

Experimental Preaching

by J.C. Philpot

A ministry without power is never profitable or acceptable to the church of God, and a minister must have a deep and daily sense of his own thorough helplessness and insufficiency, combined with a living experience of the grace and strength of Christ made perfect in his weakness.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:4, 2 Corinthians 4:7, Ephesians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 2 Timothy 1:7

Topics: "Spiritual Power", "Effective Ministry"

Description

J.C. Philpot emphasizes the necessity of a ministry filled with the power of God, rather than relying on human wisdom or eloquence. He distinguishes between the ministration of 'the letter' and 'the Spirit,' highlighting the life-giving power of the latter. Philpot stresses the importance of ministers being rooted in their own experience of God's grace and power before they can effectively minister to others. He warns against the dangers of departing from 'experimental truth' and falling into a form of preaching that lacks the genuine power and freshness of the Spirit.

Transcript

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A ministry without power never was, never can be, profitable or acceptable to the church of God. In what striking language does Paul declare what his own ministry was as regards this point, and the effect produced by it in the hearts of those to whom it was blessed: "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance." How carefully does he here distinguish between the "word" and the "power" as regards his own ministry; and, speaking of that of others, how he examines it by the same decisive test: "But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will, and will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power."

This, then, is the grand distinctive and decisive difference between the ministration of "the letter" and of "the Spirit,"--that the one is an empty sound, a mere babbling noise, and the other a life-giving power; that the one genders to bondage and death, and the other ministers grace to the hearers, and works effectually in those that believe. But if a man has never felt the power of God in his own soul, how can he minister

power to others? Life and power, dew and savor, must be in a man's heart before they can be on a man's lips. For this special gift and grace of heaven there can be no substitute. Learning, abilities, and eloquence, are not to be despised or set aside, for they may be dedicated to the service of the sanctuary; but they are miserable substitutes for that live coal from off the altar with which God touches the lips of his sent servants. Paul, Augustine, and Luther, had all these three gifts in an eminent degree; nor did they make Paul a less able apostle, Augustine a less admirable expositor, or Luther a less intrepid or successful reformer. But far above and beyond all these natural gifts was that divine power which rested upon them and clothed their words with a heavenly influence to the souls of men.

Now, if this, to us fundamental principle, be not deeply grafted in a minister's heart, and there kept perpetually alive by the teaching of the Spirit, he will be fully satisfied with a mere letter drift; or if for a while he seem to "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints," he will almost inevitably, sooner or later, be drawn aside from the path of experimental truth. This, then, is, or should be, the feeling of every servant of God, "I am nothing but by God's making; I have nothing but by God's giving; I know nothing but by God's teaching; I feel nothing (aright) but by God's inspiring; and I can do nothing but by God's working." The deep and daily sense of his own thorough helplessness and insufficiency, combined with a living experience of the grace and strength of Christ made perfect in his weakness, will keep him on experimental ground; and as the blessed Spirit works in him fresh and fresh discoveries of sin and salvation, misery and mercy, ruin and recovery, hell and heaven, so will he give out what is given in; "his heart will teach his mouth, and add learning (the right kind of learning) to his lips."

Every trial and temptation, furnace and flood, every assault from without or within, every rising venom of indwelling sin, and every fiery dart from the artillery of hell, will only root and ground him more deeply in experimental truth, as every storm roots and grounds the oak more firmly in the soil; and every beam and ray of the Sun of Righteousness, with every drop of dew upon his branch, and every shower of rain on his root, will draw him more and more out of pride and self into the light and air of heaven. Thus, night and day, winter and summer, storm and sun, cold and heat, the lowly valley's gloom and the shining mountain top, all combine in grace, as in creation, to carry on God's work, and strengthen and ripen the tree of his right hand planting in the church of God.

As long as a man is thus graciously dealt with, he will be held on experimental ground; and his soul being kept alive by the power of God, and he being in the things of which he speaks, a life, power, and freshness will accompany his word; and this will not only commend itself to the conscience of the family of God, but be conveyed with a sweetness and savor to their hearts. But let a minister of truth get into a smooth and easy path, let sin cease to vex him, Satan to plague him, the world to hate him, professors to slander him, and God to bless him, his preaching, though still on the same basis, and still dealing outwardly with the same things, from inevitable necessity will get dull and dry. This leanness of spirit and barrenness of ministry, unless wonderfully puffed up by pride and conceit, he will soon begin himself to feel. He becomes sensible by degrees of a sameness in his preaching. The supply in the tank being so often drawn upon and not fed again and again with a rising spring, gets lower and lower, and the water more vapid and tasteless, until it seems almost to breed corruption and death in himself and the hearers.

Now here is the turning point with him, whether he is all his days to be to the church of God an old, useless, worn out rain-water butt, or a flowing brook. If left still unexercised, he will soon have little else but staves and hoops; if God turn his hand a second time, and once more deal graciously with him, living water will again flow. But assume the former case. Let the rod and the kiss, the frown and the smile, the affliction and the consolation, the trial and the deliverance be alike suspended; let the Lord for his own

wise purposes leave him to settle on his lees; let him remain cold, barren, and dry in his soul, such will be his ministry; and those divine realities in living experience which he once found sweetness in declaring and the people in hearing, now becoming dead and lifeless to him, it comes to this point, that either he must keep going over the same ground over and over again, until, like a tethered donkey, his teeth and hoofs have worn out every blade of grass, or he must break his tether and get something new, for his leanness rises up in his face, and his own barrenness is evidently starving the people.

Some men, either too blind to see, too dead to feel it, or too proud to confess it, resolutely hold on to the same ground. Lord's day after Lord's day, there is the same dead dry prayer, and the same dead dry sermon. Not only is the same old tale told, but in almost the same words, with nothing new but the text. Now this may be called preaching experience, and so in a sense it is; but it is a preaching which beggars the soul; and we do believe that much of the lean and miserable state of many experimental churches is owing to this feeding them on the picked and gnawed bones and the old dry crusts of a dead, worn-out experience. No wonder that such preaching as this is despised, and that people are prejudiced against experimental preaching, when this is considered experimental.

But this no more resembles real experimental preaching than the manna which bred worms and stank resembled the manna which fell with the morning dew, or the dry and moldy bread of the Gibeonites was like the cake baked by the angel for Elijah, or their old shoes and clouted were the same as the shoes of iron and brass which God put on the feet of his people.

Many mistakes are made on this point. There is a creed of experience, as there is a creed of doctrine, which may be learned exactly in the same dead and dry way; there are certain generally recognized and almost consecrated terms, a set of current phrases, which, having been used in time past by real experimental ministers, have been handed down as a religious Shibboleth, a ministerial stock in trade; and he who has learned this key and obtained these pass-words, comes forward as an experimental servant of God, and puts himself at once, or is put by others, on the roll of the divinely-sent ambassadors of heaven. But as a man does not become the Queen's ambassador to the Court of Austria because he can speak a little German, nor to the Court of France because he can gabble a little French, so it is not a set of experimental phrases which makes a man an ambassador from the King of kings to the Court of Zion.

But many weak, timid children of God cannot see through words into things, and though sensible of increasing deadness and barrenness under the ministry of such men, take all the blame to themselves, reverencing, with almost abject superstition, the minister, because he is a minister, and believing his words must be words of grace because they are pronounced in a certain way, and are so familiar to their ears that they have become consecrated in their eyes with a kind of religious value.

But words at best are but words; and unless there be something more than word, however consistent it be with truth, such a ministry will but make empty the soul of the hungry and cause the drink of the thirsty to fail.

But it is hard to come down from the pulpit to their fit place--the pew; thus they still keep on preaching and still maintain the name and credit of being experimental ministers; and highly offended they would be if told they were more of a burden than a benefit to the church of God, and rather plundered than fed the flock of slaughter.

Perceiving this evil, seeing how dead and dry a thing experimental preaching has much become, and observing how lean and impoverished the church of God gets through it, others long to break through the

narrow circle in which they have already walked. "We want," say they, "more enlarged views of God's word. Why should we be ever treading the narrow circle of doubts and fears, comforts and blessings? Why be ever tracing out marks of grace, and talking just as our poor old minister used to talk in years gone by? Why not break forth into something different from what we have heard over and over again until we are weary of the very name of experience?"

Now just as a man is in this state of mind, not held down to experimental things by inward trials, but weary and ashamed of his own leanness and the leanness of others, the letter of God's word seems to open a door out of this worn-out pasture. Some new view of doctrine, or some light upon prophecy, or some fresh discovery, as it appears, of church government, or some insight into the precept, or some entrance into the types and figures of the Mosaic dispensation--it matters not what it is, but a new light seems to break in on his mind. His views, once so narrow and contracted, become enlarged; he reads and studies the Scripture and seems to gather with every reading more and more knowledge. No, the light which thus breaks in, as he thinks, on his mind, is attended with a power which he had not for some time felt. His zeal is kindled, his mouth opened, or his pen seized, and he cannot but give vent to his views and feelings.

This new view of doctrine may be but a revived heresy or a long-exploded error; his light upon prophecy may be merely borrowed from books and authors, or gathered up by himself from a comparison of parallel passages, without one word got on his knees or dropped into his soul; his principles of church government may be altogether visionary and impracticable and his insight into types and figures partly stolen and partly fanciful; or to put it in the most favorable light, all his views may be quite sound and in accordance with the letter of Scripture. But whatever they be, they are not wrought into his soul by the power of God; they are not burnt into him in the furnace; they are not made his own by the teaching of the blessed Spirit; they are not revealed and applied to his heart, and thus made part and parcel of a living experience; nor are they received in much affliction with joy of the Holy Spirit. At best they are but opinions floating in the brain, views presented to the eye of an intellectual religion scanning the Scriptures as a map maker or a landscape painter scans the features of an outstretched tract of country; or a theory gathered from the word, much as a student of history gathers up facts from chronicles and gazettes, and welds them into a compact system of political narrative.

Why, the remedy is worse than the disease! While on experimental ground, he was so far safe, that if he had but little to say, that little was sound. He could coast along the bays and headlands, and knew something about where he was, though the voyage did not reach very far, and was but a going from port to port along the shore. But now he has left all his old landmarks and well-known buoys, and boldly pushed out to sea, sailing up and down the letter of the word, far, far away from the ancient track. A man thus suddenly starting forward, may think himself wonderfully advanced, a very giant compared with his former dwarfish stature and the stunted forms of others.

But he has made a sad mistake in this matter. Letter is not Spirit, knowledge is not grace, light is not experience, word is not power, head is not heart, parallel passages are not applied promises. One would think that a man's own conscience would convince him that all this suddenly acquired knowledge lacks that sacred dew and heavenly unction which ever accompany the teaching of the Spirit, and that it is too rapid to be real. One would think that a man possessed of godly fear, instead of sailing along in this confident way on the letter of the word, with flowing sheet and outstretched sail, would rather tremble at every rising cloud lest it forebode a storm that might sink his ship, and shrink from the approach of every man-of-war, lest as an unlicensed sea rover and pirate, he should be summarily strung up at the yard-arm.

We speak of what we know and have felt, and are not writing upon these matters in the dark or at a distance. Did our conscience permit, we could sail along with the best of these sea rovers, hoist as high a mast, and spread as wide a sail; but we have a silent monitor within which keeps us on experimental ground--the only ground on which man or minister, preacher or writer, can safely keep. We could, if we were so minded, sail along with them on the sea of unfulfilled prophecy, explain the historical meaning of the Scriptures, fire shot and shell at all doubt or fear, dive into the mystical signification of type and figure, proverb and parable, heap text upon text and parallel passage upon passage, and skim over the surface of the letter like a revenue cutter. A very few minutes would suffice to give us all their faith and all their confidence; for we well know the men and their communication.

But what would conscience say within, and what should we feel to stand up before the church of God in Saul's armor? Could we get it on, like David we should soon gladly put it off, and come to the weapons we can handle, and of which we have proved the efficacy--the sling and the stone, and the shepherd's simple garb. We look, then, at all this heap of words, and we put it at its right figure--0. A cipher will sum up its full value. Men may preach, and write, and set off their enlarged views with appeal after appeal to the written word; (text after text may stud their writings, as dew drops the grass, but if they have not learned what they preach and write in the furnace of affliction, and by the teaching of the Spirit, all such knowledge is worthless and vain. They may think or call it what they please, but we unhesitatingly say, unless learned in the path of tribulation and through the power of God in their soul, Ichabod is its name and Tekel its value.

Bring, then, before us what you may, unless it be stamped by the power of God, we may boldly say, This is not religion; this is not gracious experience; this is not tasting and handling the word of life; nor is it a part of "the secret of the Lord," which is "with those that fear him." "But," say they, "we got quite tired of experimental preaching." Very likely. "And we saw that the people were getting tired of it too." More likely still; that is, of your preaching. "And now we are all life." Most likely of all as regards yourself; though we doubt whether the people of God are as lively under your new preaching as you.

But this is no proof that the thing is of God. Ranters are lively; Mormonites are lively; and Sisters of Mercy and fresh-cloistered nuns are lively. Such is the very constitution of the human mind, that all new things sensibly affect it; and therefore new views in religion electrify it out of torpor and dulness. But this is merely a stirring up of the animal spirits, an effect produced upon the mind, the intellectual principle, as distinct from the gracious and spiritual principle. "Ah! but we preach with more power than we did; our hearts are more in it, and we are more earnest and warm." Now, suppose that you had been converted to Popery. Would not there have been the same earnestness, the same fixing of the mind on eternal things, the same warmth, and zeal, and fervor? Most probably much more; but we mention this extreme case to show the effect that any change of views produces on the mind.

We learned a lesson on this subject about 25 years ago, which has been of wonderful service to us. It was just at the time when Irvingism broke out with its gifts of tongues, miracles, etc.; and an intimate friend of ours, then a leader and preacher of name and fame, fell headlong into it. He had gone to London, witnessed what were called the "manifestations" in Mr. Irving's chapel, and came home as confirmed a believer in the divine origin of these things as ever Irving had. But the most striking part was the visible effect produced upon him by the change. Praying and fasting day by day, reading the Scriptures incessantly, preaching and visiting the sick continually, and a most unwearied striving after inward and outward holiness, so wrought upon his mind and body, that the poor man in a few weeks was but the ghost of himself. And what produced all this? What he himself after a while renounced and denounced as a delusion of Satan. Thus being an eye-witness of what a wonderful effect new views can produce, it gave

us an insight into natural religion and the deceptiveness of mere zeal, fervor, and fleshly holiness, which has helped us to read some enigmas in the professing world which might otherwise have puzzled us to decipher.

If we look for stability in any man, it is in a minister of experimental truth. He comes forward as one taught of God, as one who has tasted, felt, and handled the word of life, as one set down and established by the Holy Spirit in the truth as it is in Jesus. He stands up before the church of God as eyes to the blind and feet to the lame, as a guide, an instructor, a counselor, a friend. He is a steward of the mysteries of God, in whom it is required that he be found faithful; an ambassador of the King of kings, and as such, deeply interested in his Master's honor; a servant of Jesus Christ, whose highest privilege is personally to know his Lord's will and do it, and ministerially to make it known to others, for obedience of faith. For one occupying such a post, instability is, to say the least, a grievous defect. If the officer wavers, if the standard-bearer faints, what confusion it makes among the rank and file! To see a minister of truth, then, waver and show himself, like Reuben, "unstable as water," saps the very foundation of our confidence that he is taught of God, throws a discredit upon the whole of his ministry, and creates strong grounds for fear that what he advanced before his change he learned merely in the letter, and not by the work and witness of the Holy Spirit in his soul.

But what makes the instability of a minister of such consequence is, that it affects others as well as himself. Many children of God, though right at heart, are exceedingly weak in judgment; and in their eyes a minister is almost a sacred being, who cannot err. If he be possessed of apparently great spirituality of mind--a thing, by the way, easily assumed, they are overawed by his eminent sanctity; and if he can talk and argue ably and fluently, they are overwhelmed by the waterfall of words, and though really not convinced, yet are silenced into acquiescence.

To our mind one of the greatest mysteries in religion is the difference between the power of truth on the natural conscience, and the power of truth on the spiritual conscience; between the faith produced in the natural mind by the letter of the word, and the faith wrought in the heart by the Spirit of God through the spirit of the word. And yet in this lies all the difference between a professor and a possessor, between the damned and the saved. Here is the rock on which thousands split; here is the grand deceit of Satan as an angel of light--that a man may have all faith, and yet be nothing. Yes; have the strongest and most unwavering faith in his natural mind, generated there by the letter of the word, and yet live and die in his sins an unpardoned criminal, an unsanctified rebel; may have the most implicit faith in Jesus Christ, and yet die out of Christ; may believe the promise, and have no interest in the promise; obey the precept, and yet be damned for disobedience.

This is the grand key of the cabinet; and he who holds not this key in his hand, be he preacher or writer that attempts to describe the work of the Spirit, will but fumble, for without it he cannot unlock one secret drawer of the heart, or penetrate into any one innermost recess of nature, or of grace. Tremendous mystery, yet not more tremendous than true, that between a spiritual and a natural faith lay all the difference between David and Saul, between John and Judas, and that on it hangs life or death, heaven or hell, unutterable bliss or eternal despair!

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