

FROM THE SCRIPTURES TO THE SERMON

I. SOME PERSPECTIVES ON PREACHING

By J. I. Packer*

“I urge you, Timothy, as we live in the sight of God and of Christ Jesus (whose coming in power will judge the living and the dead), to preach the Word of God. Never lose your sense of urgency, in season or out of season. Prove, correct, and encourage, using the utmost patience in your teaching.” Thus J. B. Phillips, that prince of paraphrasts, renders the first two verses of 2 Timothy 4. Note the aspects of the communicative action that Paul prescribes (they are all there in the Greek): proclamation, demonstration, correction, instruction. Note the commitment to the preaching ministry for which Paul calls: press on, he says, with utmost urgency and stick-to-it-ive-ness (a fine North American word that catches the force of *makrothumia* better than does the English scholar’s “patience”). And now consider whether we evangelicals, who so often cite these words of Paul to each other and who claim to know so clearly that the preaching of the Word is the power-source of the church, can be said to succeed in rising to the demands of this insight that we inherit. I think it must be honestly admitted that often we fail here; we do not succeed in preaching the Word of God as plainly, pungently, and powerfully as we would like to do. What follows is offered in the hope that it will help us to preach better. If you do not find my thoughts useful, please remember that, like so many of our unsuccessful sermons, they were at least well meant.

I.

First let me focus the concept of preaching the Word of God as I think it ought to be focused. I do not define preaching institutionally or sociologically, but theologically and functionally. An institutional definition would present preaching in terms of buildings, pulpits, and pews.¹ A sociological definition would view preaching as a special kind of monologue fulfilling specific corporate expectations on the part of the group being addressed. Both types of definition are no doubt useful in their place; but if one is, or hopes to be, a preacher oneself, and wants to know what fulfilling the ministry that Paul urged upon Timothy really involves, then a theological definition that shows what should happen when preaching takes place is what one needs. Here, then, is my attempt to formulate this concept in normative theological terms.

Christian preaching, I urge, is *the event of God bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direc-*

* Dr. Packer is professor of historical and systematic theology at Regent College, Vancouver. This article and the next were delivered at ATS’s fall lecture series in 1989.

tion from himself through the words of a spokesperson. Please note the following points about this definition. First, it is *theological*: it conceptualizes preaching in terms not of human performance but of divine communication. Also, it is *prophetic*: it views God as speaking his own message via a messenger whose sole aim is to receive and relay what God gives. Furthermore, it is *incarnational*: for it envisages God embodying his communication in the person of the messenger who both delivers it and, in delivering it, models response to it. Phillips Brooks' famous delineation of preaching as truth through personality² points to the way in which personal attitudes to God and man come through in the course of declaring God's message, and the demeanor of preachers in their messenger-role as bearers of God's truth and wisdom to people whom God loves will always, for better or for worse, become part of their message and affect the impact that they make. Jesus himself, God's incarnate Son, is of course the paradigm case here. Finally, this normative definition of preaching has a *critical* function to fulfill; for it obliges us to test pulpit utterances, and to say of any that was not Bible-based, Christ-related, and life-impacting, in a sufficient sense, that, whatever else it was, it was not preaching in the full and proper meaning of that word.

Preaching as described is necessary for a healthy church. Without a regular diet of Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting messages from God the mind-set of a congregation will become either institutionalist and sacramentalist, as in old-style Roman Catholicism where there was no effective preaching, or moralistic and legalistic, as in liberal Protestant congregations where the agenda is social service and God is expected to accept one for doing it. Where there is preaching of the type described, however, the Bible will be received

So I do not equate preaching with what is called sermonizing or pulpitering. Not every performance from the preacher's podium is preaching. It is notorious that some sermonizing produces only bitter wisecracks about the pulpit as coward's castle, and preachers as standing six feet above contradiction, talking at rather than to their hearers, and as climaxing invisibility during the week with incomprehensibility on Sunday, and so on. But such sermonizing, which is certainly bad preaching, may be my definition not be preaching at all, though the institutional and sociological definitions would compel us to call it that. From my theological standpoint, what is said from the pulpit is only preaching if its content conforms to the specification stated above. Conversely, any communication that fulfills these specifications ought to be categorized as preaching, wherever and however it is done — as when Philip sat in the Ethiopian eunuch's chariot and “told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35, NIV; KJV had “preached unto him Jesus;” the Greek word is *euangelizomai*, one of the two main New Testament terms for declaring the gospel). For the New Testament, a Christian spokesman preaches (*kerusso*) only when some aspect of the God-given message concerning Christ (the *kerygma*) is the content of the utterance. This is not our usual modern way of looking at the matter, but it is the biblical way, and it is always best to follow the Bible.

as the Word of God, because it will constantly be impacting people as just that; Jesus Christ will be known and loved, because he will constantly be projected as lover and Savior of our souls; and Christians will grow and flourish through being fed on true spiritual food. Surely it is beyond dispute that a church made and kept healthy by authentic preaching must ever be our goal.

Today's evangelicalism has behind it a noble heritage of preaching. The Reformation itself grew out of practical biblical preaching with Christ at the center. The great Puritan movement (and it was great) was sustained on both sides of the Atlantic by preaching of this kind. The eighteenth-century revival in Britain and the Great Awakening in New England were profound spiritual movements with powerful evangelical preaching at their heart. In the nineteenth century men like Charles H. Spurgeon sustained magnificent ministries by preaching in this fashion, and more recently men like Donald Barnhouse and Martyn Lloyd-Jones have done the same. But the great tradition is currently tapering off. Why is this? we ask; what has happened to eclipse the grand-scale presentations of the works, ways, and will of God, through which evangelicalism once grew lively and strong? It is not, I think, that preachers as a body have stopped caring about preaching or trying to do it properly; the problem goes deeper, and arises in the first instance from the drift of our culture. We live in days in which the credibility of faithful biblical preaching is radically doubted, not only outside but also inside the churches, and misguided but insistent expectations on the part of listeners put many difficulties in the way of faithful preaching that were not there before. Five factors in particular operate in this way; we need to be aware of them, so I propose to review them now.

First, the prevalence of non-preaching in Christian pulpits has eroded awareness of what true preaching is.

Lack of good models tends always to lower standards, and unfortunately good models have been in short supply throughout this century. Far too many pulpit discourses have been put together on wrong principles. Some have failed to open up Scripture; some have expounded biblical doctrine without applying it, thus qualifying as lectures rather than preachments (for lecturing aims only to clear the head, while preaching seeks to change the life); some have been no more than addresses focusing the present self-awareness of the listeners, but not at any stage confronting them with the Word of God; some have been mere statements of the preacher's opinion, based merely on his own expertise, rather than messages from God carrying divine authority. Such discourses are less than preaching, as was stated previously, but because they were announced as sermons they are treated as preaching and people's idea of preaching gets formed in terms of them, so that the true conception of preaching is forgotten.

It is often said, and truly, that sermons must teach Bible truth, and that the renewal of preaching needed today will take its rise from a fresh awareness that this is so; my slighting reference to some content-laden sermons as lectures rather than preachments may therefore have seemed perplexing. But

preaching is more than teaching — not less, but more! Preaching is essentially teaching *plus* application (invitation, direction, summons), and where that *plus* is lacking something less than preaching takes place. Study of printed sermons from past generations reveals that older evangelical preachers kept a careful balance between doctrinal content as such (biblical orthodoxy) and practical and experiential applications (biblical orthopraxy) — something like half and half in most messages. In our day, however, the balance has been largely lost, and sermons tend to be either all doctrinal content without application, or all exhortation without doctrinal content; and to the extent to which either form of imbalance prevails, both types of utterance become instances of non-preaching, and very inadequate models, therefore, of what preaching ought to be. Many in our churches have never experienced preaching of the historic evangelical sort at all.

Second, topical as distinct from textual preaching has become common in North America (less so in Britain and elsewhere).

For sermons to explore announced themes rather than biblical passages is a twentieth-century development, and hardly a happy one. Why should it have occurred? Partly, I suppose, to make preaching appear interesting and important to a generation that has largely lost interest in the pulpit; partly, no doubt, to make the sermon seem different from what goes on in the Bible class before public worship starts; partly, too, I am sure, because many topical preachers do not trust their Bible enough to let it speak for itself and utter its own message through their lips. Whatever the reasons, however, the results are unhealthy. In a topical sermon any text taken is reduced to a peg on which the speaker hangs his own line of thought. The shape and thrust of his message thus reflect no more than his own idea of what is good for people, and then the only authority that the sermon can have is the human authority of a knowledgeable person speaking with emphasis (raising his voice, perhaps, and even banging the pulpit). To my mind, topical sermons of this sort, no matter how biblical their component parts may be, cannot but fall short of being preaching in the full sense, just because in them the authority of God speaking is dissolved, more or less, into the authority of human religious expertise. Many in our churches have only ever been exposed to topical preaching of this kind: no wonder then that they do not appreciate what real preaching might be.

Third, low expectations become self-fulfilling. Where little is expected from sermons, little is received.

Many moderns have never been taught to expect sermons to matter much, and so their habit at sermon time is to relax, settle back and wait to see if anything the preacher says will catch their interest. Most of today's congregations and preachers seem to be at one in neither asking nor anticipating that God will come to meet his people in the preaching; so it is no wonder if this fails to happen. According to your unbelief, we might say, be it unto you! Just as it takes two to tango, so ordinarily it takes an expectant, praying congregation, along with a preacher who knows what he is about, to make an authentic preaching occasion. A century ago in Reformed circles in Britain

the regular question to a person coming from church was, how did he or she “get on” under the preaching of the Word: this reflected the expectancy of which I am speaking. Nowadays, however, on both sides of the Atlantic, the commoner question is, how did the preacher “get on” in his stated pulpit performance, and this shows how interest has shifted and the mental attitude has changed. It is now assumed that those who sit under the preaching are observers, measuring the preacher’s performance, rather than participants waiting for the Word of God. Many in our congregations do not know that there is any other way of listening to sermons than this way of detached passivity, and no one should be surprised to find that those who cultivate such passivity often dismiss preaching as an uneventful bore. Those who seek little find little.

Fourth, the power of speech to communicate significance has in our Western culture become suspect, so that any form of oratory, rhetoric, or dramatic emphasis to show the weight and significance of stated facts tends to alienate rather than convince.

This development is due mainly to the media. On radio and television strong expressions of feeling sound and look hysterical; cool and chatty intimacy is required if one is to communicate successfully. This standard of communicative sincerity is now applied everywhere. Prior to this century a preacher could use words dramatically and emphatically for up to an hour to set forth the majesty of God the King, the glory of Christ the Savior, the greatness of the soul, the momentous importance of eternity, and the significance of present reactions to the gospel message for determining personal destiny, and congregations appreciated the manner as being appropriate to the matter. Nowadays, that kind of utterance is widely felt to be false, as if passionate speech as such argues a purpose of browbeating and bludgeoning the mind, pulling the wool over the eyes, and carrying through a confidence trick. To avoid this suspicion, many preachers nowadays talk of spiritual life and death in a style better fitted to reading the sports results, and their cozy intimacy makes the theme itself seem trivial or unreal. The discrediting among us of grand-scale public speech puts preachers into what might well be felt to be a no-win situation.

It was my privilege, forty years ago, to spend a winter under the preaching ministry of the late Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and to enjoy a working relationship with him for twenty years after that, so that I was able to observe from many angles his approach to the preacher’s task. His gifts fitted him for grand-scale ministry, and his sense of spiritual reality told him that great things must be said in a way that projected their greatness. He could fairly be described as a nineteenth-century preacher born out of due time, and though he was fully aware that the older type of preaching had become suspect and unfashionable he continued to practise it and to encourage others to do the same. Combining the electric energy of the orator with the analytical precision of the courtroom or the clinic, and focusing his businesslike rhetoric on the inner drama of the gracious hound of heaven capturing and changing sinners’ benighted hearts, he communicated an overwhelming sense of the greatness of God and

the weight of spiritual issues, and left behind him a large body of hearers, myself among them, who will for ever be thankful that as a modern man he deliberately swam against the stream and did the old thing. The vision of preaching that I gained from him, as from no one else, stays with me, and what I am saying now reflects, I am sure, my experience of the power of preaching under his ministry. From the vantage-point that this experience gave me, I urge that the only real way forward for preachers today is to follow Dr. Lloyd-Jones in cultivating an honesty with words that earns us the right to fly in the face of our laid-back culture and to dwell passionately, urgently, dramatically, and at appropriate length, on the desperately important agenda of the relationship between God and man. In this as in so much else, the old paths constitute the good way. But how few today, preachers or people, know it!

Fifth, spiritual issues themselves, issues of radical repentance, self-despairing faith, costly cross-bearing as central to discipleship, spending and being spent in order to do others good, putting holiness before happiness, and keeping the world out of one's heart, are felt to be irrelevant by many church attenders.

The problem that preachers face here is that church attendance for many has little or nothing to do with the quest for God. Why then are they in church at all? The answers are all too familiar. Because churchgoing is the mark of a respectable and trustworthy citizen; or because attending an appropriate ethnic or denominational church helps one keep alive one's cultural heritage; or because the genial and relaxed regularities of Sunday worship help to stabilize a hectic life; or because faithful churchgoing is thought to guarantee some kind of happy lot in the next world; or because one likes the people one meets at church; and so on. There are many such reasons, but none of them has anything to do with knowing and loving God and none of them, therefore, fosters any spiritual interest in preaching. So when preachers point the way to a richer relationship with God, this type of hearer feels a sense of irrelevance, and his or her heart is inclined to say: here is a religious professional talking about the things he is paid to talk about; I am not a religious professional, so none of that is really my business; however, I will sit through it patiently, as good manners require. Preachers, for their part, know that this is how many of their hearers are thinking, so they strain every nerve to speak in a way that will lead persons without spiritual interest to rate them fascinating, relevant, and smart. How we love to be rated smart! But this preoccupation makes against faithful spiritual preaching, and results in congregations not experiencing faithful spiritual preaching for long periods together.

All these factors tend to set up wrong standards and thus constitute obstacles to the kind of preaching that I seek to commend. However, difficulties are there to be overcome; so I proceed.

III

In what I have said so far I have been clearing the ground for discussion of my main concern in this presentation, which is to show what authority in preaching means and to suggest how it might be reestablished in today's

churches. My interest at this stage centers not on homiletics, that is, the technical procedures whereby preachers bring to us what they have to tell us about God, but rather on the theology of preaching, that is, the supernatural process whereby God through his messenger brings to us what he has to tell us about himself. Preaching as a work of God, mediating the authority of God, is my theme, and the rest of my space will be devoted to its development in a direct way.

My first step in opening up my theme must be to outline what I mean when I speak of the authority of God. Authority is a multi-faceted relationship with a moral and intellectual as well as a governmental side: the basic idea is of a claim to exercise control that is founded on having the right, power, and competence to do it. The authority that belongs to God springs from his sovereign dominion over us as his dependent creatures, linked with the moral perfection of all his dealings with us. Holy Scripture, “God’s Word written” (Anglican Article 25), is the instrument of God’s authority; our Lord Jesus Christ exercises and embodies it; and the Holy Spirit induces acknowledgment of it by making us realize the reality of the Father and the Son as they address us in all their awesomeness, holiness, and graciousness. God speaks through his Word, written and preached, and our preaching of the Word should match the Spirit’s strategy — that is, we should always be seeking to bring home God’s reality and authority to human minds and hearts by elucidating and applying Holy Scripture. Encounter with the living, authoritative Lord brings spiritual understanding and life as we hear and respond to his call for trust and obedience, praise and worship, and the preacher’s aim should ever be to occasion this edifying encounter. The discussion on which we now enter seeks to show something of what this means, and so to help us set our sights as preachers more effectively.

I ask three questions.

First: what does it mean for preaching to be marked by authority?

The answer I propose is that authority in preaching is a reality in every situation in which the following things are true.

(1) There is no doubt about the *nature* of what is happening: *the Bible is doing the talking*. The preacher is treating himself as a mouthpiece for the biblical word of God, and that word is coming through. He has resisted the temptation to stand in front of his text, as it were, speaking for it as if it could not speak for itself, and putting himself between it and the congregation; instead, he is making it his business to focus everyone’s attention on the text, to stand behind it rather than in front of it, to become its servant, and to let it deliver its message through him. As the Westminster Directory for Public Worship put it, three and a half centuries ago, what the preacher presents must be “contained in or grounded on (his) text, *that the hearers may discern how God teacheth it from thence.*” Preaching has authority only when the message comes as a word from God himself, and that only happens when what is said is perceived as, in the words of the Westminster Confession (I.x), “the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture,” and that perception only occurs as the

preacher labors to let the text talk through him about that with which, like every other text in the Bible, it is ultimately dealing — God and man in relationship, one way or another. If what is presented appears as the preacher's ideas, it can have only human authority at best; when, however, the preacher serves the written Word in a way that lets it speak for itself, its divine authority is felt.

(2) There is no doubt about the *purpose* of what is happening: *response to God is being called for*. The preacher, as spokesman for the text, is seeking not only to inform and persuade, but to evoke an appropriate answer to what God through the text is saying and showing. Man's answer will consist of repentance, faith, obedience, love, effort, hope, fear, zeal, joy, praise, prayer, or some blend of these; for such are the dispositional qualities, springing from the heart into devotional and doxological expression, that God everywhere requires. The preacher is hoping, under God, to reproduce the state of affairs that Paul looked back to when he wrote to the Romans, "you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted" (Rom. 6:17). The teaching is God's testimony, command, and promise; the preacher entrusts his hearers to it by begging them to respond to it and assuring them that God will fulfill his promises to them as they do so; and in this process the divine authority of the message is felt.

(3) There is no doubt about the *perspective* of what is happening: *the preaching is practical*. This point is an extension of the last. What is being said would not be preaching at all were it not life-centered. Communication from the text is only preaching as it is applied and brought to bear on the listeners with a life-changing thrust. Without this, as was said earlier, it would merely be a lecture — that is, a discourse designed merely to clear people's heads and stock their minds, but no in any direct way to change their lives.

I must confess that I do not think that present-day evangelical pulpit is strong here. Reacting against the kind of preaching that too often marks the liberal pulpit, in which the speaker offers personal reflections on human and religious life, too many of us preach messages that suffer from what might be called "doctrinal overload." With thirty minutes in which to preach, we spend twenty-eight of them teaching general principles of divine truth from our text, and only for the last minute or two do we engage in any form of application. But there is little sense of God's authority where so much of the message is lecture and so little application is found.

A wiser way of proceeding, and one that mediated a very vivid sense of divine authority, was that followed by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in the greatest days of his preaching ministry. The introductions to his pastoral and evangelistic sermons were very cunningly conceived. Having announced his text, he would spend the first few minutes of the sermon talking about some widely-felt perplexity of modern life, pointing out in everyday language that no adequate solution or remedy seemed to be in sight. In this he was operating on the wise principle, "scratch where it itches," and involving his hearers in a realization that this was their problem, pressing and inescapable. When he had secured

their interest at this level, he would begin to demonstrate that this text gives God's angle on the problem and his answer to it, and the demonstration would be applicatory all the way. Not everyone who experienced the authority of God in the preaching of "the Doctor" discerned its source. Certainly, Dr. Lloyd Jones' personal power as a speaker and his humble, insightful submission to his text had much to do with it, but much of the authority flowed from the fact that he was applying the truth in a searchingly practical way throughout to remedy the need that he had already brought his hearers to face and own. The more explicit the practical perspective, and the more overtly it involves the listeners, the more the divine authority of the preaching will be felt.

(4) There is no doubt about the *impact* of what is happening: *the presence and power of God are being experienced*. The preaching mediates an encounter not merely with truth, but with God himself. A staggering throwaway line in 1 Corinthians 14 illustrates this. Paul is showing the superior usefulness of prophecy (speaking God's message in intelligible language) over tongues, and he says: "If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?" (Expected answer: yes.) "But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" (1 Cor. 14:23-25). Whatever else in this passage is uncertain, four things at least are plain. First, prophecy as Paul speaks of it here corresponds in content to what we would call preaching the gospel: detecting sin, and announcing God's remedy. Second, the expected effect of such prophecy was to create a sense of being in the present of the God of whom it spoke, and of being searched and convicted by him, and so being moved to humble oneself and worship him. Third, in the experience of both Paul and the Corinthians what Paul describes must have actually occurred, otherwise he could not have expected the Corinthians to believe his assertion: for that which never happened before cannot be predicted with such certainty. Fourth, Paul is anticipating a situation in which a divine authority in and through the preaching would be felt.

To sum up, then: preaching is marked by authority when the message is a relaying of what is taught by the text, when active response to it is actively sought, when it is angled in a practical, applicatory way that involves the listeners' lives, and when God himself is encountered through it. So much for the first questions.

Second: what are the hindrances to authority in our preaching? I can be brief here, since the points are so obvious.

Lack of a clearly Bible-based, applicatory message, summoning its hearers one way or another to a deeper relationship with God in Christ, precludes the possibility of authority.

Imprecision, confusion, and muddle in presentation, so that the message and its application cannot be clearly grasped, has the same effect.

Self-projection also undermines and erodes authority. If by his words and manner the preacher focuses attention on himself, thus modelling some mode of self-absorption or self-satisfaction rather than humble response to the word that he proclaims, he precludes all possibility of his channelling any sense of divine authority: what he does not feel himself he cannot mediate to others. James Denney said somewhere that you cannot convey the impression both that you are a great preacher and that Jesus Christ is a great Savior; he might have added: or that the Lord is a great God. God-projection and Christ-projection rather than self-projection is the way to communicate and engender in one's hearers a sense of divine authority in one's preaching.

Self-reliance in the act of preaching is a further hindrance to true authority in preaching, just as self-projection is. It too has the effect of inducing the hearers to attend to the messenger rather than the message — in other words, to man rather than to God — and authentic authority is eliminated when that happens.

So to my final question.

Third: what are the conditions of authority in our preaching?

To this question I offer first a general and then a specific answer.

The general answer is that preaching has authority when both its substance and its style proclaim in a transparent way the preacher's own docile humility before the Bible itself and before the triune God whose word the Bible is. It is as the preacher himself is truly under, and is clearly seen to be under, the authority of God and the Bible that he will have authority, and be felt to carry authority, as God's spokesman. It needs to be obvious to the hearers that he has put himself wholeheartedly under the authority of the God as whose emissary he comes; of Christ the chief shepherd, whom he serves as a subordinate shepherd, and to whom he must one day give account of his service; and of the Holy Spirit, whom he trusts each moment as he preaches actually to communicate the divine message to his hearers' hearts at that moment. A preacher who has authority will come across as one who consciously depends on the Holy Spirit to sustain in him vividness of vision, clarity of mind and words, and freedom of heart and voice, as he delivers his message, just as he trusts the Holy Spirit to be the agent of conviction and response in the lives of his hearers. It is those under authority who have authority; it is those whose demeanor models submission to the Scriptures and dependence on the Lord of the Word who mediate the experience of God's authority in preaching. "Unlike so many," writes Paul, "we do not sell the word of God for profit" — that is, we do not preach with mercenary motives, nor do we modify the message in order to please hearers who, if pleased, will smile on us, but if displeased, might become obnoxious to us. "On the contrary; in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God" (2 Cor. 2:17). Only those preachers who could say the same, by reason of their conscious and conscientious fidelity to the written Word, are likely ever to be able to say, as Paul elsewhere said: "we also thank God continually because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as

the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thess. 2:13).

Specifically, and looking at the matter directly from our own standpoint as preachers, the conditions of authority are four in number, each of which we should now recognize as a summons and a directive to us from the Lord himself.

(1) The heart of our message on each occasion must be an application of biblical material to the heart and conscience, to lead folk to know, love, worship and serve God through Jesus Christ. Is this our constant purpose when we preach?

(2) The way we preach must display a transparent wholeheartedness of response to our own message, as well as a thoroughgoing commitment to persuade our hearers to trust, love, honor and serve the Lord as we ourselves seek to do. Constant self-scrutiny is therefore required of preachers in particular, to make sure that our own hearts are right before we attempt to speak in the Lord’s name. Do we practice this self-scrutiny?

(3) We need the unction of the Holy Spirit for the act of preaching itself.³ Richard Baxter, the Puritan, in his classic volume, *The Reformed Pastor* (which every would-be pastor-preacher will be wise to read once a year), spoke of “a communion of souls” that takes place in preaching, whereby the hearers catch the preacher’s mood.⁴ This being so, it is vital that the preacher should be full of the Holy Spirit for his appointed task, so that he is clear-headed, warm-hearted, ardent, earnest, and inwardly free to concentrate on the task of instruction and persuasion that each message imposes. An anointing of the Spirit, therefore, giving *parrhasia* — uninhibited freedom to say from one’s heart what one sees with one’s heart — is to be sought every time we preach. Beethoven wrote on the score of his *Missa Sollenis* (Mass in D, op. 126): “From the heart it comes, to the heart may it go,” and these same words should express the preacher’s desire every time he ventures to speak. But it is only as we seek and receive the divine unction, sermon by sermon, that it will be so. Do we seek unction as we should?

(4) Finally, we need grace to be spontaneous when we preach: by which I mean, easy and free-flowing in appropriate expression. This, too, is a gift from God — it is in fact an aspect of the *parrhasia* that the Spirit bestows — but it does not come without hard work in preparation: preparation not just of the message but also, and even primarily, of the messenger. The appropriate formula here comes, I believe, from W. H. Griffith Thomas, and runs as follows: “Think yourself empty; read yourself full; write yourself clear; pray yourself keen; then into the pulpit — and let yourself go!” That is the sort of preparation that produces spontaneity. Is this how we prepare to preach?

God bless us all in our preaching ministry, and empower us to preach with authority — as we ought to preach!

NOTES

¹Most books on preaching assume an institutional definition. Typical is this, from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “What then is preaching? What do I mean by preaching? Let us look at it like this. There, is a man standing in a pulpit and speaking, and there, are people sitting in pews or seats and listening. What is happening? Why is this? Why does that man stand in that pulpit? What is his object? Why does the Church put him there to do this? Why do these other people come to listen? What is this man meant to be doing? What is he trying to do? What ought he to be doing? These it seems to me are the great questions . . .” (*Preaching and Preachers*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972, p. 53).

²“Preaching is the bringing of truth through personality” (Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching*, London: H. R. Allenson Ltd., [1877], p. 5).

³See Lloyd-Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 304-25.

⁴*The Reformed Pastor*, London: Banner of Truth, 1974, p. 149.

