

Preaching That Kills

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By

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By a slight perversion, the sweetest graces may bear the bitterest fruit. The sun gives life, but sunstrokes are death. Preaching is to give life. It may also kill. The preacher holds the keys; he may lock as well as unlock. Preaching is God's great institution for the planting and maturing of spiritual life. When properly executed its benefits are untold; when wrongly executed no evil can exceed its damaging results. It is an easy matter to destroy the flock if the shepherd be unwary or the pasture be destroyed; easy to capture the citadel if the watchmen be asleep or the food and water be poisoned. Since preaching is invested with such gracious prerogatives, exposed to so great evils, involved with so many grave responsibilities, it would be a parody on the shrewdness of the devil, and a libel on his character and reputation, if he did not bring his master influences to adulterate the preacher and the preaching. In face of all this, the exclamatory interrogatory of Paul, "Who is sufficient for these things?" is never out of order.

Paul says: "Our sufficiency is of God; who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit; for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Cor. 3:5-6). The true ministry is God-touched, God-enabled, and God-made. The Spirit of God is on the preacher in anointing power and the fruit of the Spirit is in his heart. The Spirit of God has vitalized the man and the word. His preaching gives life, gives life as the spring gives life, gives life as the resurrection gives life, gives ardent life as the summer gives ardent life, gives fruitful life as the autumn gives fruitful life. The life-giving preacher is a man whose heart is ever athirst for God, whose soul is ever following hard after God, whose eye is single to God, and in whom, by the power of God's Spirit, the flesh and the world have been crucified. The ministry of this preacher is like the generous flood of a life-giving river.

The preaching that kills is nonspiritual preaching. The ability of the preaching is not from God. Lower sources than God have given to it energy and stimulant. The Spirit is not evident in the preacher nor in his preaching. Many kinds of forces may be projected and stimulated by preaching that kills, but they are not spiritual forces. They may resemble spiritual forces, but they are only shadow, counterfeit; they may seem to have life, but the life is not real. The preaching that kills is the letter; shapely and orderly it may be, but it is the letter still, the dry, husky letter, the empty, bald shell. The letter may have the germ of life in it, but it has no breath of spring to evoke it; winter seed it is, as hard as the winter's soil, as icy as the winter's

air. No thawing will take place and no germination. This letter preaching has the truth; but even divine truth has no life-giving energy alone, it must be energized by the Spirit, with all God's forces at its back. "Truth unquickened" by God's Spirit deadens as much, or more, than error. It may be pure truth, but without the Spirit its shade and touch are deadly. The letter preaching is ununctionless, neither mellowed nor oiled by the Spirit. There may be tears, but tears cannot run God's machinery; tears may be but summer's breath on a snow-covered iceberg, nothing but surface slush. Feelings and earnestness there may be, but it is the emotion of the actor and the earnestness of the attorney. The preacher may feel the kindling of his own sparks, be eloquent over his own exegesis, and be earnest in delivering the product of his own brain. The professor may usurp the place and imitate the fire of the apostle—brains and nerves may serve the place and feign the work of God's Spirit—and by these forces the letter may glow and sparkle like an illumined text, but the glow and sparkle will be as barren of life as the field sown with pearls.

The preaching that kills maybe, and generally is, orthodox, dogmatically, inviolably orthodox. We love orthodoxy. It is good. It is the best. It is the clean, clear-cut teaching of God's Word. Orthodoxy is the trophies won by truth in its conflict with error, the levees that faith has raised against the desolating floods of honest or reckless misbelief or unbelief; but orthodoxy, clear and hard as crystal, suspicious and militant, may be but the letter well shaped, well named, and well learned, the letter that kills. Nothing is so dead as a dead orthodoxy, too dead to speculate, too dead to think, to study, or to pray.

The preaching that kills may have insight and grasp of principles, may be scholarly and critical in taste, may exhibit knowledge of all the minutiae concerning the derivation and grammar of the letter, may be able to trim the letter into its perfect pattern and illumine it as Plato and Cicero may be illumined, may study it as a lawyer studies his textbooks to form his brief or defend his case, and yet be like a frost, a killing frost. Letter preaching may be eloquent, enameled with poetry and rhetoric, sprinkled with prayer, spiced with sensation, illumined by genius, and yet be a corpse in a massive, chaste coffin with costly mountings, surrounded by rare and beautiful flowers. The preaching that kills may be without scholarship, unmarked by any freshness of thought or feeling, clothed in tasteless generalities or vapid specialties, with sloven, irregular style and may reflect neither closet nor study, and not be graced by thought, expression, or prayer. Under such preaching how wide and utter the desolation! how profound the spiritual death!

This letter preaching deals with the surface and shadow of things, and not with the things themselves. It does not penetrate the inner part. It has no deep insight into, no strong grasp of, the hidden life of God's Word. It is true to the outside, but the outside is the hull, which must be broken and penetrated for the kernel. The letter may be dressed so as to attract and be fashionable, but the attraction is not toward God, nor is the fashion for heaven. The failure is in the preacher. God has not made him. He has never been in the hands of God like clay in the

hands of the potter. He has been busy about the sermon, its thought and finish, its drawing and impressive forces; but the deep things of God have never been sought, studied, fathomed, or experienced by him. He has never stood before "the throne high and lifted up," never heard the seraphim song, never seen the vision, nor felt the rush of that awful holiness and cried out in utter abandon and despair under the sense of weakness and guilt. He has never had his life renewed, his heart touched, purged, and inflamed by the live coal from God's altar. His ministry may draw people to him, to the church, and to the form and ceremony, but it won't truly draw people to God, to sweet, holy, divine communion with him. By this letter preaching the church has been patched up but not edified, pleased but not sanctified. Life is suppressed, a chill is in the summer air, the soil is baked and hard. The city of our God becomes the city of the dead. The church is a graveyard, not an embattled army Praise and prayer are stifled and worship is dead. The preacher and the preaching have helped sin, not holiness and have peopled hell, not heaven.

The Secret

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WE may search out and account for the failure to preach with profit in many ways, but the true secret of failure will be found in the lack of urgent prayer in seeking God's presence and power to qualify us to secure the spiritual results of the occasion. Mr. Spurgeon is represented to have preached on one occasion with great power and effect. The secret of the spiritual energy of that occasion is revealed by the statement that Mr. Spurgeon went to the pulpit with his face bathed in tears from a season of prevailing prayer. Another occasion of his preaching illustrates the true source of this great man's great power and also the source of his failures. The circumstances are thus related:

A friend who knew him many years ago, and who heard him preach on many occasions, says that he once heard him preach in an English town in the afternoon and evening on a certain day, and that at the close of the afternoon service, Mr. Spurgeon spoke of the consciousness that the service had not been what it should have been. His friend (then a student) admitted that he thought the preacher had not been himself in the preaching. Mr. Spurgeon, with a remark to the effect that it would never do to repeat the failure in the evening, went out into the woods to pray. Indeed, he spent the whole interval between the afternoon and evening services in prayer. The latter meeting was one of great power and different in all respects from that of the afternoon.

This case is a representative one. There is no royal road to preaching. The way of humility and prayer, the constant dependence on the Holy Ghost, the constant and importunate seeking of the Holy Ghost by a faith and prayer that recognize the absolute helplessness of other agencies to give efficiency to the service, and a mighty travail of spirit that God's efficiency would be

bestowed—this only can secure for preaching spiritual efficacy and results.

There are men who can write and read, or deliver without writing, masterly sermons, masterly as cultured or intellectual productions, which may make an impression after their order; but the masterly production is not after God's order, neither is the impression for God's glory. The men who, by their preaching, mightily influence their congregations for God are the men who come from the closet, where their faith and prayer have prevailed with and conquered God, to the pulpit, where they prevail with and conquer men for God. All things being equal, or being unequal, the preachers who are the mightiest in the pulpit with men for God are the ones who are the mightiest in their closets with God for men.

What Hinders Preaching

February 11, 1892

AMONG the things that hinder spiritual results, fine preaching must have place among the first. Fine preaching is that kind of preaching where the force of the preacher is expended to make the sermon great in thought, tasteful as a work of art, perfect as a scholarly production, complete in rhetorical finish, and fine in its pleasing and popular force. In true preaching the sermon proceeds out of the man. It is part of him, flowing out of his life. Fine preaching separates between the man and the sermon; he may be the architect, he may build the sermon, but the preacher and the sermon are two. More than this it separates between the Holy Ghost and the sermon. Such sermons will make an impression, but it is not the impression that the Holy Ghost makes. Influence it may have, but the influence is not distinctly spiritual, if spiritual at all. These sermons do not reach the conscience, are not aimed at it. Some other part of the nature that is more easily reached and bears more pleasant fruit than an awakened conscience draws the arrow from this polished quiver. The preacher has made too much of the sermon; the sermon has made too much of the preacher; the hearer has made too much of both preacher and sermon for either the Holy Ghost or conscience to make much of either sermon or preacher.

The sermon may convey the truth, may be stalwart in its orthodoxy, but the orthodox truth may be lost in the wealth of fine statement. Two things are requisite to secure spiritual results for the sermon: It must be God's revealed truth, and that truth must be stated in such a way as to secure the attendance of the Holy Ghost. To accomplish this there must be simplicity and directness of statement coupled with fine-sighted aim at the conscience. The least addition of self or the least insincerity, putting anything to the front, to the rear, or in the middle but God's glory, Will

arrest the flow of the Spirit.

God's plan in regard to preachers and preaching confounds all human wisdom, opposes our views, violates our tastes, offends our pride, and staggers our faith. It is that:

God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.... That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

[I Cor. 1:27-29,31]

This method that seems to directly oppose the fitness of things, this passing by the showy agencies of this world, was not a matter of chance or because God was in a strait, but this was God's deliberately chosen and settled plan. The reason is that the agencies of this world are so unfit to secure the great results. No glory would accrue as a result of these agencies, but to those things fit for God, all glory is referred at once. Paul's own commission to preach is illustrative of the same great principles. Christ, he says, sent me "to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect." God negated Paul's fine preaching in the words of his commission. Fine preaching destroys the power of the cross. Its edge and force are bandaged and broken by garlands. The beauty and fitness of things coffins the cross. Paul's ministry was true to his commission. He declares:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. Any my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

[I Cor. 2:1-5]

"His bodily presence [was] weak and his speech contemptible" to the lettered Greek. Self-distrust and self-emptying marked his ministry. It is amazing how much of self can be crammed into one sermon. Paul's statement rejects fine thoughts, fine rhetoric, and all methods of philosophical dealing with the gospel. He rejects all methods of cultured speech, which would have secured reputation to himself and made his preaching popular among the elegant Greeks. All these he rejected as vicious alloy hindering the demonstrations of the Holy Ghost

and destroying faith.

Mr. Wesley said he dared not preach a fine sermon. He says of his sermons, "Nothing here appears in an elaborate, elegant, or oratorical dress. I design plain truth for plain people."

Robert Hall said in his later ministry: "My strain of preaching is considerably altered; much less elegant, but more intended for conviction, for awakening the conscience, and carrying home truths with power to the heart." Savonarola said of a very popular preacher: "These verbal elegancies and ornaments win have to give away to sound doctrine simply preached." Robert McCheyne cried out in prayer: "Enlarge my heart and I shall preach." His biographer says: "In this remark we see the germ of his remarkably solemn ministry: he gave out not merely living waters, but living waters drawn at the spring he himself had drank of. Others try a more intellectual method, but as the intellect is not the part of the discourse which lodges an arrow in the conscience, this intellectual preaching must have tenfold more prayerfulness bestowed on it, it if affect the heart of either the preacher or the people." This increased prayerfulness is the very thing this fine preaching does not have. The men of preaching hearts are the only preachers of prayerful hearts. When so much force is spent on the literary, intellectual, and artistic part of the sermon, very little is spent in prayer. The reliance is on influences other than that of the Holy Ghost coming through prayer to give the sermon the desired popular results.

The wisdom of words, even their persuasive beauty, abate the power of the gospel. The ends of the gospel cannot be secured by oratory, by rhetoric, by logic, by any kind of tasteful, scholarly statement. More than that, these detract from the essential effects of the gospel, and if the true ends of the gospel are not wholly lost by this "excellent speech" or these "enticing words," the results are enfeebled and reduced to a losing minimum. Christ did not choose orators, philosophers, rabbis, or scribes, to preach his gospel. He chose unlearned, common men of common education with common talent and common sense. The gospel is not to be propelled by intellect but by heart. The Holy Ghost resides not in the intellect but in the heart.

A statement of this kind is not to be used in the defense of either ignorance or laziness. No man ought to be wiser than God's preacher: wise in the wisdom that God gives, wise in the wisdom of following God's plan and submitting to and obeying God's will. None should be more learned than he: learned in the things of God, learned in the things of his own heart. None should be more industrious than he, absorbed in Gods work and in caring for God's sheep and giving himself "continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." None should be a greater student than he, absorbed in studying God's Word, intent on securing that personal nearness and likeness to Christ that will ensure the full measure of success. He will give his life

for God's sheep, happy in suffering or doing God's will, incessant in proclaiming God's Word. The preacher will find his time and strength engrossed and will have neither time nor taste for the vanities or glare of secular eloquence. These are a part and portion of that world that he has forsworn. His sermons will flow out of him from the streams, which have flowed into and filled him from the throne of God. They are a part of him, living and not manufactured by square and rule and compass, born from the incorruptible Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.

The world has never been mightily moved to Christ by the fine sermons or great fame of great preachers. It was when they were despised and without fame that Wesley and Luther did their great work for God, and their greatness and fame were the results of the success won in the fires of persecution, contempt, and scorn. One of the most magnificent of pulpit intellects and orators utters toward the close of his life this lament: "If any saving fruit has been reaped from my ministry it has been almost entirely among the middling and lower classes." Many a lowly Methodist exhorter has far exceeded this in conscious gathered fruit.

Rules for Preaching

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IN this day of the multiplication of books on preaching and the burdensome rules laid down, it is refreshing to get hold of something simple, natural, and spiritual by way of direction, and we give as of great value what John Newton wrote to a friend who asked him for rules. "I have formerly fettered myself," he says, "by following other people's rules, and therefore ought not to shackle my friend by prescribing to him. You have the word of grace, the throne of grace, and the Spirit of grace. Under this divine direction, what passes within you and around you will furnish you with better rules for your own management than you could possibly receive from the wisest man upon earth who was not exactly in your situation. Various have been the methods," continues Newton, "my wise and gracious Lord has taken to break down my spirit of self-dependence and to hide pride from me."

If the Lord can but secure this end in us, he can make firstclass preachers of any of us. it is not so much the lack of rules, the lack of method or of manner that hinders the best results in preaching, but the self that remains in us and subordinates our duties to its unhallowed uses. When the spirit of pride in all its unnumbered forms and the spirit of self-dependence in its endless diversity are destroyed in us by God's severe discipline and the brightness of his glory fills us, we are more ready to preach the gospel than we are with all the diplomas of all the theological schools in our hands and all the rules of all the preaching books stereotyped within us. Mr. Newton closes with this most important statement: "Of all the maxims I have met with

about preaching," he says, "I most admire that of Luther, which is: 'To have prayed well is to have studied well.

In closing his letter Mr. Newton says: "If my mind were in a right frame toward the Lord, I think I should not be greatly embarrassed if called to preach at five minutes' warning to the most respectable congregation." No man will ever gain true success as a preacher, however well equipped otherwise, who does not put these spiritual qualifications first and always keep them to the front.

Power from on High

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THE message of Gethsemane and Calvary had to wait for Pentecost because the facts—the letter without the Spirit—were dead. The transfiguration, the cross, the blood, the shock of the resurrection earthquake could not project the gospel. These forces waited for their crowning glory, the Spirit's fiery tongues. The power of Christ's dispensation is a fiery pulpit—not a learned pulpit, not a popular pulpit, not an eloquent pulpit, but a pulpit on fire with the Holy Ghost! A pulpit may be fired with unhallowed flames; the fire of popularity, the fire of ambition, the fire of party, of sect, or of creed may inflame the pulpit, and much heat of one kind or another may be kindled. Fiery tongues of this sort will not give vent to the energy of the Holy Ghost. Only the energy of a false, delusive flame will issue from these. The true pulpit is God's fire in the world. Its flame is heaven kindled; its power the Holy Ghost on the preacher.

This feature of power from on high distinguishes preaching from all other systems of didactic propagandism. This power is not the mere iteration or reiteration of truths well learned or well told, but it is the enabling force to declare revealed truth with superhuman authority. The preacher must have the power given by direct connection with God. As the golden pipes transmitted the golden oil in the prophet's vision, so the relation between the preacher and God must be precious and without intermission. The pipes must be kept open; every thing that will in any measure hinder or choke the freest and fullest flow of this divine current must be removed. The pipes must be clean and kept clean. The preacher must empty himself of self, of the world, and of sin, and keep himself perpetually and scrupulously emptied. The unseen and mighty spiritual forces must continually be imparted to him from God, giving divine power to the preacher and his word in a way that is foreign to the utterances of unanointed or secular lips.

The speaker for God may lack all else that gives human lips audience, yet having this power he has that which qualifies him for the work, though it may be unseemly by human estimates and gain but shame to the speaker. Although endowed with all the aggregate forces that captivate, convince, and enforce truth or opinions in judgment, if he lacks this power, which is not taught in earthly schools or transferred by human hands or learned by artful rules and which defies rhetoric, taste, and eloquence, his ministry by God's estimate and in spiritual results will fall far below zero.

God does not mix this power with other solutions to give it efficiency. It is not some or much of the Holy Ghost mixed with some or much of other ingredients. This power is from the Holy Ghost singular and alone. It is the one thing to be sought and secured, the one thing whose importance discredits all other things, the one thing that stands alone unrivaled and supreme. The circumstances and dignity of official position, the show of human learning, the vain adornments of a vicious eloquence must be despised in the pursuit of this absolutely essential, all-important thing,

Literary taste, the erudition of science, pleasing mannerisms, secular eloquence, these do not help to clothe the preacher with that unique power that alone can enable him to perform his nique work. These tend, like a luxuriant growth, to dissipate vital forces and abate the harvest fullness.

This power is something distinct from and superior to all forms of human power that may be in the pulpit and which may give it influence. This power is not the force of a mighty intellect, holding in its giant grasp great truths, flooding them with light and forming them into shapeliness and beauty. Neither is this power the effect of great learning, nor is it the result of an address faultless and complete by rule. This power is not held in the keeping of any of these earthly sources of power. The effects and energy of these forces are essentially different in source, character, and result from this power from on high.

It is the transmission of power from God, a bestowal in measure and force of that energy that pertains only to God and is transmitted to the preacher in answer to the waiting, longing wrestling attitude of his soul before God, conscious of his impotency and seeking God's omnipotence. This power may be found in combination with one or all of the sources of human power but must not be confounded with them and is not dependent on them. Whatever of human force may be present in the preacher, it is not to be trusted in or made conspicuous. The

human must be hidden, lost, or inspired by this divine power.

The preachers of the present day excel those of the past in many, perhaps in all, the human elements of success. They are well abreast of the age in learning, profound research, and intellectual vigor; but the presence of these do not insure the gift of power from on high, neither do the largest measure of these—and that in the most commanding and impressive form—in the least abate the necessity for the added and full endowment of the Holy Ghost. Modern preaching seems to fail in the very thing that creates and distinguishes true preaching, and which is essential to its being, and which can only elevate it into a divine and powerfully aggressive agency. It lacks the heavenly unction; it fails as the channel through which God's saving power may thunder on consciences. Modern preaching fails by a lack of that sacred, potent influence, which disturbs the sinner in his sleep of carnal security and awakens by its thunder peals his terror-stricken soul, which quickens and arouses the conscience from its ignoble and fatal stupor, which convulses the will by a mighty revolution, which searches into the secret parts of man's inner being, dividing the joints and marrow, opening the awful and mysterious depths and laying them bare to self and God, and which infuses new blood into the heart and veins of faith and arms it with courage and skill for the battle and the victory. These ends can never be secured by a pulpit clothed only with the human elements of power, however gracious, comfortable, or helpful they may be.

This power from on high is the one element on which God stakes the success of the pulpit, his one supreme condition of success—so supreme as to stand alone as the one universal, enduring, changeless endowment for God's preachers in all ages and among all classes. Without it the pulpit will always be veering between faith and philosophy, always powerless to stem the torrent of sin and worldliness, and will itself flounder in the storm of doubt or infidelity. This power is the only thing that can save the ministry to Christ and his church, the only thing that can save the church through the ministry. The essence of this power cannot be captured by a definition. It eludes description. It is the common inheritance, the indispensable need of every preacher. It is the great promise, the richest provision of Christ's dispensation. But it does not come simply by promise or provision; it is conditional. It must be waited for, sought for, wrestled for until received, realized. This power is not inherent in the Word of God; it does not lie in the facts of the gospel. It is the fire of God that descends on the preacher and gives to these divine facts and truths their dynamic force. This power belongs to the preacher by a conscious divine endowment. It pervades his soul as a fragrant unguent. It is on his head and heart and tongue, exudes through his life, sets tongue and heart on fire, lays soul and body on the altar—God-touched, God-illuminated, God-inflamed, God-empowered. By it the whole man is transformed and his utterances become pointed, barbed, and transfixed with convicting force and saving power.

--E.M. Bounds (1835-1913)