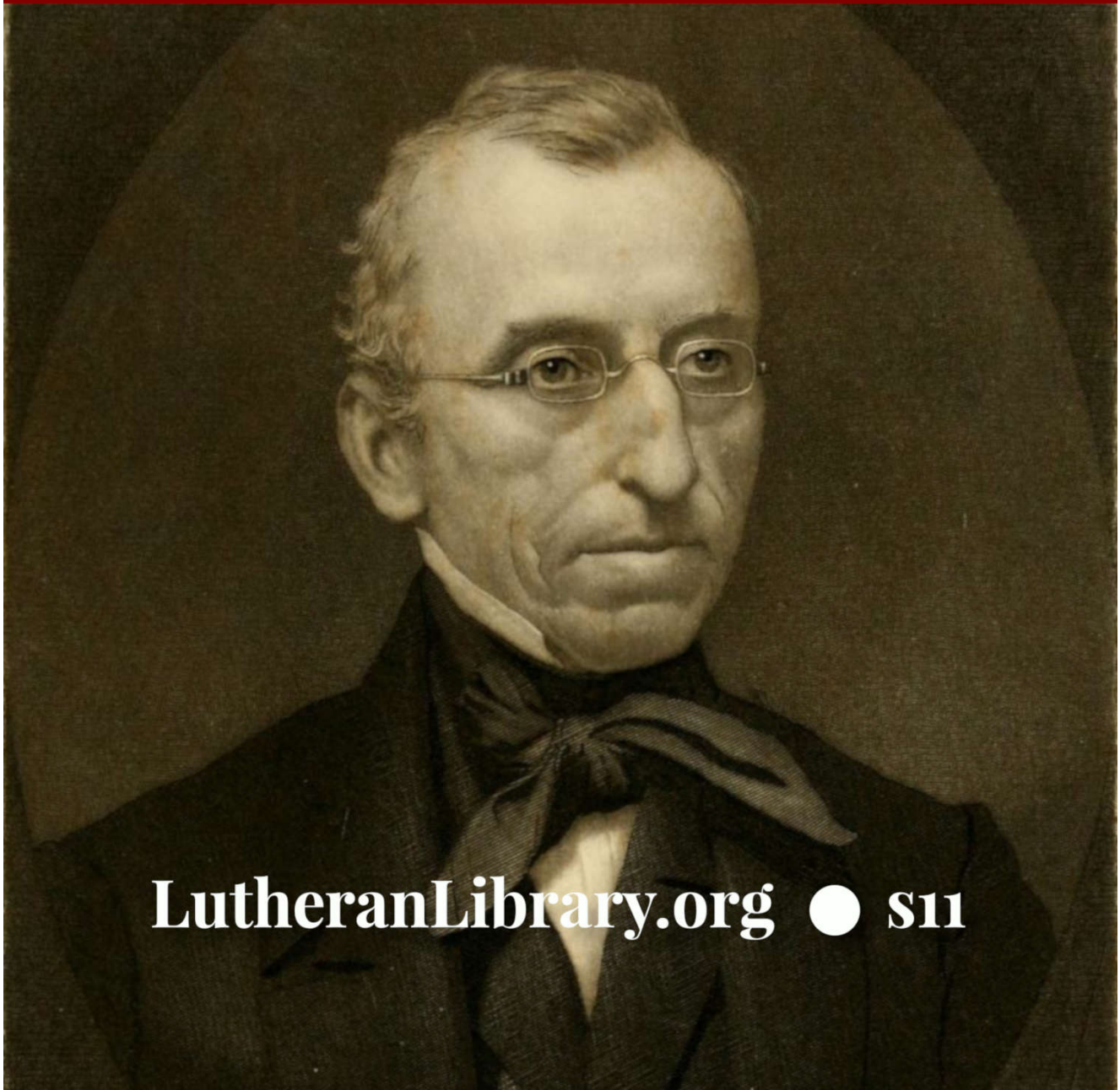


# Benjamin Kurtz

## How Should the Gospel Be Preached?



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# How Should The Gospel Be Preached?

By Benjamin Kurtz, D.D.

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# Preface by Lutheran Librarian

In republishing this book, we seek to introduce this author to a new generation of those seeking authentic spirituality.

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BENJAMIN KURTZ (1795-1865) declined his election to professorship at the Lutheran Theological Seminary because “He loved his work on the *Lutheran Observer* too well to give it up for any other... He was not under the control of any Synod or Board, and pursued his own independent way.”

“Dr. Kurtz stoutly maintained what was called the Evangelical standpoint... He was not what we call a learned man or a profound theologian... but he was uncommonly intelligent in all the ordinary affairs of life and achieved more good in the ministry than many of far greater attainments. The degree of D. D. was conferred upon him by the Washington College, and that of LL. D. by the Wittenberg College.” (source: John Morris in Jenson’s *American Lutheran Biographies*. 1890)

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# How Should The Gospel Be Preached?

By Benjamin Kurtz, D. D., of Baltimore, Md

THE GREAT AMERICAN lexicographer is doubtless correct, when he derives the term *gospel*, from the old Saxon word, *godspell*; *god*, good, and *spell*, history, relation, etc. According to this etymology, the word signifies a history or narrative of something good, the announcement of agreeable information, a joyful message, or the communication of glad tidings. This definition answers exactly to the Greek term employed for the same purpose, viz. εὐαγγέλιον — *evangelium*, the literal meaning of which is, a good or joyful message.

But in the remarks we are about to make, we use the term in a more extended sense, implying a revelation of God to fallen man, through a Mediator, comprehending the whole scheme of salvation, at first faintly intimated to our first parents, then, by degrees and from age to age, more distinctly disclosed by the prophets of the old dispensation, and at last fully and perfectly unfolded by Christ and his apostles.

This gospel was preached to Abraham, Gal. 3:8., being contained in the promise: “In thy seed shall all nations be blessed.” It is called the Gospel of *God*, because it was originally derived from the Father; Rom. 1:1. It is denominated the Gospel of *the grace of God*, because it proceeds from, and manifests his favor, and is the means whereby his grace is bestowed; Acts 20: 24. It is termed the Gospel of *Christ*, inasmuch as he is the immediate author, and the subject matter of it. Rom. 1:16. It is represented as the gospel of *salvation*, for it reveals salvation, explains the plan of salvation, and teaches how we may attain to salvation. Eph. 1: 13.

But, without detaining the reader on a subject which is generally understood by Christians, we shall at once proceed to the consideration of the great question at the head of this article, viz., “*How should the Gospel be*



*preached?*” We mean not, by what means shall it be disseminated to the ends of the earth, or what measures must be pursued in order to put it into the possession of, and bring under its saving influence all the nations and kindred of the earth. Doubtless this is a momentous interrogatory, worthy of the exercise of all our wisdom and benevolence, and of our most earnest prayers. But for the present we have our mind directed mainly to the manner or mode in which the glad tidings should be proclaimed to those who assemble to hear them. In respect to this interesting question we remark, that it should be preached with —

## 1. Plainness

So Paul preached it, and his example has as strong claims on our imitation, as his authority has on our obedience. “Be ye followers of me even as I also am of Christ.” 1 Cor. 11:1. Paul was a *scholar*, and might have made a most imposing display of learning. A student of Gamaliel, initiated into the philosophic lore of his day, and acquainted with all its intricacies and high-sounding technicalities,— what a flourish he might have made! how he had it in his power to make the ignorant gaze and gape, and the learned wonder and admire! But not such a man was Paul, — not such a vain-glorious thing had been even Saul of Tarsus.— “And I, brethren,” says he, “when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God;” (1 Cor. 2:1.) i. e. not with the flourish and arts of rhetoric used by your philosophers, who sought after gorgeousness of diction, rather than solidity of truth. It was well for his hearers that he thus eschewed all self display and studied simplicity of speech, for in a contrary event the masses would not have understood him. But he assigns a different and still more cogent reason for his plainness. He says: “Christ sent me to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, *lest the cross of Christ should he made of none effect,*” (1 Cor. 1:17.) i. e. lest the numerous conversions which followed and the wonderful ulterior results should be attributed to his learning and eloquence, and not to the working of the Holy Spirit. A distinguished and popular writer remarks, that, “In all the revivals of religion

with which he was acquainted, God appeared to make very little use of *human eloquence*, even when possessed by pious men. His own nervous truths, announced by plain common sense, though in homely phrase, have been the general means of the conviction and conversion of sinners.” Human *eloquence* and *learning* have often been successfully employed in defending the outworks of Christianity; but simplicity and truth alone have preserved the *citadel*. Luther once remarked, when in company with a minister who had been exuberant in rhetorical figures: We should proclaim the truth so plainly that the poor uncultivated peasant who stands behind the door with cap in hand, may know what we mean, and then we are sure that the learned will understand us. But if you must needs make a parade of your erudition, wait till you return to your study, and there you may spout Latin and Greek and declaim in words so huge and lofty, and flights so towering, that even our Lord God himself shall be amazed at your learning!

It is the business of the Christian minister to tell the people, in all frankness and simplicity, that they are fallen, hell-deserving and perishing sinners; that having broken the law of God, times without number, the law’s heavy curse is upon them, and that neither they nor others can remove the curse or work out their deliverance; but also, that a free and glorious salvation has been prepared for them; that Jesus Christ who suffered in Gethsemane and was crucified on Calvary, is the promised Messiah, the eternal Son of God, the great Destroyer of the works of the devil, of the guilt, pollution and power of sin, and the Almighty Savior of all who truly repent, believe, and submit to his government and laws. These solemn and all-momentous truths need no artificial dress; the arts and trappings of mere human eloquence are thrown away upon them. As the ripe and luscious fruit requires no condiment to improve its taste, so the precious doctrine of the Cross needs none of the stratagems of dramatic exhibition to impart energy to it; or, as the blazing luminary of day scorns the pencil of the artist as a means to brighten up its effulgence, so the glorious tidings of salvation through Christ, can receive no additional luster from the arts of human invention. They shine with the greatest splendor when presented in their unadorned but divine power, and permitted to glow and burn in their own native, heaven-born light.

Was the pulpit constructed to be made a theater to show off our scholastic attainments and powers of oratory; to build up a reputation, obtain a name among men, and wreath our own brow with laurels? Or, is it de-

signed to afford an opportunity to proclaim the good news of salvation to fallen man; to point out the way of eternal life; to exhort, to support, and to cheer the suffering sinner? Are not these the glorious topics on which we have to enlarge — and do these need the tricks and tinsel of oratory, or the studied beauties of eloquence? Shall truths and counsels like these be couched in terms which the poor and ignorant cannot understand? “Let all eloquent preachers beware,” said Kirk White, “lest, they fill any man’s ears with sounding words, when they should be feeding his soul with the bread of life! Let them fear lest, instead of honoring God, they honor themselves! If any man ascend the pulpit with the intention of uttering a fine thing, he is committing a deadly sin.” Let all, however, remember, that there is a medium, and that vulgarity and meanness are cautiously to be shunned. But, while we speak with propriety and chastity, we cannot be too familiar, or too plain.

Robert Hall once remarked, “I am tormented with the desire of *writing better than I can.*” He was one of the most finished writers of his day, and yet his ambition to write still better, to excel even himself, gave him a vast amount of anxiety and labor. Are not many ministers equally tormented to preach better than they can? And how often, when thus ambitiously aiming higher than they can reach, for their own glory, rather than that of their Master, does God leave them to their counsels, withholding freedom of thought and utterance, and permitting them to bring deserved reproach and mortification upon themselves? The swan cannot soar aloft with the eagle, nor can even the eagle tower higher than its pinions and the dazzling rays of the sun will permit. In either case disappointment and humiliation, if not something worse, will be the penalty of the vain attempt. Hence the force of the proverb: “*Niemand fliege höher denn ihm die Federn gewachsen sind;*” — i. e. let no one attempt to fly higher than his plumage will carry him.

“But I have no wish,” continued the orator of Paisly, “to make *fine, pretty* sermons. Prettiness is well enough, when prettiness is in place. I like to see a pretty child, a pretty flower, but in a sermon prettiness is out of place. To my ear it would be any thing but commendation, should it be said to me: ‘you have given us a pretty sermon.’”

Suppose a man were on trial for his life, and his advocate should amuse the jury with tropes and figures, burying his argument beneath a profusion of the flowers of rhetoric, how would the arraigned criminal feel? Would he

not be tempted to break through the accustomed restraints of propriety, and exclaim, in all the agony of torturing apprehension: "Hold, man of vain words and self-renown! you care more for your own vanity than for my rescue. For pity's sake, put yourself in my place,— speak in view of the gallows,— remember, my very existence is in jeopardy, and let the thought of the scaffold and the rope take hold of your mind, and then you will forget yourself, and tell your story plainly and earnestly." There can be no serious objection to a lady's winding a sword with ribbons, and studding it with roses when she presents it to her hero-lover, but in the day of battle he will tear away the ornament and use a naked edge on the enemy.

We have already quoted Luther on this subject; let us hear him again: "Thunder and lightning, O Luther," said Melancthon, "are all thy words." One evening after tea, when the learned and eloquent Bucer was his guest, Luther paid a flattering compliment to his noble coadjutor in the Reformation. Bucer had delivered that day a profound and highly finished sermon, from Luther's pulpit in Wittenberg. Luther was liberal in praising it, on the score of learning and oratory; and praise from such a man was not a thing to be lightly esteemed. "But, after all," added the illustrious Reformer, "I can preach better than you, brother Bucer" This sounded oddly enough, but Bucer took it in good part, and replied:

"To be sure you can, brother Martin; every body knows that you are the prince of preachers."—

"Do not, however, understand me," rejoined Luther, "as though I spoke merely in praise of myself. I am fully aware of my weakness, and am conscious of my inability to deliver a sermon so learned and eloquent as the one I have heard from your lips this afternoon. But my method is, when I enter the pulpit, to look at the people who sit in the aisle, because they are principally Vandals." (By this term he meant the common people, and alluded to the circumstance that that region of country had been formerly overrun by hordes of ignorant Vandals.)

"I keep my eye upon the Vandals, and endeavor to preach what they can understand. But you shoot over their heads. Your sermon was calculated for learned hearers. My Vandals could not understand you. I compare them to a crying babe, which is sooner satisfied with the breast of its mother, than the richest confectioneries. So my people are more nourished with the simple word of the gospel, than by the deepest erudition, though accompanied with all the embellishments of oratory."

It would be well, if all ministers of the Gospel kept Luther's example, in this respect, constantly before them. The world at large need the "simple word of the Gospel." — This addresses itself directly to their religious nature — to the heart and conscience. It pretends not to philosophize. It appeals to the spontaneous conviction of the soul, and, applied by the Spirit, it satisfies its deepest wants. Were a severe and extended process of reasoning necessary to an apprehension of its doctrines, the uneducated would remain ignorant of them. But as it is, no one need be destitute of the gospel for want of capacity to perceive its truths.

Does not the word of God address all men as Vandals? Does it not find them all alike in the same condition, needing the same spiritual regimen? Is it not designed for the poor and ignorant and outcast, as well as for the more favored classes, the learned and cultivated of this world? Or are the latter above the need of its helps, and capable of attaining the same ends in another way? No, truly, it makes no such distinctions. The man of the mightiest genius or the most accomplished intellect, must become a docile child, as well as the most uncultivated sinner and the rudest savage — or never be spiritually renovated. He possesses no vantage ground in respect to his spiritual destitution or necessities. He is the son of want, and must be fed from the same storehouse, and with the same food, as the lowest of his fellow creatures. There is a strait gait of knowledge through which he must pass on entering the kingdom, and many of the results of his reasonings must be abandoned at that entrance, while he confesses himself a mere disciple all the way in his progress.

But, again, the Gospel should be preached also with —

## 2. Fervor

If any preacher think that plainness in itself will supply the want of warmth of feeling, he will be disappointed. A deep experimental and abiding conviction of the truth of the Gospel will produce a glorious enthusiasm, and without a degree of enthusiasm no lofty and arduous enterprise has ever been commenced, much less consummated. If at any time, apathy

or a dull prosy listlessness be inexcusable, it is when we are unfolding and inculcating the sublime truths of revelation; when we are endeavoring to persuade men to flee from the wrath to come, and seek an interest in the blood-purchased salvation proffered in the gospel. Surely, on such an occasion, our hearts should burn with a holy fire. We should speak as the anointed of the Lord, with a profound consciousness that we are ambassadors from the court of heaven to a perishing, but still, salvable world, and also under a sense of our own responsibility and of the eternal consequences, for good or evil, that must result to those who hear us.

It is only when *we feel*, that we can expect *others to feel*; when *our affections are moved*, that we are likely to influence *the hearts of our hearers*. Not that our zeal imparts a divine efficacy to the doctrines of the Gospel, but because it is in this way that God requires us to preach them; because this mode of preaching is in itself, humanly speaking, best adapted to the conformation of human nature, and has the promise that God will honor it with his blessing.

Peter was a man of quick and ardent impulses, and *three thousand* conversions constituted the rich fruit of a single sermon, delivered from the deep depths of his burning soul, on the day of Pentecost. That this glowing fervor was one of the chief elements in the character of Paul, is evident from the spirit and manner in which he opposed the Gospel and persecuted the Christians prior to his conversion; and who has ever been more successful in proclaiming the joyful tidings of the gospel?

Luther's strongest characteristics were a zeal not to be chilled and an intrepidity that knew not how to cower, and God employed him to shake to its very center the entire structure of papal abominations, and achieve the most glorious reformation in church and state that the world has witnessed since the apostolic era. So Whitefield, Davies, Payson, and numerous others who might be named, were all men of enthusiastic feelings, and preached with an ardor that was worthy of the solemnity of eternal interests; and we all know how signally God honored them as his instruments, and blessed their labors in the church.

A minister of the Gospel asked Garrick "why it was that play actors, who dealt in fiction, often moved their audience to tears, while men could sit under the sound of the Gospel without emotion?" "Because," replied the distinguished dramatist, "we actors present *fiction* as if it were *truth*, and you ministers preach *truth* as though it were *fiction*." This was a severe re-

proof, and though by far too sweeping, yet it must be confessed that there was too much ground for it to be regarded as wholly unmerited.

The Gospel is a divine revelation; it unfolds a scheme of redemption that was conceived in heaven by the Great God of the Universe; consummated on earth by the eternal Son of his love, at an expense of humiliation and suffering that can never be computed by finite intellect, it develops such a mysterious combination of unfathomable wisdom and stupendous love, that the most exalted of the created intelligences in heaven are inadequate to comprehend its height and depth and length and breadth. In it are bound up the ever-during interests and immutable destiny of countless myriads of undying souls! In this light we should regard the gospel; to the utmost possible extent we should learn to feel that such is its nature and high importance; and the fervor with which we preach it, should ever afford evidence that we thus *regard it*, and do thus *feel*.

Such convictions and feelings will inspire us with a *holy boldness*. Neither the hope of gain nor the frowns of the powerful, will betray us into a dereliction of duty. We shall feel strong in the God of our salvation, and fearless in the consciousness of the continual presence and protection of Him who has said: "Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

Thus panoplied, we shall be ready, if duty call, to "go to Worms, though there were as many devils there as tiles on the houses." We shall suppress no necessary truth; nor "shun to declare all the counsel of God," however unacceptable to the unregenerate and hardened sinner. If men take offense; if they decry us as zealots and fanatics; if they scoff, and persecute, and slander, speaking all manner of evil against us, it will be at their own peril, while we shall clear our skirts of their blood and save our own souls alive. We shall, " 'mid dangers thick as thought can make them," be able to exclaim with the calmness and serenity of the apostle: "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God." Acts 20:24.

Finally, the Gospel should be preached with—

### 3. Prayerful Dependence On God's Spirit

Though *simplicity* and *fervor* are essential properties of the highest order of pulpit effort, yet, of themselves, they will not ensure success. However zealously the minister may perform his duty, ultimately his success depends upon the cooperation of divine grace. Without this he will preach to little purpose; his "labor is in vain and his strength is spent for naught." To the unconverted the gospel is "a sealed book," and none but Jehovah can "break the seal." "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned." 1 Cor. 2:14. The two disciples to whom Christ joined himself, when on the way to Emmaus, remembered afterwards how "their hearts burned within them while he talked with them by the way, and *while he opened to them the Scriptures.*" Luke 24:32. We all know that the Gospel was preached in vain to Lydia, until "*The Lord opened her heart* that she should attend to the things which were spoken of Paul." Acts 16:24. It seems, then, that there is in the gospel, it matters not how preached, no inherent power to regenerate the sinner, and that so far as a thorough conversion is concerned, it is a "dead letter" until made effectual by the all-powerful working of God's Spirit. Hence says the apostle: "It is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Phil. 2:13.; and again: "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase." 1 Cor. 3:6.

If then the natural, i. e. the animal or unregenerate man, "cannot receive," that is to say, neither apprehends nor comprehends "the things of the Spirit," among which must be enumerated the sublime truths of the Gospel; if they "are foolishness to him," until unfolded and made efficacious by the Spirit; if it be God's peculiar prerogative to "open the Scriptures," to "open the heart," to "work in us," to "give the increase;" then surely no degree of *plainness* and *fervor* will avail to the conversion of the sinner, unless accompanied by the energies of the Holy Ghost. Hence, the Gospel must be preached in humble reliance on the Spirit's aid; in other words, we must look to God in believing prayer for his blessing. Luther represented prayer



as a ladder upon which the Christian climbs up to heaven, enters the Holy of Holies, and takes from the fulness of God grace for grace to help in every time of need.

A *prayerless, self-confident* minister, who depends wholly or mainly upon his own intellect, the extent of his learning, and the power of his eloquence, will prove a curse to the church; and in eternity, “all reeking with the blood of souls,” damned sinners will heap bitterest maledictions upon his head; and a *prayerless* people may be “hearers of the word,” but they never will be “doers.”

A minister may possess *great* learning and *great* eloquence, and yet not be a great preacher. These qualities may secure a high degree of reputation, and gather large and delighted auditories. But valuable as they may be esteemed, they are not sufficient to constitute a successful preacher. He alone is mighty in the pulpit who carries with him thither the strength he has acquired in the closet; who is accustomed in his secret wrestlings with the God of Israel to say: “How can I go unless thou go with me; how can I speak unless thou speak by me; of what avail will my embassy be, unless my commission have thy signature and be accompanied by the working of thy grace?” — He is uneasy unless he obtains an explicit answer, thus: “Lo, I am with you.” Then he goes before the people, not to *entertain* them with “beauties and graces,” not to elicit their applause for his talents and rich imagery, but to deliver God’s message, which can be made effectual only by God’s mighty power, to the discomfiture of Satan and the deliverance of the poor sin-bound captive.

But it is not merely the duty of ministers who preach, but also of those who *hear*, — *to pray*. To secure the divine blessing essential to the fullest success of a preached gospel, there should be a united “offering up of prayer and supplications, with strong crying and tears, unto Him that is able to save from death.” Such dependence upon the Spirit; such appeals to a throne of grace, ascending from hearts knit together in love, enlist omnipotence in our behalf; bring down Jesus-Jehovah himself into our assemblies, whose presence fills the house with glory and imparts a divine efficacy, which makes the gospel “a savor of life unto life,” and “the power and wisdom of God to the salvation of them that believe.”

Oh, if ministers truly felt and could habitually realize, that their strength lies in God, and their success depends upon his blessing; if the church were more prayerful, constantly looking up to heaven for the outpouring of the

Spirit upon ministers and people, how much more powerfully and profitably the gospel would be preached! It would “run and be glorified;” sinners would be converted by thousands; revival would follow revival in quick and triumphant succession; all God’s churches would become burning and shining lights; the heathen would speedily be subdued to Immanuel’s scepter, and the whole world be filled with the knowledge and worship of the true God in Christ Jesus.

In this paper we have aimed at no more than an unpretending, unvarnished exhibition of the *mode* of preaching the gospel; perhaps on a future occasion we may advert to the *subject-matter* of pulpit ministrations. For the present we merely remark, that the grand theme of evangelic preaching must be *salvation through a crucified Savior*.

In the days of the apostles “the Jews required a sign and the Greeks sought after wisdom,” but Paul preached “Christ crucified,” and determined to know nothing among the Corinthians but “Christ and him crucified.” He, indeed, had in himself much whereof he might justly have boasted before men, and yet we hear him exclaiming: “God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” Whatever others would do, or whatever they would exult in, *he* could not glory in any thing short of the Cross, which involves the great doctrine that justification and salvation are only through Christ crucified, Christ having made an atonement for the sins of the world by his passion and death. And the apostle gloried, also, in the disgrace and persecution which he experienced, through his attachment to this crucified Christ, as he might well do, since this was in his case a mark of his fidelity.

O, what a model for ministers of the Gospel! Would they be preachers like Paul, they must imitate this example. — Would they obey God’s command and conform to the pattern set by all the other apostles; would they exhibit God’s power in converting sinners; his wisdom and mercy in reconciling them to himself, in harmonizing the claims of eternal justice and boundless love in order to the redemption of an apostate and perishing world; would they be successful in winning souls, in rescuing them from going down to the pit and bringing them back, from their descending, headlong course, to the fold of their Great Shepherd and Bishop! — Oh then they must preach “Christ and him crucified.” Let Jesus, the mighty Destroyer of sin, the Lovely One of Calvary, and his salvation, be the sum and substance of all their sermons. Let him be all and in all to themselves, and

through them, be made all and in all to their hearers, and then each attentive hearer, though the sound of the Gospel salute his ears for the last time, will sufficiently understand the plan of redemption to escape from hell and fly to heaven. It was said of Payson, that every time he addressed a congregation the thought came up to his mind, that there might be one or another present who would never again have an opportunity to hear the gospel, and that he therefore framed every discourse so that, in this event, the unconverted hearer might be at no loss to save his soul, *if he would*. This will be the character of every sermon if *Christ crucified*, if *salvation through the atonement of a suffering Savior* be, as it should be, its center and circumference. But let this glorious theme, by all means, be proclaimed PLAINLY, FERVENTLY, PRAYERFULLY. Ministers who thus preach, God will bless more and more abundantly, and make them a rich and everlasting blessing to those committed to their trust, and to the world at large.

Would to the Lord! that all Christ's ministering servants could learn, when in the pulpit, entirely to lose sight of self; to hide altogether behind the Cross and so hold up Jesus constantly and evermore before their dying and yet undying audience, that they could see naught but Him, and thus be constrained to *look* at him, *embrace* him, and *trust in him for salvation!*

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# How Can You Find Peace With God?

The most important thing to grasp is that no one is made right with God by the good things he or she might do. Justification is by faith only, and that faith resting on what Jesus Christ did. It is by believing and trusting in His one-time *substitutionary* death for your sins.

Read your Bible steadily. God works His power in human beings through His Word. Where the Word is, God the Holy Spirit is always present.

Suggested Reading: [New Testament Conversions by Pastor George Gerberding](#)

## Benediction

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25)

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