

# The Distinctives of Reformed Preaching

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**Abstract:** *This article seeks to describe and examine the salient elements of the preaching of those who adhere to reformed theology, namely five general principles: Reformed preaching is authoritative, God saturated, from God, passionate, and pleading.*

**Key words:** *preaching, expository, authority, passion, pleading*

Speaking at Westminster Theological Seminary in 1969, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said the following: “I would say without any hesitation that the most urgent need in the Christian church today is true preaching.”<sup>1</sup> I would say the same in 2024. By “true preaching” I mean reformed preaching, and by “reformed preaching” I mean expository preaching, which I believe to be the “only form of authentic Christian preaching.”<sup>2</sup> Expository preaching is “reading the Word of God and then explaining it to the people so that they understand it,” and, I might add, with a view to their responding to it.<sup>3</sup> In discussing John Calvin’s homiletical method, T. H. L. Parker writes that “expository preaching consists in the explanation and application of a pas-

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1 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2011), 17.

2 To exposit means to draw the meaning out of the text. Hence, expository preaching draws the meaning from a text and applies it to the hearers’ context. The opposite seeks, in a variety of ways, to use Scripture to super-impose the preacher’s view onto the hearer. Cf. Al Mohler, *He is Not Silent* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 48.

3 Mohler, *He is Not Silent*, 52.

sage of Scripture. Without explanation it is not expository; without application it is not preaching.”<sup>4</sup>

Such preaching is the need of our day, and should God answer the fervent prayers of many by raising a generation of preachers who are filled with the Spirit and mighty in the Scriptures, what kind of preaching should we expect? What are the distinctive elements of that preaching which we trust will turn our world upside down?

### **REFORMED PREACHING IS AUTHORITATIVE**

When Jesus spoke, He spoke as one who had authority (Matthew 7:29), and no wonder, for heaven is His throne, and earth is His footstool, and He says: this is the one “to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2). And so, the one who aspires to preach the Word of Christ does so with authority—an authority not invested in himself or his personal and denominational qualifications, but in the fact that he is proclaiming nothing less than the authoritative Word of the Living God. In the august presence of God, he is charged with preaching the Word (2 Timothy 4:1–2), and in that same presence he carries out the charge, making no apologies for his message but rather with boldness making it clear that this is what God says!

George Whitefield (1714–1770) clearly understood this for we are told that whilst preaching in New Jersey he spotted an old fellow fast asleep during the sermon. In “measured, deliberate words” he said: “If I had come to speak to you in my own name, you might rest your elbows upon your knees and your heads on your hands, and go to sleep! ...But I have come to you in the Name of the Lord God of Hosts, and” (he clapped his hands and stamped his foot), “I *must* be heard and I *will* be heard!”<sup>5</sup> God deliver us (and our congregations) from preaching with an authority drummed up by a sense of self-impor-

4 Mohler, *He is Not Silent*, 68.

5 John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 33.

tance or personal notoriety, or personal wisdom, but God give us the conviction that when we come with a message from the throne, we must be heard! We do not chat, talk, or share: we proclaim, and we declare, and we ought all to tremble at His word!<sup>6</sup>

Another who understood this authoritative element was Robert Bruce (1556–1631) who was preaching in a church at which King James VI of Scotland (James I of England) was present. The king was talking to his neighbour and paying little attention to the sermon. Bruce spoke directly to the king and said: “It is said to have been an expression of the wisest of kings: ‘when the lion roars, all the beasts of the field are quiet’: the Lion of the Tribe of Judah is now roaring in the voice of His Gospel, and it becomes all the petty kings of the earth to be silent.”<sup>7</sup> God grant that we would recapture this element of authority in our modern preaching!

### ***REFORMED PREACHING IS GOD-SATURATED***

Peggy Noonan says of President Bill Clinton that his “biggest problem as a speaker is that he rarely says anything that is intellectually interesting, that is genuinely deep and thoughtful. He has the intensity of a deep and thoughtful person without the depth of a deep and thoughtful person.”<sup>8</sup> How different things are for the preacher, who, when he keeps to his task, always has something profound to say. He preaches Christ crucified (I Corinthians 1:23), and he proclaims the unsearchable riches of Christ (Ephesians 3:8), setting the wonders of the gospel of Christ before a desperately needy world! Indeed, reformed preaching begins and ends with God! We are preaching the Word of God in the presence of God by the power of God for the glory of God. We seek to bring people to God and sanctify those who know

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6 That, after all, is the meaning of the Greek word usually translated “preach” in the New Testament.

7 Peter Barnes, *A Lamp Unto My Feet* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2013), 97.

8 Peggy Noonan, *On Speaking Well* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 17.

God. We stand in the presence of God, we speak by the authority of God, we are helpless without the aid of God, and are privileged to be in the service of God. The act of true preaching is a God saturated event.

Whilst some preaching panders to the plea for “how to” sermonettes, reformed preaching ushers people into the throne room of God and bids them gaze upon Him, and demands that they listen to Him.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones wrote: “I can forgive a man for a bad sermon. I can forgive the preacher almost anything if he gives me a sense of God, if he gives me something for my soul, if he gives me the sense that, though inadequate himself, he is handling something that is very great and very glorious, if he gives me some dim glimpse of the majesty and glory of God, the love of Christ my Saviour, and the magnificence of the gospel. If he does that, I am his debtor, and I am profoundly grateful to him.”<sup>9</sup> Dr. Lloyd-Jones said that he would not cross the road to hear himself preach, but when J. I. Packer crossed the road and sat under the Doctor’s ministry it was life changing. He said that he had “never heard such preaching.” It came to him “with the force of electric shock, bringing to at least one of his listeners more of a sense of God than any other man” he had known.<sup>10</sup> This is not surprising, since Packer said of Lloyd-Jones: “He took more of God into the pulpit with him than any other preacher I have ever known.”<sup>11</sup>

### **REFORMED PREACHING INVOLVES HOLINESS**

It must be a holy man who stands to preach the Word. It is a “man of God” whom God will equip to preach His gospel (2 Timothy 3:16–4:2),

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9 Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 110–11.

10 Christopher Catherwood, *Five Evangelical Leaders* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984), 174.

11 Dr. Packer said this during an interview with Carl Trueman in 2012, found at <https://blogs.efca.org/strands-of-thought/posts/speaking-the-word-of-god-as-a-man-of-god>.

a man who steps from the presence of the Lord and into the pulpit. It is a man who has been watching his life (1 Timothy 4:16; 3:1–7) and walking with His God. He walks in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25) because he knows that “the more anointing of the Holy Spirit, the more success will the minister have.”<sup>12</sup>

Have you ever had people stand up at their seats, so eager were they to hear more from you? M’Cheyne did and we are told that “the great secret of his proclamation is holiness!”<sup>13</sup> Andrew Bonar traced this to his “nearness of communion with God” and said that the “healthiness of his own soul was absolutely needful to the vigor and power of his ministration.”<sup>14</sup> To be sure spiritual profit in preaching is not by might or by power or even by holiness, but a “holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.”<sup>15</sup>

### ***REFORMED PREACHING GETS ITS TEXT FROM GOD***

There are great benefits to preaching consecutively through books of the Bible, not least that we know where our next text is coming from. At the same time, let us ensure that we heed the counsel of M’Cheyne and “get [our] text from God.” “I am obliged,” said Archibald Brown, “to preach what presses upon me.”<sup>16</sup> Spurgeon speaks of a text giving “your mind a hearty grip from which you cannot release yourself” and that “when the text gets a hold of us, we may be sure we have

12 Jordan Stone, *A Holy Minister: The Life and Spiritual Legacy of Robert Murray M’Cheyne* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2021), 105. M’Cheyne said this to his congregation in Dundee.

13 L. J. Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love: A New Biography on Robert Murray M’Cheyne* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 477.

14 Bruce McLennan, *M’Cheyne’s Dundee* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 49–50.

15 David Beaty, *An All-Surpassing Fellowship: Learning from Robert Murray M’Cheyne’s Communion with God* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 83.

16 Iain H. Murray, *Archibald G. Brown: Spurgeon’s Successor* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 360.

a hold of it.”<sup>17</sup> And perhaps this is what John Owen meant when he said: “A man only preaches a sermon well to others if he has first preached it to himself. If he does not thrive on the ‘food’ he prepares, he will not be skilled at making it appetizing for others. If the word does not dwell in power in us, it will not pass in power from us.”<sup>18</sup> He warns that it is an easier thing to bring our heads to preach than our hearts to preach. Get your text from God! Mr. Murray argues that while “some who preach consecutively through a passage or book of Scripture....may make the text ‘blaze’....history seems to show that gripping, persuasive, converting preaching is more usually found to be of another type.”<sup>19</sup> I beg to differ and choose rather to eat my cake and have it too, to preach consecutively while seeking to get that next passage from God, pleading that He would allow it to grip my heart and press hard upon me.

### ***REFORMED PREACHING IS PASSIONATE***

Many would agree that in recent years, even in robustly evangelical churches, “rare is the preacher who speaks with the earnestness and sobriety of a commanding officer instructing soldiers on the eve of a decisive battle. The directness of an evangelist or a prophet is swapped for the suave disposition of a life coach.”<sup>20</sup> Not so Paul! He served in Asia with “humility and with tears” (Acts 20:19). He tells the Philippians about people who are enemies of the cross, whose end is destruction, and he does so “even with tears” (Philippians 3:18). Compare this with “my eyes shed streams of tears because people do not keep your law” (Psalm 119:135)!

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17 Murray, *Archibald G. Brown*, 360.

18 From a sermon preached by John Owen, accessed at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/owen/sermons.v.viii.html>.

19 Murray, *Archibald G. Brown*, 363.

20 Joe Barnard, *Surviving the Trenches* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2022), 11.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones insists that the “primary object of preaching is not only to give information. It is, as Jonathan Edwards says, “to produce an impression.... what we need above everything else today is moving, passionate, powerful preaching. It must be ‘warm’, and it must be ‘earnest.’”<sup>21</sup> No “fireside chats” for the reformed preacher. Rather, with Richard Baxter, he preaches “as never to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.” So earnest and serious was M’Cheyne that “when he appeared in the pulpit, even before he had uttered a single word, people would begin to weep silently!”<sup>22</sup> The reformed preacher is not morose and funereal, but he is sober, serious and in dead earnest. We will manifest these passions in different ways, but we must heed Baxter’s clarion call: “How few ministers preach with all their might! Oh, brethren, how plainly, how closely, how earnestly, should we deliver a message of such importance as ours...In the name of God, brethren, labour to awaken your own hearts before you go into the pulpit, that you may be fit to awaken the hearts of men.”<sup>23</sup> Clear teaching is a strength in reformed circles. Is it so when it comes to passionate preaching? “Whatever you do, let people see that you are in good earnest... You cannot break men’s hearts by jesting with them... Men will not cast away their dearest pleasures upon a drowsy request of one that seemeth not to mean as he speaks, or to care much whether his request be granted.”<sup>24</sup>

### **REFORMED PREACHING INVOLVES PLEADING**

William Chalmers Burns (1815–1868) once put his arm around a fellow minister and said: “Brother, we must hurry.”<sup>25</sup> Preaching is an ur-

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21 Lynette Clark, *Far Above Rubies: The Life of Bethan Lloyd-Jones*, (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 23–24.

22 Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 100.

23 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 147–8.

24 Baxter, *Reformed Pastor*, 148–9.

25 Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 104.

gent business, and reformed preachers will plead with sinners. Spurgeon is exemplary here. Tom Nettles writes that “one would be hard pressed to find even one sermon” of his that did not include “direct addresses to the unconverted...all these (sermons) included potent appeals to the unconverted to flee to Christ and to do it ‘at once’”.<sup>26</sup> Do we plead with sinners, or do we simply inform them? Spurgeon said: “I hope I shall never preach a sermon without speaking to the ungodly for O how I love them!”<sup>27</sup> And when he spoke to them, he pled.

It is no wonder. “Why will you die?” God says (Ezekiel 18:30–32). “Come everyone who thirsts...come, eat, drink...come to Me that your soul may live” (Isaiah 55:1–3), that you may find rest (Matthew 11:28). “Would you persuade me to be a Christian?” asks Agrippa: “Yes,” answers Paul, “I would to God...that all who hear me this day might become such as I—except for these chains” (Acts 26:29)!

Do Reformed preachers persuade sinners? Or do they “present” the gospel rather than “preach” it? Do they explain the gospel rather than apply it? Do we urge, plead, and persuade sinners to come to Christ or are we altogether too cool, calm and collected, too refined and academic, too, dare I say it, theological? Are we indicted by the words of M’Cheyne?

“All the words of men and angels cannot describe the dreadfulfulness of being Christless; and yet, it is to be feared, we do not speak to those who are so with anything like sufficient plainness, frequency, and urgency. Alas! How few ministers are like the angels at Sodom, mercifully bold to lay hands on lingering sinners.... Some set forth Christ plainly and faithfully, but where is Paul’s beseeching men to be reconciled? We do not invite sinners tenderly; we do not gently woo them to Christ; we do not authoritatively bid them to the marriage; we do not

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26 Tom Nettles, *Living By Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2013), 292.

27 Tom Nettles, *The Child is Father of the Man* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2021), page 105.



compel them to come in; we do not travail in birth till Christ be formed in them the hope of glory. Oh, who can wonder that God is such a stranger in the land?”<sup>28</sup>

“If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay!”<sup>29</sup> So let us learn to plead. “If you want to know the art of pleading,” said Spurgeon, “read Baxter.” I would add: read Spurgeon too.<sup>30</sup>

Let me close with one final exhortation. Listen to as many of the recorded sermons of Martyn Lloyd-Jones as you can. I believe that the overall tenor of his preaching comes as close to the kind of preaching I have sought to describe as any I have ever heard. Lloyd-Jones said that he had preached twice in his life, and both times he had been dreaming. Be that as it may, his preaching is exemplary. He taught us that preaching is “Logic on fire! Eloquent reason... theology coming through a man who is on fire.”<sup>31</sup>

God grant that we may experience more of such preaching in our own day.

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28 Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love*, page 203–4.

29 C. H. Spurgeon, “The Wailing of Risca”, in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Sermons*, Vol 7, Olive Tree Bible Software.

30 And also read this excellent article by Ted Donnelly: <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2022/richard-baxter-a-reformed-corrective/>

31 Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 97.