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5.18.11

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ON PREACHING CHRIST.

BY THE REV. JOHN JENNINGS.

PROFESSING ourselves Christians, I hope, we are satisfied upon careful and rational inquiry, that the religion of Jesus comes from God; and that it is a most glorious dispensation, no less for the sublime wonders of its doctrine, than the divine purity of its precepts. Now in all the peculiar glories of this religion, *Christ* is interwoven like Phidias' name in the shield, which could not be effaced without destroying the shield itself; so that preaching Christ and preaching the Gospel are, in Scripture style, synonymous terms.

I. To *preach Christ*, therefore, is our charge, our business, and our glory. But, "who is sufficient for these things?" Give me leave, then, my dear brethren and friends, to remind myself and you, what regard a minister should have to our Redeemer in his preaching.

1. Let us make Christ the end of our preaching. If we seek principally to please men, then are we not the servants of Christ. If we look no farther than our own reputation, or temporal advantage, appropriating our talents to our own private use, how shall we make up our accounts to our divine Master?

Our *ultimate* end should be the personal glory of Christ. That the glory of Christ, as God, is the ultimate end of the Gospel, none can doubt; so that it is said of this divine

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Person : "All things are for him, as well as by him." Is he not worth ten thousand of us? Of more worth than the world; the only begotten Son of God, whom the highest angels adore? Now if the glory of Christ's person be the principal end in the divine schemes and actings, it should also be our highest view and design.

Again, as the glory of Christ's *person* should be our ultimate end, so the advancement of his kingdom of grace among men should be our subordinate end. The immediate design of the Gospel is the recovery of fallen creatures to holiness and happiness. Christ is "come into the world to save sinners;" and he sends us to preach his gospel, in order "that men might live soberly, righteously, and godly, looking for the blessed hope." We should not think it enough to inform, to amuse, to please, to affect, but we must aim farther to bring them to trust in Christ, to be penitent and holy; and every subject must be managed with this view. And let it be our great care, on a speculative subject, still to keep the end in view, and apply it practically.

Let us by all means endeavor to save precious souls, but yet aim at a higher end, that we ourselves may be "a sweet savor of Christ unto God;" and then, though we miss of our secondary end, and are not as we could wish, "the savor of life unto life" to any great number, yet in being "the savor of death unto death to them that perish," we shall be the instruments of glorifying the justice and long-suffering of Christ, and be witnesses for God, "that there has been a prophet amongst them." Our primary end is answered, "our labor is with the Lord," and we in the mean time are supported, "though Israel be not gathered," for "the word shall not return empty."

Nay, further, it is not enough that the strain of our preaching be adapted to the true design of the Gospel, but we must at heart sincerely intend it; otherwise, though our discourses be unexceptionable, and others be saved through our ministry, yet if our designs be wrong and base, we "shall be castaways."

2. Let Christ be the *matter* of our preaching. Let us display the divine dignity and loveliness of his person, as

“God manifest in the flesh,” unfold his mediatorial office, the occasion, the design, and purport of his great undertaking—remind our hearers of the particulars of his incarnation, life death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession—set forth the characters he bears, as a prophet, priest, and king; as a shepherd, captain, advocate, and judge. Let us demonstrate the sufficiency of his satisfaction, the tenor and excellence of the covenant confirmed with and by him, our justification by his righteousness, adoption through our relation to him, sanctification by his Spirit, our union with him as our head, and safe conduct by his providence; and how pardon, grace, and glory accrue to the elect through his suretyship and sacrifice, and are dispensed by his hand. Let us declare and explain his most holy laws in his name, and teach the people whatever duties he has commanded to God, our neighbor and ourselves; quicken the saints to duty, raise their hopes, establish and comfort their souls, by the exceeding great and precious promises of the Gospel, which in him “are yea and amen.” I give but short and imperfect hints of these things, and refer to the apostolical writings, which are made up of discourses on these and such like topics.

3. Let a continual regard to Christ distinguish our sermons on any subject from discourses on mere natural religion. If we speak of the perfections of God, let us consider them as shining in his Son, “who is the brightness of his Father’s glory, and express image of his person,” and exemplified in his undertaking. If we set forth Gospel blessings and promises, let us consider them as purchased by a Saviour’s blood, and distributed by his bounty; for “by his own blood he has obtained eternal redemption, and from him the whole body is supplied.” If we take notice of the providence of God, let us not forget that “all power is given to Christ, in heaven and in earth,” and that “he is head over all things to the Church.” If by the terrors of the last judgment we persuade men, let “the wrath of the Lamb” be denounced, while the reckoning is represented as most dreadful for abused grace and a slighted Saviour; for “this is the condemnation.” And when we are assisting the devo-

tions of the people, the same regard to Christ should be observed.

When we are discoursing on the subject of duty, Christ, as the most powerful motive, is by no means to be forgotten; for to persuade men to practical godliness is one of the most difficult parts of a minister's work. Men will hear a speculative discourse with a curious satisfaction, and attend to the displays of God's grace with some joy; nay, a Felix may tremble when judgment is preached. Many, indeed, will bear to hear of duty too; but to induce them to practice it, *hic labor, hoc opus*. Here we have need to call in all helps, and take all advantages, which the Gospel, as well as the light of nature, can furnish. In other discourses we are rather attacking Satan's outworks, a blind and prejudiced understanding; but, in practical subjects, we assault his strongest fort, corrupted will. We may gain the understanding on our side, with some share of the affections; but to subdue a perverse will, in favor of practical Christianity, is not so easy a thing, that we can afford to spare any important motive or quickening consideration.* But here I must be more particular in explaining how we should regard Christ in preaching duty.

(1.) We should represent *duty* as the fruit of faith in

* In reference to what is advised in this and the following sections, a young preacher will do well to read, with devotion and care, those parts of Mr. Matthew Henry's practical and incomparable Exposition, which relate to the subject he would preach upon. He will also find in the works of Mr. Arthur Hildersham, his Exposition of Psalm 1 and John 4, an uncommon degree of sacred skill, in recommending duty and practice from Christian motives, worthy of assiduous imitation.

Perhaps this may be the most proper place to recommend a work lately published, namely. *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, contrasted with real Christianity*, by W. Wilberforce, Esq.—a work which, for excellency of plan, a strain of masculine eloquence, acuteness of discernment, and force of reasoning, and above all, a spirit of sublime devotion, is not perhaps equalled in our language; nor is it a small part of its excellence that it represents duty, according to our author's advice, as the fruit of faith and love, enforcing obedience with motives respecting Christ, to be performed by his grace, and acceptable through his merits.—*Dr. Williams*.

Christ, and love to him. When by faith we behold a crucified Jesus, do we not tremble at the severity of God's justice, and hate those sins that occasioned his sorrows? When we consider that "by his stripes we are healed," can we forbear to love Him who first loved us? Shall we not live to him that died for us? Can we have the heart to crucify him afresh?

From such actings of faith and outgoings of love, flows that divine temper which constitutes the new creature, and lays the foundation of all right Gospel obedience. Thus, therefore, let us continually trace Gospel duties up to their fountain-head, that the people may learn, that it is not outward reformation which will stand the test in the day of judgment, but an inward renewal of the soul; that "the tree must first be made good, before there can be any good fruit;" and that all must be done for Christ's sake, and flow from "faith working by love."

(2.) Let us enforce duties with motives respecting Christ. As grateful love to him should constrain us, fear of his wrath should awe us, if we would approve ourselves the disciples and followers of Christ, and enjoy communion with him; if we would promote his honor and interest, and possess joy and not confusion, at his appearing. Not that we should neglect any motives which the light of nature can furnish, and are level to the capacities of the people; for we have need enough of all; but if we go no further, our exhortations will want far the greatest part of their weight. We must "beseech and exhort by the Lord Jesus."

(3.) Let us inculcate duties, as to be performed by the grace of Christ; telling the people that our fruitfulness depends on our being ingrafted into this vine; that there is no holy walk without being "led by the Spirit, and when we do good, it is not we, but the grace of God that is in us; that out of a sense of weakness we are to be made strong, through Christ strengthening us."

(4.) Let us consider all good works as acceptable through the merits of Christ; and remind our hearers, that could we do all, we were but "unprofitable servants;" and that we must seek to be found at last, not having our own righteousness, but that which is of God by faith.

4. Let us express ourselves in a style becoming the gospel of Christ ; not with great swelling words of vanity, or in the style of the heathen sophists, or words that man's wisdom teacheth, and perhaps sound best in our own ears ; but let us use "great plainness of speech," and seek to find out such "acceptable words" as may best reach the understanding and affections of the bulk of an auditory.

As for the affectionate part of a discourse, brethren, I suppose you allow, upon a view of ancient and modern learning, that the men of the east, and next to them the ancient Greeks, excelled in fire, and works of imagination ; and yet the moderns, inhabiting milder western climates, even the French, from whom, on many accounts, we should expect the most of this sort, produce but an empty flash, in comparison with the solid heat of the ancients ; and rather amuse us with little delicacies, than, by masterly strokes, command our whole souls. Now the Scriptures are the noblest remains of what the east has produced, and much surpass the best of the Greeks in the force of their oratory. Let us, therefore, take their spirit and style, and thence borrow bold figures and allusions, strong descriptions, and commanding address to the passions ; but I am prevented in all I would say on this important head, by the Archbishop of Cambray's *Dialogues concerning Eloquence*, which I am as little capable of improving upon, as I am of commending them as they deserve.*

* The sublime Fenelon's *Dialogues on Eloquence* are deservedly mentioned, by many writers of eminence, with a sort of respect bordering on veneration ; and no wonder, for such a union of the sublime and simple, of learning and familiarity, of judicious criticism and happy illustration ; and unaffected humility and warm benevolence, delicate taste and solid sense ; and above all, such reverence for sacred things, blended with a subject so often employed by human vanity and pride, are superior excellencies very rarely found.

Dr. Doddridge (Fam. Expos. on John 14 : 2. Improvem. Note) having alluded to a beautiful observation of this author, says : "This is the remark of the pious Archbishop of Cambray, in his incomparable *Dialogues on Eloquence* ; which, may God put it into the hearts of our preachers often and attentively to read!" Another able judge on this subject thus expresses himself : "But what need I enter further into the detail of pulpit eloquence ? If you want to see the

II. And now, brethren, let me lay before you some reasons and motives, to back this friendly admonition concerning preaching Christ.

1. It is the only way to have our labors accepted of Christ, and to have communion with him in our work. Even *Paul* cries out: "Who is sufficient for these things?" With how much more reason may we do so? Does not our cheerful progress in our work depend on a divine *afflatus*, and the spirit dispensed by Christ? but if we take little notice of him in our preaching, and do not distinguish ourselves from the moral philosophers of the Gentiles, how can we expect any more of this enlivening and encouraging presence of Christ than they had? Nay, we have less ground to expect it, if we slight willfully so noble a revelation, with which they were never favored.

2. It is the only way to win souls to Christ, and to make them lively Christians. The success of the Gospel is owing, certainly, no less to the power of its motives, than to the clearness, fullness, and purity of its precepts. These peculiar motives of the Gospel have all such a respect to Christ, that they are enervated if HE be disregarded. The Gospel is what God in his unfathomable wisdom has fixed upon, as the grand mean to reform mankind, and save them; and he seems in honor concerned to crown it with greater success than any other scheme whatsoever. "The preaching of Christ crucified is the power of God." If, by suppressing a part, we maim the Gospel, we can expect in the nature of things, but a very defective success. Nay, may we not fear that God's honor is concerned, in such a case, to blast us while we labor almost in vain?

Observation agrees with this theory. The great masters of reason, who have less regard to Christ in their

whole machinery and apparatus of it displayed in the completest manner, I refer you to the great and good Prelate of Cambray's Dialogues on that subject; who was himself the justest critic, and one of the best models of eloquence that I know." *Fordyce's Theodorus*, p. 150. Lond. 1755. For a brief but striking character of the eloquence of Fenelon, see the *Abbe Maury's Principles of Eloquence*, sect. 55.—*Dr. Williams*.

preaching, may indeed, have a charm for one of an hundred, who have a taste for the beauties of fine reasoning, and be of use to them, while the bulk of an auditory is asleep. Alas! with what heart can we go on, entertaining two or three, while starving most of the souls in an auditory? May we not also observe a happier effect of a strain prudently evangelical on Christians themselves: that they who sit under it are more lively, zealous, ready to every good work, and heavenly-minded, than those Christians who have heard less of the Gospel?

3. It is a direct imitation of the Apostles of Christ. Christ himself, whilst upon earth, preached the Gospel in parables, in a concealed manner, distantly, and with reserve. He could not so fully take the advantage of his resurrection, satisfaction, ascension, and the like, not yet done, made, or proved. He had many things to say, which his disciples could not then bear; but he declares them afterward by his spirit in his Apostles. They therefore are the true pattern of our preaching *now*, after the mystery of redemption is brought to light, and hath its full evidence.

How then did the Apostles preach Christ? It is endless to attempt a full detail of particulars; any part of the apostolical writings is authority sufficient to our purpose; and therefore I have been sparing in quotations all along, as needless to those who will look into these writings with this view; and here we do not desire to insist upon any passages in their writings which may be supposed to be written for reasons peculiar to that age and country in which the Apostles wrote, and in which perhaps we are not so much obliged to imitate them in our preaching; for what will remain, after all these are put out of the account, will, I am satisfied, be as full to our purpose as those that are struck off.

I shall then, by way of specimen, select some of the Apostles' discourses on moral duties, where we are most apt to forget Christ, or a due respect to him; that it may at once appear that the Apostles neither shunned the pressing of such duties, nor disregarded Christ in treating of them.

Honesty is pressed by these motives: "The unright-

eous, thieves and extortioners shall not inherit the kingdom of God," (which in the style of the New Testament, is Christ's kingdom of grace and glory.) That Christians are "converted by the Spirit of Christ, and justified by his righteousness." *Chastity* is enjoined, as "our bodies are members of Christ, as we are one spirit with him, temples of the Holy Ghost, and bought with a price." *Alms-giving* is recommended, as it brings a large tribute of "praise to God for our subjection to the gospel of Christ—and Christ became poor for our sakes." *Evil-speaking* is forbidden, because "we were foolish and wicked; but the grace of God has made the difference; not for our righteousness, but of his free mercy he has regenerated us, and given us his Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ, by whom we are justified and heirs of glory." Subjects are commanded to obey magistrates, because "the Gospel is come, and we should put on Christ Jesus." Husbands are charged "to love their wives, as Christ loved the Church." The obedience of wives is urged, because "the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church." Servants are exhorted to their duty, as they would "adorn the doctrine of Christ, because grace so teacheth, and that we look for Christ's appearance, who gave himself for us that we might be holy." Now what is there in these motives peculiar to one age or nation? Are not all these as good now as formerly? And are men so ready in their duty, that we have no need of them?

Nay, it is worthy of observation, that the Apostles do not confine themselves to motives peculiarly adapted to the duty they are pressing, and which serve to enforce one duty rather than another; but, as you may see, when such proper motives are not at hand, they take, without any scruple, common or general ones, which will equally enforce any duty whatsoever.

And why should not we introduce the peculiarities of the Gospel on all occasions, as frequently as the Apostles did? If our schemes of theology will not allow us, we have reason to suspect we are in a different scheme from the Apostles. Are we afraid that men will make perverse use of such doctrines as the Apostles used for mo-

tives? The Apostles chose to venture it, and why should not we? If we will not dare to preach such a Gospel as may be perverted by men of corrupt minds to their own injury, we must not expect to be instruments of any good. If we are a "savor of life" to some, we must expect to be the "savor of death" to others, or not preach at all.

I confess, even the *Remonstrant* scheme (which, I think, considerably sinks the doctrines of grace) does allow room to regard Christ abundantly more than most preachers of that denomination do. I would meet them on their own principles; what hinders their frequently inculcating the merits of Christ, the depravity of our nature, the necessity of regeneration, the aids of grace, union, and communion with Christ? These topics, it were to be hoped, might have their effect: but alas! how few of the *Remonstrants* improve to advantage, so much of the Gospel as they hold and receive; and it makes me less inclined to this scheme, that it so generally draws those that embrace it into a strain of preaching, even on practical subjects, so different from that of the Apostles; and inclines them, I know not how, to suppress those glorious motives (which yet their own principles might allow) by which the Apostles enforced Gospel duties.

4. So only shall we deserve the name of Christian preachers. *Only* did I say; I am afraid this may sound too harsh. Come let us put the matter as soft and candid as common-sense will allow us. So shall we most evidently or best deserve this honorable title.

Whilst a preacher keeps off from the peculiarities of the Gospel, and says nothing but what the light of nature would also suggest and authorize, give me leave to say, a stranger might possibly doubt whether he is a Deist or a Christian; the question is like an imperfect mathematical problem, which equally admits of different solutions.

Suppose the ghosts of Paul and Seneca to come, mere strangers, into an assembly, where one is haranguing the people in this abstracted manner, I am apt to think Seneca would claim him as a philosopher of his own sect and religion. Now if Paul should also make his claim

to him as a minister of Christ, how could the question be decided, without allowing Seneca to be a preacher of Christ also?

On the other hand, if a preacher insists upon even the peculiar and glorious truths of Christianity, but so unhappily manages them, as not to lead people to holiness, and the imitation of Christ thereby—what is this to the grand and full purpose of preaching; or to the ultimate design of the Gospel? Such preachers are quite off that divine system which is calculated to destroy the works of the devil, and to teach men sobriety, righteousness, and godliness. It is not only Christ *without us* we are to preach, but also Christ *in us*, and our putting on Christ Jesus, by a holy heart and life.

If the Apostle James should come again, and make a visitation to our churches, and hear such a preacher, he would imagine himself among such people as he writes against in his epistle; he would be apt, when the minister had done, in his zeal for Christ, to take the text in hand again, and supply what the preacher had omitted, namely, the application: and to say to the auditors: “Know ye not that faith without works is dead?” If the preacher should here interrupt him, saying, “Hold, spare your pains, the Spirit of God will make the application, and teach men holiness,” would not James reply: “I and the rest of the Apostles were taught to preach otherwise, and to give particular exhortations to duty: we judged we might as well leave it to the Spirit, without our pains, to reveal the doctrine, as to instruct men in the practice of the Gospel.”

Upon the whole, brethren, let it be our resolution to study and preach Christ Jesus. On this subject there is room for the strictest reasoning, and most sublime philosophy; it deserves, invites, and inspires the strongest fire of the orator; in extolling Christ, we can not shock the most delicate taste by over-strained hyperboles: here the climax may rise till it is out sight; our imagery can not be too strong and rich.

Should our Lord himself appear, and give you a charge at your entrance on the ministry, would he not say, (what indeed he has said already :) “As the Father hath sent me,

so send I you to preach the kingdom of God, that every knee may bow to me, and every tongue confess me. Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and tell them, that without me they can do nothing; that when they have done all, they are unprofitable servants, and must be found in my righteousness. Become all things to all men; seek words which the Holy Ghost teacheth, that you may gain souls, and bring in my sheep, for whom I have laid down my life. If ye love me, feed my sheep. I have called you friends; do all in my name, and to my honor: so I will be with you always; and if you thus watch for souls, you shall give up your account with joy, at my appearing. This is the preaching which, though it seems foolish to many, shall prove the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Cast forth the net on this side, and so may you expect to catch many souls. Be ye followers of my Apostles, as they are of me, and in my name shall ye do wonders; if you preach me, I and mine shall therein rejoice; be not ashamed of my gospel, and I will not be ashamed of you."

But to arrive at any tolerable perfection in preaching Christ is a work of time, the result of a careful perusal of the Scriptures, and studying the hearts of men. It requires the mortifying of the pride of carnal reason, a great concern for souls, and a humble dependence on the Spirit of God, with the lively exercise of devotion in our closets.

As for the reasoning part on the more agreed points of our religion, a young preacher sooner may get to considerable excellency; but the Christian orator is longer in finishing. We may soon get necessary truths into our own minds, and come at minds of our size and taste; but by proper motives and ways to reach the souls of a different make and turn, even the lowest of the vulgar, is what very few quickly arrive at; but let us not despair: if we thus regard the Lord Jesus in our ministrations, we may very reasonably expect the assistance of his Spirit—and then we shall be "able to do all things, through Christ strengthening us."

