



Passion in Preaching

By Mark Lawson

One of the Church's greatest needs is for preachers who feel the power of the doctrines they expound. We need preaching that is imbued with passion. I am, of course, not speaking about those feigned moods and sickly affectations that sometimes manifest themselves in pulpits. Neither am I commending the kind of dramatic, or overly affected, style of oration that is a poor substitute for a heart wrought upon by the power and beauty of the Gospel. Rather, this article seeks to commend that deep love and devotion to Christ that, if resident in the preacher's heart, cannot but reveal itself in the pulpit. As William Ames (1576-1633) observed:

Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation [feigned emotionalism].

Such preaching characterised the Reformers and the Puritans; indeed, it distinguished Christ and His Apostles.

OUR LORD'S EXAMPLE

Christ is the archetypal Gospel preacher. If He, as a preacher, displayed indifference to His message, or to the people to whom He ministered, then we may be excused for our clinical Gospel presentations. Jesus' interactions with the lost sheep of Israel were, however, always compassionate and tender. The Saviour looked upon the self-righteous, young ruler with "love" (Mark 10:21), and He spoke with him accordingly. A crowd always drew compassion from Christ (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; Mark 3:34), and He taught them gently and lovingly.

Indeed, there are few words in the whole of the Scriptures that contain as much pathos as those which burst from Christ as he looked upon Jerusalem:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"

Matthew 23:37

Such was the love that Jesus felt for sinners that it is impossible to imagine Him preaching to them otherwise than out of deep pity and love. "No man ever spoke like this Man," reported those whom the Pharisees sent to arrest Jesus (John 7:46); while this is certainly a reference to the authority with which Jesus spoke, might it not, also, refer to the pathos of His preaching?

Lest the reader think that I am only commending preaching that is tender and compassionate, it is well to remind ourselves that Christ's preaching was frequently fuelled by anger. No one can read Jesus' exchanges with the Pharisees and Doctors of the Law, for example, without discerning the passion behind His words (see Matthew 12:30-37). There is, therefore, a place in our pulpits for a holy anger against sin.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE APOSTLES

The book of Acts contains a number of examples of Apostolic preaching; and the sermons recorded therein are characteristically impassioned. In Acts 2 we read of the first Christian sermon delivered on Pentecost. As the Holy Spirit opened Peter's mouth to testify to the grace of God that had been foretold by the prophets, the Apostle to the Jews did not content himself, merely, with dispassionately instructing his congregation; instead he earnestly testified and exhorted them to believe with many other words (2:40). Likewise, Paul, in addressing the Ephesian elders, reminds them "... that for three

years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears' (Acts 20:31). These are but two of many examples in the New Testament that record the urgency and the passion of Apostolic preaching.

THE TESTIMONY OF CHURCH HISTORY

Of the innumerable men who have preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world, it is incontrovertibly true that those who have been most effective in it were those who were most affected by it. The hearts and minds of congregants are aroused when they see true religion conspicuously, and passionately, on display:

"If we be not in good earnest in religion, and our wills and inclinations be not strongly exercised, we are nothing. The things of religion are so great, that there can be no suitableness in the exercises of our hearts to their nature and importance, unless they be lively and powerful. In nothing is vigour in the actings of our inclinations so requisite as in religion; and in nothing is luke-warmness so odious. True religion is evermore a powerful thing; and the power of it appears, in the first place in the inward exercises of the heart."

(Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), The Religious Affections).

In preachers, this "inward exercises of the heart," where it is in residence, will always be evident in the pulpit. Preachers ought to be so given over to the best and highest experience of the Christian Faith that their sermons cannot but reveal their resultant, holy affections.

Consider the example of George Whitefield (1714-1770), of whom a contemporary wrote:

"... sometimes [when preaching] he exceedingly wept, and was frequently so overcome, that for a few seconds you suspect he never would recover; and when he did, nature requires some little time to compose herself. I hardly ever knew him to go through a sermon without weeping more or less. His voice was often interrupted by his affectations; and I have heard him say in the pulpit, "You blame me for weeping; but how can I help it, when you will not weep for

yourselves, although your own immortal souls are on the verge of destruction, and, for all I know, you are hearing your last sermon, and may nevermore have an opportunity to have Christ offered to you?"

One can heap historical example upon example in commending the efficacy of passionate preaching, but space will not permit it. Church History is adorned by many men like Whitefield and Joseph Alleine (1634-1668), of whom it was said he:

"... poured out his very heart in ... preaching. His supplications and his exhortations were so affectionate, so full of holy zeal, life, and vigor, that they quite overcame his hearers; he melted over them, so that he thawed and mollified, and sometimes dissolved, the hardest hearts."

CULTIVATING PASSION IN PREACHING

No man has ever searched for that which he believes he has not lost. The very first step in reclaiming godly passions in preaching is the recognition that we currently lack them. Both history and the Scriptures teach us how far we fall short. We are, moreover, not merely deficient in passionate preaching, we are sinfully deficient. As preachers, we ought to pray for God's forgiveness for the many sermons that we have preached in a cold and indifferent manner. Likewise, as congregants, we should seek mercy for the careless and sleepy way in which we've attended to the hearing of God's rich mercy in Christ Jesus. Pray also that God may grant his ministers, as well as His people generally, hearts that faint with love for Christ, because this grace, surely, only settles upon the heart after much prayer.

Indeed, writes Spurgeon (1834-1892):

"... truly pathetic [passionate] delivery [in preaching], in which there is no affectation, but much affection, can only be the offspring of prayer. There is no rhetoric but that of the heart, and no school for learning but the foot of the cross."

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