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Preaching 4 The Preacher's Character

The Influence of the Preacher

“All churches either rise or fall as the minister doth rise or fall. Oh brethren, watch therefore over your own hearts. Keep up the life of faith and love. Be much with God. Many a tailor goes in rags, that makes costly clothes for others.” In these words Richard Baxter the Puritan preacher of three hundred years ago, stressed the enormous importance of the preacher's life and its impact on those whom he influences. It would be, of course, quite unfair and unjust always to blame the state of the church on its pastor. Many a church is in its present condition in spite of the best of teaching and the finest of examples. Yet it cannot be questioned that the pastor of the church normally wields a tremendous influence, especially if he is in a church for any length of time. “Like pastor like people” says the old tag and undoubtedly what a preacher says, the example he sets, the causes he supports and, in some places, even the way he speaks and dresses will leave an indelible mark upon a congregation. Spurgeon compared the minister with the parish clock from which many in the old days took their time and so “if he be incorrect then they all go wrongly, more or less, and he is in a great measure accountable for all the sin which he occasions.” Every eye, both in the church and out of it, is on the pastor and in one way or another he cannot fail to influence those who watch him closely.

It is the pastor who lives the standard of spirituality in the church and it is rarely exceeded by that of his people. It is a sobering thought for him to see – in the words of A.Moody Stuart – “his own image reflected on them for good or for evil, himself multiplied a hundredfold” – and consequently “his spiritual life is of ten times more importance than that of any other member of his church”.

Preaching is different from other forms of communication in that the man cannot be separated from his message. The truth which is preached in the pulpit is either augmented or reduced by the life of the man who utters it. We are rightly reminded on all hands that “the minister's life is the life of his ministry”. His life and preaching must be all of a piece; he is not just an advocate but a witness as well.

In the light of these undoubted facts it behoves every preacher of the Gospel to pay the utmost attention to the quality of his Christian life and the example that he sets. The Pastoral Epistles in particular abound in urgent counsel on this score, e.g., “The overseer must be above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:2), “Watch your life and doctrine closely” (1 Timothy 4:16) (Note the order), “In everything set them an example by doing what is good” (Titus 2:7). Happy is the man who can say with Paul, “I am innocent of the blood of all men” (Acts 20:26) and “You are witnesses and so is God of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you that believed” (1 Thess. 2:10).

Consecration

The true minister of the Gospel in singleness of purpose will be utterly dedicated to the task to which God has called him. Of all men he must be able to say “This one thing I do”. In submitting his whole being without reserve to God, he is concerned at all costs to do God’s will, he makes God’s glory his chief end, and his entire dependence is on the presence and power of God.

In this attitude of whole-hearted dedication he ensures that every aspect of life has some relationship to and is a means of furthering the work to which he has committed himself. His gifts, skills and intellectual attainments together with his recreation will all have a place in his life, but they will be kept in strict subordination to the supreme object of his existence. They are not to be prized as ends in themselves but when they are consecrated to God they will greatly enlarge his usefulness and widen his influence. For example the man who combines intellectual gifts and a trained mind with genuine holiness of life and a profound love for Christ is likely to be a very effective instrument in the hand of God.

In all his endeavours the preacher remembers that he is required to be faithful – though he is not always bound to be successful. One of the old divines once quaintly commented that the devil did not care how ministers are employed as long as it is not in their proper work.

Only as a man is mastered and controlled by God will he be able to preach with real conviction and authority. His will be no borrowed theology and he will not be preaching an unknown Christ or unfelt truths. The doctrine which he has learned from the Word of God will be part and parcel of himself and his sermons will be the product of a first hand knowledge of and personal encounter with God. He will not preach with cold philosophical detachment about Christ, but will speak of the things which he himself has seen and heard. No man can speak with conviction about matters of which he is not sure, but if he does know the inward power of the truth in his heart it will be soon evident to his hearers. Such preaching never fails to make a deep impression on a congregation and no one can easily be indifferent to it. It is said that the Unitarian James Martineau used on occasion to go to hear Spurgeon preach. When some one reminded him that he did not believe what the great preacher believed, his telling reply was “No! but he does”. Martineau detected the sincerity of conviction and it commanded his respect. On another occasion two visitors commented on the impact of a sermon by Spurgeon in the following terms, “There is no doubt about that” and “It sat so close to reality”.

Earnestness

Closely related to preaching with conviction is the spirit of earnestness which will always characterize great preaching. Earnestness is not to be confused with “synthetic unction”, empty emotionalism, bellowing at the top of the voice or the hypocrisy of a theatrical performance. But it does mean that the preacher is marked by zeal, seriousness and fervency. The spirit and manner of the preacher frequently influences a congregation more than the matter of the sermon. A zealous preacher will normally create a zealous congregation but on the other hand a dull preacher will create a dull congregation. Zeal rarely rises from the pew to the pulpit. Furthermore, earnestness is not to be equated with the denigration of the intellect or contempt for theology.

Indeed true preaching has been described as “theology coming through a man who is on fire”. Earnestness is engendered as the preacher considers the matters of eternal significance with which he is dealing and as he experiences the burning heart which comes from the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. G. Campbell Morgan used to say that the three essentials of a sermon were truth, clarity and passion.

F. B. Meyer in describing a sermon on one occasion pointed out its fatal weakness in the following terms:- “Its exegesis was correct, its illustrations apt, its spirit evidently sincere. It was altogether above the average of pulpit productions. But somehow it failed to move, because the preacher was not moved. It did not kindle, because the preacher did not glow. There was no passion in the utterance, no magnetic intensity; no thought to show that the speaker realized he was standing between the living and the dead, and was called to plead with men as one who must give an account. And as I listened, I realized that a mirror was being held up to myself.” And was Meyer the only one to whom that mirror was being held up?

What a contrast such preaching is with that of Martin Luther who said of himself “I preach as though Christ was crucified yesterday, rose again from the dead today and is coming back to earth tomorrow.” Another preacher of the same ilk was George Whitfield who is regarded by many as the greatest of all English preachers. (In the thirty-four years of his ministry it is reckoned he preached 18,000 sermons!) One of his biographers says that while other men were only half alive he was fully alive. He preached like a lion and his sermons were all life and fire. There was no getting away from them and men had to listen whether they liked it or not.

Richard Baxter rightly asked “How few ministers do preach with all their might? – What excellent doctrines some ministers have in hand and let it die in their hands for want of close and lively application. Sirs how plainly, how closely and earnestly shall we deliver a message of such a nature as ours is, when the everlasting life or death of men is concerned in it ... What! Speak coldly for God and for men’s salvation? Such a work as preaching for men’s salvation should be done with all our might – that the people can feel us preach when they hear us.” Of Baxter himself it was said that he preached with deep earnestness – “as never sure to preach again and as a dying man to dying men.” Tragically, with much truth it has been claimed that while the actor presents fiction as though it were truth, many a preacher presents the truth as though it were fiction!

Holiness

But it is with holiness of life – wholeness of character or “the visible side of salvation” – that people both in and out of the church are most concerned in their expectation of the minister of the Gospel. It can never be urged too strongly that those who preach to others must themselves display Christian character at its very best. Their standards in morality, integrity and honesty must be the highest, and every word and action be above suspicion. Practical orthodoxy must walk hand in hand with doctrinal orthodoxy.

The Christian message is either emphatically reinforced or shamefully contradicted by the lives of those who propagate it. One of the severest charges of Jesus against his Pharisaic enemies was that they did not practise what they preached (Matthew 23:1-

3). Paul pointedly asked those who preached to others whether they applied their message to themselves first of all (Romans 2:17-24) while James warned those who taught that they would be subject to stricter judgment (James 3:1).

Holiness of life possesses a wonderful power and makes up for many deficiencies. Robert Murray McCheyne used to say that his people's greatest need was his personal holiness and in his most frequently quoted words he asserted, "In great measure according to the purity and perfection of the instrument will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God." Earlier than this, Richard Baxter had warned preachers of the dread possibility of building up an hour or two with their mouths and all the week after, pulling down with their hands. "One proud, surly, lordly word, one needless contention, one covetous action may cut the throat of many a sermon, and blast the fruit of all that you have been doing." Every preacher can sadly testify how the deep impression made by a sermon has been quickly dissipated by an indiscreet or stupid remark made after a service had ended. Everyone can recall with great grief instances where many years faithful service have been tragically destroyed by five minutes' folly, to be followed inevitably by a career in ruins. The preacher is never off duty and can never allow himself the luxury of an unguarded moment. Every preacher knows that it is easier to denounce any number of sins in his congregation than to deal with just one in his own life. Accordingly he would be wise to listen to the advice of John Owen who declared, "No man preaches his sermon well to others if he doth not first preach it to his own heart." Alas, for the preacher of whom it can be said that when he is in the pulpit it is a pity he ever gets out of it, and when he is out of the pulpit it is a pity he ever gets into it again.

Undoubtedly the urgent necessity of living a consistent Christian life is the biggest challenge which any preacher faces. Contrary to popular opinion his dangers are more numerous, insidious and deadly than those faced by most of his congregation. Indeed many preachers have learned to their cost that far from being a help to their piety, their office can be one of its most serious hindrances. Baxter reminds his readers, "The tempter will make his first and sharpest onset upon you ... He beareth you the greatest malice that are engaged to do him the greatest mischief."

Writers, ancient and modern, who deal with this subject at length do not spare the preacher as they catalogue his weaknesses and then go on to add their own comments:- Lack of discipline, "Almost a professional disease ... Leading to frustration and cynicism"; vanity – "A vice all too common among ministers"; self indulgence "which has slain its thousands"; little debts, unpunctuality, gossiping – "little vices which fill the ointment with flies"; covetousness "which has almost grown to a proverb in ministers"; lack of faith "to which all our failures may be traced"; love of praise "my besetting sin" (McCheyne); spiritual pride "which offers to Satan his main advantage"; empty levity (not to be confused with cheerfulness) which forgets "you cannot be a clown and a prophet; slackness an "insidious peril" because the control of his time is in the minister's own hands; envying others – a vice which "eats as doth a canker"; jealousy for "we cannot bear anything that shines too near us and will probably eclipse our own brightness"; magnifying our own opinion and being censorious of others because "we would be popes ourselves"; and self-dependence "the great hindrance to our efficiency".

The list is endless and no doubt pastors – and of course their congregations – will be able to make their contribution to it ad infinitum. But the total picture makes the point clear that the pulpit is not a charmed circle and that the life of its occupant can – to use the terms of J.H.Jowett – be better described as a battlefield rather than a garden.

The situation demonstrates the urgency of the preacher following the example of his master who said “For their sakes I sanctify myself.” (John 17:19) No instant solutions or short cuts are available here. It is imperative that the minister of the word aims above all else to cultivate assiduously a close and ever deepening relationship with Christ, day by day and year by year. “To walk with God all day” says Handley Moule “is to be our distinct and practical purpose and not merely a sweet sentiment and holy aspiration of the hymn book.” This relationship will involve rigorous self discipline in the power of the Spirit, spending adequate time in fellowship with God, dwelling in Him and not just paying Him occasional visits, speaking and acting as in His sight, seeking the help of God in everything and maintaining a clear conscience by keeping short accounts with Him. The preacher will also know what it is to meditate on God’s grace in salvation, His dealings with him in mercy, His purposes for and through his life and his accountability to Him for every aspect of his service. As long as the preacher’s vision of God in Christ is expanding constantly there will be growth and progress, and all fear of staleness and stagnation will be banished. And yet when all is said and done he will remain for-ever an unprofitable servant. We need never be afraid, said Spurgeon, of becoming too holy or too full of the Holy Spirit.

A Concluding Picture

For many years now people have often felt that the best concise description of the life and work of the preacher is that which is forever associated with the name of John Bunyan and which is in fact inscribed on his statue in the centre of Bedford. While some may feel it has limitations it is nevertheless worth passing on:-

“A very grave person:
Eyes lifted up to heaven.
The best books in his hand.
The law of truth was written upon his lips.
The world was behind his back.
He stood as if he pleaded with men.
A crown of gold did hang over his head.”