul. That is the point.

And so when you only preach shallowly, you see, and you only go on the surface and you only deal with things in the mind and you don’t go down into the soul and to the soul’s experience, well, then you don’t divide your hearers in different categories and you don’t speak to them in their different areas of need.

Even a cursory look at Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount or the apostolic preaching in the Acts of the apostles, or the great preaching of the past by the Reformers and the Puritans shows that good preaching is rich with application.

I spent a large part of my life in the last two years reading John Calvin’s sermons in preparation for different conferences. And what amazed me the most in all that reading is how much of his sermon is application. Sometimes it is 50 percent or more, just application. It is like he almost rushes through the exegesis and then he says. Now, this is what we must do with it. This is what we must... this is the way we must think. This is the way we must act. This is what we must experience.

The Westminster divines summarized this so well in the *Directory for the Public Worship of God* in the 1640s. This is what they said. “The preacher is not to rest in general doctrine though never so much cleared and confirmed, but to bring that doctrine home to special use by application to his hearers which, albeit, is proves to be a work of great difficulty to himself requiring much prudence, zeal and meditation and to the natural and corrupt man will be very unpleasant. Yet he is to endeavor to perform it in such a manner that his hearers may feel the Word of God to be living and powerful and a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart and that if any unbeliever or ignorant person be present he may have the secrets of his heart be made manifest and give glory to God.”

Experiential preaching must be applicatory.

Thirdly, experiential reformed preaching is always discriminatory. That is, it discriminates. It makes a line division between the Christian and the non Christian. Opening the kingdom of heaven to one, as our Heidelberg Catechism puts it in Lord's Day 31, and shutting it to another. In fact, the catechism describes this as two keys; one key being church discipline, but the other key being preaching that makes this distinction.

So by these two keys, it says, the kingdom of heaven is open to believers and shut against unbelievers.

You see, if preaching does not discriminate, it is not the kingdom work for which Christ commissioned his apostles and servants.

Now how does experiential preaching do that? Well, it discriminates because it opens the kingdom of heaven by offering the forgiveness of sins and eternal life to those who truly embrace Christ as Savior and Lord, by living faith. But it also shuts the kingdom of heaven by proclaiming the wrath of God and his eternal condemnation upon those who are unbelieving, unrepentant, unconverted.

And so such preaching teaches that our religion must result in a personal experienced relationship with Jesus Christ.

You see, if our religion is not experienced, we will perish. Not because experience itself saves, but because the Christ who saves sinners must be experienced personally as the foundation upon which the house of our eternal hope is built, the rock, Jesus Christ.

And no one teaches us how to do that better than Jesus. He begins the most famous sermon in all the world ever preached with discriminating experiential preaching.

“He opened his mouth and taught them, saying...”⁹

Matthew 5:3. “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁰

Blessed are the spiritually poor. Blessed are the spiritually mourning. Blessed are the spiritually meek. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness. These are all... well, very, very experiential marks of grace. And the implication is cursed are those who are not spiritually poor in themselves. Cursed are those who do not mourn over sin. Cursed are those who don't ever experience what it means to become meek and submissive before me. Cursed are those who don't hunger and thirst after the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Cursed are those who are not merciful. Cursed are those who are not peacemakers.

It discriminates, you see, right away, the opening words of the sermon. Actually, the first three Beatitudes are blessings that focus on the inward disposition of the believer. The

⁹ Matthew 5:2.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:3.

fourth, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,”¹¹ reveals the heart beat of spiritual, experiential faith. That is really the essence of it all, that we hunger after Jesus Christ and his righteousness. And the last three or last four, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peace makers, the persecuted show experiential faith lived out in the midst of the world in our various relationships.

So here in the Beatitudes you have the exact kind of illustration of what I am trying to say experiential preaching really is.

Now, there are three ways in which ministers must discriminate in their preaching. The first is we must discriminate between the Church and the world, the living Church and worldly people, that is, discriminate between the godly and the ungodly. We must discriminate their states before God. One is righteous. One is wicked. We must discriminate by their knowledge or ignorance of the gospel. They are either spiritual men or they are natural men. We must discriminate by their regard for Christ as believers or unbelievers, by their interest in the Spirit of God, either they walk by the Spirit or they walk by the flesh. We must discriminate by their rule of conduct. Either they walk by the Word of God or the Bible says by the course of this world. We must discriminate by the masters whom they respectively obey, either the servants of God or the servant of Satan. We must discriminate by the road in which they travel, either the broad road to destruction or the narrow road to eternal life. All of these things I have just said have several scriptural proofs behind them, each one of them which would be too tedious to give you here from the pulpit.

But, you see, this is biblical. This is scriptural distinguishing between the godly and the ungodly. That is the first line of demarcation.

But the second line of demarcation is a little tighter. Discrimination between false professors or hypocrites in the Church and true professors. And the Bible speaks a lot about that, too, doesn't it, discriminating between an Esau and a Jacob, between the five false virgins and the five true, discriminating between those who have true faith and those who say, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name?”¹²

Haven't we been in the church?

Haven't we in thy name done many wonderful works?

And Jesus will say, “I have never known you.”

So we must discriminate between saving faith that what we call historical or temporary faith.

The great missionary to the Indians, David Brainerd put it this way. “Labor to distinguish clearly upon experiences and affections in religion that you may make a

¹¹ Matthew 5:6.

¹² Matthew 7:22.

difference between the gold and the shining dross. I say labor here if you would ever be a useful minister of Jesus Christ.”

And then there is also a kind of discrimination that a minister must carry on in preaching between those who are believers. That is to say they are all believers, but we must discriminate among them those that are mature and give advice to them and those that are young men and give advice to them and those that are babes and give advice to them as I mentioned before. So there is really three levels of discrimination here.

Listen to what one of our forefathers said. “The minister must discern between his sheep and wolves, in his sheep between the sound and unsound, in the unsound between the weak and the tainted, in the tainted between the nature and the qualities and the degrees of the disease and infection. And to all these he must learn how to administer a Word in season.”

See, preaching is not just a shallow thing where you simply say, “Well, if you believe in Jesus everything is well, no more to say.” There is a lot more to say.

Fourthly, experiential Calvinistic preaching stresses inward knowledge. In other words—I have hinted at this already—head knowledge is not enough.

Reverend [?] likes to tell this story that his father who wrote several books went into a bookstore once and he was actually looking at the price the book dealer was offering on his own book. So he had his own book in his hand and the bookstore owner came up to him and said, “Oh, that is a really good book.”

“Oh, really?” the old now deceased Reverend [?] said. “Do you know this man?”

He was kind of teasing him a little bit.

“Do you know this man?”

“Oh, yes,” the book store owner says. “I know him. He is a very good author.”

“Well,” he said, “If you would have known him you would have greeted him when he walked in the door.”

You see the point. It is one thing to read something and to have some head knowledge of it. It is another thing to actually know the person. It is one thing to read about Jesus Christ. It is another thing to have a relationship with Jesus Christ through the Word and to know him, to be able to say he is sweet and he is lovely to my soul.

It is one thing to know that I am a sinner and to have my conscience speak and, well, who sitting in this audience today wouldn't say or would dare to say, “I am not a sinner”?

We would all say, “Well, of course, we are sinners.”

It is another thing to experience the sinfulness of sin and what it does in my relationship with God and to grieve over it and to have that Romans seven struggle about it.

You see, in that Romans 7:22 to Romans 8:1 text what we really have here is three things going on in the believer. There is an inward delight. There is an inward dilemma and there is an inward deliverance. And all three are experienced in the depths of the soul. The inward delight is very obvious here in Paul's earnest inner life.

He says, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man."¹³

Paul is saying, "I have a conflict in my flesh between the Spirit and the flesh, but in my inward life, in the deepest part of my being, I delight in God's law. I want to walk in God's ways.

Who gave that to Paul? Well, you see, that is a sign of spiritual life, that inner delight, that longing from the core being to do the will of God.

Paul says, "I delight to be and to do that which is consistent with the law. I enjoy thinking consistently with God's law. I enjoy speaking consistently with God's law. I enjoy acting consistently with God's law. I delight in the inward man after the law of God. Oh, how love I thy law. It is my meditation all the day."

A believer wants to walk in the ways and in the fear of God. An unbeliever, well, maybe for benefits and so, but to really want to walk in the ways of God in order to honor God and love God and reflect his law because his law reflects who he is and to cherish it for what it is in itself that is only a believer's portion.

But then there is this inward dilemma. I find another law in me, this struggle, this incredible struggle, this law in which sin is always right there.

John Owen said, "Sin is always behind a believer's elbow." He uses a Greek word actually that refers to the idea that sin is always at hand as we would say it in our English expression today. Sin is always like an unwelcome foreigner, like a foreign intruder is always there to attack us.

Like a lady in Wales who had people break into her home and they were stealing things and she was bound and around her eyes and her ankles and set on a chair and she was 80 years old and these thieves are taking everything out of her house and suddenly she spoke to them. She said, "You men have no business being here. You are foreign intruders in my home. Be gone. God will bring you into judgment for this."

And one man was so troubled at what she said he sat down and began to weep and finally they had division among themselves and they left without the things they came to get. She sent them out of her house even when she was bound. That is an amazing story.

¹³ Romans 7:22.

But I thought later, “That is exactly how a believer ought to be.”

You see, when we feel bound up with this conflicting law and something inside of our flesh says, “Go ahead and yield to that temptation,” we ought to cry out, “Oh, my soul. I have no business allowing sin as a foreign intruder into my heart. Be gone, sin.”

You see, there is a struggle, this tug of war. It is like boys and girls. It is like two teams, you know, like at youth camp, the Canadians on one side, the Americans on the other, pulling on the rope and it seems like the Americans are going to win for a little while. And then the Canadians are pulling and they are going a few feet. And they are going back and forth and finally one group wins.

Well, that is how a believer feels inside. There is an inward dilemma.

“The good that I would I do not. The evil that I would not I find myself doing. Oh, wretched man that I am. Who shall deliver me?”

That is experiential religion.

But so is inward deliverance.

“I thank God through Jesus Christ.”¹⁴

You see, the believer knows what it is to take his misery, to take his struggle to Jesus, to lay it at his feet, to pick himself up when he falls seven times.

You know, when the wicked fall he doesn’t rise up again, but when the righteous fall he rises up seven times and goes back to God seven times, goes, flies back to the cross.

Well, [?] said, “I go to the cross a thousand times a day. I sin and I go to the cross. I sin and I go to the cross. Oh, Lord Jesus, forgive me. Forgive me. I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

That is our refuge. That is our hope. That is our everything.

If you don’t know what it means to go to the cross you are not a believer. That is experienced. Thank God for the cross. Thank God for his Son. Thank God for deliverance in the Lord Jesus Christ.

No believer goes to the cross as often as he wants to. So if you are sitting here thinking, “Oh, no. That is not me now because I don’t go to the cross 1000 times a day. I must not be a Christian.”

Don’t go down that road. Don’t go down that road.

¹⁴ Romans 7:25.

If you know what it means to be a sinner and you hate sin because God hates sin and you know what it means to cry out after God and you know what it means to hunger and thirst after the righteousness of Jesus and you know what it means to take your sin to God, howbeit many times there are few or you wish you could do it more, you are a Christian.

But if you don't know what that means you are not a Christian.

A Christian does not just have head religion. It penetrates the depths of his soul.

There is war going on.

You know, we often read in the paper of a black market that sells various human body parts. Well, Satan owns the blackest market and he works through this law, this inclination, this seeking, this contrary law that seeks to take possession of our eyes and our hands and our feet and our affections and our will and our heart. And so the end result is there is this jihad going on, this warfare, this holy war. John Bunyan calls a holy war between two powers and it goes on at eye gate. It goes on at ear gate. It goes on everywhere. And yet the believer experiences victory. Though he loses many skirmishes, he experiences victory through the war because Paul says, "Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁵

So there is a tug of war, but that tug of war drives me to Jesus. And I put all my trust in him and there I get the victory. There I get the deliverance.

Do you know? It is a healthy sign to be at war with sin, particularly when that war drives us to Jesus because then we know that true deliverance and that true reality, that true heart religion by which we can say, "Thank God."

You can be jubilant. Thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. What a joy it is to be delivered in Jesus Christ and to know the joy of that salvation.

Well, there are other marks. There are other marks to reformed preaching. Let me just give them. My time is almost up. Let me just give them to you very quickly. You can meditate on them yourself. Experiential preaching aims for balanced thinking. There is a balance between the objective, salvation outside of me in Christ, and the subjective, what is experienced inside. There is a balance between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. There is a balance between preaching doctrinally and practically and experientially and so on.

And then, two, experiential preaching is sincerely earnest. That is one thing you notice about all the experiential preachers of ages past. They were dead earnest in the pulpit. They weren't telling jokes in the pulpit. They weren't like a modern day comedy and then with a few serious things sprinkled throughout. They warned sinners. They were going to life eternal or life's eternal destruction.

¹⁵ Romans 5:1.

And then, finally, experiential preaching coincides with holy living and with dependence on the Holy Spirit. Experiential preachers of ages past that were greatly owned of God were men whose sermon transcripts matched their lives. This gives power when the preaching and the preacher harmonize together and the Spirit blesses it.

But also when that preacher is dependent on the Holy Spirit and realizes that he can only knock at the door of men's hearts, but the Spirit must come and open the door with a key.

And, you see, congregation, this whole pathos now... let me wrap things up by just saying this. This whole pathos of experiential preaching, this is what we are trying to do not only in our church, this is what we are trying to do in the seminary. We are trying to fill the world with reformed, experiential preachers. And as we take this around the world today it is amazing. There are countries where there is no experiential preaching at all. And by God's grace the funds that you give that train men, are being used to train men to bring this kind of preaching to countries that don't know anything about it. And so in this way we are trying to... God help us, but we are trying to change the world and we believe that the whole world needs this kind of preaching desperately. But also you and I need this kind of living desperately. We preach it because we need it ourselves.

So may I ask you: Are you a subject of the Holy Spirit's experiential work? Do you know these struggles, these joys, the truths of God experienced in your life?

Amen.