

Preaching in Decay and in Revival

by Ian Murray

The sermon explores the decline of preaching in the 17th century and the revival of preaching in the 18th century, highlighting the importance of the power of the gospel and the need for a holy, humble, and zealous ministry.

Duration: 54:32

Scripture: Acts 2:17-18, Romans 10:14-15, 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, 2 Corinthians 5:20, Ephesians 4:11-12, Philippians 2:27, 1 Thessalonians 2:4, 2 Timothy 4:2, Hebrews 4:12, James 5:16

Topics: "Preaching", "Revival"

Description

Ian Murray discusses the decline and revival of preaching, beginning with Matthew Henry's reflections in 1712 on the sorrow caused by the loss of faithful ministers and the state of the nation. He highlights the persecution faced by dissenting ministers and the subsequent decline in the power of preaching, particularly after the Act of Uniformity in 1662. Despite this decay, the evangelical revival in the 1730s, led by figures like George Whitefield and John Wesley, marked a significant return to fervent and impactful preaching, characterized by personal conviction and the power of the Holy Spirit. Murray emphasizes that true preaching is not merely teaching but involves heartfelt persuasion and a deep connection to Christ, which was evident in the lives of revival preachers. He concludes by urging contemporary ministers to seek a fresh outpouring of the Spirit to revitalize their preaching.

Transcript

My subject this morning is preaching in decay and in revival. And I want us to begin in the month of April in the year 1712, and in a country church in the northwest of England, Matthew Henry was conducting a funeral service. The deceased man had been the minister of the congregation and had died at the age of 51.

And Matthew Henry, who ministered in the neighborhood, was called to take this funeral service. And he preached on the text in Philippians chapter 2 and verse 27, Lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. And speaking in this year, 1712, Matthew Henry spoke of the many reasons that God's people had for sorrow.

In the first instance, he said, because of the death and the passing of so many faithful ministers. In little more than seven years, he says, about 17 dissenting ministers have been removed. And another grief was the state of the nation.

Rivers of tears should run down our eyes, because there are so few that keep God's law and so many who break it. And above all, he says, we should mourn the state of Christ's cause. It may justly grieve us to see not only how iniquity abounds, but how the love of many waxes cold.

Love to their God, to their Bibles, to their brethren. Devout affections ebb and abate. The kindness of our youth is forgotten.

It is our sorrow to see so little of the power of Godliness among those who retain the form of it. Well, in that year, 1712, there were sadder things still to come. But Matthew Henry did not live to see them.

He was, I suppose you might say, the last of the Puritans, certainly the last of the old Puritan leaders. And he died at the age of 52, just two years later, in the summer of the year 1714. And six months after Matthew Henry died, a baby was born in the Bell Inn in Gloucester and named George Whitfield.

And the boundaries of our period today are the birth of Matthew Henry in 1662 and the death of George Whitfield in 1770. And in that period of time, we have, I think, all the great lessons concerning preaching eminently shown in that epoch of history. Now, when Matthew Henry was born in 1662, Puritan preaching had passed its ascendancy.

It had probably passed it 20 or 15 years before his death, before his birth. But from the time of Matthew Henry's birth in 1662, there was a dramatic decline in the preaching of the Word of God. There were various causes for that.

You will remember that the king on the throne in 1662 was Charles II, supported by a parliament that was filled with enmity in many instances against living Christianity. And so on the 24th of August in 1662, the Act of Uniformity came into force which ejected 2,000 ministers from their churches, from schools, from the universities, and overnight, as it were, countless congregations were deprived of ministers. It was as though a light had gone out.

And right down until 1688, those ejected ministers, who were now called dissenters, were in many instances the subject of persecution, severe persecution. And simultaneously, there were a series of catastrophes in the nation. In the year 1665, for example, in London, 100,000 people died of the plague in a comparatively small city.

10,000 people in one week. And the next year, there came the Great Fire of London. When that fire began, there were 97 churches standing in the city of London, churches that had had in their pulpits most of the great Puritan leaders.

When that fire was burnt out, there were only 10 churches still standing in the city of London. And yet, despite those things and others, the persecution of Christians continued. Many pastors and preachers spent long years in prison.

John Bunyan, you recall, spent 12 years in prison. Others died in prison. A conventical act was passed, the result of which meant that if Christians met, as they often did during the night or an early morning, and if they were found in their meetings, they were severely fined.

And someone has calculated that between 10 to 14 million pounds, say 20 to 28 million dollars, was spent in fines by the dissenters in that period. Now, that's in the currency of that time. An enormous amount of money that greatly weakened the evangelical cause.

And the reason for this hatred of the gospel is put in a few sentences by William Jenkin, one of the great Puritans who wrote that commentary on Jude which has been reprinted. William Jenkin died in prison in London and he said, The true reason of Satan's peculiar rage against saints is because they have that faith delivered to them which is the bane and battery of his kingdom. I have given them thy word, said Christ, and the world hath hated them.

And another Puritan writing on the same subject says, Satan labours with might and maim, with rage and fury, by imprisonment, by banishment, by fire and faggot, to eradicate and to destroy Christ's kingdom and interest out of the world. Either by falling upon the church in general or upon her lights and guides and watchmen in particular. Remove the watchmen and the garrison is easily surprised and taken.

And therefore Satan, sometimes in his persecutions, aims chiefly at pious, learned, painful and zealous ministers. Because they, most of all, like burning and shining lights, dispel the darkness of his kingdom. Well, the Puritan preaching continued despite the persecution, but the congregations were greatly reduced in size and when liberty at last was restored in the year 1688, the spiritual force of the Puritan movement was broken.

It seemed to have gone in great measure. Between 1688 and 1730 in London, there was only one new dissenting building put up. Some others were enlarged, but speaking generally, the cause of evangelical religion went backwards.

One writer speaking of the dissenters, he says they went to their little meeting houses, they heard their preachers, they paid them perhaps as well as they could and were satisfied. If they thought much of the deadness and ignorance and corruption around them, it must have seemed too great to be removed. Now, what were the reasons why the successors of the great Puritans of the mid-17th century, what are the reasons why the pulpit declined as it did? Let me just suggest a few reasons to you before we move on.

One reason, I believe, was that in the later 17th century, there was a growing tendency for ministers to be over-occupied in controversies between Christians. Now, when Christians are in controversy with the world, the gospel never suffers. But when Christians are in controversy with one another, it's very often the case that the gospel does begin to suffer.

Matthew Henry testified, I am most in my element when I am preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified. But he complained of the readiness with which too many fell into disputes. And he says, multitudes lose the power of godliness while they are eagerly contesting about the forms, the form of words, the form of worship, the form of government.

And he is reflecting there upon a tendency that was certainly present in his day. And Harold Harris, one of the Welsh evangelical leaders of the following century who grew up as a child close to dissenting congregations, he said, they were very ready to debate with me concerning outward things, but no one told me that I was on the way to hell. The distracting influence of controversy.

Secondly, this decay of preaching was influenced undoubtedly by the spirit of the age. I mentioned yesterday morning Lawrence Chatterton of Emanuel College, Cambridge. I also mentioned Thomas Hooker who was a fellow of Emanuel College.

Emanuel was the great nursery of the Puritans. It was, if you like, the sort of Geneva of 17th century England. That one college did more than any other, both for this side of the Atlantic and for the British side

in raising men for the ministry.

And, as so often happens, it was in that very college that the philosophy began that did such damage in the nation. What is known as Cambridge Platonism, which meant briefly that the revelation of Scripture is not to be denied, but it has to be supplemented with reason. And, of course, the next stage was that reason made unnecessary in great measure Scripture at all.

And so they developed the whole idea that Christianity is not a doctrinal system, but rather it is a scheme of morality. And when we speak of faith, personal faith, we really mean sincerity. And so in the 18th century there came the whole notion of Christianity as a scheme of morality.

And the work of the Holy Spirit in conviction of sin, in giving assurance of salvation, that was altogether passed over. And along with that, there was in the universities and in the theatres and in the literature of the day there was a prolonged and sustained attack upon experimental religion. It was ridiculed.

It was held up to laughter. There was a magazine called The Spectator which published 20,000 copies every week. And that, with great literary giants like Addison writing in it, that magazine continually ridiculed anything like unction or zeal in religion.

The great virtue of the day was to be broad-minded and to be charitable. Matitudinarianism, as it's later been called. And anything to do with emotion in religion was a great evil.

Now the dissenting congregations lived in the middle of that atmosphere. And they did not capitulate to it entirely, but they were subtly influenced by it. They felt that if they were to have any credibility at all, they had to some extent to move with the times.

They had to show a more tolerant spirit than had been seen in an earlier generation. And the direct result was that preaching declined. The zeal of the Puritans was almost as unknown says one writer, as it was unimitated.

And Charles Miles says, in less than half a century, the doctrines of the great founders of Presbyterianism could scarcely be heard from any Presbyterian pulpit in England. The Puritan doctrine remained in literature in an occasional pulpit, but otherwise its power was gone. The influence of the times A second reason.

A third reason, the last, which really explains, I think, the other two. And you will find it dealt with at length in that great work by John Owen, The Nature and Causes of Apostasy from the Gospel. A book that he wrote in 1676 and which is found in volume 7 of his works.

He says many things about the state of preaching, but if you read the ninth chapter of that great work, you will see that under the title of Defects in Teachers of Religion, under that title, Owen goes to the root of the existing weakness. And he argues that preaching will only be effective to the extent in which the power of the gospel abides in the hearts of those who are in the ministerial office. And where the Holy Spirit's influence declines and when heart religion languishes, says Owen, preaching will cease to do its true work.

And he said there was only one remedy. When God shall be pleased to give unto the people who are called by His name in a more abundant manner pastors after His own heart, to feed them with knowledge and understanding, when He shall revive and increase a holy, humble, zealous, self-denying, powerful

ministry by a more plentiful effusion of His Spirit from above, then, and not until then, may we hope to see the pristine glory and beauty of our religion restored to its primitive state and condition. And John Owen was absolutely right in those words.

He didn't live to see it. But the evangelical revival began with preachers. And it began with preachers not where they might have been expected to appear, but as you know, it began with preachers in that church where the lights had gone out in 1662, in the Church of England.

The church where preaching was so cold and dead. I could pause to say a few things about the nature of the Anglican preaching at that date, but I think I must hurry on. Except perhaps to mention one rather amusing thing that I read recently.

Among the critics of Anglican preaching was the diarist Samuel Pepys. Samuel Pepys, who by men of the world is reckoned to be some authority. This Canon Overton who writes a book on the period was rather disturbed at the damaging nature of Pepys' criticism and he responded to it in this way.

He said that Pepys was really no authority on preaching because in all solemnity he writes in his book he frequently slept all through the sermon. And of course thousands of others did the same. King George and Queen Caroline it was said used to talk about politics when the sermon was being preached in the Royal Chapel.

And the people loved to have it so. Another writer says, the people far preferred the chatty, easy going parson. The preacher who allowed them to live as they might choose.

Who did not preach too censoriously about sin. And who professed to give them with the sanction of the state and all the bishops an easy entrance to heaven after death. He was the preacher for them.

Now that was the general state of preaching particularly in Anglicanism before the 1730s. And then in the 1730s there came so unexpectedly and suddenly this great change. A new phenomenon.

And the phenomenon was that people who had given up listening to sermons or had slept through sermons now began sometimes in great numbers to wait upon the preaching of the Word of God. In the year 1739 in the first few weeks of that year George Whitfield who was then 24 he preached 30 times. And on a very famous day in church history it ought to be ringed on all our calendars to be remembered.

On the 17th of February 1739 George Whitfield for the first time preached in the open air at a place called Rose Green near Bristol to a company of miners. You remember how as he preached that day their blackened faces began to be streaked white as tears fell. 1739 John Wesley from April 1739 to the end of the year preached some 500 sermons.

And henceforth these two men and others with them gave their lives to the preaching of the Gospel. Now let me just give you a few eyewitness accounts of this new preaching. What was it that made it so different to the preaching that had been long customary? There was a man in the midlands of England called Joseph Williams.

He was a businessman a very level-headed middle-aged man. He had been a Christian for a number of years. He was a dissenter.

He was a prayerful man. And when he heard of what was happening in Bristol he decided, wise man that he was, to go and see for himself. And the day he got to Bristol at the very moment actually he arrived Charles Wesley was leading the service in the open air.

Williams says, I found him standing on a table in an erect posture with his hands and eyes lifted up to heaven in prayer. He prayed with uncommon fervor and fluency and variety of expression. He then preached about an hour in such a manner as I scarce ever heard any man preach.

Though I have heard many a finer sermon according to the common taste, I never heard any man discover such evident signs of vehement desire or labor so earnestly to convince his hearers that they were all by nature in a sinful, lost and undone state. And then he showed how great a change faith in Christ would produce in the whole man. And with uncommon fervor he acquitted himself as an ambassador of Christ.

And so Williams goes on. I can't read it all. But later in the day Williams found himself in a prayer meeting where these others were also present.

Never, he said, never did I hear such praying. Never did I see or hear such evident marks of fervency in the service of God. And then after speaking a bit more about this prayer meeting, he says, if there is any such thing as heavenly music upon earth, I heard it there.

If there be such an enjoyment, such an attainment as heaven upon earth, numbers in that society seem to possess it. And as for my own part, I do not remember my heart to have been so lifted up in divine love and praise as it was then for many years past. Well, there are many descriptions of the preaching of George Whitefield.

I never saw, said one witness, I never saw in my life such an attentive audience. All that he said was demonstration and life and power. Another said, he appeared to speak of divine realities.

He appeared to speak of spiritual and divine things as awful realities. And one minister who heard Whitefield and was present in a service, he wrote afterwards, my inmost soul is penetrated with an overwhelming sense of the power and the presence of God who has visited us with an effusion of His Spirit in a very eminent manner. Mr. Whitefield's words seemed to cut like a sword.

Oh, with what eloquence and energy and melting tenderness did he beseech sinners to be reconciled to God. And when the sermon was ended, the people seemed chained to the ground. And then this sentence of John Newton, converted, you remember, in the 1750s, found himself in London early one morning and for the first time he went to Whitefield's Tabernacle.

They had an early morning service about six o'clock in the morning. When John Newton got there, he found about a thousand people gathered and he doesn't say much about the sermon or anything, but this is what he says, Never before had I such an idea and foretaste of the business of heaven. The business of heaven.

Then later on he heard Whitefield and he describes his sermon and having described it, he goes on to say, Something like this was his plan, but the power and the warmth with which he treated it, I can by no means express, though I hope I feel the influence of it still. Now, the leading preachers of the evangelical revival were men of very different characters and personalities, as Mr. Martin said the other evening. Umption in preaching may show itself in many different outward ways, but this same spiritual reality was

present through their preaching.

Just a few words about Daniel Rowland. Christmas Evans, the great Baptist preacher, as a young man, went to hear Daniel Rowland preach in Llangistu in Wales where Rowland was minister. He says, There was a sort of vehement flame transforming and driving away the earthly dead and careless spirit and the people, the congregation, drew nigh it seemed in the cloud to Christ and to Moses and Elijah and eternity and its realities rushed into their minds.

The story is told, Daniel Rowland was once preaching at his chapel, the windows on the west and the windows on the east and as he began preaching, the sun was coming through the eastern windows of the chapel before the sermon was ended that day. The first rays of sun were coming through the western windows of the church. The people, says Christmas Evans, they drew near to eternity and its realities rushed into their minds.

Thomas Charles, the man who was to be the great leader of revival in North Wales, he says, I went to hear Mr. Rowland preach at the new chapel, Llangistu. His text was Hebrews 4.15. A day much to be remembered by me as long as I live. Ever since that happy day, I have lived in a new heaven and a new earth.

It was the day of his conversion. I had such a view of Christ as our high priest of His love, compassion, power and all sufficiency as filled my soul with astonishment, with joy unspeakable and full of glory. My mind was overwhelmed and overpowered with amazement.

The truths exhibited appeared too wonderfully gracious to be believed. I could not believe for very joy the glorious scenes which then opened to my eyes will abundantly satisfy my soul millions of years hence in the contemplation of. Now then, some lessons to be drawn from this revival of preaching.

And the first lesson is this. As one reads about Whitefield and Rowlands and the Wesleys and many others, there is surely the striking impression of the resemblance between this preaching and the preaching of the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The preaching in the book of Acts was doctrinal and it was powerful.

It was bold, soul-piercing, awe-inspiring, convicting, warm. All the things which we read about these men, there is a very distinct resemblance so that even men who have no real sympathy with the evangelical revival have been forced to admit there is some kind of parallel. Now, how do we explain that parallel? Well, many of the clergy of the time explained it as a delusion.

Fanaticism. They argued that what happened in the Acts of the Apostles could not happen in the 18th century. That it was one thing at Caesarea for the Holy Ghost to fall upon all those that heard the Word, but that wasn't to be expected in London.

It might have been necessary in Jerusalem that multitudes would be pricked in their hearts and cry, what shall we do? That could not happen in 1739. It belonged only to the foundation of the church and the resemblance to the apostolic age was only, as I say, the delusion of fanaticism. There were many, sadly, who said that.

And the other alternative was just this. And it was the testimony, unitedly of all these preachers, that any success and influence that they had was due only to the Spirit of God moving again on the face of the waters. It was God's Spirit.

And surely it is very striking that this awakening did not begin because of a new program. It didn't begin because men had new views. It began because something happened to these men.

They were themselves convicted. They began to long for holiness. They were converted.

They gave themselves earnestly to seek God for themselves and for others. And what happened after that was spontaneous. They didn't plan it.

If George Whitefield had had a diary for the year 1739, he wouldn't have had written on February the 17th, Preach at Rose Green Bristol. It didn't happen that way. It began because, as John Owen had said way back in 1676, this will come with a new, a more plentiful diffusion of God's Spirit from above.

Now, there are plenty of records to show in private the springs of what happened in public. For example, on January the 1st, 1739, Whitefield and the Wesleys and some other Christians spent the evening together in London. George Whitefield had a bad head cold that night.

But as they spoke together and began to pray together, the hours speedily passed. And John Wesley says, about three in the morning, as we were continuing intent in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and others fell to the ground. And as soon as we recovered a little from our awe and amazement at the presence of the Divine Majesty, we broke out with one voice, we praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.

Speaking of these same days, Whitefield says, it was a Pentecost season indeed. Sometimes whole nights were spent in prayer. Often those that met were filled as with new wine.

And often have I seen them overwhelmed with the Divine Presence and heard them cry out, will God indeed dwell with men upon earth? And what made these men different preachers was just that their experience was so different. They had a full assurance of salvation. In great measure they lost the fear of man.

They had that boldness which results from the conviction that they stood in the presence of Christ. And the unction of the Spirit was a reality of which they were conscious. George Whitefield says, I knew by happy experience what our Lord meant by saying, he that believeth on me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

And so they went on to say that preachers will do no good unless in a real sense they bear likeness to the one whom they preach. That is to say, as Jesus preached with authority and not as the scribes, so, said these men, by the anointing of his Spirit, we also must speak. George Whitefield, the first time he preached in Stockton, in Glasgow, preached on the text the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the Gospel.

Well, he preached the Gospel gloriously and fully and pressed it upon all the people. But before he ended his sermon, he turned to the ministers who were present and the theological students who were present and he said, see whether you feel these truths you are preaching to your congregations or not. It will be poor, dry, sapless stuff and your people will go out of church as cold as they came in.

Accept your ministry, be attended with the power of God. When shall we hear or see such a day in Scotland? Until we find a stirring of the work of God among ministers, we cannot expect to find it among the people. Pray, he says, pray the Lord of the harvest.

Pray for students that when they come out, they may say the Spirit of the Lord is upon me. And when, says Whitefield, when it is upon them, the whole world will be set on fire of love. I wish well for this poor kingdom, but this will never be until the Spirit of God is poured out upon the sons of the prophets.

So Whitefield. And George, I'm sorry, and John Wesley, preaching in Oxford on August the 24th in 1744, one of the boldest sermons preached in the 18th century. You'll find a good lengthy account of it in J.C. Ryle's 18th Century Leaders.

Amidst all the dignities of the university, the dons and the professors and the graduates, he spoke from the text, and when they had prayed, the place wherein they were assembled was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and with boldness. John Wesley preached that text in Oxford with great plainness. It was the last time he was ever asked to preach there.

Which illustrates, of course, that these men were not interested in what the world calls influence. They believed in practice as well as in theory that all success depends upon God. And though they might be called madmen and enthusiasts, they knew that it was man-centered religion which had been the death of preaching.

George Whitfield said very boldly to Bishop Warburton, one of the great so-called scholars of his day, Whitfield said, as far as perverted reason and disguised sophistry could carry him, he has robbed the church of its promised comforter and thereby he has left us without any supernatural influence or divine operations whatsoever. Now, if you read that great book of John Owens on the nature and causes of apostasy, Owens says that the real heart reasons for apostasy are pride and vanity and carelessness and the love of the world. And these were the things which were broken through in the 1730s.

A new impulse ran through Christians. The head of the church gave new life to the body and a new era had begun. The parallel then with the apostolic era.

And the second lesson to which I hasten on is this. The very apparent connection between the preaching of these men and the great theme of their preaching and their personal private lives. What they were in public was the result of what they were in private.

The apostle Paul says he determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Paul spoke like that because of his personal conviction of the worth of the Lord Jesus Christ. We sang those beautiful words of Charles Wesley, Thou O Christ art all I want more than all in Thee I find.

That was the keynote of these men. They were not faultless. They were not delivered from some mistakes and sometimes even from errors.

But as you look at them, the first thing that strikes you is that in their personal lives they were supremely devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ. And they did not simply profess to believe in the love of Christ. They actually enjoyed that love.

They were conscious of it. They could say with the apostle Paul the love of Christ constrains us. They had foretastes of glory.

Many foretastes. They used to love the hymn of Isaac Watts. The men of grace have found glory begun below.

George Whitefield speaks on various occasions of acting under immediate views of a happy eternity. And so we need to say, speaking of this connection between their personal private lives and their preaching, we need to say and to note that the striking thing is that they did not set out to be great preachers. They did not even set out to obtain a revival.

What they set out to do preeminently was individually and personally to be real Christians. That was their goal. And it was as they sought that goal that God gave them so many other blessings.

Their overriding concern was to know Christ and to be like the Lord Jesus Christ. They did not call prayer meetings to gain results. They prayed in the first instance for fellowship with God.

They were not in the first instance interested in numbers. George Whitefield once having preached to several thousand people, when the sermon was over, the comment that he makes is, I myself was so overpowered with a sense of God's love that it almost took my life away. Now a few quotations from Whitefield to illustrate this devotion to Christ.

When he was 25 years old, a minister in South Carolina who met him said, he appears to me to be full of love of God and to be fired with extraordinary zeal for the cause of Christ. His head, his heart, his hands seem to be full of Christ's business. Whitefield said himself, oh for a thousand lives to spend for Jesus.

And as he grew older, we find him writing, there is nothing I dread more than having my heart drawn away by earthly objects. When that time comes, it will be all over with me indeed. I must bid farewell to zeal and fervency of spirit.

My blood runs cold at the very thought. At the age of 36, he says to a friend, I long to be on the stretch for him who was stretched upon the cursed tree for ill and hell deserving me. And again, oh that I may be enabled to the end to evidence that nothing but a pure disinterested love to Christ and souls caused me to begin and go on and hold out.

At 43, he writes, what can reconcile us to stay longer on earth for the prospect of seeing the kingdom of the Lord Jesus advanced? People spoke of the ardent love he showed to Christ, but that's not what Whitfield felt. Age 48, he says, oh that I had done more for the blessed Jesus. Oh that I could think more of what he had done for me.

On his 52nd birthday, he wrote, oh loving, ever loving, altogether lovely Jesus, how little, yea, how very little have I done and suffered for thee. I am ashamed of myself. Tomorrow, God willing, I intend to take a sacrament upon it that I will begin to begin to be a Christian.

George Whitfield, age 52, I will begin to begin to be a Christian. And bear in mind that when the evangelical revival began, there was a great deal of professional religion and the clergy were paid to preach. And they preached too often because it was their profession.

And here were men, like the Wesleys and Whitfield, who were not paid to preach. Who, because they preached, were disowned and put out of churches. And sometimes mobbed and repeatedly attacked and ridiculed and slandered.

They gained nothing in the way of this world's goods by their preaching. But they gained, as they believed, something far more. The opportunity to make the Lord Jesus Christ known.

One American said of Whitfield, he had such a sense of the incomparable excellence of the person of Christ that he could never say enough of him. And then, before I leave Whitfield, just remember that Saturday in Massachusetts, September the 29th in 1770, George Whitfield preaching in a little country village in Massachusetts on that Saturday afternoon. Before he preached, one of his friends advised him that he was more fit to go to bed than to preach.

And Whitfield didn't exactly respond directly to his friend, but he was overheard to say, Lord Jesus, I am weary, I am weary in thy work, but not of it. And he preached for two hours that afternoon. And he went on after the sermon was finished to new report to the manse of Jonathan Parsons, his old friend of the days of the Great Awakening.

And he found the house full of people hoping he would preach that night. Well, Whitfield was given his supper. And at the end of that supper, even Whitfield, the day's work that he had already done, was exhausted and admitted that he must go to bed.

So when he was asked to preach to the people, he declined. He was given his candle and he began his ascent of the staircase in Parsons' home. But as he did so, his eye caught the sign of the people who were gathered around the porch and also many in the house.

And he stood still. And halfway up the staircase began to preach to them. Went on, it said, preaching until the candle was burnt down to the bottom of its socket.

And at five o'clock the next morning, George Whitfield was dead. Fifty-five years of age, beginning to be a Christian, loving the Lord Jesus Christ. Whitfield's great friend, William Grimshaw, says, preaching is health and food and physic to me.

There is a very great need of preaching now and our Master well deserves it and infinitely more. The point then that these men's personal lives are the explanation why in their preaching they made so much of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let me just mention one other man.

A man called Paul Greenwood. I'm sure his name is unknown today. He was just an itinerant in the northeast of England.

A plain Methodist preacher. In the year 1767 he was overtaken with fever and he died as a result of that fever. And it was said that on the last night of his life he was delirious.

And yet, says somebody who was with him, in all his conversation he was spiritual and heavenly. The last night of his life he preached and prayed the whole time until daybreak appeared in the morning. He then said, another sun shall arise.

Christ, the sun of righteousness with healing in his wings. And immediately he fell asleep in the Lord. That's a Methodist preacher.

Preached all night and prayed and as the sun arose in the morning fell asleep in the Lord. The last point then. This preaching shows us that there is no real preaching unless there is this element of feeling.

The very thing that was so opposed by the latitudinarians. Preaching is not simply teaching. We've already said this, have we not, in various sessions.

James Durham the Puritan says preaching is called persuading, testifying, beseeching, entreating, or requesting, exhorting. Richard Sibbes says to preach is to woo. And true revival is something which urges and compels and pleads in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Before the evangelical revival preaching left people unmoved and untouched. And they were unmoved because ministers with cold lips spoke out of cold hearts. And the prevailing theology justified the cold hearts.

George Whitfield said, I am persuaded the generality of preachers talk of an unknown and unfelt Christ. The reason why congregations have been so dead is because they have dead men preaching to them. Oh Lord, that Thou would quicken and revive them.

How can the dead beget living children? It is true indeed, he says, that God may convert even by the devil if he so chooses. And he may by them convert ministers, but I believe he seldom makes use of either for his purpose. No, he chooses vessels made meat by the operation of his blessed spirit.

And Whitfield and these brethren they did not pursue feelings or emotion or tears. What feeling they had it seems to me was the result of their own communion with Christ. It was the overflow through them of the compassion with which Jesus himself looks upon the multitude.

Their feelings resembled those of the Savior. William Cooper or Pauper has those stanzas on Whitfield. And he says much about Whitfield's Christ-likeness.

And he has those beautiful lines. He loved the world that hated him. The tear which fell upon his Bible was sincere.

And as we read of these men it seems to me that there is a danger in our day of our being like the priests and the Levites who when they saw that poor man by the wayside passed by on the other side. Or like Simon the Pharisee when he saw the extravagance of the woman who washed Christ's feet with tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head. They were Simon was unable to appreciate what that meant.

And is it not true my brethren that as we read these things the great danger may be that we read them as past history. And even admire them as that. But somehow we do not understand why such devotion to Christ should be needed.

And if George Whitefield were to be present to address us this day I am sure he would tell us that we need to cease from man and that we certainly do not need his presence here. But what we need is to realize that the one who clothed them with authority and grace is the ever living head of the church who lives to give pastors and teachers. Who lives to fulfill what John Owen said in 1676.

To give a more plentiful effusion of the Spirit. And Whitefield then would have called upon us to go to him and to plead with him. And he would have assured us that we would not plead in vain.

Let us then my brethren as we think of these things afresh, thank God that he has given us in history also this guidance which speaks to us even at the present hour.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ian-murray/preaching-in-decay-and-in-revival/>

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