

Part 1. WGT Shedd and Powerful Preaching

Written by Andrew Young

Friday, 21 January 2011 09:06 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 20:40

Introduction



In the course of teaching, preaching and pastoral labours I have found myself returning again and again to William G.T. Shedd's little volume on Homiletics and Pastoral Theology for help and insight. It has proved a never failing source of inspiration to me, and want to share with you some of the things that I have found so helpful particularly as they relate to the subject of effective, or powerful preaching.

There is another reason for wanting to do this as well. For many years I have had a deep longing to see a revival of powerful preaching in the church. By powerful preaching, I mean preaching that has spiritual force and impact - preaching that compels attention and produces lasting effects. Of that, I fear, we suffer a great lack. In recent years there has been something of a restoration of biblical preaching, and for that we can all thank God. But if we are honest about our own ministries, and those of our colleagues whom we love and respect, we have to admit that there is still little of what we might call spiritually impressive preaching about today. Preaching that makes a lasting and powerful impression upon the spiritual lives of men and women. One can hear accurate preaching, solid preaching, substantial preaching, logical preaching. But where is the preaching that raises men and women to the throne of God, and humbles them to the dust; that grips them and stirs them, compels and transforms them? Unless I am completely ignorant of the true situation, I have to conclude that there is precious little of it about - at least in my own country, and certainly in my own ministry. I want to know why this is so. I want to know if this is simply a matter of the sovereignty of the Spirit, or if there are human causes for which we are accountable. And it is in search of an answer to these questions that I have found Shedd so helpful.

William Greenough Thayer Shedd lived in a very different generation to ours. He was born in the year 1820 in Acton, Massachusetts, into a culture, which had; for one thing, a far greater appreciation of classical elements in education than ours does today. Students, not simply in seminaries, but in schools and colleges studied such subjects as Latin, logic, rhetoric and moral philosophy - subjects which many of us had no contact with in our own educational courses.

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This instilled into those of a more academic caliber anyway, a great appreciation of such mental skills as analysis, arrangement, order and unity.

You cannot read the sermons and writings of the great preachers of this age without being impressed by the force of their minds and of their entire characters. They were men of substantial mental and spiritual power. And that showed when they spoke. They had tremendous effect upon those who heard them. T.C. Johnson tells us, for example, that some of Dabney's students were at times so overcome by the power of his preaching that they couldn't concentrate on their studies for periods of up to six weeks after hearing him.

It is particularly this mental and spiritual force, this deep impressiveness of the manner and speech of men like Shedd, Dabney, Thornwell and Benjamin Palmer that interests me so deeply. I know that these men were uncommon men who were special gifts to the church of Christ and that they are not to be viewed as the norm of their day or ours. But at the same time, their greatness was not all a matter of sheer genius. They were great teachers and preachers because they were men of great method and discipline. Added to that, they were men of great personal faith and godliness. The two things; discipline and godliness were, as we shall see, very much intertwined in their lives and ministries. Their industry and earnestness were but necessary expressions of their inner religious force; the natural emission of their spiritual energies. At the same time, their diligence and studiousness fed and nurtured the flame of piety within them. There was no tension between prayer and study, the one infused the other with its life and light, and gave birth to men of great mental vigour and strength of spirit.

I want then; to try to enter into the very soul of a man like Shedd, to drink as it were of his very spirit, if I may put it like that. What did he consider were the vital ingredients of a ministry of great spiritual power and influence? In his view, how do men become preachers of great power? I want to suggest to you that Shedd, were he alive to tell us, would probably direct our attention to three matters. He would say the first thing he would tell us that we have to consider the man himself behind the preaching. Secondly, we have got to turn our minds to the source of powerful preaching, where it finds its roots and origins. And then thirdly, he would insist that we consider the form appropriate to powerful preaching. That, is how I propose to lead you into a fresh look at his thinking and counsel to us

Part 1: The man behind powerful preaching

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Our concern is to understand more about powerful preaching, specifically to understand how we can become more powerful preachers. There will of course, always be an element of mystery about this. Spiritual power is not under our control. "The wind blows wherever it pleases," Jesus told Nicodemus, "you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.(John 3:8)." We recognize the absolute sovereignty of the Spirit in this matter of powerful preaching. He is able to take the humblest and feeblest of preachers and use them out of all proportion to their theological and literary gifts. He is Lord in this matter, and we are not evangelical shamanists pretending we can manipulate his Being.

At the same time, we recognize that ordinarily the Holy Spirit works through means adapted to his purposes. We also recognize there are certain means more adapted to his use than others and from that point of view, we believe it's our duty to do everything in our power to become the best-fitted instruments we possibly can for His use.

Further in our discussion our interest will be taken up with what we preach and the way in which we preach it. That is with the content and the form of our sermons. We need to ask if this is the only point at which there is an 'adaptation between means and ends,' or if there are other factors as well that can influence a preacher's usefulness. In particular, we need to ask if there is anything about the manner of a preacher's life that fits him or unfits him to be a messenger of God. Is there any correlation between the preacher's personal and spiritual character, and the power with which he preaches the Word?

William G.T. Shedd, our mentor in these studies, is as emphatically clear upon this point as he is upon matters of formal rhetoric. Yes, he would insist, the man behind the sermon who is the means of the message does matter.

After all, the classicist in him argues, a discourse be it secular or sacred; "... is not so much the product of the man, as it is the man himself - the embodiment of all his faculties and all his processes." p. 41

He is simply saying that you cannot separate the man from the message.

While the man is not the message, his humanity is mingled with it and leaves its mark upon it.

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The state of mind, heart and soul of the preacher diffuses its quality through what he says, and either serves to chill or to vivify its message. Consistency between the message and the messenger is of the utmost importance in powerful preaching!

What qualities in the preacher himself, then, are vital to powerful preaching?

Three emerge again and again in Shedd's writing- spirituality, discipline and intensity.

I. SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality, like the term beauty, is one that is somewhat out of favour in contemporary Christian circles. It smacks of an elitist pietism that people want to distance themselves from. We are happy to be known as committed Christians, diligent Bible students, powerful preachers, and eminently practical and relevant Christians. But we don't court the reputation of being spiritual Christians. That sounds too puritanical, and nobody wants to be that pious.

Shedd, on the other hand, ranks spirituality among the first requirements of an effective preacher. By that term, he has nothing airy in view, but a very sane and biblical notion. For him, spirituality is a matter of being taken up with realities in the spiritual realm. It is "That solemn and serious mental frame which is naturally and constantly occupied with eternal realities." p. 108

It means to be at home in a realm of thought and life that concerns the unseen. It means to love and enjoy above all things communion with God, to dwell upon the glory of the risen Lord, to ponder the mystery of the Spirit's power, to agonize over the lostness of men, and to live in hope of the world to come.

"Some Christians" he says, "seem to be much more at home in the invisible realm of religion than others. They are characterized by a uniformly earnest and unearthly temper, as if their eye were fixed upon something beyond the horizon of this world, as if they saw more, and farther, than thoughtless and unspiritual men about them. Their eye is fixed upon something beyond time and sense, and they do see more, far more of the 'things unseen and eternal,' than the average of Christians." p. 108-9

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Unless a preacher is of this bent, Shedd would argue, he could never be a truly powerful preacher. He is doomed to speak to others of matters of which he is a personal stranger. When he preaches, he trades as it were in a foreign currency, one he neither understands nor appreciates, and consequently, one he can never commend with the earnestness that he should. He might be a practical man, a caring man, an efficient man, and even a learned man. But he will never be a powerful man as long as his heart and soul are not most at home with heavenly things. The powerful preacher is one who, to use his words, speaks

" as an eyewitness of eternal realities. He speaks convincingly, because he knows what he says, and whereof he affirms." p. 109

How does one cultivate this kind of spirituality? We are drawn back, once more, to Shedd's favourite theme. The Christian man, and especially the Christian pastor, will find his spiritual life deepened only as he immerses himself in the study of the Bible and of useful books. Shedd is a firm believer in the importance of thinking and study in the nurture of a preacher's spiritual life. He has a great wariness of experiential Christianity that is severed from revelation and intelligent understanding. Commenting on the value of catechizing youth he says, "Experimental religion, without doctrinal knowledge, must deteriorate.

Religious feeling will become more superficial, religious zeal more insincere and religious action more fitful and selfish, if the mind of the church is not obtaining clear and self-existent conceptions of religious truth. A dead orthodoxy is an evil, and so is an ignorant pietism. But there is no necessity for either. Feeling and cognition are not antagonistic, but exist together in the most perfect Being. And only as they coexist in the renewed mind is there the highest type of Christian life." p. 356-7

There you have his philosophy stated perfectly. We must have experiential Christianity; there is no other sort worthy of the name. But it must be an experiential Christianity founded upon and nourished by a careful, insightful and prayerful study of the truth. To that end, preachers in particular must devote themselves. They must read and study above all things for their own benefit. There must be no rift between the hard discipline of thinking and devotion. The two belong together.

"Those who unduly magnify the practical to the undervaluation of the doctrinal and theoretic in

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theology, are wont to make the objection, that study is unfavourable to devotion. There cannot be a more erroneous judgment than this. The studious, thoughtful Christian is always more unworldly and sincere than the Christian who reads but little and thinks still less... Study close, persevering study, improves his religious character. An indolent minister is not a spiritually-minded man. How much more favourable to the growth of piety is... a studious life than an indolent and day dreaming one! For the mind must do something. If it is not occupied with great and good themes, then it will be busy with small and frivolous ones." p. 285

"The fact is that the holiest men in the Christian Church have been the most studious men. Those spiritual minded and heavenly divines who accomplished most in the ministry of their own day, and who have been the lights and guides of the ministry up to this time, were men of great learning." p. 286

Firstly, then, a spiritually minded man will necessarily be a studious man.

But, Shedd is quick to add the process does not stop there. He was too well aware of the dangers of rationalism to allow that. He recognized that truth was really just the raw material for devotion. Study must lead us to God himself, or it has failed to discharge its proper function. The scholar must pray.

"Let [the preacher] not be satisfied with studying and pondering the best treatises in theology, or with studying and pondering even the Bible itself. Besides all this, and as the crowning and completing act in the religious life, let him actually and really pray." p. 294

He sums this matter up perfectly in the following memorable words: "It is not sufficient to commune with the truth, for truth is impersonal.

We must commune with the God of truth." p. 291 WGT Shedd on Powerful Preaching

There you have it. There must be truth. But truth is not enough. There must be active, vital communion with the God of truth, or we have not tasted of the essence of spiritual life.

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I cannot but wonder if part of our problem today lies in our failure to maintain this intimate marriage of study and devotion that Shedd commends. I fear that many of us face a terrible danger of becoming too intellectual in our Christianity. Do not mistake what I am saying. I am not saying that we can ever use our intellects too much. But I am saying that it is possible to become thoroughly imbalanced in their use to the point where our Christianity becomes deformed. Unless what we read and study is assimilated and becomes the stuff of what we believe and live, we are going to become rationalistic and intellectual and that is what I fear is a very great danger to us today. True, there are vast sections of the church of Christ that suffer from the opposite plight; the abandonment of the mind in their Christian preaching and living. But that, I suspect, is not the peril that faces most of us here today. We have so many books that we can read and feel we that we need to read; there are so many magazines to peruse, and so many scholars to listen to, that we are losing the ability to meditate, absorb, and pray. Our learning is in danger of being simply heady rather than hearty. And spiritually minded people recognize that. Tozer put it well nearly fifty years ago when he said, "Sound Bible exposition is an imperative must in the church of the living God. Without it, no church can be a New Testament church in any strict meaning of that term. But exposition may be carried on in such a way as to leave the hearers devoid of any true spiritual nourishment whatever. For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience, they are not the better for having heard the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts." Pursuit of God, p. 13

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I commend this to you then as the first and indispensable quality a preacher must possess if he is going to be used powerfully by God. He must be a spiritually minded man; a man who makes the cultivation of real, vital religion the priority of his life.

II. DISCIPLINE

A second quality Shedd considers essential in a powerful preacher is that of discipline. Again, lest we associate the term simply with that which is regimented, inflexible, and authoritarian, let us take a moment to explore more fully what he means by this term.

Perhaps the best way of doing so is by examining the different areas of a preacher's life that need to demonstrate this quality. The first is the area of the mind. A preacher must be able to control his mental habits, and more than that, he must be able to train them. Shedd, for example, sees a particular need for a preacher to develop a "methodizing" intellect. "By a

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methodizing intellect is meant one which spontaneously works in a logical manner, and to which consecutive reasoning has become natural." p. 200

This kind of mental orderliness is essential, Shedd claims, especially in days when the public mind craves a short, sharp method in the pulpit. Mere brevity, he argues, will not satisfy them. Men and women, even in an age as impatient as our own, need to be fed. What they need is the greatest possible amount of matter compressed into the smallest possible form, all presented in the most energetic manner possible. And that, he insists, requires a strong methodizing power of mind. A preacher must cultivate the ability to seize the main points of a subject, hold them firmly in his grip like a vice, and then clothe them with beauty, warmth and vitality. As difficult as it may seem, it can be obtained by "diligent and persevering method." p. 48-50. Shedd was a firm believer that mental skill such as this could be cultivated. Listen to what he says in connection with developing a homiletical habit of mind:

WGT Shedd on Powerful Preaching "By this is meant, such a habitual training of the mind as will impart a sermonizing tendency to it. The human understanding, by discipline and practice, may be made to work in any given direction, provided it is a legitimate one, with something of the uniformity, precision and rapidity of a machine. It can so be habituated to certain processes, that it shall go through them with very little effort, and yet with very great force." p. 93

The mind can be trained. And it needs to be trained. But it requires discipline.

Discipline must also show itself in the area of application to study. An effective preacher must be, in Shedd's estimation, a man of ripe and growing mental culture. He ought to have thought deeply and communed long with the best minds of the ages. This is not the work of a moment or an hour, as we all know, nor even of a college or seminary course. It is properly the work of a lifetime. A powerful preacher must be a man who is ever pushing back the frontiers of his own understanding, and deepening his grasp of the fundamentals of the Christian faith and human life. Progress will only be made if a preacher disciplines himself to read, and to read the very best books.

"[He] .. must dare to by-pass all second-rate authors, and devote his days and nights to the first-rate. No matter how popular or brilliant a contemporary may be, no matter how active the popular mind in a certain direction, it is the true course [for a preacher] to devote his best powers to mastering those authors who have been tried by time, and are confessedly the first intellects of the race." p. 306

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The preacher's discipline should show itself also in the promptness and exactness with which he performs all his duties. Whether it is his pastoral visiting, his letter writing, his sermon preparation or in matters of practical family concern, the preacher must discipline himself to do things well.

"The scrupulous and faithful performance of work of any kind improves both the mind and the heart.... the habit of doing work uniformly well, and uniformly in time, is one of the best kinds of discipline.... If he half does his work, his moral character suffers. " p. 296

Strength of character is ultimately the issue for Shedd. He is not interested in being pedantic or perfectionist. His primary concern is for vigorous personal and spiritual character. Preachers need to be men of character; they need to be men of courage, insight, wisdom and decision. This latter point he dwells on at length. A preacher must be a man who is prepared to be decisive. He does not encourage haste, and still less ignorant bigotry. But he does urge clarity, decision and judgment. In company with Charles Bridges, he recognizes that one of the faults of pastors is their reluctance to make judgments on issues. The fault becomes the more and more marked as the swelling tide of scholarship overwhelms us with our ignorance. We can easily reach a point of dreading the presumption of being certain about anything.

And when that happens, our preaching loses its note of authority. What is the remedy? Not blind and precipitous haste; but courageous, careful judgment following disciplined and prayerful investigation. To have the strength of character we need to be compelling preachers, we must be self-disciplined men.

I am aware that in setting these requirements before you, I run the risk of discouraging you. Who is sufficient for these things? Not one of us, to be sure. But does that mean we relinquish our ideals and settle for that which is less than we ought to offer the Great Master we serve? I am reminded of a comment I read in Iain Murray's account of the life of Professor John Murray, known at Westminster Seminary not simply for the caliber of his teaching and scholarship, but also for his extraordinarily consistent and disciplined life. The point made by his biographer was that his colleagues, while respecting his manner of life deeply, tended to regard its exceptional character as a personal peculiarity, rather than a model to emulate. That is a danger we face whenever we are confronted with demands beyond our present level of achievement. We can dismiss them as idiosyncratic, and never experience the uplifting and strengthening effect they can have in our own lives. I would encourage you not to be overwhelmed by the ideals Shedd holds before us.

Rather, let each one of us, according to the measure of gift and grace given to us, endeavour to make the best use of our talents, never resting upon our oars, but ever seeking to become more fit and more usable instruments for our Lord and King.

III. INTENSITY

Lastly, one cannot leave a discussion of Shedd's views on the necessary qualifications for powerful preaching without mentioning what might be called the quality of intensity. Shedd believed that there was need for greater intensity on the part of preachers in his day.

"The principal lack in the current preaching" he writes, "is not so much in the matter as in the manner. There is truth sufficient to save the soul in most of the sermons that are delivered; but it is not so fused with the speaker's personal convictions, and presented in such living contact with the hearer's fears, hopes, and needs, as to make the impression of stern reality. The pulpit must become more intense in manner, or the 'form of sound words' will lose its power." p. 109-110

Again, lest some fleeting mental caricature incline us to dismiss this emphasis, let us take a moment to ask what, precisely, Shedd means when he appeals for more 'intensity' on the part of preachers. Surely he cannot be pleading for that temperamental deformity that besets some of us, making us unable to relax or release our grip on the thoughts filling our minds. And surely he is not calling for that unhealthy introspection of mind that we have already heard him pronounce woes against. What then does he have in mind?

Three words may help us, energy, focus and depth. This is the nearest he comes to offering a definition of the trait we are considering, Shedd says that a preacher "Should be a man of great energy and simplicity of aim." p. 215 WGT Shedd on Powerful Preaching

In as much as he is able, a preacher should be a man of one thing.

Admittedly, that is not always possible. Many earnest pastors and Christian workers are compelled to divide their energies between preaching and bread winning. This call for simplicity

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and intensity of aim on the part of a preacher ought not been seen as the condemnation of all who are for various reasons unable to devote the whole of their time to the ministry of the word. But to those who are, it is a challenge to seize the opportunity they have to concentrate on becoming the very best preachers they can possibly be. We seldom achieve anything significant without the discipline of concentrated, focused effort. That is particularly so in the realm of spiritual ministry. There are rare and wonderful moments to be sure when messages seem to wing their way to our minds untold for messages, to use Dr. Lloyd-Jones' terms, that are "given" to us but by and large, they are the exceptions. The rule calls for patient, persevering, concentrated study. And unless preachers are intensely focused on their calling, they will seldom excel in it.

High aims is a second way in which this intensity of character should express itself. The connection between casualness and mediocrity is close. If a preacher is to be effective, he must have an intense desire to effective. All of his powers must be concentrated on doing the very best that he can. "[A preacher ought] form a high ideal of a sermon, and constantly aim at its realization," Shedd writes in one place (p. 95). In another he says "The preacher's idea of a sermon must ... be as full and perfect as possible. He must not be content with an inferior grade of sermonizing, but must aim to make his discourses as excellent in matter and in manner as his powers, natural and acquired, will possibly allow... He ought to keep his ideal of a sermon high and bright before his eye, and not allow his mind, by the frequency and insufficiency of his preparations, to become accustomed to inferior performances, because this is the next step to becoming satisfied with them." p. 96-97 WGT Shedd on Powerful Preaching

This, undoubtedly, is the kind of intensity he had in view. No slackness, no time serving, no mediocrity, but constant, sterling effort to do the very best one can.

Finally, this intensity of character should show itself in the serious earnestness with which we go about our preaching task. Preachers should be serious, earnest men. Such a mood, in Shedd's mind, is the only frame consistent with the high and difficult task facing a preacher. Unlike the after dinner speaker, he does not speak to entertain or please. Unlike the politician, he does not aim at a momentary pencil stroke at a ballot box. He is in earnest to rescue and revive eternal souls. He is aiming at the transformation of the inner life of his hearers, and that, in a permanent way.

"The eternal salvation of the human soul, through the presentation of divine truth, is the end of preaching. The created mind is never employed so loftily and so worthily, as when it is bending all its powers, and co-working with God himself, to the attainment of this great purpose.... The sermon is designed to produce an effect upon human character; and this not upon its mere

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superficies, but its inmost principles.... It aims at the whole nature of man ... at the formation of an entire character." p.37, 41

What other manner or state of mind and heart is fitting for a preacher about this work, than one that is intense. He may indeed be affable and amiable still, but he will be unerringly focused. He cannot ever be fully "off-duty" as it were. The immensity of his task never leaves him. He cannot help but be plain, direct, bold and passionate in other words, intense.