

THE PROBLEM OF
THE “GIFTED SPEAKER”

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THE PROBLEM OF
THE “GIFTED SPEAKER”

by

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P R E F A C E

ONE of the serious problems facing the Church in the Western world today is the problem posed by the “ministry” of those who are considered “gifted speakers” and consequently idolised by the Church. Stated in its most simple form this is the problem posed by the prioritising of the personality, charisma, “profile,” popularity, stage presence and ability of the speaker as an orator and entertainer over the content of the message being delivered—in short, the triumph of style over content, the consequence of which has been the creation of an intellectually feeble-minded and theologically malnourished generation of churchgoers who are overstimulated by sentimental and mindless entertainment worship masquerading as spiritual edification.

The problem has a long history, but it is made particularly problematic today by the intellectual dumbing down process that currently afflicts British culture generally and has produced a semiliterate society. This debasement of culture to its lowest common denominator is inevitable when those in positions of authority and leadership, in whatever sphere this happens to be, have to appeal constantly to the worst predilections and whims of the semiliterate masses, which are manipulated by an irresponsible media world that values the crassest forms of entertainment and the good ratings they generate as man’s highest good.

The problem of course is not confined to the Church, nor to Britain; it is a cultural problem in modern Western society. The problem is apparent in modern politics, where the same obsession with style and charisma, usually perceived in terms of media presence, has triumphed over statesmanship. The consequences have been devastating for the political life of the nation, which has been reduced to an extension of the entertainment world, particularly when it comes to choosing political party leaders. What policies a candidate for leadership would bring to the job along with his

experience and wisdom counts for very little against the overriding importance of his media image. As a consequence, it would not be going too far to say that some of the nation's greatest statesmen of past eras would have stood little chance of being elected let alone promoted to positions of leadership in the media controlled environment of modern politics. And people who would have stood little chance of being promoted to positions of leadership and power in previous generations are promoted to such positions today on the basis merely of their ability to manipulate their image in the media. The political life of the nation has suffered as a consequence, and we are now at a point where the shallow politics of mere personality has reduced the political life of the nation to an all time low.

That the Church should also have fallen into this ditch is, however, particularly problematic because her role in providing spiritual, moral and intellectual leadership for society is vital to the health of the nation. Without the leadership of the Church the nation cannot recover from its present descent into cultural degeneration and the neo-paganism that is its inevitably accompaniment. While the Church is obsessed with the same mindless prioritising of style over content that is vitiating the cultural life of the nation as a whole she will remain useless and irrelevant to society, and therefore unable to provide the leadership that the nation so desperately needs and that can only find its proper context in a worldview created by the dominating influence of the Christian faith. We should remember that the epitome of the "gifted speaker" is the successful second-hand car salesman.

The following essay is being reproduced here in the hope that it will help to encourage the Church to consider and address this serious problem and deal with the silly idolatry that is at the heart of it. The essay was originally the text of a talk given in September 2004 and subsequently published in *Christianity & Society*, the biannual journal of the Kuyper Foundation.

STEPHEN C. PERKS

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THE PROBLEM OF THE “GIFTED SPEAKER”

AN EXPOSITION OF I CORINTHIANS 2:1-5

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. (I COR. 2:1-5)

§I

INTRODUCTION

Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles. In the Graeco-Roman world into which Paul was sent as an apostle of Christ philosophy, rhetoric and oratory were very important. The Greeks were obsessed with these things and with the “wisdom of men.” When Paul went into this world he did not fit the expectations that the Greeks had of a philosopher and a teacher of wisdom. He also fell short of their expectations in terms of rhetoric and oratory skills. They were dissatisfied with him. In particular he did not have the charisma—what actors call “stage presence”—that they had come to expect of those to whom they looked for guidance in wisdom and understanding.

(1) *The First Century Context*

This is clear from the complaints that the Church at Corinth made against him: “For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible” (2 Cor. 10:10; cf. 1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1, 4). He was considered “rude in speech” (2 Cor. 11:6). The word translated as “rude” here (*ιδιώτης*) means “1. a private person as opp[osed] to the State or an official . . . 2. one without professional knowledge, unskilled, uneducated, unlearned.”¹ “It also means the ‘layman’ as compared with the expert”²; in other words one who is “unskilled in any art,”³ the arts in question here being the Greek arts of rhetoric and oratory (it is this Greek word from which we derive our English term *idiot*). What is in view here, therefore, is not the message itself, the content or subject matter of Paul’s preaching, since Paul says immediately “yet not in knowledge.” It was not that Paul did not understand the gospel or that the content of his message was rude or unlearned. Everyone recognised that the content of his message was powerful and weighty. Rather, what was considered rude, or unprofessional, was the *style* in which he delivered the message; i.e. his lack of rhetoric and oratory skills and his lack of charisma. Paul’s message, the content of his preaching and teaching, was powerful, but his lack of charisma irritated the Corinthians and they abhorred the style in which he presented the message because it did not kowtow to Graeco-Roman ideals regarding what constituted good philosophy, wisdom, and rhetoric. In other words they did not consider him a “gifted speaker.” Paul had to defend himself against this accusation in both of his letters to the Church at Corinth. It is obvious from reading these letters that Paul had come under severe criticism and that his ministry was being disparaged and deprecated by those

¹G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1986), p. 218.

²Heinrich Schlier, “*ιδιώτης*” in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Wm B. Eerdmans, 1965, trans. G. W. Bromiley), Vol. III, p. 215.

³J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1901), p. 297a.

who had made an idol out of the “gifted speaker” who embodied the Greek ideals of wisdom and rhetoric. He was being judged in terms of the world’s ideals and standards concerning charisma and speaking abilities.

This is also a problem that the modern Church faces. The Graeco-Roman heritage regarding these matters is very strong in Western culture, and this heritage has always exercised a strong influence upon the Western Church. We need to pay attention, therefore, to how Paul deals with this. It is a major theme in his letters to the Church at Corinth.

The gospel was foolishness to the Greeks (1 Cor. 1:23). Why? Because of its content. The Christian worldview is the complete antithesis of the non-believer’s view of reality. The central message of the gospel is Creation, Fall and Redemption. These three truths are the foundation of the Christian faith and they stand as a great bulwark against the non-believing world. All three doctrines stick in the throat of the non-believer. The non-believer will not accept them and will do everything in his power to overturn and hold down these truths. All three doctrines were considered foolishness to the Greeks.

First, the gospel teaches that the Creation is the handiwork of God and that it is a “good” Creation. But the Greeks found this unacceptable. In the Greek worldview the physical world, matter, is inferior to the spiritual world. For the Greeks the supreme God could never have stooped so low as to create a physical world. The creation of matter was for the Greeks the real problem with the world, not ethical rebellion against God. As a result they considered the physical world to be the creation of a lesser god, the demiurge. This was also the religion of Gnosticism, which infiltrated the Church early in its history and has continued to exert a disastrous influence in the Church right up to our own day.

Second, the Christian gospel teaches that the Fall of mankind was ethical, not metaphysical. For the Greeks man’s Fall was metaphysical. His spirit has become trapped in the physical world of the human body and salvation is deliverance from this physical body. Man’s problem is not that he has offended a holy God by his

rebellion and come under eternal condemnation as a result. His problem rather is that his spirit, which is a divine spark, is trapped in the body. The Christian gospel teaches that the physical body is created by God and good. The problem is man's *will*, his desire to be as God, to be his own God. The Greeks rejected this. For them salvation was deliverance from physical matter, the body. It was the imprisonment of the spirit in the body that they considered evil.

Third, therefore, the Christian doctrine of redemption was foolishness to the Greeks. Christianity taught the resurrection of the physical body. Nothing seemed more absurd to the Greeks than this. If the Fall of mankind was the imprisonment of the spirit in the physical body, salvation must necessarily mean escape from the world of physical matter. But the Christians believed that matter was good and that the human body would be redeemed and resurrected. When the early Christians recited the Apostles' Creed they thumped their chests when they came to the statement about the resurrection of the body to emphasise their belief that the human flesh that God created good will be resurrected on the Day of Judgement. Thumping the chest when reciting these words was like thumbing one's nose at the religious beliefs of the Greek world.

In all these things, Creation, Fall and Redemption, the beliefs of the Christians stood out like a sore thumb against the religious worldview of the Greeks. The gospel was an offence to the Greeks, foolishness. But on top of this Paul was no clever orator. Clever speaking was a Greek ideal. God does not call men to be silver-tongued orators for the gospel. The Christian ideal is speaking the truth plainly with grace. But the Greeks wanted "gifted speakers" who would come up to their ideals and expectations in terms of rhetoric and wisdom. Paul consistently gave them the opposite of this. He made a decision that he would not present the gospel in this way (1 Cor. 2:1-5). Why not? Because this could not bring them salvation. The word of God is what the Holy Spirit uses to bring men to faith in Christ, not the clever rhetoric and oratory of men. Rhetoric and oratory may produce false conversions, but not

genuine ones. Genuine conversion is produced by the renewing of the *mind* of man through the application of God's word by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:21–23 cf. 2 Tim. 1:17).

(2) *The Modern Context*

Today in Western culture we face a very similar situation to that faced by Paul in the Graeco-Roman culture of the first century. In Western culture, increasingly, *style* is what matters, and it takes precedence over content. Hence we have today a media culture obsessed with inane “sound-bytes”—one sentence answers to the world's spiritual and economic problems that sound clever but are really quite shallow, misleading and ultimately useless. The population is virtually force-fed on a diet of politically correct sound-bytes that discourages independent thinking via the influence of the media, the State education system and the political system, which seems to be held captive to, perhaps even paralysed by, its obsession with creating and maintaining political correctness in all spheres of life. In addition, however, there is in modern Western culture a process of dumbing down that has produced an intellectual deficit in society.

The combination of these two trends has been extremely detrimental to Western culture and the Church has been affected by these deleterious influences just as much as any other institution, and this has vitiated her witness to the faith and her ability to provide moral and cultural leadership in society. Those who create a good impression by their charismatic style are promoted to positions of leadership regardless of their maturity in or understanding of the faith. The Church is obsessed with those who are “gifted speakers” and “gifted communicators.” Smooth operators with charismatic personalities and gifts in “communication skills” are doted upon as the answer to the Church's decline by congregations and denominational leaders alike. Yet the Church still continues to decline and atrophy under this absurd prioritising of style over content. I wish I had £1 for every time I have heard Christians say such and such is a “gifted speaker” or a “gifted communicator.”

But it is not the content that counts; rather it is merely the style of the speaker. In fact such speakers could be talking complete rubbish, even heresy, and often are—but, well you see, such and such is a “gifted speaker” and so we must listen to him expounding his doubts with such skill. If you get one of these “gifted speakers” to your church the chances are he will be full of his own importance, and it will be his own *personality* that dominates the message, not the content of the gospel, and more than likely it will be because of the force of his personality that he will be considered to speak with “authority,” regardless of what he teaches.⁴ The modern Church has lost discernment in this matter.

Is this God’s way? Is it what God wants for his Church? No. Paul contradicts this whole emphasis in the most forthright way. God has chosen to do things differently. He does not call silver-tongued speakers, smooth operators, demagogues full of their own importance with personalities to match their inflated egos to preach his word (1:26–29). Why? “That no flesh should glory in his presence.”

Now, let us be honest. Our great preachers, those worthies of the pulpit to whom so much attention is paid and on whom so much honour is lavished—who is glorified? God or men? Let’s be honest. Think of the best. Let us not restrict ourselves here merely to the charlatans who are out to serve themselves only. Let us consider those who are renowned as great preachers, genuine

⁴For a discussion of the problem of popular preachers teaching heresy see my essay, “Dealing with Heresy” in *Christianity & Society*, Vol. XIV, No. 4 (October 2004), pp. 10–21. This problem has existed for some time. The Church I first attended after I became a Christian 35 years ago regularly had the principal of one of the denominational colleges to preach because the Church supported the college. He was considered a “heretic” by many in the denomination. His communication and speaking abilities were renowned and undeniable, but wherever he spoke he left a trail of doubt and dissension. Eventually at the Church meeting a discussion was had about why this speaker was repeatedly asked to fill the pulpit in view of his reputed “heresy.” After some heated discussion the pastor of the Church stood up and said “You cannot say he is a heretic because he believes this or that. He is so confused that he does not know himself what he believes. I know because I was at college with him and I know him.” Nevertheless, he was an excellent communicator of his doubts and led many down the road of doubt.

Christians who are orthodox in their theology and also considered “gifted speakers.” Who ultimately gets the glory? God or men? Let us take two of the best examples. I pick them not because they are heretics or unorthodox, but because they represent what so many in the Church consider to be the best of preachers. If there are problems with these men, how much more so with the heretics and charlatans who are “gifted speakers”?

First, let us look at David Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He was a Christian, Reformed, an orthodox Calvinist in his theology. He preached salvation by faith in Christ through grace alone. And I do not doubt that many were helped by his ministry. I myself gained much from reading his books as a young Christian. But who got the glory in the end? So many who came to Christ under his preaching and ministry, or who came under his influence, became paralysed by their idolatry of the man. “The Doctor said it”—*ergo* it must be the truth. I have heard this said and preached both by well-known and respected speakers in Reformed/evangelical circles and by lesser mortals. He may not have wanted it himself. But he got it because he deliberately and self-consciously prioritised *style* as an essential component of true preaching. He championed rhetorical oratory. He may not have used these words precisely, but this is what he promoted and championed—a *performance* in the pulpit, preaching as an *art form*.⁵ Jesus and Paul would have scored very low in terms of the Doctor’s criteria for what constitutes good preaching because they did not use their whole bodies. How do we know this? Because the Bible tells us that they sat down to preach, a major failing in the Doctor’s school of preaching. But preaching today in Reformed circles is what the Doctor did, not what the Bible teaches. Preaching and much else is judged by the Doctor’s standards among certain communities in the Church today, not by the standard set forth in the Bible.

⁵ See D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971). See also “The Implications of the Information Revolution for the Future of the Christian Church” in my book, *Common-Law Wives and Concubines: Essays on Covenantal Christianity and Contemporary Western Culture* (Taunton: The Kuyper Foundation, 2003).

The Doctor has been idolised, and this has done much harm to the Church. Why? Because the glory goes to man, not to God.

Second, let us consider Robert Murray M'Cheyne. At least this man recognised that there was a problem, though he realised what was happening too late to stop it. He was associated with revival in Scotland in the nineteenth century. He was a "prince of preachers," a gifted speaker. But in the end he acknowledged that it troubled him that so many attended church to hear *him*, not God's word, that people were attracted to *him* and doted on *him*, not Christ—many who flocked to hear him never became believers. These facts came out in the course of his pastoral work and they troubled him. He was the one that many people came to hear, not Christ speaking in his word. The flesh of man was glorified in this. Of course he did not want this. It grieved him. But it is what happened.⁶

This sort of thing happens on a small scale as well among men who are not internationally renowned speakers, who are not known to posterity or written about in history books, but whose emphasis on style in the pulpit has resulted in the same glorification of men rather than God. The pastor of a Church I attended as a young Christian was a "gifted speaker." People attended church to hear him. You will probably have never heard of this man, but in his circles he was considered an outstanding *preacher*, a "gifted communicator." Before his appointment the Church prayed for a "real preacher without note-pad." That was what was paramount to them: preaching style, oratory. Perish the thought that the preacher should have notes to follow in the pulpit! That would distract them from the real business of the pulpit, the *performance* of the

⁶ See further David Estrada, "Robert Murray M'Cheyne: The Shining Light of Scotland" in *Christianity & Society*, Vol. xiv, No. 4 (October 2004), pp. 28–37. Professor Estrada writes that "Towards the end of his ministry, he became peculiarly jealous of becoming an idol to his people, for he was loved and revered by many who gave no evidence of love to Christ. This often pained him much" (p. 31*b*) and "... he saw backsliding, and false professions of salvation. Observing also that some were influenced more by feelings of strong attachment to their pastor personally than by the power of the truths he preached, he became reserved in his dealings with them" (p. 34*a*).

preacher. And the Church got their prayers answered, a man who “preached without note-pad” and used his whole body. They were proud of their comet preacher. He was good. He walked up and down the aisles among the people and pressed the rhetoric home. What a performance! But it was all rather short on content and substance (I seem to recall that whatever text was announced it usually turned out to be John 3:16 in the end). He was a good, sincere and genuine Christian. Do not misunderstand me. But this is just my point. People often came to church to see *him*, not Christ. He was regarded by many in the community as a model speaker and they came to church to learn his rhetorical techniques, not to listen to God’s word explained.

The Church is subtly taught to look for the wrong things by this kind of thinking: men with charisma and great communication skills—pulpiters. But there are no pulpits in the Bible. The pulpit is a concept foreign to biblical Christianity. In the Bible authoritative teaching is done from a *seated* position—hence Christ criticised those who *sit* in the seat of Moses and teach the law but do not obey it themselves (Mt. 23:2–3). Jesus preached from a *seated* position both in the synagogue, where it was the custom to stand to read the Scriptures then sit down to expound them (Lk. 4:16–21), and in the countryside, for example in the sermon on the mount (Mt. 5:1) and from the fishing boat (Mk 4:1). Paul, as he entered the synagogues on his travels, would have followed the same procedure that Christ followed in the synagogue. This tradition passed into the Church. The bishop’s teaching is done from a seat, the *cathedra*, which is Latin for seat. The building in which the bishop’s *cathedra* is housed is the cathedral. Even the Pope is only considered to speak infallibly when he speaks *ex cathedra*—from his throne. But what we have today in our churches is the centrality of the pulpit. The word pulpit comes from the Latin word *pulpitum*, meaning “a staging made of boards, a scaffold, platform, pulpit, for public representations, lectures, disputations; and esp[ecially] a stage for actors.”⁷ There you have it. The

⁷C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1879), p. 1490a.

pulpit is a stage for actors, and when it is made the centre of the Church's life the result will be that the Church is dominated by men who are primarily actors, great performers. The whole life of the Church will begin to revolve around them, not around Christ and his word. In other words, the Church will become dependent on the preacher and take on the character of the preacher. And when the preacher leaves the Church will flounder until a new performer can be found around whom the life of the Church can revolve. This is what happens repeatedly in Church life, especially in Free Churches.

So, I ask again, is this God's way? Is this what God wants for his Church?

(3) *The Biblical Perspective*

From one end of the Bible to the other, from Moses to Paul, you will find that God did not choose those who were "gifted speakers." Those whom God chose as his prophets and spokesmen were almost invariably not the obvious choice in terms of the criteria that men think are important. It seems that God deliberately chose those who were not "gifted speakers." Indeed it seems he chose those people who found it quite difficult, for one reason or another, to speak for God and who were not naturally endowed with the abilities necessary for a career in being a "gifted communicator."

This was deliberate. There is a reason for it, and Paul spells it out here: "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came *not with excellency of speech* or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was *not with enticing words of man's wisdom*, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: *that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God*" (2:1-5). Paul deliberately avoided the very kind of preaching that so many seem to think is essential today precisely so that he might avoid the false

conversions that have so often accompanied the performances of “great preachers.”

§2

IDOLATRY OF THE
GIFTED SPEAKER MINISTRY

The obsession with “gifted speakers” and “great preachers” that seems to beset so many in the Church is a worldly infatuation that is sinful and needs repenting of. After all, it is “gifted speakers” and “smooth operators” who lead congregations astray and fleece them for all they have, deluding them with impossible promises of wealth and success in return for complete devotion to the cult of their own personality, not those who are considered “rude in speech” and held in contempt because of their lack of charisma and rhetoric. And as we have seen, even where “gifted speakers” are genuine Christians with a real concern to preach the gospel there is the problem of false conversions and the idolatry of men rather than the glorifying of God.

So why do people look for these “gifts,” these “communication skills” in their preachers? What do *you* look for in a preacher? What does your Church look for in a preacher? What do you look for in the preaching? A great performance, or the word of God explained in such a way that it helps you to understand your duty in serving God? Preaching that thrills and excites you or preaching that equips you for service in the kingdom of God? Preaching that makes you admire the preacher and his wonderful “gifts” or preaching that calls you to make sacrifices for the work of the Kingdom? What matters to you? That you attend a church with a “gifted speaker” or that you attend a church where there is an ongoing programme to equip members of the Church for service in the world, which is our mission field?

The truth is, God does not have much to say about “gifted speakers” in the Bible. God can, of course, use “gifted speakers” to bring people to faith in Christ, but he does so not because they are “gifted speakers,” but rather in spite of this. As we have already

seen, genuine conversion is produced by the renewing of the *mind* of man through the application of God's word by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:21-23 cf. 2 Tim. 1:17), not by means of the clever rhetoric and oratory of men.

Well, what are the results of the "gifted speaker" ministry? Unfortunately, we find often that "gifted speakers" do the devil's work, not God's. Paul refused to use such rhetorical techniques *because* it made the cross of Christ of *no effect*. I did not make this up. Paul said it himself: "For Christ sent me . . . to preach the gospel: not with the wisdom of words, *lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect*" (1 Cor. 1:17).

It is interesting to observe that although Christ has equipped his Church with various spiritual gifts to enable her to fulfil her calling, there is no spiritual gift comparable to the abilities considered essential to being a "gifted speaker." There is a gift of prophecy, but as we have seen, the prophets were often awkward speakers who did not naturally possess the abilities deemed necessary for being "gifted speakers." There was also the gift of knowledge, but this is a different thing. Paul admitted to being "rude in speech" but not in *knowledge* (2 Cor. 11:6). The fact is that this quality of being a "gifted speaker" is nowhere in the Bible set forth as desirable or helpful, let alone essential, for the effective communication of the gospel. Rather the reverse, it is shown to be a hindrance to the effective communication of the gospel, producing false conversions.

§3

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE GIFTED SPEAKER MINISTRY

Because of this we need to understand the psychology of this kind of "gifted speaker" ministry. Very often, indeed usually, when the "gifted speaker" comes along the congregation is whipped up into a state of emotional excitement by the rhetoric. The technique may make use of humour, involve grave seriousness, or inspir-

ing language. But a state of emotional excitement of some kind is created. In such a state human beings are much more easily manipulated by suggestion. This is a fact of human psychology that has been investigated, explored and used in various contexts to induce certain types of behaviour.⁸

(1) *The Technique of the Gifted Speaker Ministry*

There is a definite technique to this. It can be learned. And this technique has been used very successfully by “revivalists” for a long time, ostensibly for good, but often also for bad. The state of emotional excitement created by frightening people into converting to Christianity by dangling them over hell, for example, is well attested (Jonathan Edwards has often been accused of this because of his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”). In such a state of emotional excitement, possibly even emotional exhaustion, people are susceptible to all kinds of influences and ideas that they would not otherwise have been susceptible to. This technique produces a general state of suggestibility in which people are easily re-programmed to accept ideas, beliefs and *behaviour* that go against their previous better judgement. This is probably why there was so much fornication following the Great Awakenings.⁹

⁸ See William Sargant, *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brain-Washing* (Heinemann, 1957), *passim*.

⁹ Sargant gives the following interesting example that throws much light on the subject: “Wesley appreciated the danger of stirring up crowds, reducing them to penitence, and then leaving others to do the work of reconditioning. While touring the Irish Catholic countryside in 1750, he was asked to preach at Mullingar, but refused because ‘I had little hope of doing good in a place where I could but preach once, and where none but me could be suffered to teach at all.’ In 1763, similarly, he wrote from Haverfordwest: ‘I was more convinced than ever that preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer (the Devil).’ When investigating a North Carolina religious snake-handling cult in 1947, it was easy for me to see what Wesley had meant. The descent of the Holy Ghost on these meetings, which were reserved for whites, was supposedly shown by the occurrence of wild excitement, bodily jerkings, and the final exhaustion and collapse, in the more susceptible participants. Such hysterical states were induced by means of rhythmic singing and hand-clapping, and the handling of

Even in modern churches where such emotional excitement is created unscrupulous leaders and “gifted speakers” can use this as an opportunity to prey on emotionally confused people.

In such a state people can be influenced for bad as well as for good. The condition of such emotional excitement is non-specific. Just because this emotional condition has been created by a “gifted speaker” in a Church gathering does not mean that those subject to it are open only to suggestions that are consistent with Christian teaching and morals. They are not. They are open to all sorts of suggestions, and charlatans use these techniques to manipulate people for their own ends. They may preach the gospel but still use such a state of emotional excitement to manipulate people into doing their bidding, whether that is putting more money into the collection plate than they can afford, agreeing to become involved in immoral sexual behaviour, or putting themselves completely under the control of the “gifted” leader—and all such things happen too often for comfort. Nevertheless, the point is that even where good behaviour is implanted in the “convert” this is a psychological technique, not the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in the “convert’s” life, though of course it will be attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit by the “gifted speaker,” the convert and the congregation. But the Holy Spirit does not work in this

genuinely poisonous snakes . . . brought several visitors unexpectedly to the point of collapse and sudden conversion. But a young male visitor—the ‘murderer’ incarnate—was attending these meetings with the deliberate object of seducing girls who had just been ‘saved.’ The fact is, that when protective inhibition causes a breakdown and leaves the mind highly suggestible to new behaviour patters, the conversion may be non-specific. If the preacher arrives in time to preach chastity and sobriety, well and good; but the ‘murderer’ [the devil] had learned that on the night that followed a sudden emotional disruption, a sanctified girl might be as easily persuaded to erotic abandon as to the acceptance of the Gospel message. However, on attempting to follow up his amatory successes a day or two later he found, as a rule, that the abnormal phase of suggestibility had passed, and the girl’s moral standards had returned to normal. Because he had not been continuously at her side to consolidate his victory, she might now indignantly rebuff him, and say that she could not understand what had come over her on the night in question. Two very opposite types of belief or personal behaviour could, in fact, be implanted at the close of a revivalist meeting: by the preacher or by the ‘murderer’” (*ibid.*, p. 217f.).

way. The Bible tells us that genuine conversion is the result of the renewing of the *mind* through the application of God's word by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:21-23 cf. 2 Tim. 1:17).

Now, add to this revivalist technique repeated drumming patterns, continuous loud and monotonous music and emotional abandon. All these things are very common elements in charismatic "worship." Such things are very effective in creating this state of emotional excitement. Subject the congregation to this for an hour before the "gifted speaker" comes on and people are then already in a state of emotional excitement, possibly even emotional exhaustion, when the "gifted speaker" starts preaching. In such a state of emotionally heightened suggestibility people are much more easily manipulated by charismatic leaders and gifted speakers whom they already idolise as "great men of God," "apostles" or "prophets." Reason does not count for much in this state of mind. It is abandoned, possibly even reversed. Indeed such techniques are used in brain-washing programmes and as part of interrogations aimed at inducing false confessions precisely because this is a known effect. This kind of technique was very useful in show trials in communist countries. The same technique was used. It was developed and adopted to different ends but it was the same technique.¹⁰

But the question we must ask is this: is this what the Bible teaches? Is this what God expects of us and requires of us? Emphatically not. The Bible teaches that our worship should be *reasonable* worship, that it should involve all our faculties, and therefore that our *minds* should be fully working and engaged in worship. Without this our worship falls short of what God requires of us (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:21-23 cf. 2 Tim. 1:17). The Holy Spirit works through the *renewing* of the *mind*, not through the creation of an emotionally heightened state of suggestibility, which is a non-specific state of mind that opens people up to manipulation by anyone who is in a position to exploit it.

¹⁰ See the comments made on the use of Pavlov's animal experiments in Soviet Russia in *ibid.*

(2) *The Psychology of the Doting Congregation*

There is another important aspect to this that needs to be considered now. When someone is in this state of heightened emotional suggestibility something often happens that psychiatrists call “transference”; i.e. the person becomes emotionally dependent on the one guiding him, whether this is the psychiatrist, the preacher or even his “confessor.” I refer again to Robert Murray McCheyne and D. M. Lloyd-Jones as examples of this in Church life. The preacher or “gifted speaker” becomes more important than the message. He himself becomes the focal point, not the content of the message itself. As a result when the preacher or gifted leader leaves for better pastures the Church often declines and falls apart, or becomes a mere shadow of its former glory. Why? Because the focus was on the preacher or charismatic leader, not on God’s word. The congregation becomes *dependent* upon the “gifted” leader because a sufficient enough number of people in the Church experience “transference” while he is guiding the Church. When he leaves or dies the Church declines. Who gets the glory, God or men? If we are honest with ourselves we know it is usually men. We make idols of these “gifted speakers.” The last time I visited the Evangelical Library in London there was even a little shrine in the corner of the main reading room dedicated to D. M. Lloyd-Jones, and this was some time after his death.

I am not saying that God does not use these men. He does, but he does so in spite of their rhetoric and oratory and “gifts” not because of them. As already noted, the gifts we are talking about here are not the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but the natural abilities of men who are great orators and rhetoricians, men who gain a following by means of their natural charisma—all those things that the apostle Paul did not have and for lack of which he was so severely criticised by the Corinthians.

Do you find this difficult to accept? Well, what about “unction”? “Spiritual unction” is one of the most abused terms relating to preaching that there is. It is used as a substitute word for rhetoric by Christians who know that they should not idolise rhetoric and

oratory in the pulpit. No, their heroes do not go in for rhetoric and oratory. They are far too spiritual for that you see. What they have is “unction”—and, well, as everyone knows, this is a divine gift. “Unction” is just another term for rhetoric and oratory cleverness used by delicate souls who are too pious to admit the truth about their idolatry of the men who use these techniques. The term “unction” can be usefully dispensed with. It need never be used. It has been the cause of much mischief.

It is the exegesis and application of the word of God that the Holy Spirit uses to bring men to faith in Christ, regardless of the rhetorical techniques employed or not employed by the preacher. It was the exegesis and application of the word of God that the Holy Spirit used in the preaching of men like D. M. Lloyd-Jones and Robert Murray McCheyne, not the quality of their rhetoric or “unction,” which only hinders the message. And it was the exegesis and application of the word of God that the Holy Spirit used in Paul’s preaching, who lacked the charisma and rhetorical qualities considered so essential for great preaching by so much of the modern Church. The power of God is in the *content* of the message, not the style of the preacher. Style gets in the way. It does not help. It hinders people from coming to God by drawing them to the speaker instead. This produces false conversions and “transference” in which the preacher or “gifted” leader becomes the focus of attention, the person around whom the “convert’s” new life revolves, instead of around Christ and his word. This is the polar opposite of what Paul wanted: “And I, brethren, when I came to you, came *not with excellency of speech* or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was *not with enticing words of man’s wisdom*, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: *that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God*” (1 Cor. 2:1–5).

I repeat and emphasise that the results of the kind of “gifted speaker” ministry that is so idolised today, in which style is pri-

oritised over content, are detrimental to the work of the gospel, even where the speaker is orthodox and speaking the truth. It is not the style that the Holy Spirit uses but rather the content, the word of God, to bring men to conviction, faith and repentance. If you are obsessed by this idolatry of style you need to repent of it, abandon it. It is contrary to God's explicit word as set forth by Paul in this passage of Scripture. To dote on these things is sinful. What good comes of it? It is "gifted speakers" with charismatic personalities who lead gullible congregations astray into false teachings, heresy, stupidity and the idolising of mere men, not the plain and straightforward teaching of God's word, which is what God requires of those who preach the gospel. One need only look at the modern revival meetings and the latest charismatic circus to see the consequences of such idolatry of the flesh.

§4

THE STRATEGY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

Now think about Paul's strategy and personality. He deliberately attempted *not* to present himself as a "gifted speaker." He was the very antithesis of what the Corinthians deemed a "gifted speaker." I have heard preachers talk about practising their sermons in front of the mirror in order to perfect their style. What an obscene idea! Can you imagine Paul doing that? Can you imagine him giving advice to Timothy like that: "Take a little wine for your stomach's sake, Timothy, and don't forget to practise your preaching in front of a mirror. Charisma, style and rhetoric are so important if we are going to be effective communicators of the gospel of God." How absurd! Such ideas go against the whole thrust of Scripture. God deliberately chose men who were despised by the world because they lacked these qualities of charisma and style, which are considered so essential by the world. They were not actors with "stage presence" but men who obeyed the call of God despite their often severe feelings of inadequacy in just those areas of personal charisma, rhetoric and "gifted leadership" that we are increasingly

being told are necessary for effective gospel ministry. Why did God do this? So that the glory would go to God, not to men. But today we see this infatuation with giving glory to men.

Look at Paul's appearance. He was weak, trembling, not a persuasive orator at all. In short, he was not a charismatic personality or a "gifted speaker." His power was in the message, the content, that he preached. Why? So that the faith of the Corinthians would not be in the flesh, in the wisdom of men, human rhetoric, but rather in God.

But what is it that the Church wants today? Her faith is in the wisdom of men. The Church constantly looks to idols instead of to God's word to guide her—comet preachers who more often than not fleece their sheep and bring them into a state of dependence on themselves, to serve their own ends, not those of the kingdom of God.

This infatuation with style over content is sinful because it goes against God's word. God has not chosen the wise of this world, but rather those to whom the world shows such contempt, so that we should glory in God, not in human personalities. Our faith, Scripture tells us, is to be a *reasonable* faith, and our worship is to be *rational* and ordered worship (Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 14:40), not an emotional binge. Why? Because emotional binges open us up to the manipulation of our minds by charlatans devoted to the wisdom of men, not the precepts of God's word. Order and reasonable, rational worship concentrates the mind on God's word, and it is through the *mind* that the Holy Spirit works in renewing us (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:21-23 cf. 2 Tim. 1:17).

§5

CONCLUSION

If you insist on following and idolising "gifted speakers" and engaging in emotionally unrestrained worship you will be led astray. If this is what you want out of going to church you will miss what you need to grow in the faith. You will not be edified. You will remain

a child in the faith able only to receive milk, as did the believers at Corinth precisely because of these things, despite their manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit. Remember, it was the Church at Corinth that had the charismatic problem. Paul said they lacked no good gift, and yet they were immature, unable to be fed with meat, which was what they needed. Their idolatry of the wisdom of men ensured that they remained spiritually immature. And if there is one thing that adequately defines the modern Church in Britain, and probably the Western world generally, it is spiritual immaturity. Despite the pervasive obsession with spiritual gifts and claims for all kinds of manifestations of the Spirit, the Church today is spiritually immature. This is one of the reasons why the modern Church is so defeated before the world. The Church is full of spiritual infants who remain immature and are therefore useless for the battles ahead.

Despite having every good gift the Church at Corinth was immature and beset by troubles. The believers there were incapable of being fed with the meat necessary for them to be equipped for the battle. They were put under disciplinary measures by Paul because of their disorderly and immoral behaviour (1 Cor. 11:17–34). The Christians at Corinth were obsessed with the wisdom of the world despite their spiritual gifts, and this was why they showed such contempt for Paul's person (his lack of charisma) and his preaching abilities (his lack of those qualities considered necessary for one to be a "gifted speaker").

Let us not follow their example and imitate the Church at Corinth. Let us seek instead to understand God's word, focus on the content, and order our lives and worship reasonably and rationally so that we are not led astray into error and the glorifying of men rather than God.