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Who Else? An Appeal for True Preaching!

R. C. Lucas

Editor's Introduction: This article was originally a letter mailed to encourage evangelical ministers in the Evangelical Minister's Assembly, which convenes in London each June. It retains much of its original letter format and is only slightly altered for publication in this form. R. C. Lucas wrote it to encourage ministers to consider the question, "Who will bring the Word of God to your church-if you don't?"

Writing from King's College, Cambridge, on September 23, 1782, to Mr. J. Venn (the son of the better known Henry) on the occasion of his ordination, Charles Simeon said,

My dearest friend, I most sincerely congratulate you, not on permission to receive 40 pounds or 50 pounds a year, nor on the title of Reverend, but on your accession to the most valuable, most honorable, most important, and most glorious office in the world—to that of an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is the hope and purpose of the June Assembly to serve those in the great office of the pastor/teacher. In difficult and confusing times we all need help and encouragement from one another. We need to understand our task and believe it: we need a firm confidence in the fact that we have a great work to accomplish which will not be done if we—and like-minded pastors in all the Protestant churches—do not do it. Let me give seven illustrations of what I mean; there could certainly be several more.

1. *Who else but the pastor/teacher can devote himself wholly to prayer and the ministry of the Word?*

Christians today, like everyone else it seems, lead very busy lives with all too little time for prayer and Bible study. To be fulltime in the church pastorate, to be freed from the daily business of earning one's living, to have a real measure

of security in precarious times, to “have time” to think and pray and give oneself to the sacred Scriptures, this is a *remarkable gift* and provision of God. Like Moses’ mother we are paid to do the one job above all others that we longed to have. From time to time I find it salutary to repent of self-pity and gentle grumbling and recognize my astonishing privilege. Therein, of course, lies our heavy responsibility before God and man. As every young minister knows, it is the easiest thing in the world to fritter that precious time away, to find handling the 24 hours of comparative freedom a difficult discipline, and to slip into bad habits that may, in the end, last a lifetime. For instance, to have one’s office at home is not always a blessing—for wives as for husbands—and it is interesting that American pastors tend to “go to the office” in their church buildings.

It is perfectly possible, however, to be both disciplined and industrious and *still fail to do that for which God gave you the time*. Parkinson’s Law, that “work expands to fill the time available for doing it,” applies to parish work as to any other. It requires a steady, almost ruthless, determination in order to maintain any semblance of the apostolic ideal of Acts 6:4. It also requires a “considered neglect” of other duties (how easy it would be if our only distraction were the oversight of arrangements to care for some believing widows!), or rather a delegation of these duties to Christian men. There lies the rub. Many evangelical pastor/teachers take on new charges where at the start, there is not one man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. However, if we do not immediately and perseveringly aim for Acts 6:4, there never will be such men to share the work. We must break into the circle of decay somewhere, not at first expecting sympathy or understanding from an untaught congregation.

I know that this appeal will touch the conscience of all who are truly called by God to the work of the pastor/teacher. Alas, there are not a few ordained men who discover,

later in life, that they never had such a call. Speaking recently to a young minister who shows unusual aptitude for the work of preaching and teaching, I discovered that he had been reading eight chapters of the Bible every day since his conversion (which itself took place in most unpromising and awkward circumstances). In response to my evident surprise he said, “But isn’t that sort of thing part of a call to the ministry?” I’m sure that it is! How many chapters one reads every day is not the point. But the authentic sign of “the pastor/teacher to be” is to have set one’s heart, with Ezra (7:10), to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes to Israel.

This, then, must be our great priority if there is to be a true rebuilding, in both reformation and renewal, of the churches of our country. We must, very simply, get back to our number one task and priority.

One final word on this point: When I read Lloyd-Jones on *Preaching and Preachers* (see review in this issue), I remember thinking that Anglican evangelicals would never accept so exclusive a view of the tasks of the minister of the gospel. But I still hope that we are willing to learn, despite our many traditions. It grieves me when I hear Westminster Chapel, in the Doctor’s day, described as simply a “preaching shop.” That is ignorant, and takes no account of its peculiar position and opportunity. Have such critics ever read *The First Forty Years*, Iain Murray’s brilliant Volume One of the Lloyd-Jones biography? Do they know nothing of his labors in Sandfields, in Wales? There, if you like, was a true living church and community of a rare kind. Not long ago I drove past Port Talbot and slipped off the motor-way in order to find the old Forward Movement church building. Silent and somber, without notices of activity, it was a rather dreary sight, as were the environs. Even today with new estates, I cannot think that a young minister called to those parts would not feel himself facing a most formidable and up-

hill task. But, as Luther would put it, it was the Word that did it!

2. Who else, but the pastor/teacher will defend the faith today?

There is a widely held belief that this is the peculiar responsibility of other church leaders or authorities. Naturally, convictions of this sort have not been helped by the miserable affair of the Durham bishopric. Here we have a bishop who openly denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus. This has given the church what one calls "academic terrorism," but, thankfully, the churches are becoming tougher in resisting this with vigor.

What may be lacking these days is a sufficient willingness to fight for the faith as, for example, Bishop Gore did in the famous "Hereford Scandal" of 1917. I believe we should encourage our leaders to "take up the cudgels" in their ecclesiastical gatherings. What is needed is not "slops" but strong meat. What a power for good that can be!

However, let us remind ourselves that the bishop of the New Testament is *none other than the pastor/teacher of the local congregation!* It is worldliness which imagines that the only utterances which enjoy influence are those of important public leaders. After all, how many people really read most of the utterances of such men? Not many in your congregation, my brother, and perhaps fewer in your local community. In any case, few of today's church leaders, understandably in view of the times in which they grew up and were trained, know how to "handle the Bible." Since the Bible is "God preaching," what matters is that His voice is heard! We need not fear for the influence of His voice.

Controversial preaching was never easy. We all cringe at "knife-happy" preachers. (Murray's previously referred to Volume One of the Lloyd-Jones biography provides some of the most helpful treatment of the wrong spirit in

denunciatory preaching that I have ever read. I commend it to you who preach.) Nevertheless, controversial preaching is a major feature of the Gospels and Epistles. Christ and His apostles use the utmost plainness of speech in discriminating between truth and error. We must dare, humbly but boldly, to follow.

No doubt God has His own ways of seeing to it that His church is the pillar and bulwark of the truth (see 1 Tim. 3:15). Raising up a young English don at Magdalen, Oxford, in the middle years of this century, Clive Staples Lewis, may prove to have done more for the defense of supernatural Christianity than anything else in our times. And this through children's stories, as well as weightier works!

But in the New Testament there is no doubt about the responsibility of the pastor in this regard (see 1 Tim. 1:3f; 1:18f; 3:14ff; 4:1f; 6:3ff; 6:20-21). So let's buckle down to the work afresh. Don't despair when atheists get prime time and receive a hearing. The live churches are still growing, and many grow not just in enthusiasm but in the grand convictions of Athanasius, Calvin, and Luther. The power of clear doctrinal preaching is still very great. God multiplies the loaves and fishes so that thousands are nourished and cease to be sheep without a shepherd.

Incidentally, some of these critics say helpful things. Don Cupitt, a recognized atheist in Great Britain who gets prime time on the BBC, recently wrote, "A new kind of asceticism is emerging, as many of us react sharply against the extreme eudaemonism, the intellectual and emotional softness and self-centredness of popular belief." Yes, indeed! I react sharply for one. The sooner we evangelical pastors, who want biblical standards, clearly and openly renounce "entertainment Christianity" in all its shapes and forms (and they are legion) the better. Our church buildings are not theatres or concert halls. We have serious work to do, teaching the Bible. It won't be easy to resist the amazing

modern pressure to turn almost everything, from breakfast on, into entertainment, but it may be exhilarating to try!

3. Who else but the pastor/teacher can bring back to our nation the knowledge of the true God?

It is useless and unreasonable to expect religious broadcasting to engage in a serious and sustained treatment of scriptural Christianity. It, too, is in the entertainment business. Not that we should fail to support those brave Christians, with requisite skills, who try to stem the tide of religious drivel reaching millions of homes and insert, as they do, some genuine Christian testimony. But experience shows that most producers have little more discernment than the pigeons outside my window who peck hopefully at any grit or garbage in lieu of absent grain.

No, here again it is a growing conviction of mine that if the pastor/teacher does not do this job then *it will simply not be done*.

We have often been told that it is only our doctrine of Scripture that separates and divides us from fruitful cooperation with non-evangelicals. This is simply not so. It is not issues such as inerrancy that separate us so drastically from our non-evangelical contemporaries, but a fundamental disagreement as to *who God is, and what is His name*.

Take an obvious example. I once preached a series of five lunch-hour sermons on the anger of God. Purposely, with one exception, I stuck to the New Testament. It was an eye-opener to the preacher if no one else! Now no series like this, calmly and clearly taught, will more certainly divide us from the majority of religious teachers today. They tell us frankly that they do not, cannot, and will not believe in this God. Exactly! They are, quite simply, unbelievers, and they do not know it. How can they join in the worship of heaven which so often centers around God's just judgments? The

glorious beings around the eternal throne rejoice continually in that pure and righteous wrath that will, in the end, eliminate all that offends and opposes God. "Hallelujah! The smoke from her [the great harlot] goes up for ever and ever" (Rev. 19:3).

In our daily prayers we are required to ask that God will hallow His Name. In our regular teaching ministry we cooperate in the work of making Him known. Through our words (how the angels must envy us!) men and women, boys and girls, may get a first glimpse, awesome yet wonderful in its attractions, of the Eternal God and of His Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

One reason why I love to move among my more "Reformed" friends is that they think and speak so much of the greatness of God. With them I wilt when the evangelist pleads with young people to be concerned about God, offering every inducement, seemingly ready for any reasonable bid as long as it is made now. In heaven's name, why not tell them rather that, despite their foolish lack of concern, their ignorance and rebellion, *God is concerned for them?* That is the amazing news—almost too good to be true—that the true God accepts the unacceptable through sheer grace and goodness, for Jesus' sake.

Will you, my brother pastor, not give yourself afresh to this supreme task of declaring the whole counsel of God, lest the churches lose touch completely with the only true God and are consumed by idolatry?

4. Who else but the pastor/teacher can give the Bible back to the British people?

I gladly recognize the labors of numerous Christian teachers in schools seeking to do the vital work of teaching the Scriptures—similarly in evangelical theological colleges. But the fact is that the Bible seems not to "teach" anything quite so well outside the realm of the local living church.

The classroom does not take kindly to “preaching,” and the Bible is nothing if it is not *a preaching book*. Is this one reason why scholarship divorced from the preaching situation produces such disappointing commentaries? Whenever I come across a fine commentary—and this can be outside the “conservative” stable, like Cranfield’s splendid two volumes on Romans in the new International Critical Commentary series—I say to myself, “This man must preach on Sundays.”

I doubt whether we shall see a deep understanding of the Bible spreading out and about among the churches and beyond unless the pastor/teachers themselves become “mighty in the Scriptures.” I find that it is in regular preparing and preaching that I come to quite new appreciations of the power of the Bible to speak today, and many of you must find the same.

The truth is that personal “quiet times” and Bible reading notes are not sufficient for Christian people. Teaching in His church is the God-ordained way of opening minds to the truth and truth to human minds. This is primarily a speaking, not a writing, ministry.

For one hundred years, with some bright exceptions, there has been a deepening famine of the Word of God preached in the churches, even in those called evangelical. The chief cost of relieving that famine is the hard labor of the pastor/teacher in prayer and study.

Of course radical biblical criticism is a major reason for a church without a message. But my guess is that it is becoming an increasing irrelevance as living churches and radical theology move out of range of each other. (The obvious exception is seen in the ruining of ministerial candidates in training, like one poor lad who told me on the morning of his ordination examination he had nothing to pass along except his doubts.) When I was a student many dubious notions used to be purveyed on the grounds that

they were “assured results of modern criticism.” I seldom found then, or since in over 35 years of active ministry, that these new ideas had any power evangelistically or pastorally. And now I think we must be out of our minds if we allow lay leadership or aspiring teachers in our churches to be trained by the degenerate theology offered by such an approach. Of course if we are looking back to giants like Lightfoot, well and good. But what can one say when taking up the Cambridge Bible Commentary series (based on the NEB text) on the letters of Peter and Jude only to find at the end of 2 Peter an extended note on the Christian hope which tells readers that “The expectation of a last day, when Jesus the Lord will return, must be abandoned. In practice it has been abandoned. . . .” The man hasn’t even done his field work. Or does he never enter into one of today’s growing churches, where hundreds, even thousands, in university centers, rejoice to sing of Christ’s coming again? Such ludicrous and lamentable theology as I have alluded to has nothing to offer us, except as an explanation for the plight of the older denominations in the West—and, alas, one explanation for the growing anti-intellectualism of charismatic groups and many house churches.

My pastor friend, every time you find yourself in a pulpit, speaking at a wedding service or at a graveside, remind yourself, “I am here to teach the Bible, only thus can I meet the needs of these people and of the hour.” You will do this if you share the vision that in every town of any size in our country there should be at least one church (denominational labels don’t matter a jot!) where the Scriptures are properly and effectively taught. No children’s talk is ever a substitute for a serious sermon (which all from 13 upward can understand)! No missionary speakers unless they, too, teach the Bible. Normally, there should be no preparation at the last minute (Saturday evenings or Sunday afternoons) except last minute touches. (Let’s face it, Spurgeon was a

genius: we should not follow his extraordinary habits unless we can produce his extraordinary results!) We should not expect to pull any bees from the proverbial ministerial bonnet. Sentimentalism is out for the true preacher of the Word. Unnecessary jesting and unnatural shouting are a hindrance. Pulpiteering, by which I refer to oratory and the "hot air" of much content, is unbecoming to the minister who would teach the Word. And I would add, no lay preaching unless the person preaching is evidently gifted well above the average! Apologies for God's truth are a positive nuisance, and clerical cant will help no listener. And false modesty is out in light of Paul's words regarding Timothy's "letting no one despise" his youth. We are not to give little chats, or dull and endless lecture series. Who is sufficient for these things? You must know the answer to that if you know your Bibles.

5. Who else but the pastor/teacher will train the laity properly?

I will be brief for a change. The Scriptures know no clericalism. To all the people of God belongs the work of the ministry. This is still a revolutionary truth for most churches if practiced as well as preached. How are Christian people to discover their worth and their gifts? Ephesians 4:11f. is the only answer I know.

Extension courses from good colleges have a useful place. But in my view they arise largely because the pastor/teacher is not doing his job. Living Christian communities offer the best sphere for theological and ministerial training for the layman.

If we stick to our work to the last, and speak the truth in love, other works and workers will ultimately spring up around us, though patience, always linked with teaching, will be necessary (2 Tim. 4:2c).

6. Who else but the pastor/teacher can hope substantially to change the course of the church in our land?

Space forbids the possibility of expounding this hope in a worthy way. Suffice it to say that recent use of the *Davies Dictionary on Liturgy and Worship* gave me a curious glimpse of some of the less admirable effects of the "catholic" revival in the Anglican Church these last 150 years. Seventeen pages on vestments with less than a column on the sermon seemed to typify the outlook of this approach. It all seemed leagues away from the gospel and the biblical hopes we have for the churches. Indeed, it often seems to me that decaying tractarianism, with liberalism eating at its vitals, doesn't know how to recognize God's church when it sees it.

The new evangelical movement is now well past its beginnings, but will it be sustained with biblical integrity and apostolic zeal? Only if we renounce old habits like "biting and devouring one another," as Paul puts it in Galatians 5:15. And only if the pastor/teacher keeps his nerve, his message, and his willingness to suffer for the gospel. It is awfully easy to adjust our position just that inch or so from the line of Scripture in order that we may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. One of the things that makes me apprehensive about "full gospelism" is that it is so acceptable. "Healing," for example, is just the gospel today's world desires since it has an obsession with health and happiness. But Christianity without tears isn't on offer right now. God will wipe away all tears, but that is for the world to come! Meanwhile, we must go forth weeping, sowing in tears, if we hope to reap a harvest and see God do great things for us (Psalm 126).

7. Who else but the pastor/teacher can hope to contribute so effectively to the welfare of our nation today?

It is far too easy to join in the chorus of criticism one hears of the born-again movement in the U.S., and to ask why, if

there are so many Christian people in that great nation, so little difference is made. But is that really so? No doubt as American teachers and pastors themselves say, there is superficiality everywhere. But there is also *immense influence*. The current Presidential election campaign is revealing. Neither side can ignore the convictions of Christians regarding abortion. (The same could not be said in Great Britain!) Who listens to the church in the U.K., or even if they hear its voice, fear its wrath? It is the same old story. Trying to be “relevant” and politically committed, we are ignored, by and large. But seek first the kingdom (and I am not talking about the errant kingdom theology of some evangelicals) and preach the real gospel, in season and out of season, and we begin to see God at work in society. Look at Charles Colson in the U.S. Has any committee or reform group achieved a fraction of what he has for American prisons? Men are born anew through the living and abiding word of God. No preaching of the good news means no new births from above! No new births means no salt and light in the world. No salt and light in society means increasing disintegration, decay, and despair in the secular city.

Many more things could be said. *Who else* can demonstrate that the evangelism of full value means sowing as well as reaping? *Who else* is so well equipped for the big spiritual battles ahead, both with unfaith and with fanaticism? *Who else* but the man with the sword of the Spirit in his hand and the knowledge of how to wield it?

Author

Rev. Richard C. Lucas has served as pastor of St. Helen's Bishopsgate, a Church of England ministry in London, since 1962. He is the author of *Fullness & Freedom: The Message of Colossians and Philemon* (InterVarsity Press, 1980).
