

The Pastor as... Prepared

Pastor Carl Muller

Pastor Carl Muller brings a B.Th. from Ontario Bible College, a B.A. from Waterloo University, and most importantly, over 25 years of pastoral experience to bear on this important topic of faithfully preparing our hearts and lives for ongoing effective pastoral ministry.

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It would appear that William Wilberforce had something of a “fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants” approach to things. So much so that his brother-in-law James Stephen took him to task and said: “*Your great defect has always been want of preparation!*”¹ Let such a charge never be laid at your feet. What a momentous responsibility you have! With all the solemnity of a man testifying under oath, Paul urges you to “*preach the word*” (II Timothy 4:2). With all the sobriety of a man uttering his dying words (4:6-8), Paul commands you to “*preach the word.*” The essence of the charge that Paul lays upon you is this: *preach the word.* Now put that in the context of all that I and II Timothy call upon that young minister to *be and do.*

1 Timothy

- Correct those teaching false doctrine and call them to a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith (1:3-5);
- Fight for divine truth and for God’s purposes, keeping his own faith and a good conscience (1:18, 19);
- Pray for the lost and lead the men of the church to do the same (2:1-8);
- Call women in the church to fulfill their God-given roll of submission and to raise up godly children, setting an example of faith, love and sanctity with self-restraint (2:9-15);
- Carefully select spiritual leaders for the church on the basis of their giftedness, godliness and virtue (3:1-13);
- Recognize the source of error and those who teach it, and point these things out to the rest of the church (4:1-6);
- Constantly be nourished on the words of Scripture and its sound teaching, avoiding all myths and false doctrines (4:6);
- Discipline himself for the purpose of godliness (4:7-11);

¹ Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*, (San Francisco: Harper, 2007), p. 199. The assessment is harsh, given Metaxas’ description of Wilberforce’s study habits (page 65).

- Boldly command and teach the truth of God's word (4:12);
- Be a model of spiritual virtue that all can follow (4:12);
- Faithfully read, explain and apply the Scriptures publicly (4:13, 14);
- Be progressing toward Christ-likeness in his own life (4:15, 16);
- Be gracious and gentle in confronting the sin of his people (5:1, 2);
- Give special consideration and care to those who are widows (5:3-16);
- Honour faithful church leaders who work hard (5:17-21);
- Choose church leaders with great care, seeing to it that they are both mature and proven (5:22);
- Take care of his physical condition so that he is strong to serve (5:23);
- Teach and preach principles of true godliness, helping his people discern between true godliness and mere hypocrisy (5:24-6:6);
- Flee the love of money (6:7-11);
- Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness (6:11);
- Fight the fight against all enemies and all attacks (6:12);
- Instruct the rich to do good, to be rich in good works, and to be generous (6:17-19);
- Guard the word of God as a sacred trust and treasure (6:20-21).
- Be strong in character (2:1);
- Be a teacher of apostolic truth so that he may reproduce himself to faithful men (2:2);
- Suffer difficulty and persecution willingly while making the maximum effort for Christ (2:3-7);
- Keep his eyes of Christ at all times (2:8-13);
- Lead with authority (2:14);
- Interpret and apply Scripture accurately (2:15);
- Avoid useless conversation that leads only to ungodliness (2:16);
- Be an instrument of honour, set apart from sin and useful to the Lord (2:20-21);
- Flee youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, and love (2:22);
- Refuse to be drawn into philosophical and theological wrangling (2:23);
- Not argue, but be kind, teachable, gentle, patient even when he is wronged (2:24-26);
- Face dangerous times with a deep knowledge of the Word of God (3:1-15);
- Understand that Scripture is the basis and content of all legitimate ministry (3:16-17);
- Preach the Word – in season and out of season – reproofing, rebuking and exhorting with all patience and instruction (4:1-2);

2 Timothy

- Keep the gift of God in him fresh and useful (1:6);
- Not be timid, but powerful (1:7);
- Never be ashamed of Christ or anyone who serves Christ (1:8-11);
- Hold tightly to the truth and guard it (1:12-14);
- Be sober in all things (4:5);
- Endure hardship (4:5);
- Do the work of an evangelist (4:5).

Dr. MacArthur sums all this up in five categories: Paul commanded Timothy to

- Be faithful in his preaching and teaching of Biblical truth;
- Be bold in exposing and refuting error;
- Be an example of godliness to the flock;
- Be diligent and work hard in the ministry;
- Be willing to suffer hardship and persecution in the service of his Lord!²

And then look closely at II Timothy 4:2 – “Preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” Clearly, the heart of the responsibility of the pastor is that he must preach the word and with his dying breath Paul urges that upon you. Preach *the Word* – that glorious deposit (1:13, 14), the sound teaching (4:3), the truth (verse 4), the “*the faith*” (verse 7), the Old Testament Scriptures and the teaching of the Apostles (3:10, 14). Preach the Word – always be ready to do so. Be on stand-by. Be on hand. Be alert and eager to preach the Word. Picture the linebacker in his three-point stance, tense, alert, ready to burst into action and you get a sense of what is called for here!³ Be ready! Be prepared!

Well, then, how do we go about getting into our three point stance?

PREPARE COMPREHENSIVELY

Prepare the whole man. Prepare the heart, the life, and the mind.

² John MacArthur and the Master’s Seminary Faculty, *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically*, (Nashville: Nelson, 2005), pages 25, 26.

³ Omit the idea of inflicting physical harm on the person in front of you.

Prepare the heart

Be ready to preach earnestly. You do not chat. You preach. You authoritatively announce danger and deliverance! Like Richard Baxter, you preach as never to preach again; you speak as a dying man to dying men. You do not simply explain your text correctly (though you must do that – II Timothy 2:15), you announce it passionately! “Remember, that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” (Acts 20:31)!

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*What! Speak coldly for God, and for men’s salvation? Can we believe that our people must be converted or condemned, and yet speak in a drowsy tone? In the name of God, brethren, labour to awaken your own hearts, before you go to the pulpit, that you may be fit to awaken the hearts of sinners. Remember they must be awakened or damned, and that a sleepy preacher will hardly awaken drowsy sinners. Though you give the holy things of God the highest praise in words, yet if you do it coldly, you will seem by your manner to unsay what you said in the matter. It is a kind of contempt of great things, especially of so great things, to speak of them without much affection and fervency. The manner, as well as the words, must set them forth.*⁴

This does not mean that you have to be loud, but you must be in earnest! Preaching, said Dr. Lloyd-Jones, is “*logic on fire ... it is theology on fire.... Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire.*”⁵ Give us “*of the speech which comes of*

⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, (Edinburgh: 1979), page 148.

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*,

a burning heart, as lava comes of a volcanic overflow," pleads Spurgeon, calling for "much heavenly fire" and deploring those sermons which make us feel "all the while as if you were sitting out in a snowstorm!"⁶ J. W. Alexander argues that preaching needs to be "argument made red hot," while G. Campbell Morgan said that the three essentials of a sermon are truth, clarity and passion.⁷ I wonder if, in our circles, we are a little weak on the "passion".

Now this earnestness cannot be self-generated. You cannot "work it up." At the risk of being labelled a cynic, may I say that one of the things we might learn from Tiger Woods' televised apology is that earnestness must not appear to be forced! The earnestness must be of the Spirit. Dr. Lloyd-Jones describes how preaching can be "theology coming through a man who is on fire," arguing that it is the Spirit who sets him aflame!

Do not quench the fire, do not quench the Spirit.... Christianity means warmth, it means a glow..."Yes, of course," you say, "but if you have true scholarship you will not be animated; you will be dignified. You will read a great treatise quietly and without passion" Out with the suggestion! That is quenching the Spirit. The Apostle Paul breaks some of the rules of grammar; he interrupts his own argument. It is because of the fire! We are so decorous, we are so controlled, we do

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), page 97.

⁶ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), page 283.

⁷ *Ibid.*, page 283, 284. Stott lays much stress on this matter. This seems ironic given his position on Hell. Surely annihilationism blunts passion!

everything with such decency and order that there is no life, there is no warmth, there is no power! But that is not New Testament Christianity ... Does your faith melt and move your heart? Does it get rid of the ice that is in you, the coldness of your heart, and the stiffness? The essence of New Testament Christianity is this warmth that is invariably the result of the presence of the Spirit...⁸

Be ready to preach earnestly. Who knows how God may use that in the life of your unbelieving hearers!

Stott comments: "fire in preaching depends on fire in the preacher, and this in turn comes from the Holy Spirit." And so we pray that the other Helper will do for us what Jesus did for the two on the road to Emmaus, and that as we ascend the pulpit our hearts will be burning

within us, and set our preaching aflame!

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There is a silent and almost unconscious process often going on in the minds of those who are listening to the sermons of a preacher really laboring for the conversion of souls. "Is he so earnest about my salvation, and shall I care nothing about the matter? Is my eternal happiness so much in his account, and shall it be nothing in mine? I can meet cold logic with counter argument; or at any rate, I can raise up objections against evidence. I can smile at the artifices of rhetoric and be merely pleased with displays of eloquence. I can sit unmoved under sermons which seem intended by the preacher to raise my estimate of myself, but I cannot stand this earnestness

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

*about me. The man is evidently intent upon saving my soul. I feel the grasp of his hand upon my arm, as if he would pluck me out of the fire. He has not only made me think, but he has made me feel. His earnestness has subdued me.*⁹

Be ready to preach humbly. I heard someone preach within the last year. After listening I felt no need to try and encourage the brother. The self-congratulatory orgy I had witnessed gave evidence of the fact that he was sufficiently encouraged with his own ministry as to not need my words. Pride in the pulpit is an abomination. It is so very hard to listen to a man who is boasting (albeit with great subtlety) about what he has done for the Lord. The Apostle Paul saw himself as a “servant of Christ” (I Corinthians 4:1 – literally, an “under oarsman”). And yet Stott is probably correct when he says that “pride is, without a doubt, the chief occupational hazard of the preacher.”¹⁰ Baxter laments: “O what a constant companion, what a tyrannical commander, what a sly, subtle and insinuating enemy is this sin of pride!”¹¹ One wonders where such pride originates? One would expect men who serve a sovereign God and preach sovereign grace to do so with humility. One would expect that given our faults, humility would mark our ministries. Horatius Bonar left instructions that after his death, no biography of him was to be written. Such is the nature of our ministries that

⁹ Zachary Eswine, “The Secret of Preaching: Wise Counsel from ‘Old Princeton’”, *Reformation and Revival*, Volume 9, Number 4, Fall, 2000, pages 106, 107.

¹⁰ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, page 320.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, page 321.

you and I need leave no such instructions! And yet overweening pride grips us! Far better to imitate that good man and walk humbly with our God!

And so learn humility. Without humility we will learn little else. Without humility we will fail to listen to our betters and miss the opportunity to imitate them. Without humility we will fail to listen to our people, whose influence can be so transforming.¹² Without humility we will fail to depend upon the Spirit. May God deliver us from self-sufficiency. Dr. Lloyd-Jones said somewhere that self-sufficiency was one of the besetting sins of the church

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in the 20th Century and I believe it to be still true today. However weak the faith of Moses and Jeremiah may have been as they stood on the threshold of ministry (Exodus 3:11f; Jeremiah 1:6), they certainly were not arrogantly self-confident! And yet, “*there are those who are overly keen and who display an overweening self-confidence that ill becomes true ambassadors of Christ.*”¹³ And so yes, without humility we will fail to depend upon the Spirit, but depend upon the Spirit we must! We tend to rely upon our theological acumen, our linguistic ability, our fervency, passion and preparation and, when too busy to prepare adequately, our gift for gab. But we should realize that our job (“*preach the Word*”) is impossible!

I shall not attempt to teach a tiger the virtues of vegetarianism; but I shall as

¹² Think of all the “one another” texts and imagine how God can shape us as they pray for us, teach us, exhort us, rebuke us, etc.

¹³ Frederick Leahy, *The Hand of God: The Comfort of Having a Sovereign God*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006), page 164.

*hopefully attempt that task as I would try to convince an unregenerate man of the truth revealed by God concerning sin, and righteousness and judgment to come.*¹⁴

And so we must tackle our ministries while humbly dependent upon God, entering into them as Paul entered Corinth (I Corinthians 2:1-5), excited about the possibility that God might repeat what He did in Thessalonica (I Thessalonians 1:5), glorying in the fact that when we are weak we are really strong (II Corinthians 12:7-10) because God will make His arm bare! As we serve we draw comfort from what my old professor said: God had power to use Balaam's donkey; he can use you! And how often have we not agonized through sermons, pitying our listeners, only to see God work mightily through it, just to show us who's in charge!

If you are a good preacher, listen to Henry Martyn: "*Men frequently admire me, and I am pleased; but I abhor the pleasure I feel.*"¹⁵

May God purge pride from us and teach us the humility of Whitefield, who prayed, after thirty years of ministry: "*Lord, help me to begin to begin.*"¹⁶

Be ready to preach boldly. I have been struck recently by the tremendous courage displayed by the Apostle Paul himself. In II Timothy 4:2 he tells us that we should preach the word "*in season and out of season.*" The idea is probably something like this: "*whether the time is favourable or not*". Further, we are told to preach the word

¹⁴ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, page 329.

¹⁵ Samuel Logan, Editor, *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, (New Jersey: P&R, 1986), page 76.

¹⁶ Leahy, *The Hand of God*, page 148.

even when people have no inclination to listen to sound doctrine, and we are to be faithful even when they are surrounding themselves with teachers who scratch where they itch. Preach the word no matter what! And Paul did this before Felix (Acts 24:22-27). This was not an "*in season*" time. It was dangerous to speak about righteousness, self-control and judgment to an unrighteous man who couldn't control his sexual desires and whom God would judge because he stole another man's wife! Felix had the keys to Paul's prison doors. It's not always easy to "*preach the word*"! Sometimes the people in front of us hold the purse strings, if not the keys to prison doors.

When you are solemnly charged before the Triune God to preach the word, however, you had better be bold to do so no matter what!

When you are solemnly charged before the Triune God to preach the word, however, you had better be bold to do so no matter what! Paul could reflect on his time in Ephesus and say that he had not kept anything back from them and, he says, "*I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God*" (Acts 20:20, 27). Indeed this must be true of us

for the Word we are called to preach is *His* word: "*....speak to them all that I command you. Do not be dismayed before their faces....speak to all the cities of Judah....all the words which I command you to speak to them. Do not diminish a word*" (Jeremiah 1:9, 17; 26:2). The fear of man is a snare (Proverbs 29:25) that militates against the moral courage needed to shepherd a people, that leads us to over-commit because we are afraid to say "no," that leads us to kowtow before those whose good opinion we value, and leads us to shut our mouths before those who might be offended at what we know the Bible to be saying! And so it is difficult to "*preach the word,*" but preach

the word we must. *“Courage is the indispensable requisite of any true ministry...if you are afraid of men and a slave to their opinions, go and do something else. Go and make shoes to fit them. Go even and paint pictures which you know are bad but which suit their bad taste. But do not keep on all your life preaching sermons which shall say not what God sent you to declare, but what they hire you to say. Be courageous. Be independent.”*¹⁷

Stott lists page after page of bold preachers, reminding us of Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Stephen, Paul, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, John Knox and so on.¹⁸ Would our names make that list? We shall speak of the Spirit later, but in regard to this matter of boldness, how encouraging to witness the transformation in the disciples that was produced by the indwelling and ministry of the Spirit. They go from running away like scared rabbits (Mark 14:50) to speaking the word boldly (Acts 4:31) despite being flogged, and they do so with joy (Acts 5:41)! That same Spirit lives and works within us.

Prepare the Life

A prepared life is a godly life. Listen to Phillips Brooks: *“Nothing but fire kindles fire. To know in one’s whole nature what it is to live by Christ; to be His, not our own; to be so occupied with gratitude for what He did for us and for what He continually is to us that His will and His glory shall be the sole desire of our life...that is the first necessity of the preacher....”*¹⁹ And so it is that Paul urges us to *“take heed to ourselves and our doctrine”* and to be *“examples to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity”* (I Timothy 4:16, 12). Paul was not embarrassed when people scrutinized his life:

¹⁷ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, page 300.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pages 300-305. Knox feared no man, or woman, as is evident by the title of his book, *“The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women”*!

¹⁹ John MacArthur and the Master’s Seminary Faculty, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition*, (Dallas: Word, 1992), page 65.

“but you have carefully followed my doctrine, my manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance” (II Timothy 3:10).

*An abundance of biblical knowledge or the dexterity of ministry skills is not the first test of the validity of one’s desire for the pastoral ministry. Rather, Scripture makes the primary test that of godly character (I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). It is with this area that training for such a high and holy calling must commence (and, I might add, continue).*²⁰

The man of God, writes Dr. MacArthur, is marked by what he flees from: he runs away from immorality (I Corinthians 6:18), idolatry (I Corinthian 10:14), youthful lusts (II Timothy 2:22), the love of money (I Timothy 3:3), and so on.²¹ This is absolutely crucial, for as M’Cheyne says, *“in great measure, according to the purity and perfection of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents which God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful instrument in the hand of God.”*²² M’Cheyne urges that we *“not forget the culture of the inner man – I mean the heart”*, and Baxter admonishes us:

Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine, and let you lay such stumbling blocks before the blind, as may be the occasion of their ruin; lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues; and be the greatest hinderers of the success of your own labours...It will much more hinder your work, if you contradict yourselves, and if your actions give your tongue the lie, and if you build up an hour or two (!) with

²⁰ MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry*, page 94.

²¹ MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, pages 86-88.

²² Samuel Logan, Editor, *The Preacher and Preaching*, page 63.

*your mouths, and all the week after pull down with your hands! This is the way to make men think that the Word of God is but an idle tale, and to make preaching seem no more than prating. He that means as he speaks, will surely do as he speaks. One proud, surly word, one needless contention, one covetous action, may cut the throat of many a sermon, and blast the fruit of all you have been doing.....we must study as hard how to live well, as how to preach well.*²³

A prepared life is a godly life, and we must not be like the man of whom Spurgeon spoke who preach so well and lived so badly, that when he was in the pulpit everybody said he ought never to come out again, and when he was out of it they all declared he ought never to enter it again!²⁴ We should be well aware of the withering influence of personal spiritual declension on our ministries. “When your soul becomes lean, your hearers, without knowing how or why, will find that your prayers in public have little savour for them, they will feel your barrenness, perhaps, before you perceive it yourself.”²⁵ And then the terrifying thought is what that declension may lead to in terms of a fall of some sort! What reproach that will bring on the name of Christ and what disrepute to the truth. No! Let us watch our lives and our doctrine. Let us remember the lesson Whitefield learned when he visited and sat under the ministry of Gilbert Tennent: “he convinced me more and more that we can preach the

*gospel of Christ no further than we have experienced the power of it in our own hearts!”*²⁶

A prepared life is a godly life. Here is a convicting story. A young man complains to John Wesley that his ministry lacks power and Wesley responds by saying: “Your temper is uneven; you lack love for your neighbours. You grow angry too easily; your tongue is too sharp – thus, the people will not hear you.”

A prepared life is a godly life. Here is advice for a church seeking a pastor. Organize a softball game in which the pastoral candidate participates. “Then on a close play at second base, call him out when he is really safe. See what happens.”²⁷

A prepared life is a pastoral life. The man who is called to “be ready in season and out of season” to preach the word is not some angelic visitant who only mingles with the mortals once or twice on Sundays.

He is a shepherd of souls. “Shepherd the flock among you,” says Peter (I Peter 5:2). Preparing a preacher means preparing a pastor.

We can preach the gospel of Christ no further than we have experienced the power of it in our own hearts!

What is a good sermon? The preacher can have the exegesis right, make all the proper redemptive-historical connections, have a clear outline and clever illustrations, but if it is not preached from his heart to the hearts of his people with specific knowledge of and concern for them, then it is not truly a sermon. To affirm with the Bible that the “shepherd knows his sheep” communicates a deep awareness of the wounds that need to be healed, the weaknesses that need to be strengthened, and the stray that need to be

²³ MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, page 89.

²⁴ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), page 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, page 14.

²⁶ Timothy Z. Witmer, “Seminary: A Place to Prepare Pastors?”, *Westminster Theological Journal*, Volume 69, page 240.

²⁷ Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centred Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), page 38.

sought Producing faithful shepherds who are concerned not only to feed the sheep, but also to know, lead, and protect them must be the goal of ministerial formation in general and the context of fruitful preaching in particular.²⁸

A friend of mine described the pastors in his area in this way: some have a big head and a small heart; others have a big heart and a small head. What I am saying here is that we need both. Loving, sacrificial, assiduous care for the flock ought to be the context in which the preacher preaches the word. When he mounts the pulpit, he will have come from their living rooms, their hospital beds, their gravesites.

Never lose touch with the people. John Owen said: “A sermon is not made with an eye upon the sermon, but with both eyes upon the people and all the heart upon God.” Martin Luther wrote: “when I preach, I regard neither doctors nor magistrates, of whom I have above forty in my congregation. My eyes are on the servant maids and the children.”²⁹ We must avoid becoming bookworms who shun the company of people. We shepherd the flock by feeding them from corporately and individually, by helping, encouraging, rebuking, stirring, comforting, and taking a general and genuine interest in them. Now you may have a large congrega-

²⁸ Witmer, “Seminary: A Place to Prepare Pastors?”, page 241.

²⁹ Curtis C. Thomas, *Practical Wisdom for Pastors*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), page 47.

tion and find it impossible to watch over all of them. Thank God then for a plurality of elders and for men who take their office seriously by actually caring for the flock, and reporting at elders’ meetings about their involvement with the sheep. In this way all the elders may be aware and prayerful.

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In light of this seminary training must never be isolated from the local church. “It takes a flock to shape a shepherd.”³⁰ Certainly then, by way of example, all faculty members should be committed to and actively involved in local churches. Pastors ought to be supportive of seminaries in any way they can. Seminary students ought to have opportunities for involvement and service in local churches.

Now let me emphasize that while we prepare for preaching by caring for people, the people, by their input and prayers prepare us for preaching. The people in our congregation inspire me, teach me, challenge me, and, on occasion, become the fiery ordeal that sanctifies me. All this contributes to improving the preaching. Furthermore, I have found, time without number, that as we gather on Wednesday to pray for, among others things, Sunday, my thoughts about Sunday’s messages begin to crystallize. Perhaps, come Sunday, they feel as if they ought to have prayed more, but nonetheless they do have this involvement in sermon preparation. In addition to that, I have found that when I have had opportunities to minister outside the context of our

³⁰ Witmer, *Seminary: A Place to Prepare Pastors?* page 242.

church, their faithful and fervent prayers are a vital part of any blessing God might choose to bestow upon that ministry. In a very real sense then my ministry has been their ministry.

Prepare the Mind

Get thee to a seminary! While seminaries alone cannot prepare a man for the ministry, they can be immensely helpful. Years ago Samuel Miller (1769-1850) wrote: *“How difficult is it, even in this day of theological seminaries, to supply an important vacant congregation with a pastor, in whom the union of eminent learning, talents, and piety is considered indispensable.”*³¹ Seminaries are certainly helpful in addressing the need to cultivate *“eminent learning”*. Now John Frame criticizes modern seminaries saying that *“most seminary graduates are not spiritually ready for the challenges of ministry”* while Robert Banks warns that the *“current model of theological education emphasizes ‘knowing’ at the expense of doing and being.”* Consequently Frame suggests that we scrap the whole idea: *“I propose first that we dump the academic model once for all – degrees, accreditation, tenure, the works.”*³² But that is surely to throw the baby out with the bath water. Surely an emphasis on spiritual formation, on mentoring, on local church involvement can move us closer to a proper balance between eminent learning and true piety. Furthermore, the opportunity to sit under eminently qualified men is absolutely invaluable and can get you started towards the *“eminent learning”* which you will require if you are to rightly divide the word.

³¹ Witmer, *Seminary: A Place to Prepare Pastors?* page 235.

³² *Ibid.*, pages 6, 7, 11.

But let us heed this caveat from Charles Bridges:

*Yet, after all, the solidly-learned, the studious, and well-furnished man is but a unshapen mass, from which the Christian minister is formed. The plastic energy – the quickening influence of the Almighty Spirit – is still needed to put light, life, and motion into inert substance, to mould it into the divine image and to make it a “vessel of honour meet for the Master’s use”.*³³

What of adding degrees later on in your ministry? I suppose a variety of questions would need to be answered: do I have the time and the money; what are my motives; will this degree help me in my ministry? Bridges has pointed words for us:

*The tree of knowledge may thrive, while the tree of life is languishing. Every enlargement of intellectual knowledge has a tendency to self-exaltation. The habit of study must be guarded, lest it should become an un-sanctified indulgence; craving to be fed at the expense of conscience or propriety; employed in speculative enquiries, rather than in holy and practical knowledge; preoccupying the time that belongs to immediate duties; or interfering with other avocations of equal or greater moment.*³⁴

However, if the questions are answered and the warnings are heeded, by all means proceed. But remember, the pastor is a passionate and life-long student whether he is adding letters or not. Some

³³ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), page 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, page 49.

of the most Biblically literate, erudite, wise and useful men I have known have had a minimum of degrees. An unquenchable thirst for God and the things of God has driven them to be always learning and always preparing!

Read and study the Bible. This is obvious, is it not? (I often wonder why the Scriptures are not read more often in church services than they are.) The well prepared pastor will have a thorough knowledge of the Bible. For the Christian minister, other branches of learning *“although important, are indeed only auxiliary to the main body of ministerial erudition”*³⁵ – the reading and study of the Scriptures! *“Constant perusal and re-perusal of Scripture is the great preparation for preaching.”* J. W. Alexander calls you as a preacher to *“engrave it upon your souls, that the whole business of your life is to prepare yourself for the work, and that no concentration of powers can be too great.”* This will involve *“dogged labour”*!³⁶ (Sometimes, in my study, it’s so glorious I can’t believe that they actually **pay** me to do this – but sometimes it is *“dogged labour”*!)

After thirty years of ministry I honestly feel that I am not anywhere near familiar enough with the Bible and the words *“constant perusal and re-perusal”* come to me with stinging force! Martin Holdt of South Africa urges pastors to read the Bible constantly and to read great chunks at a time. Charles Feinberg used to read through the Bible four times a year. John MacArthur says that he longs for the time to *“just sit down and go repeatedly through the Scriptures”*.³⁷ Whenever, to my shame, I neglect the read and study of the Word, I think of the man who was severely injured in an explosion. He lost his eyesight and both hands. Because he was a Christian he wanted to read his Bible but he found that

³⁵ Eswine, *“The Secret of Preaching”*, page 115.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, page 116.

³⁷ MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry*, page 169.

without hands he would have to use his lips to read his Braille Bible. However his lips were too badly damaged and so he ended up using his tongue! After a while he had *“read”* through the Bible four times!

The reading and study of which I speak is especially that which is meant to feed your own soul not the flock. *“Do not read the Bible to find texts for sermons, read it because it is the food that God has provided for your soul, because it is the word of God, because it is the means whereby you can get to know God. Read it because it is the bread of life”*!³⁸ What great need there is for such devotion!

*When commencing the study of divine truth, amid all the jarring opinions of human authors, it is of inexpressible moment to begin with studying the pure word of God, and to go regularly through the whole of that word before we prepossess our minds with human opinion. While continuing the study of divine truth, it is also of vast moment to keep up the daily reading of considerable portions of the pure word of God and so to keep Scriptural truth continually revolving in the mind. It will be the only effectual preservative against the taint and deterioration, which the mind might otherwise receive from reading human authors.”*³⁹

Read generally. I do not suppose that this group needs to be encouraged to read books about the Bible. But perhaps we can be encouraged that it is *“ok”* and indeed profitable to read books seemingly unrelated to the Bible. Jesus knew about farming, business, plants, weddings, children’s games, and used that knowledge in His teaching. It is clear from Acts 17 that Paul was familiar with pagan culture and used that knowledge, at one level, with his audi-

³⁸ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, page 172.

³⁹ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, page 51.

ence (Acts 17:28). Wide reading can be just as helpful for us.

So read books. I keep a list on my iPod of books to read. They include biographies of Ted Bundy, Nelson Mandela, and the Bielsky brothers, along with Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Books that in recent years have profoundly affected me, and I believe, helped me in my ministry include: John MacEnroe's autobiography, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Sidney Poitier's *Life Beyond Measure: Letters to My Grand-daughter*, and Paul Johnson's *Heroes*. Read books. Listen to the music of Brett Dennen, and be confronted with the inner workings of a seriously depressed mind. Watch television shows like "House" and learn about the twisted nature of the human heart. And listen to people. I find myself surrounded by people who know so much about the multitude of things about which I know nothing! Listening to the people in my church is a vital part of my on-going education.

Improve your skills. Learn to be a better preacher.⁴⁰ A sword is a dangerous weapon in the hand of the unskilled.

Learn what to leave out of your sermons. Generally speaking, we ought to be circumspect with our words anyway.⁴¹ This is especially true in preaching. So learn what to leave out. I read this quote somewhere and keep it in my Bible: "*Most fundamentalist preachers think that most people come to church vitally interested in who the Jesusites are.*" What I find interesting, they probably don't. And also ask yourself: will this little tidbit of scholarship (a Greek word, an historical reference, or some such thing) help the 12 year old girl in the front row? Ask yourself: would I actually men-

tion these things if a linguist or historian were sitting next to her?

Learn to be simple. A US state department spokesman said: "*I know that you believe that you understood what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.*"⁴² We want to be as clear as possible. Stuart Olyott writes: "*I have spent a good deal of my life trying to get across to preachers that an oral style is not the same as a written style.... We need to have deep thoughts, but we also need to express them simply. If the children can't understand, we are being too complicated; so we have to keep them in mind all the time.*"⁴³ It was a twelve year old girl who could not wait for Dr. Lloyd-Jones to get back into the pulpit because she couldn't understand all the other preachers! Let us note also that simplicity does not preclude beauty and power. We should seek to master the language so that we might communicate with elegant simplicity, utilizing the beauty of the English language. Erasmus used to have his students give "*no fewer than one hundred and fifty ways of saying 'Your letter has delighted me very much.'*" The point was to force students to "*use of all the verbal muscles in order to avoid flabbiness*".⁴⁴

Learn to make powerful, pointed and personal application. *Convince, rebuke, exhort!* Application is what separates the men from the boys when it comes to preaching. If you have simply explained the text, you have not preached. When people leave, they ought to know, in no uncertain terms, what impact this text ought to have on their lives. And let the application be authoritative. *God's Word requires you to respond in this way!*

Learn to use your voice. Let it be a normal, real, recognizable voice, one that

⁴⁰ Stuart Olyott, *Preaching Pure and Simple*, (Bryntirion: Bryntirion Press, 2007). Superb. Chapter six, entitled "Helpful Delivery" is very useful in this regard.

⁴¹ "Blessed is the man who, having nothing to say, abstains from giving wordy evidence of the fact." George Eliot.

⁴² Robert McCloskey, who served during the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

⁴³ Olyott, *Preaching*, page 133.

⁴⁴ John Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009), page 73.

people associate with you and not some other more famous preacher! Be aware of pitch, pace, volume, tone and emphasis. And be aware also of the “wonderful power of the pause”. Cicero said: “The secret of rhetoric is.....the pause.”⁴⁵

Learn to make eye contact. “You have no more useful means of non-verbal communication than this one. Eye contact demands attention.....Look them in the eyes, and each one will feel that the message is for them personally....Don’t treat them as a crowd, but as the individuals that they are.”⁴⁶

PREPARE CONFIDENTLY

It appears that to some, the title of a sermon is something of a key to its effectiveness. “We name babies and sermons to give them identity and significance. Unnamed anything are harder to love and harder to file.....it is almost impossible to be proud of anything unnamed. In short, all significance waits on a name, and, as a famous umpire once said, ‘It ain’t nothing’ till I call it’.”⁴⁷ Perhaps I am just bad at titles, but I suspect that they do not make much difference. God is the difference maker. In fact, if this whole matter of “preparing comprehensively” is overwhelming and almost discouraging, it is good to remember what John Newton said: “None but He who made the world can make a minister of the gospel.” We must prepare diligently but our confidence ought to be in this God who made the world. Listen to Richard Cecil:

⁴⁵ Olyott, *Preaching Pure and Simple*, page 137.

⁴⁶ Ibid., page 138.

⁴⁷ Calvin Miller, “Naming the Baby: The Right Sermon Title Makes all the Difference”, *Leadership Journal*, January 1, 1998.

*I once said to myself in the foolishness of my heart, “what sort of sermon must that have been, which was preached by St. Peter, when three thousand souls were converted at once!” What sort of sermon! Such as other sermons. There is nothing to be found in it extraordinary. The effect was not produced by his eloquence, but by the mighty power of God present with His word. It is in vain to attend one minister after another and to have sermon after sermon, unless we pray that the Holy Spirit may accompany His word.*⁴⁸

We need to be reminded of this, because while we may not trust in titles, we may

While we may not trust in titles, we may put our confidence in our theological acumen, our diligent preparation, our faithful prayers, and our earnest delivery.

put our confidence in our theological acumen, our diligent preparation, our faithful prayers, and our earnest delivery. We may do the same in counselling. Am I the only one who, upon hearing of someone in need of counsel, says, “Let me speak to him,”

as if to say, “That will surely do the trick!” Despicable hubris! No. Our confidence is in God.

Prayerful Preparation.

Some years ago my wife did a survey of all the pastors in my email address book in preparation for a message on prayer. The question she posed was: if you had your ministry to do over again, what would you do differently? The most common response: I would pray more. The purpose of this section is not to bash you but to inspire you, but let me begin with a heavy blow from Owen:

⁴⁸ Olyott, *Preaching Pure and Simple*, page 155, 156.

*For a man to solemnly undertake the interpretation of any portion of Scripture without invocation of God, to be taught and instructed by His Spirit, is a high provocation of Him; nor shall I expect the discovery of truth from any one, who thus proudly engages in a work so much above his ability.*⁴⁹

So we must pray in the preparation and in the delivery and then we must pray that God would be the “after preacher”. We must pray because “all our libraries are mere emptiness compared with our closets.” We must pray because our “prayer will be our ablest assistants while (our) discourses are yet upon the anvil.” We must pray because “nothing can so singularly fit you to preach as descending fresh from the mount of communion with God to speak with men.” We must pray because “great talents you may never have, but you will do well enough without them if you abound in intercession.”⁵⁰ We must pray because this is the command of God (Matthew 6:10), the example of Christ, the practice of the early church, the pattern set for us by Paul who urged the Ephesians believers that they be “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit...for all the saints – and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:18, 19).

The saints inspire us to pray. Samuel could say: “far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you” (I Samuel 12:23). How many times did Paul say things like this: “we give thank to

⁴⁹ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, page 61.

⁵⁰ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), pages 43, 45, 47.

the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you” (Colossians 1:3)? Joseph Alleine prayed from 4 am till 8 am, while Jonathan Edwards could write of David Brainerd that “his life shows the right way to success in the works of the ministry ... animated with love to Christ and souls, how did he labour always fervently...in prayers day and night, wrestling with God”. Let my diary have an entry like that of Henry Martyn: “September 24 – the determination with which I went to bed last night, of devoting this day to prayer and fasting, I was enabled to

*put into execution.”*⁵¹

Let it be evident to all that we are men of prayer. It is one thing for you to say that prayer is important to you; it is another thing for your wife to say it! But R. A. Torrey’s wife declared: “My husband was a man of much prayer and Bible study. He denied himself social

*intercourse with even his best friends, in order that he might have time for prayer, study and the preparation of his work.”*⁵²

We ought to pray for the people we preach to. Paul cared for the Thessalonians believers as a father cares for his children (I Thessalonians 2:11), and so a pastor ought to pray for his church family. “Because it is secret and therefore unrewarded by men, we shall only undertake it if we long for their spiritual welfare more than for their thanks.”⁵³

And then we urge others to pray for the ministry of the Word. Prayer meetings in a local church are absolutely vital. Spur-

⁵¹ Ibid., page 49.

⁵² MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, page 82. I was intrigued to note that even Charles Finney (!), in his own way, acknowledged the need for prayer: “I would say that unless I had the spirit of prayer I could do nothing.” Page 76.

⁵³ Ibid., page 79.

geon said that he would “plead even with tears for others’ prayers”.

*The bell in the steeple may be...fairly fashioned, and of soundest metal, but it is dumb until the ringer makes it speak. And...the preacher has no voice of quickening for the dead in sin, or of comfort for living saints unless the divine Spirit gives him a gracious pull, and begs him speak with power. Hence the need of prayer for both preachers and hearers.*⁵⁴

R. A. Torrey had advice for dissatisfied with their pastor: “Do you want a new minister? I can tell you how to get one. Pray for the one you have till God makes him over!”⁵⁵

R. Kent Hughes apparently assessed “scores of books on preaching, and was frequently disappointed that the authors said little or nothing about prayer”, prompting him to write: “this, and what experience God so far has given me in preaching and prayer, has brought a conviction. Should I ever write a book on essentials for preaching, I know now that I would devote at least a third of it to spiritual preparation in matters such as prayer. This would be the first third.”⁵⁶

The Spirit’s Power.

The weight of ministerial responsibilities renders the work apparently more fitting to the shoulders of angels than of men⁵⁷ and prompts Paul to ask: “who is sufficient for these things?” (II Corinthians 2:16). But that same Apostle can write: “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, that you, always having all sufficiency in

all things, may have an abundance for every good work” (II Corinthians 9:8). Sitting in an airport on my way to speak at a conference I felt overwhelmed with inadequacy. Turning to the Scriptures, I read this text, as if for the first time! What comfort!

And so if we are to preach the word in season and out of season and be effective, the Spirit must work!

*The gospel is preached in the ears of all; it only comes with power to some. The power that is in the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher; otherwise men would be converters of souls. Nor does it lie in the preacher’s learning; otherwise it would consist in the wisdom of men. We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were mysterious power going with it – the Holy Ghost changing the will of men. O Sirs! We might as well preach to stone wall as preach to humanity unless the Holy Ghost be with the word, to give it power to convert the soul.*⁵⁸

The weight of ministerial responsibilities renders the work apparently more fitting to the shoulders of angels than of men.

Watch as Jesus illumines the minds of the two on the Road to Emmaus! Observe as Paul enters Thessalonica and people turn from idols to serve the living and the true God. Know that this is the powerful work of illumination and regeneration by the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 2:10-14; 12:3). Be encouraged that God is able to do the same through you.

⁵⁴ Ibid., page 83.

⁵⁵ Ibid., page 82.

⁵⁶ Ibid., page 74.

⁵⁷ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, page 31.

⁵⁸ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, page 335.

PREPARE CONTINUALLY

Preparation is on-going

It was a chapel service more than 30 years ago at Ontario Bible College and a student was preaching. I sat back feeling I had nothing to learn from this fellow. I glanced at the professor sitting next to me and noticed him taking notes, not for critical reasons but for personal growth. It was, perhaps, my first intimation that preparation is on-going. Then some fifteen years later, and after ten years in the ministry, I was taken on as assistant to Bill Payne. Watching him, I felt like a novice, and again realized that preparation is on-going.

Furthermore, preparation pervades his life!

*I would lay it down as a first postulate that (the preacher) is always preparing. I mean that literally. That does not mean to say that he is always sitting at a desk; but he is always preparing. As it is true to say that there is no such thing as a holiday in the spiritual realm, I always feel that in the same sense the preacher never has a holiday. He has times of absence from his normal work, he has vacations, but because of the nature and character of his calling he is never free from his work. Everything he does, or that happens to him, he finds to be relevant to this great work and is therefore a part of his preparation.*⁵⁹

Preparation is arduous

Notice that Paul says we must “convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering.” The choice of words suggests that people will be resistant to the word. This work, and the ongoing preparation it involves, is not going to be easy. Timothy is to keep preaching in season and out of season. Chrysostom suggests that there is includ-

ed the idea of times that are reasonable or unseasonable to *Timothy* as well as his hearers. It’s not going to be easy to preach the Word sometimes! Sometimes we will grow weary, failing to see a harvest (Galatians 6:9), or fruit of any kind. Benjamin Beddome speaks of the “*precariousness and uncertainty of success.*”

*“We have toiled all the night”, say the disciples, “and caught nothing”, and thus may ministers do, nay many nights and days.....sometimes the gospel makes astonishing progress...(but) in general ministers fish with an angling rod, and it is but now and then that they win a soul to Christ.*⁶⁰

Chrysostom urges us to press on no matter the difficulties!

Just as the fountains, though none may draw from them, still flow on; and the rivers, though none may drink from them, still run; so must we do all on our part in speaking, though none give heed to us.

Yes, the work will be hard. We labour at exegesis, we search for illustrations, we study with diligence, we agonize in prayer, we organize material with difficulty, and we try not to be shattered when everything seems the same on Monday. But this is what we are called to! “*We must die to the notion that we do not have to think hard or work hard to achieve spiritual goals.*” But thanks be to God, our sufficiency is of God (II Cor 3:5), for “*on the other hand, we must die to the notion that our thinking and our working is decisive in achieving spiritual goals....the key to spiritual achievement is to work hard, and to know and believe and be happy that God’s sovereign grace is the decisive cause of all good that comes.*”⁶¹

⁶⁰ William G. Moore, “the Kind of Man God Uses: Early Baptist Voices”, *The Founders Journal*, 2004.

⁶¹ Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ*, pages 35, 36.