

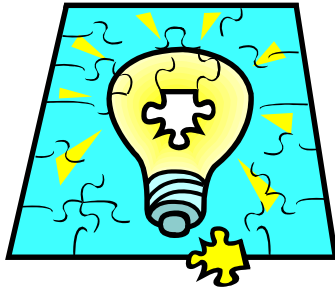


Insights
on

Sharing God's Truth

Gleaned from William G. T. Shedd

by Andrew Young



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HAVING SOMETHING TO SAY

God often uses particular authors, speakers and friends to bless us. They are not necessarily the same for everyone – it depends on our gifts and the stage we are in our spiritual journey. When we discover those he uses in our lives, we need to make the most of them.

William G. T. Shedd, a 19th century seminary teacher and Presbyterian pastor, has been a great blessing to me. In 1867 he published his lectures on preaching and pastoral care under the title “*Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*.” I obtained a copy of this book soon after the Banner of Truth Trust republished it in 1965, and it’s been my constant companion since. It never fails to nourish and stimulate me. Over this coming term I want to share some of the gems I’ve found in its opening chapters. Later, perhaps, we can explore other sections.

That doesn’t mean the insights this term are just for pastors and preachers. As the years pass I realize how important it is that every Christian can share with others what they learn from the Scriptures. Sometimes that may be in a public and formal setting – such as in a worship service, a Sunday school class, a counselling session, or a Bible study. But for most, that opportunity will arise in their family, small group fellowship, workplace, or among friends. The point is that everyone should to be ready to serve others by sharing God’s truth, and everyone needs to learn to do that better. In my view, William Shedd is someone worth learning from.

He begins his lectures on preaching by discussing the relationship between “eloquence and exegesis.” Eloquence refers to fluent, pleasing and persuasive speech, and exegesis (in simple terms) to the analytical study of the Bible.

Shedd sees the closest of relationships between these two things. To his (and other minds) the first requirement of effective speaking is having something to say. To use his words (not the way we would

say it, but worth quoting all the same), “*It is conceded by all, that eloquence is the product of ideas*” (p. 1). It follows from that – and we shall discuss this further next week – that to speak effectively, Christians must have something to say. And they get something to say – at least, something helpful and spiritually encouraging to say – from their study of the Bible.

It’s worth exploring this relationship between eloquence and ideas further. Some people talk freely without saying very much. Words spill easily from their tongue, and their mind roves freely from one topic to another. Occasionally they say something helpful, but such pearls are rare. They speak because they like to speak, not because they have something to say.

Encouraging speech, on the other hand, is based on saying something of value. It doesn’t have to be clever or deep, but it does have to be something definite – an idea, or a truth. These don’t have to be said in a preachy or teacher-like way; they can be shared humbly, or presented as something to discuss. The method doesn’t matter, but the substance does. It is definite truths that feed the mind and change the heart. And if we want to be a source of blessing to others – people whose speech is a fountain of life (Proverbs 10:11) – then we need to have something to say.

That’s a challenge facing Christians today. It’s not a new one, but an increasingly serious one. As a rule, people aren’t as interested in ideas as they once were. There’s less Bible study and less serious thinking and talking. And because of that, there’s less helpful spiritual conversation taking place. We’ve got to do something about that, and Shedd can help us.

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FINDING THINGS TO TALK ABOUT

Stated simply, William Shedd believes that the key to speaking well is having something to say. Perhaps we should expand that and say something like this: “The key to encouraging others through our words, is to have something of spiritual worth to say.”

The question is, however, “Where do we get worthwhile things (ideas) to talk about?”

Shedd didn’t believe that we were to invent them. For one thing, as finite creatures we don’t have the power to bring something (including ideas) out of nothing. Everything we think about comes from somewhere, either from our memory, or from what we see or sense, or from what others tell us. As we interact with these sources, ideas take shape in our minds.

If that is indeed true, then we have to be thinkers and observers and listeners if we are going to have anything worthwhile to say. Again, that doesn’t mean we have to be profound or intellectual people. But it does mean we have to be alert, open and observant. We have to feed our minds if we are to fill them with ideas.

And where better for a Christian to feed their mind than the Scriptures. We can learn from what we see in the creation, and from our conversations and everyday activities. We can learn from books and from discussion groups, from television programmes and documentaries. But what can compare, as a source of insight and ideas, with the words God has given to us?

William Shedd makes this point to preachers: “We shall 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” (*Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, p. 6). In more current terms, Shedd is saying that careful Bible Study is

the source, second to none, of helpful, refreshing ideas for sharing with others.

He is careful to point out, however, that it’s not casual reading, but deeper analytical study that unlocks these ideas. When he refers to Bible study, he means patient, reflective, repeated examination of the individual words and sentences of the Bible. The more deeply we can do that, the more we are likely to get from it. But whatever our ability, there is the promise of a rich feast for all who care to feed on God’s words.

Only, that is, if we feed on God’s word in the right way. Just studying the Bible more intensely won’t guarantee that our minds (and hearts) are spiritually fed. The Bible is God’s word, and can only be really understood as God himself teaches us by the Holy Spirit. We can come to the Bible arrogantly, or mechanically, and it won’t do us any good. God only shows himself to those who are humble, and who realize how much they need his help. To such he gives “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that they may know him better” (Eph. 1:17).

When we learn from God himself in this way, his word does something to us. It thrills us and strengthens us, excites and comforts us. Above all, it changes us. And when that happens, we don’t only have something of value to share with others, we have something we cannot but share! We feel we must speak. A fountain within begins to flow (*John 7:38*).

Is this typical of Christian conversation today? Are pastors, preachers, counsellors, teachers, and Bible study leaders sharing things that flow from hearts that have been blessed by God’s word and Spirit? Are rank and file Christians bubbling over with truths God has shown them? It’s something that we don’t often see, but which needs to be.

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SPEAKING WITH CERTAINTY (1)

This series of insights based on William Shedd's lectures on preaching is about speaking well. It's not just for preachers, or about speaking in formal situations. It's about speaking Christian truth effectively wherever we are.

The first thing we noted was that effective speaking grows out of solid ideas. You can't speak well if you don't have anything to speak about. Next we looked at the Bible as the peerless source of ideas for spiritual conversation. Shedd made the point that mastering the Bible guaranteed an endless stream of important and helpful things to talk about.

Flowing on from that he argues that careful Bible study imparts authority to what we say. "The thorough exegesis and comprehension of the written Word of God," he writes, "endow the human mind with authority" (*Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, p. 19).

Defining Authority

Theologian Millard Erickson defines authority as "the right to command belief and/or action." It's a quality that should characterise Christian preaching and witness especially. The gospel confronts people – howbeit compassionately and respectfully – with their need to believe and obey. It doesn't offer tentative suggestions, nor promote itself as just one of many alternatives. It dares to say it is the only solution to man's deepest problems, and to provide the only way to eternal happiness.

The Basis of Authority

What basis do we have for making that claim? Shedd puts it this way: "By what right, then, does that portion of the world which calls itself Christendom undertake to inform that portion of the world which is called heathendom, concerning God and the future life –

concerning the soul, its needs, its sorrows, and its doom? What authority has the Christian man above that of the pagan man in regard to the whole subject of religion, and who gave him this authority?" (*Ibid.*, p. 19).

He answers these questions in this way: "By virtue, then, and only by virtue of *its possession of the living oracles of God*, Christendom is entitled to sound a trumpet, and tell the world in all its centuries, and all its grades of civilization, that he that believeth shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned." (*Ibid.*, p. 21 emphasis added).

To put it another way, the only reason that we can call the world to respond to the gospel is because it comes from God. He has spoken. Without divine revelation, Shedd says, "all men stand upon a common level" (*Ibid.*, p. 19). With it, we have the right – and the duty – to "command belief and/or action."

Personal Authority

If the Bible is the *basis* of speaking with certainty (or authority), how do we gain that certainty personally? How can we be confident that what we say is true?

William Shedd believed that this certainty only comes as we study the Bible carefully. The close, exegetical study of the Bible, he said, "imparts a calm, conscious authority" (*Ibid.*, p. 21). It overcomes any doubts we may have about the trustworthiness of the Bible, and it enables us to see that its message is comprehensive and self-consistent. More importantly perhaps, it provides the means for the Spirit to bear witness to his word. In the end, it is his seal upon his truth that enables us to speak with certainty.

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SPEAKING WITH CERTAINTY (2)

Last week we noted that Christian witness and preaching should be authoritative. That is, it should *command* belief and action, and not timidly hint at a response.

That runs counter to the convictions of our culture and much of today's religious world. Graham Johnston writes that the postmodern worldview says: "All you can believe is what's in your own heart, count on intuition and faith, give up on the idea of truth, have an experience instead" (*Preaching to a Postmodern World*, p. 9). Postmodernism doesn't believe in absolute truth and has no time for "religious bigots" who do.

William Shedd certainly didn't share the postmodern perspective. He believed that God's word was truth, and that Christian messengers needed to speak it with certainty. He gave two reasons why this was so necessary.

Authority and the Word of God

For one thing, the fact that Scripture is God's word demands that it be spoken authoritatively. "There is no option," Shedd writes. "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 'Thus says the Lord,' a transformation takes place, and human weakness becomes immortal strength" (*Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, p. 27)

Shedd is right. We may be timid and retiring by nature, and shrink from speaking boldly about anything let alone the exclusive demands of the gospel. Yet, when the Holy Spirit opens our ears and convinces us that God has spoken, we cannot but take on what Shedd describes as a spirit of "high celestial dogmatism" (*Ibid.*, p. 26). Nothing else is fitting for God's messengers.

Authority and the Condition of Society

Shedd also believed that the competing claims of a sceptical and unbelieving world demanded that the gospel be spoken with certainty. He described the intellectual world of his day (the mid-nineteenth century) as "an arena of contending ideas and systems" (*Ibid.*, p. 29). It was a world, he said, full of dogmatic men, all aggressive and "assertory" when it came to promoting beliefs. Christianity, even then, had to fight to be heard.

And in that environment, was the gospel herald to be tentative and apologetic? By no means! "It is not time," he wrote, "for Christianity – the only system that has a right to say to the world, 'Thou shalt,' and 'Thou shalt not' – the only system that has a right to utter its high and authoritative, 'He that believeth shall be saved...' it is not time for that absolute and ultimate religion, in and by which this miserable and ruined race must live or bear no life, to be deprecatory and 'borrow leave to be'" (*Ibid.*, p. 30).

This speaks to the heart of the issue of how we should respond to the postmodernism and pluralism of our own day. Should we be speaking with boldness and certainty, or should we be more tentative and flexible? Because this is such an important issue we will explore it further next week.

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SPEAKING WITH CERTAINTY (3)

William Shedd introduced us to the idea that Christian witness should be authoritative – that is, it should be positive and unafraid to call people to belief and action. But we noted last week that this runs counter to the spirit of our times. Postmodernism insists on religious tolerance and rejects claims of absolute truth. This essentially rules out authority. Who, then, are we to believe – Shedd, or the postmodernists?

Bryan Chapell, President of Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, USA, helps us here. In a recent book on preaching he makes the claim that “this generation of preachers will face no greater challenge than confronting a cultural acceptance of religious pluralism with an uncompromising commitment to the Christian faith as God’s way of salvation from the human predicament” (*Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, p. 61)

Cultural Acceptance of Religious Pluralism

Chapell states it as fact that today’s preachers will encounter “cultural acceptance of religious pluralism.” “The pressures of family acceptance, good manners, and simple decency,” he writes, “combine with centuries of cultural currents now flowing with riptide force to compel us to say, ‘Religious differences don’t really matter. We all worship the same God’” (*Ibid.*, pp. 63-64). These forces, along with “cultural intolerance of bigotry and discrimination, personal qualms against pride and insensitivity, and the simple need to live together, are making our culture more and more resistant to religious claims that privilege any truth having the potential to separate or infuriate people” (*Ibid.*, pp. 62-3). To dare say there is only one God and only one way to God is to invite hostility and the charge of arrogance.

Christian Insistence on Preaching Christ

Yet, Bryan Chapell insists, that is exactly what preachers (and Christians generally) must do. We must demonstrate “an uncompromising commitment to the Christian faith as God’s way of salvation from the human predicament.”

Chapell here identifies the two reasons why we must be resolute in insisting that Christianity is the only true religion. The first is **the reality of a human predicament**. From the Bible’s perspective all humans are sinners and as a consequence are liable to judgement and eternal misery. If religion were simply a matter of morality, or of giving people a sense of value, then any one of dozens of faiths would be adequate. But if there is a human predicament, as Christians believe, then just any remedy won’t necessarily do. Only one that solves the problem is sufficient.

And that, Chapell says, is why we must be uncompromising in preaching the Christian faith. It alone provides **God’s way of salvation** from the human predicament. The Christian gospel tells how God has acted in history to bring a Redeemer, Jesus Christ, to deliver humankind from the tyranny and consequences of sin and restore them to a right relationship with himself. The fact that this is God’s solution to the human problem is what makes it exclusive and what compels us to claim that right for it in the face of competing alternatives.

For that reason we must be ready to endure the hostility of a religiously tolerant world. If Christ is not the only way for people to be saved, then it “unquestionable evidences undiluted arrogance, gross insensitivity, and religious bigotry” to claim special status for Christianity. But if it is true, “then proclamation of the only true hope is the most important and loving message that a person can communicate, and failure to do so evidences incomparable callousness, gross negligence, and religious selfishness” (*Ibid.*, p. 66).

SPEAKING WITH EFFICIENCY (1)

Mid-way through the nineteenth century William Shedd noticed a marked change in the tastes of readers and sermon listeners. Up until that time people had been content to read wordy journal and newspaper articles and listen to long (up to two hour) discourses on Sundays. But change was in the winds. To quote Shedd, “The public audience now craves a short method, a distinct, sharp statement, and a rapid and accelerating movement, upon the part of its teachers” (*Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, p. 48).

The reason for this, Shedd believed, wasn’t the superior intelligence or thoughtfulness of the rising generation. It was rather the growing busyness and distractedness of a changing society. More voices were clamouring for attention, more activities vied for time, and people were consequently less patient with tedious, dragging communication. They wanted their speakers and authors to say what they had to say in as short a time or space as possible. They wanted them to communicate in “in straight lines.”

A century later Sue Nichols commented on the same trend. Modern Americans, she said, were “sophisticated, free and distracted” (*Words on Target*, p. 13). Because they were **sophisticated**, they were sceptical of absolutes and resented being told what they had to believe or do. Because they were **free** – that is, they were self-sufficient and to a large degree able to choose what they did with time and life – they were able to tune in or out to communication at will. And because they were **distracted**, you had to win their attention and keep it. “Americans are a busy, distracted lot,” she wrote. “A myriad of activities and worries vie for their attention. Which has made them a nation of master dippers... If we hope to reach them with the good news of Christ, we must communicate in a strictly twentieth century manner” (*Ibid.*, pp. 14,15).

The same is true – in fact, even more so – of our twenty-first century audiences. We might not describe them as sophisticated, but they are “free” and “distracted,” and in perhaps more cases, plainly apathetic. Getting attention is harder today than ever.

How are we to do that? Before turning back to Shedd, it is worth noting the qualities Sue Nichols thinks necessary for grabbing and holding the modern mind. Her “big three” are first **economy** – “communicating without any unnecessary words,” second **energy** – “communicating thoughts with force,” and third, **subtlety** – “communicating without overdrawing conclusions for the receiver.” These three, she claims, are needed to “pry open” the minds of modern readers and listeners and “convert dippers into readers” (*Ibid.*, p. 24).

Whatever we think of the impact of modern life on the ability of people to read, think and listen, we have to face reality. People today are impatient with wordiness. They are also easily bored with tasteless prose and speech. We have to “propel” our thoughts into the minds of others,” Sue Nichols writes. That means “girding our message in strong, vivid language,” and writing with an energy that “supplies the momentum” for carrying ideas “across the barrier of a reader’s inattention” (*Ibid.*, p. 19). Next week we will consider what Shedd has to say about doing that.

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SPEAKING WITH EFFICIENCY (2)

How are we to get modern audiences to listen to or read what we want to say? We noted last week that today's listeners are typically distracted, pressured or simply indifferent. If they are going to hear us at all, we need to be efficient. Modern communicators, as William Shedd put it over 150 years ago, have "to compress the greatest amount of matter into the smallest possible form, and in the most energetic manner possible" (*Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, p. 49).

Shedd believed that this required more than brevity. "The popular mind still needs and craves instruction," he wrote, "and, impatient as it is of dullness, will listen with more pleasure to a discourse that possesses solid excellence, though it be tedious in its method ... than to a discourse which has no merit but that of shortness" (*Ibid.*, pp. 48-49). Short messages with little content starve listeners.

How then can we achieve the compaction (and energy) of thought that modern listeners want? Shedd believed we could only do so by developing what he called "a strong methodizing power" (*Ibid.*, p. 48). By this he meant the power of "seizing instantaneously the strong points of a subject, of fixing them immovably in a rigorous logical order, and of filling them up into a full rhetorical form, by such subordinate thoughts and trains of reflection as will carry the hearer along with the greatest possible rapidity, together with the greatest possible impression" (*Ibid.*, p. 49).

It may help to tease out the three phases of this "methodizing" process. The first involves "seizing the strong points of a subject." We might call this the process of **identification**. Knowing what is primary or most important to an argument is always the key to stating it concisely. If the "strong points" are not clear in your mind, you will never communicate efficiently.

Next is the process of arranging these points in logical order – we might call this the process of **organization**. People tune out quickly if they can't follow the sequence of your ideas, or if the sequence seems illogical. For centuries students of public speaking have recognized that effective arrangement is essential for efficient communication.

Thirdly, logically arranged ideas need to be amplified in a way that gives them force. This could be called the process of **elaboration**. The bare statement of ideas seldom sells them. They need to be clothed with enough supporting material to give them impact. Knowing how much is an art – part of the skill we need to develop to become good communicators. Step over the line and helpful elaboration becomes useless padding.

Developing this power of "methodizing" requires hard work. It takes "severe" mental effort to seize main ideas and hold them "with the strength of a vice," while at the same time clothing them with "the vitality and warmth and beauty of a living thing" (*Ibid.*, p. 50). But the effort is well worth it. Whoever acquires this ability, Shedd suggests, "will be able to convey the greatest possible amount of instruction in the shortest possible space, and... will be able to produce the strongest possible impression in the shortest possible amount of time" (*Ibid.*, p. 50). That's exactly what efficient communication is about.

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PLAIN SPEAKING

We associate plain speaking with straight talking – telling the truth without beating about the bush. Technically, however, the term refers to speaking that can be easily understood. It is one of three qualities that William Shedd believed should mark all good communication.

When something is plain, says Shedd, it can be seen clearly. More than that, it has a definite shape. “A thing is plain,” he writes, “when it is laid out open and smooth upon a level surface. An object is in plain sight, when the form and shape of it are distinctly visible” (*Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, p. 54).

This holds true not only for objects like trees and houses, but also for ideas. Ideas can be fuzzy and indistinct. They can be obscured by clumsily chosen words and poorly constructed sentences, or by a simple lack of substance. We often try to express ideas that we haven’t defined clearly in our minds. The result is always the same – waffle and confusion.

It takes hard mental work to speak and write plainly. Ideas have to be birthed, moulded and shaped. Shedd likens the process to the work of a sculptor. They have to be “cut and chiselled as a statue,” he says, so that they come to assume “a substantial form” that can be easily taken in.

Indeed, well-formed, plainly cut ideas aren’t just easy to take in; they force their way into the mind. “There is prodigious power in this plainness of presentation,” Shedd writes. “It is the power of actual contact... When the style is plain, the mind of the hearer experiences the sensation of being touched; and this sensation is always impressive, for a man starts when he is touched” (*Ibid*, p. 55).

I like that – plain ideas, propelled passionately into the minds of others, have the effect of “touching” them. That’s what all communicators want to do – to touch their audiences.

But there is another price plain speakers have to pay beyond hard work. They have to lay aside surface glitter – showy ways of speaking and writing. You can’t be a plain communicator and showy at the same time. Try to do that and form (manner of presentation) will soon become more important than content. You will end up more concerned about *how* you are saying things than *what* you are saying. And that always spells the death of good writing and speaking.

It takes determination and “high moral character” to avoid that temptation. Plain speakers must set themselves on being understood at all cost. “He must be determined,” says Shedd, “to be so intelligible, that the mind of the hearer cannot fail to understand him. He must compel the hearer to understand. He must force his way into consciousness by the most significant, the most direct, the very plainest address to his mental powers” (*Ibid*, p. 62). To do that, every other distraction has to be set aside.

Hard though it is to express ideas plainly, the effort is worthwhile. There is no point in saying or writing something that can’t be easily understood. On the other hand, there is a positive thrill in knowing what we say strikes the minds and hearts of people in a way that “start” with the sense of having been touched.

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