



A Closer Look

AT THINGS PERTAINING TO THE FAITH

August 2004

Another Interview with Wayne Jackson On Preaching

EDITORIAL NOTE: Wayne, in my estimation, is one of the finest preachers we have. I was recently reminded of this at the 2004 Visalia Lectureship and walked away thinking that someone needs to tap into his thinking on the subject.

I am not suggesting by this that the church should be pumping out exact replicas of Wayne. In part, what makes Wayne memorable is his uniqueness. Other preachers I could listen to all day have different preaching styles. Each man is unique; he is unlike the others.

Having said that, it is also the case that there are things we can learn from each of these men.

Steven Lloyd

Steve: What do you see to be the primary purpose of preaching?

Wayne: Perhaps it would be helpful if one first approached this question from a negative vantage point. I might express it like this: The primary purpose of preaching is not merely to provide a recounting of certain historical events (e.g., the life and death of Jesus), though that certainly is crucial to our message. The prime thrust of our preaching is not to make better families, though such is a subsidiary benefit of the gospel. The purpose of preaching is neither to agitate nor to comfort, though each of these may result, depending upon the need and the quality of the hearer. Certainly our preaching is not to entertain, though a rich study of the Scriptures is one of the most “entertaining” exercises of life—in the noblest sense of the term.

No, there is but one purpose of preaching ultimately. Preaching, like the “sacred writings” themselves, must have as its terminal goal that of making our auditors “wise

unto salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). The acquisition of “eternal life” is the world’s most important issue (Mt. 16:26), with no rival even close.

Steve: While the answer to the next question may seem obvious to some, it does not seem so apparent to others. What connection exists between preaching and the Scriptures?

Wayne: Well, the connection is this. The Scriptures contain that cohesive body of revealed truth, from God to man, in which is contained Heaven’s plan for human redemption (2 Tim. 3:16-17). There is no message from God today apart from that contained in the Bible. With the completion of the New Testament canon, “the faith” had been “once for all time” delivered to Adam’s offspring (Jude 3). Hence, all that one knows of the will of the Lord for humanity is that which is conveyed by the sacred Writings. Any preaching, therefore, that stands apart from that library of spiritual truth could be nothing more than human philosophy—which has never been anything but a conglomerate of contradictory and confusing ideas that are naturalistic in essence and, ultimately, therefore, fruitless. Unfortunately, that is a pretty fair characterization of much of the verbiage today that goes by the name “preaching.”

Steve: What connection exists between preaching and the character of the preacher?

Wayne: The character of the preacher is extremely significant in providing credibility for the message he conveys. This most certainly is reflected in Luke’s statement regarding that which our Lord “began both to

do and to teach,” as the historian refers to his earlier treatise regarding Jesus (Acts 1:1). The poet’s query, “How can I hear what you are saying, when what you are is forever thundering in my ears?” is a haunting refrain that throws the spotlight upon the credibility of some preachers today. Christ delivered a blistering rebuke to those teachers who “say and do not” (Mt. 23:3).

Every preacher should immerse himself in the admonitions of Paul to both Timothy and Titus, relative to the examples they were to set (1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:7-8). Of course it must be remembered that no preacher, even the noblest, is without flaw. Both Peter and Paul struggled with weaknesses on occasion (Gal. 2:11ff; 1 Cor. 9:27). Nonetheless, those who publicly proclaim the teaching of Christ have an especially sobering responsibility to cause no hindrance to the cause of Jesus.

Steve: I preach using notes—full content outlines. You preach without them. In an interview I conducted with Weldon Langfield (April 2002), he extolled the importance of preaching with notes, but then wrote, “Wayne Jackson is the only preacher I know who can preach an organized lesson without taking an outline to the pulpit, so unless you are him, prepare it to be used in your sermon.” How did you develop the skill of preaching without notes?

Wayne: The same way that one learns to swim when he is thrown into the lake and told: “Swim!” Seriously, when I entered The College of Evangelists (Tupelo, Mississippi) in January of 1957 (the first preacher-training school of the modern era, I believe), I entered a wholly new environment of rigorous study discipline. The student preachers were regularly required to “preach” to their classmates, and all presentations were to be made without notes. Furthermore, all Scripture quotations had to be cited from memory. No notes; no open Bibles! That was a difficult task as we spoke from pine-stump “pulpits” around the perimeter of a huge wooded amphitheater each week. This was an almost three-year exercise. Over the nearly-half-century since then, I have pretty much stayed

with that format, and even now I find it more difficult to preach with extensive notes than to do otherwise.

I discovered that if I immerse myself in the subject matter, and construct a general-direction outline in my mind, the task is not that difficult. Occasionally, however, I will have a few notes, though more often than not I do

not refer to them. I may have a small outline (on an index card) consisting of three or four words as sequence memory-joggers. On Saturday nights, or when I am doing a lecture series away from home, the last thing that I do before I drop off to sleep is attempt to go through my lesson for the following day entirely from memory. Such an exercise facilitates the extemporaneous process considerably. Too, it gives me a “sharing” experience with my audience. I fall asleep preaching the sermon the night before; they fall asleep while I’m preaching it the following day!

Steve: What general guidelines would you offer today’s preacher where structuring a sermon is concerned?

Wayne: Some say that a good sermon should accomplish three things: impart knowledge, stimulate emotion, and motivate to action. In a word, something to know, feel, and do. Realistically, the experienced preacher knows that lessons may be designed to accomplish specific goals, and that there is no “fixed” format mandated. Some of the sermons recorded in the book of Acts do not follow today’s recommended procedures!

Any good speech, however, is characterized by certain elements: the opening, the body, and the conclusion. The “opening” should engage the audience’s attention immediately, and perhaps provide some direction as to the aim of the presentation. The “body” ought to lay out the information intended to accomplish the goal—whether the design is to instruct, to persuade, or to activate. The “closing” should tie everything together (but not by re-preaching the message), so as to leave the audience with the impact of the lesson to take with them.

Preaching, above all, should be designed to exalt God and his Son, and to provide redemptive information that

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can direct the auditor towards heaven. There are some pitfalls to be avoided, in my judgment. When a sermon appears to have been crafted to impress the audience with the speaker's knowledge and/or oratorical ability, rather than to deepen the hearer's spirituality, such is but a distracting noise. What good does it accomplish when one's scholastic vocabulary is over everyone's head? We are not speaking to a conglomerate of professors from Cambridge. Lessons ought to be easy to understand. This is especially crucial in an ever-increasing, biblically illiterate society, when such fundamental terms as "gospel," "deity," "penitent," "Godhead," and "apostasy" are not comprehended by the common man. One of the greatest compliments that a preacher can receive from a visitor is: "You know, I'm not sure I agreed with every thing he said, but the lesson surely was easy to understand."

Or what is accomplished when a man quotes fifty passages in rapid-fire fashion but leaves you impressed with his ability rather than the content of the message? Unfortunately, too many sermons are disorganized, characterized by a lack of preparation, and/or exhibitions of self-aggrandizement.

Our younger preachers should study the sermons of men like T.B. Larimore, N.B. Hardeman and Guy N. Woods for their content, humble simplicity, and easy flow of presentation. Unfortunately, these men are largely now ignored by a brotherhood headed in a new direction—away from Jerusalem and towards Rome.

Steve: While interviewing for a particular work, an elder asked me what I thought the typical day of a preacher might look like. How would you respond to that question?

Wayne: First, it is difficult to provide a "blanket" response to this question. It would depend largely upon what kind of understanding the preacher has with his elders, or, in the event the congregation does not have elders, the brethren in general. It occasionally is the case that elders want to force a preacher into a work-mold that fits neither his personality nor his abilities. There is no "one size fits all."

Second, there is hardly a "typical" day for the average preacher. There are so many unexpected things that arise that no preacher can count on a 9:00 to 5:00 arrangement. I once knew of a woman who was in the hospital at the very threshold of death. She put in an urgent call to her preacher, asking if he would come by and talk with her. He declined because it was "his day off."

These matters aside, I can give you an idea of what

my "typical day" is like. On average, I arise about 4:00. I go to my study, which is located to the rear of our house. I check my e-mail and determine if anything requires an urgent answer. I usually allow myself about an hour for that. Around 5:00 I leave for a walk, which normally takes about an hour. When I return I begin either: a study of some theme (in preparation for a lesson or an article), work on a writing project, answer further mail, etc. After a brief time-out for breakfast, I resume work until about 10:00, at which point I usually visit the post office to pick up my regular mail. If there are hospital visits to be made, I will work these in the afternoon depending, of course, upon the urgency of the situation. Due to a heavy writing schedule, I must use every spare moment to keep up with regular projects and requested assignments. By the day's end I am usually pretty well spent. Amidst all of this there are social activities and trips away from home for speaking engagements, etc. I have always had a happy and wholesome relationship with my elders. They allow me considerable freedom to schedule my own activities, and they believe that I am competent and conscientious enough to do so. I am, however, always quite willing to accommodate their needs. Ideally, in my judgment, this is a fair arrangement, and one that facilitates the greatest productivity.

Steve: What advice can you give concerning building a workable library?

Wayne: I am probably not the best person to answer this question due to the changes that are occurring in the world of information, regarding which I still am a novice. We are rapidly passing from the environment of the bound book to that of CDs, etc., and of course, the world-wide web has study tools galore. My personal library consists of hundreds of books that require an enormous amount of space and many of these volumes have long been out of print. The young preacher of the future can have a treasure house of books on a few CDs. I am not familiar with what is currently available in this format, but I know that enormous libraries are on the market. I will therefore focus upon the type of selection that I would recommend.

Perhaps books can be classified into two broad categories. First, there are those one may buy for a special need; that he will read and profit from, but likely never need to refer to again—if so, only rarely. It may take a few years for him to learn that these should be kept to a minimum. They take up space and merely gather dust.

On the other hand, there are valuable reference works

the student will consult again and again. Maximize these. The prudent student will want to collect a good base of study tools that will enable him to do independent investigation, so that he does not have to rely simply upon what others tell him the text means. Works that pertain to the original languages of the Bible are indispensable, grammars, lexicons, general dictionaries (e.g., the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia* (five volumes), and specialized dictionaries (e.g., the Kittel, *Theological Dictionary*, ten volumes, and the three-volume *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Balz & Schneider). Good commentary sets, e.g., Lenski, Hendricksen, the *New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (NICOT & NICNT—neither of which is complete at this point), etc., are just a sampling of the kind of books that are helpful. One should have some sense of the theological inclination (liberal or conservative) of the author/editors. Then there are reference works in specialized areas: Bible geography, archaeology, apologetics, systematic theology, etc. Truly, of the making of many books there is no end.

Of course the best library in the world, without the mental industry to study, will be of no value. I know of preachers who have significant libraries; who appear to have collected books simply for the sake of such, who seem to have used them hardly at all.

Additionally, it is helpful to subscribe to a few religious journals so as to keep up with the current trends in religion in general, and in the church particularly.

There are many people who still yearn for good, rich teaching from the sacred Scriptures, and the preacher who is willing to pay the price of diligent study, who has reasonable teaching ability, and who conveys a sense of profound reverence for the Scriptures, will find an attentive audience.

Steve: You have preached for the same congregation for almost 43 years. To what do you attribute your longevity at one place?

Wayne: I am asked that question quite frequently. Sometimes I am inclined to facetiously respond that I've outlived most of the original congregation, or else I've simply worn them down. More seriously, I have reflected upon this matter from time to time and I think I would suggest the following factors.

First, I've always studied hard so as to keep my preaching fresh. I want to feed my audience with treasures from God's word that will thrill their souls. Preaching, to me, is a passion. I am so fascinated with the Scriptures and I delight in conveying their message. Even if I am

going to speak on a theme that I know very well, and which I have addressed many times, I will attempt to at least bring some new study to the subject. I try to deliver the lesson as if it was for the first time, and my audience has never heard it before. I entertain the belief that the church deserves the very best that I can do—all the time. That requires some mental discipline, and though I'm sure I don't always succeed, I do try.

Second, while I don't make daily "ministerial house calls" to sip tea and engage in light conversation, I try to be available whenever folks need me; I show them genuine love and concern. There have been numerous occasions when I have arisen in the middle of the night to go to the side of someone who is in dire straits. This past week, for example, I have daily been at the bedside of a beloved sister whom I baptized 30 years ago. As I bade her farewell from earth's scenes yesterday afternoon, I recalled the inscription she wrote to me in a book given to me more than two decades ago. "Dear Wayne, This gift is because you are always available when someone needs your help. Love, Cathey." I have a very close bond with most of our people.

Third, I feel that a good sense of humor has been valuable. I don't hesitate to "tease" or joke with my brethren in a jovial way. We laugh much and have wonderfully great times with one another. Mine is not an employer/employee relationship; we are family in the richest sense of the term.



Wayne is very busy with his writing and speaking engagements, not to mention the health issues he has faced over the past couple of years. I am thankful to report that the health issues have been resolved.

I appreciate the time he took to engage in this interview. My first interview with Wayne is posted on the web at www.closerlookbooks.com From there, go to "Closer Look Journal" and look under interviews.

If you would like to hear Wayne on the internet, visit his web site at www.christiancourier.com and navigate to "Audio." Have paper and pen handy to outline his lessons as a study in sermon preparation.