

Thus Saith the Lord

Ezekiel 2:4

James Petigru Boyce

James Petigru Boyce (1827-1888) was the founder and first president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The influence of Boyce is captured well in the biography written by John A. Broadus, *Memoir of James Petigru Boyce*. Boyce's most significant work, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, remains in print today as does Broadus's biography. The sermon below was preached by Boyce at the ordination service of the Rev. H. M. Wharton at the Walnut Street Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky on May 31, 1874. Reverend Wharton proceeded to take the pulpit of the First Baptist Church in Eufaula, Alabama.

Introduction

The present is one of the few occasions when we may speak about preaching, the great work of the ministers of Jesus. Such a theme, though only occasionally suitable, should be full of interest to all men, but especially to the people of God. In what way should that work be performed? What constitutes the special qualifications for it? How shall it be made most successful? How shall it best secure the blessing of God, and aid in the advancement of His kingdom? These are inquiries which, while they may be of more special interest in him who is this day to be inducted into the full office of a minister of Jesus, or even to those whose life work is the same as his, are not without special claims upon those who are to look to the ministry as one of the highest sources of their instruction, and who are required to obey in the gospel those whom God has thus put over them.

A great deal is frequently said as to the ministers suited for our age. Some, in pressing the claims for education and culture, would almost seem to ignore the fact that the centuries that have gone were ages of learning and cultivation. Some, in speaking of the need of preparation to refute the forces antagonistic to Christianity, appear to have forgotten that it has had its conflicts with the enemies of the truth in every cycle of the past. Some, in referring to the antagonism of science overlook the fact that science, falsely so called, was its opponent even in the apostolic times. Some, as they are stirred with emotion at

the numerous heresies which surround us, fail to remember that such had their place in the early churches, and that indeed the wise historian of the churches of Christ can trace each of these heresies to original germs, which were condemned by those who were the first great witnesses of the truth.

The truth is that no one age is so peculiar that the minister of that age needs to be greatly different from that of any other. Each age has its slight variations which give to it some peculiar characteristics. And each people, too, are marked by peculiarities of thought and mental training. But these give to the work of the preacher only such variety as his countenance and personality give to each man and to different ones of each nation. The work, like the man, is in all its integrity the same, and he who is well fitted for it in one age and clime would not find himself out of place were he transferred to another. The preaching of God's truth is governed by grand and general principles which are connected with God and man, and which must therefore be as broad as humanity itself, and as the relations sustained by it to God.

Hence, in looking for the embodiment of these principles in some such brief sentence as may serve for my text on this occasion, I have found it not in the pithy utterances of some minister of our own day, nor in the forcible conviction of some one of the leaders of the great reformation under Luther, not in the eloquent homilies of the golden-mouthed

Chrysostom, nor even in the instruction of the New Testament days, but far back of these, even in the fifth year of the captivity of King Jehoiachin in the land of the Chaldeans and by the river Chebar, in the language of God himself to His prophet Ezekiel. In the words then spoken will be found embodied those principles which are at the basis of a ministry at once true and successful because such as God requires and such as He blesses.

Speaking of Israel God says to Ezekiel, "I do send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God."

Authoritative Preaching

The first principle here taught us then is that preaching should be authoritative. The preacher speaks for God. It is God that speaks through him. He is God's messenger. He proclaims God's truth. Our Lord Himself hath said of His minister, "He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth Him that sent me." This was not said to the twelve, but to the seventy, and therefore is true not of the inspired men unto whom the Lord gave special powers, but of all His ministers who speak His truth and whose words are carried home to the hearts of their hearers by His Spirit.

This authoritative character of the ministry should never be forgotten. The tendency of our times is too much in the direction of such forgetfulness or disbelief. Hence the critical nature of the hearers of the Word. They listen not to God but unto man. They look not at the treasure but at the earthen vessel which contains it. Instead of longing for and seizing upon the message from God's Word, they are engaged in critically examining the form which that message has assumed. To some it is unpleasant because too long; to

others uninteresting because too brief. These despise it because it is rude and without the graces of cultured scholarship; those because it appears to them in too stilted dress, and is disfigured by overornamentation. It is the man that fills the eyes of almost all. Here and here alone is found one who realizes the great fact that God in His providence and grace has sent a message at the hour to the heart, in which the thirsty soul may find God speaking with authority.

It is a solemn fact to meet as minister and people in the proclamation of God's Word. However much the messenger may be but a man, one who stands to us at other times in the nearest earthly relations though he may be the inmate of our families or the merchant from whom we buy our daily supplies, or even the slave who toils for us in the field; though he may be in no respect better or wiser than ourselves—though, indeed, at other times our positions may be reversed, and we be the preacher and he be the hearer—yet, standing there as God's messenger to deliver to us His message, he is the representative of Christ, and in hearing him we are listening to our Lord. The message of the King may be sent through His humblest subject, but, if His message, it may be believed and received and rejoiced in with equal joy as though delivered by the proudest noble of the realm; and if despised or refused, it is with equal peril as though uttered by the King himself.

It is well to remember this. In avoiding the extreme of other ages, which clothed a minister's person with sanctity, and exempted him from the control of the civil law, let us not fail to give, not to him, but to his message, that reverence to which it is entitled as coming from God. And let the ministers of Christ not fail to exact it.

that is child-like in its readiness; obedience that is exact, which discusses not the propriety of what is required; obedience which is trustful, recognizing that it is God that has spoken to his soul.

It is objected that such obedience cannot be justly demanded, because the Word of God does not come to us through his ministry unmixed with error, as a direct inspiration from Him.

The objection is based upon a misconception of what is demanded. It is not that any doctrine or duty is to be accepted or performed because taught by a minister of God. It is readily admitted that error is thus taught, and that oftentimes it is as much the duty of the hearer to reject a message as on another occasion to accept it. The Word of God teaches no such folly as that either a preacher or a mass of preachers, or a church, is to be accepted as the infallible exponent of God's truth. Paul recognizes that the vessel is earthen, so that the excellency of the power may be seen to be of God. He warns his Galatian brethren that though he or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto them than that he had preached, he should be accursed. It was said in approbation of the church at Ephesus that they had tried those who had falsely claimed to be apostles and had found them liars.

Surely no one should claim to speak with higher authority than our Lord Himself and His apostles. We are told on more than one occasion that the people were astonished at Christ's speaking because He spoke as one having authority and not as the scribes. Yet does Jesus say to the Jews: "Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me." With whatever authority He spake, accompanied by mes-

senger must be received as would be God Himself.

That which makes this the more important is that in all the more common teachings of the ministry their hearers have no doubt that they are speaking the Word of God. And hence that Word should be spoken authoritatively as His. Its acceptance should be demanded. The great sin of refusing God should be pressed upon those who do not give heed to it. And they should be warned by the severe punishment of which they are worthy when they treat it with indifference, or even with timid unbelief.

It is needless to say what increased efficiency such preaching would give to God's Word. It is not man only that tells of sin and offers a Savior; not man only that presents promises of acceptance through Christ; not man only that calls his fellows to repentance and trust in Jesus; not man only that invites to a life of full consecration to God, and gives assurances of help in the attempt to lead that life. It is the voice of God—of the living God. It is the invitation of Christ—the ever-present Christ. It is the Holy Ghost whose sword is thus unsheathed to convict of sin, of righteousness and of a judgment to come, so that we may say, without exaggeration, that not more truly did God speak of Christ at His baptism, nor to the apostles at the transfiguration, nor to the Jews at Pentecost, nor to Saul on the way to Damascus, than He is now heard to proclaim His messages through the men of like passions with ourselves, through whom even in our day His gospel is preached unto their fellows.

Declarative Preaching

Another element of successful preaching is that it should be declarative. It

should, for the most part, assert and declare what God has revealed, and demand its acceptance as such. It should not present His truth as something which may be questioned, or caviled at, or reasoned about. It should not place God in the attitude of one who must explain the why and the wherefore and the how of those things which he teaches, but it must set forth the messages of His Word as truth which the infinitely wise and true God has made known and which must be true, nay which are true because thus has God said.

It may be that circumstances may compel the minister to set forth at some time or times the evidences which we have that the Bible is the Word of God. But it is seldom that this would be requisite. Indeed, perhaps never is it best to discuss this point in the pulpit. We have but few who question these points; and we have enough of printed books, and of opportunities for private talk, with which to meet these difficulties. It may be that it is more frequently necessary to show that the doctrines which we hold are not liable to the objections made against them. But even this would call for but an occasional sermon, and that from someone who has some special fitness for such discussion. Almost all the preaching to which we are called, is to those who believe the Bible and who will accept its statements more quickly than any arguments which can be presented. Yet how sadly true is it that a large number of the sermons which we hear are made up of arguments drawn from sources outside of Scripture declaration. To what an extent is the philosophy of religion presented! How frequently do men undertake to show us the reasonableness of Scripture truth. With what niceties of metaphysical distinctions do men attempt to set forth the first principles

of our faith. A mere declaration of God is worth it all, not only with the ignorant, but with those most wise and learned. This is especially true with all the important and fundamental truths of the Bible. These are not so much doctrines as facts—facts which the Scriptures reveal, and to which, upon statement, the mind and heart give assent. God has, in these, made known facts which were otherwise unknown, and of them furnishes explanation by the statement of other facts equally unknowable but equally forcing acceptance when revealed. How otherwise could we know of man's present condition, but for the fact of sin and its beginnings which are revealed? How could we explain the delay of God's punishment of sin, but for the purposes of merciful probation which He has made known? How could we know of the possibility of pardon, but for the statement of that fact? How could we learn of Christ, but from revelation? How could we explain the universal rejection of His salvation anterior to God's compelling grace, but for the Word of God? How shall we know God's future purposes, but for His revelation of that future? In short, if you have never thought of it and realized this fact before, call to mind the whole scheme of Scripture truth and see how completely it is made up of mere facts and statements, and assurances and promises and revelations in which God has told us all that we need know of what we are, of how we became such, of what He is, of what He has done for us, of what He is doing, of what He will do, not one of which could we learn from nature, for a knowledge of which we are totally dependent upon God's statement, and of which we have no other personal knowledge than that what God tells us about them, is at once

realized to be true so far as we can know, and to be worthy of the universal acceptance of mankind.

Would that this fact were always remembered by the minister of God, that he might realize that his ministry should be almost purely declarative, if not entirely so? What can be as good evidence of any truth as that God has said it? What should give more natural power to any truth to force its way into the human heart than that God has asserted it? And that truth which is not thus made acceptable cannot be impressed by all the learning and eloquence of the world. There is but one other resource, the renewing and life-giving Spirit of God, and that Spirit uses not the arguments of men, not their philosophic development of principles; but the plain Word of God, either in its actual words or in their substance, is the power by which He accomplishes that which is beyond the natural man.

Let the Word of God, then, be simply declared, made known, spoken forth as such, and men called upon to receive it as such, and the most effective preaching must be attained. "Thus saith the Lord God" will carry home the truth to those who will be impenetrable to any merely human declaration or argument. It was this element which gave such power to the pioneer preaching of this country from fifty to one hundred years ago. To the preacher of that day the fact that God had spoken the truths of the Word was of all things the most deeply impressed upon him and the most convincing. And he treated his hearers as though those hearers must believe the same. Such also was the apostolic preaching. Such was the message of the seventy. Such was the bold and simple language of the Baptist. Such is our own language when we shake off

the formality of pulpit performances and enter into the earnest work of protracted meetings. Such is the secret of the power of many preachers whose ability is feeble, whose learning is limited, whose statements are common-place, in whom, indeed, few can see the basis of success, but whose power is to be found in the simple assertion of those things which God has said as to sin and salvation. Thus saith the Lord God is the watch word of their power, and God blesses their simple declaration of what He has spoken.

Scriptural Preaching

The third principle involved in the language of our text is that it should be scriptural. The doctrines which are enunciated, and the practices which are enjoined, should be set forth by God in His holy word. We should be able to say, with reference to all our teachings, "Thus saith the Lord God." The limit of our instructions should be the limit of inspired truth.

We have no authority to add; we have no right to take anything away from it. We have no power to modify its teachings in any respect. We must take the pure, simple truth, which is there found, and set it forth, not only as the foundation but as the sum of our teachings. Philosophy may have for us its special charms, and speculation may fascinate us by its bewitching visions, but we have no right to introduce these into the realms of the pure light given by God's truth. The past history of the church, especially in its early ages, is full of warning upon this subject. To such admixture has been due every heresy which has led men away from what God has taught.

We have not even the liberty of supplementing the plain interpretation of that truth by our own conjectures of what must

be or what ought to be. It was upon this rock that the Jews were destroyed in their views of the Messiah. We must take God's word as far as it goes and no farther. We must mark the boundaries which it places. We must not undertake to pass them. The way beyond may appear to us plain, and yet were we to attempt to tread it we should certainly go astray. We must feel that there is safety only in the paths which God has marked out for us. Yet it is here that we are so apt to err. Forgetting that our foundation knowledge is from faith in God's word and not from deductions of our own reason, we attempt to push our belief beyond the line up to which He has made all things plain, and by our own reasonings to decide what must be beyond it. And perhaps, in no case, certainly but in a few, are our conjectures and inferences correct. Nor is this surprising. What can we know of God save what He has told us? What of the future world save the glimpses He has given? What even of our own hearts save when this light has been thrown into their dark recesses? What of the universe upon a point only of which we live, and of but a small portion of which we have any knowledge? Upon this very subject of conjectural interpretation, what warnings have we not had in connection with what is known as science? How frequently have men planted themselves in the past upon positions inferred from the word of God, from which the advancing light of science has driven them, and which have then been seen to have been mere human inferences from very insufficient facts? If our attempted progress beyond God's revelation in such matters has been so easily proved erroneous by the additional light which He has given us through scientific discovery, how strongly should we be

impressed with our weakness and blindness, and the impossibility of our safely taking a single step in advance beyond what God has plainly taught us in matters which are still less within our ken.

And that which makes this especially a practical point is that almost all the differences in the phases of Christian belief and practice have arisen from the admixture of conjecture and inferences, and additions, to the word of God. If today all men could sincerely agree to take this simple word as the rule of faith and practice the days of denominational divisions would be over; the people of God would see eye to eye, and all would dwell together in unity, rejoicing in the simplicity which is in Christ.

Upon each minister of Christ, therefore, devolves a solemn duty to see to it that his preaching is so far Scripture that it shall set forth the doctrines and practices enjoined by God in their pure simplicity. To those who do not thus, the word of God sent, in the 13th chapter of Ezekiel, by our prophet unto other prophets of Israel, is a solemn warning:

The word of God came unto me saying, Son of Man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel that prophesy out of their own hearts. Hear ye the word of the Lord; thus saith the Lord God: woe unto the foolish prophets that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing. They have seen vanity and lying divination, saying, the Lord saith; and the Lord hath not sent them, and they have made others to hope that they would confirm the word. And mine hand shall be upon the prophets that see vanity and that divine lies; they shall not be in the assembly of my people, neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel, neither shall they enter into the land of Israel; and ye shall know that I am the Lord God. Because, even because, they have seduced My

people, saying, Peace; and there was no peace, and one built up a wall, and, lo others daubed it with untempered mortar, and bring it down to the ground, so that the foundation thereof shall be discovered, and it shall fall, and ye shall be consumed in the midst thereof, and ye shall know that I am the Lord.

These are but some of the verses of the denunciation of those who use false admixtures in building the walls of Zion. Equally terrible is that from the Book of Revelation: "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book. And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."

I do not present these extracts believing that all who have been guilty of conjectural admixture will be subjected to the punishment here threatened. There are degrees of crime and folly, and God's punishments are meted out according to these degrees. There are many who will build on the true foundation their wood, hay and stubble, and they shall be saved. But the only safeguard against any of these calamities is to cling closely to the word of God, making no omission nor addition, but simply setting forth that for which we may say "Thus saith the Lord God."

And that this may be fully accomplished it will be well that the very words of Scripture shall be used whenever it is possible. There is special power in such words; power inherent in them as the inspired language of God; power because of the familiarity which the most of hearers have with them, and power because of their associations with the divine truth which they embody.

I have heard sermons objected to because they contained too much Scripture quotation. It is a good fault, if fault it be, and a very rare one. An objection might much more frequently be drawn from the absence of Scripture. How abundantly did Christ use it. How much of apostolic preaching does it not form. The older English divines, especially the Puritans, were greatly given to it. Bunyan's sermons are almost all Scripture. Perhaps in some of these preachers there may have been excess. But the fault of our day is in the other direction. Yet what force is there not in an apt Scripture quotation? It is like the clinching on the opposite side of a piece of wood of the nail that has been driven into it. It gives authoritative and declarative efficacy to the truth by showing that it is Scriptural.

Uncompromising Preaching

Lastly, if our preaching be "thus saith the Lord God," it must be uncompromising. It is God's Word, and not ours. It is his message which He has sent us to deliver. And we dare not vary that message from the instructions we have received. Our message may be unpalatable, but it is God's message of mercy and of warning. If we say peace, peace, when there is not peace, we are lying prophets, who shall be destroyed. We may be charged with bigotry, as indeed must every earnest man, but our bigotry need be only a determination to obey God and witness as to His truth.

There is special need in our day for this uncompromising spirit in speaking for God. Our age is peculiarly latitudinarian. Religious liberty has achieved its supremacy only within the past century, and many of its recent beneficiaries, like others who have been bound in civil serf-

dom, upon attaining liberty are running into licentiousness. And it is hard to stand against this pressure; yet it is our duty. The cause of truth demands it. Especially should Baptists give true witness upon this point. In the past we have ever maintained liberty of conscience when others have been for restraining it. Now we should still maintain liberty of conscience, by showing that we hold to that and not to licentiousness. That liberty of conscience is not affected because one preaches in its proper place the truths which constitute the difference between him and others. He may do this in kindness, in courtesy, in candor, and in charity. He should do it. If he speaks not with this spirit he speaks—the words of God indeed—but with the spirit of Antichrist.

That liberty of conscience is not affected when the lines of separation from others are strictly drawn according to the light of God's word. If one who has been a member of the church has departed irrevocably from the faith he ought to be cut off. But this leaves him still all liberty of conscience to hold his own views, without violating the consciences of others who cannot fellowship those errors.

And so also in the separation of one denomination from others. It is pleasant to dwell together in unity, but it must be in unity and not in discord, or it is no longer pleasant. It is natural to love to extend fraternal courtesies and greetings, but our pleasure must not be sought at the expense of God's truth.

So also is it painful to utter threatenings and denunciation and woe, and I fear so painful that the threatenings of God's word are not often uttered, and some have learned to believe it best always to speak of a Savior's love, and many regular attendants upon the sanctuary have

begun to despise, as rude, and unpolished, and impolite, and low, and vulgar, and unfashionable, and nauseous, and disgusting, and still others as unwise, and fitted to drive men from the house of God, mere allusions to the hell to which thousands around us are daily hastening, much more plain and faithful statements of what God has certainly taught. My brethren, to what are we drifting in these compromises of the truth of God? How solemn upon these very points come the words of the Lord to our prophet, in the third chapter. "Son of Man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore, hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die, and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way to save his life, the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at thine hand."

Who shall dare to compromise God's messages of hell under such a threat as this? Yea, who dares make any compromise on any point whatever, when God has taught him the truth, and made him his witness on its behalf?

The mistake is frequently made, and too many give reason for it, that to be uncompromising as to the truth one must have a bitter and sectarian spirit. But this spirit arises from selfish passion, and not from love of the truth. Is the Christian missionary filled with such a spirit when he seeks to teach the truth as it is in Jesus to the heathen? Was there bitterness in the heart of Paul when he yearned over Israel that his brethren might be saved? Or was Christ embittered when weeping over Jerusalem? Then need not he who loves and cherishes the truth feel aught but love and vehement desire and yearn-

ing over those in error? The real love of the truth and desire to see it triumph is inconsistent with bitterness, but is perfectly consistent with the firm maintenance of it upon all proper occasions. It is because it is God's truth that the disciple so earnestly maintains it, and does it too because he knows how valuable it is and how great is the loss of that man who fails to attain it. It is the love he bears to his opponent as well as to the truth itself that makes him the more firm. He has, as he believes, what God has revealed, and he hears and must obey the message of his Lord. "I do send thee unto them and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God."

The minister who realizes his position in which our text places him must be filled with the true spirit of his office. To him his work is not a formality, nor a profession, nor one in which he is chiefly representing his church or his congregation. He will not enter the pulpit ambitious of fame or courting popular display, or rejoicing in the flattery of attendant multitudes; nor is his anxiety about the mere form of his discourse, or its literary excellence, or the applause with which it is received. His is a more solemn position. He is God's messenger. He is sent to his own fellowmen. He feels his own insufficiency for the work. He must cling to God for help, and rest only upon Him.

His message too is a solemn matter. He has a message from God to his fellow men. By that message he shall bind or shall loose. He is to be a savor of life unto life or of death unto death. He stands between time and eternity. His is a word which God will not let return unto Him void. There is, therefore, no personal pride in the authority with which he speaks for God. The weight of that authority is almost crushing. His heart is filled with

tender emotions of pity and love for his hearers. And he lifts up his soul in prayer to God for His guidance and blessing.

Nor will such an one rashly undertake to deliver a message which he is not personally convinced to be the truth of God. He will aim after all such knowledge of the word of God as he may obtain in the providence of God, and strive not simply to store it in his mind, but to obtain a gracious and spiritual knowledge of it with his heart. Thus will he be fitted in deep conviction of the truth to speak it forth without compromise or addition, declaring what God has said with the authority of one who speaks for God.