

Some Relevant Extracts on Preaching & the Biblical Languages from Charles H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries*¹

Selections with Introduction by Rodney J. Decker, Th.D., 2006

Spurgeon is perhaps the most famous Baptist preacher of all time. His life and ministry are a fascinating study of God's blessing. It is not uncommon to hear people appeal to Spurgeon's example as a defense of an untrained ministry—though that is usually from those without the benefit of training. It also belies the facts of Spurgeon's ministry. Though he did not have a seminary degree, he was trained by his pastor grandfather (who taught him Greek), and he was a careful student, teaching himself Hebrew and amassing a very large library.² Much of that library is now housed at William Jewell College in Missouri³; I saw it while teaching in Kansas City in the early 90s. He was also concerned to found a training school for pastors (Spurgeon's College in London), so he certainly was no advocate of an untrained ministry.

To make good sense of the following extracts you need to understand a bit of Spurgeon's context and of contemporary preaching styles at the time. Spurgeon is sometimes called "Prince of the Expositors." If you've read any of his sermons (and most were published), you might wonder how he ever earned such a title since there is scarcely a scrap of solid exposition in them. (You'd also be inclined to think him a hypocrite in some of the following remarks!) The prevailing "style" of "preaching" in Spurgeon's day was mostly oratory—flowery "sermons" on biblical ideas, often "hung" on a text. Although Spurgeon was probably better at that than most of his contemporaries,⁴ he understood that God's people needed more than that, so he included in his regular Sunday services what he called "readings" or "commenting" (thus the title of his book). In these "readings" he would read extensive passages in consecutive order, stopping as he read to "comment" on the text—that was his exposition which earned his "princely" title.

¹ Orig. pub. 1876; reprint, Baker, 1981.

² You can see a photo of that library on the paper jacket of the Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit for 1873 in the Pilgrim Publications reprint of 1971. There is also a photo at the end of this paper; the original is posted at <<http://www.spurgeon.org/fsl/library.htm>>. See also <<http://www.spurgeon.org/fsl.htm>> for other relevant information about Spurgeon's library.

³ See <<http://campus.jewell.edu/academics/curry/library/collections/spurgeon.html>> for the official college library page. An online "tour" of the modern replica of Spurgeon's library is posted at <<http://campus.jewell.edu/academics/curry/library/collections/spurgeontour.html>>. There are 6,618 vols. in the Spurgeon Collection at William Jewell College, but Spurgeon's original library was double that size.

⁴ There were other contemporary preachers who also drew crowds of similar size in London, e.g., Joseph Parker (see his published sermons: *Preaching Through the Bible*, originally published 1886–93 as *The People's Bible*).

Today we have (hopefully!) moved beyond the religious oratory style and, at least at my Seminary, emphasize expository preaching. We need far more of it for although the oratory style is gone, the prevailing mood in the evangelical pulpit today is much more oriented to conversation and story-telling rather than an authoritative proclamation of the Word (κήρυγμα/κηρύσσω). But this document is about Spurgeon's views of preaching and the biblical languages, not mine.⁵

The following extracts are in sequence from Spurgeon's book with page numbers at the beginning of each quote in parentheses. The text from this point on is entirely Spurgeon's own words.



(p. v) A judicious critic would probably complain that many sermons are deficient in solid instruction, Biblical exposition, and Scriptural argument: they are flashy, rather than fleshy; clever, rather than solid; entertaining, rather than impressive. He would point to rhetorical discourses in which doctrine is barely discernible, and brilliant harangues from which no food for the soul could ever be extracted. Having done this, he would probably propose that homilies should flow out of texts, and should consist of a clear explanation, and an earnest enforcement of the truths which the texts distinctly teach. Expository preaching he would advocate as the great need of the day, its best protection against rising errors, and its surest means of spiritual edification.

(p. vi) Many are persuaded that they should expound the Word, but being unversed in the original tongues they can only fall back up on the help of their English Concordances, and are left floundering about, when a sound comment would direct their thoughts.

(p. 21) Having introduced you to the commentators, I must now press upon you one of the most practical uses of them, namely, your own public commenting upon the Scriptures read during divine service. Preaching in the olden time consisted very much more of exposition than it does now. I suppose that the sermons of the primitive Christians were for the most part expositions of lengthy passages of the Old Testament; and when copies of the gospels, and of the epistles of Paul, had become accessible to the churches, the chief work of the preacher would be to press home the apostolical teachings by delivering an address, the back-bone of which would be a complete passage of Scripture: there would probably be but faint traces of divisions, heads and points, such as we employ in modern discoursing, but the teacher would follow the run of the passage which was open before him, commenting as he read.

In the synagogue, it was the rule of the Rabbis that never less than twenty-two verses of the law should be read at one time, and the preaching consisted of notes upon a

⁵ If you'd like to know what I think, I commend to you this essay on preaching: "Respecting the Text," available at <<http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/documents/RespectText.pdf>>.

passage of that length. Such a rule would be a mere superstition if we were slavishly bound by it, but I could almost wish that the custom were re-established, for the present plan of preaching from short texts, together with the great neglect of commenting publicly (22) upon the word is very unsatisfactory. We cannot expect to deliver much of the teaching of Holy Scripture by picking out verse by verse, and holding these up at random. The process resembles that of showing a house by exhibiting separate bricks. It would be an astounding absurdity if our friends used our private letters in this fashion, and interpreted them by short sentences disconnected and taken away from the context. Such expositors would make us out to say in every letter all we ever thought of, and a great many things besides far enough from our minds; while the real intent of our epistles would probably escape attention. Nowadays since expository preaching is not so common as it ought to be, there is the more necessity for our commenting during the time of our reading the Scriptures. Since topical preaching, hortatory preaching, experimental preaching, and so on ... have almost pushed proper expository preaching out of place, there is the more need that we should, when we read passages of Holy Writ, habitually give running comments upon them.

(23) If you want to make full proof of your ministry, and to leave no single point of revelation untouched, your easiest mode will be to comment upon Scripture habitually. Without this much of the word will be utterly unknown to many of your people.

(24) Earnestly do I advocate commenting. It is unfashionable in England . . . It may be pressed upon you for one other reason, namely, that *in order to execute it well, the commenting minister will at first have to study twice as much as the mere preacher*, because he will be called upon to prepare both his sermons and his expositions. As a rule, I spend much more time over the exposition than over the discourse.

But as for the exposition, you must keep to the text, you must face the difficult points, and must search into the mind of the Spirit rather than your own. You will soon reveal your ignorance as an expositor if you do not study; therefore diligent reading will be forced upon you.

A man to comment well should be able to *read the Bible in the original*. Every minister should aim at a tolerable proficiency both in the Hebrew and the Greek. These two languages will give him a library at a small expense, an inexhaustible thesaurus, a mine of spiritual wealth. Really, the effort of acquiring a language is (25) not so prodigious that brethren of moderate abilities should so frequently shrink from the attempt. A minister ought to attain enough of these tongues to be at least able to make out a passage by the aid of a lexicon, so as to be sure that he is not misinterpreting the Spirit of God in his discoursings, but is, as nearly as he can judge, giving forth what the Lord intended to reveal by the language employed. Such knowledge would prevent his founding doctrines upon expression in our version when nothing at all analogous is to

be found in the inspired original. This has been done by preachers time out of mind, and they have shouted over and interference drawn from a *shall*, or an *if* gathered out of the translation, with as much assurance of infallibility and sense of importance as if the same language had occurred in the words which the Holy Ghost used.

Translations cannot be verbally inspired, and ... to the original is the last appeal.

(26) Need I after my previous lectures commend to you the judicious reading of *commentaries!* These are called “dead man’s brains” by certain knowing people, who claim to give us nothing in their sermons but what they pretend the Lord reveals directly to themselves. Yet these men are by no means original, and often their supposed inspiration is but borrowed wit. They get a peep at Gill on the sly, inferior in all respects to what they affect to despise, namely, the mind of good and learned men.

(27) No, my dear friends, you may take it as a rule that the Spirit of God does not usually do for us what we can do for ourselves, and that if religious knowledge is printed in a book, and we can read it, there is no necessity for the Holy Ghost to make a fresh revelation of it to us in order to screen our laziness.

(30) Again, *avoid all pedantry.* As a general rule, it may be observed that those gentleman who know the least Greek are the most sure to air their rags of learning in the pulpit; they miss no chance of saying, “The Greek is so-and-so.” It makes a man an inch and a-half taller by a foolometer, if he everlastingly lets fall bits of Greek and Hebrew, and even tells the people the tense of the verb and the case of the noun, as I have known some do. Those who have no learning usually make a point of displaying the page on which learning ought to hang. Brethren, the whole process of interpretation is to be carried out in your study; you are not to show your congregation the process, but to give them the result; like a good cook who would never think of bringing up dishes, and pans, and rolling pin, and spice box into the dining hall, but without ostentation sends up the feast.

(31) Here is a hint for the reader as to his *reading* [i.e., the public reading of Scripture]. Let it always be distinct. Aim to be good readers, and be the more anxious about it because few men are so, and all preachers ought to be so. It is as good as a sermon to hear our best mean read the Scriptures; they bring out the meaning by their correct emphasis and tone.

(32) Never fall into the idea that the mere utterance of the words before you is all that is required of you in reading; good reading is a high, but rare attainment. Even if you do not comment, yet read the chapter previously, and become familiar with it; it is inexcusable for a man to betray the fact that he is out of his latitude in the reading, traversing untrodden ground, floundering and picking his way across country, like a huntsman who has lost his bearings. Never open the Bible in the pulpit to read the

chapter for the first time, but go to the familiar page after many rehearsals. You will be doubly useful if in addition to this you “*give the sense.*” You will then, by God’s blessing, be the pastor of an intelligent, Bible-loving people.



Spurgeon’s Study