

# Preaching the Gospel

**A monthly magazine for preachers and those who want to preach.**

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## **PROFESSIONALISM IN PREACHERS TODAY**

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The purpose of this study is not to attack the work of preaching or most of the men who genuinely devote themselves to this task which is thankless to too many. Nor do we here criticize the spiritual development of men who have acquired high proficiency in study or proclamation of the message of Christ in either private or public setting. All who take their responsibility seriously and grow to perform it better are acting commendably. The object of this study is to examine what Ralph Turnbull called “the specter of professionalism” in his title of chapter one in his book, The Minister’s Obstacles.

### **Describing the Problem**

Turnbull describes the work of the professional preacher as “perfunctory automatism.” He meant that this kind of preacher works automatically, simply because he has to do so. If this be the case, then it is clear that he does not do his work for the love that He has for God or men. He is merely going through the motions of preaching. He further examines this problem in quoting a “layman” who was commenting on a preacher’s boast about his own qualifications:

“Why, see now,  
Without your gown ye dare not preach;  
Without your book ye could not preach;  
Without your pay ye would not preach.”

Whatever Turnbull’s orientation toward these matters might have been, let it be clear that this writer is using this quotation only to reflect the attitude of some toward preaching. They must have their gown (or other uniform), their book (creed, preacher’s manual, latest issue of a religious journal, sermon outline book, etc.), and their pay if they are going to preach. To work in a less desirable location among people to whom a tie and suit are a uniform without any guarantee of remuneration is unthinkable to them. Professionalism truly might have its adherents even today among the Lord’s people.

Would this indictment fit you? Do you preach because of a spiritual passion to serve God and to save souls, or are you a hireling? Others might only suspect, but you know beyond doubt. If your support were withdrawn, would you continue seeking ways to preach the gospel of Christ? It has sometimes been the necessary lot of evangelists to pick cotton or otherwise support their families, because brethren refused to continue supporting them after they

preached truth that was upsetting to them. In the years when the battle lines over church support of human institutions were being drawn, I heard men like Franklin T. Puckett acknowledge their willingness to return to the cotton fields before turning their backs on duty to God and truth. Is there present among us today the same love, sacrificial spirit, and fervor? Articles and studies that concern the need for preacher support are needed, but I am persuaded some like this one are equally needed.

This writer fears that too many see preaching as a means for a life of ease, easy money, popularity, and control. Is it possible that some have turned to preaching after they despaired of finding something else to do? One said he would just get him a job preaching. Some few seem to think that their responsibilities are finished when they have spent their “three or four hours a week,” because they do nothing the rest of the week. Whatever they get in support is too much for what they are doing! It becomes too easy and fashionable for men thus motivated to please their hearers; their popularity is certain. One young preacher, moved more by his lack of understanding than a desire for control, said he was going down to a certain place and “take over that church.” If control of people and congregations is his objective, he usually gains it at the jeopardy of his victims. When the hireling beholds the wolf coming, he leaves because he cares not for the sheep (Jn. 10:11-13). The Book of Acts tells us of Elymas and Demetrius—two who pursued their own advantage at the expense of the souls of others. It soon becomes obvious where our hearts are when material advantage is our goal. It also soon becomes clear that we have privately communed with God and are personally committed to Him in His work. Fire in the bones like that of Jeremiah will find a way out.

O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me.

For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of the LORD was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily.

Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay (Jer. 20:7-9).

### **Solving the Problem**

The passage in Jeremiah actually relates more to the solution than to the problem. We must learn that individual introspection and honesty of heart are irreplaceable. Any solution that does not take into account the need for truly dedicated disciples of Christ will never work.

1. Maintaining a scriptural view of the preacher-elder relationship is a start. The term used of elders stress their qualification (elder, presbyter) or their work (bishop, overseer, pastor, shepherd), indicating functional relationship to the church. Likewise those terms that refer to preachers (preacher, evangelist, minister) must be taken as functional, not official. Preachers and elders have common objectives but somewhat different functions. To view either as being “higher on the totem pole” is to miss what the New Testament teaches. God has no “totem pole.” While elders tend and oversee the church, they and preachers must see themselves as co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord.
2. Understanding the preacher’s role/work is essential. He does not do anybody else’s work. He is not a church administrator or manager, church representative or principal participant at civic/social functions, official visitor of the sick and bereaved, or the church’s “youth minister.” His work is to herald the message of the King, to proclaim the Word, to bear the good tidings of salvation, and to be a servant of Christ, the gospel,

- and all whom he can teach. In doing this work, he will have his time occupied, thus having no time for the work assigned to others.
3. Support the preacher and elders financially, thus avoiding the idea that the preacher is a “hired hand” (1 Tim. 5:17, 18).
  4. Begin stressing divine standards for preachers and quit emphasizing the human ones as absolutely necessary. The Lord said not a word about being college-trained, handsome, socially gracious, polished in speech, or ideal in family. While all of these traits might be desirable and helpful, it is quite noticeable that it was man who initiated them, not the Lord. God has much to say about his faithfulness, lack of contentiousness, gentleness, teaching aptitude, forbearance, meekness, and soberness. How many times have brethren really looked for these qualities in the men whom they considered? The ubiquitous (and one reminds me of the rhyming word “iniquitous”) resume (CV) has no place for such matters.
  5. Let congregations take a more active role in preparing men to preach by converting them to Christ and filling them with God’s Word to the point that they have to declare it. The best preachers are the men who were first genuine followers of the Lord. Men who have learned to be ministers (servants) of Christ and their brethren will not have to learn much when they begin preaching.
  6. Re-instill the spirit of sacrifice on the part of all Christians—preachers, elders, and the rest. Christians must sacrifice to support teachers of the gospel, preachers must be willing to sacrifice when the need requires it, and elders must sacrificially devote themselves to the care of the sheep.

Acceptance of support for preaching or overseeing does not make one a professional, as in football or baseball. It should make one ever thankful for the grace of God seen in the lives of concerned brethren and more resolved to give himself sacrificially to the great task of saving souls.

A preacher is first, last, and always a Christian, possessing the same responsibilities that all other Christians have. In the areas of personal work, visiting the sick, helping brethren or the congregation with physical labor, he must find time to work for Christ and for his brethren. He must never view himself as having none of these duties simply because of the added duty that he has accepted. There is much potential for good in his work, but it all depends upon his attitude and performance in harmony with God’s will.

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### **A Conversation With Harold Comer About Personal Work**

Harold Comer is my old friend from the 1960’s when we both preached in the Indianapolis area. On July 6 after the Sunday evening service of the Vestavia church, Birmingham, Alabama, where he is one of the preachers and one of the elders, he and his wife took Helen and me to supper. Over the meal I decided to get his insight on methods for converting people to Christ.

I started by saying, “I know you are an expert on church growth, and I know that by church growth you do not mean growing in numbers by attracting members from faithful churches nearby.” He said, “That’s right. That is not growth, it is swelling.”

Then we talked about the years gone by. He said, “In the 1960’s when I was in Brownsburg, Indiana, of every two prospects I approached, one of them let me come to his house for a Bible

class. Today things have changed. If you approach a person with a request for a Bible class, he feels threatened and refuses.”

“So what is the solution?” I replied. He said, “There are several New Testament passages which show us the proper approach. One is in John 1. When John the Baptist told his disciples, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God,’ two of his disciples followed Jesus. Jesus asked them, ‘What do you seek?’ and they asked him, ‘Where are you staying?’ He said, ‘Come, and you will see.’ (John 1:35-39).”

“That was a gentle, non-threatening invitation, wasn’t it?” I replied.

“Yes, but that is not all.. Notice Philip’s invitation to Nathaniel. ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’ Nathaniel said to him, ‘Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ (John 15-46)”

“And out of those two invitations came several of the apostles of Christ!” I said.

“But even that is not all. In John 4 Jesus sat by a well in Samaria. A woman came to the well and Jesus said, ‘Give Me a drink.’ This got her interest, and she started talking. Jesus turned the conversation to ‘living water,’ and the result was that she ran to the village to invite the men there to ‘Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ is it?’ As a result ‘many of the Samaritans believed in Him.’”

“Even the book of Revelation ends with the words, ‘The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’” (Revelation 20:17)

I said, “So you are saying that all Christians should be saying, ‘Come.’”

“That’s right. This will work when the Christians live lives which show that they are truly disciples of Christ. One of their friends will come. Maybe she will come to church with the Christian, or come to the house where she meets other Christians. As she relaxes and hears the beautiful gospel as it is preached and practiced by true disciples, her heart is opened. Then when one says, ‘Let’s sit down and study these things. I can come to your house, you can come to my house, or we can study in the church building.’ She replies, ‘I think I would prefer the study to be in the church building,’ and she now is in position to listen and obey.

“I find that most people prefer to study with me at the church building. This requires less commitment than if they open their home, and the study is free from the interference of their little children.”

(I intend writing more observations on this subject next month—PKW.)

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