

Zealous Preaching: Exercising Fervent Love for God and His People

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Throughout much of their time at the Westminster Assembly, the divines worked on a single catechism. Yet this attempt to write just one catechism left the assembly disappointed, as some stressed conciseness for lay people, while others wanted fuller statements for the learned. Finally, the decision was made to produce two catechisms - the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, published in 1647. For, as Samuel Rutherford said, the divines were not satisfied to “dress up milk and meat both in one dish.”¹

Clearly, one place that the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) expanded the “milk” of the Shorter Catechism (WSC) into “meat” is in this area of preaching. From Question 89, which asks, “How is the word made effectual to salvation?” we hear the only real mention regarding preaching and its work in the WSC. “The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.” But the description of preaching is expanded in the WLC into six descriptive phrases, only four of which we consider in this issue of the journal.

Correspondence: Preaching in the Larger Catechism and the Directory of Publick Worship

Interestingly, these six phrases have a high degree of correspondence to a document published earlier by the assembly, which testify to their origin. The *Westminster Directory for Publick Worship* (WDPW) contains, in the section headed “Of the Preaching of the Word,” one of the best descriptive statements on preaching. This chapter on preaching begins by declaring, “Preaching of the word, being the power of God unto salvation, and one of the greatest and most excellent works belonging to the ministry of the gospel, should be so performed, that the workman need not be ashamed, but may save himself, and those that hear him.”² This chapter continues by describing the qualifications of a minister, how he should develop the text for a sermon, how to structure a sermon, and errors he should avoid. Then it concludes with how “the servant of Christ, whatever his method be, is to perform his whole ministry.”³ It is here, in these concluding statements on the minister’s preaching duties, that the correspondence to the WLC’s description of preaching is seen.

For instance, Dr. Joel Beeke considered the WLC’s phrase “plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit.” The *WPDW* also says, “Plainly, that the meanest may understand; delivering the truth not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in

¹ John Bower, *The Larger Catechism: A Critical Text and Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 11.

² Sinclair Ferguson, *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008), 93.

³ *Ibid.*

demonstration of the Spirit and of power, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect”. Likewise, the phrase in the WLC that the present author is considering says preaching is to be done “zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people.” The *WDPW* turns that around and fleshes it out a bit more by saying the minister’s work is to be done with “loving affection, that the people may see all coming from his godly zeal, and hearty desire to do them good.” Recognizing this correspondence helps one to properly understand the catechism’s descriptive phrase and emphasis as we move now to clarifying further what zealous preaching means.

Table: Correspondence between Larger Catechism and Directory for Publick Worship on the Manner of Preaching⁴

Directory for Publick Worship	Larger Catechism Q. 159
1. Painfully, not doing the work of the Lord negligently	1. Diligently, in season and out of season
2. Plainly, that the meanest may understand; delivering the truth not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect; abstaining also from an unprofitable use of unknown tongues, strange phrases, and cadences of sounds and words; sparingly citing sentences of ecclesiastical or other human writers, ancient or modern, be they never so elegant.	2. Plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit
3. Faithfully, looking at the honour of Christ, the conversion, edification, and salvation of the people, not at his own gain or glory; keeping nothing back which may promote those holy ends, giving to every one his own portion, and bearing indifferent respect unto all, without neglecting the meanest, or sparing the greatest, in their sins.	3. Of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God 6. Sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation
4. Wisely, framing all his doctrines, exhortations, and especially his reproofs, in such a manner as may be most likely to prevail; shewing all due respect to each man's person and place, and not mixing his own passion or bitterness.	4. Wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers
5. Gravely, as becometh the word of God; shunning all such gesture, voice, and expressions, as may occasion the corruptions of men to despise him and his ministry.	

⁴ Numbers in the table reflect the order of which each phrase or statement appeared in the original document.

6. With loving affection, that the people may see all coming from his godly zeal, and hearty desire to do them good.	5. Zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people
7. As taught of God, and persuaded in his own heart, that all that he teacheth is the truth of Christ.	

Clarifications: What Defines Zealous Preaching

Describing preaching as being done in a zealous fashion certainly can conjure up different imagery in people’s mind. The word “zealous” is defined as “fervent partisanship for a person, a cause, or an ideal,” and has synonyms such as “fervent”, “ardent”, “impassioned”, or even “fanatical” or “fierce”. Thus, talking about zealous preaching could make us think of preaching by a pastor with his voice raised, gesticulating wildly, his eyes glaring avidly at you as he preaches hellfire and brimstone. However, in the sixteenth century, zeal had more the sense of “intense devotion.” Yet the meaning soon began to move toward the sense we have in our modern day. In the book *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë uses zeal in this manner, when she described the priest, Mr. St. John, who “was comparatively seldom at home: a large proportion of his time appeared devoted to visiting the sick and poor among the scattered population of his parish,” and as “zealous in his ministerial labours.”⁵ However, Mr. St. John did not have the true sense of zeal, for as she continues, she says of him, “yet (he) did not appear to enjoy that mental serenity, that inward content, which should be the reward of every sincere Christian and practical philanthropist.”⁶

These examples fall short of precisely what is meant by the use of the word “zealous.” The Scripture reference attached to the word “zealously” in the WLC points to Apollos, the great New Testament preacher, who was “fervent in spirit” for “he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus” (Acts 18:25). His fervent spirit has more to do with his commitment to the gospel and his desire for people to embrace it than in his manner of speaking.

For as Thomas Ridley says in his commentary on the WLC, “This zeal does not consist in a passionate, furious address, arising from personal pique and prejudice, or in exposing men for their weakness, or expressing an undue resentment of some injuries received from them.”⁷ Rather, it is “such a zeal as is consistent with fervent love to God and to the souls of men.”⁸ Here is where the *WDPW*’s expression with proof texts that the minister is to conduct his preaching with “loving affection, that the people may see all coming from his godly zeal, and hearty desire to do them good” gives clear insight. The preacher is to say to God’s people what Paul said to the church at Corinth about his zeal in preaching, “If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us” (2 Cor. 5:13-14). Preaching with zeal means preaching with love for the people, for, again, as Paul said “some preach Christ out of envy and strife” but others preach from a posture “of love” (Phil. 1:15-17). Yet again he said, “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (2 Cor.12:15).

⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: A.L. Burt Co., 1864), 373.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity: Wherein the Doctrines of the Christian Religion are Explained and Defended, Being the Substance of Several Lectures on the Assembly’s Larger Catechism* (New York: Robert Carter, 1855), 2:478.

⁸ Ibid.

The majority of the people in our generation does not hear this type of preaching. Often, when we attempt to go back and try to preach with the zeal we see in those of the Westminster generation, the Reformers, and the Puritans, we can fall into the following error spoken of by Sinclair Ferguson. Speaking of our modern day exegetical preaching, he states,

“One of the hidden snares in systematic biblical preaching is that we may become so taken up with the task of studying and explaining the text that we forget the actual poverty and falsehood it addresses. One distinctly Reformed manifestation of this is that our love for the works of the past (coupled with their ready availability today)—our discovery, for example, of the depth of Puritan preaching by comparison with contemporary preaching—may suck us into the very language and speech patterns of a past era, thus making us sound inauthentic to our own generation.”⁹

Ferguson further warns that “preaching to the heart will not be encrusted with layers of ill-digested materials from the past, however relevant these were to their day. Those preaching helps must rather be fully digested by us, made our own, and applied to people today in today’s language.”¹⁰ What the Scottish minister Alexander Whyte said of his own day a century ago is still true today:

Spiritual preaching; real face to face, inward, verifiable, experimental, spiritual preaching; preaching to a heart in the agony of its sanctification; preaching to men whose whole life is given over to making them a new heart — that kind of preaching is scarcely ever heard in our day. There is great intellectual ability in the pulpit of our day, great scholarship, great eloquence, and great earnestness (of manner), but spiritual preaching, preaching to the spirit — ‘wet-eyed’ preaching — is a lost art.¹¹

Thus, as Ridgley further explains,

The love which is to be expressed to God, discovers itself in the concern ministers have for the advancing of his truth, name, and glory, ...and their love to the souls of men induces them to preach with concern and sympathy. Their hearers not only have the same nature in common with themselves, in which they must either be happy or miserable forever; but they are liable to the same infirmities, difficulties, dangers, and spiritual enemies. Hence they who preach the gospel should express the greatest sympathy with them in their troubles, while they are using their utmost endeavours to help them in their way to heaven.¹²

To further clarify, zealous preaching then is that preaching which is motivated by a love for God the Father, where the preacher aided by the Holy Spirit displays a passionate and earnest desire for people, whom he views like himself, to know Christ as contained in the Scriptures in such a way that he is preparing them to live with God in heaven forever.

Given this definition, we then need to deepen further our Biblical sense of what knowing Christ in zealous preaching truly means.

⁹ Sinclair Ferguson, “Preaching to the Heart,” *Feed My Sheep* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2008), 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 108-109.

¹¹ Alexander Whyte, *Bunyan Characters, Third Series* (Scotts Valley, CA: Create Space, 2018), 115.

¹² Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, 478-479.

Christology: What Drives Zealous Preaching

As recorded in John 2, Jesus entered Jerusalem several months after beginning his public ministry in the year 27 A.D. It was the time of the Passover, followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This feast was the celebration of God's deliverance of the people out of Egypt, a week long feast where many memorial sacrifices were offered. Jesus deliberately went into the temple and was met with quite a sight.

The construction of the temple, called Herod's temple because he had provided for its rebuilding, had begun some 46 years earlier in 19 B.C. A magnificent structure, the temple and its courtyards were surrounded by outer walls enclosing roughly twenty acres of land. In the area outside the temple building proper, but inside the walls, was the open air place called the Court of the Gentiles. In this courtyard, the Gentiles, who were not allowed into any part of the temple structure, could come and worship the God of Israel.

Yet Jesus found there was no room for them to pray or worship, for it was filled with those selling animals and exchanging money. For the priests and Levites, who were supposed to be the spiritual leaders of the people, instead were overseeing a business. Most likely they were only accepting those animals sold on site in the courtyard for sacrifices. Like the food at an airport or movie theatre, they charged exorbitant prices. Each worshipper also had to pay a temple tribute, which could only be paid with a certain Jewish coin, and the priests controlled the circulation of this coin. The people then would have to exchange common money, at a high rate, to purchase one to pay their temple assessment. Thus, the temple courtyard had taken on the air of a county fair, complete with stockyard smells and noises, vendors who overcharged, booths to buy special tokens, yet all under the guise of worship and honoring God.

What did Jesus do when he saw this scene? He gathered some of the ropes undoubtedly lying on the ground that most likely had been used for tethering the animals. He then fashioned a scourge or whip out of them, and drove away these merchants. It was not a peaceful scene. He whipped and beat the sellers and animals out of the courtyard, flung over the tables of the moneychangers, and spoke directly to the sellers of the doves, "Take these things and get out of here. My Father's house is not to be a house of merchandise." Recall from the Old Testament that the doves were sacrifices that the poor offered, so these merchants were taking advantage of the poor. When animals are moved quickly, they can react in a panicked fashion, so one can only imagine the sounds, sights, and smells of what was taking place.

As his disciples witnessed the Lord on this occasion, John tells his readers what came to their minds. "His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me'" (John 2:17). Again, hearing these words in this immediate context could cause the reader to interpret this verse, a quotation from Psalm 69, simplistically, as only describing Jesus' outer actions on this occasion. Again, the association of zeal would then be with ardent, fervent behavior. Though certainly that is on display here, there is an underlying understanding in the heart of our Savior over what is taking place that deepens our comprehension of the statement "zeal for your house will consume me."

For the house that truly was the Father's and for which Jesus was consumed with zeal, was not the physical temple structure around them. Rather, his zeal was for the spiritual house of the church that the temple represented and that which Christ came to build. This fact is clear from John 2, for when he is asked to give a sign that he had the authority to do what he had just done, Jesus declared to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). His giving of his life in his crucifixion for his people, and his resurrection from the dead to give them life forms the cornerstone of the church, the temple of the living God. The temple of the Old Testament with its priesthood, its sacrifices, its holy places, its ark – all of it was to picture Christ's offering for his people. However, the leaders of Israel with their merchants were

corrupting this picture, and blinding people to the Christ who was now standing before them. Hence Jesus' holy anger was aroused. Therefore, He drove these corrupters away, and proclaimed the true gospel which is the only source of salvation for mankind: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

For it is this true zeal for his Father's house that consumed Jesus. He is so desirous for men, women, and children to be saved from their sins, experience life instead of death, know his Father, and be a member of his household forever. His zeal for us led him to be devoured by the hateful act of wicked men who put him to death on the cross.

For zealous preaching is gospel preaching not only in the content of the message but in the character of the messenger. The only God-ordained way out of this aforementioned corruption is preaching, the primary mark of the church. What must characterize such preaching is that it is zealous like Jesus' own preaching was. What will then chiefly characterize this zealous preaching is that the preacher is consumed himself with a solemnity that people will know and experience themselves the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Conclusions: What Develops Zealous Preaching

So what will develop zealous preaching? Five resulting applications are apparent.

First, zealous preaching can only be done by zealous preachers who love the people of God.

At the heart of what Christ was teaching in John 2, and behind the words of the Westminster standards on zealous preaching, is sincere love for the people to whom you are preaching. We must have a "loving affection" and a "hearty desire to do them good." Cold-hearted, brain-dulling, browbeating, unimaginative preaching is not showing love to the people. As Sinclair Ferguson states, the minister is not to be "lugubrious (sad, dismal, burdensome) and censorious, but rather filled with a loving affection for those to whom he ministers and preaches."¹³

Yet this truth goes deeper. T. David Gordon asks this question, "Do hearers get the impression that the minister is *for* them (eager to see them blessed richly by a gracious God), or *against* them (eager to put them in their place, scold them, reprimand them, or punish them?).¹⁴ At the heart of preaching is loving people enough to tell them what they need in a manner that convinces them that you also need it and have nothing but their best interest in mind as you tell them. The preacher must thus know his flock. "Christ did not ordain pastors on the principle that they only teach the Church in a general way on the public platform, but that they care for the individual sheep, bring back the wandering and scattered to the fold, bind up the broken and crippled, heal the sick, support the frail and weak."¹⁵

Next, zealous preaching is accomplished only through the minister being in prayer.

If God's house is to be a house of prayer, then the minister of prayer and the Word (that is the order of his ministry given in Acts) must be a man of prayer. Before the preacher stands behind the pulpit, he must kneel in his prayer closet. As the Westminster Directory for Public Worship explains the need for the minister to have a knowledge of theology and God's Word, it says he is to have "his senses and heart exercised in them above the common sort of believers" and encourages this to be sought through prayer. John Angell James asks, "How came the spirit of

¹³ Sinclair Ferguson, "Ministers of the Word", *Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008), 32.

¹⁴ T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 25.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Acts 14-28: Torrance Edition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 175.

slumber over the church? Was it not from the pulpit? And if a revival is to take place in the former, must it not begin in the latter?”¹⁶ If a minister wants revival in the church, then he needs to bring it into the pulpit. It begins with praying.

Third, zealous preaching opens up the Scriptures to show Christ to His people.

Even Jesus told the Jews, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). The zealous preacher also should have his heart so filled with the love and glory of God’s Son that whether he is in Genesis or Revelation, or any text in between, there is a clear, redemptive-historical bridge that leads his hearers from the text to Christ. To use Paul’s great chain of preaching in Romans 10, if people cannot call on Christ unless they believe in Him, and they cannot believe on him unless they hear, and they cannot hear him unless someone preaches him, then a Christ-less sermon is not only a sermon without zeal but also a failure to preach.

Thomas Goodwin reminds us that the Scriptures are to “open a window into Christ’s heart.”¹⁷ The preacher in communicating those Scriptures is to speak with the words, voice, and tones of Jesus, so that the people listening to him are hearing their Savior. Again, Goodwin states the the Bible “doth, as it were, take our hands and lay them upon Christ’s breast, and let us feel how his heart beats.”¹⁸ A zealous preacher, aided by the Holy Spirit, will seek to put the heartbeat of Christ into his hearers. Preaching is not just an exchange of information, it is an exchange of energy, of communicating with passion the heart of Christ into others.

Fourth, zealous preaching longs and calls for the conversion of unbelievers.

The next phrase that follows in the catechism answer after zealous preaching is that preaching is to be done “sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.” Too often Reformed preaching contains no clear call for people to repent of their sins and believe upon Christ. We preach as if people are in no danger, no need of Christ, and that just by being in church, it means they are converted. John Stott warned against such faithless preaching when he said,

“(Christian preachers) can be faithful to Scripture, lucid in explanation, felicitous in language, and contemporary in application. It would be hard to find fault with their content. Yet somehow they appear cold and aloof. No note of urgency is ever heard in their voice, and no suspicion of a tear is ever seen in their eyes. They would never dream of leaning over the pulpit to beg sinners in the name of Christ to repent, come to Him, and be reconciled with God.”¹⁹

May it not be! If you are a preacher, beg God for conversions in prayer. If you are not a preacher, beg God still for conversions. Pray that your minister will hold the bread of life out to all assembled. Preachers, call sinners to come to Christ and like the blind man cry out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

¹⁶ John Angell James, *An Earnest Ministry: The Want of the Times* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 59.

¹⁷ Thomas Goodwin, “The Heart of Christ in Heaven,” *The Works* (Eureka, California: Tanski, 1996), 4:96.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:111.

¹⁹ John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 283.

Zealous preaching will purify and even purge the church of Christ.

Jesus was the greatest prophet to stand in the temple and declare the corruption of God's people. But he was not the first one to do so. Clearly the Lord had in mind the words of Jeremiah when he spoke on that day. For centuries earlier, Jeremiah had lifted his voice before temple worshipers preaching against those who trusted in the physical structure and their involvement in its activities. He said, "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" (Jer. 7:9-11).

We live in an age where the church has grown corrupt once again. Not only is the Church of Rome reeling from sexual abuse cases by its non-marrying priests, but the evangelical church cannot stand on any higher moral ground either as daily it seems that married preachers are doing the same. These corruptions of behavior and morality begin with idolatry and corruption in worship. As the *Cambridge Declaration* states, "Evangelical churches today are increasingly dominated by the spirit of this age rather than by the Spirit of Christ."²⁰ This statement traces the said corruption to the lack of commitment to Scripture and preaching:

"Scripture alone is the inerrant rule of the church's life, but the evangelical church today has separated Scripture from its authoritative function. In practice, the church is guided, far too often, by the culture. Therapeutic technique, marketing strategies, and the beat of the entertainment world often have far more to say about what the church wants, how it functions and what it offers, than does the Word of God."²¹

When the preachers of a generation are characterized as "lovers of self rather than lovers of God," then zealous preaching has disappeared. Again, may it not be! May the Lord be pleased in our generation to raise up a multitude of preachers who are consumed with zeal for his house.

²⁰ James Boice and Benjamin Sasse, eds., *Here We Stand: A Call from Confessing Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.