

W.G.T. SHEDD ON POWERFUL PREACHING

1: The man behind powerful preaching¹

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INTRODUCTION

A. Our concern in this series of studies is to understand more about powerful preaching how we can become powerful preachers.

1. 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."² Jesus was speaking in this instance of the sovereignty of the Spirit in connection with the new birth. But what he says in this regard applies equally to preaching. The Holy Spirit is able to take the humblest and feeblest of preachers and use them out of all proportion to their theological and literary gifts. On the other hand, he can apparently by-pass those who are naturally more gifted. He is Lord in this matter of powerful preaching, and we mustn't for a moment think that we can manipulate him.

2. At the same time it is proper to recognize that ordinarily *the Holy Spirit works through means* adapted to his purposes. In particular, he uses his word and skilled ministers of that word. Ordinarily, he does his greatest work through those who know his word best, who have a passion to share it with others, and who are able to do so with clarity and integrity. That being so, it is surely the responsibility of all who want to be powerful preachers to prepare themselves as best they can for that task. How the Lord chooses to use us is his business. Our duty is to do all we can to become well-honed instruments ready for him to use as he pleases.

B. Our mentor in these studies, W.G.T. Shedd, would argue that the man behind the message is of first importance when it comes to powerful preaching.

1. He insists that *you can never separate the man from the message in preaching*. He contends that any message, be it on a secular or sacred theme, "... 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."³ He doesn't mean to suggest that preachers preach themselves rather than Christ. He is simply saying that the humanity of a speaker shows in what they say. In the case of a preacher, the state of his heart, mind and soul will leave its mark on his message. It will either chill it or breathe vigour into it. Consistency or congruence between the message and the messenger is of the utmost importance in powerful preaching!

2. According to Shedd, there are at least *three personal qualities* that a man needs in order to be a powerful preacher - *spirituality, discipline and intensity*.

I. SPIRITUALITY

A. By spirituality, Shedd is thinking of a state of mind and heart that is absorbed with the spiritual realm. To use his words, it is "that solemn and serious mental frame which is naturally and constantly occupied with eternal realities."⁴

1. In practical terms it means *to be at home in a realm of thought and life that concerns the unseen things of God*. 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" writes Shedd, "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

¹ Based on an address delivered at the 1996 Banner of Truth Minister's Conference, Sydney, Australia.

² John 3:8

³ Shedd, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, Banner of Truth, 1965 reprint, p. 41

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 108

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."⁵

2. *Unless a preacher is of this bent*, Shedd would argue, he can never be a truly powerful preacher. He is doomed to speak 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."⁶

B. How does one cultivate this kind of spirituality?

1. According to Shedd, 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 is wary 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."⁷ Shedd is a great believer in the need for a vital, personal, experiential kind of Christianity. To his mind there is no other form of Christianity worthy of the name. But it must be experiential Christianity founded upon and nourished by careful, insightful and prayerful study of the truth. And preachers, if they are to be of use to the Lord, must devote themselves to that.

2. In doing so, they must be careful not to allow *any rift to develop between the hard discipline of thinking and a warm spirit of devotion in their hearts*. The two – earnest study and fervent devotion – are not antagonists but close friends. "Those who unduly magnify the practical to the undervaluation of the doctrinal and theoretic in theology," writes Shedd, "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."⁸ Appealing to the history of preaching he goes on to say, "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."⁹

3. *The fruit of careful study, then, must become the fuel for ardent devotion* if the preacher is to become a spiritual man. Study of God's truth must lead us to God himself or it has failed to discharge its proper function. The scholar, in other words, must also be a man of prayer.

⁵ Ibid, p. 108-9

⁶ Ibid, p. 109

⁷ Ibid, p. 356-7

⁸ Ibid, p. 285

⁹ Ibid, p. 286

“Let [the preacher]” Shedd continues, “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.... It is not sufficient to commune with the truth, for truth is impersonal. We must commune with the God of truth.”¹⁰ There you have it. There must be truth, for without solid truth, religious life becomes sentimental. But truth in itself is not enough. Vigorous spiritual life will only develop where truth fosters and enriches a living fellowship with God.

C. Failure to maintain this marriage between study and devotion lies behind the lack of powerful preaching today.

1. Many of us face the danger of being *too intellectual in our approach to ministering God’s word*. That is not to say that we can ever use our minds too much – that we can ever think too clearly, too patiently, too deeply. But we can be imbalanced in the way we go about doing this. We can read without thinking, and we can think without praying. Unless what we read and study is assimilated and becomes the stuff of what we believe and live, we are going to risk the danger of becoming rationalistic and intellectual Christians. At best we will become theoretical Christians. And that, I fear, is a danger facing many of us today.

2. Others face the opposite danger of *seeking a message from God apart from the revealed truth of God*. Many preachers have a sincere desire to know God and have a message to speak for God, but look for these in ways other than through careful and prayerful study of the Bible. They turn to Christian books, to the sermon outlines of famous preachers, and to their own mystical experiences. To do so is to run the risk of dishonesty and delusion. Powerful ministry requires more than trading with the insights of others. It also needs to be founded on something more secure than our subjective experiences. Powerful ministry flows from authentic spirituality created and nourished by Spirit-illuminated study of the truth.

II. DISCIPLINE

A. A second quality Shedd considers essential in a powerful preacher is that of discipline.

1. Above all things, a preacher must be a *man of mental discipline*. He 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 methodizing intellect” he writes, “is meant one which spontaneously works in a logical manner, and to which consecutive reasoning has become natural.”¹¹ This kind of mental orderliness, Shedd insists, is essential especially in days when people crave short sermons. 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, and then clothe them with beauty, warmth and vitality. As difficult as it may seem to do this, it can be achieved by “diligent and persevering method.”¹² Shedd was a firm believer that mental skills such as these could be cultivated. “The human understanding,” he claims, “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.”¹³ The mind can be trained and it needs to be trained. But it requires discipline to accomplish this. That in part is reason why a powerful preacher must be a disciplined person.

2. Discipline must also show itself in the area of *application to study*. An effective preacher must be, in Shedd’s judgment, a man of ripe and growing ‘mental culture.’ He ought to have

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 294, 291

¹¹ Ibid, p. 200

¹² Ibid, summary of pp. 48-50

¹³ Ibid, p. 93

thought deeply and interacted thoroughly with the best minds of the ages. But this is not the work of a moment or an hour, nor simply that 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 of truth and life. But he will only do this if he disciplines himself to read and digest books, and the very best books at that. He must "... dare to bypass 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."¹⁴

3. Thirdly, 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 matters of practical family concern, the preacher must discipline himself to do things promptly and well. "The scrupulous and faithful performance of work of any kind improves both the mind and the heart," writes Shedd. "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."¹⁵

B. Strength of character is ultimately the issue for Shedd in stressing the need for discipline.

1. 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. Decisiveness is particularly important. A preacher must be a man of decision. This is not to say he is to be a hasty man, and still less an uninformed bigot. But he must be someone who is clear-thinking and able to make definite judgments. Along with Charles Bridges, Shedd recognizes that one of the faults of pastors is their reluctance to take a clear position on issues. This fault becomes the more marked as the growing mass of scholarship intimidates ordinary preachers and pastors. We can easily reach a point of thinking it presumptuous to be certain about anything. And when that happens, our preaching loses its note of authority. What is the remedy? Not unthinking decisions made in haste, but courageous, careful judgment following thorough and prayerful investigation. And that requires discipline.

2. *We mustn't let these high demands discourage us*. No one is competent in themselves for these things.¹⁶ But that doesn't mean we can settle for lesser standards. Our great Master deserves the best we can offer. Our inadequacies mustn't paralyse us, but turn us again to him for grace to work out the good purposes and desires he has place in us.¹⁷ Each one of us should, 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

A. Powerful preachers, according to Shedd, must be intense men.

1. He recognized this as *a special need of preachers in his own 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."¹⁸

2. By this he was not referring to *a particular temperamental characteristic so much as a spiritual quality*. There is a kind of intensity that is unhealthy and reflects a nervous disorder

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 306

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 296

¹⁶ 2 Cor. 3:5

¹⁷ Phil. 2:13; 2 Thess. 1:11

¹⁸ Shedd, pp. 109-110

or imbalance. It shows itself in an inability to relax and in a tendency to introspection. It is not this kind of intensity that Shedd has in view, as the above quotation makes apparent. It is something of a different order altogether. The nearest he comes to defining this quality is to say that a preacher "... should be a man of great energy and simplicity of aim."¹⁹

B. The kind of intensity Shedd has in mind is marked by focus, high goals, and earnestness

1. 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 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 without the hard grind of careful preparation, but those instances are rare and tend to be the exception rather than the rule. The rule calls for patient, persevering, concentrated study. And unless preachers are intensely focused on their calling, they will seldom excel in it.

2. Intensity will only be achieved if in addition to being single-minded, the preacher is also *a man with high aims*. He will never be a focused, diligent, energetic man if he is not also, in the proper sense, an ambitious man. He must have a consuming desire to be as useful as he can possibly be. All his powers must be concentrated on being the very best preacher he can be. Casualness at this point will lead to mediocrity. "[A preacher ought] form a high ideal of a sermon, and constantly aim at its realization," Shedd writes²⁰. "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."²¹ This, undoubtedly, is the kind of intensity he had in view. There can be no room for slackness, for time serving, for mediocrity if one wants to become a powerful preacher. Instead, there must be constant, sterling effort to both be and do the best that one can.

3. 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, a preacher doesn't speak to entertain or please. Unlike the politician, he doesn't aim at a momentary pencil stroke at a ballot box. He is in earnest to rescue and revive souls destined for eternity. He is aiming at the permanent transformation of the inner life of his hearers. "The eternal salvation of the human soul, through the presentation of divine truth, is the end of preaching," writes Shedd. "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 superficialities, but its inmost principles.... It aims at the whole nature of man ... at the formation of an entire character."²² What other manner or state of mind and heart is fitting for a preacher about this work than one that is intense. A preacher may indeed be an affable and amiable, person, indeed, even one filled with natural wit and humour. But he will still necessarily be a man who is unerringly focused. He can never be fully "off-duty" as it were, nor flippant, causal or

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 215

²⁰ Ibid, p. 95

²¹ Ibid, pp. 96-97

²² Ibid, pp. 37, 41

light-hearted. The immensity of his task never leaves him. He cannot help but be plain, direct, bold and passionate. In other words, he must be an intense man.

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W.G.T. SHEDD ON POWERFUL PREACHING

2: The source of powerful preaching¹

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INTRODUCTION

A. Powerful preaching – that is, preaching marked by the power of the Holy Spirit - **is usually characterized by three things: substantial ideas, compelling authority and deep feeling.**

1. *The Spirit-empowered preacher* finds himself full of things to say, gripped by conviction and certainty about what he has to say, and passionately involved with what he is saying.

2. Our quest to become powerful preachers leads us to ask *how we come by these qualities*. Does the Holy Spirit supply them in the moment of preaching irrespective of our prior preparation and state of heart? Or are they the product, at least in part, of something that we ourselves must do?

B. W.G.T. Shedd is quite clear about where the source of powerful preaching lies.

1. While acknowledging the sovereignty the Holy Spirit in preaching, he nevertheless *believed that the Spirit works through means*. Foremost among those means is the study of Scripture. It is through the prayerful, careful exegesis of the Bible, he argued, that the Spirit fills the mind of the preacher with truth and conviction and sets his heart aflame with concern for others. "We ... maintain the position," he wrote, "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."²

2. *Patient and exact Bible study*, then, is the main source of power in preaching. Shedd suggests three reasons why this is so. Such study provides clear ideas for preaching, establishes firm authority for preaching, and arouses deep feelings for preaching.

I. THE SOURCE OF SUBSTANTIAL IDEAS

A. Shedd believed careful, prayerful Bible study to be the source of powerful preaching because it provides the ideas for preaching

1. He contended that *strong ideas are necessary for powerful preaching*. Early in his discussion of preaching he makes the claim that "it is conceded by all, that eloquence is the product of ideas..."³ Effective speakers are effective firstly because they have something significant to say. Rhetorical power is never a function of feeling alone. It is ideas that feed and make lasting impressions upon people. This principle needs to be re-emphasized today. Sincerity, fervor, captivating wit, and engaging manner may appeal to people for a moment. But if this is all that a preacher has to offer, he will send his congregation away with nothing more than the memory of a performance. Strong, clear, substantial truths are needed to satisfy the inner man and bring about permanent change. And it must be these that form the backbone of a preacher's message.

2. Shedd believed that the *Bible was the only source of such ideas for preaching*. The preacher's task, in his mind, was not to collect ideas from this place and that, and still less to invent them. Instead, he was to be a student of the ideas God had revealed in the Scriptures. He must set himself to master the Scriptures by exact and painstaking exegesis. He is not to be an innovator of ideas but a transmitter of those God has made known. His task was to be something like that of a naturalist or scientist. A scientist sets out to explore and analyze the physical world. He doesn't aim to create anything, but unravels the mysteries of what already exists. In a sense he could be called an exegete of the creation. The preacher is his counterpart in the sphere of revelation. He

¹ Based on an address delivered at the 1996 Banner of Truth Minister's Conference, Sydney, Australia.

² Shedd, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, Banner of Truth, 1965 reprint, p. 6

³ *Ibid*, p. 1

devotes himself to discerning and communicating what God has said in his Word. "The duty and function of the theologian" writes Shedd, "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."⁴ The Bible, then, is the sole source of a preacher's ideas.

3. Shedd also believed that the Bible provides *an exhaustless store of such ideas* for preachers. He viewed the Scriptures as a deep and unfathomable mine of revealed truth. Preachers are called to dig, and dig deeply into this treasure store. If they do they will always find themselves with something fresh to explore. They will never run dry of things to say because God's Word is so deep. What is more, they will never be short of truly important things to say because God's Word is so rich. His truth is as infinite and wise as his Being. It is so perfectly adapted to our needs that anyone who feeds deeply upon it cannot but find inspiration and substance to be the most forceful of speakers. "Think for a moment of the contents of the Christian Scriptures," writes Shedd. "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."⁵

B. To benefit from the Scriptures, however, a man must make sure that he studies in the right way

1. He must study with a *humble, receptive spirit*. As important as it is to bring the keenest mind and best technical skills to the study of the Bible, there is something even more important than these that a preacher needs if he is to benefit from the Scriptures and find them a source of truly powerful ideas for preaching. He needs what Shedd calls a "wise and docile reciprocity."⁶ A preacher mustn't take the stance of an interrogating critic when he comes to the Bible, but that of a child-like learner. He must study the Book as one under its authority and in need of its teaching and correction. He must study for his own good first of all, and determine to share with others the things that he has learned himself. Such an attitude will result in a mind and heart that bursts to preach to others.

2. He must, furthermore, aim to *imbibe the spirit of what he reads*. He must do more than understand the meaning of the Bible. He must seek to drink in the very spirit of its teaching. "... It is the spirit of a book, and the spirit of an author, which is of chief importance," Shedd writes. "He who has imbibed [the spirit of the Bible] 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."⁷ As ethereal as this sounds, it is important. What Shedd is saying is that the words of the Bible are charged with feeling as well as meaning. The indictments of the prophets are full of grief and severity, the announcements of gospels full of joy and grace, and the counsels of the letters steeped in tenderness and care. A sensitive student of these passages will detect more than their meaning. He will absorb their mood and spirit as well. He will be humbled by their warnings, comforted by their counsels, and exult in their promises. A preacher who has studied in this way will be able to speak to others as one who has actually tasted what he is talking about. Preaching will be the outflow of his heart, and emission of the energy of his soul.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 3-5

⁵ Ibid, pp. 11-12

⁶ Ibid, p. 11

⁷ Ibid, pp. 30-32

C. There is special need for this challenge today

1. For one thing, the mass of writings about the Bible that are available today *threatens to distract preachers from the actual study of the Bible itself*. Preachers can easily come to rely on others to do their Bible study for them. Almost without realizing it, they can develop such a reflex dependence on scholars that they miss out on the incalculable benefits of first-hand analysis and discovery themselves. Sadly, when that happens, they find themselves trading only second-hand goods. The late Professor John Murray recognized the importance of the study of the Bible itself when he made the following appeal: "... 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."⁸ Without that commitment, preachers are in danger of being mere middlemen – technicians devoted to collecting, resorting, and transferring the thoughts and convictions of others to their hearers. And this is hardly the recipe for powerful preaching.

2. Then, too, the hurried spirit of our age *doesn't encourage patient reflection on the truths of the Bible*. Earlier generations of preachers recognized the need to spend considerable time thinking and praying about what they read. They were not recluse in their habits, but they did put a priority on getting uninterrupted time to study, mediate and pray. It was only in this way, they believed, that the truths they read could be assimilated into their hearts. They would probably be horrified by our high speed, cut and paste world of computers. If they were with us today they would be quick to warn us of the peril of confusing information with knowledge. I can picture them in my mind's eye urging us to take time to reflect on what we read and to absorb what we understand. For, they would warn us, you can never preach well if your message hasn't become part of you.

II. THE SOURCE OF COMPELLING AUTHORITY

A. Shedd believed that spiritual authority was an essential element of powerful preaching

1. *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.⁹ 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 to be obeyed. Preaching comes to its rights when it is the heralding of the authoritative word of the sovereign Lord to the minds and hearts of people. When it is 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.

2. *But how can preaching approach that state?* What enables a sinful man to stand up and speak as though he were uttering the very words 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

⁸ Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 3, p. 1

⁹ 1 Thess. 2:13

portion of it, no one age or generation of it, is entitled to teach another."¹⁰ 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."¹¹

B. He believed that spiritual authority was only gained through careful and prayerful study of the Bible.

1. *Accurate exegesis is essential to knowing the truth of God.* There is only one way, Shedd insisted, for a preacher to reach the point of certainty about his message that enables him to speak with the finality of one transmitting the very words of God. That way is careful, prayerful Bible study relying on the Holy Spirit for insight and understanding. "The thorough exegesis and comprehension of the written Word of God endow the human mind with authority," he says.¹² 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 what it is saying, and that he is correctly applying it to his hearers. His preaching will only be authoritative in the measure that these things are true. And usually, they are only obtained through the Spirit-enlightened study of the Bible.

2. *This should motivate us to be more diligent Bible students.* Shedd lamented the absence of authority from the pulpit of his day. "Certainly", he wrote, "there never was greater need of originality and authority within the province of religion than now."¹³ The same might be said of our own age. Preachers of commanding force are few and far between. While authority may not be what people look for in preaching today, it is surely what they need. Jesus spoke with authority and his hearers recognized it.¹⁴ His word, as it comes to people today through his ministers, ought still have that ring about it. But as we have seen, that only comes through the Spirit-illuminated study of Scripture itself. Let this drive us back to the constant and patient first-hand study of the Bible. By all means, let us use the guides past and present that can help us reach a clearer understanding of the mind of God in the Bible. But let us also remember that it is close and direct contact with its own words that imparts the certainty we crave.

III. THE SOURCE OF PROFOUND FEELING

A. Deep feeling is another component of powerful preaching

1. *Preaching, Shedd insists, is not simply a matter of communicating ideas from one mind to another.* In Spirit-empowered preaching, truth is conveyed through the total humanity of the preacher to the total humanity of his hearers. The whole of the preacher is involved in communicating the message. His mind is active in discerning and shaping the message, and his spiritual character suffuses it with feeling. If the preacher is spiritually dead, the message – however accurate it may be – will be cold. But if his heart throbs with warmth, his words will burn. Thought and feeling are fused together in powerful preaching.

2. *Both thought and feeling are needed if preaching is to be effective.* 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.

¹⁰ Shedd, pp. 20,21

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 26-27

¹² Ibid, p. 19

¹³ Ibid, p. 27

¹⁴ Matt. 7:29

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."¹⁵ Legitimate feeling does have a place in preaching. Indeed, preaching is lifeless without it. We must be careful that in guarding against emotionalism we do not become heady and theoretical in our preaching. As is often mentioned, we need both heat and light in our pulpits. We shall never have truly powerful preaching until we have preachers who are themselves deeply affected by the truths they preach.

B. But deep feeling is only produced by prolonged and intimate contact with the Bible.

1. *Genuine religious feelings can never be aroused by looking within ourselves.* Subjectivity, Shedd argues, is fatal to true and strong feelings. Spinning on the axis of our own broodings is not likely to produce robust and vigorous feeling but only sentimentality and other poisonous counterfeits. We need to look outward, and contemplate the objects that arouse deep feeling if we are to ever experience it within us. "The mind cannot think successfully without an object of thought," writes Shedd, "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."¹⁶

2. *The Bible alone sets before us the objects that stir genuine spiritual feeling.* Where do we go to discover profound spiritual feeling? How can love, joy, grief, compassion, tenderness and indignation be awakened within us so that they take hold of us and turn us into flaming messengers of the Lord? Only through careful, patient, loving Bible study. It is there we find truths designed to excite the deepest feelings. Is there anything conceivably more wonderful, for example, than the fact that we can have fellowship with the infinite and eternal God, that he has placed his Spirit within us, that he has pardoned our sins in Christ, and that he has prepared a kingdom for us? When these truths sink down deeply into our hearts they are bound to stir us as nothing else can. Our lack of deep feeling reflects our failure to grasp – or be grasped by - these wonderful things. And nothing can overcome that lack but diligent, prayerful study of the Bible

CONCLUSION

This is how I understand what Shedd says about the source of powerful preaching. He doesn't offer quick recipes and foolproof techniques. Rather, he points us to a life steeped in the careful, prayerful study of Scripture. Let any preacher, whatever his gifts and abilities, devote himself to that basic task, and he will find the Holy Spirit at hand to make him a man of genuine spiritual power. For the Spirit will lead him to see truth clearly, believe it certainly, and feel it deeply. And that is what makes a man a powerful preacher.

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¹⁵ Shedd, pp. 199, 114

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 64-65

W.G.T. SHEDD ON POWERFUL PREACHING

3: The form of powerful preaching¹

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INTRODUCTION

A. The final aspect of our study of powerful preaching is the form of powerful sermons

1. Is the spiritual impact of our preaching in any way connected to *the manner in which our material is presented*? Does the capacity and state of mind of our hearers need to be considered? Is content all that matters, or is form of some relevance?

2. *W.G.T. Shedd has no hesitation* in answering these questions. Form is important, he says. We must understand the people we are speaking to, and realize that there are fundamental laws and principles that affect how they receive information from others. We must also appreciate that there are particular cultural moods that will influence how readily we will be understood and listened too. He could say, for example, of his own generation, "The greatest difference between the men of the present day and their forefathers consists in the greater distinctness and rapidity of their mental processes. They are not more serious and thoughtful than their ancestors are, but they are more vivid, animated, and direct in their thinking than they were. They are more impatient of prolixity, of a loose method of arrangement, and of a heavy, dragging method in the exhibition of truth.... The public audience now craves a short method, a distinct, sharp statement, and a rapid and accelerating movement, upon the part of its teachers."²

B. This is an aspect of preaching which does not always receive the degree of attention it requires.

1. It is indeed *possible for an interest in form to outrun a concern for content*, and to become a great hindrance to effective preaching. But it is also possible for us to become so remote from our hearers and so unrealistic in our expectations, that our preaching requires a miracle to be comprehended let alone useful.

2. Shedd has some *helpful words of counsel* in this regard aimed particularly at preachers who are intellectually inclined: "The studious, thoughtful mind especially needs the influence of homiletical discipline, in order to prepare it for the work of addressing and influencing the popular audience. There is a method of so organizing the materials in the mind, of so arranging and expanding and illustrating truth, as to exert the immediate impression of rhetoric, united with the permanent impression of logic and philosophy. This method can be acquired only by the study and the practice of the art of sermonizing."³

3. He considers *three elements of style essential* to powerful preaching: plainness, force and beauty. Let us consider these in turn.

1. PLAINNESS

A. Shedd asserts that powerful preaching must be plain preaching

1. By that he *does not mean dull, commonplace or trite preaching*. He is all for fresh, insightful and vigorous preaching. But he insists that the heart-moving and life-transforming material that a preacher wants to communicate must be presented in a plain form.

2. Shedd is using the term plainness to refer to *ease of understanding and comprehension*. A plain preacher is one who is easy to understand. No one will ever be an effective preacher if he can't be easily understood. People must be able to see clearly and immediately to the heart of what they are hearing. Power, Shedd says, is connected with contact - contact between the speaker's soul and that of his hearers. The most effective speakers are those whose ideas go straight to the minds and hearts of their hearers. "The thoughts which the religious teacher

¹ Based on an address delivered at the 1996 Banner of Truth Minister's Conference, Sydney, Australia.

² Shedd, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1965 reprint, p. 48

³ *Ibid*, p. 45

presents to the common mind," he writes, "should go straight to the understanding. Everything that covers up and envelops the truth should be stripped off from it, so that the bare reality may be seen. There is prodigious power in this plainness of presentation. It is the power of actual contact. A plain writer or speaker makes the truth and the mind impinge on one another. 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."⁴ Our preaching, in other words, should have a quality of transparency about it. The light that has flooded our own minds and hearts ought to stream from us without diffraction, reflection, or distortion into the minds of our hearers. And to do that, we need to be plain.

B. Four things are essential to being a plain preacher.

1. ***Strong thinking.*** We must work with our ideas until they are perfectly clear to us. We shall never be plain and powerful speakers if our thoughts are vague. We cannot rest with fuzzy notions or mystical intuitions. Our ideas must be brought to the point where they can be stated as clear propositions. We must force ourselves to analyze and reason and define and describe until the shimmering mirage of an intuition is given the form of a concrete idea. Until we do so, our ideas will remain indistinct in their form, poorly distinguished from others, and be unfit for communicating with effect. "It is not enough that thoughts be seen through a clear medium; they must be seen in a distinct shape... A style may be as transparent as water, and yet the thoughts be destitute of boldness and individuality. Such a style cannot be charged with obscurity, and yet, it does not set truth before the mind of the reader or hearer in a striking and impressive manner."⁵

2. ***Clear language.*** Our ideas can be distinct from each other, substantial and worthwhile in their content, and yet not be expressed clearly. Clear expression demands that we work hard at using the best words in the best way to convey our meaning in the best manner. No one should ever have to ask of a preacher, "What did he mean?" The moment a shadow of obscurity is cast over our thoughts they will have lost their power to affect people. If the first step to achieving plainness is the discipline of hammering our ideas into distinct form, the second is expressing them in clear language.

3. ***Simple form.*** Our thoughts may be distinct and expressed in the most understandable language, yet not be simple. They may be too complex for people to absorb easily. Our sentences may be too long and our reasoning too tight. Our words may be too abstract and even too technical. Simple speech is familiar speech. It shies away from abstractions that don't touch base with what people can see and feel and taste. An old Arabian proverb says that the best speakers are those who turn people's ears into eyes. Simple speech is commonly visual speech – speech loaded with everyday objects that people can immediately relate to. It requires savage discipline and effort to make the obscure simple. Few of us appreciate how often we lapse into abstract speaking and writing.

4. ***A humble heart.*** It takes humility to be a simple speaker. Plain preaching is not showy preaching. It demands that we cast off everything that aims at impressing. It takes "a very strong will, a very high character" Shedd claims, to resist the temptation to impress our hearers with our depth of learning or skill of language. "Now there is nothing," he says, "that will prevent a preacher from falling into this false manner, but a determination to be plain, - a determination, whether he does anything else or not, to bring the truth into contact with the human understanding."⁶ It will be our truest brilliance to make the obscure and complex plain. Few things are more humbling than to toil for hours to make a difficult passage clear, only to have a hearer say how simple and obvious everything was anyway. That kind of comment, while a compliment to our effort, is a dagger to our pride.

Could part of the reason for the absence of power in the modern pulpit be our failure to preach plainly? Are we being understood? Are our words winging their way directly to the minds and hearts of people, or falling short of their mark because they can't be understood? Has laziness kept us from

⁴ Shedd, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, p. 55

⁵ Ibid, p. 53

⁶ Ibid, pp. 58,59

working as hard as we need to work in order to be clear and simple and distinct? Or has pride kept us from being as plain as we need to be? In Shedd's words, we need to *determine* to be plain, to be so intelligible that our hearers cannot fail to understand us.

II. FORCE

A. A second quality of form or style that Shedd commends is force.

1. He defines this term as it relates to preaching style as *the quality of penetration*. Some people, he says, speak with a power that pricks. Their words penetrate beyond the mind to the depths of the soul. "The principal quality in a forcible style," he writes, "and that which first strikes our attention, is penetration. While listening to a speaker of whom this property is a characteristic, our minds seem to be pricked as with needles, and pierced as with javelins. His thought cuts through the more dull and apathetic parts into the quick, and produce a keen sensation. Force is electrical; it permeates and thrills."⁷

2. *Force needs to be distinguished from passion*. True force will always be accompanied by passion. One cannot contemplate profound ideas without feeling and expressing them deeply. But it is possible to have deep feeling without true force. A preacher may rouse himself to a state of feeling and passion by sheer will, imagination, or rhetorical facade. He may master the art of varying intonation and pace, of pitch and action to such a degree that he can hold vast audiences captive. But while the master of the moment as it were, his performances will leave little lasting impact. Indeed, the fluster of his acting may eventually wear him out. "The created mind" Shedd says, "may endeavour to make up for [its] want of inward power by a stormy and passionate energy; but... sooner or later the overtaken, because unassisted, intellect gives out...."⁸ Truly forceful speaking is not necessarily the same as highly passionate speaking.

3. Shedd contends that there are *distinctive features of forceful speaking that can be identified and explained*. Foremost among them is *the innate power that lies in the ideas* we are conveying. Force, he insists, does not lie in the sheer energy of the human mind, or in the intensity with which we may express ourselves. At heart, it springs from the power of ideas and principles themselves. Some ideas are inherently more weighty and forceful than others. For example, to remark, "the sky outside is blue," doesn't strike with much force. It may be a fact, but it's not a very penetrating fact simply because, in most circumstances anyway, it is a commonplace fact. On the other hand, the statement, "the Lord Jesus will return at the end of the age with hosts of glorious angels," does arrest our attention. It does so, not because it is more true than the earlier statement about the colour of the sky, but because it is more substantial, and is innately more forceful as a result. Ideas penetrate when they have substance. Let a preacher saturate his mind with the peerless truths of Scripture, and let his own spirit imbibe their power, and he cannot but be a forceful man.

B. Ideas become weighty and penetrative through contemplation

1. It is at this point that *I personally have received the greatest help from Shedd*. Were you to look at pages 63-65 in my copy of *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, you would find them disfigured by marking to the point of being almost illegible. For many years I grappled with the issue of how to preach effectively; how to find those ideas and insights that would thrill and nourish my hearers. Often, I admit, I lapsed into what was little more than sterile brooding, a fault to which some of us are more inclined by temperament than others. In Shedd I found the antidote. Subjective processes - the musing, reflective, brooding habits that the mind can so easily lapse into - spell its ruin. The mind was made to look outward, not inward. It is by steadily contemplating truths outside itself that the mind gains vigour, energy and strength. "Insulation, isolation and subjective processes" can lead to nothing but the destruction of all energy and vitality in your mind, Shedd contends. On the other hand, "communion with real and solid verities promotes both."⁹ "The oratorical power of the preacher," he claims, "depends upon his reciprocity; upon his contemplation of those ideas and

⁷ Ibid, p. 72

⁸ Ibid, p. 75

⁹ Ibid, p. 65

doctrines which the Supreme Mind has communicated to the created and dependent spirit; upon his clearly beholding them, and receiving through his intuition a fund of knowledge and force of which he is naturally destitute." ¹⁰

2. ***In simple terms***, what Shedd is saying is this: If you would be a forceful preacher, then you must have forceful ideas to convey. And there is only one place to find such ideas. You do not find them by looking within. You find them by gazing upon the revelation that God has given us. Absorb it into your being, and you will be necessarily a forceful preacher.

III. BEAUTY

A. The third and final property of style, or form that Shedd discusses is beauty.

1. By the term 'beauty', Shedd is ***not alluding to that which is ornate or decorative***. Ornament and decoration, for their own sake, have no place in preaching. When present in sermons, they draw attention to the speaker rather than to what he is saying. "Beautiful" sermons in this sense are a betrayal of true preaching.

2. He uses the term to describe the ***properties of completeness, symmetry, and order*** in preaching. Shedd defines beauty in this way: "The essential principle of beauty is that by which all the manifoldness and variety in an object is moulded into unit and simplicity...[Beauty] has a spontaneous origin. It springs into existence whenever the mind has succeeded in imparting the properties of unity and simplicity to a multitude of particulars which, taken by themselves, are destitute of these properties."¹¹ Unity and simplicity, then, are the basic characteristics of beauty in anything. A beautiful painting, for example, is one that has every component in proper proportion, place and balance, every colour and tone fitly blended together. The impact of the whole is that of perfection and completeness. A jarring piece of art, on the other hand, is marked by discord and impropriety in every detail. Perspective is distorted, colour is misplaced and mismatched, and composition is disorientated. Its ugliness relates not to the quality of the paint, or the artist's technique, but to the absence of order and balance. The same, Shedd, argues, is true of sermons. A beautiful sermon is one with every particular in proper place and proportion, and in which all is blended together in a single whole. It is not deformed by improper emphasis, or by incompleteness or unrelatedness. Everything that belongs together is together and all is in its proper place.

3. Beauty of this kind is ***the overall effect of other properties rather than a separate entity in itself***. It is something spontaneous; something that arises from within, and not something washed on from outside. "It is too much the habit to regard beauty as mere ornamentation, as something that is added to other properties, instead of growing out of them. Hence it is too much the habit to cultivate the beautiful in isolation, - to set it up before the mind as an independent quality, and to make every other quality subservient to it.... Thus, it appears that true beauty is not an ornament washed on from without, but an efflux from within."¹² No one can quarrel with this concept of beauty. It reflects our innate appreciation of order in our Father's beautiful, though sin-marred world.

B. But how is it to be achieved?

1. Beauty, Shedd says, is ***a product of structural form***. A sermon needs unity and order and completeness in its inner structure to possess this quality. Foremost among these requirements in Shedd's mind, is ***unity of thought and purpose***. "The sermon," he says, "must preserve an oratorical character. It should never allow either the philosophical or the poetical element to predominate over the rhetorical. The sermon should be eloquence, and not poetry or philosophy. It should be a discourse that exhibits singleness of aim, and a converging progress towards an outward practical end."¹³

2. ***Not all modern preachers would agree*** with Shedd at this point. Some protest that the pursuit of unity can distort the natural diversity of a passage of Scripture. The expository

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 67

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 76, 79

¹² Ibid, pp. 79, 82

¹³ Ibid, p. 128

methods of our day tend to reflect a closer adherence to the structure of the text itself than the rounded symmetry of a classical oration. They tend to be more exegetical than oratorical.

3. *The point that Shedd makes is still valid.* Preaching must be marked by unity if it is to be effective. A series of poorly related comments taxes concentration and memory by its many diverse and scarcely related thoughts. Rather than containing a succession of ideas that build upon and reinforce each other, sermons can become an array of poorly-related thoughts that compete with each other for retention and application. Instead of encountering a single train of ideas that compels them to respond to a particular truth, listeners are often faced with a number of scarcely related applicatory comments. Instead of being carried on a journey of discovery by the exposition to a point of climax and response, they are left to digest a barrage of unconnected truths. Instead of being entranced, they are confused and burdened. If the properties of converged focus, movement and climax are missing from our preaching need we be surprised that it fails to make much impression? Men and women are often failing to respond to what we preach because they have not felt the weight of it. They will not respond if we merely scatter our bread aimlessly over the flock. It requires clear aim, relentless pursuit, and searching appeal to achieve that end. Listen to what Shedd says: [A sermon should be] "A rounded and symmetrical discourse, pervaded by one idea, breathing but one spirit, rushing forward with a uniformly accelerating motion, and ending with an overpowering impression and influence upon the will."¹⁴ Again he writes, "... Sermons are more defective in respect to unity of structure, and a constant progress towards a single end, than in any other respect," says Shedd. "But these are strictly oratorical qualities, and can be secured only by attending to the nature and laws of eloquence, - to the rhetorical, as distinguished from the philosophical presentation of truth."¹⁵ Perhaps the lack of power in our preaching is partly a result of failure at this point. Powerful preachers will never be content to unload a mass of unsorted ideas upon their hearers. They will not spare effort to arrange them in the best way. In other words, they will strive for beauty as well as substance in their messages.

CONCLUSION

I had found Shedd an unfailing source of inspiration and help as I have read and re-read his thoughts on preaching over the years. I cannot escape the conclusion that the ideals he expounds, (by no means unique to him, I might add), lie at the foundation of powerful preaching. The contributions of modern writers on preaching are not to be dismissed. But at the same time, these often don't grapple with first principles in the way older writers did. They provide us with helpful techniques and approaches, but they don't always school us in the fundamentals that the old giants of preaching mastered so well. Just as Isaac reopened the wells Abraham's servants had dug, we too need to re-explore the homiletical emphases of our fathers. And it is my prayer that as we do, heavenly power will begin to stream through us bringing with it unprecedented blessing to our needy generation.

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¹⁴ Ibid, p. 130

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 129