

STUDY 13

The Ministry of the Word (3): The Proclaimed Word

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THE SENSITIVE PREACHER

As preachers, we can be quite touchy about our preaching. It is one of the most important things we do—our whole being and existence is tied up in it. It is also one of the most heartfelt things we do—in our preaching we invest, and sometimes expose, ourselves and our innermost concerns. Any attack or criticism of our preaching we take very personally—it is an assault on our very selves and our reason for being. So we do not always respond well to such critical attack, or even the prospect of it. It could be a case of: ‘You toucha my sermon I smasha your face!’

I put it that way in a recent meeting with my spiritual advisor/companion. There were aspects of my preaching that I was a little uncomfortable about, and I thought it was time that I addressed them—maybe I had said one or two things that I should not have said, or maybe at some points I had been too clever by half, perhaps with a view to currying some favour with the congregation. I admitted to this kind of sensitivity with regard to my preaching. His response, in the form of a question, was most helpful: ‘Why do you call it *your* sermon?’ I knew he was right, on two counts: in preaching (1) I am not speaking on my own behalf, and (2) it is not my job to try to make myself pleasing to the people.

We’ll take the second one first.

PEOPLE-PLEASING

Paul the apostle was clear as to where our approval needs to come from:

Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10).¹

Pleasing people, even though it is almost automatically our default position, is an indication that we are still not sure that we are pleasing to God. Pleasing to God!—

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

The Proclaimed Word

how could we ever be that? Deep down inside us there is an uneasy discomfort about the way we are, occasioned by the guilt of our sin. It could be that we have given up on any possibility of ever being pleasing to God. So we opt at least to try and be pleasing to ourselves, so that we can live with ourselves a little more easily. Our inner dissatisfaction, however, makes that difficult. So we turn to outside sources—we work hard on getting other people to be pleased with us. Not so that they would have pleasure from us, but so that we would have approval from them, and so bolster our sagging self-esteem. How dreadfully selfish is that! And what an abuse of others for our own ends. And a preacher with any modicum of skill or giftedness has the instrument ready to hand—the sermon! Preach it with an ear to the crowd and half an eye on the main chance and we’ll get enough positive feedback to alleviate the inner discomfort—at least for a while (though actually compounding it by the very thing we are doing)! And Paul says, as long as we are doing that, we are not serving Christ.

What we need to hear is what Jesus heard at his baptism:

You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased (Luke 3:22).²

God’s full approval, in everything we do—isn’t that what comes to us in the gospel? ‘There is . . . no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:1); ‘let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience’ (Heb. 10:22). Once we know that God Himself is pleased with us, what other affirmation do we need? ‘Such a person receives praise not from others but from God’ (Rom. 2:29). Our Lord Jesus said that as long as we persist in seeking the praises of others, we are preventing ourselves from knowing the praise that comes from God—that he knew, and came to bring us to:

How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? (John 5:44).

God forbid that we should be among those believers in Jesus who ‘loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God’ (John 12:43)!

THE WORD OF CHRIST

The other thing I was reminded of was that when I preach in the name of Jesus, it is not *my* sermon. I am the delivery boy. Paul says that ‘faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ’ (Rom. 10:17)—which most likely means ‘the word spoken by Christ himself’. That is certainly how it came through to Paul:

. . . I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ . . . God . . . was pleased to reveal his Son to [literally *in*] me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles (Gal. 1:11–12, 15–16).

We had better receive it in the same way—whichever messenger it comes to us through—or else our ‘faith’ will be second-hand, and our preaching even staler.

² NRSV note.

The Proclaimed Word

Paul renounced dependence on rhetorical skills in order that his message could come through to people directly:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God (1 Cor. 2:1–5).

This is indeed how his message did come through and was received:

... our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction ... you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit ... when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers (1 Thess. 1:5, 6; 2:13).

As a result, no less livingly:

... the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it (1 Thess. 1:8).

So Paul could then leave them to it, and move on elsewhere. Peter insisted on the same approach:

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God (1 Pet. 4:10–11).

Others have seen the same dynamic at work. Martin Luther:

The mouth of the preacher and the Word which I have heard, is not his word and preaching, but of the Holy Spirit who through such external means gives faith and also sanctifies.³

John Calvin:

The word goes out from the mouth of God in such a manner that it likewise goes out of the mouth of men; but God does not speak openly from heaven; but employs men as his instruments.⁴

P. T. Forsyth:

Revelation does not consist of communications about God. It never did ... revelation is the self-bestowal of the living God, His self-limitation in the interest of grace. It is the living God in the act of imparting Himself to living souls. It is God Himself drawing ever more near and arrived at last. And a living God can only come to men by living men.⁵

³ Quoted in Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1996, p. 113.

⁴ Quoted in Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, p. 114.

⁵ P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, NCPI, Blackwood (1907) 1993, p. 10. Forsyth here is speaking of revelation in relation to the Bible, but it applies also to the way he sees revelation coming to people through the preached word (see below); quoted also in Geoffrey Bingham, *True Preaching: The Agony and the Ecstasy* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1988), p. 106.

The Proclaimed Word

Are we then to equate preaching with God speaking? There is a statement in the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), authored by the Swiss reformer Henry Bullinger, that reads as follows: ‘The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God’ (*praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*).⁶ The article of which these words are the marginal heading says that ‘when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful’, and speaks of how ‘the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; who, although he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God abides true and good’. What is meant by ‘this Word of God’ that is preached is illuminated by the fact that this article appears in a chapter entitled ‘Of the Holy Scripture being the true Word of God’.⁷ Peter Adam comments:

... the statement ‘The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God’ needs some careful theological treatment ...

Perhaps the best way of describing it is to say that when human beings explain the Word of God, preach it, teach it, and urge people to accept it, then the Word of God achieves its purpose, and this is one of the normal ways in which God brings his Word to human beings. It is perhaps helpful to describe this in terms of the work of the Spirit. We must assert that the Spirit was involved in the creation of the Word of God, that is, Scripture. For Scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16), and ‘no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’ (2 Pet. 1:21). We must also recognize the work of the Spirit in the activity of the preacher, and the activity of the Spirit in the minds, hearts and wills of the hearers. The Scripture itself is a product of the Spirit, and when the Spirit works in the preacher and in the hearers, the words of God are mediated and bear fruit in the lives of those who hear.⁸

Peter Adam’s own practical definition of preaching (among other ministries of the Word) is ‘the explanation and application of the Word to the congregation of Christ, in order to produce corporate preparation for service, unity of faith, maturity, growth and upbuilding’.⁹

Lest we should think that ‘speaking the very words of God’ exalts us as possessing some kind of papal infallibility or specially privileged position above others, Calvin saw God’s use of human preachers as an accommodation to our weakness, and as a way of teaching us humility and obedience:

He also provides for our weakness in that he prefers to address us in human fashion through interpreters in order to draw us to himself, rather than to thunder at us and drive us away.¹⁰

Again, this is the best and most useful exercise in humility, when he accustoms us to obey his Word, even though it be preached through men like us and sometimes by those of lower worth than we ... when a puny man risen from the dust speaks in God’s name, at this point we best evidence our piety and obedience toward God if we show ourselves teachable towards his minister although he excels us in nothing.¹¹

God’s gracious and condescending action, rather than any exaltation of the preacher, is in view:

⁶ Quoted in Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, p. 112.

⁷ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, p. 113.

⁸ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, pp. 114, 118.

⁹ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, p. 75. By ‘the Word’, Adam here means the Scriptures.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.i.5; quoted Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, p. 140.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes* IV.iii.1; quoted in Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, pp. 139–40.

The Proclaimed Word

Therefore when the gospel is preached among us, God's applying himself in that way to our weakness is as much as if he came down to us himself . . . how greatly he loves us in that he deals with us according to our own small capacity.¹²

GOD AT WORK

Preaching, then, is not just the preacher's words, nor the reiteration of Scripture in however engaging a fashion. Behind and through and at the forefront of this is the saving action of God:

. . . the Gospel of this grace . . . is an act and a power: it is God's *act* of redemption before it is man's message of it. It is an eternal, perennial act of God in Christ, repeating itself within each declaration of it. Only as a Gospel done by God is it a Gospel spoken by man. It is a revelation only because it was first of all a reconciliation. It was a work that redeemed us into the power of understanding its own word. It is an objective power, a historic act and perennial energy of the holy love of God in Christ; decisive for humanity in time and eternity; and altering for ever the whole relation of the soul to God, as it may be rejected or believed. The gift of God's grace was, and is, His work of Gospel. And it is this act that is prolonged in the word of the preacher, and not merely proclaimed.¹³

Preaching, for Forsyth, is 'sacramental'. We need to understand carefully what he means by this:

The preacher's place in the Church is sacramental . . . In true preaching, as in a true sacrament, more is done than said . . . A revelation may be something exhibited, but in a sacrament there is something effected. And the one revelation in the strict sense is the sacrament of the Cross, the Cross as an effective act of redemption . . .

The preacher, in reproducing this Gospel word of God, prolongs Christ's sacramental work. The real presence of Christ crucified is what makes preaching. It is what makes of a speech a sermon, and of a sermon Gospel . . . We do not repeat or imitate that Cross, on the one hand; and we do not merely state it, on the other. It re-enacts itself in us. God's living word reproduces itself as a living act . . . Every true sermon, therefore, is a sacramental time and act. It is God's Gospel act reasserting itself in detail. The preacher's word, when he preaches the gospel and not only delivers a sermon, is an effective deed, charged with blessing or with judgment.¹⁴

Forsyth names some of the things that get in the way of this happening:

It is this sacramental note that I fear our preaching often loses. It is this objective power, overruling both the temperament of the preacher and the temper of his time. We speak freely and finely about the Gospel, but does the Gospel come to its own in it all? Does it preach itself through us with power? Are our sermons deeds, 'action-sermons'? They cost much labour, and what do we take by it? They are not without some effect, but are they real causes in the religious life? If they are not, is it because they lack will-power, because they are exercises more than acts, productions more than powers, which aim at impression more than change?¹⁵

Lest we should think that it is all up to us and our own lone willpower, Forsyth goes on:

¹² John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (on 4:11–14), Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1973, p. 376; quoted in Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, p. 140.

¹³ Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, pp. 53–56.

¹⁵ Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, pp. 57–58.

The Proclaimed Word

Is it because they lack behind them the volume of a Church's conviction, a Church's faith, the impact of a whole Church's will?¹⁶

A renewal of true preaching will need not just the renewal of the individual preacher but the renewal of the whole church in conviction, faith, and robustness of will.

What we are talking about here is illustrated by a couple of accounts of Geoffrey Bingham's preaching. The first is told in a story entitled 'The Glory on the Inside', from the time of Geoffrey's ministry at Miller's Point in the 1950s. One woman had found that 'His preaching was too sincere, too related' to allow her to drowse during it. 'It kept pinging against her mind, impinging on her feelings.'¹⁷ She later tells the preacher:

John and I were secular—both of us—but then you changed it all for me. It happened when I saw the Glory . . . I used to sit in the church and see this great golden glow around you. It was on you and about you, and the only times it was never there were when you were angry at something people had done. Those times your words were apart from the Glory . . .

The Glory was like that right up to the first Temple Day, and then after that I never saw it but once, and that was the night the church changed, the night Trudi became a new person . . .

The Glory never really left . . .

That night when the Glory was around you and you preached like you never had before, and we were all brought to tears, that was when the Glory came to stay amongst us . . .

That night . . . the Glory passed into Trudi. I saw it actually go from you into her. She shone with it . . .

It came in this new way to more of us also; you and your lovely wife, in fact those of us who wanted it. It just didn't have to be with you: it was for all of us.¹⁸

The other account comes from a teaching Mission at St Luke's Church, Thornleigh NSW in August 1962, when Geoffrey was on furlough from missionary service in Pakistan. During this Thornleigh mission one woman said:

'When Mr Bingham was speaking there, he just suddenly disappeared, and there was Jesus there in the pulpit, and he looked right through me, and I know now I am forgiven.' She was a changed woman from that point onwards.¹⁹

What happened with the apostle Peter in the house of Cornelius should be the prayer of every preacher:

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word (Acts 10:44).

THE PREACHER AND SUFFERING

What is necessary for this to come through? Forsyth says of the preacher:

He is a living element in Christ's hands (broken, if need be) for the distribution and increment of Grace. He is laid on the altar of the Cross . . . No true preaching of the Cross can be other than part

¹⁶ Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, p. 58.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Bingham, *3 Special Stories*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1983, p. 10.

¹⁸ G. Bingham, *3 Special Stories*, pp. 23–24.

¹⁹ Interview with John Dunn, recorded 9th September 2008. The woman was John Dunn's mother, not normally accustomed to attending religious meetings.

The Proclaimed Word

of the action of the Cross. If a man preach let him preach as the Oracle of God, let him preach as Christ did, whose true pulpit was His Cross.²⁰

Preachers must first of all know themselves, in God's dealing with them:

When we know the dark reaches of dread and guilt, the grey, wraith-like angst of the fearful human heart, then we can understand what God must do to purge away every stain, and to dissolve the enormous clouds of wrath that lie over the human heart to trouble it up to death and through all eternity . . .

This preacher, then, has not only a thinking knowledge of these things, but a living experience of them. He has been drawn down into the depths of intolerable shame. His own heart has been deeply convicted by the evil of the human heart, and he has long ago acknowledged the perfectness of God in His wrath upon evil.²¹

This is to be in no way downplayed, 'lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power'.²² 'He must face the cringing, hating world with the unadulterated truth that God is wrathful when they violate His creation, and confront His holiness with their pollution.'²³ Only so will the full glory of the gospel come through:

If he so much as minimize God's wrath on sin one iota, or maximize the good of man one degree then he shall lose sight of overwhelming grace which works out on the Cross the full meed of wrath, and the full exercise of love and mercy. God-in-Himself deals with the anguish of man's evil and his alienation from the Father-Creator, and reconciles the world unto Himself. The wonderful dimensions of this are what bear down on the human heart and liberate it, and make it love God and agree to do all that He requires, not only in moral obedience, but in the obedience wrought by grace and love to tell others of the God of love. This living, pulsing, warm and palpable thing in the heart is the true *kerugma* which the preacher knows . . . This is the true constraint, and the passing over it, many times, of pain, loss, and persecution will not prevent the kerigmatic utterance, 'God is love!'²⁴

Maintaining this stance will inevitably arouse opposition, and with it the consequent suffering. Under a heading 'The Suffering Apostle and the Non-Suffering Super-Apostle'—we can pick which type we want to be!—Geoffrey wrote of the opposition Paul encountered in Corinth:

It appears that Paul had opponents in the Corinthian assembly. These were people whom he calls—with some disgust—'superlative apostles' ([2 Cor.] 11:5; 12:11). They seemed to accuse Paul of being dull, a poor preacher, weak when present although able to write powerful letters at a distance! They appeared to be attractive, dynamic, and brilliant—far outclassing Paul.

Paul's answer to their criticism of him is virtually to ask, 'How do these people suffer?' He is really saying, 'You show me a person who suffers in the preaching of the Gospel and I will acclaim him as a true preacher. However, show me a man who does not suffer and I will show you a charlatan.'²⁵

He then peruses 2 Corinthians 6:3–10 and 11:2b–29, in which Paul catalogues his sufferings as an apostle of Christ on account of the offence of the Cross, and exhorts

²⁰ Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, pp. 54–5.

²¹ Bingham, *True Preaching*, pp. 32–33.

²² 1 Cor. 1:17, RSV.

²³ Bingham, *True Preaching*, p. 33.

²⁴ Bingham, *True Preaching*, pp. 33–34. See further 'The Word of God', ch. 2 in *A Quiet Revival: Geoffrey Bingham in Life and Ministry*, ed. Martin Bleby, yet to be published.

²⁵ Bingham, *True Preaching*, pp. 64–65.

The Proclaimed Word

us ‘to turn to our own preaching and ask whether it stirs up such opposition, calls for such suffering, and thus has such effects’.²⁶ He concludes:

We conclude rightly that genuine proclamation will inevitably bring suffering, but will also be powerful and effective preaching.²⁷

PREACHING: A FEW PRACTICALITIES

We conclude by looking at three practical aspects of preaching: length and frequency of preaching, the matter of application, and the use or non-use of notes.

Length and Frequency of Preaching

On the length of a sermon Forsyth observes:

I should like to say here that in my humble judgment the demand for short sermons on the part of Christian people is one of the most fatal influences at work to destroy preaching in the true sense of the word. How can a man preach if he feel throughout that the people set a watch upon his lips? Brevity may be the soul of wit, but the preacher is not a wit . . . If the preachers are not satisfactory, let the Church take steps to make them so. If they bore the people, let the people not be too patient. But let us not go wrong as to what preaching is for the Gospel, or for any Church that is in earnest with the Gospel. A Christianity of short sermons is a Christianity of short fibre.²⁸

Luther, on the other hand, had this to say:

To me, a long sermon is an abomination, for the desire of the audience to listen is destroyed, and the preacher only defeats himself. On this account I took Dr. Brughenhagen severely to task, for although he preaches long sermons with spontaneity and pleasure, nevertheless it is a mistake.²⁹

But for Luther, however, how long is long? Luther gave this advice to a discouraged preacher who complained that preaching was a burden and his sermons were always short:

If you cannot preach an hour, then preach half an hour or a quarter of an hour.³⁰

Calvin preached for forty minutes, presumably fitted to his congregation’s ability to hear.³¹

In Ephesus, Paul the apostle, after three months of speaking in the synagogue, ‘argued daily in the lecture hall of a certain Tyrannus, from eleven o’clock in the morning to four in the afternoon. This continued for two years’ (Acts 19:8–10, with footnote). Five hours a day for two years amounts to 3,650 hours of teaching. The Reformers followed suit:

²⁶ Bingham, *True Preaching*, p. 65.

²⁷ Bingham, *True Preaching*, p. 67.

²⁸ Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, p. 75

²⁹ From Thomas Kepler, ed., *Table Talk of Martin Luther*, Baker Book House, 1979; quoted in *The Parish Herald*, Eudunda Lutheran Church, July 1983, p. 5.

³⁰ Quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: Martin Luther*, Lion Publishing, Tring, 1978, pp. 349–50.

³¹ Publisher’s Introduction to Calvin, *Ephesians*, p. xv, n. 1; referred to in Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, p. 153. Eight years after Calvin’s death the Council of Geneva issued a decree that ministers should preach shorter sermons and not exceed one hour.

The Proclaimed Word

The reformers at Wittenberg undertook an extensive campaign of religious instruction through the sermon. There were three public services on Sunday: from five to six in the morning on the Pauline epistles, from nine to ten on the Gospels, and in the afternoon at a variable hour on a continuation of the theme of the morning or on the catechism. The church was not locked during the week, but on Mondays and Tuesdays there were sermons on the catechism, Wednesdays on the Gospel of Matthew, Thursdays and Fridays on the apostolic letters, and Saturday evening on John's Gospel. No one man carried this entire load. There was a staff of the clergy, but Luther's share was prodigious. Including family devotions he spoke often four times on Sundays and quarterly undertook a two-week series four days a week on the catechism. The sum of his extant sermons is 2,300. The highest count is for the year 1528, for which there are 195 sermons distributed over 145 days.³²

Following the practice of many of the church fathers, but even more extensively, Calvin preached through whole books of the Bible Sunday after Sunday or day after day . . .

At first he preached, we must assume, twice on Sundays and once on every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. But in the autumn of 1542 some who appreciated his preaching urged him to preach more frequently, 'which I have already commenced and shall endeavour to do until the others have become more acceptable to the people'. But this proved too heavy a burden and after two months the council released him from preaching more than once a Sunday. In October 1549, however, sermons were ordered for every day and from now he usually preached on every day of alternate weeks as well as twice on Sundays.

His custom was to expound the Old Testament on weekdays, the New on Sundays, although sometimes he gave up Sunday afternoons to psalms.³³

These practices put to shame even New Creation Teaching Ministry's extensive program of weekly classes and short-term schools!

Application

While some make an art of application which is sometimes a little forced, trendy or artificial, others eschew intentional application on the grounds that simply speaking the word should be enough, and the word can be trusted then to do its own work in people (and we don't want to be tainted by any suspicion of works-righteousness, so we won't ever tell anybody what to do!). Neither of these approaches matches the freedom and love of the great preachers. Jesus, with his parables, images and humorous wisecracks (he had a good line in camel jokes!), as well as in his direct rebukes and exhortations, rooted his teaching inescapably in the daily lives of his hearers. Also the apostles and evangelists, when they needed to, did not mince words (see e.g. Acts 5:3-4, 9; 7:51-53; 13:9-11; Gal. 3:1-5; 5:2-6; Eph. 4:25-6:20; 2 Pet. 2:1-22). Augustine of Hippo was keen to accommodate his message to the conditions of his hearers:

It will likewise make a considerable difference, even when we are discoursing in that style, whether there are few present or many, whether they are learned or unlearned, or made up of both classes combined; whether they are city-bred or rustics, or the one and the other together, or whether again, they are a people composed of all orders of men in due proportion . . . I find myself variously moved, according as I see before me, for the purposes of catechetical instruction, a highly educated man, a dull fellow, a citizen, a foreigner, a rich man, a poor man, a private individual, a man of honours, a person occupying some position of authority, an individual of this or the other nation, of this or the other age or sex, one proceeding from this or the other sect, from this or the other

³² Bainton, *Here I Stand*, pp. 348-9.

³³ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin*, Lion Publishing, Tring, 1975, pp. 108-9.

The Proclaimed Word

common error . . . although the same charity is due to all yet the same medicine is not to be administered to all.³⁴

The Puritans almost made a science of careful application:

The ways of application are chiefly seven according to the divers condition of men and people which is sevenfold.

- I. Unbelievers who are both ignorant and unteachable . . .
- II. Some are teachable, but yet ignorant . . .
- III. Some have knowledge, but are not as yet humbled . . .
- IV. Some are humbled . . .
- V. Some do believe . . .
- VI. Some are fallen . . .
- VII. There is a mingled people . . .³⁵

Spurgeon included five chapters of his *Lectures to My Students* on illustrations and anecdotes, which liberally sprinkled his own highly influential preaching, as well as chapters on ‘The Need of Decision for the Truth’, ‘The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear’, and ‘On Conversion as our Aim’.³⁶

P. T. Forsyth sums it up:

He is not a mere reporter, nor a mere lecturer, on sacred things. He is not merely illuminative, he is augmentive. His work is not to enlighten simply, but to empower and enhance. Men as they leave him should be not only clearer but greater, not only surer but stronger, not only interested, nor only instructed, nor only affected, but fed and increased. He has not merely to show certain things but to get them home, and so home that they change life, either in direction or in scale.³⁷

Prepared Notes

It would appear that the apostles did not have notes prepared for the sermons they preached in the Acts of the Apostles. Nevertheless it is evident that they had a personal knowledge of Christ (as in Acts 4:13), and that they had at their fingertips passages from the (Old Testament) Scriptures on which they could draw most readily. Sometimes it is said that they were ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 4:8) and spoke from that; at most other times this goes without saying. A number of these occasions were in situations of persecution, where Jesus had told them not to prepare beforehand what to say (Matt. 10:19–20)—an injunction he did not extend to general preaching!

It seems that having a sermon written out in full beforehand is not necessarily detrimental in its effects. Jonathan Edwards was not scheduled to preach at the Enfield meetinghouse on 8th July 1741 but substituted for someone else by reading out a sermon he had recently given in his own church, ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ (later called the most famous sermon ever preached in America), which was so interrupted by moans and cries like ‘What shall I do to be saved?’ that he was obliged to desist before finishing.³⁸

³⁴ Augustine, *On Catechising*, English translation, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 3rd edition, 1883, pp. 300–1; quoted in Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, p. 136.

³⁵ William Perkins, *An Instruction Touching Religious or Divine Worship*, quoted in Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, p. 136.

³⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London, 1954.

³⁷ Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, p. 54.

³⁸ See Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1992, pp. 168–9.

The Proclaimed Word

Calvin preached without notes, probably directly from his Hebrew Old and Greek New Testament—he had, after all already written commentaries on most of the books he was expounding. He did say, however:

If I should enter the pulpit without deigning to glance at a book, and should frivolously think to myself, ‘Oh well, when I preach, God will give me enough to say’, and come here without troubling to read or thinking what I ought to declare, and do not carefully consider how I must apply Holy Scripture to the edification of the people, then I should be an arrogant upstart.³⁹

Charles Simeon of Cambridge (1759–1836) usually took twelve hours to prepare one sermon, often over two or three days.⁴⁰ He published twenty-one volumes of 2,536 sermons in all, some written out in full, but mostly ‘skeletons’ and (rather full) sermon outlines, to help fellow preachers.⁴¹

Let Martin Luther have the last word:

Pray that God will give you a mouth and to your audience ears. I can tell you preaching is not a work of man. Although I am old [he was forty-eight] and experienced, I am afraid every time I have to preach. You will most certainly find out three things: first, you will have prepared your sermon as diligently as you know how, and it will slip through your fingers like water; secondly, you may abandon your outline and God will give you grace. You will preach your very best. The audience will be pleased, but you won’t. And thirdly, when you have been unable in advance to pull anything together, you will preach acceptably both to your hearers and to yourself. So pray to God and leave all the rest to him.⁴²

³⁹ Quoted in Parker, *Calvin*, p. 110.

⁴⁰ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, p. 166.

⁴¹ James M. Houston, ed., *Evangelical Preaching: An Anthology of Sermons by Charles Simeon*, Multnomah Press, Portland, 1986, p. xv.

⁴² Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 350.