

Preaching was central in Puritan worship—but how do you preach well? Mark Dever looks to the Puritans to glean some very practical advice for preachers for their preparation and delivery of sermons



Worship in the Puritans

It can be a strange experience to wander through old English churches. I have found that if you understand what your eyes are seeing, it begins to evoke a by-gone age. You see a moveable altar, or you notice in an old church the centrality of the pulpit, and you know it means something. You see old iron circles next to the pulpit given as gifts to the preacher to hold an hourglass, giving him one or two turns for his sermon and galleries for people to be able to hear God's Word. The sentiment represented by the gallery was that the focus of worship was hearing God's Word. This is what the Puritans understood and practiced, so that is our topic: preaching, the centre of Puritan worship.

Most folks would know of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Westminster Catechisms*, even if they don't know the other document the Westminster Assembly produced, the *Westminster Directory for Public Worship*. It is just a few pages but it represents, I think, the flowering of Puritan understanding on topics such as the public reading of Scripture, public prayer, and of course, the preaching of the Word.

Let me begin with nine simple statements on preachers, preaching and sermons. These nine summary statements will help you understand how the Puritans understood preaching.

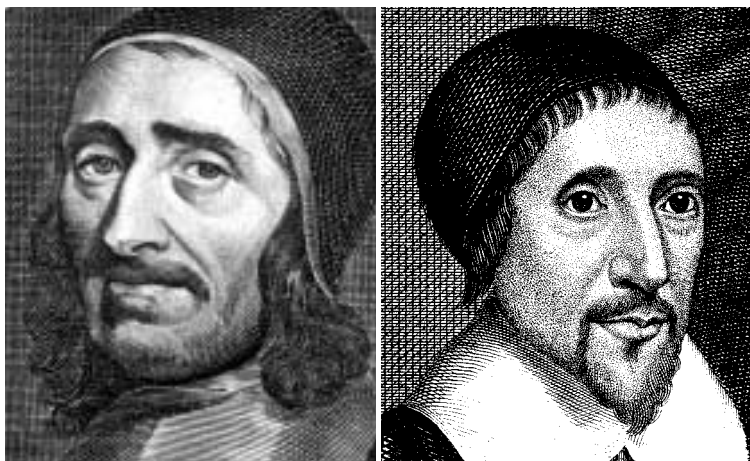


BY MARK DEVER

1. Preaching matters and it should be done well.
2. Not just anyone can preach. The preacher is to be gifted and is to make use of those gifts.
3. Sermon texts can be selected, as demanded by special occasions or an expositional series.
4. Introductions should be brief and nearly related to the topic of the message.
5. The structure of the sermon should be text, then truths. The text should first be summarized and the doctrines drawn from it.
6. The sermon should be faithful to the text. Sermons should deal not just with words but with whole sentences. Sermons should not be mere lexical exercises, declining this noun or conjugating this verb, but should rather deal with the point of the text.
7. A sermon should be true, biblical and helpful. The doctrines drawn from the text should be true; they should be evident in the text; they should be edifying and helpful to the church.
8. Sermons should be clear. Not only is the doctrine to flow clearly from the text, but the doctrine itself should also be clearly expressed.
9. Every part of the sermon matters. From arguments to illustrations, every part of the sermon is to be well crafted.

These are the outlines of their thoughts about preaching, and now I want to zero in particularly on matters of controversy and application.

The Puritans said you must discern difficulties your



(l-r) Puritans John Owen, Richard Baxter and Edmund Calamy.

hearers may have with the text that you are preaching. Those that are seen to be real must be dealt with thoroughly. Those seeming to be imaginable but uncommon or nearly non-existent should be ignored for clarity and edification's sake. Only those false doctrines that seem to be currently dangerous are to be answered and they are to be answered well. Of course, the history of Puritanism, and therefore, its preaching, is littered with controversy. Certainly, these preachers understood themselves as having plenty to contend with as it was. Controversy was at home in the Puritan pulpit but only in so far as it was deemed needful. They did not seek to pick theological fights.

In doing this, the Puritans were good New Testament Christians. Such work to help hearers understand Scripture is what we see in the New Testament itself. Jesus Himself often cleared difficulties with various texts as He does in several passages about the Law in Matthew 6. Paul clears objections, but he picks the key thing when he writes to the Galatians. The letter to the Hebrews is confuting certain misunderstandings that were growing up among those early Christians. This is a New Testament way to preach.

The Puritans also said that application is essential. Doctrine must never be left unapplied and application should be argued. You see this throughout the Puritans' preaching and in the *Directory*:

He[the preacher] is not to rest in general doctrine, although never so much cleared and confirmed, but to bring it home to special use by application to his hearers which albeit it prove a great difficulty to himself, requiring much prudence, zeal, and meditation, and to the natural and corrupt man will be very unpleasant. Yet, he is to endeavour to perform it in

such a manner that his auditors may feel the Word of God to be quick and powerful and a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And that if any unbeliever or ignorant person be present, he may have the secrets of his heart made manifest and give glory to God.

Here, too, we see that the Puritans were biblically faithful. Paul lays out wonderful doctrine in Colossians, and then he applies it. He does the same in Ephesians, and there is that wonderful 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians. In 1 Peter, we see Peter applying truths to different categories of hearers and James in James 1 and 2 shows us how dangerous unapplied truth is. He shows us that application is essential.

Today, we face twin dangers of hypocritical Christianity and hypothetical theology. We have lives unaffected by truths unapplied. We sometimes think it more spiritual to declare the objective realities of the work of God through Christ in history alone, and never to address the Spirit's work of application in the hearts of our hearers. Such application work, some decry as subjectivism or pietism or the seed-bed of legalism and works-righteousness. While such perversions may in fact arise, they are perversions. When we oppose application, we are certainly separating ourselves from the understanding of the Bible and its truths held by the Westminster Divines.

The Puritans also said that one should not only tell people what they should do but help them to see something of how they might do it. Of course, this kind of practical teaching is very consistent with what we read in the New Testament. Jesus Himself, in His parables, examples and teachings, is very practical. The apostles are the same. How specific and practical does Peter get in 1 Peter 3 or Paul in Romans 12? Friends, we must remember that direct, practical application is part of our call to declare God's Word to God's people.

More specifically, in their application, the Puritans said in the *Directory*:

in dehortation, reprehension, and public admonition, which requires special wisdom, let him as there shall be cause, not only discover the nature and greatness of the sin with the misery attending it, but also show the danger his hearers are in to be overtaken and surprised by it, together with the remedies and best way to avoid it.

Pastors, let us encourage each other not to shy away from talking of sin and judgement in our preaching. I remember one journalist telling me about her experience working on a

...never talk about sin without talking about the Saviour. You simply bring them to see the reality of their sin so that they will see the Saviour's love more fully and completely displayed...

particular story about some heinous sins that a well-known person had committed. She was, at the time, a non-Christian and we were studying through the gospel together and she was on the verge of being converted. She came to see me one morning and as she was telling me how the story was just breaking her heart, she said, "I came to see that what this man was doing was wrong." And when she said the word "wrong," a flood of tears came out, and she said, "I'm sorry. You must understand, I was raised in an agnostic home where I was taught never to say the word 'wrong.'"

Sometimes, we forget the coherence—the powerful communication of reality—that Christianity is to people who are lost. For her, among other things, she needed that piece that was missing to her puzzle to assemble life and reality in a way that made sense. Gaining that category of "wrong" made sense to her of this very subject she was working on for her story. And it made sense to her of her own life.

But of course, we should not only specifically speak of sin. The Puritans also said to "comfort fully." Comfort should be carefully applied to those in need of it. We read in the *Directory*,

In applying comfort, whether general against all temptations or particular against some special troubles or terrors, he is to carefully answer such objections as a troubled heart and afflicted spirit may suggest to the contrary.


In this, too, I think the Westminster Divines were faithful to the pattern we see in Scripture. Jesus was careful to speak honestly and yet comfortingly to Peter in John 20 after Peter had denied Him. Barnabas was careful and encouraging to Paul and more tender than the great apostle with Mark. Paul wrote in Galatians 6:1 of the need to restore gently those who are caught in sin. And consider that whole books of the New Testament such as Hebrews, 1 Peter and Revelation are meant in substantial parts as encouragement to afflicted Christians.

The Puritans also said that sermons should help the hearers to examine themselves. In August 1662, 2,000 of the 6,000 ministers in the Church of England resigned their pulpits because they did not feel they could, in good conscience, say that everything in the *Book of Common Prayer* was taught by the Bible. In his farewell sermon, Edmund Calamy said to his congregation

Maybe some will say 'I have committed many sins, but am not brought into any difficulty.' Remember,

it was nine months after David had numbered the people before he was in his difficulty. But as sure as God is in heaven, sin will bring difficulties sooner or later. Though one sin a hundred years, yet shall he be accursed. Maybe thy prosperity makes way for thy damnation. And this is thy greatest distress that thou goest on in sin and prosperity.

That's the kind of undermining statement you want to preach. That's how you begin to undermine the self-righteousness in your hearers. That is a powerful way to apply God's work. That such trying sermons are biblical should be beyond question. We see Paul calling his readers to the most serious self-examination in 1 Corinthians 11. Peter, in 2 Peter 1, tells us how we should make our calling and election sure. In our preaching today, we must be designing our sermons to focus not on those bad people out there in reactionary self-justification and self-seclusion or even those unsaved people next to us. We must fashion our sermons to focus on ourselves. You and I, we need the gospel. Never a day goes by that we do not need it. We need the free, sheer grace of God as much now as we did the first moment we ever heard it. And in light of our continuing sins despite having known God's grace, we need it more. The same is true of those who hear your preaching. I encourage you to preach about sin and to preach about it in such a way as to make their own sins clear to the people. Then, never talk about sin without talking about the Saviour. You simply bring them to see the reality of their sin so that they will see the Saviour's love more fully and completely displayed.

Friend, look at the depravity of your own heart. Look at the decay of your own body. The flight your own years are taking. Recall to your minds the faces of some of those you've seen won to Christ by the Spirit's moving through your offering the gospel to them, others who've been won back from sin, others who've been encouraged or built up. Can you think of anything you'd rather do? What a privilege to preach the gospel! 

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