Preaching With Power
Wisdom From The 19th Century For Preachers Today

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“The eternal salvation of the human soul, through the presentation of divine truth, is the end of preaching. The created mind is never employed so loftily and so worthily, as when it is bending all its powers, and co-working with God himself, to the attainment of this great purpose...”

“The sermon 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.”

“The sermon is designed to produce an effect upon human character; and this not upon its mere superficies, but its inmost principles... It aims at the whole nature of man... at the formation of an entire character.”

W.G.T. Shedd
Powerful preaching has always fascinated me. Even as a young boy I was captivated by it. I can recall pleading to be allowed to accompany my father to an evening service when I was still very young, just to hear a particularly eloquent visiting preacher for a second time. That was over forty years ago. Grand truths delivered with red-hot passion gripped me then, and they still do today.

Yet, unless I am mistaken, there is little truly powerful preaching today – at least in my own country. In fact, preaching is in decline as a phenomenon. The clamour of a “visual” generation for something more relevant has seen the traditional sermon all but replaced by drama, dance and film in many Christian worship services. And sadly, what preaching does remain is often anecdote-ridden and man-centred.

To be fair, there is a section of the church that still has a high view of preaching. In recent years there has been a gratifying rediscovery throughout the evangelical church of the importance of exegetical or expository preaching. Yet, where this is practiced, there is often still something missing. Expository preaching is often “heavy” and appeals only to the mind. It seldom grips and inspires. There is little evidence of people being challenged, stirred and awakened under it, and still less of people being dramatically converted to faith in Christ.

In grappling with this problem, I have been led time and again back to the writings of a few favourite 19th century preachers. These men have never failed to inspire me. There is a force about what they say on the subject of preaching that stirs me deeply. They had something we seem to lack today.

I think I have discovered what that missing factor is. 19th century preachers appreciated the rhetorical factor in preaching more than we do today. They did not see it as the first or most important thing in powerful preaching – not at all. With them, the content of the message was always the first thing, as it is in all good preaching. Furthermore, they believed that the power of the Holy Spirit was always the vital thing in effective preaching. But nevertheless, they recognized that the form of the message was important too. And in this regard, they drew on their classical education and applied the disciplines of rhetoric and logic to preaching. They preached with the deliberate goal of persuading their hearers to do something, and used words in the very best way they could to achieve their end. That, to them, was what rhetoric was about.

It is this aspect of their preaching – their appreciation of rhetoric – that has particularly interested me. Modern scholarship provides us with a wealth of fresh resources for exegesis, biblical studies and theology. But it doesn’t help us greatly in knowing how to communicate the information it supplies in a powerful way. We need to go back to the preachers of an earlier day to learn how to do that. In them we discover a quality of knowledge and wisdom that’s missing today.

In 1996 I had opportunity to distill some of that wisdom when I was asked to speak at a Banner of Truth Conference in Sydney, Australia. I chose on that occasion to extract some of the insights of W.G.T. Shedd on powerful preaching. Working with Shedd kindled a desire to extend this study to embrace two of his contemporaries – J.W. Alexander and R.L. Dabney.
An invitation to present a special elective on preaching at Birmingham Theological Seminary in Birmingham, Alabama in January 2002 provided occasion for the extra research and writing. The notes that follow have been prepared as a basis for those lectures. They have also been prepared as the groundwork for a more detailed study of the use of rhetoric in 19th century preaching.

These notes, then, gather the insights of three important 19th century preachers and organize them in a way that will make them more accessible to preachers today. This is not an exegetical or biblical study, but a distillation of the practical wisdom of men who were greatly used by God in their day. It is made available to all who have an interest in seeing the emergence of a new generation of men who proclaim the gospel “not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5).

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INTRODUCTION

I. Objectives
1. This study has been born out of a passion for the recovery of powerful preaching in the 21st century. It is based on the belief that preaching is in a state of decline – at least in the Western world; that it is the great means God uses to perform his work in the world; and that a recovery of powerful preaching will bring great blessing to the church.

2. By powerful preaching is meant preaching that makes deep and lasting impressions upon people. It is preaching that the Holy Spirit uses to bring sinners to conviction and conversion, and believers to higher levels of holiness. It does more than inform; it transforms.

3. It is acknowledged at the outset that the power that makes preaching effective is beyond immediate human control. The Holy Spirit is the active agent in spiritual transformation, and true effect in preaching is a “demonstration of the Spirit’s power.”1 Characteristically, that power is demonstrated through human weakness rather than sufficiency.2

4. The sovereignty of the Spirit in this matter does not relieve preachers of personal responsibility. They are to “do their best” to present themselves to God as those who are approved, workmen who do not need to be ashamed, correctly handling the word of truth.3 This study, in effect, is an attempt to discover how preachers can “do their best” to become effective instruments of the Spirit in the ministry of his Word.

II. Approach
1. This is a historical rather than exegetical study. It taps into the wisdom of an earlier generation of preachers – men who were known as powerful preachers and who lived in days when preaching held a higher place in the church than it does today. It gathers and arranges their insights in a way that makes them readily accessible for preachers today.

2. The focus throughout is on factors that contribute to impact in preaching. There is no attempt to explore the mechanics of sermon preparation – at least, not in a structured and comprehensive way. Nor is there any attempt to analyze the sources exhaustively. Impact, or power in preaching, is the single point of interest, and only those factors contributing more or less directly to it are examined.

3. It relies heavily on the actual words of the primary sources. In fact, it does little more than extract, arrange, and introduce helpful quotations. It lets the preachers consulted speak for themselves.

III. Sources
1. Three 19th century American Presbyterian preachers – James W. Alexander, Robert L. Dabney, and William G. T. Shedd - form the basis of this study. All were not only preachers but also highly regarded teachers of preachers.

- James Waddel Alexander (1804-1859) was the eldest son of Archibald Alexander, the first professor of Princeton Theological Seminary. An outstanding scholar, and for a time a seminary professor himself, J.W. Alexander was nevertheless preeminently a preacher. His latter years were spent in influential pastorates in New York, the last of which was at the centre of a great movement of revival in 1857. His Thoughts on Preaching is a collection of what he describes as “homiletical paragraphs,” letters to students, and articles on preaching.

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1 1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Thess. 1:5
2 1 Cor. 1:17; 2:4,5; 2 Cor. 1:9; 12:9
3 2 Tim. 1:15
• **Robert Lewis Dabney** (1820-1898) was a giant among theologians, writers, preachers and teachers in the 19th century. Like Alexander, he was a native of Virginia. In 1853, after six years in the pastoral ministry, he was called to serve as Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Polity at Union Theological Seminary. The remainder of his life, apart from an interlude during the Civil War when he served as chaplain and Chief of Staff to General T.J. (Stonewall) Jackson, was spent teaching various branches of theology and moral philosophy at both Union Seminary and the University of Texas. His *Sacred Rhetoric*, which first appeared in 1870, is the published form of his lectures on preaching delivered to students at Union Theological Seminary.

• **William Greenough Thayer Shedd** (1820-1894) was born in Massachusetts to parents deeply appreciative of their New England Puritan heritage. After two short pastorates he became professor first of Biblical Literature, and then of Systematic Theology, at Union Theological Seminary in New York. His *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology* is a comprehensive presentation of the main features that should characterize powerful preaching and effective pastoral care.

2. The three men reflect an earlier educational heritage that grappled with principles and disciplines – especially in areas of logic and rhetoric – that have been largely abandoned today. They are characterized by distinct personal strengths. *Alexander* had a love for literature and writing, and this literary bent is reflected in his counsel to ministers young and old. *Dabney* was marked by immense energy and strength of mind, and his work bears the stamp of that in its clarity, orderliness and completeness. *Shedd’s* early philosophical training remained a dominating influence in his thinking and teaching throughout life, and this shows itself in his approach to preaching.

3. They were united in their high view of preaching. They believed that preaching shaped culture and served as an index of the health of the church. They regarded it as a noble task, a difficult task, a task demanding the very highest effort and commitment and the best available training. In particular, they viewed it as a task concerned with the

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4 Dabney, for example, refers to his indebtedness to men like Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, Plato, Quintilian, Vinet and Fenelon – authors most modern students know little or nothing of: See R.L. Dabney on Preaching, Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric, (hereafter, Lectures), pp. 5, 6

5 Shedd has this memorable comment to make on the task of the preacher: "The eternal salvation of the human soul, through the presentation of divine truth, is the end of preaching. The created mind is never employed so loftily and so worthily, as when it is bending all its powers, and co-working with God himself, to the attainment of this great purpose.... " Homiletics and Pastoral Theology (first published 1867, republished in 1965, London, Banner of Truth Trust; hereafter, Homiletics), p. 37, 41

6 Shedd claims that preaching “… has given origin to all that is best in human civilization and hopeful in human destiny.” Homiletics, p. 1. Alexander similarly believed in the unrivalled power of preaching to influence the minds of the masses: “The pulpit will still remain the grand means of effecting the mass of men. It is God’s own means, and he will honour it. The work done by Wesley and by Whitefield, and by Christmas Evans in Wales, could not have been accomplished by any other agency - the press, for instance. In every age, great reformers have been great preachers.” Alexander, Thoughts on Preaching (First published 1864, First Banner of Truth Reprint 1975 – hereafter, Thoughts), p. 10

7 “… the state of the pulpit,” writes Dabney, “may always be taken as an index of that of the church. Whenever the pulpit is evangelical, the piety of the people is in some degree healthy; a perversion of the pulpit is surely followed by spiritual apostasy in the Church.” Lectures, p. 27.

8 Regarding the need to prepare for such a work, Shedd writes, “To assert that the attempt can be a successful one without study and training upon the part of the preacher, is to deal differently with the department of Sacred Rhetoric, from what we do with other departments of intellectual effort. It is to treat the higher and eternal interests of men with more thoughtlessness and indifference than we do their lower and secular interests. The union of such sterling, and yet opposite, qualities as thoughtfulness and energy, is the fruit of no superficial education, the results of no mere desultory efforts. The sacred orator needs not only a general culture, but a special culture in his own art.” ibid. pp. 42, 45. Dabney writes, “Let me impress you with the high responsibility
transformation of the human heart. Preaching, they held, was essentially practical in its intent. It aimed at persuading people to faith and godliness.

4. Finally, they believed that the Holy Spirit used means in the work of conversion and sanctification. They held it as fundamental that the first and essential cause of all spiritual influence was God himself working immediately upon the hearts of men through the Holy Spirit. However, they believed equally that in calling men to co-labour with him, the Lord used human personality and means to achieve his purposes. What is more, they believed that some means were better adapted to the Spirit’s work than others. While he could use the humblest and most ill-suited of instruments to achieve his work, usually he made use of those best adapted to his purposes. This was the basis of their insistence that preachers need to equip themselves well for their task, and to work faithfully at it.

IV. Plan
1. Impact in preaching, as Shedd, Dabney and Alexander viewed it, is related to three things:
   - the man behind the message. While a preacher doesn’t preach himself or his own experience, his character nevertheless does have a great influence on his ministry. Powerful preaching is the outflow of a godly life.
   - the content of the message. The Scriptures are the only legitimate source of ideas in preaching. Powerful preaching is preaching that confines itself to making the message of the Bible clear and relating it to the lives of people.
• **the form of the message.** Form, while secondary to content, is nevertheless important in preaching, especially preaching aimed at persuading and influencing people.

2. This study explores these three areas in the following way:
   • the first section, entitled “The Man Behind Powerful Preaching”, considers the priority, essential qualities, and development of the preacher’s character.
   • the second, called “The Message of Powerful Preaching”, examines the connection between exegesis and eloquence, and then the scope, emphases and application of powerful preaching.
   • the third, “The Manner of Powerful Preaching”, includes a discussion of rhetoric and preaching along with the qualities and the act of powerful preaching.

3. There has been no attempt to suggest specific applications of the insights of Shedd, Alexander and Dabney to preaching today. The extracts presented speak clearly for themselves.

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PART 1: THE MAN BEHIND POWERFUL PREACHING

I. THE PRIORITY OF THE PREACHER’S CHARACTER
A. The Need For “Eminent Spirituality”

1. Shedd, Dabney and Alexander all agree that the first requirement for effective preaching is a godly life. The character of the man does matter. There is such a thing as being a vessel “meet for the Master’s use.” Preachers are God’s fellow-workers, and can only function as such as they share God’s mind and heart in their work.

2. As God’s ambassadors, preachers need to be men of “eminent spirituality.” “The calling and profession of the clergyman,” writes Shed, “demand eminent spirituality. An ordinary excellence is not sufficient.” Dabney adds, “… the prime qualification of the sacred orator is sincere, eminent piety… only an eminent Christian can be an eminent preacher of the gospel.”

B. Its Value

1. One reason for this is that the preacher himself needs to be in harmony with his message. His life needs to match up to what he teaches, and he needs to have a vital experience of the spiritual truths he proclaims. Alexander has the following helpful insight on this latter point:

   “The question has been much discussed, whether a minister should ever preach beyond his own experience. In one sense, unquestionably, he should. He is commissioned to preach, not himself, or his experience, but Christ Jesus, the Lord, and his salvation; he is a messenger, and his message is laid before him in the Scriptures; it is at his peril, that he suppresses aught, whether he has experienced it or not… Yet every preacher of the gospel should earnestly strive to attain the experience of the truths which he communicates, and to have every doctrine which he utters turned into vital exercises of his heart: so that when he stands up to speak in the name of God, there may be that indescribable freshness and penetrativeness, which arise from individual and present interest in what is declared.”

2. Furthermore, a preacher’s power to persuade others depends largely on the strength of his personal feelings and convictions. Only people in earnest about what they have to say – in other words, people who have been themselves deeply impressed by their message - are likely to interest others in it. Shed writes:

   “[A preacher] 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.”

Dabney adds,

   “… in order to be capable of any power of persuasion, you must be men of ardent and genuine religious affections. You must be men of faith and prayer; you must live near the

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1 2 Tim. 2:21 (AV)
2 1 Thess. 3:2
3 Homiletics, p. 282
4 Lectures, pp. 40, 117
5 Thoughts, p. 108
6 Homiletics, pp. 199, 114
cross and feel the ‘powers of the world to come.’ We thus learn the great truth that it is
divine grace which makes the true minister.”

3. But perhaps more importantly, a preacher needs to be a man with a deep passion for the
spiritual welfare of others – a passion that can only be nurtured through intense
spirituality. He must see the peril of sinners and feel deeply for them in their need. And he
must long to see fellow-Christians entering more fully into the life they have in Christ.
The salvation and sanctification of others must be his constant heart burden. But this will
only be true if the preacher himself is a man who daily experiences the grace of God in
Christ.

“Let the preacher, then, cultivate that faith which makes the ruin and rescue of sinners
dread realities to him; let him share the constraining love of Christ in its power; let him
feel a consuming zeal to save souls. Then he will not go into the pulpit aimless, except
with the grovelling object of satisfying decency and filled the allotted hour with the
expected pious talk. He will have a definite and absorbing purpose, a message to deliver,
and a result to effect, which he cannot leave unaccomplished without grief.”

“The pastor should be recognized as one who affectionately hungers for the spiritual good
of his charge. His admonitions should be received by them as the outpourings of a
compassion which cannot be restrained. He sees the worth and danger of their souls in the
light of eternity, and his eloquence is inflamed from the very altar of God.”

Alexander attributes the lack of powerful preaching in his day to the absence of this kind
of earnestness. The reason for its scarcity, he claimed, was the lack of piety in pastors.

“The great reason we have so little good preaching is that we have so little piety. To be
eloquent, one must be in earnest; he must not only act as though he were in earnest, or try
to be in earnest, but be in earnest or he cannot be effective... We have loud and
vehement, we have smooth and graceful, we have splendid and elaborate preaching, but
very little that is earnest. One man who so feels for the souls of his hearers that he is
ready to weep over them - will assuredly make himself felt... We must therefore aim at
high degrees of warmth in our religious exercises, if we would produce an impression
upon the public mind.”

Dabney concurs, saying

“The true cause of the vapid and aimless discourses, which are heard from so many
pulpits, is that the preachers are not under the active influence of faith and love for
souls.”

4. Another reason the preacher’s character is so important is its role in securing the
confidence of his listeners. According to Dabney – and in fact, according to Aristotle, the
father of rhetoric – an audience looks for three qualities in a trustworthy speaker. The first
is intellectual competence – so they can be sure that what they are being told has
substance and foundation: the second is integrity – so they can actually trust the motives
and ends of the speaker in using the information he conveys; and thirdly, genuine affection
– so they can be persuaded of his interest in their well-being above his own. “He who has
secured the reputation of these three qualities,” writes Dabney, “has the ear of the
people’: they are prepared to hear him favourably before they know what he will say.”

5. Finally, a preacher’s character is important because it can undo the good effects of his
preaching. His life during the week can wreck the impact of his Sunday sermons. For,
according to Dabney, “the preacher’s character speaks more loudly than his tongue... If a solemn sermon be followed by an idle, worldly week, the people will feel that the apparent earnestness of the preacher is professional...” Elsewhere he writes, “Without a sacred weight of character, the most splendid rhetoric will win only short-lived applause; with it, the plainest scriptural instructions are eloquent to win souls. Eloquence may dazzle and please; holiness of life convinces.”

II. ESSENTIALS IN A PREACHER’S CHARACTER

A. Dedication

1. Alexander was particularly concerned that preachers should be dedicated to their calling. He recognized the duty of every Christian to devote all their powers to God, and in that respect didn’t make any distinction between preachers and the common mass of men. But at the same time, the demands and the incomparable aims of preaching made it doubly important that preachers be men of “one thing.” The most useful preachers, he said, were always men who lived “in and for their spiritual work.” Those who spread themselves over many fields invariably failed to reach the heights they might have done had they confined themselves to their main work.

“It is a source of deep regret to many,” he wrote on one occasion, “in review of life, that they have scattered themselves over too many fields; let me entreat of you to spend your strength on one.”

2. Alexander had good reason for this concern. He saw many young men entering the ministry yet failing to make an impact. The reason for this, he believed, lay in their lack of whole-heartedness. They were allowing themselves to be distracted by trifles – such things as gaining social recognition, building their libraries, and carving out a literary reputation. In doing so they were on a road to ruin. “The young minister,” he said, “who is evidently concentrating, his chief thoughts on something other than his ministry, will be a drone, if not a Demas.”

3. One way in which this lack of dedication showed itself was the absence of spiritual fire or passion in many young preachers. They might have been learned and elegant, but they lacked spiritual power. Distracted by literature and social interests during the week, it was little wonder they found themselves without passion when it came time to preach.

“No wonder we preach so coldly on the Sabbath,” he wrote, “when we are so little moved on weekdays about what we preach... There is indeed a sort of pulpit fire which is rhetorical – it proceeds from no warmth within, and diffuses no warmth without; the less of it the better. But genuine ardor must arise from the habitual thought and temper of the life. He with whom the ministry is a secondary thing, may be a correct, a learned, an elegant, even an oratorical, but will never be a powerful preacher.”

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13 ibid. pp. 261, 267
14 ibid. p. 263
15 The Christian, and especially the minister, is “bound to devote all his powers to the glory of God, in the good of mankind... his is a work which requires great diligence and earnestness and may well occupy the whole man all his life... Man may be called to labour in different spheres, but always with the same devotion and singleness of purpose.” Thoughts, p. 38
16 ibid. p. 103
17 ibid. p. 103
18 “The complaint is becoming common, respecting young men entering the ministry, in every part of the Church, that many of them lack that devotion to their work, which was frequently manifested twenty or thirty years ago.” ibid. p. 101
19 ibid. p. 103
20 “Here and there are young ministers, visiting among vacancies, and ready to be employed in any promising place, who are often well educated persons, of good manners, and irreproachable character: but what a want of fire. There can be no remedy for this evil, but a spiritual one...” ibid. p. 101
21 ibid. p. 104
4. Blame for this, Alexander said, could not be laid at the door of ministerial training or education. Ultimately, he believed, it reflected a lack of spiritual zeal.

“It is vain to attribute the alleged change to any particular mode of education. In this there has been no such alteration as will account for the loss of zeal. The cause must be sought in something more widely operative... Nor need we go farther for an explanation, than to the almost universal declension of vital piety in our Churches, which will abide under every form of training, until the Spirit be poured out from on high.”

5. His call, then, was for preachers to have a high view of their work, and to give themselves wholly to it. They had no right to expect usefulness from anything less.

“My dear young friend, if there is anything you would rather be than a preacher of the gospel; if you regard it as a ladder to something else; if you do not consider all your powers as too little for the work; be assured you have no right to hope for any usefulness or even eminence. To declare God's truth so as to save souls, is a business which angels might covet: acquire the habit of regarding your work in this light.”

B. Spirituality

1. Modern theologians are careful to define spirituality in a way that avoids any suggestion of dualism – a false distinction between spirit and matter. 19th century theologians were aware of this danger too but didn’t hesitate to speak of the need for spiritual-mindedness, or absorption with the invisible realm of the Spirit. Shedd, for example, speaks of spiritual-mindedness as “that solemn and serious mental frame which is naturally and constantly occupied with eternal realities.” Some Christians, he writes,

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

2. According to Shedd, it is a great advantage – if not a necessity – for a preacher to be a spiritually-minded man. If he is always thinking about spiritual realities he will be always ready to speak to people with freedom and confidence. More than that, when he does speak, he will do so with earnestness and sincerity, as one to whom eternal concerns are both real and important.

“He speaks seriously because he understands the nature of his subject. He speaks clearly and distinctly, because this spiritual-mindedness makes him substantially an eye-witness of eternal realities. He speaks convincingly because he knows what he says, and whereof he affirms.... Dwelling among the things that are unseen and eternal, such an orator, when he comes forth to address volatile and worldly men, will speak with a depth and seriousness of view, and an energy and pungency of statement, that will leave them thoughtful and anxious. Without this abiding sense of the reality and awfulness of eternal things, though the preacher may send people away entertained and dazzled, he cannot

22 Thoughts, p. 102
23 ibid. p. 105. This whole-heartedness, according to Shedd, was to show itself in the high ideals preachers established for their sermons. 
24 Homiletics, p. 108
25 loc. cit.
send them away thinking upon themselves and upon their prospects for eternity. And of what worth is a sermon that does not do that?”

3. Shedd believed that it was precisely at this point that so much preaching failed. Most sermons, he claimed, contain enough information. What they lack is the quality of serious earnestness that comes, above all, from mental and spiritual absorption in heavenly things.

“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 speakers 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.”

4. Alexander was also aware of this need. He connected it with devotion to the work of the ministry. A minister would be spiritually-minded in the measure that he was swallowed up with his work. “The more you are swallowed up in the vastness of your work,” he wrote, “the more you will be cultivating spiritual-mindedness.” Ministers, he believed, needed to be always thinking about the great end of their preaching and visiting – namely, the glory of Christ, the building up of his kingdom, and the salvation of souls.

“This should be always in your mind,” he once said. “When you go to bed, and when you are awake, it should be as a minister of Christ; not, surely, in the way of professional assumption, but with a profound sense of your dedication to a momentous work, for which one lifetime seems too short.”

C. Conviction

1. The powerful preachers of the 19th century were men of distinct and deep spiritual convictions. Their study didn’t just make them knowledgeable, it made them decided – men of definite moral, spiritual and theological beliefs. It was this strength of conviction that gave their messages such force.

“The clergyman” writes Shedd, “.... ought to be a man of decision. But this implies that his own mind is settled and established. There is nothing which weakens a leading man – that is, a man who by his position ought to lead – like wavering and indecision. Doubt and uncertainty are a tacit acknowledgement of unfitness to guide and preside. The clergyman must therefore be positive in his theological opinions. In as much as he is called to the work of indoctrination, he must be clear in his own mind. It is his vocation to shape the religious views of an entire community, and consequently his own views ought not only be correct, but firmly established.”

2. Such definite and positive theological views were, they believed, consistent with the character of Scripture as divine revelation. Scripture reveals but a single, non-contradictory system of truth from the mind of God. It was only proper, then, to their way of thinking, that preachers strive to attain clear and settled views of what that truth is.

“If the gospel were a merely human system, there would be ground for hesitation and doubt,” writes Shedd; “but since it is the revelation of an infallible Mind, what is left for

26 ibid. p.109
27 ibid. pp. 109-110
28 Thoughts, p. 107
29 ibid. p. 107
30 ibid. p. 330
31 “The Scriptures teach but one system of truth, though the ingenuity of the human intellect, under the actuation of particular biases, has succeeded in torturing a variety of systems out of it, by dislocating its parts instead of contemplating it as a whole.” This one evangelical system has been received by the Christian church in all ages; and if the clergyman feels the need of aids in getting at it, embedded as it is in the living, and therefore flexible substance of the Bible, let him study the creeds of the Christian Church.” ibid. p. 331
the Christian teacher but to reaffirm the Divine affirmation, with all the positiveness and
decision of the original communication itself?32

3. The way to gain such convictions is through diligent study. Certainty can only come
through patient and often painful effort. And it can only come as individual reflection is
strengthened and tested by the thinking of others – especially the thinking of the great
intellects of the church through the ages. In this regard, the creeds of the church are of
great help in forging definite doctrinal views.

“The Church, it is true, may be mistaken. It is not infallible. Creeds may be erroneous.
But after this concession has been made, it still remains true that the symbols of the
Christian Church do very clearly and fully display the opinions of the wisest and holiest
men, and the closest students of the Scriptures, for sixteen hundred years, in respect to
the actual contents of revelation. The clergyman who adopts the theology embodied in
them may be in an error; but if he is, he is in good company, and in a large company.”33

4. Preachers of decided and clear convictions, then, will invariably be men of a historic and
conservative spirit. They will be men ever ready to add to what has gone before, but at the
same time, they will be intensely wary of discarding the wisdom of the past.34

“Such a settled and constant mental firmness can proceed only from a historic spirit, or,
what is the same thing, out of a truly conservative temper. For conservatism, properly
defined, is the disposition to be historical, to attach oneself to those opinions which have
stood the test of time and experience, rather than to throw them away and invent or adopt
new ones… By the conservative, rather than the radical method, then, the clergyman
should render himself a decided man in his opinions and measures. His mind will then be
made up in the company with others, and he will not be compelled to stand alone as an
isolated atom, or, at most, in connection with a clique, or a clan, or a school, that has
nothing of historic permanence in it, and which must vanish away with the thousands of
similar associations, and never even be heard of in human history, because history
preserves only the tried and true for all time.”35

32 ibid. p. 331
33 ibid. p. 331-2. “Moreover,” the same writer adds, “that man must have a very exaggerated conception of his
own powers, who supposes that he will be likely to find the real teaching of the Scriptures, upon each and all of
the profound subjects respecting which they make revelations, by shutting himself out of all intercourse with
other human minds, who have gone through the same investigation. That the Bible must be studied by each one
for himself, and that each individual must, in the end, deliberately exercise his own judgment, and form his own
opinion as to the system of truth contained in Revelation, is the fundamental distinction between Protestantism
and Romanism. But this does not carry with it the still further and really antagonistic position, that the individual
should isolate himself from the wise and good men who have preceded him, or are his contemporaries, and do
his utmost to be uninfluenced by those who have studied the Scriptures for themselves, and have moreover found
themselves coming to the same common result with thousands and millions of their fellow-men.” loc. cit.
34 “A conservative theologian… is inclined to that system of doctrine which has been slowly forming from age to
age ever since the Christian mind began a scientific construction of revealed truth, and is unwilling to make any
radical changes to it. He concedes the possibility of a further expansion of existing materials, but is opposed to
the addition of new as well as the subtraction of old matter. He does not believe that there are any new dogmas
lying concealed in the Scriptures, having utterly escaped the notice of the theologians of the past. Christianity for
him is a completed religion. The number of fundamental truths necessary to human salvation is full. The Church
of the past needed the same truths in order to its sanctification and perfection that the Church of the present
needs, and it possessed each and every one of them. There can be no essential addition, therefore, to the body of
Christian doctrine until another and new revelation is bestowed form God.” ibid. pp. 335-6
35 ibid. pp. 335, 337. “The clergyman will be likely to be positive in his doctrinal opinions, in proportion as he
perceives that his own views of the meaning and contents of Scripture are corroborated by those of the wise and
good of all ages. If, on the contrary, he finds himself unable to agree with his predecessors and contemporaries in
the ministry, we do not see how he can be a decided man in the proper sense of this term. He may be a
presumptuous, self-conceited, arrogant man, setting up individual judgment in opposition to that of the great
majority of individual judgments. He may be a kind of private pope, first throwing himself out of the line of
historical Christianity and then calling upon the Church universal to unlearn all that it knows, and forget all that
it has learned, insisting that it bend the neck and bow the knee to the new infallibility that has appeared…” ibid.
p. 333
5. This certainty of conviction, however, needs to be tempered by wise judgment. While holding firmly to the fundamentals, and ever ready to defend these against error, the wise preacher will nevertheless know when it is vital to take such a stand and when not. “Judiciousness teaches when to modify and temper the resolute and settled determination of the soul. Some subjects are more important than others. Some opinions and measures are vital to the prosperity of religion, and others are not. The clergyman must be able to distinguish the fundamentals from the non-fundamentals, so that he may proceed accordingly. It is absurd to be equally decided upon all points. A conservatism that conserves everything with equal care, insisting that one thing is just as valuable as another, is blind, and therefore false.”

III. THE FORMATION OF A PREACHER’S CHARACTER

Shedd makes the point that a preacher’s calling not only requires eminent piety but also tends to produce it. The more contemplative activities of the study – the reading, careful analysis of the Scriptures, the thinking, writing and praying connected with sermon preparation - all encourage the formation of a spiritual state of mind and heart. Similarly, the more active aspects of his calling – the visiting, counselling, actual teaching and preaching, the leading, comforting – are also uniquely adapted to making him a spiritual man. “By his very position, the clergyman is greatly assisted in attaining to a superior grade of Christian character,” writes Shedd, “and if, therefore, he is a worldly and unspiritual man, he is deeply culpable.”

The following activities help develop a preacher’s character:

A. Prayer

1. Above all things, it is immediate communion with God in prayer that shapes a preacher’s character. “That which is the first maxim for any and every Christian in keeping the heart,” Shedd continues, “is also the first for the clergyman. He must maintain regular habits of communion with God, in prayer.” “Of all people on earth,” writes Alexander, “ministers most need the constant impressions derived from closet piety.”

2. The danger of neglecting prayer is very real for preachers - and the more so for those of an intellectual or studious bent. Their tendency is to substitute reading, thinking and study for actual communion with God – for presuming that a mind filled with the things of God can be a substitute for personal fellowship with God. But this is a mistake. “There can be no genuine religion without prayer.”

“In order to growth in religion,” Shedd insists, “it is not enough for him [the preacher] to meditate upon the divine character and religious doctrines; he must actually address God in supplication.” Elsewhere he puts it this way: “It is not enough to commune with the truth, for truth is impersonal. We must commune with the God of truth. It is not enough to study and ponder the contents of religious books, or even the Bible itself. We must actually address the Author of the Bible, in entreaties and petitions.”

36 ibid. pp. 337-8. “When a fundamental truth is menaced, or a fundamentally wrong measure is proposed, the clergyman must be immoveable. In the phrase of Ignatius, he should ‘stand like an anvil’… But when the matter in controversy is not of this vital nature, even though it have great importance, judiciousness in the clergy would dictate more or less yielding.” ibid. p. 338
37 ibid. p. 283
38 ibid. p. 283
39 ibid. p. 289
40 Luther, for example, was marked by the frequency and urgency of his petitions. “The peculiar vigor and vitality of Luther’s religion should be traced not solely to his reception of a doctrine, even so vital a doctrine as justification by faith, but to direct intercourse with God.” ibid. p. 293
41 ibid. p. 291
42 ibid. pp. 289-90
43 ibid. p. 291
3. While stressing the importance of prayer, Shedd and his contemporaries didn’t prescribe recipes for devotional activities. “How often you shall fast or sing or pray, must be left to be settled between God and your conscience,” says Alexander. “Only, fix it in mind and heart the necessity of much devotion.” Shedd adds this:

“… the degree of religion will depend upon the depth and heartiness of prayer. It does not depend so much upon the length, as the intensity of the mental activity. A few moments of real, absorbing address to God will accomplish more for the Christian in the way of arming him with spiritual power, than days or years of reflection without it.”

4. Frequency and intensity in prayer, then, are of more importance than duration as such. In this regard, Shedd and Alexander saw special value in what they called ejaculatory prayer – spontaneous petition arising out of the pressing circumstances or immediate activities of daily life. A preacher’s life, they held, should be marked both by regular times of prayer and spontaneous, circumstantial petitions throughout the day.

“The most holy and spiritual teachers and preachers in the church have been remarkable for the directness and frequency of their petitions,” writes Shedd. “They were in the habit of praying at particular times in the day, and also of ejaculatory prayer. Some of them began their day with hours of continuous supplication, and then interspersed their labours with brief petitions.”

5. It would be wrong to suggest that in emphasizing the priority of prayer over study that Shedd and Alexander saw any conflict between these activities. Quite the contrary. They did not suggest that prayer should replace study, but simply that preachers should not neglect prayer for study. They believed that the two activities needed each other and helped each other. The most prayerful men, they insisted, are always studious men – even if the converse is not always true.

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

Rather than set study and prayer over against each other, preachers need to learn to marry them together – to make all of their study prayerful study.

“Neglect of his intellectual and theological character will not help his religious character... Let him consecrate and sanctify all his study, and all his meditativeness, and all his profound and serious knowledge, with prayer.”

6. Furthermore, Shedd and his contemporaries were wary of an intensely devotional spirituality that devalued doctrine. Doctrine, they believed, was the fuel for true devotion. "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.

44 Thoughts, p. 111
45 Homiletics, p. 291
46 ibid. pp. 292-3
47 ibid. pp. 284-6
48 ibid. p. 294
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.  

B. Study

1. “The second rule for the cultivation of the religious character of the clergyman,” writes Shedd, “is, that he pursue theological studies for personal conviction and improvement.”  

Two things are of note in this statement. The clergyman – or, in terms of our interest, the preacher – must study. Then secondly, his studies must be pursued with the goal of his own spiritual improvement.  

2. The impact of study on a preacher’s character cannot be overstated. It not only furnishes his mind with information and tones its powers of thought and action, but it shapes his whole manner of life.

“Study – close, persevering study – improves his religious character. An indolent minister is not a spiritually-minded man. He who neglects his library, and passes by biblical and theological science to occupy himself with the frivolities of society, or with the light literature of the day, cannot keep his mind and heart in a very high state of devotion. There is something in a regular routine of careful investigation eminently fitted to deepen and strengthen the religious character… God bestows a blessing upon intellectual seriousness, upon devotion to good books, and upon a meditative spirit.”  

3. It is not every kind of study, however, that will have this effect. It is above all the disciplined mastery of definite truth that impacts character. Ideas that are either vaguely understood or half-heartedly embraced will have little influence on a life. Only that which a man knows with certainty will affect his character.

“If theological studies result in an undoubted belief, a belief in which there is no wavering or tremulousness, they will result in solid religious growth… We are in reality influenced by divine truth only in proportion as we thoroughly know it and thoroughly believe it.”  

4. To that end, the preacher must carefully select what he studies – in other words, the books that he reads. He should aim at becoming a man of “choice” mental culture, and to that end, should engross himself only with those books that will strengthen and enrich his mind – books Shedd speaks of as belonging to “the very first order.”

“Why should a man,” he says, “except for some special reason, read a very inferior book at the very time that he might be reading one of the highest order? A man of ability, for the chief of his reading, should select such works as he feels beyond his own power to have produced. What can other books do for him, but waste his time and augment his vanity?… The time and ability of the preacher, in this age of innumerable small books and upon innumerable small subjects, is too often expended upon inferior productions. Let him dare to be ignorant of this transitory literature, whether sacred or secular, that he may become acquainted with the Bible itself, and those master-works of master-minds  

\[49\] Homiletics, pp. 356-7. Alexander records this interesting reflection on the interplay of doctrine and devotion:

“On Sabbath and other occasions, I have wearied myself with attempts to awaken devotional feeling, by reading compositions of a merely hortatory kind – practical and experimental writings. Our devotion must have a solid basis, and I believe it is in many cases the best thing we can do to go into the very strongest parts of theological argument, and feed upon such strong meat as one finds in Calvin, Rivet, Turretin, Witsius and Owen.” Thoughts, pp. 70-71  

\[50\] Homiletics, p. 294  

\[51\] Shedd prescribes this course of study for preachers: “… the daily, nightly, and everlasting study of standard authors.” Ibid. p. 305  

\[52\] Ibid. pp. 285,289  

\[53\] Ibid. p. 295
which contain the methodized substance of the Bible, and breathe its warmest, deepest inspiration."^{54}

Putting it in a slightly different way, he says,

“Choice and high culture is the fruit of communion with the very finest and loftiest intellects of the race. Familiarity with ordinary productions cannot raise the mind above the common level. Like breeds like… The preacher must love the profound thinkers, and meditate upon them…[He] must therefore dare to pass by 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 may be the popular mind in a particular direction, it is his true course to devote his best powers to mastering those authors who have been tried by time, and are confessedly the first intellects of the race.”^{55}

5. While on the subject of the best books to study, it is perhaps worth noting that Alexander in particular viewed the reading of unorthodox or heretical literature as dangerous.

“I have observed that in perusing an able statement of a heterodox creed,” he writes, “I am for the time being affected with their force; and it is not till afterwards that the mind recovers itself, and comes to rest… It is not good to be much conversant with error, even though the object be to refute it; it is disturbing, if not defiling.”^{56}

6. But above all books, the preacher must be a student of the Scriptures. He should never tire of reading the Bible extensively, and studying it intensively.^{57} The effectiveness of his ministry depends upon it.

“No man,” writes Alexander, “will be uniformly a good preacher, who is not habitually perusing the Scripture as his book of delights. There is no special preparation for the pulpit which can take the place of this general preparation. No man can lack subjects who is thus commonly employed.”^{58}

7. As mentioned above, it is only study aimed at personal improvement that really benefits the character of a preacher. It is possible to read vast amounts yet be touched by scarcely a single idea. It takes a particular attitude of mind and heart to benefit from study. Melancthon, one of the most learned and spiritual of the 16th century Reformers, once said concerning himself, “I am certain and sure that I never investigated theology as a science for any other purpose, primarily, than to benefit myself.”^{59} To this remark, Shedd adds,

“If the clergyman would advance in spirituality, he must seek, first of all, in the investigation of divine truth, to satisfy his own mind, and put it at rest, in respect to the great themes of God’s purposes and man’s destiny. He must make the theology of the Bible contribute to his own mental peace.”^{60}

8. It takes disciplined effort to make time for and to persevere in regular study. The clamour of the urgent, the attraction of mingling with people, and the reluctance of the flesh all

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^{54} Homiletics, pp. 305,106
^{55} ibid. pp. 305-6. Alexander offers similar advice. “Familiarize yourself with master-pieces; you will find in them relaxation enough, and may afford to look on the perishing nothings of the hour, as you do upon the drift that plays along the edges of your river.” Thoughts, p. 125
^{56} ibid. p. 62
^{57} Alexander repeatedly states his view that Bible reading and Bible study should have the first place in a preacher’s study life. “Return daily and hourly to the study of the Scriptures,” he says (p. 90). “The Bible is, after all, the one book of the preacher. He who is most familiar with it will become most like it; and this in respect to every one of its wonderful qualities; and will bring forth from its treasury things new and old” (p. 13). “Constant perusal and re-perusal of Scripture is the great preparation for preaching. You get good even when you know it not. This is one of the most observable differences between old and young theologians” (p. 30). “Cut off superfluous studies. Come back to the Bible. This rings in my ears as the years go on. Consider all past studies as so much discipline, to fit you for this great study. Make Scripture the interpreter of Scripture. Seek practical wisdom rather than learning, and as tending to holiness and eternal happiness. Make the Bible your book of prayer” (p. 36).
^{58} ibid. p. 24
^{59} Homiletics, pp. 294-5
^{60} ibid. p. 295
conspire to take a preacher away from the arduous mental discipline needed to master truth.61 Nothing less than determined action will preserve the time needed to study.62 “In order to the successful prosecution of such a course of study, the clergyman must rigorously observe hours of study. His mornings must be seasons of severe application… Let there be in the study no idleness, no reverie, and no reading outside the prescribed circle. Let the mind begin to work as soon as the door is shut, and let it not cease until the clock strike the appointed hour; then stop study, and stop composition, and devote the rest of the day to parochial labours, the amenities of life, and the relaxation of lighter literature.”63

9. Feeding the mind is always an unfinished business for a preacher.64 To his dying day he needs to be learning and growing intellectually. Without this, his supplies will soon dry up.65 And in that regard, he ought to work purposefully and systematically with the aim of making himself as well educated as he can be.

“… this is a course of study for life. It is not to be run through in a year, or ten years, and then to give place to another. It is not to be outgrown and left behind… The clergyman should intellectually, as well as morally, lay great bases for eternity. He ought not, therefore, to be overwhelmed in the very outset by the greatness of the proposed edifice, but should relieve his mind by remembering that he has his whole life before him.” 66

Alexander writes,

“To the last day of life, regard your mental powers as given you to be kept in continual working order, and continual improvement, and this with reference to the work of preaching and teaching. You will find all great preachers to have lived thus; and though neither you nor I should ever become great, we shall sink less by reason of such struggles.” 67

C. Thinking
1. A preacher must be more than a reader – he must also be a thinker.68 Reading alone doesn’t make a person learned, nor equip them to be a teacher of others.69 What is read must be weighed, digested, and assimilated by careful thinking.

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61 “Looking at the greatness of the harvest, and the shortness of life, one is tempted at the first blush to say, ‘Let the study alone; go forth and save souls.’ And this has been so much the tendency in every era of church revival, that it would have been the settled policy to multiply unlettered preachers, if God, in his wonderful providence, had not, at the forming periods, raised up men to hold fast by the immovable maxims of sound learning… If our brethren are unanimous in anything, it is, in Luther’s judgment, that sound and varied learning must be sustained, if we would preserve the church.” Thoughts, pp. 126-7

62 “… to carry out such a purpose, you must avoid a thousand things, to which, at your age, you will be tempted, and which consume time and preclude habits of application.” ibid. p. 137

63 Homiletics, p. 323. Alexander adds, “In nothing is it more important for a man to open his own path, than in habits of study. As a general thing, it would seem to be well (using Scott’s words) ‘to break the neck of the day’s work’ as early as possible.” Thoughts, p. 136

64 “… there must be perpetual acquisition. This is the secret of preaching.” ibid. p. 128

65 “Engrave it upon your souls, that the whole business of your life is to prepare yourself for the work, and that no concentration of the powers can be too great… ‘Fill up the cask, fill up the cask, fill up the cask! Then, if you tap it anywhere, you will get a good stream; but if you put in but little, it will dribble, dribble, dribble, and you must tap, tap, tap; and then you get but little after all.’” (Quoting a Dr. Bellamy), ibid. p. 129

66 Homiletics, pp. 321-22

67 Thoughts, p. 129

68 This is true because all clear speaking and writing demands clear thinking. “The first requisite for good writing or speaking,” writes Dabney, “is good thinking. Clear, discriminating and careful thought must precede the attempt to compose.” Lectures, p. 280

69 Alexander writes, “… reading is but a part of study; and that he cannot be admitted to the title of learned, who has not the habit of concocting, methodizing, and expressing his own thoughts.” Thoughts, p. 128. Quoting a favourite maxim of his father’s, he says to preachers, “think long and deeply on your subject, and as if nobody had ever investigated it before.” ibid. p. 100. Again, “A thinking man’s thoughts gradually grow into a system. The less he follows other men’s lives, the more will his own fabric of method compact itself.” ibid. p. 66.
2. At the same time, it is impossible to be a fruitful thinker without being a careful reader. The two things go together. “I hardly need caution you,” writes Alexander in one of his letters, “against the sententious maxim, prevalent among freshmen, concerning those great geniuses, who read little, but think much… The greatest thinkers have been the greatest readers, though the converse is by no means true.”

3. Dabney and Alexander both provide helpful insights into the thinking process. The first requirement for good thinking, they insist, is to have something definite to think about. Letting the mind rove aimlessly won’t produce ideas of substance. “It is the steady contemplation of definite truth in its definite relations which enriches the mind with instructive thoughts,” writes Dabney. As to what truths ought occupy the thoughts, Alexander has this to say:

   “Occupy your mind, since life is so short, on the following: 1. The true rather than the false… 2. The positive rather than the negative… 3. The great rather than the small… 4. The divine rather than the human.”

4. One challenge thinkers (and preachers) face is the difficulty tapping into stores of knowledge hidden away in the memory. Dabney offers this suggestion as a way of overcoming this problem:

   “When we would discuss any subject, our first glance at our own mental furniture usually gives us but few thoughts concerning our theme… The question is, How may we regain our hold of these reserved stores of our own knowledge, when we wish to apply them to a given discussion. I answer, by proceeding, so far as we have any thoughts concerning it, to think systematically. Let the ideas which already present themselves be contemplated in their relations, and arranged in the mind according to them. Other connected ideas will speedily arise and rank themselves beside them, which, when they are subjected to the methodizing law of the mind, will, in turn, suggest others.”

5. Alexander suggests a most helpful approach to thinking exhaustively through a subject. The main difficulty in thinking, he argues, lies in keeping the mind fixed on an idea and moving in a definite direction. Its tendency is to flit to other subjects or to lapse into sterile passivity. How can this be overcome?

   “Let me suggest a device which I have never met in books,” he writes, “but which I have practiced in bed and on horseback. Stake down every attainment in your thinking by a verbal proposition. The thing of emphasis is the propositional form… put your thoughts into words, as affirming or denying… Seek to deduce another from the one you have…The aid to memory is surprising… The turning of certain leading thoughts, as they arise, into propositions, marks the rate of progress, indicates direction, and blazes one’s way through the forest.”

6. Healthy thinking needs to be distinguished from destructive musing. The latter, a common complaint of preachers, is both sterile and destructive.

   “Few habits are more injurious than musing,” writes Alexander, “which differs from thinking as pacing one’s chamber does from walking abroad. The mind learns nothing, and is not strengthened, but weakened; returning perpetually over the same barren track. Where the thoughts are somber, the evil is doubly great, and not only time and vigour are

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70 ibid. p. 127
71 Lectures, p. 106
72 Thoughts, p. 32. “The Scriptures,” he says, “furnish the best materials for thought. They stimulate the soil. They secure the right posture of mind for calm judgment and even for discovery. They promote holy states and are favourable to truth. They prevent trifling reasonings, by keeping the mind constantly in the presence of the greatest subjects.” op. cit. pp. 40-41
73 Lectures, pp. 134-5
74 “What is it that a man does in thinking out any subject,” he asks, “beyond keeping his mind’s eye in a certain direction?” Thoughts, p. 95
75 ibid. pp. 93-95
squandered, but melancholy becomes fixed. It is really a disease, and the question, how
should it be treated, is one of the most important in anthropology.\footnote{76}

D. Work

1. Shedd’s third rule for the promotion of godly character in a preacher is “that he perform
every clerical duty, be it in active or contemplative life, with punctuality, uniformity, and
thoroughness.” Work well done, of whatever kind it is, improves character. On the other
hand, when anyone only half does his work, “his moral power suffers.”\footnote{77}

2. Thorough weekly sermon preparation is a major means of promoting godly character in a
preacher. Not only does the effort required for sermon preparation tax his diligence,
exactness, orderliness, and perseverance, it brings him into immediate contact with
biblical truth. And it is this that makes his work such a powerful means of grace.

“Now we affirm that the careful and uniform preparation of two sermons in every six
days is a means of grace. It is in its very nature adapted to promote the piety of the
clergyman. Punctual and faithful sermonizing fixes his thoughts intently upon divine
truth, and preserves his mind from frivolous and vain wandering. It brings his feelings
and emotions into contact with that which is fitted to enliven and sanctify them: it
overcomes the natural indolence of human nature, and precludes a great deal of
temptation to employ the mental powers wrongly; it leaves no room for the rise of
morbid and unhealthy mental exercises; it makes the clergyman happy in his profession
and strong in the truth, because he becomes, in the process, a thorough-bred divine; it
gives him a solid weight of character and influence that does not puff him up with vanity,
as mere popularity always does, but makes him devoutly thankful and humble before
God….”\footnote{78}

3. It is not only the preparation of sermons that does a preacher good, but also the actual
delivery of them.

“The clergyman who preaches his sermons with earnestness, feeling the truth of every
word he utters, will be spiritually benefited by this part of his labours. Elocution, the
mere delivery of truth… when emphatic and sincere, produces piety.”\footnote{79}

4. The same thing applies to pastoral aspects of a preacher’s work. Regular, intimate contact
with people regarding their spiritual welfare stimulates and promotes holiness in the
preacher himself.

“There is nothing better adapted to develop piety… than going from house to house, and
conversing with all varieties of character and all grades of intelligence upon the subject
of religion… let him [for example] submit his own soul to the great variety of influences
that come off from the experience of the sick and the dying, and he will greatly deepen
and strengthen his own religious character… The clergyman does not need to go up and
down the earth, seeking for instrumentalities for personal improvement. By his very
position and daily labour, he may be made spiritual and heavenly… A single word is the
key to holiness in the clergyman. That word is fidelity – fidelity in the discharge of all
the duties of his closet, his study, and his parish.”\footnote{80}

\footnote{76} ibid. pp. 49-50
\footnote{77} Homiletics, p. 296. Shedd adds, “There is discipline in labour. The scrupulous and faithful performance of
work of any kind improves both the mind and heart… The habit of doing work uniformly well, and uniformly in
time, is one of the best kinds of discipline.” loc. cit.
\footnote{78} ibid. p. 297. Shedd continues: “For what is such sermonizing as we are pleading for but religious meditation of
the very best kind – patient thought upon that divine truth which is the food and nutriment of holiness, bringing
out into the clear light of distinct consciousness in our own minds, and for the minds of others, the doctrines of
salvation? There is no surer way to become interested in a truth than to write a well-considered discourse upon it.
The careful composition of a sermon oftentimes brings the heart into a glow of feeling that gives itself vent in
prayer.” loc. cit.
\footnote{79} ibid. p. 299
\footnote{80} ibid. pp. 299-301

17
Alexander stresses the importance of the preacher balancing the solitary and social aspects of his calling. Too much solitude, he warns, is unhealthy for a preacher. To be always with one’s books deforms character. Preachers need to be out among people as well. “A life of study,” he writes, “has always appeared to me an unnatural life… Recluse habits tend to sadness, moroseness, selfishness, timidity and inaction… Collision produces scintillation of genius, and proximity of friends opens a gush for the affections. The early Christians seem to have been out-of-door people, rehearsing to one another the wisdom that had been given to them orally… We are made for action, and life is too short for us to be always preparing… Ever turning the thoughts inward produces corrosion. We should have something, it is true, within, but it should tend outwards… To live for others is the dictate of religion. And what to do for others is best done by actual approaches, face to face, eye looking into eye, and hand pressing hand.”

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81 Thoughts, pp. 46-47. Alexander adds, “To read always is not the way to be wise. The knowledge of those who are not bookworms has a certain air of health and robustness… Part of every day should be spent in society. Learning is discipline; but the heart must be disciplined as well as the head; and only by intercourse with our fellows can the affections be disciplined. Bookishness implies solitude; and solitude is apt to produce ill weeds: melancholy, selfishness, moroseness, suspicion, and fear. To go abroad, is therefore a Christian duty. I never went from my books to spend and hour with a friend, however humble, without receiving benefit.” Ibid. p. 52
PART 2: THE MESSAGE OF POWERFUL PREACHING

I. EXEGESIS AND POWERFUL PREACHING

“If Sacred Eloquence is to maintain its past commanding position in human history, and is to exert a profound influence upon human destiny, it must breathe in and breathe out from every pore and particle, the living afflatus of inspiration. By this breath of life it must live. If the utterances of the pulpit are to be fresh, spiritual, and commanding, the sacred orator must be an exegete. Every discourse must be but the elongation of a text.”

A. Ideas and Eloquence

1. Shedd begins his Homiletics and Pastoral Theology with a fascinating discussion of the relationship between pulpit eloquence and exegesis. His purpose is “to consider the influence, in oratorical respects, upon the preacher, of the thorough exegesis and mastery of the Word of God.”

2. He takes as his starting point the thesis that “eloquence is the product of ideas.” In other words, the impact of any speaker ultimately depends upon the quality of the ideas he conveys. Noble, vigorous ideas promote powerful speaking; limp and trite ones, the opposite.

3. It is at this point that the connection is made between powerful preaching and exegesis. Powerful preaching, according to Shedd’s thesis, is the product of powerful ideas. But where do these ideas come from? They come from God’s written revelation, the Bible, through a process of exegesis. Powerful preaching, then, has its source in exegesis of the Scriptures.

B. The Preacher as an Interpreter

1. Shedd insists that exegesis is the fundamental task of the preacher. He stands before the Bible as the scientist stands before nature - as an observer and interpreter of a divinely given revelation. His task is not to mould, fashion, or create, but to interpret what he sees before him.

“The duty and function of the theologian,” he writes, “is most certainly that of an interpreter, and that alone… The naturalist does not attempt to mould mountains to his patterns; and the theologian must not strive to pre-configure the Scriptures to his private opinions.”

2. In that regard, all true preaching is exegetical or expository in character. While it might not follow the pattern of regular, consecutive exposition of connected passages, it will always

1 Homiletics, p. 27
2 ibid. p. 2
3 ibid. p. 1
4 Shedd defines exegesis as “a leading forth into the light of a clear perception, of an idea that is shut up in human language. It supposes words - words that are filled with thoughts that require to be conducted from behind the veil which covers them.” ibid. p. 5
5 “…the Christian ministry ought to lay deep the foundations of its address to the popular mind, in the understanding and interpretation of the Word of God. The proper function of the preacher is to put strictly revealed doctrine into oratorical forms for popular impression, and to imbue all discourse in the sanctuary upon the Sabbath with a strictly biblical spirit.” ibid. p. 30
6 ibid. pp. 3,4.
aim at uncovering the intended meaning of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures. Dabney is insistent upon this point. "Nothing is preaching," he writes, "which is not expository of the Scriptures." Furthermore, he adds,

"The exact mind of the Spirit in the text must then be ascertained, before you presume to preach on it. The methods for doing this, by the grammatical study of the original with all accessible learned helps, and by meditation on the context and the connection of thought in which God has placed the passage, belong rather to the science of interpretation than to sacred rhetoric. I need only add that a proper apprehension of the preacher's mission will make him intensely honest and prayerful in his study."°

3. The preacher then, if he would be a powerful speaker, must be an industrious exegete. Only the constant, careful analytical study of Scripture will furnish him with the ideas that will impress and change the lives of people.°° And the more dedicated he is to the task of searching the Scriptures, the more he will find himself overflowing with ideas, and capable of being truly eloquent. So rich is the supply, and so profound the quality of the truths revealed in the Bible, that its diligent student never finds himself without something worthwhile to say.°°°

"We shall maintain the position," he writes, "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... In the wise and docile recipiency of that which is fixed and eternal, we find the fountain of perennial youth and freshness for the sacred orator... Only as the sermonizer and orator, by a critical analysis of the biblical words and their connections, saturates his mind with the biblical elements, and feeds upon revelation as the insect feeds upon foliage, until every cell and tissue is coloured with its food, will he discourse with freedom, suggestiveness and energy."°°°°

4. To illustrate his point, Shedd compares the preachers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with those of the eighteenth and nineteenth. The former, he says, lived in "an age of belief, of profound religious convictions, of linguistic, reverent and contemplative study

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7 Lectures, p. 7
8 ibid. p. 98. Dabney argues, “… the preacher has no other task than to unfold the mind of the Spirit... I would have you feel that every meaning of the text, other than that which God expressly intended it to bear, is forbidden fruit to you, however plausible and attractive – fruit which you dare not touch on peril of a fearful sin.” ibid. pp. 101,97
9 "... 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
10 “The Christian pulpit in this age is in danger of losing its originality, because it is tempted to leave the written revelation and betake itself to lower and uninspired sources of thought.” Homiletics, p. 28. “A genuine biblical student is both an exegete and a dogmatic theologian. He is one whose mind is continually receiving the whole body of Holy Writ into itself in a living and genial way, and who, for this reason, is becoming more and more energetic in his methods of contemplation, and more and more forcible in his modes of presentation.” ibid. p. 67
11 “… while the truths which make up the circle of gospel theology are limited in number, their applications to the different phases of human experience and character are infinite. The true pastor will find a fountain of inexhaustible variety if he will become acquainted with his own heart and the hearts of his charge. Faithful communion with himself, under the guidance of the Word, and an intimate enquiry into the wants of the souls over whom he watches, with diligent study, will always furnish him out of his treasury with things new and old. He will find his mind so teeming with scriptural and timely topics of instruction that his only difficulty will be to find occasions enough to present them.” Dabney, Lectures, p. 73
12Homiletics, pp. 6,11,12-13. Having briefly surveyed the galaxy of grand ideas that fill the Bible, Shedd concludes, "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.” ibid. pp. 11,12
of the Word of God.” They were men “imbued with the substance and spirit of the written revelation”, and as a consequence were “all alike profound religious thinkers, and all alike suggestive, original discoursers.” By contrast, the preachers of the later period were tame and failed to make the same impact on mind and heart. The reason for the difference? Shedd says,

“…the secret of the torpor and tameness lies in the fact that these intellects had never worked their way into the deep mines of revelation, and found the ore in the matrix. It was an age in which biblical exegesis had declined, and they had experienced only the more general influences of the written word. The living elements themselves, the evangelical dogmas, had never penetrated and moulded their thinking.”

5. Shedd assumes, it needs to be noted, that exegesis involves deep and prayerful contemplation as well as technical analysis. Truth discovered by the careful examination of words, phrases, paragraphs and sections, is to be absorbed and believed as well as observed and understood. In this way, a preacher not only discovers the meaning of a passage of the Bible but imbibes its spirit as well. And it is this Shedd considers to be the final goal of exegesis.

“…it is the spirit of a book, the spirit of an author, which is of chief importance… He who has imbibed it 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… well may it be the sole great aim of the pulpit orator to reach and acquire the spirit of the Scriptures.”

C. Exegesis and Authority

1. Exegesis not only guarantees originality and freshness, but also authority. For one thing, the authority of the Christian preacher to address others on moral and spiritual matters rests ultimately upon having a message from God. He has no other ground for taking upon himself the role of spiritual instructor. But he can only do this as he derives his message from the inspired Scriptures through exegesis.

12 ibid. pp. 16,17
13 ibid. pp. 17,18
14 Alexander stresses the need for preachers to digest what they study before preaching it to others. “Great is the difference, though little apprehended, between a theological dissertation and a sermon, on the same subject. The crude matter falls heavily upon the popular ear. Only the last exquisite results of mental action are proper for public address. Not that the truth of doctrine is to be neglected... but it must have undergone a great change in the mind of the preacher, and present itself in a more popular form, with more colour of imagination and warmth of passion, before it can reach the deep places of the heart with due effect.” Thoughts, pp. 10,11
15 Homiletics, pp. 30, 31
16 “By what right does a mortal man rise upon the rostrum, and make positive statements concerning the origin of the human race, the dark mysterious beginnings of human history, the purposes and plans of the infinite Mind, and conclude with announcing the alternatives of eternal salvation and eternal damnation? With respect to these dark and difficult problems, all men stand upon a common level, if divine revelation is thrown out of the account... By what right ... 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 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?... Unless Christendom possesses superior knowledge, it has no right to instruct heathendom; and unless the Christian clergy are endowed with the authority of a special revelation, and can bring credentials therefore, they have no rights to speak to their fellow men upon the subjects of human duty and destiny. The first and indispensable requisite, consequently, 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... 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. pp. 19,20,21
“The whole authority of his addresses to the conscience,” writes Dabney, “depends upon
the correspondence evinced between his explanations and inferences from the infallible
Word.”17

2. Similarly, preaching is most likely to be attended with the power and authority of the Holy
Spirit when, as a result of careful exegesis, it closely reflects the form and words of the
actual text of the Scriptures themselves. While it is true that preaching is more than
verbalized exegesis, the most helpful and authoritative preaching is that which closely
mirrors the actual words of the Bible itself.

“We, in our self-sufficiency,” says Dabney, “detach a cardinal truth from its context; we
exactly define our proposition; we discard the argument by which the Holy Ghost has
seen fit to sustain it; we construct another, recasting the elements of proof in forms
dialectical or theological, according to the rules of our human science. The effects always
disappoint us. Our discourses have far less power over he conscience than we hoped. The
ignorant may gape after what they suppose our wondrous learning and logic; the
educated may applaud the regularity and art of our discussion; but souls are not
awakened. But now, let the preacher humbly take the same proposition in its context. Let
him make all his human learning ancillary to the simple work of ascertaining and
explaining the argument of the Holy Spirit. Let him drink into the very meaning and
temper of that inspired discussion. And let him do nothing else but place it, without
change or addition, in contact with the souls of his hearers. He will find with delight that
he has now opened a way to their hearts. God’s sermons will tell upon them as men’s
sermons never do… Have faith and humility to trust his truth in his own forms, and you
will find your sermons clothed with a true power and unction. If you thus honour his
Word, he will honour your ministry with success.”18

3. Finally, the confidence or assurance with which a preacher conveys his message is also the
fruit of exegesis. The more sure a preacher is that what he says comes from God – that it
accurately reflects the message and intent of God in the Scriptures - the more his preaching
will be pervaded by a spirit of certainty that Shedd describes as “a high, celestial
dogmatism.”19

“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 says the Lord,’ a
transformation takes place, and human weakness becomes immortal strength.”20

II. THE SCOPE OF POWERFUL PREACHING

A. The Primacy of Redemptive Themes

1. Powerful preaching is preaching that confines itself to the great themes of the Bible, and
specifically, to the central truths of redemption.21 While it is true that the Christian faith
embraces all of life, and that the Bible deals, at least in principle, with the whole scope of
existence, this does not mean that a preacher has liberty to preach on every topic of human

17 Lectures, p. 75
18 ibid. p. 89
19 ibid. p. 26. “Say what men say, it is doctrine that moves the world. He who takes no position will not sway the
human intellect. Logical men, dogmatic men, rule the world.” ibid. p. 23
20 ibid. pp. 26, 27.
21 Dabney insists, “The appropriate mission of the minister is to preach the gospel for the salvation of souls. The
servant, who by diverging into some other project not especially enjoined to him, nor essential for him to
perform, precludes himself from his allotted task, is clearly guilty of disobedience to his Master, if not of treason
to his charge… God’s topics, the fall, the curse, sin, death, immortality, duty, redemption, faith, hope, judgment,
hell, heaven, these transcendent subjects have an abiding, an overmastering common interest. All men share it
because they are men.” Lectures, pp. 41, 47
interest. His task is to be an interpreter of the Word, not to be a dabbler in politics, economics and physics.  

“If he is to err in regard to the range of subjects, let him err upon the safe side. It is undesirable and unwise for the pulpit to comprehend anything more, in its instructions, than that range of inspired truth which has for its object the salvation of the human soul. It is true that Christianity has a connection with all truth … But it no more follows that the Christian minister should go beyond the fundamental principles of the gospel, and discuss all of their relations to science, art and government, in his Sabbath discourses, than that the astronomer should leave his appropriate field of observation, and attempt to be equally perfect in all that can be logically connected with astronomy.”  

2. Shed, Dabney and Alexander all agree that this applies especially to the realm of party politics. The preacher, though a citizen and entitled to his own political opinions, ought nevertheless avoid everything that could be called “political” preaching. Not only is it inappropriate, but it creates division and disharmony. Dabney, himself a great patriot and a very vocal citizen, has this to say about preachers introducing political issues into their Sunday sermons:  

“We solemnly protest to every minister who feels the impulse to introduce the secular into his pulpit, that he thereby betrays a decadent faith and spiritual life in his own breast. Let him take care! He is taking the first steps toward backsliding, apostasy, damnation.”  

The way for the pulpit to influence society, these men argued, was by changing the lives of individual men and women through preaching the evangelical doctrines of grace.  

“The only innocent way… in which the minister of religion can further these secular results, is so to preach each man’s own sins and redemption to him as to make him personally a holy man. When society is thus purified, by cleansing the integral individuals who compose it, then, and then only, will the social corruptions of the commonwealths be effectually purged away.”

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22 “The giants in theology have dared to let many books go unread, that they might be profoundly versed in revelation. And the mighty men in practical religion, the reformers, the missionaries, the preachers, have found in the distinctively evangelical elements of Christianity, and their application to the individual soul, enough, and more than enough, to employ all their powers and enthusiasm.” Shedd, Homiletics, p. 216


24 Dabney writes, “… questions of politics must ever divide the minds of men; for they are not decided by any recognized standards of truth, but by the competitions of interest and passion. Hence it is inevitable that he who embarks publicly in the discussion of these questions, must become the object of party animosities and obnoxious to those whom he opposes. How then can he successfully approach them as the messenger of redemption? …This abuse of the pulpit tends directly to produce in the hearers, uncharitableness, spiritual pride, censoriousness, animosity, contempt of opponents, and violence instead of humility, penitence, holy love, and holy living.” Lectures, pp. 41,42,43,44

25 ibid. pp. 43. He adds, “God has reserved for our spiritual concerns one day from seven, and has appointed one place into which nothing shall enter, except the things of eternity, and has ordained an order of officers, whose sole charge is to remind their fellow men of their duty to God... But when the world sees a portion or the whole of this sacred season abstracted from spiritual concerns, and given to secular agitations, and that by the appointed guardians of sacred things, it is the most emphatic possible disclosure of unbelief.” ibid. p. 42

26 ibid. pp. 45-6. “The Christian minister can do more towards promoting the earthly and temporal interests of mankind by induction, than by direct efforts. That minister who limits himself, in his Sabbath discourses, to the exhibition and enforcement of the doctrines of sin and grace, and whose preaching results in the actual conversion of human beings, contributes far more, in the long run, to the progress of society, literature, art, science and civilization, than he does who, neglecting these themes of sin and grace, makes direct effort from the pulpit to elevate society.” Shedd, Homiletics, pp. 216-7. Those who let their ministries sink into discourses on semi-religious themes, are in the end “rewarded with nothing. They see, as the fruit of their labours, neither the conversion of the individual nor the prosperity of society.” On the other hand, “that unearthly sermonizing of Baxter and Howe, so abstracted from all temporal and secular interests of man, so rigorously confined to human guilt and human redemption, - that preaching which on the face of it does not seem even to recognize that man has any relations on this ball of earth, which takes him off the planet entirely, and contemplates him simply as a
3. They also applied this principle to “polemical” or “apologetic” preaching – preaching aimed at defending the Christian faith through argument.\(^{27}\) They believed that the best means of defending the faith was to state it positively and boldly.

“Christianity is not so much in need of apologetic as of aggressive efforts,” writes Shedd. “Statement its doctrines with plainness, and they will hold their ground. Fuse them in the fire of personal convictions, and utter them with the confidence of an immediate perception, and they will not need the support of collateral argument. They are their own evidence, when once enunciated, and lodged in the conscience of man – as much so as the axioms of science.”\(^{28}\)

**B. Bible Truths in Bible Proportions**

1. The basic rule that should govern the scope of preaching, according to Dabney, is “Bible truths in Bible proportions.”\(^{29}\) He held that God has given man the truth he needs in its best form and in its required proportions. Consequently, they will be the best ministers whose preaching reflects the full range of Bible truth as God has given it.

“…preaching should be simply representative of Bible truths, and in Bible proportions! The preacher’s business is to take what is given to him in the Scriptures, as it is given, and to endeavour to imprint it on the souls of men.”\(^{30}\)

2. That is not to say that every passage of Scripture is equally suited to pulpit preaching – in the sense of being a suitable text for a complete sermon. The Holy Spirit, Dabney argues, did not give the Scriptures as a collection of isolated texts for Sunday sermons. The Scriptures were given for purposes other than Sunday preaching alone. Not every verse can be atomized from the rest and made the subject of a sermon.

“No passage of Scripture is suitable for a text which does not contain a distinct and important point. Because a sentence is a part of that Scripture which is declared to be all inspired and all profitable, it does not follow that it is a suitable proposition to furnish instruction for a sermon. Every continuous composition must contain many passages which are not cardinal, but yet are necessary to connect those that are.”\(^{31}\)

3. Expository preaching aimed at unfolding the message of the Holy Spirit in Scripture will result in a variety of kinds of preaching. As preachers explain and apply the message of the Bible, they will find themselves preaching doctrinal,\(^{32}\) practical,\(^{33}\) historical, prophetic

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\(^{27}\) “A controversial tone in the pulpit is usually to be avoided, and the habit of throwing your arguments into the form of a logical combat with an imaginary opponent is most unfortunate.” Dabney, Lectures, p. 209

\(^{28}\) ibid. p. 224. “The age and condition of the world demand ministers of this type. The preacher of this age is appointed to proclaim the gospel at a period when the Christian religion and the church are assailed by materialism in the masses, and scepticism in the cultivated. These are the two foes of Christ he will feel wherever he goes.” ibid. pp. 223-4

\(^{29}\) See also Alexander: “At the outset we may safely postulate that the Scriptures themselves exhibit the various elements of divine truth in the relative proportions in which it is the preacher’s duty to teach and enforce them.” Thoughts, p. 196

\(^{30}\) Lectures, p. 37

\(^{31}\) ibid. p. 100. “That conceit of some of the Puritan divines, which caused them to compose a separate sermon on each verse of a book of Scripture or of a Psalm was therefore but a serious trifling. Under the appearance of a great reverence and value for the Scripture, it really misrepresented and perverted its fair meaning. The Holy Spirit did not mean a sermon in every sentence he uttered: it is incorrect for us to represent him so.” loc. cit.

\(^{32}\) On the value of doctrinal preaching, Dabney writes, “Doctrinal preaching is that which aims to instruct the people methodically in the truths of the Gospel… no people can be formed into stable, consistent and righteous Christians without much doctrinal instruction… The preacher may amuse the curiosity of his hearers with human speculations; he may excite by the scintillations of his rhetoric, but if he has not instructed them in divine truth, he has done nothing. A permanent religious effect is impossible.” ibid. pp. 51,55
and narrative\(^3^4\) sermons. Preaching that reflects the full scope of revelation in this way is adapted to building strong and balanced Christian lives.

**III. EMPHASES IN POWERFUL PREACHING**

**A. God**

1. Powerful preaching, while reflecting the full range of Bible truths in Bible proportions, nevertheless has recurring emphases. Foremost among these is its focus on God. Preaching that convicts and transforms is preaching that confronts people with the reality and presence of an infinite, holy, and yet merciful God.\(^3^5\) Alexander writes,

> “God should be the great, overshadowing object set forth in the preacher's message. All preaching that violates this precept must be vicious… The truths which the Bible unfolds are truths relating to God, in his nature and attributes, his works and his ways; or they concern us in our relations to him as our Creator, Preserver, Sovereign, Redeemer and Judge; or they respect the relations and obligations of men to each other, which in turn depend upon their common relation to the one God and Lord of all. Herein are contained all the doctrines, and hence arise all the duties of our religion. How then can they be adequately set forth in any kind of sermonizing which does not make God all in all?”\(^3^6\)

2. The first and greatest need of people, according to Shedd, is to be made aware that there is a living God who displays both kindness and anger, who both judges and forgives.\(^3^7\) They need to be made aware of their accountability to him. Alexander puts it well when he writes,

> “The great object of the preacher should be to make him know and feel that he is a dependent, rational, and accountable creature, owing fealty [loyalty] to his Maker – that he was made to love, serve, and commune with, and enjoy him; that herein is life and blessing, and that alienation from God by sin is death and woe. These truths, the more earnestly they are pressed, find a responsive attestation in every conscience not seared as with a hot iron. And they are all the more felt, in proportion as God is apprehended in his goodness and holiness, his sovereignty and omniscience.”\(^3^8\)

But in order to convey that sense of solemn accountability, the preacher, says Shedd, must first absorb into his own being the overwhelming awareness

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\(^3^3\) “By this term are intended those discourses which discuss the duties of the Christian life toward God and toward man; with their nature, limits, obligations and motives. These topics should abound in the preaching of every pastor.” ibid. pp. 56-7

\(^3^4\) “That this method [narrative sermons] of presenting truth should be often employed, might be inferred from the fact that more than half of the Scriptures is narrative or biography. God, who knows what is in man, has evidently judged this a suitable way to instruct him. Experience shows that it is the way most intelligible and pleasing to the popular mind.” ibid. p. 65. The chief difficulty of this form of sermon is “to catch correctly he precise didactic scope of the sacred narrative, and to limit himself to it. Certain schools, of even Protestant preachers, have given us deplorable examples of error here. They have used the plain histories of the Bible as though they were trifles for the exercise of an ingenious fancy.” ibid. p. 67

\(^3^5\) “The human spirit trembles to its inmost fibre, when God’s personal character darts its dazzling rays into its darkness. When one realizes in some solemn moment, that no blind force or fate, no law of nature, no course and constitution of things, but a being as distinctly self-conscious as himself, and with a personality as vivid in feeling and emotion toward right and wrong as his own identity, has made him, and made him responsible, and will call him to account; when a man, in some startling but salutary passage in his experience, becomes aware that the intelligent and emotional I AM is penetrating his inmost soul – he is, if ever upon this earth, a roused man, and earnest, energized creature.” Homiletics, p. 234

\(^3^6\) Thoughts, pp. 197-8

\(^3^7\) Both sides of God’s ‘emotional’ character, Shedd insists, need to be made known. “There are not two positions in Revelation more unqualified and categorical, than that ‘God is love’ and that ‘God is a consuming fire.’ Either one of these affirmations is as true as the other; and therefore the complete unmutilated idea of the Deity must comprehend both the love and displeasure in their harmony and reciprocal relations.” Homiletics, p. 231

\(^3^8\) Thoughts, p. 200
“...that God is just that intensely immaculate Spirit, both in his complacency and his displeasure, in all his personal qualities and on both sides of his character, which revelation represents him to be. No other energy can make up for lack of this.”

B. Human Guilt

1. The second need sinful men and women have is to be made deeply aware of their guilt and danger. There is a universal tendency among people, Shedd asserts,

“...to extenuate and diminish the degree of human guilt, even when the general doctrine is acknowledged. To apprehend and confess our sin to be our pure self-will and crime, is very difficult.”

Because of this, the stark blackness of human sin needs to be pictured clearly. Human guilt and corruption need to be probed deeply and displayed vividly. Half measures can never awaken people to their need. Sinners are so bound to their sin that only the most direct and powerful demonstration of their lost condition will arouse them.

“It is by the dalliance with the shallows of the subject,” Shedd contends, “that public religious address is shorn of its strength... The more a man knows of sin and of holiness, and of the immense gulf between them, and of the difficulty of the passage from the one to the other, the more heartily will he believe that the methods and the processes by which the transition is effected are each and all of them of the most energetic and thorough character.”

2. To that end, the law of God in its various expressions and searching spirituality needs to be preached - not so that sinful men and women can make themselves right with God, but...
to know that they cannot possibly do so. In this sense, it serves as a school-master to drive people to Christ.

“That men may heartily embrace the gospel, the essential point is to make them know and feel their radical disease. This you will not teach them effectively by mere general announcements of depravity and the fall. When the claims of the law are brought to their souls, when they are made to see perspicuously what is their extent, and that they are reasonable, when they become conscious of their own innate and fundamental enmity to those just demands, and bondage to evil desires; and when they hear the wrath denounced by God against every transgression; then there is hope they will find themselves truly lost, and will cry to the Deliverer for rescue.”

C. Jesus Christ
1. It is Christ himself, however, as Redeemer, Lord and Judge, who must be the supreme focus of gospel preaching. In fact, Jesus himself is the gospel for sinners.
2. All themes lead ultimately to him as the source of salvation and life.

“It were a poor and unworthy work,” writes Alexander, “to smite, and not to heal; to tear and not to bind up; to kill, and not make alive. Hence, since He, who by death overcame him that hath the power of death, alone can deliver us from sin, our paramount office is to declare Him, who is the way, the truth, and the life… All else converges towards him, or radiates from him. It tends to lead us to him, or flows from our union with him. All unfoldings of God in his perfections and glories; all exhibitions of the character, condition and duties of man; all inculations of doctrine and practice, if true and scriptural, lead the soul directly to the Lord Jesus Christ, for wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.”

IV. APPLICATION AND POWERFUL PREACHING
A. Application and Teaching
1. As has already been pointed out, preaching for Shedd, Dabney and Alexander is always practical in its orientation. It always aims at a response from those who hear it. At the same time, all three men protest against what they call “hortatory” preaching – preaching that

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44 “I would have you preach the duties of the law, not that men may learn to expect their salvation from them, but that they may know they cannot be saved by them… The whole policy of the pastor’s instructions is contained in the germ, in that saying of Christ: ‘They that be whole need not a physician; but they that be sick.’” Dabney, Lectures, p. 57. “We have reason to fear that too much of our current preaching is more or less emasculated by a deficiency here. We are no legalists. Neither are we antinomian. The law must be proclaimed, not for the purpose of showing us how we can, but that we cannot, obtain life, according to its requirements. It is the grand instrument for producing conviction of sin… It is only as the law, in its breadth of precept and awfulness of penalty, is apprehended and witnessed by the conscience, that conviction of sin is felt, that self-righteous hopes are extinguished, or that men are driven from all other refuges to Christ. None will thirst for or flee to the Saviour till they see their case to be hopeless without him. The whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.” Alexander, Thoughts, p. 201
45 Dabney, Lectures, p. 57. Shedd, Alexander and Dabney all insist that conviction of sin is a necessary prelude to true peace with God. Shedd writes, “He who knows with a vivid and vital self-consciousness what guilt means, knows what atonement means as soon as presented; and he who does not experimentally apprehend the one, cannot apprehend the other. If any man would therefore see the significance and necessity of sacrificial expiation, let him first see the significance and reality of crime, in his own personal character and direct relationships to God… the remorse, now felt, necessitates and craves the expiation; and the expiation, now welcomed, explains and extinguishes the remorse.” Homiletics, pp. 240-1
46 Thoughts, pp. 207-8. “…every doctrine, every duty, all legitimate matter of preaching, of whatever sort, culminates in Christ, in whom all things shall be gathered into one, and who filleth all in all. All duty leads to him, to discharge the debt incurred by its non-performance, to obtain strength for its future fulfilment; while the wisdom, power and love displayed in Christ, evoke the highest love and adoration, and incite, while they enable us to render grateful and devoted obedience.” loc. cit.
consists of little more than fervid exhortations to duty. Evangelical obedience (as they called Christian duty), can never be separated from the gospel.

“It is only the morality of the cross which a Christian pastor should teach,” writes Dabney. “...He should trace every precept of the law to its connection with the redeeming love of Christ, and draw thence his incitements to obey.”

2. Powerful preaching, they said, was preaching with application that flowed naturally and inevitably out of teaching. The application itself might follow directly from the truth being considered, or be an inference derived from it. But whichever be the case, the more solid and profound the teaching, the more it produces, when skillfully handled, deep and lasting practical results.

B. Specific Applications

1. The most critical requirement for effective application, they believed, was specificity. Application needs to be definite and address details. Vague, general applications are seldom effective. The practical responses called for by the text need to be brought into close contact with everyday life. More than that, they need to be brought into the inner world of thought, feeling and attitude – not simply confined to the realm of outward action and behaviour.

2. This is especially true when trying to awaken unbelievers to their need to be saved. “It is a precept of prime weight,” writes Dabney, “that your enforcements of evangelical duty and charges of shortcoming be definite, and even specific. There is, I apprehend, in the pulpits of our church, no lack of general declarations concerning man’s depravity, transgression and guilt. Nor do we find, among the ungodly, any backwardness in making the general confession that they are sinners. But this vague sense of sin and guilt is manifestly without effect. They confess, and still transgress. They avow, in words, their need of cleansing and justification, and yet refuse the salvation offered... It is to be feared that a quickening of these dead hearts will never be effected by launching at them the commonplaces of theology. The mere statement of their responsibility and guilt, in general, will be inadequate. But if their own duties and delinquencies were brought home to them in their details, they would, with the blessing of the Holy Ghost, be made to feel wherein they were sinners indeed, and why under the curse... It is only when we become specific, and apply the general principles of evangelical duty, with close discrimination, to the circumstances of our hearers, that we make the law their ‘schoolmaster to lead them unto Christ.”

47 “You will note,” writes Dabney, “that I have said nothing of hortatory sermons as a separate class. In strictness of speech there should be none such. Action is only produced by conviction. The only legitimate weapon of conviction is the truth. The well-ordered, warm, and logical argument is indirectly the best exhortation you can apply. Direct exhortation, which is not founded on argument, is meaningless.” Lectures, p. 72

48 ibid. pp. 59-60

49 Shedd sees critical need for inferences when preaching abstract doctrines. “The preacher... must detect a popular element in them, that will make them proper themes for eloquence. He must discover in them a practical quality which will bring them home to the business and bosoms of Christians.” Having done so, he must first give a “a brief, yet sufficient, explanation of its meaning... This accurate enunciation of the truth or doctrine, prepares the way for the inferences, - for that handling of it which brings it into living contact with the affections and will of the hearer. In this way, the most abstract and intrinsically metaphysical doctrine of Scripture becomes eloquent, that is, persuasive and influential upon the human mind and heart.” Homiletics, pp. 173-4

50 Lectures, pp. 60,61,62. Alexander agrees. The preaching of the law fails to awaken people, he believed, when it is “declaimed too abstractly.” When this happens, “… it does not reach, enlighten, or awaken the conscience. Why? Because it is not unfolded and defined in its import and applications to the manifold relations of our inner and outer life, and the modes of thinking, feeling and acting required therein required.” Thoughts, p. 202
C. Application and Conclusions

1. The place where such application comes to its most intense focus in powerful preaching is the conclusion. It is here that the preacher musters all that has gone before to make a final assault on the heart of his hearer.

“The highest vitality of the oration shows itself in the peroration,” writes Shedd. “The onset on the hearer is at this point. If the man’s will is ever carried, if this true effect of eloquence is ever produced, it is the work of this part of the sermon.”

3. Interestingly, Shedd in particular rejects the idea (common in his day) that each sermon should end with a definite statement of the cross, the heart of the gospel. As noted above, he held that all true application must be connected with the cross. But that does not mean each sermon should close with a specific repetition of the facts of the cross.

“This, we think, is a false rule,” he says, “both rhetorically and morally. If the law is preached, then let the conclusion be legal, dammatory, terrible. If the gospel has been preached, let the conclusion be winning, encouraging, and hopeful. A preacher should know beforehand the wants of his audience, and deliberately make up his mind in respect to the species of impression which it is desirable to produce… He is duty bound to make the truth which he has established bear with all its weight, and penetrate with all its sharpness.”

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51 This is not to say that application must be confined to the conclusion. Dabney writes, “There may indeed be, especially in expository sermons, a continuous application where each topic is addressed to the conscience as soon as the exposition develops it. In such cases the final conclusion will be shorter, because the work of application has already been in part done. But even here a general conclusion will usually be best, to gather up the collective effect of the whole…” Lectures, p. 170

52 Homiletics, p. 171. “Bringing all the teachings of the discourse into a single burning focus, it should converge all the rays of truth upon a single spot. That spot is the point of the hearer’s soul where the feelings and the conscience come together. Any auditor whose affections are roused, and whose conscience is stirred, may be left to himself and the Spirit of God.” ibid. p. 182

53 ibid. pp. 180-1. Dabney writes, “There was a very pious and venerable class of ministers who insisted … that no sermon was correct unless, whatever the text, it included a statement of the whole plan of salvation, sufficiently detailed to be understood and embraced, with the aid of the Spirit, by a soul which heard it then for the first and last time… I will admit that a missionary who preaches transiently to ignorant and destitute persons to whom he will not soon return, should honour the spirit of the precept by preferring uniformly texts which contain the very marrow of the gospel… But the ordinary pastor who meets his people frequently should limit himself in compliance with the demands of unity, lest, by attempting to make all his sermons comprehensive of the whole system of redemption, he should make them all meagre.” Lectures, p. 113
PART 3: THE MANNER OF POWERFUL PREACHING

I. RHETORIC AND POWERFUL PREACHING
A. Preaching as an Oration

1. 19th century preachers typically viewed the “popular” sermon of their day as an oration – an address to an audience designed to achieve practical effect. It was not an essay, nor a lecture, nor for that matter, what they called a homily. It was an address aimed at persuading people to embrace God’s salvation and respond to his will. Because of this, they recognized the value and need for training in the skills of rhetoric, the art of persuasion through effective speech.

2. They were well aware that many protested against applying principles of rhetoric to preaching the Word of God. Paul’s repudiation of persuasive speech, it was commonly held, excluded this “art” from preaching. To this, Dabney responds, “The spurious and unworthy art which is here rejected, was that of the Greek Sophists – a system of mere tricks of logic and diction, prompted by vanity and falsehood, and misguided by a depraved taste... While the Apostle disclaimed this, surely he did not preach without any method! He adopted an appropriate one of his own. If you say that it was honest, as opposed to the deceitfulness of the Greeks; that it was simple, as opposed to their ambitious complexity of the Greeks; that it was modest, as opposed to their...”

3. They were well aware that the earliest Christian preaching was of an informal, conversational, and didactic character. Shedd, for example, says, “…the sermon in the early history of the Church was much more homiletical – that is, conversational – than rhetorical in character. Like those free and familiar lectures which the modern preacher delivers to a limited audience on the evening of a secular day, the first sermons possessed fewer of those oratorical elements which enter so largely into the discourses that are now prepared for the great congregation in the house of public worship, and on the Sabbath, the great public day of Christendom.” Homiletics, p. 34. Dabney describes apostolic preaching as “inartifical, warm and practical, seldom delivered from a manuscript, and often extemore,” then adds: “As the church gained members and worldly importance, and was able to migrate from the private chamber, where early worship was held, to lordly temples and basilicae, the style of preaching became more ambitious... Pulpit eloquence was now cultivated with zeal; and many of the clergy acquired a distinguished fame as orators.” Lectures, p. 25

4. “… the regular sermon is a sacred oration,” writes Dabney, “and I define the oration as a discourse always converging to a practical end.” ibid. p. 92. “The sermon is not an essay or a treatise. It is an address to an audience, like a secular oration. Its purpose, like that of a secular oration, is to influence the will and conduct of the auditor.” ibid. p. 36. “The sermon must preserve an oratorical character,” Shedd adds. “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... 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.” ibid. pp. 128,130. That which differentiates the sermon from other forms of oratory, according to Dabney, is “…that it applies to the will, the authority of God, the only Lord of the conscience... If your discourse urges the hearer merely with excellent reasons and inducements, natural, ethical, social, legal, political, self-interested, philanthropic, if it does not end by bringing their wills under the direct grasp of a ‘thus saith the Lord,’ it is not a sermon; it has degenerated into a speech.” Lectures, p. 34

5. Dabney recognizes that this kind of preaching is not the only proper form of ministering God’s word. “…we have not asserted,” he says, “the pastor must always be expressly the orator, or that every discourse must needs be a true oration. His teaching may sometimes properly be homiletic rather than rhetorical.” ibid. p. 52

6. Rhetoric has been defined as “the study of how to use language eloquently in order to influence people’s thoughts and feelings.” (Rhetoric, in Colliers Encyclopedia, Vol. 20, p. 32). Dabney describes it simply as “the art of persuasion.” Lectures, p. 233

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5. 1 Cor. 1:17; 2:4
ostentation; that it was disinterested, as compared with their overweening selfishness, I assent, and I add that these are the things which made St. Paul’s a true rhetoric.  

Dabney maintained that rhetoric, as “true art,” needed to be distinguished from “artifice.” “Art is but the rational adjustment of means to an end,” he says. “Art is adaptation; it employs proper means for a worthy end; it is but wisdom in application. Artifice is false; it adopts deceitful means for a treacherous end.”

3. But while appreciating and insisting upon the value of rhetoric, men like Shedd, Dabney and Alexander were only too well aware that preachers could become infatuated with it and pervert it for selfish ends. They warned against all that was artificial and mean, and insisted that true eloquence was a product of intense spirituality rather than oratorical polish. Preachers do not become mighty through training in the skills of rhetoric, they said. At best, rhetoric was simply a means of allowing gifts and graces to have full expression. It allowed the preacher’s message to achieve its deepest effect. It didn’t create “feeling, taste or genius,” but only taught their most effective use.

B. Preaching and Persuasion

1. At heart, preaching (or sacred rhetoric as they sometimes called it), was concerned with persuasion. It aimed at moving men and women to accept God’s salvation and respond to his revealed will. That response, it needs to be noted, was never conceived of as something shallow and external. It was always something that involved the total person. True preaching reaches the heart, convincing the mind, stirring the emotions, and moving the will.

“Volition [action resulting from decision of the will]” writes Dabney, “is not a conclusion of any separate faculty of the soul, but of the soul itself, involving all its powers, whether active or passive, whether of cognition, sensibility, or desire.”

2. The element of emotional appeal in preaching was something that Dabney in particular stressed. The emotions, he claimed, were what, in the final analysis, move people to act. “It is the emotions,” he contends, “which immediately move the will. To produce volition, it is not enough that the understanding be convinced; affection must also be aroused.”

He makes a statement like this knowing the prejudice many have against preachers trying to arouse feelings. “…you will still find a general prejudice against what is popularly termed ‘an appeal to feeling,’” he says. “Men argue that truth should be the guide of the righteous man’s

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6 Lectures, p. 17
7 ibid. p. 15. The real choice, he says, is not between art and no art, but between skilled and clumsy art. “Art, I repeat, is but a well-adapted method, and the real option which we have is not between art and nature, but only between art wise and art foolish, art skilful or art clumsy. Indeed, the result of true art is simply to assist nature to perfect herself, and thus to open the way for her to her worthiest ends… And it is not only the preacher’s privilege, but sacred duty to seek and use it.” ibid. pp. 16,17
8 “Of all this art of persuasion,” Dabney writes, “he is the greatest master who would seem to have none. Let your aim be to persuade men in Christ’s name, and not to be praised for skill in persuading.” ibid. p. 260. Adolphe Monod was of the same mind: “Until you cease to regard the preaching of the word as in any sense a rhetorical exercise, it matters little whether you read or speak, or what method of preparation is adopted; you will be as a ‘sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.” In Alexander, Thoughts, p. 153
9 True eloquence, Dabney insists, is distinguished by noble aims. “…I trace the true rhetorical power to its source in a noble purpose. There must be clear intelllection, vivid sensibility, ardent emotion, vehement will; but chiefest of all, must be the virtuous end.” ibid. p. 33
10 “No good preacher was ever made such by exercise in oratory.” Alexander, Thoughts, p. 31
11 Lectures, p. 14
12 ibid. p. 31
13 ibid. p. 235. Alexander agrees. “Feeling is the prime mover in eloquence” he says, “but feeling cannot be produced to order; and the affectation of it, however elegant, is powerless.” Thoughts, p. 30
actions, and not mere emotion. They imagine that because the understanding is the directive faculty, its decisions are always correct, and the impulses of feeling are blind. Hence they conclude that he who appeals to their understandings deals honourably and beneficially with them, while he who appeals to their feelings is seeking to abuse their natures.”

3. He remains adamant, nevertheless, that these objections are mistaken. It is always wrong to try to influence the emotions directly, and always wrong to inflame sensuous and wrong feelings. But it is a mistake to suppose that people are ever free of emotion, or that feelings have no place in their ordinary decision-making. The important thing in preaching is not to shun or deny the emotions, but to address them through the mind with biblical truth.

“The emotions to which the preacher appeals,” he says, “are only the rational. They can be incited only through the understanding. The warmth which characterizes them is but the temperature of the logical thought.”

4. Preaching of this nature – that aims at persuading people to respond to the gospel in the depths of their being – is something that involves the total person of the preacher as well. It flows from the depths of his own being into the depths of his listeners.

“[It] operates through all the powers of the speaker’s soul likewise. Not only must the orator’s reason perform the processes of perception and logic, his heart must be powerfully actuated by those processes of emotion which he seeks to propagate, his taste must thrill with those affections of sentiment which he would make ancillary to his main effect, and his will must go forth vehemently to that act to which he would decide the hearer.”

C. Preaching and Rhetorical Training

1. The fact that preaching seeks to persuade made men like Shedd and Dabney place so much emphasis on the need for rhetorical training. The art of persuasion is something that makes the highest demands of a preacher. It calls for the highest intellectual powers and creative abilities, and the deepest feelings of the heart. Shedd puts it this way:

“[The sermon] is the product of all the powers of the human mind in the unity of their action, and not of the imagination alone, or of the understanding alone; and like the secular oration, it addresses all the faculties of the hearer, ending with a movement of his will… We find, therefore, in the gravity and importance of the sacred oration, a strong reason why the homiletic art should be most assiduously cultivated”

14 Lectures, p. 31
15 ibid. p. 138. “In the things of God man only feels as he sees, and because he sees with his mind… there cannot be, in the nature of the case, any other instrumentality to be used by creatures for inculcating religion and procuring right feeling and action, than that which begins by informing the understanding. The truth, as seen in the light of evidence, is the only possible object of rational emotions… If any affection is produced otherwise, it must be merely animal or else evil. Heat without light is blind, as light without heat is cold.” ibid. pp. 52-3
16 “The impression of eloquence,” writes Dabney, “is not merely a communication of conceptions, opinions, mental convictions, facts; but it is the communion of the speaker’s soul, in all its powers, with the souls of his hearers. It is an impulse communicated from the one to the others.” ibid. p. 121
17 ibid. pp. 31-2
18 ibid. pp. 36,39. “All the faculties of understanding, imagination, and feeling must be in exercise together; while above, and beneath, and around, and through them all, must be the agency of that highest and most important of all the human faculties – the will, the character, the moral force of the man.” ibid. p. 40. Shedd mentions that ministers with a scholarly bent have special need of this discipline. “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.” ibid. p. 45
2. A second reason Shedd gives for cultivating the “homiletic art” is the general unwillingness of people to listen to preaching. He speaks of the men and women of his own day as “more distracted” than earlier generations. Absorption with the affairs of life made them unwilling to listen to long, limp sermons. If they were to be reached and awakened, preachers, he said, would need to be masters of persuasion.

“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, but they are more vivid, animated, and direct in their thinking than they were. They are more impatient of prolixity, of loose method of arrangement, and of a heavy, dragging movement in the exhibition of truth… The public audience now craves a short method, a distinct, sharp statement, and a rapid, accelerating movement, upon the part of its teachers.”

II. THE QUALITIES OF POWERFUL PREACHING

A. Substance
1. Powerful preachers have something to say. “He can never preach well,” writes Alexander, “who has nothing to say.” No amount of noise, action or feeling, can make up for lack of substance.
2. People are stirred and moved only as they are instructed. Powerful preaching is always informative preaching. This is not the same as “intellectual” preaching. It is simply preaching that abounds in solid and instructive ideas – both factual and practical.

“An instructive sermon” writes Dabney, “…abounds in food for the understanding. It is full of thought, and richly informs the mind of the hearer… it will have an important subject; it will be rich in matter and will communicate solid knowledge.”

3. Preaching with substance will attract and hold listeners. Solid, practical, spiritual instruction is intensely satisfying.

“The desire to know is one of the most vivid sentiments of the soul, and its gratification is one of the purest and most uncloying pleasures of our nature,” writes Dabney… Hence you may securely rely upon instructiveness as an unfailing power to attract the people permanently to your ministry… Make your people feel that they are gaining permanent acquisitions of knowledge from you, and they will not desert you.

B. Clarity
1. Preaching must be understood if it is to affect people. The mind is the corridor to the heart, and the heart won’t be stirred if the mind doesn’t comprehend. This makes clarity, or perhaps better, “plainness,” an essential characteristic of powerful preaching.
Plainness, as Shedd uses the term, is a quality that enables a person to comprehend something easily and quickly. Ideas are plain when they have definite shape, and are communicated in simple words.26

“A thing is plain,” says Shedd, “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.” 27

One advantage of clear or plain speaking is that it allows ideas to impact directly on the mind and heart of a hearer. The thoughts of the preacher go straight to the heart of his listeners. They don’t need to grope to detect meaning or substance – both are immediately evident and instantly felt.

“The thoughts which the religious teacher presents to the common mind 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 upon each other. 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.” 28

It takes both discipline and self-denial to be a plain speaker. Discipline is needed to think out ideas fully so they are distinct in shape and expressed in the best words. Self-denial is essential to overcome the temptation to be impressive or flowery. There is always a danger of form outrunning content in public speaking. The temptation to be showy is always at hand. Yet all unnecessary ornamentation obscures ideas. The best speakers want, above all things, to be understood. This makes them toil to be plain and clear.

"...there is nothing," Shedd 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." 29

C. Unity

1. “There is no canon of rhetoric more universally admitted than... [the need for] unity in discourse,” writes Dabney. “The sermon which lacks this quality can only do good by accident.” 30

2. When rhetoricians speak of a discourse having “unity,” they are not suggesting that it contains a single idea. Rather, they are alluding to the way in which all the particulars of a message relate to a single theme. There can be great variety within unity, provided all the parts are connected into a single whole. 31

3. Dabney insists that this property is essential if listeners are to retain the impact of successive ideas. Where unrelated ideas follow one another in a sermon, they effectively cancel each other out.

“If image follows image before our attention,” he says, “without any tie between them, the impression of the second obliterates that made by the first. There can be no cumulative effect. But if the several topics are convergent toward the same conviction of mind and purpose of will, the second promotes the impression begun by the first. The

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26 “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.” Homiletics, p. 53
27 ibid. p. 54
28 ibid. p. 55
29 ibid. pp. 58-9
30 Lectures, pp. 108, 113
31 “It does not forbid variety, diversity, nor even contrast, in the subordinate parts. Nature’s unity is full of variety. It is not the singleness which the dialectician expresses by unicity, but it is the combination of parts into one whole... Unity is what results from union.” ibid. p. 108
hearer’s soul is consequently borne toward the designed terminus by the accelerating force of the whole, and a powerful effect is produced.”

4. Two things are required for unity in a sermon – a clear theme and a single purpose. Where both exist, a sermon can develop as a single, unified message.

D. Point
1. A quality rhetoricians call “point” also marks powerful preaching. The term relates to the incisiveness of the ideas being presented. A sermon without point lacks definite aim and thrust. There is no energy, no sense of the relentless pursuit of a purpose.
2. The essential requirement for developing point in a message is a single dominant idea to which all others are subordinated. Unless a preacher has an important, practical truth to convey, aimed at producing a definite response in the hearts of his hearers, his sermon will lack point.
3. This quality, according to Dabney, is all too often missing in preaching.
   “Many sermons are deficient in point,” he says. “They either have no valuable and practical truths of cardinal weight, or these are not made to stand out to the apprehension of the hearers. No decided impression can be expected from such addresses. No lodgment is made in the conscience of the people; they go away with the vague feeling that they have been only listening to a strain of goodish but aimless talk.”

E. Movement
1. The quality of movement in a message is so important that it has been described as “the royal quality of style.” Movement in a message is the sense it conveys of progress toward a destination. It shows itself in the resolute march of the preacher’s thoughts toward a climax and conclusion. To use Dabney’s words,
   “It is, in short, that force thrown from the soul of the orator into his discourse, by which the soul of the hearer is urged, with a constant and accelerating progress, toward that practical impression which is designed for the result.”
2. Without movement, Dabney says, a sermon is dead. Both he and Alexander picture the ideal discourse in terms of a river. It ought flow – at different speeds perhaps – and must never be allowed to pool and become stagnant. It must carry the mind and heart of the hearer with it, or else it fails to do its work.

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32 ibid. p. 113
33 To achieve unity, the preacher “… must first have one main subject of discourse, to which he adheres with supreme reference throughout. But this is not enough. He must, second, propose to himself one definite impression on the hearer’s soul, to the making of which everything in the sermon is bent… Unity of discourse, then, requires not only singleness of a dominant subject, but also singleness of practical impression.” ibid. pp. 109-10
34 “The thought must be incisive.” ibid. p. 126
35 “…the impression made by an oration depends upon its point, and this, in turn, depends upon the prominence of the cardinal thoughts and the perspicuous subordination of the rest to their support.” ibid. p. 127
36 To achieve this, there must be “…first, a chief truth, practical and important, distinctly apprehended by the speaker in its relation to the action of the soul which he would excite.” ibid. p. 126
37 ibid. pp. 127-8
38 Dabney, quoting Vinet, ibid. p. 121. “It may be said without exaggeration,” he continues, “that it is this which makes discourse eloquence.”
39 ibid. p. 122. “The importance of movement in public discourse can scarcely be exaggerated. Among those who really have matter to present, and who possess the fundamental quality of perspicuity, I am persuaded that the difference of impressiveness is chiefly due to their movement. Without it, there is neither animation, force nor beauty.” ibid. p. 125
40 “Discourses should be like the river; sometimes it flows more rapidly than at others, but it is never stagnant.” ibid. p. 125. Alexander writes, “To be worth much, a sermon must begin like a river, and flow, and widen, and roughen, and deepen, until the end; and when it reaches this end, it is hurt by every syllable that is added.” Thoughts, p. 22
“If it does not succeed in transferring the hearer’s soul to a new position,” writes Dabney, “or a new practical conclusion, or, at least, in causing it to travel afresh to a position once occupied before, it has failed of its work.”

3. Movement naturally terminates in a climax. The conclusion of a sermon is the point at which the emotional energy of the speaker is brought to its highest pitch, and his appeal to the heart is most intense. A sermon, if it is a true oration, writes Shedd, should be “…a rounded and symmetrical discourse, pervaded by one idea, breathing but one spirit, rushing forward with a uniformity of accelerating motion, and ending with an overpowering influence and impression upon the will.”

4. Wordiness, or prolixity, is a “sin” against such movement. Dabney says that a sermon should be characterized by “a nervous brevity and a certain well-ordered haste, like that of a racer pressing to his goal.”

F. Force

1. Powerful preaching is marked by spiritual force. Force is a quality that makes ideas penetrate. It is not the same thing as loudness; it has to do with the innate strength of ideas themselves. Forceful speaking, preaching and writing are marked by an energy that makes ideas penetrate to the heart. It is, according to Shedd, “…power manifested, - power streaming out in all directions, and from every pore of the mind.”

“The principal quality in a forcible style,” he says, “…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 thoughts cut through the more dull and apathetic parts into the quick, and produce a keen sensation. Force is electrical; it permeates and thrills.”

2. Force in preaching arises from the latent power of ideas themselves. No preacher can make himself forceful simply by effort – except, perhaps, in a blustery outward way. True force is an inner quality escaping through speech – a quality generated by the innate energy of the truth itself.

“It originates in truth itself, and partakes of its nature; it does not spring ultimately from the energy of the human mind, but from the power of ideas and principles… the power of the human mind issues ultimately from the truth and reality which it contemplates, and … no finite mind can be energetic in its manifestations that does not first behold objective truth. All attempts to be forceful by mere speculation, by an intellectual activity that falls short of a direct intuition of an objective reality, must fail. And this, because the human mind is rather a capacity than a self-sufficient fullness. It was made to receive truth in to itself, and not to originate it out of itself. The human mind is recipient in its nature, and not creative; it beholds truth, but it does not make it.”

41 Lectures, p. 122
42 “In its emotional character, the discourse must sustain and perpetually raise the emotion inspired to its proper culmination at the change or the end.” Lectures, p. 122
43 ibid. p. 130
44 ibid. p. 124
45 Homiletics, p. 63
46 ibid. p. 72. “A speaker destitute of energy never produces such a peculiar sensation as this. He may please by the even flow of his descriptions and narrations, and by the elegance of his general method and style, but our feeling is merely that of complacency. We are conscious of a quiet satisfaction as we listen, and of a soft and tranquil mental pleasure as he closes, but nothing more. He has not cut sharply into the heart of his subject, and consequently he has not cut sharply into the heart of his hearer.” loc. cit.
47 “The created mind may endeavour to make up for this want of inward power by a stormy and passionate energy; but time is long, and truth is infinite, and sooner or later, the overtasked, because unassisted, intellect gives out; and its possessor, weary and broken by its struggles and convulsions, rushed to the other extreme of tired and hopeless scepticism…” ibid. p. 75
48 ibid. pp. 63,64,65,66. Shedd has some helpful philosophical reflections on the limits of the mind in this respect. “Speaking generally,” he writes, “power in the finite mind is derived, not from the mind itself, but from...
3. To become forceful, a preacher must immerse himself in a world of forceful ideas – the world of the Bible. He will not find energetic thoughts in his own imagination or spirit, but in the revealed ideas he encounters as he studies the Scriptures. The Bible presents to the mind of the preacher a galaxy of truths from God, truths adapted to the deepest needs of man, and truths capable of exciting the strongest feelings in the human heart. Steady, intense reflection upon these will generate the inner force that makes a preacher’s message powerful.

“The oratorical power of the preacher depends on his recipiency; upon his contemplation of those ideas and 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 of force of which he is naturally destitute.”

4. Forceful ideas will naturally generate their own words. A preacher need not concern himself about what words to choose if his ideas are clear, and if he feels about them deeply. His thoughts, when this is the case, will clothe themselves in the best and most energetic words naturally.

“Let the matter to be expressed exist distinctly in the mind,” writes Dabney, “and it will clothe itself in its most appropriate verbal dress… In the act of composition, let not your minds concern themselves chiefly about the verbal dress of the thought, but about the thought itself.”

5. Shedd believed that the times in which he lived demanded forceful preaching.

“An age that is itself full of energy, “ he said, “craves an eloquence that is powerful; and this power must be pure and sustained. The energy must display itself through every fibre and the whole fabric. The sermon should throb with robust life. But it will not, until the preacher has inhaled into his own intellect the energy and intensity of revealed ideas, and then has dared to strip away from the matter in which this force is embodied, everything that impedes its working.”

the objective world of truths and facts to which it is correlated. For the finite mind is a created thing, and all created things are dependent. It is the prerogative of the Infinite alone, to derive its energy from the depths of his own being… The efficient power of the human intellect results, not from spinning out its own notions and figments, but from contemplating those objective and eternal ideas to which it is pre-conformed by its rational structure. If the human mind, by a hard, convulsive effort, analogous to the dead lift in mechanics, attempts to create thought and feeling without any contemplation; if it attempts to think and to feel, without beholding the proper objects of thought and feeling, it fails of necessity. 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… The history of philosophical speculation teaches no truth more plain and important than this – namely, that insulation, isolation and subjective processes generally are destructive of all energy and vitality in the created mind, while communion with real and solid verities promotes both.”

49  “A truly mighty sacred orator is ‘mighty in the Scriptures.’ By this, it is not meant that a preacher whose memory is tenacious, and holds a great number of texts which he can repeat readily, is necessarily a powerful orator… True biblical knowledge is dynamic, not atomic. There is no better word to denote its nature than the word imbue. The mind, by long-continued contemplation of revelation, is steeped in divine wisdom, and saturated with it.”

50 ibid. p. 65. Every attempt to derive inward energy from other sources will ultimately fail. “The neglect of revelation, and an endeavour to spin out matter from his [the preacher’s] own brain, by the process of ratiocination, must result in feeble discourse.”

51 Lectures, p. 280. “If there were a perfect orator, men would come away from his discourse without having any conscious recollection concerning the qualities of his style; they would seem to themselves to have been witnessing, by a direct spiritual intuition, the working of a great mind and heart.”

52 Homiletics, p. 76
G. Beauty

1. Powerful preaching has a quality about it that can perhaps best be described as beauty. When Shedd uses the term in connection with preaching, he uses it in the sense of a quality in which "all the manifoldness and variety in an object is moulded into unity and simplicity."\(^{53}\) Sermons, no less than paintings and sculpture, possess beauty when all their parts cohere into a pleasing whole – a unity marked by such things as symmetry, elegance, neatness, proportion, grace, dignity and sublimity.

   "It springs into existence" he says, "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."\(^{54}\)

2. Beauty, then, is not so much a manufactured quality that can be added to a sermon, but the product of other more essential features of its structure.\(^{55}\) To try to create beauty as a distinct quality in itself is almost certainly a recipe for losing it. "He who finds beauty," Shedd says, "shall lose it, but he who loses beauty shall find it."\(^{56}\) His advice to those wanting to cultivate this characteristic in their sermons is to pay attention to other properties of style such as simplicity and unity. If a sermon has these, it will possess a natural elegance.

3. Shedd insists that there are two special requirements for cultivating beauty in sermons – what he calls a "methodizing intellect," and the practice of forming and following a plan. He defines a methodizing intellect as a mind "which spontaneously works in a logical manner, and to which consecutive reasoning has become natural."\(^{57}\) It selects and organizes information. It has 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…"\(^{58}\)

4. This kind of mental orderliness, he believed, is especially needed in days when people crave short sermons. Mere brevity, he believed, would never satisfy them. Men and women, even in an age that is impatient, need to be fed.\(^{59}\) 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 in words with beauty, warmth and vitality.\(^{60}\)

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\(^{53}\) ibid. p. 76. "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 create the beautiful in isolation…" ibid. p. 79

\(^{54}\) ibid. p. 79

\(^{55}\) "…true beauty is not an ornament washed on from without, but an efflux from within. The effort to be methodical results in beauty; the endeavour after unity results in beauty; the effort to be simple results in beauty. True beauty in rhetoric, therefore, is the natural and necessary accompaniment of solid and substantial characteristics, both in the matter and in the form." ibid. p. 82

\(^{56}\) ibid. p. 81. "He who is prematurely anxious to secure beauty will fail; but he whose anxiety has respect first to the necessary properties of style, will find beauty following in their train, as the shadow follows the substance." loc. cit.

\(^{57}\) Homiletics, p. 200

\(^{58}\) ibid. p. 49

\(^{59}\) "The public audience now craves a short method, a distinct, sharp statement, and a rapid accelerating movement, upon the part of its teachers… Now the preacher can meet this demand successfully only by and through a strong methodizing power. He cannot meet it by mere brevity. The popular mind still needs and craves instruction, 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 and somewhat dull in its style, than to a discourse which has no merit but that of shortness." ibid. pp. 48-49

\(^{60}\) ibid. p.50. Acquiring that skill costs. It doesn’t come instinctively or easily, but only through the “severe tasking of the intellect, a severe exercise of its faculties … only by diligent and persevering effort.” (loc. cit.).
5. The second requirement, that of following a plan, is vital to achieving the form and symmetry needed for beauty. If a preacher doesn’t plan, he will fail to organize. And if he cannot organize, his sermons will lack form.

“The sermonizer should uniformly form a plan before beginning to compose. The plan may sometimes be fuller and more perfect than at others; but a plan of some sort, of more or less perfection, should invariably be formed at the outset.”

III. THE ACT OF POWERFUL PREACHING

A. Passion

1. Powerful preaching is charged with deep feeling. Dabney defines eloquence as “the emission of the soul’s energy through speech,” and adds that he believes it to be “one of the finest exercises of the soul’s faculties.” A preacher, writes Shedd,

“… needs the strong stir and impulse of holy affections in order to succeed in his vocation… A heart replete and swelling with the grand emotions of Christianity, is a well of water springing up into everlasting life and power, for it is fed from infinite fountains. With what force, vividness, and natural method, also, does the Christian, destitute it may be of mental discipline and culture, sometimes speak upon the subject of religion out of a full heart!”

2. A preacher, then, must speak from the heart if he is to move the hearts of those who hear him. “If you would make others feel,” says Dabney, “you must feel yourself.”

“The heart is the seat of life,” says Shedd, “the source of vigour, the spring of power. From this centre, vitality, energy and impulse go out, and pervade the whole system… If profound feeling, the feeling that is grounded in reason and truth, pervade a discourse, it will surely attain the end of eloquence, and produce deep movement in the hearer. That peculiar energy, issuing from the heart, which we designate by the word emotion, must mix and mingle with the energy issuing from the intellect, in order to the highest power of speech…”

3. The intense feeling a preacher needs to preach well must be produced by truth. It is not any kind of passion that will do. Emotion, according to Dabney, is really the proper...
temperature of thought. Powerful truths, deeply contemplated, are bound to stir the heart. The critical thing is that head and heart must go together.

“In order that the human faculties may work with the greatest energy and harmony, the heart must be in the head and the head in the heart. Never does the mind operate so powerfully, and with such truth and beauty of result, as when the faculty of cognition co-works with the faculty of feeling. If these two faculties become one and indivisible in action, the result is not merely truth, but living truth – truth fused and glowing with all the feeling of the heart, and feeling mingled with, and made substantial by, all the truth of the head. The light is heat and the heat is light.”

B. Naturalness
1. If preaching is to carry weight with people, it must be natural, or unaffected. Listeners quickly detect – and despise – theatrics. Attempts to carry the day through bluster, or to embellish weak ideas with inflated language, are bound to fail. Strong preaching, powerful preaching, is natural preaching – preaching in which the energy of the soul, generated by the power of truth, is expressed in the simplest, plainest and clearest terms natural to the speaker.

2. Every preacher is unique and needs to express their uniqueness. Attempts to imitate, or to suppress, are bound to blunt the impact of a ministry.

“Every genuine preacher becomes such, under God, in a way of his own, and by a secret discipline.”

3. Deep feeling rather than studied technique is the source of all true animation in preaching. If a preacher would speak with natural animation, let him understand his message clearly, feel its importance deeply, and then forget himself completely.

C. Freedom
1. Powerful preaching is more than recitation. It is a creative, living activity. A preacher interacts in a living way with his listeners and with the Scriptures even as he speaks. Often his best thoughts and choicest words will come to him at the very moment of delivery. He will find a constant interplay between what he has prepared and what comes freely to

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68 “Let him, by prayer and meditation first purify the feeling of his heart, and then render it more deep and intense by the same means, and he will be prepared to speak freely and forcibly to the human heart.” loc. cit.

69 “Feeling, though vivific and energizing, is not precise and clear in its own nature. The man of all feeling has a vague and mystic tendency. Hence the need of logic, in order that the energy issuing from the heart may be prevented from diffusing itself over too wide a surface, and may be guided along channels and flow along in them. When a beating heart is allied with a methodizing mind, there are at once, vigour and life, with clearness and precision. The warm emotions are kept from exhaling and becoming vapoury and obscure by the systematizing tendency of the logical faculty, and the hard, dry forms of logic are softened and enlivened by the vernal breath of the emotions.” ibid. pp. 202-3

70 loc. cit. It is possible to apply this principle to any material. “If the preacher has attained this facility of methodizing, and is under the impulse of ebullient, swelling affections, awakened by the clear vision of divine truths and realities, he will be able to speak powerfully in any presence, and extempore.” ibid. pp. 203-4

71 “Every excess of manner over matter hinders the effect of delivery, on all wise judges. Where there is more voice, more emphasis, more gesture, than there is feeling, there is waste, and worse; powder beyond the shot.” Alexander, Thoughts, p. 30

72 ibid. pp. 31,160

73 “The development of inward feeling is the only proper source of true animation. All else is affectation… [The preacher] should not attempt by verbal artifice a pathos which is foreign to his heart. Let him say what he has to say clearly and naturally. This is what is meant by the rule, ‘not a word more than the thing itself carries along with it.’” ibid. pp. 30,158

74 “Forget yourself so as to behold nothing but the glory of God, and the salvation of your hearers.” ibid. p. 163
mind as he speaks. For that reason, powerful preachers have typically preached extemporaneously. 75

2. The term “extemporaneous” does not mean the same thing as “off-hand,” or “without preparation.” Literally, it means preaching ex tempore – from the time – in the sense that the exact choice of words is left to the moment of delivery. 76 Extemporary (as distinct from impromptu) preachers prepare well, organize their thoughts clearly, and often write out their messages in full. But they nevertheless choose their words as they speak. They don’t read their sermons, nor recite them from memory.

3. Extemporary preachers need to guard, however, against over-fluency. It is one thing to be free to respond to the impulse and mood of the actual moment of preaching. It is another to use the freedom of extemporary speech as opportunity to ramble.

“You will find.” comments Shedd, “that mere fluency is the easiest and cheapest of all gifts to which the public speaker aspires… The orator’s difficulty is that it is too easy to be fluent. The difficult thing for the extempore preacher is to make his words scarce.”77

D. Unction

1. Preaching that affects people deeply is typically spoken of as preaching with “unction.” Dabney says this is a “term used frequently to represent the effusion of the Holy Ghost as an anointing from God… It expresses, therefore… that temperature of thought and elocution, which the Spirit of all grace sheds upon the heart possessed by the blessed truths of the gospel.”78 John Livingston, a Scottish preacher, describes unction in this way: “There is sometimes somewhat in preaching that cannot be ascribed either to the matter or expression, and cannot be described what it is, or from whence it cometh, but with a sweet violence, it pierceth into the heart and affections, and comes immediately from the Lord.”79

2. According to Dabney, it is not the same thing as the natural animation that arises from deep feeling.

“There every passion in the preacher does not constitute unction. While it does not expel the intellectual activity, authority and will, it superfuses these elements of force with the love, the pity, the tenderness, the pure zeal, the seriousness, which the topics of redemption should shed upon the soul of a ransomed and sanctified sinner.”80

3. Unction is not something that can be generated artificially. In fact, because it comes directly from God, and is evidence of the Holy Spirit assisting the preacher in special way, it cannot be produced by the direct action of the preacher at all. 81 If there is any way to attain to such a thing, John Livingston said, “it is by the heavenly disposition of the speaker.”82

75 “…whenever any great movement has been produced, either in church or state, it has commonly taken its rise, so far as human agency is concerned, from the unwritten words of some man of sound knowledge and thorough discipline, impelled to speak by strong feeling in his heart… when the clergy shall dare to speak to the people with extempore boldness out of a full heart, full head, and clear mind, we may expect, under the divine blessing, to see some of those great movements which characterized the ages of extempore preaching, - the age of the apostles, the age of the Reformers, the age of John Knox in Scotland, the age of Wesley and Whitefield in England and America.” Shedd, Homiletics, pp. 212-3

76 Dabney defines extemporary preaching – which he believed to be the proper mode of preaching – as “a discourse in which the thought has been perfectly prearranged, but the words, except in cardinal propositions, are left to the free suggestion of the moment.” Lectures, p. 332

77 Homiletics, p. 335

78 Lectures, p. 116

79 Quoted in Alexander, Thoughts, p. 106

80 Lectures, p. 116

81 Alexander writes, “The utterance which the apostle Paul craved, and which is often mentioned in the New Testament, is very different from worldly eloquence, being a spiritual gift.” Thoughts, p. 31

82 ibid. p. 106
“To affect unction,” writes Dabney, “is manifestly impossible. It is, in short, a quality not merely intellectual or sentimental, but spiritual. Although not identical with ardent piety, it is the effluence of ardent piety alone.” 83

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83 Lectures, p. 116-7
Grace Theological College (GTC) is a non-denominational theological college in Auckland, New Zealand. It was established in 1995 to equip godly servant leaders for ministry in churches. It seeks to do this by providing training in biblical, pastoral and theological disciplines, and by supporting and encouraging existing church leaders through literature, conferences and church-based ministry. GTC is evangelical and Reformed in its theological commitment. It upholds the authority and inerrancy of Scripture and endeavours to bring a God-centred perspective to every aspect of life.

About the Author
Dr Andrew Young comes from a farming background in the South Island of New Zealand. He studied and then taught Soil Science at Lincoln College (now Lincoln University) between 1969-80 before spending 15 years pastoring churches in Christchurch and Brisbane (Australia). In 1995 he became founding Principal of Grace Theological College in Auckland where he teaches courses in Biblical and Practical Theology. He has recently completed a book on 1&2 Thessalonians for the Let’s Study series published by the Banner of Truth Trust, and a Teaching and Preaching Guide on Ephesians published by GTC. Andrew and his wife Nola live in South Auckland with their four children, Mark, Katherine, Deborah and John.