

Long Sermons--Loud Sermons--Itinerating

by John Newton

John Newton expresses concern about the length and loudness of his sermons, urging moderation and faithfulness in ministry.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:9, Proverbs 25:17, Ecclesiastes 7:16, 1 Corinthians 6:12, 1 Peter 5:2

Topics: "Preaching Style", "Ministry Guidance"

Description

John Newton expresses concern to the preacher about the length and intensity of his sermons, cautioning against excessive exertion that may harm his health and effectiveness. He advises moderation in preaching, emphasizing the importance of being heard without straining the voice excessively. Newton also discourages overly long sermons, suggesting that shorter, frequent messages may be more beneficial for the congregation's attention and spiritual growth. Additionally, he warns against the temptation of itinerant preaching, urging the preacher to carefully discern God's will and remain faithful in his current ministry.

Transcript

Sept. 10, 1777.

Dear Sir,

I was glad to hear from you at last, not being willing to think myself forgotten. I supposed you were ill. It seems, by your account, that you are far from well: but I hope you are as well as you ought to be; that is, as well as the Lord sees it good for you to be. I say, I hope so: for I am not sure that the length and vehemence of your sermons, which you tell me astonish many people, may not be rather improper and imprudent, considering the weakness of your constitution; at least, if this expression of yours be justly expounded by a report which has reached me, that the length of your sermons is frequently two hours, and the vehemence of your voice so great that you may be heard far beyond the church walls. Unwilling should I be to damp your zeal; but I feel unwilling likewise. that by excessive, unnecessary exertions you should wear away at once, and preclude your own usefulness.

This concern is so much upon my mind that I begin with it, though it makes me skip over the former part of your letter; but when I have relieved myself upon this point, I can easily skip back again. I am perhaps the more ready to credit the report, because I know the spirits of you nervous people are highly volatile. I consider you as mounted upon a fiery steed, and provided you use due management and circumspection,

you travel more pleasantly than we plodding folks upon our sober, phlegmatic nags; but then, if instead of pulling the rein you plunge in the spurs, and add wings to the wind, I cannot but be in pain for the consequences.

Permit me to remind you of the Terentian adage, *ne quid nimis* (No more than enough). The end of speaking is to be heard; and if the person farthest from the preacher can hear, he speaks loud enough. Upon some occasions a few sentences of a discourse may be enforced with a voice still more elevated, but to be uncommonly loud from beginning to end is hurtful to the speaker, and I apprehend nowise useful to the hearer. It is a fault which many inadvertently give into at first, and which many have repented of too late: when practice has rendered it habitual, it is not easily corrected.

I know some think that preaching very loudly and preaching with power are synonymous expressions; but your judgment is too good to fall in with that prejudice. If I was a good Grecian I would send you a quotation from Homer, where he describes the eloquence of Nestor, and compares it, if I remember right, not to a thunderstorm or hurricane, but to a fall of snow, which, though pressing, insinuating, and penetrating, is soft and gentle. You know the passage: I think the simile is beautiful and expressive.

Secondly (as we say), as to long preaching. There is still in being an old-fashioned instrument called an hour-glass, which in days of yore, before clocks and watches abounded, used to be the measure of many a good sermon, and I think it a tolerable stint. I cannot wind up my ends to my own satisfaction in a much shorter time, nor am I pleased with myself if I greatly exceed it. If an angel was to preach for two hours, unless his hearers were angels likewise, I believe the greater part of them would wish he had done. It is a shame it should be so: but so it is; partly through the weakness and partly through the wickedness of the flesh, we can seldom stretch our attention to spiritual things for two hours together without cracking it, and hurting its spring: and when weariness begins, edification ends.

Perhaps it is better to feed our people like chickens, a little and often, than to cram them like turkeys, till they cannot hold one gobbet more. Besides, overlong sermons break in upon family concerns, and often call off the thoughts from the sermon to the pudding at home, which is in danger of being over-boiled. They leave likewise but little time for secret or family religion, which are both very good in their place, and are entitled to a share in the Lord's day. Upon the preacher they must have a bad effect, and tend to wear him down before his time: and I have known some, by overacting at first, have been constrained to sit still and do little or nothing for months or years afterwards. I rather recommend to you the advice of your brother Cantab, Hobson the carrier: so to set out that you may hold out to your journey's end.

Now, if Fame with her hundred mouths has brought me a false report of you, and you are not guilty of preaching either too long or too loud, still I am not willing my remonstrance may stand for nothing. I desire you will accept it, and thank me for it as a proof of my love to you, and likewise of the sincerity of my friendship; for if I had wished to flatter you, I could easily have called another subject.

I have one more report to trouble you with, because it troubles me; and therefore you must bear a part of my burden. Assure me it is false, and I will send you one of the handsomest letters I can devise by way of thanks. It is reported then (but I will not believe it till you say I must), that you stand upon your tiptoes, upon the point of being whirled out of our vortex, and hurried away, comet-like, into the regions of eccentricity: in plain English, that you have a hankering to be an itinerant. If this be true, I will not be the first to tell it in St. John's college, or to publish it on the banks of Cam, lest the mathematicians rejoice, and the poets triumph. But to be serious; for it is a serious subject; let me beg you to deliberate well, and to

pray earnestly before you take this step. Be afraid of acting in your own spirit, or under a wrong impression: however honestly you mean, you may be mistaken. The Lord has given you a little charge; be faithful in it, and in his good time he will advance you to a greater: but let his providence evidently open the door to you, and be afraid of moving one step before the cloud and pillar.

I have had my warm fits and desires of this sort in my time; but I have reason to be thankful that I was held in with a strong hand. I wish there were more itinerant preachers. If a man has grace and zeal, and but little fund, let him go and diffuse the substance of a dozen sermons over as many counties; but you have natural and acquired abilities, which qualify you for the more difficult, and, in my judgment, not less important, station of a parochial minister. I wish you to be a burning, shining, steady light. You may perhaps have less popularity; that is, you will be less exposed to the workings of self and the snares of Satan, if you stay with us; but I think you may live in the full exercise of your gifts and graces, be more consistent with your voluntary engagements, and have more peace of mind, and humble intercourse with God 'in watching over a flock which he has committed to you, than, by forsaking them, to wander up and down the earth without a determined scope.

Thus far I have been more attentive to the utile than the dulce (The practical than the sweet). I should now return to join you in celebrating the praises of poetry, and the other subjects of your letter; but time and paper fail together. Let me hear from you soon, or I shall fear I have displeased you, which, fond as I am of poetry, would give me more pain than I ever found pleasure in reading Alexander's Feast. Indeed I love you; I often measure over the walks we have taken together; and when I come to a favourite stile, or such a favourite spot upon the hill-top, I am reminded of something that passed, and say, or at least think, Hic stetit C**** (Here stood C.).

Your's, &c.

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