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Preaching Like Our Savior

by David Dunlap

Preaching the Word of God in a small church can be very challenging. A small active church seems to attract people who are from all walks of life: the unsaved, those new to the faith, the struggling and unstable, the quirky, the uncommitted, and, of course, the small devoted core who are the heart of the local church. Very often, as preachers we have only a Sunday or two to make an impact on the lives of some who are listening to the message. Ministers of the Word of God are faced with the question of how to meet the spiritual needs of these various groups .

There is a danger of trying to impress people through our preaching and to move them emotionally. Sometimes we try to impress them by our knowledge; we may sprinkle our sermons with Greek and Hebrew words and high-sounding theological terms. Other times we copy the preaching style of a famous preacher. But the question we need to ask is: “Do I want to *help* people, or do I want to *impress* them?” For some, the temptation to impress may take years to overcome. Our answer to this question should be that we want to *help* them with the sound teaching of the Word of God.

Simplicity and sincerity are very important to preaching in a small church. We cannot compete with the great Bible expositors of the big church in town. Nevertheless, the small church will be equipped with preachers who love the Lord and love His Word. Armed with these virtues, the small church will have powerful and effective ministers who can feed the flock of the small church.

The Example of George Mueller

George Mueller is well-known for founding the Ashley Downs orphanage in Bristol, England over one hundred years ago. What many do not know is that he was an effective preacher. He never attended Bible college or received theological training. He was a humble man with a thick German accent, who ministered the Word of God along with other godly men to the believers at Bethesda Chapel. A visitor named Gavin Kirkham, the first secretary of the Open-Air Mission, described the preaching style of George Mueller. He wrote:

Mr. Muller’s appearance is striking; he is tall and commanding. He is in his seventieth year. He has a strong German accent, though he can be easily understood by any English hearer. In his public ministry, he is emphatically a teacher, yet he frequently brings in the way of salvation, in a preaching clear, sweet, persuasive manner. A preacher may learn from his method of He, first of all, gets a message from the Lord; he waits on the Lord, by reading the Scriptures, meditation, and prayer, till he realizes that he has the mind of the

**“Nothing
but grace
can make
a man so
humble
and at the
same time
so glad.”**

C. H. Spurgeon
(1834-1892)

“The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”

**Timothy J.
Keller**

Spirit as to what he shall say. He has sometimes been in doubt till almost the last minute, but never once has the Lord failed him.

He strongly advocates and practices expository preaching. Instead of a solitary text detached from its context, he selects a passage, it may be several verses, which he goes over consecutively clause by clause. His first care is to give the meaning of the passage, and then illustrate it by other Scripture and then to apply it. This is done sentence by sentence, so that it is definition, illustration, and application all the way through. Yet there is no uncertainty to his hearers as to when he is coming to a close, as he intimates at the outset how many verses he purposes to consider. His illustrations are taken from history, biography, or nature, but chiefly from Scripture or his own personal experience.

One of the most striking things about Mr. Muller's preaching is the way in which he encourages his hearers to reconsider what has been already said. He frequently says: "let us ask ourselves, 'Have I understood this? How does it apply to me? Is this my experience?'"¹

In this description, we see that George Mueller was a simple and winsome preacher. Each preacher will have his own particular style of preaching. Many young preachers try to imitate other well-known evangelists and preachers. May I suggest that if we are going to pattern ourselves after anyone, it would be best to pattern our preaching after Jesus' style of preaching. Allow me to share some lessons from the preaching of Jesus.

Practice What You Preach

The first thing a reader of the gospels will see is that Jesus preached only what He was already practicing. He *did* first and then *taught* (Acts 1:1). So, His preaching always had a practical application. The Bible instructs me to prophesy (preach) only according to the proportion of my faith (Romans 12:6); in other words, only up to the level of my spiritual experience. Many preachers will fail in this area, because they fall prey to the temptation of trying to impress people. When we preach that which we have not practiced (or experienced), we find that we are preaching for the praise of men and not for the approval of God. Preachers must always remember that they preach to an audience of "One." Preaching for the praise of men will lead to spiritual barrenness, and if not remedied in time, a backslidden condition. May we determine in our hearts to preach that which we practice. When this is your desire, God will take you through varied trials in order to teach you His ways, and then you may pass on to others these vital lessons of the Christian life. In a small church, it is impossible to be someone in your preaching that you aren't in everyday life, for the people that know you best are the fellow believers in the local fellowship. Therefore, in your preaching, preach the message that the Lord has given you, preach the lessons that the Lord has taught you, preach from the heart and share your life, and God will bless your ministry.

Preach With Guidance of the Spirit of God

Jesus always preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. When He walked with the two disciples to Emmaus, He preached to them for two hours and *their hearts burned within them* throughout those two hours. Christ should be our example and it should be our desire to preach in the power of the Holy Spirit. A raw chicken-leg taken out of the freezer is totally unappetizing. But the same leg, when cooked on a fire, makes everyone's mouth water. That is the difference cold truth and the same truth with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Utter dependence on the strength of the Holy Spirit, therefore, should become primary in all our preaching. May we depend on God every time we speak to equip us, so that our hearers might say, “Did not our hearts burn within us?”

Remember, when God gives a man a message, it doesn’t need to be delivered with perfect grammar and diction, following every rule of Bible exposition. When God gives a man a message, He gives him passion and a heart desire to deliver this message. Modern church leadership and scholarship will tell us that unless a man has gone to Bible college and is trained in homiletics, he cannot be an effective preacher. It is a well-known fact in church circles that the preaching of many professors of theology and seminary-trained clergymen is as dry as dust and as cold as ice. To mistake human eloquence or oratory for preaching in the power of the Spirit of God is a great oversight. It is a lamentable fact that a great deal of most of the eloquent gospel preaching today would never lead one to the conviction of sin or salvation in Christ. Sermons may be theologically correct, but when they make no true application to the needs of the hearers; they can be as clear as crystal, but cold as ice. C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1893), the well-known preacher of a past generation, has aptly said:

*The power of the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher, otherwise men would be the converter of soul. Nor does it lie in learning, otherwise souls would be converted by the wisdom of men. We might preach until our tongues rotted out, till we exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless the Holy Spirit be with the Word of God to give it the power to convert a soul.*³

Curb Loud, Manipulative, & Emotional Preaching

Jesus spoke *primarily* to people's *minds* and not to their emotions. His preaching challenged and convicted people, stirring them to faith and obedience. He never whipped up their *emotions* the way many preachers do today. We are told to love God with all our hearts and also with all our *minds*.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus never shouted while preaching? “Behold My Servant, whom I have chosen, My Beloved, in whom I am well pleased; I will put my Spirit upon Him...He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall He not break and a smoking flax shall He not quench” (Matthew 12:18-20). Hard hearts are not broken by loud voices, but rather by tenderhearted and compassionate voices. Nor did He say “Hallelujah” every now and then in His messages. May we seek to follow Jesus’ example here, too. When preachers shout in their preaching, it is *not* the fire of the Holy Spirit usually, but just their emotional attempts to manipulate people; and their “Hallelujahs” are merely a habit or “time-fillers,” while they are thinking of what to say next! Well-known missionary Jim Elliot (1927-1956) once wrote about his own preaching:

I was terribly depressed after preaching tonight. Felt as though I had no preparation, no liberty, no power. I felt compelled to stop during the sermon and tell the people I didn’t have a message from God...I never want to preach that way again. How sadly and slowly I am learning that loud preaching and long preaching are no substitutes for inspired preaching.

His exhortation that “...loud preaching and long preaching are no substitutes for inspired preaching” needs a greater re-application today.

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Humor, Exaggeration, & Emphasis

Jesus used humor and exaggeration at times. He spoke of a camel going through a needle's eye, of people straining out mosquitoes and swallowing camels, of those who had big logs in their eyes while looking for specks in the eyes of others—and thus He exposed hypocrisy and spiritual pride. Humor can sharpen a message and make it more interesting, just like spices can add taste to food. However, excessive humor will lead to a loss of spiritual power. Youth preachers who are forever cracking jokes will find they have little real spiritual impact with young people. Some preachers, it seems, try to make people laugh *all the time*, just to get a reputation for humor; such preachers become like circus clowns! A preacher should never use humor to simply entertain people, rather it may be used to drive home a point. Our audience should never just remember the joke or funny story and forget the message. This does not mean we can never use humor, but we must give care that it doesn't cancel out the spiritual impact of the message.

Conclusion

In our preaching, may we see people obey God's Word — and not just to move them emotionally for a short time. The goal of our preaching should be "to present every man perfect in Christ" (Col. 1:28). All preachers will discover that good preaching comes from a spirit of brokenness and tenderness. There is in the spirit-filled preacher a tender affection that sweetens every promise and softens every warning and rebuke. For all His authority and power, Jesus was attractive because He was "gentle and lowly in heart." May we preach and teach with love for those in our spiritual care, always keeping our Lord Jesus Christ as our model and guide.

Endnotes

1. Roger Steer, *George Muller: Delighted in God*, (Christian Focus Publications: Ross-Shire, GB, 1997), p. 172-173
2. Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 1992), 573.
3. Elisabeth Elliot, edited, *The Journals of Jim Elliot*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1978), p. 353