

A WORD TO PREACHERS

by W. J. McCLURE

“And moreover, because the preacher was wise he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. The preacher sought to find out acceptable words, and that which was written was upright, even words of truth. The word of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd” (Eccles. 12:9-11).

There are many kinds of ministry to our Lord Jesus Christ and the saints but upon none has God been pleased to put such honor as upon the public ministry of the Word. By that believers are edified, instructed, fed, led, encouraged, warned, corrected, rebuked and restored. Something that God deigns to use in such a variety of ways might well be coveted, and whatever will fit for the better exercise of the ministry of the Word should be welcomed.

The professing church has its institutions of learning for qualifying those who will fill the place of “the minister,” but in most of them God is not taken into account at all. Even in the case of those who are really the Lord’s, by going at the work in man’s way, they miss the most important qualification, for the purely human is allowed to overshadow the Divine, the result being that even where there is a God-given gift, there is little or no Holy Ghost power, without which gift counts for nothing. The most ungifted speaker, without a spark of eloquence, will be a far more effective minister of the Word, and of far more blessing to saint and sinner, if in the Spirit’s power, than the most gifted and eloquent without it. Indeed, it is a real snare to have a little eloquence, as it enables one to

go on without the Spirit of God, while the one who has no gift must have God with him or he cannot get on.

But while the Word of God gives no encouragement to the very common practice of going to the "College" or "Divinity School," and the less pretentious "Bible School" or "Missionary Training Home," which, by the way, is liable to engender more conceit than the more complete college course, on the principle that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing," yet the Word of God does teach that fitness is required in those who minister, and one cannot read the letters of Paul to Timothy without being impressed with the need of fitness for the ministry of the Word of God.

The ability to put before others what is on our hearts, grows with using, as the ploughshare becomes bright, not by lying idle but in making furrows. But there can be no greater mistake than to suppose that merely standing and talking on the platform frequently, will increase that gift. It is very sad to hear one who has a ready way of speaking, occupying the time of a meeting for thirty or forty minutes with what could be easily said in ten. Such an one confounds "talking" with "ministering." Ministering is giving, and unless we are "taking in" we cannot "give out."

If there is not constant "taking in" of the Word, two things will occur, there will be little in what we say to feed any who hear us, and there will be the tendency to fall back on old discourses. But it may be asked, "Is it wrong to give again that which we have given before?" Assuredly not. The needs that were met by certain portions of the Word of God in days gone by, still exist, and these same Scriptures will still meet them. Hence, we read that the instructed scribe brings out of his treasury "things new and old." But it is not because he has nothing "new" that he brings out the "old." Yet in taking up the same passages again, to give almost word for word what we said on it before, would suggest that we are not *digging* into the Scriptures, as the Word is "a

great deep" and our best is but a skimming of the surface. Henry Moorhouse preached seven nights on John 3:16. But if night after night he had just said the same things, it is safe to say that instead of growing larger, his audiences would have grown smaller. And may this failure to study not have much to do with diminishing audiences?

The instructions given by Paul to Timothy are by no means as much heeded as they ought to be. "Give attendance to reading." "Meditate on these things, give thyself wholly to them" (I Tim. 4:13-15). It need scarcely be remarked, that it was the Word of God Timothy was to read and meditate upon. "Skeleton Sermons," "Points for Preachers," "Feathers for Arrows," "Bible Briefs for Busy Men," etc., are poor substitutes for what one may dig out for themselves. David did execution for God with his sling and the stones gathered by the brook. He had proved them, but was afraid of Saul's armor, which would have fitted David as well as "ready made addresses" fit many a preacher.

The passages we are going to look at briefly, if read and pondered over by those who seek to serve the Lord in the ministry of the Word, will be of more service to them than a course in Homiletics (sermon making), in some "Divinity School."

I. HIS CHARACTER

"The preacher was wise," v. 9. In his exhortation to Titus (Titus 2:7-8), the apostle says, "Young men likewise exhort to be sober-minded. In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works; in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity." The preaching will be just as weighty as the preacher and no weightier. It is not so much *what* is said, as the *man behind* what is said that counts. To be able to put things in a clear way with well chosen words, is to be desired, but this may be done and the effect utterly spoiled by the behavior of the preacher. A conference was held in a certain town, the Christians were delighted with the ministry of two men, whose grasp of the truth and

ability to give it out was above the average, indeed, they felt edified and honored by the presence of these preachers at their little conference. But as soon as the meetings were over, these preachers threw off restraint and indulged in light talking and jesting, so that the Christians were grieved by their behavior, and the good that their ministry accomplished was spoiled. This may be an extreme case, but we have known the edge taken off many an address by the want of sobriety of the preacher.

II. HIS OCCUPATION

“He still taught the people knowledge,” v. 9. We have not only his occupation in this sentence, but also the fact that, as the saying goes, he “stayed with his job.” He still taught the people. In spite of the fact that the Holy Spirit indwells every believer, and that because of that it is written, “We need not that any man teach you” (I John 2:27), we know that the great majority of God’s people never get much at “first hand.” And God has graciously condescended to meet the failure of His people by raising up those who “glean” in the fields of Scripture, and “beat out” what they glean for others. And till the Lord comes, there will be ample room for all who have the heart and the ability to do this work. Of old, God had to say, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos. 4:3). And He might make the same complaint today, for it is in the great majority of cases, ignorance of His mind that keeps His people in the various social, religious and commercial mixtures, that are destroying their power to be a testimony for Himself. And the crying need now, as ever, is for those who, as the preacher, will “still teach the people knowledge.”

Not long since with another brother we visited a public school in the city of New York, and watched a teacher at work with a class of little ones. It is not often we have had such a lesson taught us. Again and again she put them through the simple lesson, till we just marveled at her patience, and could not but smile at the stupid answers they gave after being told it so

often. However it turned out with them, I think *we* got our lesson that day. Isaiah 28:13 came to mind and had a deeper meaning for us: "But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little and there a little." Till we instruct after this fashion, we should be slow to blame believers for being unfaithful to the truth. Merely to have heard it once or twice, does not give the assurance that it has been understood, indeed, we did not grasp it so quickly ourselves. Let us ever remember that there is more than natural dullness to contend with in teaching the Word of God; we have the opposition of the flesh and the Devil.

III. MEDITATION

"He gave good heed ["pondered," R.V.]" v. 9. Paul's words to Timothy come to mind here, "Meditate on these things." When the portion of which we are exercised as to ministering, is pondered, its hidden beauties open up to our souls, and prevent our preaching from being just "a wilderness of words" that tends only to spiritual penury. Meditation is the great need of the present, but in the rush and bustle of business, it is being neglected; nor does it appear that conditions are likely to improve for those who follow worldly callings. But there is less excuse for those who have not to spend their day in the office or the factory; those have time to grind out between "the millstones of meditation and prayer," the precious wheat they are about to give out. Probably those who are in the greatest danger of neglecting meditation and prayer, are those who have a ready way of speaking—trusting to that, and the fact that they have preached on that subject before, they allow themselves liberty to run around, till almost time to get on the platform, with the result that all spiritually-minded ones feel there is a lack of weight in what is said. And though they may not tell the preacher, they feel that the cause is lack of prayer and meditation.

IV. HIS PREPARATION

"The preacher sought out and set in order many proverbs" v. 9. It is the desire of every one whose heart is in the work of the Lord, that those who listen should *comprehend* and *retain* what is spoken. To enable them to do this it is most important that it be presented in an *orderly* way. To give it out in a topsyturvy fashion, makes it more difficult to carry away, whereas order assists the memory. We are far from favorable to the sermon style of "Firstly, Secondly and Thirdly." We merely seek to remember that *clearness* in setting forth the Word of God is due to Him, and needed by His people. "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15). As the servant of Christ goes on with God in the exercise of his gift, he should become more workmanlike in the performance of it. "The preacher sought out and set in order many proverbs."

V. THE MESSAGE

"The preacher sought to find out acceptable words, and that which was written was upright, even words of truth" (v. 10). There are very few whose manner and diction are beyond criticism, and we are conscious of the fact that there is room for much improvement in us, in this respect, since it was the will of God that we were not in circumstances in our early days to get an education. But whatever may be said of manner or diction, our message should be beyond gainsaying. Timothy was exhorted to "preach the word" (II Tim. 4:2). Titus to use "Sound speech that cannot be condemned" (Tit. 2:8). Of himself, Paul says, "By manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (II Cor 4:2).

The prophet Jeremiah learned this lesson: "The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my Word, let him speak my Word faithfully" (Jer. 23:28). The best that the human mind can produce in matters which belong to God, is but "chaff" as compared with "wheat," a dream as com-

pared with the sure Word of the Living God! What an immense difference there is between the Word of God and the thoughts of men! It has a majesty and power all its own. Let us be sure, however, it is the Word, and not our interpretations of it that we give out, then if not received, it will be to God men will be responsible.

Not only was the message of the preacher "words of truth," but it was also "upright." The apostle tells us that he did not handle the Word of God "deceitfully" (II Cor. 4:2), which would be the opposite of upright. There is little that is so objectionable as hearing the Word of God used on the platform, not to edify, instruct or restore, but to get a hit at some one, who should have been sought out privately, if only there was the courage and honesty to do this. Alas, when hints and insinuations, from which anything may be taken, are regarded as "faithfully delivering the message!" Scriptures are read which caused one to wonder what is in the mind of the preacher, and then these are twisted around to suit the purpose he has in mind, and things taken out of it that never were in it. This ought not to be.

VI. THE MESSAGE FELT

"The words of the wise are as goads" (v. 11). The "goad" was a sharp pointed stick, which was used to urge on the oxen in the yoke; the animals felt it and naturally dreaded it. So true spiritual ministry will be felt, and if there is no probing of the conscience, no exercising of the hearts of God's people as to sin and departure from God, then there is something lacking in the ministry. This result, flowing from spiritual ministry, is something altogether different from getting God's people angry, on account of our ungracious manner in speaking to them. We sing often of the Shepherd's voice, that, "Even when it chideth, tender is its tone." And words which are like "goads" are also "acceptable words."

We think of the Doctor's skill, as he manifests his ability to heal the afflicted one, not in the strength of

a dose he could administer, which may kill the patient. It is poor comfort for the owner of a priceless vase, to be told by the servant that she broke it in trying to clean it! Departure from God is soul-sickness, or worldliness, like the vessel becoming defiled, and God-given ministry is intended to cure and to cleanse—if it does not succeed, the real servant of God sees cause for being humbled over his failure to reach the backslider.

VII. THE MESSAGE STICKS

“The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies” (v. 11). Who has not looked back over Conference meetings for Christians, where many addresses have been given, but where much that we had heard took very little hold of us, while on the other hand, some things stuck to us like nails that were clinched. Years may have passed since we heard some servant of the Lord give an address, and yet it stands out in our memory as vividly as when we heard it. It is not that we judge we were in more receptive condition of soul in the one case than in the other, though undoubtedly this has much to do with the hold that God’s Word takes of us. No, we believe that it was the force behind the ministry that made it so different from much else that we listened to. What has a grip on our own hearts will doubtless grip others.

VIII. THE SOURCE OF THE MESSAGE

“The words of the wise are as goads and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are “given from one Shepherd” (v. 11). The hand that drives the nail is that of the “masters of assemblies,” but the “nail”—the message—comes from the “One Shepherd,” and we know who He is, the exalted Head of the Church, from whom all ministry that edifies must flow. We like the word “Shepherd,” as it recalls the love and care that three times over, laid upon Peter the care of the lambs and sheep.

We began this with a most important word, one that we cannot ignore if we are to bring glory to God or good to His people, "The preacher was wise." Now we find a still more important one at the close telling us the source of the message—the "One Shepherd." Unless it comes from God it will never return to God with the results of precious fruit to His praise and glory. To be sure that one has a message from God, requires the soul to be in His presence, self-judged, and willing to see any other on the platform, if it be God's will. There will be the honest looking at what we have to say. "Is this food convenient for the flock, or is it something I think I can give a good address upon?" when the sight of so many people, perhaps, stirs us up to be on the platform.

Those who have God's message will be the last to proclaim that as they take the platform. "The Lord has given me a word that I want to give you," said a young fellow, a few years ago in a meeting, and he fumbled in vain for a while to find his Scripture, and had at last to sit down without being able to deliver the message he said "the Lord" had given him. Every now and then we hear, "I have a message from the Lord," and the word that comes very forcibly to our mind is what Joab said to Ahimaaz, "Wherefore wilt thou run, my son, seeing that thou hast no tidings ready" (II Sam. 18:22).

Nevertheless it is the responsibility of all who minister in the name of the Lord, to "speak as the oracles of God" (I Peter 4:11). Mark, not merely according to the oracles of God, while most assuredly it will be that. One may say what is truth, while it may not be the truth for that person or for that meeting. And while we may have the consciousness in our own souls that we had God's message, should anyone dispute that, we shall not defend ourselves, we will be content to let the Judgment Seat of Christ determine that, though results may now justify us.