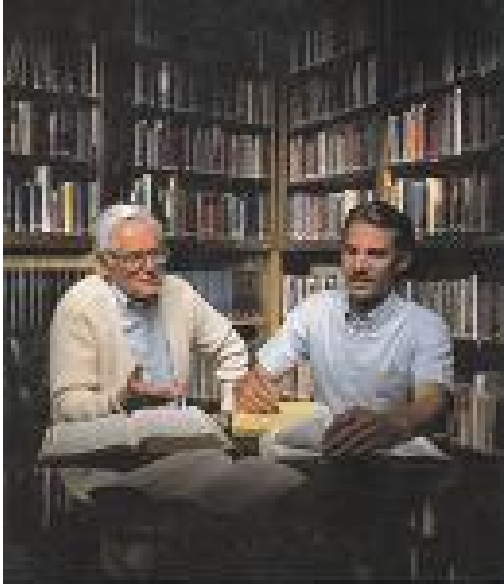


Part 2. The Source of Powerful Preaching

Written by Andrew Young

Friday, 21 January 2011 14:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 20:43

Part 2. The Source of Powerful Preaching



Lets begin by looking at what W.G.T. Shedd considered to be the source of powerful preaching. This we can identify and state simply. Shedd considered that persistent, prayerful, careful study of the Bible was the fountain at which a man must drink if he is ever to become a powerful and impressive preacher.

On the surface, that sounds almost trite, a mere truism. But let me take you a little deeper into his thinking on this matter. What made Shedd lay such emphasis on careful, exegetical study of the Bible? What made him say, for example, "We ... maintain the position that the sacred orator is quickened by the analytical study of the sacred volume into a freedom, freshness and force, that are utterly beyond his reach without It." p. 6

Three things compelled him to lay emphasis upon this point.

I. POWERFUL IDEAS

The first was the conviction that the Bible is the only proper source of ideas for preaching. At

Part 2. The Source of Powerful Preaching

Written by Andrew Young

Friday, 21 January 2011 14:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 20:43

the very outset of his book on Homiletics, we meet Shedd the classicist making a striking and very important little statement, "It is conceded by all, that eloquence is the product of ideas..."
p. 1

This principle, so basic to formal rhetoric, it is one that we need to pause to reconsider today. How many of us have, I wonder in our efforts to be powerful preachers, looked to mere strength of inner feeling to carry the day? And how many of us, when that passion has waned and the dust has settled, have been overcome with a sense of tragic failure? We sense that we have merely ignited our powder, but it has been without shot. We have spoken in white heat, but people have not been influenced beyond that moment. We supposed that mere feeling could generate force, and have been disappointed. "You are wrong," says Shedd. Eloquence; truly effective speaking, is the product of ideas, not mere words, and still less, mere human passion. Let a man's mind be filled with truly significant and substantial thoughts, his heart will begin to glow and his best and choicest words will rise from their resting place and make him truly eloquent. And, most important of all, people will be fed and helped and changed.

But, where do these ideas come from? Shedd insists that there is only one legitimate source; those ideas revealed by the divine mind and written in the Scriptures. He sees no room at all for a preacher to be an inventor of truth.

His proper role is that of a student and interpreter of revelation. In other words, he is to be an exegete of God's Word. In a vivid analogy, he likens the preacher's calling to that of a naturalist, or of a scientist. The scientist recognizes, or at least should recognize that his task is to observe, to explore and to analyze the physical universe. He is a student of the creation, trying by every means at his disposal to explore the world about him. In a sense, he is an exegete of nature. In the same way, Shedd says, the preacher must be first and foremost a student of the mind of God revealed in the Scriptures.

"The duty and function of the theologian is most certainly that of an interpreter, and that alone.... The attitude of the human mind toward revelation should be precisely the same as toward nature. The naturalist does not attempt to mould the mountains to his patterns; and the theologian must not strive to reconfigure the Scriptures to his private opinions...In the presence of both nature and revelation, man ... is a minister and interpreter, and not a creator and lord."
pp. 3,4,5

God, he insists, has given us in his Word a wealth of incomparable truth for preaching. Deep

Part 2. The Source of Powerful Preaching

Written by Andrew Young

Friday, 21 January 2011 14:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 20:43

and unfathomable mines await our exploration. And the preacher must dig, and he must explore and enjoy this wonderful treasure store. This, he argues, is where it all begins. There is such a freshness, a fullness, a grandness about the revelation that God has given, that any man who cares to search in humble dependence upon the Holy Spirit, will here find a class of truths so deeply and uniquely compelling -so elevated -so adapted to the deepest human needs -that he shall never lack the substance nor the inspiration to be the most forceful of preachers.

" Think for a moment of the contents of the Christian Scriptures... Bring to mind the ideas and doctrines which hang like a constellation in these heavens... weigh this immense mass of truth and dogma in the scales of a dispassionate intelligence, and say if the mind of the preacher will not be filled with freshness, with force and with originality, in proportion as he absorbs it." p. 11,12

But, Shedd would add, let the preacher see to it that he approaches this study of God's Word in the right way. Yes, he must approach it rigorously and acutely, employing the best skills of his mind and the most helpful tools that he has at his disposal. But above this, he must approach it in the right spirit.

There must be humility and receptivity - a "wise and docile reciprocity" as he puts it - about the preacher as he studies the Scriptures. He must explore it as one under its authority, and one who himself needs to receive its instruction. He must study it for his own good first of all, and then determine to share with others the nectar he himself has gathered. This is the true attitude that will fill a preacher's mind and heart with a store of truly significant ideas that he feels that he not only can, but must share with others.

One more thing in this connection needs to be mentioned. Let the preacher of the Word, Shedd says, in his role as a student of the Word, aim not simply to understand the doctrines and teachings of the Bible, but seek also to imbibe their spirit.

"... It is the spirit of a book, and the spirit of an author, which is of chief importance.... He who has imbibed [the biblical spirit] from the close and penetrating study of the words, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, sections of the sacred volume, puts the seal of the Eternal Spirit upon everything that he writes, and everything that he utters...He then, whose public discourse is pervaded with the spirit of revelation, and who speaks as the oracles of God, will be eloquent in the highest style." p. 30- 32

Part 2. The Source of Powerful Preaching

Written by Andrew Young

Friday, 21 January 2011 14:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 20:43

Ethereal as this may sound, it is important. We all recognize, I am sure, that the bold indictments of Israel's prophets carry with them the inbuilt demand for a response of contrition. Then as you read and study them, Shedd suggests, let your heart become contrite beneath them. There is only one response consistent with the seer's glimpse of the paradise to come, we say - wondering joy and earnest longing. Then, let your own soul thrill as you read the pages of the Apocalypse. Don't rest content with reading the Bible - absorb its very mood and spirit in your own soul. Having done that, you will be able to go and preach to others as those who have actually tasted the things you proclaim. Preaching will be the outflow and overflow of your own heart - an emission of the energy and sweetness of your own soul.

These are things we need to be reminded of with force today. I am not convinced that our generation is nurturing the kind of biblical scholarship we just have if we are to have the kind of preaching we need. I do not dispute for a moment that technically speaking, we are a very advanced generation of preachers. We have resources and skills never known in any other age. But are we using them the right way? I am inclined to believe that the richness of our resources is one of the things that blight our preaching. Do not misunderstand me, I am not decrying the need for the best scholarship, nor calling for a reversion to an earlier age of scholarship. What I am calling for is the proper use of our scholarship. I am concerned that the plethora of tools and resources we have for helping us understand and interpret the Bible is deflecting our attention from actually studying the Bible itself. It is my observation that there is an almost reflex dependence upon the work of scholars among many ministers, to the point where there is little close, penetrating first-hand analysis of the Bible itself. As a result, our learning is borrowed, and it sounds borrowed. We do well to call to mind often the words of the late Professor John Murray who once wrote "... What I am going to stress is the necessity for diligent and persevering searching of the Scriptures; study whereby we shall turn and turn again the pages of Scripture; the study of prolonged thought and meditation by which our hearts and minds may become soaked with the truth of the Bible, and by which our deepest springs of thought, feeling and action may be stirred and directed; the study by which the Word of God will grip us, bind us, hold us, pull us, drive us, raise us up from the dunghill, bring us down from our high conceits and make us its bondservants in all of thought and life." Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 1 p. 3

Without that commitment, we stand in danger of being mere middlemen; mere technicians, collecting, resorting, and transferring the thoughts and convictions of others to our hearers.

Could it be, that the powerlessness of the pulpit today is due in part to preachers being too far removed from the original spring of their life, freshness and power - the Bible itself?

II. COMPELLING AUTHORITY

Leaving this first and fundamental reason why the study of Scripture is so important, let us turn to a second. According to Shedd, careful, exegetical study of the Bible is essential to powerful preaching because it is necessary to authority in preaching. And authority belongs to the essence of powerful preaching.

What is it that gives preaching true moral and spiritual power? In large measure, it is the consciousness that what we are hearing is not merely the word of man, but the Word of God. As such, it comes to us with compelling force - the force of an obligation to submit and respond. If God is the supreme and rightful Governor of the world, then his voice is a voice of command.

Preaching comes to its rights when it becomes the heralding of the authoritative word of the sovereign Lord to the minds and hearts of people.

When it becomes that, it must be heard, and it must be heeded. For truth to have impact it must be more than suggestive or speculative. It must be declarative, and carry with it the weight of an absolute and inescapable authority.

But how can preaching approach that state? What enables a sinful man to stand up and speak as though he were uttering the oracles of God? Isn't such a suggestion blasphemous? Indeed not, says Shedd. It is not the sin of preaching to aspire to this, but its glory. For the preacher has received in the written Word the very oracles of God, and in as much as he knows and understands them, he may indeed become a herald wielding divine authority.

This is the awesome possibility of preaching and its need in every age.

"The first and indispensable requisite ... in both speculative theology and practical homiletics, is authority; and this authority must be found in a direct and special communication from the mind of God, or it can be found nowhere. Throw the Scriptures out of the account, and the whole human race is upon a dead level. No portion of it, no one age or generation of it, is entitled to teach another." p. 20,21

Part 2. The Source of Powerful Preaching

Written by Andrew Young

Friday, 21 January 2011 14:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 20:43

Let a man, be he ever so meek and shrinking by natural temperament, be gripped by the certainty of his message and the authority that lies behind it, and he must become a commanding preacher. There is, writes Shedd, a "high celestial dogmatism" that is necessitated by the reception of divine revelation. "There is no option. There may be natural timidity; there may be the shrinking nature of the weeping prophet; but the instant the mind perceives that the eternal intelligence has originated and communicated a series of revelations, the instant the ear hears the 'thus saith the Lord,' a transformation takes place, and human weakness becomes immortal strength." p. 26,27

But again, I ask, how can that happen? How can a preacher reach that point of certainty that enables him to speak with finality, as the oracles of God?

Shedd has the answer for us: "The thorough exegesis and comprehension of the written Word of God endow the human mind with authority." p. 19

There is only one way. An authoritative preacher must be a careful student of the Bible. He must be sure that the Bible is God's word, that he has rightly understood God's Word, that he is rightly applying God's Word. In just the measure this is true, his preaching will be authoritative.

Shedd complained that authority was a sadly missing element of the pulpit in his day.

"Certainly", he can write, "there never was greater need of originality and authority within the province of religion than now." p.27

We would rise to contest that our age is in even deeper need than that of Shedd's for the quality of commanding force in its preachers. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was certainly of that opinion. True, we are in an age that resents authority.

But resent it or not, there is a quality about true spiritual authority that compels people to hear. Our confused and rebellious age desperately needs to hear a note of certainty in its preachers.

Part 2. The Source of Powerful Preaching

Written by Andrew Young

Friday, 21 January 2011 14:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 20:43

But as we have seen, that will only come through the Spirit-illuminated study of Scripture. Let this be another incentive to drive us back to the Book itself. By all means, let us use the guides past and present that can help us reach a certain understanding of the mind of God in the Bible. But let us also remember that it is close and direct contact with the Bible itself that imparts the certainty we crave.

III. PROFOUND FEELING

Thirdly and finally, Shedd commends the prayerful, careful study of the Bible as the source of power in preaching because of its impact upon the inner religious life of the preacher himself. Preaching, he insists, is not simply a matter of communicating ideas from one mind to another. It calls for truth to be conveyed through the total humanity of the preacher to the total humanity of his hearers. God does use the human instrument in the act of preaching. And he uses not simply the unique structure and character of a preacher's mind to give shape to the message, but uses his religious character to vivify that message with warmth and life.

A preacher, Shedd claims, " ...needs a strong stir and impulse of holy affections in order to succeed in his vocation... Without that warm glow that comes from a warm heart ... purely intellectual excitement.. will fail to influence the hearer in the way of emotion and action. A purely intellectual force and energy may arrest and interest an audience; but, taken by itself, it cannot persuade their wills or melt their hearts." p. 199, 114

That, it seems to me strikes at the heart of one of the missing components of much modern preaching. We have a great deal of light, to use the familiar image, but not nearly so much heat. Consequently, our preaching often fails to touch the heart. It emanates from the mind, and at best, it lodges in the mind. We shall never have truly powerful preaching until we have preachers who are themselves powerfully affected by the truths they preach.

And how is that to happen? Here again, Shedd would contest, the patient, loving study of Scripture holds the answer. What is the source of profound spiritual feeling? How can those valid religious affections of love, joy, grief, compassion, tenderness and indignation be awakened from their slumber and be caused to take hold of a man and turn him into a flaming messenger of the Lord? There is a way, says Shedd. It is not found by looking within.

Subjectivity is fatal to true and strong feelings. Spinning on the axis of your own broodings is not likely to produce robust and vigorous feeling, he says, but poisonous sentimentality. You must

Part 2. The Source of Powerful Preaching

Written by Andrew Young

Friday, 21 January 2011 14:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 20:43

look outward, and contemplate the proper objects of feeling is you are going to arouse feeling.

"The mind cannot think successfully without an object of thought, and the heart cannot feel strongly and truly without an object of feeling. There can be no manifestation of power, therefore, and no force in the finite mind, except as it has been nourished, stimulated and strengthened by an object other than itself." p. 64-65

Once more, then, he leads us back to the Scriptures. Has there ever been a source of truth and ideas more calculated to excite true and vigorous feeling than the Bible? Is there anything conceivably more wonderful than the fact that we can have fellowship with the infinite and eternal God; that he has pardoned our sins in Christ; that he has prepared a kingdom for us? Let these ideas be duly considered and they are bound to stir us in a way that nothing else ever can. Our want of vital, living pulsating spiritual life is a reflection of our failure to be impressed by the spiritual realities of our calling. And nothing can overcome that lack but diligent, prayerful study of the Bible. In closing, let me say that I cannot but believe that part of the ineffectiveness of our preaching today lies in our failure to grasp the proper role and function of emotion in human life. Those of more academic bent have been guilty at times of despising and dismissing emotion altogether, almost as though it had no legitimate existence in our psychology. Feelings, it is claimed, are inherently untrustworthy. Indeed they are, but so too is the corrupted intellect.

We have not distinguished in our minds between sentiment and proper emotion; between corrupt passion and legitimate moral and spiritual affections. In doing so, we deny an element of our humanity, and more importantly, rob ourselves of essential insight into the workings of the human mind and will. In practice, we have become mere informers rather than persuaders.

Perhaps I am overstating the case, but I ask you to at least consider this matter. I consider the reaction against emotionalism that has driven many preachers into a very didactic and intellectual manner of speaking, something that needs correcting. We need to re-read Shedd and Dabney and their contemporaries, and consider afresh their helpful discussion on the place of feelings in preaching. Until we understand their place and function, I am convinced we will never be adequate preachers.

This, then, is how I understand how Shedd would counsel us regarding the subject of the source of powerful preaching were he with us today. He would not begin by pointing to methods and techniques. He would rather take us back to the deeper, root source of power in preaching, and the careful, prayerful study of the Scriptures. And he would tell us that there is, for each and

Part 2. The Source of Powerful Preaching

Written by Andrew Young

Friday, 21 January 2011 14:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 20:43

everyone who dares to devote themselves to this basic task, an ample supply of that rich and compelling truth that form the fuel both of authority and affection, to ensure that even the humblest man can become a flaming and seraphic preacher. May the Lord of the Word send us back to its reverent, loving study with fresh hope.