

Preaching: The Man

by *Geoff Thomas*

I have chosen to speak on preaching under these three headings, the Man, the Message and the Method.

If preaching is not a divine activity it is nothing at all. When Paul writes about it he says, 'We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us' (2Cor. 5:20). These men are representatives of the most powerful of all beings, and they are beseeching men to be reconciled to the King of the Universe, but there, in that activity, by the preachers' voices, and manner, and in their entreaty, appears the very Creator King and he himself is appealing to men: 'Won't you come to me from your sin? Won't you bow to me your God? Don't grow old without me.' Jehovah is crying, 'Why will you die?' The word 'beseech' which Paul uses is the same term he actually employs elsewhere for the activity of men in prayer who are longing for God to save their dear ones, aching for the Sovereign Lord to do what no one else is able to do, pleading with God ... 'we beseech Thee, Almighty God, oh hear us...' Think of the father of the prodigal longing for his son to come home from the distant city. In the activity of preaching, behind and above the voice of his herald, is the voice of the infinite, eternal and unchangeable God himself, and he is beseeching sinners to come to Christ. It is a divine act. If it is merely the engineering of man then it is nothing at all.

When Jonathan Edwards set out as a preacher he was absorbed with God. Ultimate reality to him was the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. God overwhelmed him. God laid him low. The contemplation of God was his delight. The experience of God's nearness was heaven on earth. God was his magnificent obsession. What was there on earth that could compare to this activity of preaching the good news about the Lord of glory when it was declared not in word only, but with power and with the Holy Ghost and with much assurance? When Edwards heard Whitefield preach from his own pulpit he wept with thankfulness for all that he was hearing. We sing the words, 'Those who know it best are hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.'

George Whitefield never had a single lesson on how to preach, but God was his alpha and his omega. He could say from his heart, 'For me to live is Christ,' his conscience bearing him witness that that was indeed so. There were years in his life when there was not a single day in which he did not speak to multitudes about God, and counsel individuals about God, and pray to God to assist and bless what he was doing. When he rose in the morning he would appropriate his great High Priest as his first thought for the new day. Then he sought to walk with God the Spirit throughout the day. He seized opportunities to serve the Son of God morning, afternoon and evening, and at the close of the day he commended himself to the living God. God was in all his thoughts, and under God Whitefield changed two nations. Preaching is animated Omnipotence regenerating, instructing, convicting and redeeming sinners that they may love God and be like him. In other words, preaching is a saving and sanctifying act of God.

Yet we have chosen these three simple alliterative headings for these three preachy lectures, and they are seeming (at least this minute to the speaker) so horizontal, another pathetic example of the church's fascination with mere man, and his message, and his methods. The professing church feels comfy with such an approach. It reaffirms our restlessness in having to acknowledge

the uncontrollable sovereignty of divinity, and our unspoken attitudes that it's us who are really in control. And we've got it down in our notebook. We've got the tape. We've done the course. We've read the book. We can assess shrewdly. We know the men, and we've chosen the best role models, contemporary and historical.' But, do we know God as those role models have known him? Are we a pastiche of them, or are we true pastors? We can take into the pulpit with us those notes whose preparation we've passed through the mesh of exegesis, historical redemptive insights, structure, a personal reference or two and application. Then on our ministry goes, year after year. It is a better ministry than thousands, but are we accepting the good at the cost of the best?

1. PREACHING: ITS CONCEPTION IN MEN.

We have to begin with men. Let me give you my *apologia*. It is men that the Lord chooses. There were hundreds of fishermen around the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus walked around and selected four of them. Peter and Andrew, James and John. He discriminated against all the rest. There was no hand-wringing, 'Won't any of you come and follow me? Will you, or will you, or you? Isn't there one? Please come!' cajoling, and finally berating, and a little angry, so that he screwed a half-reluctant response out of four young men. Four? Being led by One who could walk on water there should have been the march of a million men on recalcitrant Jerusalem, shouldn't there? Let's think big. Let's think Madison Avenue.

Jesus' ministry was nothing like that at all. Rather there was this enfleshment of Sovereign Grace who had become bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh, and he walked up to these four men in the middle of their working day, and in the particularity of his love effectually summoned them to become his disciples. 'You must follow me now, and I will do something with you and in you,' he told them. 'I will make you fishers of men.' They forsook all and followed him.

The call was his and the continuation was his too. Without that divine intervention and transformation then one day they would have taken over the management of the fishing business from Zebedee and from Jonas, as all their friends were going to do, and they would have been forgotten, like Whitefield might have been, becoming the publican of the Bell Inn in Gloucester, another 18th century statistic. But when the Lord effectually calls and enables then Peter does not remain an anonymous fisherman. He could throw out his net in Jerusalem and 3000 men were caught by it. God did not need a million men. He only needed one. Jonah was one man sent to Nineveh: Philip, one man sent to Samaria: Paul, one man sent to Corinth. They all proved totally adequate for the mighty task. There is nothing wrong with being a Zebedee or a Jonas. It is an honourable calling to fish. God can be glorified by it. But he will be more glorified by catching men.

I do not believe that the call of God comes by a voice, or even by a verse of Scripture leaping out at us and striking us with its heart-melting authority. I hope such experiences are yours often, so that you spontaneously hug the Bible to your breast and bless God with a lump in your throats for his word. But such peak experiences are too slender a foundation on which to erect a vocation, and then announce to other Christians that you are going to become a minister and that from now on they have to put their hands in their pockets and give money in order to feed and

clothe you, plus your family, purchase you a home, a car, medical insurance and vacations in Florida.

There were four colossal decisions that I made in my life – when I became a Christian, when I became a preacher, when I asked my wife to marry me, when I accepted a call from a church in Aberystwyth. Not for one of them did I ‘have a verse.’ When I became a Christian there was a longing in my heart month after month in 1954 as I walked from my home to church, would God call me to himself in this service? And one evening, as the sermon was being preached in a little valley chapel, I received that assurance that Christ had died for me, even me. I cannot remember the text, just the impact of the Word on my life. That same longing was also given to me to marry Iola because she was happy and holy, and in my eyes she was ‘fair.’ And concerning preaching there had developed a joy in the pulpit which transcended anything else which has never left me, and I could detect a bond of indescribable blessing that had formed between myself and those who heard me which came about because of sheer vertical sovereign grace. There was identification between pew and pulpit, and a mysterious solidarity. We were ‘family’. We had entered something divine together.

So I longed to return straight home from Philadelphia and go to a university town in Wales and influence students. It seemed to me to be a worthy ambition. God even gave that to me. But no verses jumped out of the Bible to confirm any of those longings, just the Scriptures’ big themes – ‘these words are true, do this with your life, marry this sort of spouse, to desire this work is a good desire, and preach this message.’

It was my responsibility to educate that delight by reading, and by conversing with men who had touched my heart, and by hearing preachers. Certainly I had to examine myself concerning my own fitness in five key areas:-

i] *vitality*: was there an energy of God in the encounter of proclamation to a congregation and in never-ending pastoring?

ii] *rationality*: did I have common sense and a practical sagacity which, enlightened by grace, is the most important characteristic a preacher can have? I wasn’t sure of that. I am impulsive and can be silly and make ill-judgments, and all these years seem to have matured me little there.

iii] *intellectual ability*: if I were to spend my life teaching others, was I myself apt to learn?

iv] *mood*: the ministry is no place for a man with mental problems, a melancholic, a depressive, an exhibitionist, an extrovert or an angry man. When the leader needs leading and the shepherd needs shepherding God help the flock.

v] *spirituality*: it has become an abused word: I mean *godliness*, the life of God in the soul. When Duncan Campbell arrived off the ferry on the Isle of Lewis fifty years ago to take part in meetings which are still talked about today the elders of the church where he was to preach met him and first asked him this question, ‘Mr. Campbell, are you walking with God?’ That is what I mean by spirituality, and I will amplify it in a moment.

So by spiritual self-disciplines the sense of call becomes an educated, and an informed, and thus a conscientious human assessment. We make it about ourselves in self-examination, and other Christians make it about us. However, men can be mistaken. Most men in the Christian ministry today, I solemnly believe, have been mistaken concerning so crucial a life-changing decision as this, their own divine vocation. I am saying bluntly that God has not called them. We know from their message that God has not called them because they are contradicting his own words. They have never understood the gospel. If so many have been confused then let no one here say that 'a misjudgement of such mammoth proportions would be impossible for me.'

We have also to say this, that no one is called by the Head until the body calls him to be its pastor. That is, until a gospel congregation invites you to become its pastor-preacher you are not permitted to say that the Lord Jesus has called you. You may believe he has, and long for such a call, and prepare yourself for it, but until the call of the church comes to you, you may have no assurance that you have a call from the church's head. The assurance occurs when the church's call is given, because ultimately God's call is mediated to you through his people. Then you go on and on, hearing the Word together, pulpit and pew, and time will go by, and there will be growth by inches, and to your amazement you will find them still saying to you 35 years later, 'You will come back from America won't you? You will be preaching here this winter won't you? You will be preaching to us next Sunday, won't you?' And your love for them constrains you to say 'Yes.' And that artless call of theirs to you to teach them the Word is still the call of God.

So I have been saying that the Sovereign God (who is everywhere imploring sinners to be reconciled to himself through men) summons favoured men to himself, firstly in salvation, and then, with even more particularity, by calling some into the work of the gospel ministry. God does this by planting and nurturing a longing for this work in a man's heart – which the Christian has to educate and evaluate through self-examination, through as full an acquaintance as possible with what this work will involve, and through a deepening relationship with God.

Though there are always sweet old people who will encourage every callow youth to enter the ministry, there are also men whose judgment we have to trust, whose favours cannot be bought, whose counsels should be sought. But we have to add that even they are not infallible. Men of maturity can be mistaken. One of our members came out of seminary and accepted a call to a church-planting ministry in Yorkshire. I actually said to him that I did not know whether he had a gift for church planting. Through his integrity, prayerfulness, faithful preaching and living without guile in the midst of the people for almost thirty years he has gathered a sizeable congregation, converted an old building into a beautiful meeting place, and planted another congregation which are meeting in a tastefully modernised old Moravian church which has also known considerable blessing in the past decade. Now they are taking breath, and building the energy to plant a third church. His leadership is known in all the churches, and if there is one explanation to that success and to my dismal misjudgement of him it is found in these words, 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'

But one more factor is essential for anyone who believes that he has been called to speak as though the Holy One of Israel were addressing men through him, and that is a sense of inadequacy and awe at the vocation before him. Maybe it is there that we are found most

wanting. A professor at Westminster Seminary was telling me of the questionnaire sent out to all students who apply to that school. It asked such questions as how the students judged their own abilities in such categories as counselling, in pastoring, in working with other people, in management, in caring for those in need, in study, in personal devotions etc. Students gave themselves 6 or 7 out of 10 in most of those categories, but when it came to their assessment of their own preaching ability candidates for study at Westminster Seminary more often than not awarded themselves 9's or even 10's.

How different those men were who met God in the glory of his being and perfections who called them to speak for him. Moses said, 'Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?' and he protested his ill-equipment, his lack of natural eloquence. Isaiah said, 'I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips, and I have seen the King.' It was not until he was assured of God's call that he said, 'Here am I, send me.' Jeremiah said, 'Ah, Lord, I am a child. I cannot speak.'

I know that our calling is not to the office of Jehovah's prophets, but it is the same Jehovah Jesus we are serving. The apostle Paul had no cause to glory that he was a preacher of the gospel. 'Necessity is laid upon me,' he said. Peter said, 'We cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard.' Jeremiah had a fire in his bones. If he refused to speak he burned within, and once he spoke there would be fire without. Paul's preaching was 'in weakness and fear and much trembling.' The Christian ministry is not a matter of building a library of books and parchments, using whatever other helps we might have at hand, with some confidence of our fluency of speech. It is not simply teaching people about the Bible. It is bringing God to bear upon the life of a church. It is bringing the power of God into the lives of a congregation. Its end is that people might experience the power of the Word. The Methodist, William Bramwell, confessed, 'I die a death every time I preach. I wonder I have lived as long as I have.' He was a man who actually had an awakening ministry, and yet he felt he did not possess knowledge enough, prayer enough, holiness enough, experience enough, love enough, and sacrifice enough to carry on as a preacher.

I am saying this, that if you have taken up the ministry easily you will drop it just as easily. I am saying that there is always an awesome gap between our ambitions and what we achieve. At times it seems to me that every street in Aberystwyth has its story of gospel rejection, and even every house and almost every slate upon the roofs. Only a sense of divine call can keep one going. But having that call then you will always preach, and no one can stop you. You will not always have a parsonage, and a salary, and a building to preach in, but who or what can ever prevent you preaching? Go into all the world and preach the gospel. That is quite different from becoming a denominationally approved minister.

I am half way through saying two things: Fear God: stand in awe of this office: don't enter the ministry if you don't have to. But I am now adding something else, he that desireth the office of a preacher desires a good thing, so cultivate your desire. Nurture and educate and purify it. Esteem this work, and see the need for true preachers of the Word today. I can appreciate what Dabney says in his article on what is a call to the ministry, that men of ability should be volunteering to this glorious work. I found myself regularly writing in response to the family Christmas letter two former students would send to me this sort of comment, 'Are you still in England working for a finance company? Why aren't you in France serving a congregation?'

They both speak French fluently, and are earnest Christians, especially the husband, and yet these two are going to be in the fishing business for the rest of their lives when they could be catching men for God. For the last few Christmases I am afraid that they have stopped sending me their Christmas letters because they are irritated by my refrain. But is it not possible to kick against the goads of God? Remember Stephen's great words to the religious leadership of his day, 'You always resist the Holy Spirit' (Acts 7:51). And would there be no one at all in this distinguished congregation resisting God today?

2. ITS CONTINUANCE

Then let us presume that everyone in this distinguished congregation who has a true call to the gospel ministry is also anxious to spend his entire life in it. God has always been pleased to use favoured and gifted men who have become consumed by their message. This calling is total, so that men become their message. John the Baptist lived his message with every fibre of his being, the way he dressed, how he faced the world, where he lived, and what he ate and drank. Ezekiel was actually commanded to eat the scroll on which his message was written. His message became part of him – what Jonathan Edwards called 'the energy of his soul.' So Edwards kept going. Through the dangerous intoxication of the Great Awakening Edwards kept going, and in the worst days when his own congregation rejected him and he had to leave that church yet he was enabled to keep going. There were always new goals. His youth was renewed like the eagle. There is a freshness about a true preacher in old age. He is still buying books, thinking of new series, offering a considered judgment on trends and emphases, not only steadfast but abundant in the Lord's work.

Churches are established by the preached word of God. The history of my Principality in the last half a century is proof of that. The regular preaching ministry needs no defence. Its record is its own defence. There is a church two hours away from me in South Wales where half the congregation of 75 people are converted Muslims. It began with one Muslim three years ago who was converted, who then brought members of his family to church, and then other Muslims to hear the regular preaching of the Bible. The area is deprived, unemployment is high, there is an abundance of single-families and dysfunctional families. Petty theft is rife so that the church is barricaded with steel doors. All around there are the drugs and the videos – somebody gets a video when the shop opens, watches it and then passes it to his neighbour, who passes it to his neighbour and so on until it is returned to the shop the next day, half a dozen homes having watched it, and another video if hired. So time is killed. In such a dead end place God has called these people from darkness to light. The preacher was in Aberystwyth, speaking to the Inter varsity group last month, and he brought one of the Muslims with him to give his testimony to the hundred students. There is another congregation 40 miles from me in a small market town of 1500 people in which little evangelical church for three decades nothing at all happened. It stayed at under twenty people each Sunday morning, but they did not panic. They cried to God, and in the last three years they have had steady growth to between forty and fifty each Sunday. The preacher is over sixty; he is without guile. He is never invited anywhere else to preach. He is no orator, but he serves the Word of the Lord and the Lord of the Word. He is the most unintimidating man I know, accessible to everyone. Again, the largest congregation in the whole of Wales of 700 people is pastored by a 73 year old man who has been in that church almost forty years doing a Lloyd-Jones in the mornings and a Spurgeon in the evening services. He still

uses the King James Version. Not a year has gone by without many true conversions. I say that the regular ministry needs no defence.

I am saying that to continue in the ministry you need to believe in the office of preacher, and to it you have to give your best years and hours and energies. It is impossible to think of doing a bit of preaching 'on the side' while fulfilling your real delight which might be real estate, or managing a business, or desktop publishing. Of course there is the necessity of tent-making until there are enough wage-earners to free you for this calling, and there are countries in the world which you cannot enter as a preacher. We all appreciate that. If at all possible the ministry should be full time. What I cannot appreciate is someone who sets out to be a businessman AND a preacher. There is no one who can do justice to two highly demanding vocations at the same time – and all vocations have their demands today, especially farming. Either the business is going to ruin the preaching or the preaching is going to ruin the business. It is possible to leave your first love, isn't it? When I was six years of age I saw my first love, a girl with blonde ringlets called Victoria Wright. I smiled at her across the hall in school and she shyly smiled back at me. I never once spoke to her, but I went home that day and told my mother, 'M'am, I'm in love.' But as the months went by I left that love. There must have been someone else. Judas' first love was the Lord Jesus, and so was Demas' but they forsook their first love for this present world and its silver. All around us are tens of thousands who for a while loved the Lord and then forsook the Lord for real estate, or the firm, or the business.

But more than gumption is needed, more than a stubborn certainty that preaching must be the climactic aspect of worship. If we are talking about this human being who is the God-called herald then we must say that he has to be a man of love. God is love. His servants must be loving men. We can take the words of the Lord, 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you love...' and it must be applied to the preacher par excellence. Those who come to know the preacher should be constrained to comment 'We know that he follows Jesus because he is such a loving man.' You yourself will be the last to hear those comments, or to believe they are talking about you if you should hear them, because your cry is, 'Lord it is my chief complaint that my love is cold and faint.'

That a preacher is loving does not mean that he is saccharine, or smiles all the time to the congregation, or is utterly bland. Those are the easiest features for the devil to counterfeit. This man is united to the love of Jehovah Jesus. That is the only explanation for his manner. When the congregation are with him they know they are safe, and they feel loved. Now that love is defined for us in I Corinthians 13, and we often hear men saying that if 'Christ' were put in the place of 'love' there then that chapter would be a composite picture of the Lord. So here we have to put the word 'preacher' in the place of the word 'love' if we are to know what it is that God requires of a preacher, and then it reads thus: 'The preacher is patient: the preacher is kind. He does not envy, he does not boast, he is not proud. He is not rude, he is not self-seeking, he is not easily angered, he keeps no record of wrongs. The preacher does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. The preacher always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.' What an imposing definition of love! It is not touchy-feely or warm'n'fuzzy. It is immensely and stringently ethical.

That loving is absolutely indispensable for leaders in the church. This is not some option that you can pick up or discard like a change in the order of service. The apostle is saying that without love you are as much help as a gong. Imagine the congregation gathering on a Sunday morning and the climax is hearing a gong being beaten for thirty minutes, and then they go home. That is listening to the loveless preacher, 'the Rev. Clanging Cymbal.' In fact, without love you are 'nothing.' Nothing means nothing. And I would plead with all those who teach Church Growth seminars to find a place in their theological universe for the centrality of love. To be a pastor, the preacher must be in love with his people, and he must like people and be interested in them. He must be approachable, and not defensive in his attitudes. He must welcome and not resent people who want to ask him questions about his preaching. My son-in-law is about to become the father of their fifth child, and he is a pastor in inner-city London. He was ruefully saying to me recently, 'I am not a people person (I don't believe that at all). I am a book person, but these four sons of mine have made me a people person.' He is thankful for that. His wife and children have made him a more humane man. So there must be the love of I Corinthians in a preacher.

Again, God beseeches sinners through a blameless man. Would you drink the purest spring water if it were offered to you in a rusty cup? Think of the 'Scarlet Letter.' One minister fails to mortify his anger, and the congregation see the great letter 'A' on his forehead as he preaches to them. One preacher is known for his greed and the congregation sees the letter 'G' on his forehead. Or they see 'L' for lust, or 'P' for pride. They cannot hear anything he says because they are so distracted by that scarlet letter, and all it stands for which they have experienced in their minister. So you see why, when Paul describes a church leader, that it is on this note he begins, 'A bishop then must be blameless' (1Tim. 3:2). What a man is will be far more important than what a man does. It is the difference between an apple tree and a Christmas tree. The fruit of an apple tree comes from within itself. The chocolate fruit of a Christmas tree is an adornment hung upon it, merely cosmetic. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good things, such as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control. They come from the life of God within the man. When the apostle describes the church leader divine graces are Paul's priority, not his eloquence or man-management skills, or his orthodoxy – important as all such things can be – but that he is without blame. Then Paul opens up that theme in the following verses to show that he does not mean eminent perfection because he confesses that he himself is pressing toward the mark rather than having reached it, 'not that I have attained neither am I already perfect.' But the apostle means this, being 'temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well' (1Tim. 3:2-4). It is the constant theme of the apostle to Timothy: 'But you, man of God ... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness' (1Tim. 6:11).

Preaching is different from every other form of communication. Someone has pointed out that a famous actress may have few moral scruples yet she can stand on the stage in a Broadway theatre and play Portia in the 'Merchant of Venice' and dissolve an audience into tears. How she lives has little influence on her power to move an entire hall of people. A homosexual actor can memorise Mark's Gospel and recite it all in the White House to great appreciation. Those who listen become gripped by the person of Jesus and want to know more about him, but there is no direct relationship between how that actor lives off-stage and his words when he is in the limelight.

No doubt reprobate men may say, 'Lord, Lord,' and prophesy and do many mighty works. The Lord Jesus does not deny that. They may be itinerant men, here today and gone tomorrow, leaving common people amazed. But to be a pastor living at the hearth and home of a congregation, growing old with them, accessible and observable in the darkest hours then the truths you declare are either augmented greatly or reduced drastically by how you live. Holy lives lead to a holy ministry. Anointed lives lead to an anointed ministry. The more you and I are known by our people our influence will increase or diminish according to the tenor of our lives. Paul can appeal to the Thessalonians – 'You know what manner of men we were among you' He says again, 'You are our witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.' They looked at that life and it was utterly different from anyone else's they had ever known. They had not dreamed it was possible to live like that. It was new, and beautiful, and fragrant and the consequence was when they heard what the apostle had to say they received the message as the very word of God. We are to say right things, yes, but we are to embody them by a right example.

When I was an undergraduate I went to a planning meeting for a mission to a small town. I listened for a few hours as they planned the programme and put men in charge of music and follow-up and the counsellors and advertising etc. – the necessary features of evangelism today. When the meeting was over I stood at a bus-stop with a distinguished elderly man in a homburg hat and we talked about some of the things that had been said. Finally he said to me, 'You know, we shouldn't pray 'Lord use me.' We should pray, 'Lord make me usable.'" Then he quoted to me the words of Ecclesiastes 10:10, 'If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put forth more strength.' He added that the reaper with a scythe doesn't waste any time stopping to sharpen the edge of his tool. He was talking about the instruments God uses in evangelism, and they are holy men and loving men and Christ-like men. We always quote M'Cheyne, 'A holy minister is a powerful weapon in the hands of God.' It's true, but being holy is the need of the hour, not knowing the quotation. M'Cheyne goes on to say, 'Pray, 'Make me as holy as a saved sinner can be.'" It's a wonderful prayer, and doing it is the challenge, mortifying remaining sin by the power of the Spirit, and looking unto Jesus.

We become usable in the secret place. There are lessons we can learn only at the feet of Jesus. As a friend of mine has said, 'It is in the context of secret prayer that the eternal verities to which we give constant mental assent become living realities. I find, and this is somewhat of a confession as well as an exhortation, that my own words mock me often when I preach – when I can say the word 'hell' and not feel the horror of it; when I can speak of heaven and not be warmed with a holy glow in the light of the fact that this is the place my Lord is preparing for me. I find no answer to this problem but to mediate long upon the passages that speak of these spiritual realities, and ask God the Holy Ghost to burn them into my heart. I plead with him to make real to me that the very people I look at may hear those terrible words, 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire.' I find I must plead with God to make real to me that the people whose voices will say to me at the door, 'Thank you for the sermon, pastor,' are the very voices that may one day be uttering those cries and groans of the damned. I must ask God to help me to believe these things, to help me to preach them so often that others will know that I verily believe them. The truth that burned on Sunday can be icy cold by Monday. The truth that burned in the closet on Saturday can be lifeless on Sunday. Truths received in the crucible of waiting

upon God can only be maintained in their warmth in that same context. If I read aright the biographies of the great men of God, I find that this is their unanimous testimony. All with one accord declare that if there was any secret to their ministries it was this: it was the man, cultivating his inner life in the presence of God' (Al Martin, 'What's Wrong with Preaching Today?' Banner of Truth).

Let me end this address on 'The Man,' with these often quoted words of a former Confederate chaplain who had known 'Christ in the Camp,' a man from Missouri who lived until 1913, E.M. Bounds. He would not stand exactly where we stand, but he was a man who loved Jesus Christ, and he was a man of prayer, and his most famous book, 'Power Through Prayer,' begins with these words, 'We are constantly on a stretch, if not on a strain, to devise new methods, new plans, new organisations to advance the church and secure enlargement and efficiency for the gospel. The trend of the day has a tendency to lose sight of the man or sink the man in the plan or organisation. God's plan is to make much of the man, far more of him than anything else. Men are God's great method. The church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men. 'There was a man sent from God whose name was John.' ... What the church needs today is not more machinery, or better, not new organisations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Spirit can use – men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men, He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men – men of prayer' (E.M. Bounds, 'The Complete Works of E.M. Bounds on Prayer', Baker, 1996, p. 447).

GEOFF THOMAS

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Preaching: The Message

by *Geoff Thomas*

Having begun with 'The Man' we now turn to 'The Message,' and it's the message that concerned Christians long to hear everywhere today. I had been in the ministry a couple of years and was preaching in a Bible Rally on a holiday Monday in Stow in the Wold, about sixty miles from London I guess, when I spotted entering the school hall for the evening meeting Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and his wife. It was enormously intimidating. He had been my role model for a decade. He would, as it were, be there as I preached, and I thought I could detect when he would be enjoying my preaching and when he wouldn't be! On that particular Bible Rally I had preached in the afternoon on Lot lingering outside Sodom, and in the evening I was to preach on 'Remember Lot's wife.' That was the sermon Lloyd-Jones was going to hear. In both cases I was indebted to the relevant chapters in Ryle's 'Holiness' and the Doctor's arrival made me embarrassed about that. I thought of other sermons I had left at home which I believe would have been less plagiaristic and also might have been more his type of preaching, but I had no alternative and Bishop Ryle alone was with me in the pulpit that day. I was certainly pleased that I wasn't preaching a message heavily dependent upon an actual Lloyd-Jones' sermon, though that would not have been impossible. I have no idea to this day what he made of my sermon, just remembering that afterwards as he was leaving he introduced me to his wife Bethan. But having to preach with him sitting in the congregation had unnerved me and I couldn't relax. It had been a strain and so I felt I had been too strident.

My point is this: Dr Lloyd-Jones had come there to hear the Message, that is, he wanted to find out whether I was gripped by the real message of the Word of God. Might I be one of those preachers who could bring that message to the next generation? He was nearing retirement and he knew a little bit about me and he had come to hear me, as he came to hear other Welsh boys like me, because he longed that there would be a generation raised in Great Britain of men with the message, because that was the paramount need of the hour. Was it the 'big message' and would there be something heavenly and of divine authentication in my preaching? He sought such men out and encouraged them, and many made him their friend and counsellor. So when men he knew, or even family members, were enthusiastic to him about a new preacher he would go out of his way to hear the man for himself. Could that one be gripped by the revealed message and be preaching it with the unction it merited? That concern which brought him out on a Monday – after a Sunday's preaching – to listen in hope to someone like me was part of his wonderful attractiveness to many of us and why he had become and remains my principal role model. Today I find myself, like him, listening with hope to the next generation to see if God has raised up others consumed by the message.

Our vocation is to establish such a testimony throughout the whole world. We are praying for the Word of God to be heard from ten thousand pulpits. 'You are the light of the world,' the Lord said to a group of young men who had never preached a sermon, who were untried and inexperienced, who must have glanced at one another with amazement as they heard him direct those words to them. But he knew what he was saying and to whom he was speaking, whatever their response might have been: their testimony is the light for the world.

Our message is light for all the nations of the world. There is a great promise rooted in the Old Testament and it defines the scope of our mission and it should fill us with tremendous confidence. God promised Abraham that through his seed the nations of the whole earth were going to be blessed. And when the Messiah, the Son of Abraham, came then the time had arrived for the light to dawn. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. Jesus told them, 'Now go and take my gospel into all the world.' The Lord has given to us a message which cannot but succeed, assuredly, effectually and infallibly. There is no doubt about that at all. All the nations of the world are going to be blessed. People are going to come from north and south, east and west and they are going to fall before the throne of God and sing the song of the Lamb. The message can no more fail than the blood of the new covenant itself, and we must keep that confidence constantly before us, because congregations can fall into ruts of despondency and preachers lie on the floor of despair.

But ours is a message of hope. The gospel is good news for all the nations, or as the ancient Markan ending phrases it, 'for every creature.' In other words, we can go to every human being and say to him, 'I have good news for you,' good news individually and personally. As we look down from the pulpit on our congregations we must think to ourselves, 'Today I have good news for everybody here.' We may have no doubt about it at all. People who listen to us aren't permitted to protest, 'But I am not a religious person.' 'Whoever you are, whatever condition you are in, to every single individual, there is good news. If you are Bunyan's man in the iron cage, despairing because the day of grace is past there is good news for you. Or if you are a man who thinks he has sinned the unforgivable sin, there is good news for you in this great word of God.'

Our message centres upon God: 'the Lord – He is God: Jehovah – he is God.' I think we overlook the glory of that. We take the great fact of God's existence for granted, and we imagine that it has no religious importance. Yet is it the greatest single piece of news a person can hear – 'Jehovah – he is God.' This world does not come out of nothing, not does it exist in nothing, but God made it, and he holds it, and he has a purpose for it. It is not a world in the hand of chaos, but a world in the hand of God. It is not a world in the hand of chance, nor of cosmic malice. It is a world in the hand of God, even with all its sadness and sorrow. It is gripped by God today with a love that will not let it go.

Know this – that Jehovah, he is the God, and that is good news, and it is good news for everyone of you. Remember John 'Rabbi' Duncan, the great missionary to the Jews and a Hebrew teacher, a man who had spent years in the depths of atheistic despair. One day God showed him his grace. He said, 'I first saw clearly the existence of God in walking along the bridge at Aberdeen; it was so great a discovery to me; I stopped and stood in an ecstasy of joy at seeing the existence of God.' He told another friend, 'When I was convinced that there was a God, I danced on the Brig o' dee with delight' (Moody Stuart. 'The Life of John Duncan,' Banner of Truth, 1991, p. 18).

That is where the good news begins, that God was and God is and God will be, and that this world is in the hand of a divine, benevolent, wise, loving, gracious ruler. This life of mine has its meaning, and when I attend an internment in a cemetery I can stand over the open grave and know that that decaying corpse is not the meaning of life. No! That is not life's meaning. It is not reducible to that. For our lives are hid with Christ in God, and as it is in God it does have

meaning. It has the meaning of his grace and the meaning of his love. Our message is a message of God. You know that Dr David Wells of Gordon Seminary has a friend who is a believing theologian, but he sighs to David saying, 'As I go to church I never hear sermons about God.' And that is a terrible indictment about modern preaching that its whole focus has become horizontal, and seeker-friendly. Here is the most fascinating subject of all, the being of God, and we are ignoring that – to speak about what? Ours is a divine message.

Now you would think that there is no confusion at all as to what the content of our message is. Yet if I had asked you to write down your own answer to the question, 'What is the gospel?' how many different replies would I have got to the question? Let me clear away some misunderstandings.

1. The message is not that God is to be found in the wonders of the heavens and the earth. 'Look around you,' say the siren voices, 'and stand in awe of the vastness of the universe, and the beauties of the world. That whole, that mighty all-embracing world-process is God. Look within! Search for the hero inside yourself and you will find God.' Who does not appreciate the appeal of such a view? Our generation has been inspired by it, but, as Dr. Machen once said, 'that message contains no comfort whatever for oppressed and burdened souls. If God be another name for the totality of things, then when we possess him we possess nothing that we didn't have before. There's no appeal from the creatures of this world to He who is its gracious Creator.' The hero inside ourselves has proved too weak for old Adam on too many previous occasions. If dead orthodoxy has killed its thousands this New Age message has killed its tens of thousands.
2. The message is not 'Let us follow the example of Jesus.' The first question is not, 'What would Jesus do?' Of course if a man really lived the life of Jesus all would be well. But such a man would not be a Christian, but something far better than a Christian. He would be a being who had never lost his high estate of sonship with God. The trouble is that our lives aren't like Christ's. We are sinners and the example of Jesus is a part of the proclamation of that terrible law of God which is the schoolmaster to bring men to God. It is bad news for me to realise that once, but once only, this world witnessed a man as holy as God is holy, a man in whom the Holy One was well-pleased. God did not stumble across this man. He had always been God's delight, and God sent him to this world. The example of Christ serves by its lofty purity to produce a consciousness of sin. There is no good news in the knowledge that he is holy and I am not.
3. The good news is not that men must be converted. Luther once said that there was no more terrible word in all the Bible than 'conversion.' You may find that strange, but it only takes a moment's reflection to confirm its truth. For men enjoying their lives without God, and in whose hearts there is an antipathy to all things that are truly divine, there can be nothing more undesirable, disagreeable and unnecessary to flesh and blood than what is conveyed in the word 'conversion.' That is why the world makes so many jokes about Christian conversion. It is nervous laughter.

The old Dutch minister, Gerard Wisse (1873 – 1957), tells us, 'I recall how I once spoke earnestly with an unconverted man concerning the state of his soul, and told him that God was

able to triumph over him, and cause him to say farewell to his bosom sins in order to seek for his life in the things of God's kingdom. The miserable man answered me honestly, 'No, Reverend, I truly hope that God will not do so.' Luther was right – conversion is a terrible word' (Gerard Wisse, 'Godly Sorrow,' Free Reformed Publications, 1998, p. 62). So all those exhortations to believe and to repent and be born again and be saved – where in the world is 'good news' to a sinner in commands such as those?

What, then, is the message? Two things:-

1. It is the Gospel of God's Grace.

Think of those parting words of Paul to the Ephesian elders. His great concern, he tells them, was this, that 'I may finish the race, and complete the task the Lord Jesus Christ has given me of testifying to the gospel of God's grace' (Acts 20:24). How do we testify to the theology of grace? (Here I am indebted to Principal MacLeod) By telling men that,

i] **Grace has a purpose.** It has a specific and particular end in view: 'He did predestinate us to be conformed to the image of his Son.' If we begin at that relatively modest goal it takes our breath away. Grace is God's determination to make favoured sinners Christ-like. Grace is not content with justification, or adoption, or union with Christ. Grace is concerned to make people like God. Grace is not going to rest until all it embraces are a transcript of the Lord Christ himself. God so loves his Son that he will fill heaven with an innumerable company of people each one of whom, morally and spiritually, are in the image of Christ, and all the divine energy and creativity are committed to that end. All his resources are to serve that great enterprise. 'When we see him we shall be like him.' 'That he might present the church to himself, a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.' That is the destination of grace.

Or we can expand the purpose further, that grace will make Christ the first-born among many brethren. There is this constituency of the redeemed which does not exist for itself, but to be a family of brethren in which Christ has the pre-eminence. He will be the first-born, and the centre, and the sun. They will all cohere in him. This will be a community of joy and praise because from eternity God has purposed to fill the heaven of heavens with the sound of the praise of the Lamb, like the sound of many waters. 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain' 'Unto him that hath loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood...'

Or beyond that, God's purpose can be expanded further: he will regenerate the whole heavens and the earth. He will make a new universe which shall be, in all its glory and beauty, the inheritance of the Son of Man and all the children which God has given to him. The whole cosmic environment comprehending the distant stars, or the blades of grass, the solar system or the sands on the seashore, the beasts of the field or the atoms and molecules will be redolent with the righteousness of Christ. God will gather together all things in Christ. There will be a reconciliation of everything in the universe joined to that single hub. Grace has that great end in view.

ii] **Grace is invincible.** God has made an eternal commitment. He has set his mind upon saving a company of people more than any man can number. He has donated every one of them to his Son to have and to hold for ever. His whole heart is in it. 'I shall be their God,' he has said. His omnipotence is committed to save them. He has enlisted every divine attribute, and prerogative, and function to this end. The Father is committed. The Son is committed. The Holy Spirit is committed. The angels, principalities, powers, things present, things to come, height, depth, every other creature has that end in view. That is the goal of the incarnation – that is reason there dwelt in Christ all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.

Grace is invincible because it is the strength of God. It is not sentiment, though songs about it may be. It is not feeling, though it creates the most powerful feelings. Grace is power acting to redeem. The old persecutor from Tarsus became what he became by the grace of God. When his thorn in the flesh almost destroyed him it was Christ's grace that was sufficient for him and his future life. That mighty grace can change every circumstance, strengthen every weakness, cheer every distress, lift every burden, enable us to climb every mountain, carry every load, handle every responsibility.

Grace is super-abundant. If we make the claim that our lives have been touched by grace we are saying that we are being preserved by the might of the Maker of the heavens and the earth. The grace of the one who raises the dead has a grip on us. So all our hope of keeping on and on and on, going on trusting, and repenting, and believing, and persevering, and entering heaven and receiving a resurrection body depends upon the power of God alone.

Grace is invincible because Christ has ultimate authority in the whole universe. The Lamb sits in the midst of the throne, not as a spectator. He exercises real power. His session there is not only eloquent to us of his centrality in the cosmos and the blessedness of the position he now occupies but it is eloquent of his unchallengeable supremacy. That Lamb who loved the church and gave himself for it today wears a crown. He is head over all things to the church. He has supreme power over every force in the cosmos – physical, intellectual, spiritual – all must obey his command. If you can conceive it, it is under his command. If you can think it then Christ is in control of it. Grace is invincible because Christ is unchallengeable. Should all the hosts of hell gang against him they must miserably fail because he has already triumphed over them at his weakest. Now that he has a name above every name how can he fail? What is utterly beyond human comprehension is ruled over in its every movement by the supremacy of the enthroned Lamb. Christ has taken the church in the grip of grace and is leading it through the darkness and the valleys to its blessed rest. The message of grace is that the divine pity is invincible and is enfleshed in the Man in glory.

iii] **Grace is sovereign.** God's determination to save sinners is entirely a matter of his own initiative. It is reduced by the apostle Paul to one marvellous statement as he reminisces about his own conversion – 'When God was pleased' he says (Gals. 1:15), then Paul was saved. Grace is utterly discretionary – consider the title of Shedd's sermon on the text, 'I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy'. Shedd calls it, 'The Exercise of Mercy Optional with God' (W.G.T. Shedd, 'Sermons to the Natural Man,' Banner of Truth, p. 358ff). No saviour was commissioned to the angels that rebelled: God simply dealt with them in utter fairness. God has no obligation to save a single sinner. You would think today, hearing some

men, that the most obvious and predictable characteristic of God was his mercy, that he should love the world and spare not his Son. In the New Testament the forgiveness of God is a mystery. It is a supreme paradox. In vain the first-born seraph tries to sound the depth of love divine. That is because grace is optional. It is rooted into God's sovereign good pleasure.

It is utterly unconditional, that is, it is not evoked by any qualities in us at all. It is not because of perceived beauty, or righteousness, or attractiveness that constrained the pity of God. He did not look and see a decent life and so focused his salvation on that one. Salvation comes forth utterly and entirely out of God's own unconditional love. So the message of God's grace declares that always it is objective, and invincible and sovereign.

iv] **Grace redeems.** Think of John Murray's classic, 'Redemption Accomplished and Applied' (Banner of Truth). Whether by Christ or by the Holy Spirit, for us or in us, past accomplishment in the finished work or present reality in the ongoing work – it is all of grace, from beginning to end, from the alpha to the omega.

In the accomplishment of redemption it was God who conceived the possibility. He thought of it. It dawned on him, we would say. He then took the initiative. He had not created the quarrel, nor forged the enmity, nor set up the estrangement, but in effecting reconciliation he acts. He draws the blue-print in its every detail. It was not that his intervention is constrained by the pleading of man. No counsel of the most holy men in the world gathering together laid out this plan before him and urged him to act upon it. Prior to any human initiative or sense of need God alone set up this tremendous machinery of redemption.

God provided the instrumentality. He found a Lamb in his own flock, even from his own bosom, bearing his own image. He even became that Lamb: the providing God is not a different being from the provided Lamb. The God who said that without the shedding of blood there could be no remission himself provided the blood that should be shed: 'Feed the church of God which he purchased with his own blood.'

That same grace made him who knew no sin to become sin for us. That same grace paid him the wages of sin. It was all of God. We did not make Christ our substitute – that was God. We did not offer him upon Calvary – that was God. We did not give our son to the death of the cross – that was God. He aroused the sword of rectitude and commanded it to find its sheath in Christ's breast. We did not go through our sins one after another trying to think of them all placing them carefully upon him – the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. The accomplishment of redemption was all of God. The great theme in the letter to the Hebrews is that Christ was all by himself when he purged us of our sins.

But also in the application of redemption it is the same divine grace which saves us. God embarks upon a ministry of reconciliation. God becomes the preacher of his own gospel. Men are 'ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us' (2Cor. 5:20). Paul was conscious that behind all his speaking there was the authority of God. Behind Paul's imploring there was a yearning God, longing and pleading with men – the one who in the days of his flesh saw the city and wept over it.

We might think that that would be the conclusion of God's application but the audience hearing of the finished work of Christ are deaf and blind and hostile. The hearts of the hearers are closed to the message. What happens? Grace acts again, and the one who preaches to the heart opens the heart. On the road to Emmaus the one who opened the Scriptures also opened the understanding. Lydia heeds the message of Paul for this reason – the Lord Jesus opened her heart to receive it. He gave her a birth from above. He resurrected her. He made everything new. He gave her the conviction that this message was true. He revealed to her the beauty of Jesus. He created in her heart a desire for him. He made sin loathsome. To what does Paul ascribe the success of the gospel in Thessalonica? That 'our gospel came not to you in word only, but in power and in the Holy Ghost and with much assurance.'

So firstly our message is a message of grace, and whenever it is preached the Lord is delighted and our experience will be that of the apostles: 'So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace' (Acts 14:3). Thus it has ever been in the history of the church – think of Geneva, and Edwards, and Whitefield, and Princeton, and Spurgeon, and Lloyd-Jones.

2. The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are informed that Philip told the Ethiopian 'the good news about Jesus' (Acts 8:35). It is *his* gospel; it is all about *him*. He is its source and theme. The good news is Jesus Christ, in the glory of his person and the perfection of his finished work. And he is for every sinner. I can go to any person and I can say to them, 'I have a Saviour for you.' And if I don't continually use those precise words like some mantra nevertheless that precise conviction is part of my theological universe. I believe that I have a Teacher who will overcome your ignorance. I have a great Priest who will speak on your behalf to God. I have a Lord who will protect and keep you, and he is for you. I can use the language of the Marrow men without any reservation. I am not using the preposition 'for' there in the sense of substitution but in the sense of offer. Christ's teaching – for you. Christ dead – for you. Christ reigning – for you. Christ interceding – for you, that is, for you to receive, to have and to hold in this world and the next, to know his protection and be educated by him.

One Christ: – of course in three offices, of course in two natures, and of course in three states – but still one Christ. One Christ – of course one in being and substance with the Father and the Spirit – the triune God. But one indivisible Christ who is a powerful King, an instructing Prophet and a serving Saviour. You cannot separate him when you offer him to sinners. Think of a computer, and

1. the power of its motor, and
2. the instructions of its screen, and
3. all the services that it provides you – e-mail, wake-up calls, diary, spreadsheets, the Net.

Could you go into a computer store and say that you want a computer which only does the services – without the power-box and without the screen? The assistant would say to you that that was impossible, that the box and the modem and the services provided are all one, and you

cannot have the one without the others too. He would say to you that what you would like is impossible, for a PC is one.

So it is with Christ, the gospel is that the sovereign Lord who directs and protects, is also the great Prophet who teaches and enlightens, and also the High Priest whose blood de-sins and whose righteousness wraps us about safe and sound for time and eternity. This one Saviour is freely offered to all. He is one God and Surety and by himself he has fulfilled all those three offices for every one of his people. 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...' he said, and in all these ways he serves his people. God doesn't do half a job. He does not leave us washed – but lacking his protection. He does not leave us informed – but in our guilt and shame. He does not leave us shepherded – but in the dark. I am saying that we cannot disconnect his offices. You have neither the wit nor the power to disentangle them, and anyone who tells you he can is deceiving himself and the truth is not in him.

1. I have Prophet Christ who will teach you who you are, who God is, what the good life is, who is your neighbour, what you must do to be saved, how you can inherit eternal life, what lies beyond death. That is the message we have for everyone.
2. I have Priest Christ whose blood cleanses us from all sin, no matter who you are, where you come from, what your reputation has been or the quality of your life. Here is the remedy for every guilty conscience; here is peace for every troubled soul; here is the source of a clean heart.
3. I have King Christ whose Lordship is such that he has put everything under an obligation that if it touches me in any way, as shattering as the crash of a plane or as gentle as a mother's kiss on the cheek of her sleeping child, he will ensure it must work for my good – the best things that happen to me, and the worst things that affect me.

This complete Christ of the three offices is for you. I am saying that this is our message when God comes by us in the glory of the gospel. God draws near and he makes men an offer. God visits and makes us a proposition. God offers forgiveness. He promises more. He offers us himself: 'I will be your God. I will bless you with every spiritual blessing.' And what is unbelief? It is the rejection of that offer.

We can listen to our young people as they look back at us Sunday by Sunday, a glazed look customarily having fallen over their eyes, and then they graciously condescend to discuss with us their position, and they will always describe it in a different way. They will try to give the impression that their position is something rather strong and positive, that they are 'seeking,' that they are 'searching,' that they are 'considering,' that they are approaching this whole matter of the glories of the person and work of Christ from a position of strength, that they are 'sifting the evidence,' that they are 'examining the facts.'

I would say to them that that is not the way it is. The way it is, is that they know the facts and they have heard the offer and they refuse to bow the knee and they will not yield the heart. The way it is, is that they will not accept the offer God makes. It is not insufficiency of evidence keeping them away from Christ. Their chief need is not more time to think. That is not their problem. Everything hangs upon a commitment they will not make when God says 'Come!'. Theirs is an attitude of disobedience and from it come many acts of disobedience.

Most of them are laying down conditions before God and they are saying that they will come when they've got the evidence, when they've established the foundation, when their hearts are strangely warmed, when their taste for the world is getting jaded, when they are sure God will answer them, when the hairs on the back of their necks stand on end. And to them all God is saying, 'Come! Come as you are! Come with your weakness. Come with your mental reservations! Come as an ungodly man!

Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness he requireth
Is to feel you need of Him:
This he gives you -
'Tis the Spirit's rising beam.

Come, ye weary, heavy-laden,
Lost and ruined by the Fall;
If you wait until you're better,
You will never come at all:
Not the righteous -
Sinners Jesus came to call.

We do not come as those who are absolutely persuaded. We do not come with strong faith. If our faith is as thin as a spider's thread, as long as it is fixed in Christ alone, it is so infrangible it can take the weakest believer across the bottomless pit and over the lake of fire. 'Come with smoking flax faith. Come with bruised reed faith. Come with every single one of your doubts and questions and perplexities. Come with your personality problems. Do not come as someone who has solved all his problems before he comes,' we tell them that plainly. That is our message. We tell them to take Christ now as we offer him to them. Take him! You bow to Christ when he is offered to you. You come to Christ when he invites you to draw near.

Too many of our congregation have some half understanding of the great doctrine of God's sovereign grace in salvation, and so they are wresting it to their own destruction. I believe in a sovereign God and in sovereign grace, but I believe I am speaking his mind when I say to congregations that he loves weaklings and doubters and ungodly men and women so much that he offers himself to them. That is our message. I believe I am speaking his word when I say to them that he commands and beseeches them to come now to him, and that he is ready to receive them now, and if they come now he will in no wise cast them out, and that if they truly believe in his sovereignty then they must believe in the sovereignty and authority of that.

When favoured sinners hear the gospel they hear it in their shame. They feel that they are so unique in their sin. They are not like anyone else in the congregation. They feel they are personally disqualified because of their hypocrisy and weakness. They are conscious of the aggravation of their own condition. But God is bringing this message to them, that no matter who they are, what they have been or how they have lived, he will never cast out any who come to come. There has never been a single instance of rejection in the history of the world.

Can you imagine the angels looking down from the portals of heaven and they are concentrating just at this moment on the man who is the chief of sinners – the very worst one of all. He has been dormant for years, but he is stirring, and he is turning, and, yes, he is actually coming to Christ – in all his filth, pulling on the chains that tie him to all his past – and, yes, he is coming to the Son of God in the glory of his person and the perfection of his work. He is coming to the one who smote the fig-tree, to the one who called the Pharisees white-washed sepulchres, and King Herod a fox. This blackguard who has committed the very worst sins the angels have ever beheld is coming to the one John saw on the Isle of Patmos before whose feet John fell as one dead. This piece of trash is crawling and limping and staggering to the one before whom the sinless seraphim hide their eyes, and the angels are looking at one another in amazement and they are saying, ‘No hope for that one! Not a chance! He’s for the pit!’ And then they see something far more amazing so that there is utter silence in heaven. They see the Son of God running to that man lest he change his mind, and cutting short his rehearsed apologies, and they see Christ wrapping his arms around him and hugging him and Christ’s hot tears wetting that man’s cheeks, and God rejoicing and saying, ‘This my son was lost, and is found; he was dead and is alive again.’

There is nothing today more marvellous in the whole universe than that we can stand before a congregation in our frailty and youth and mortality burdened with all our personal inadequacies, facing many who have but the slightest interest even in Christian morality, and our message to every single one of them is that Jehovah God is offering himself to them that moment to be their Saviour and prophet and priest and king and husband and lover and friend for ever and ever. He is sincerely offering every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ Jesus to them.

We only long for them to stop rationalising their unbelief, and cease attempting to justify it. Do they want a warrant to come to Christ? Do they plead their unfitness because they do not have a warrant? Are they searching for a warrant in their own experience? Are they waiting for a verse to jump out at them one day and zap them? Those things may happen, but they are not the warrant for faith. They are looking in the wrong place if they are saying, ‘Give me an experience and then I can trust.’ God says, ‘I will make you an offer: here is my Son, the divinely appointed prophet, the priest and the king, and he is for you to receive now.’ Those who receive him to them he gives the right to become the sons of God. This is an utterly sincere and genuine offer. The Lord is not at the front of the meeting making this offer or we would ask sinners to come to the front to receive him. The Lord is near you, in the message we preach, in your ears, in your conscience, in your heart, in your mouth, that whosoever calleth on the name of the Lord shall be saved. The Holy Spirit takes the message and the offer and he enables you to hear it, and he moves you to receive him. He is being offered now. You accept this offer or you reject it. That is our message. It is a message of grace, and it is centred upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

GEOFF THOMAS

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Preaching: The Method

by *Geoff Thomas*

I want to present to you seven-fold beginners' methodology to the true work of the ministry.

1. The work of the ministry will only be achieved by unfeigned belief in the truthfulness of the Bible.

There is nothing for the preacher more fundamental than the principle that a thing is true if Jesus Christ says so. That is the foundation on which every true ministry begins. That is why we ask every candidate wanting us to recognise his call to the ministry this question, 'What do you think of Christ?' 'He is the Son of God.' Does everyone here have that unqualified commitment? We have submitted personally to the authority of Jesus Christ over us.

Then one consequence of that is that we believe in the inerrancy of the Old Testament. We believe in its infallibility for one great reason, because Christ said that it cannot be broken. Men may say that I am a fundamentalist worshipping a book. Now, I don't worship this book. This book is not my first principle. The Lord Jesus Christ is my first principle, but that Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, sends me to this book. The incarnate God spoke and said, 'It is written.' If I am a Christian then this is my fundamental posture. It is not simply 'the Bible says,' but 'God in Christ says.' I believe in the infallibility of the Son of God. My life is held captive to that, and every thought of every true preacher has to be brought into the obedience of Christ. The infallibility of the Lord is what gives me my epistemology, and it determines and rules my intellectual position. That is my first great principle, that Christ is never wrong. When he said, 'Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female,' (Matt. 19:4) then I acknowledge it was he who said, 'I am the truth' who made those statements. So it is Jesus Christ who has given me the obligation to lay the truthfulness of the opening chapters of Genesis right on the consciences of my hearers. For us, the Master is always right.

That is the first requirement of every preacher. I have to live with many unresolved difficulties, with verses in the Bible I cannot readily harmonise, with secret things that belong to God. Maybe my problem today happens to be why God does not keep gifted preachers from falling. If he has not kept them will he keep me? Maybe that is this week's perplexity. But I also can live with such dilemmas very comfortably and very happily because I know my questioning is the inevitable consequence of the grappling of my finite mind with things that are infinite and eternal. I have peace at the depth of my soul, because my authority is Christ. I am his servant and his pupil. I know a thing is true because Christ has said it. There can never be a single effective preacher who has rejected that.

What is controlling us, even in our Christian profession? By what rule or standard do we live by? Are we going on our own way? Are we serving self, or are we being controlled, week by week, by the will of God? Let me put the challenge before you in the most concrete terms. If I held today a great belief – some conviction or other – and I had believed it for years, and my community also had, and also my family, but then I discover that it has no foundation in God's Word – would I let it go just because God said it was wrong?

I am asking you this, because if you are going to stand before a gathering of God's people and declare to them the will of God, how do you yourself stand in relationship to his word? I am saying to you that we face the constant peril that our thinking is only the rearranging of our prejudices. I seem to see this in churches all the time – a scant regard for the will of God. A confessional church and yet God's will is not the supreme thing, and that makes me anxious. Are we really being controlled by the will of God? Suppose we knew that the Bible taught such and such, and that the Bible condemned such and such, are our minds really open, because if our minds are not, then how will our congregation's be open to God's Word? Is my life – because that is where I have to begin – one of submission to God's will? I am painfully aware of preaching to you what I should preach to myself. But this is God's message for you. It is the providence of God that brings me and you here, and you have to accept your providence, and it is asking you is your life one of submission to God's will, however much that will may contradict your background and traditions, or contradict your revolt against that background and traditions?

2. The work of the ministry will only be achieved by enduring tough times.

When I speak to you about preaching I am talking about the activity of the pastor in the local church. I am not talking about the men who itinerate from church to church speaking on specialised subjects, like family life, or student ministries, or those who do the work of evangelism in different settings throughout the year. I am not even talking about men who follow other callings, like working in seminaries but who also preach on Sundays in different churches. I am not talking about retired ministers who help out on Sundays in this church or that. I am addressing my remarks to men who live by the gospel, men in the heat of the battle, who are preaching twice on Sundays and also in the mid-week meeting of their own congregation year after year. Full time preacher-pastors ... full term pastor-preachers: men who are in the business of changing a congregation – whom they have grown to love – by the word of God, through 'teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2Tim. 3:16). The life of the pastor-preacher is all about changing people into the image of Christ.

I am not talking about those preachers who have never become entirely comfortable in their own skin. There is always something the matter, mysterious aches and pains in odd parts of the body – the sinuses, the feet, the shoulder. They are not comfortable with themselves and they cannot make themselves at home in any of the churches which they happen to be pastoring at any given moment. They don't know how to set about things. They are there a wee while, and away they fly for a brief encounter somewhere else. On it goes, keeping things ticking very quietly – but you can't hear anything. I am talking today about men who are locked into a congregation, surviving by the money that the people they preach to put in the offering plate each week

These are the men who even in the longest ministries and in the happiest congregations endure a minority who would love to have someone else in the pulpit. That never changes. Amongst these preachers are many who would barely survive a vote of confidence even though some of the people voting against them would actually have been drawn into the church and professed faith under their ministries. I have in mind men who endure regular officers' meetings with a heavy spirit, and who are often on the verge of resignation, but who go on preaching at the heart of their own congregations year after year.

This is no unusual phenomenon. It is the virtual norm for most of us pastor-preachers. All in Asia forsook the apostle Paul. If Jonathan Edwards, after that illustrious ministry, was dismissed by a majority of the 230 men who were his church members then certainly lesser preachers cannot be surprised if it happens to them. After Dr Lloyd-Jones had been four years in Westminster Chapel, Dr. Campbell Morgan, the senior minister, retired. It was 1943 and there was no unanimity in the Chapel that Lloyd-Jones should carry on as the sole pastor. In fact many who had heard him for four whole years – maybe 150 sermons – were firmly opposed to his becoming their preacher. Let me give you an instance of their scorn: Dr Lloyd-Jones invariably ended his morning pastoral prayer with the words, ‘and may the Triune God abide with us throughout the remainder of this our short, uncertain earthly life and pilgrimage’ and one man sitting in a pew would occasionally mutter out loud at that moment ‘and before we are carried out dead to the mortuary’! The object of his contempt had had a remarkable awakening ministry in Aberavon in the preceding decade in which hundreds were converted, yet the deacons of Westminster Chapel were now writing to him and asking, ‘What are your views as to the position arising from Dr Morgan’s resignation, as it affects your ministerial office?’ (Iain Murray, ‘David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, The Fight of Faith, 1939-1981’, Volume Two, p. 101, Banner of Truth, 1990). He preached into the faces of boredom and hostility – people who could snipe at his preaching because he made them feel like sinners. But Dr Lloyd-Jones survived that time, and numbers left, while he won others over, but it was not straightforward even for him.

I am saying that there is not a true preacher who is not often made aware of just how fragile his position is, who would not be surprised if a quarter of his membership were to secede this year and start another church. There is scarcely a single faithful minister who has not been misunderstood and opposed even by members of his own family – as Spurgeon was by his own younger brother. That is the reality of the Christian ministry, and it is a myth to think there is somewhere a perfect church where all the congregation hang onto every word their preacher says. There is a name for groups like that. We call them cults. The real ministry is not like that at all. Your heart is often in your mouth. You find yourself looking at the PC screen and reading the words of the resignation letter you have just compiled. You may be the godly man I’ve been describing, and your message may be from the living God as I have outlined it, but that means you will certainly face trials within the church. So I am saying the true preacher has to preach with courage, and endure hardness as a good servant of Jesus Christ, and mortify his wishbone and develop a backbone.

It is no disgrace to lose a vote of confidence in a church – but the rules have to be fair. For example, instead of your having to get a two-thirds majority – which Jonathan Edwards himself would not get – your opponents have to get two-thirds support that the congregation has no confidence in you as pastor. It is not at all just when a minority can remove a pastor with almost twice as many in the meeting wanting him to stay on. True preachers endure hardness. They don’t give up. Keep on, keep on, keep on, keep on!

A friend went to Westminster Chapel earlier this month on 7th October to the annual International Christian Human Rights Conference organised by Christian Solidarity and Premier Christian Radio. There were 800 present, and Christians spoke from Egypt, Burma, China and East Timor of the sufferings the church has known there. But the most moving time was when

four women entered the pulpit, Patti Tenenoff, her daughter Dora, Nancy Mankins and Tania Rich. Eight years ago they and their husbands were in Colombia working for the New Tribes Mission when guerrillas took their husbands hostage. The women have not heard a thing from them since that time. Yet they believe their three husbands are still alive, and Dora read a poem she had written when she was about twelve years of age about growing up without her father. What contented, peaceful, trusting women they were, modestly standing there and committing themselves, their husbands and the cause of Christ into God's hands. Our friend had a lump in her throat listening to them. This is the first verse of the poem Dora wrote:

THERE ONCE WAS A MAN.

There once was a man,
a man I once knew.
Who told me stories every night,
laughed at my jokes, and held me tight.
He told me, 'Don't quit!
Always fight the good fight!'
He said, 'Love the Lord with all your heart,
and serve Him with all your might!'
He begged me, 'Do right!'

Don't quit! Keep on. That's our first words to men under pressure. I find a tension counselling such ministers. There have been times when I have pushed a man almost to a nervous breakdown because of the pressure he is under, and I didn't realise it. 'Hang in there brother! We are praying for you! Don't quit!' That is our initial response. But there is an additional doctrine in Scripture of brushing the dust from under your feet and moving on. But the line between moving on and sticking it out is often a razor's edge and not a chasm, and the minister and his advisers do not always spot it. But you have the same heavenly Father as I have, and he will make things clear to you. Cleave to the Lord! So every ministry develops in the crucible of rejection.

3. The work of the ministry will only be achieved by toil.

The Lord Jesus once spoke to his disciples and said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field' (Luke 10:2). Who does the Lord send out into vineyard? Not men who want position and prestige and reputation. Not men who want security and leisure time. Not men who want a life of study. Men who labour! Men who love to work! Labourers! Men who are in love, not with theology and discussion and academic recognition, but men who will work their socks off for the Lord. Men who will sweat and toil in the work of the Lord. Men who manifest a work of faith and a labour of love all their lives through.

I realise that the Lord Jesus is not talking here in Luke 10 about the preacher but of every single disciple. This is the vocation of all the church. We are looking for men who will labour at every single level of the Christian life. Parents, and youth workers, and Sunday School teachers and elders. We are looking for those deacons who arrive early on Sunday and get the bucket and

brush and wash the vomit off the church steps from the Saturday night drunks, people in charge of the book-table and the tape ministry, the people who pray in the Prayer Meeting – every single one of them labouring for the Lord. It is the most elementary challenge that a whole congregation is motivated to work for the Lord, not one sluggard from the book of Proverbs tolerated, but everyone abounding in the work of the Lord – in season when it is wonderfully convenient – and also out of season when it is not. Of course, that is your longing – to belong to a congregation of labourers for the Lord. The reality for too many of us is that those who do the most seem to have the time and energy to take on more, while those who are doing nothing have no time for anything. So often it is the lambs who are pointing sinners to the Good Shepherd while the old rams are doing nothing.

I am saying that the pastor enfleshes and exemplifies Christian labour. Six days shalt thou labour. I would expect to work until 10 p.m. every night of the week. That's my delight of course. (I hope that this is not boasting. You cannot listen with profit if you detect pride in any preacher.) Working until 10 has not always been like that. This is just how it has developed for me. I am now in my last promised decade. If we have seven decades, and each decade is like a day in the week then today it is Saturday for me and my week has almost ended, so I am anxious to make up for wasted years. A week last Sunday at 10.45 p.m. my wife said to the 20 students in the Manse, 'Well, now, it is time for you go home to your beds!' At the end of the one night a week on which I take my assistant visiting with me I drop him at his home and then I call in at McDonald's drive-in – which is just round the corner from his home – just before it closes at 11.00 and treat myself to a hamburger.

Excuse those trivial personal references. My point is that there is no method for success and growth for a minister which does not embrace labouring in the gospel. Here is the great model for us in 2 Corinthians 11:27 'I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Beside everything else, I face the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?' But the great challenge of those words is this – to be labouring and toiling when we are emotionally disinclined. To be abounding in the work of the Lord when we lie, as we sometimes do, in the depths of depression, wallowing sometimes in self-pity. We know that there is a duty to attend to, and that duty is very unpleasant, unattractive and unwelcome. Do we have the maturity to stand right on top of our emotions, and in the face of our reluctance and aversion attend to what God commands us to do – even when we are emotionally totally disinclined? There is no greater peril for the Christian minister than to make our emotions the touchstone of our duties: to wait for the moment of inspiration before we pray, or do what God commands us to do. There is no more common excuse that the minister makes than saying to himself, 'I couldn't be expected to witness and pray and visit when I feel like this.' Time and again we have to stand at ourselves and insist that although we lie virtually on the emotional floor of despondency we have to pick ourselves up and attend to what God commands us to do.

Are we labouring in the face of our emotional disinclination? Are we working in the face of the tremendous obstacles and difficulties that providence may often place in the way of doing our duty? More than that. Are we labouring in small things? It is one of the surest signs of ministerial maturity that we pay careful attention to matters of detail in the Christian life. The Lord's highest

commendation falls upon men who are faithful in little things. It is at that point so often we are losing this particular struggle. It may not seem much to you while in Seminary that a minister who is going to be in the pulpit at 11 on a Sunday morning has a considered prepared sermon, and that he is back there that Sunday evening with another such message. That may seem to you so very obvious – only an incidental matter. It may seem to you obvious that he knows where the doubts are in the congregation, where the backsliding is, where the tears are. It may seem trivial to you that he knows what the children's names are, what are the significance of certain dates are for some people. It may seem just a small thing to keep certain promises, write certain letters, say thank you regularly to the Sunday School teachers, the youth leaders and those who keep the machinery of the church turning, and show genuine appreciation. It may seem to you inconceivable that there should be a minister and he does not have a time of personal devotions every day. It's just a small thing to labour at such matters, but it is here our works are being severely tested. It is out of all this that your preaching emerges. How will they listen to you if you are remiss in these areas?

Then one closing word in this matter of labouring for the Lord. Do everything for double usefulness. I think that that is Herman Hoeksema's exhortation. A man gave that to me at one time in my life, and it proved to be very useful. For example, if I write an article or a report I will send it to magazines in different corners of the world. I will attend conferences and listen but I will take my laptop with me and transcribe a full outline of what is said and put it on the Banner of Truth website: others then can profit from it. I will gather my sermons series together and offer them to some publisher as a book. I will aim to put a sermon, word for word, every week, or about 40 a year on our church website. I have put these three talks on preaching on the church's website so that you can go home after this lecture and before the day is out I hope you will be able to download them all. So I preach to a congregation of up to 100 people on a Sunday night in my little town of 15,000 people on the shores of the Irish Sea, but then to a thousand more who normally visit the web and who read the sermon and download it every week. If I were going to become a John Newton having to answer many people's correspondence with their questions I would certainly gather the letters together and if they were deemed helpful prepare them for a larger audience to read them. Do everything for double usefulness. Be always abounding in your work for the Lord

4. The work of the ministry will only be achieved by dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

We must learn to trust him, and instinctively to invoke his help at every moment of crisis in our ministries as we witness to the glory of Jesus Christ. You remember the Lord said these fascinating words, 'do not worry about what to say or how to say it' (Matthew 10:19). He was not warning us against study or preparation. He was not saying, 'Don't read and learn the Scriptures.' But you know that sometimes we worry about the actual action of speaking. We become tense and anxious about certain occasions. We try to rehearse everything we are going to say. We attempt to have a prepared response to every foreseeable situation. Then something arises in a form we have not foreseen. We have no prepared answers, no formulae, no ready set of words and we are embarrassed by our own silence.

The answer is really this. You have come to know the Word of God, that is, known the system of doctrine that Scripture teaches, the flowing of redemptive history, and you have charged your

minds to retain and memorise verses the Bible has taught. You have taken the responsibility of that upon yourself very seriously: Ephesians 6:14, 'Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist.' That is where the Christian soldier begins. Before he can fight he has to buckle everything together with this belt. But then, in addition I am saying, you learn to depend upon God, so that even in the moment of proclamation he will give you words. He will tell you what to say. We depend upon the Spirit of God for efficiency at every level in our spiritual lives. We are all to be Spirit-enabled people.

A PCA minister from Florida sent me a dozen sermons on the Psalms of Ascents and I listened to them. They were all written out by him word by word and earnestly read to the congregation. The sermons would have made the same flat impression upon the people if he had mailed them each a copy of the sermon and they had read them at home. I advised him that once a month he must go into the pulpit with no notes at all and speak to his people. I believe that confidence in the great fact that the Spirit helps us as we are preaching would cure many of our spiritual neuroses, and raise our whole level of preaching – if we were only prepared to believe that God would help us, and teach us on every occasion when we are standing up for him.

I remember going to a pro-abortion meeting in our town on the pier addressed by a local abortionist doctor in a roomful of feminists. I went with a wife of one of our deacons who had recently had a miscarriage. I could feel the bench we sat on trembling as she was preparing to get up and speak as some of these women talked of this 'growth' within themselves. I do not know if there were any more Christians there that night but Pearl and myself, but once she was on her feet her nervousness went and God helped her to speak and He made sure that not one of her words fell to the ground.

I am saying that if we enter the pulpit in a right relationship with God, with a good conscience, armed with the truth, knowing what we believe and why, with true affection for the people we are addressing, and depending upon the Holy Spirit then you will find this marvellous thing happening ... you will find the Spirit coming with power and wisdom, giving you the words that are entirely appropriate to the particular situation. You may climb the steps of the pulpit thinking, 'I do not believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. I do not believe in Jesus Christ his Son...' You may start the service as exhausted and weary and listless and lifeless as you have ever been, but as you cry for the assistance of God the Spirit, and sing hymns to Jehovah, and read his word, and pray, and begin to preach you will find the Lord himself coming as he has come again and again, to you and to the whole congregation, filling you with his word and presence. You will preach yourself and your congregation into fulness from emptiness, and joy from the ashes of mourning.

I told my friend and counsellor Iain Murray that I was speaking here this week and he wrote to me and said, 'Don't be tied to a script at RTS. They need to learn freedom, liberty and actual dependence on the Holy Spirit for the exercise of preaching as well as for the preparation. We cannot be too simple. A village in New Jersey didn't know Archibald Alexander, but was used to hearing his students, and one day they heard him without apparently knowing who this preacher was. They commented, 'He is not as learned as the students we hear.' The OPC church across the road from Westminster Seminary had many of the faculty in its membership, and that could intimidate many of the preachers who took that pulpit. But all that the professors wanted was for

themselves, and especially their wives and children to be fed with the Word of God, and hear the gospel, and be urged to come to Jesus Christ. That is what we all want, for the gospel to come, not in word only, but in power and in the Holy Ghost and with much assurance. Don't be bound by what your perception of what leading a Reformed preacher might expect from you. Be yourself in dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

5. The work of the ministry can only be achieved in the defence of the gospel.

I am referring to Paul's words in Philippians 1:16, 'I am put here for the defence of the gospel.' There is some reluctance to do this, and all kinds of pressures within the church's present structures. Let me illustrate that: if we go back to Blaise Pascal we meet a man who gave Christianity much of its thinking as far as defending the gospel is concerned. There is a famous statement of Pascal when he says, 'The heart has its reasons that reason cannot know,' and time and again men have taken that statement and they have said, 'That is the way. You cannot bring reason to the defence of the gospel because it is a matter of the heart.' Or you take that old saying, 'It is easier felt than telt.' You meet there exactly the same principle. Or you have it in the song, 'You ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart.' Come again to C.H. Spurgeon and he tells us this 'Defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion. Just let it loose and it will defend itself.'

Now the reality today is that all over Africa the lion has to be defended. Lions are no match against poachers with rifles. Men have it in their power to exterminate the lion and all that will be left is a curiosity we choose to visit in a zoo, not a powerful independent roaming roaring killing presence. If the lion has to be defended today certainly the gospel has always to be defended. The New Testament is full of the defence of the gospel. It is packed with examples of men reasoning in support of the Christian faith. I am totally convinced that Pascal has misunderstood the New Testament at that point.

Paul was set for the defence of the gospel. Peter tells the early church to give a reason, an apologia, for the hope they have. Almost the whole of apostolic preaching in Acts is defensive preaching. It is full of reasoning and argumentation. The early Christians were disputing in the synagogues and before the philosophers because, they said, 'We have a defensible gospel.' I was always glad of the apologetics department and the man who led it at Westminster Seminary. I was also glad of the impact that Francis Schaeffer made in the 1970's because of his use of the infallible Bible and emphasis on biblical spirituality.

To defend the gospel you have to remove every misunderstanding and prejudice that stands in the way of faith in Christ. You read Acts 2 and the history of Pentecost and immediately you find the church misunderstood: 'These men are drunk.' God is overwhelming them, and they are proclaiming a message that comes from the throne of the universe, and people dismiss them as inebriated. Right down through the ages the living church faces such calumny. 'These people burnt witches. These people supported the monkey trial. These people destroy unity. These folk are snake handlers. These are the people who caused the civil war in the north of Ireland.' We have to remove prejudice and misunderstanding. That is a legitimate part of our witness.

Or consider the great doctrines of the Confession which men misunderstand: predestination, the atonement, the creation, depravity, the Trinity – the church has to remove prejudice. We have to answer the objectors. There are objections to a historic Adam, a virgin birth, Christ walking on the water, the sufferings some men and women pass through, an axe-head that floats, the eternal punishment of the wicked, and we have to defend Christianity against these objections.

We have to give a reason for the hope that is in us. I was in school with a man who later led the Labour Party in Great Britain, Neil Kinnock, and there was a time when as a 13 year-old boy he came to the Christian Union we started in 1955 (he is three or four years younger than me), but he later drifted away from interest in living faith. Then at a General Election, when he was leading the Labour Party and Mrs. Thatcher was leading the Tories, he was asked what his views on Christianity were. He told them he would like to believe but felt unable to make the leap into the dark. I wrote to him and reminded him of the old days in school, the Christian Union, and told him that coming to Christ was not a leap into the dark but coming to the light of Jesus' teaching, and claims and great works. Coming to Christ required thinking about these things very very seriously.

In the New Testament faith is the result of persuasion and conviction and demonstration and argument. We are people of hope, but that hope is not whistling in the dark to keep up our spirits. We have a light that is shining on and on. There is our faith in the resurrection of Christ. That did not happen in the dark, in a corner. Ordinary people saw the Lord for almost six weeks, and ate and drank with him. The resurrection didn't happen in Narnia. It happened outside Jerusalem out of a tomb which was in a garden where a degree of latitude crossed a degree of longitude. I am not taking a gamble when I believe in Jesus. I am not taking up Pascal's wager as the smart man's option. I am persuaded that there are reasons that carry conviction, and out of them my faith comes.

On 30th September 700 people came to a conference called 'Say Yes to Creation' at the University of Leeds, England. Such meetings are enormously encouraging if only to shake up and disturb unbelievers' thoughts about what they call 'evolution.' Dr Lloyd-Jones tells the story of a man walking down a country lane and seeing a farmer friend chasing a horse around a field. 'What are you doing?' he said. The breathless farmer said, 'I want to harness this horse to plow a field, but he won't let me catch him. He doesn't want to work. So I am just chasing him round and round the field. I am making sure that he is not going to enjoy a day of idleness.' So it is in our defence of the faith. If we are unable to convert evolutionists and abortionists at least by defending the faith and presenting truth to people we can stir their consciences and take away some of their happiness in their sinning.

6. The work of the ministry will only be achieved by discriminatory preaching.

Discriminatory preaching shows the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. Consider the irresistible power of the preaching of Stephen in Acts 6 and 7. This is the verdict the Holy Ghost makes about his sermons, 'they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke' (Acts 6:10). That is our goal. We can never be satisfied with anything less than that. You remember how Stephen was summoned to defend himself before the Sanhedrin, and when they saw him 'his face was like the face of an angel' (Acts 6:15). George

Orwell's last words in his notebooks were, 'At 50, everyone has the face he deserves.' I do believe that the indwelling of the Lord Jesus and the constant looking unto God does create a kind of facial beauty. We all know cases like that of certain people who have left their mark on us whose nobility and purity and benevolence of soul shines through the face, and to gaze at it is to be peering at a friend of God. I think that that is a beautiful grace.

Stephen preaches and he tells them at length their deplorable history and then concludes, 'You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him' (Acts 7:51&52). Then what happens? Are they asked to vote? Does the high priest thank him for an interesting message, and then tell the Sanhedrin that there's a buzzer under their seats and they can all decide whether Stephen's right or wrong? 'Of course I'm going to be neutral, but you're all free to vote one way or the other.'

Is that what happened? And they voted and then went home and had dinner and told their families all about it? That is not the way that service ended. Hear! 'They were furious, and gnashed their teeth at him ... and they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him' (Acts 7:54 & 57). The sermon ended with them killing him. They had killed his Lord and now they killed him the servant, and Stephen or any preacher of the gospel would not want it any other way. What preacher wants people who hate his Saviour to say pleasant things about him? And these men were the inner circle of the most religious people in the world. And they had brought him there on trial. They had put him in the dock and they thought that they were the jury and were going to pass verdict on him, and make up their minds how bad he was. Stephen disillusioned them of that pretty quick. He was not on trial. They were, because they had betrayed and murdered Jehovah Jesus and all that lay before them was an open-ended encounter with his Father.

Stephen wasn't asking for a decision or a verdict. He was asking for submission and repentance. That sermon was so powerful that it cut them to the heart. Stephen wasn't a performer, a sword juggler, he was taking the sword of the Spirit and he was thrusting it into their hearts, and he wouldn't stop until they were convicted of sin and righteousness and judgment to come.

God has given to us the Bible, this miraculous book, and it is at the heart of the church, and he has given us men with the message of the book to declare it, but we are not seeing people being cut down by its power, and few are entering the Kingdom of God. I am saying that one of the reasons for this is that what happened in the Jerusalem Sanhedrin is not happening in too many churches today. Stephen discriminated in his preaching. In other words, he showed the difference between Christians and non-Christians. It was not simply that he had marvellous redemptive historical insights, and theologically was straight down the line, but he proclaimed the implications of the death of Christ for that very congregation – 'you have betrayed and murdered him.' He gave them an encounter with the Holy One of Israel He cut them to their hearts, and at least one of those who heard him began to kick against the sword. Saul of Tarsus felt the power of the truth and the sword of the word penetrating him, but he was just kicking and kicking against it. And we have to be like Stephen and get around to saying to people, 'And what about you? What is Jesus to you? Are you seeking or are you a finder?' Men and women are not

coming to Christ because they have no need of Christ. They feel no guilt and so they have no desire for a Saviour. They don't know what the hymnist is writing about when he says, 'Vile and full of sin I am,' or when he says, 'Foul, I to the fountain fly, wash me Saviour or I die.' We have to take the sword of the Spirit and thrust it into their hearts and prick their pride and deflate them.

What does Paul ask the church to pray for when they think about him? Boldness. They were to cry mightily to the Lord, 'O God, give Paul courage in his life and message. Help him not to be bought by men's smiles or fearful because of their frowns.' We need boldness because 'the fearful and the unbelieving shall not inherit the kingdom of God.' One great reason the evangelical pulpit is not making an impact upon the world is that we are not preaching in a discriminatory way. Discriminatory preaching is putting our heads through the gates of hell and telling people that is where they are, because they don't know it – in the church or in the world.

7. The work of the ministry will only be achieved by applicatory preaching.

Applicatory preaching shows the difference between obedience and disobedience in Christians. The latter half of Matthew 5 is full of applicatory preaching. Start your preaching in a new church with a series on the Sermon on the Mount. The Lord says, 'You think you have never broken the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill,' but God's law also embraces the inner life of man, feelings of rage or anger. You can kill a man with your lips – 'Crucify him, crucify him! Release unto us Barrabas!' And you also are thinking that because you've never taken your secretary away for a week-end that you've never broken the commandment, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery,' but you can lust after a woman in your heart without ever having spoken to her, let alone touched her, and so that seventh commandment is broken. And what are the consequences of that for you? 'You are in danger of hell fire,' says the Lord. He brings the threat of the place of woe to Christians to break the power of indwelling sin. Now that has to be done in applicatory preaching. The word must be applied to church members, so that it sticks!

You remember how our Lord dealt with the young man from Israel's covenant community in Matthew 19, applying to him the 10 commandments and then especially the last commandment to test whether he had conquered covetousness or not? 'Sell all you have and give to the poor and you shall have treasure in heaven and come and follow me.' The young man went away sorrowful. He was a very attractive and eager person who had come running to Jesus but he went away sad. Do we know that that is possible – to back away from Jesus sorrowful because the Lord has been laying down the terms of being his disciple?

When Christ had finished his personal work with this man the disciples, watching and listening to everything, cried out in amazement. What did they say? 'How marvelously simple the three steps of salvation?' No, they groaned and said, 'Who then can be saved?' If this is what it means, the whole course of our life being turned from treasure on earth to treasure in heaven, from self to Christ, and from satisfying the flesh to pleasing the Father – if that indeed is what is involved in true Christianity – who then can be saved?

The Lord Jesus did not say, 'Ah yes, I see what you mean. The standard is impossibly high. Let me bring it down a bit.' He said in effect, 'You get the point, brethren? With men it is

impossible, but with God all things are possible.’ Only grace can save us and only grace can keep us. That is the fruit of discriminatory and applicatory preaching. At first many people look back in amazement at us, and then with some stirrings of resentment and anger. But then some begin to see what it takes to be converted and to live the Christian life – nothing less than the power of the God who made the world. Only he can bring it to pass, and that is the first rudiments of the biblical doctrine of the Christian life. After that such a new man, finding the blessed work of God has been wrought in his own heart, does not talk about his experience, or his decision, or his profession, but of the grace of God that has caused him to wonder. ‘Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me!’

GEOFF THOMAS

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