

Articles and Sermons :: The Preachers Confess! by Horatius Bonar

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The Preachers Confess!

Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. Re. 2:5.

Introduction

In 1651 the Church of Scotland drew up what they called an “humble acknowledgment of the sins of the ministry.” While we at The Heartbeat of the Remnant have little confidence in a State Church that is in allegiance with the civil government, we also know that any person or church can experience revival if they will humble themselves and repent of sin in their life. It is impossible to know just how serious the ministers took this document, but the mere fact that they were willing to publish it is a sign that there was at least some desire for revival. Whether we are an ordained minister or not, this confession should stimulate us to look at our heart. The following points are extracts, not the entire document.

Before entering the ministry

Lightness and profanity in conversation, unsuitable to that holy calling which they strove for, not thoroughly repented of. Not studying to be in Christ before they be in the ministry; nor to have the practical knowledge and experience of the mystery of the gospel in themselves before they preach it to others. Neglecting to fit themselves for the work of the ministry, in not improving prayer and fellowship with God, opportunities of a living ministry, and other means, and not mourning for these neglects. Not studying self-denial, nor resolving to take up the cross of Christ. Negligence to entertain a sight and sense of sin and misery; not wrestling against corruption, nor studying mortification and subduedness of spirit.

Entering the ministry without respect to a commission from Jesus Christ, by which it hath come to pass that many have run unsent. Entering the ministry not from the love of Christ, nor from a desire to honor God in gaining of souls, but for a name and for a livelihood in the world, in spite of a solemn declaration to the contrary when they became a minister.

After entering the ministry

Ignorance of God; lack of nearness with Him, and taking up little of God in reading, meditating, and speaking of Him. Exceeding great selfishness in all that we do; acting from ourselves, for ourselves, and to ourselves. Not caring how unfaithful and negligent others were, so being it might contribute a testimony to our faithfulness and diligence, but being rather content, if not rejoicing, at their faults. Least delight in those things wherein lieth our nearest communion with God; great inconstancy in our walk with God, and neglect of acknowledging Him in all our ways. In going about duties, least careful of those things which are most remote from the eyes of men. Seldom in secret prayer with God, except to fit for public performance; and even that much neglected, or gone about very superficially.

Glad to find excuses

Glad to find excuses for the neglect of duties. Neglecting the reading of Scriptures in secret, for edifying ourselves as Christians; only reading them just enough to do our duty as ministers, and oftentimes neglecting even that. Not given to reflect upon our own ways, nor allowing conviction to have a thorough work upon us; deceiving ourselves by resting in the fact that our hard conscience does not bother us, and looking upon the same as an evidence of a real change of state and nature.

Poor guarding of and watching over the heart, and carelessness in self-searching; which makes much unacquaintedness with ourselves and creates separation from God. Not guarding nor wrestling against seen and known evils. Easily drawn away with the temptations of the time, and other particular temptations, according to our inclinations and fellowship.

Deadness of spirit, even after all the sore strokes of God upon the land.

Instability and wavering in the ways of God, through the fears of persecutions, hazard, or loss of reputation; and declining duties because of the fear of jealousies and reproaches. Not esteeming the cross of Christ and sufferings for His name as honorable, but rather escaping from sufferings, due to self-love. Deadness of spirit, even after all the sore strokes of God upon the land. Little conscience made of secret humiliation and fasting, by ourselves apart and in our families, that we might mourn for our own and the land's guiltiness and great backslidings; and little applying of public humiliation to our own hearts. Finding of our own pleasure, when the Lord calls for our humiliation.

Not laying to heart the sad and heavy sufferings of the people of God abroad, and the nonthriving of the kingdom of Jesus Christ and the power of godliness among them. Refined hypocrisy; desiring to appear what, indeed, we are not. Studying more to learn the language of God's people than their practice. Artificial confessing of sin, without repentance; professing to expose iniquity, and not resolving to be sorry for sin. Confession in secret much slighted, even of those things whereof we are convicted. No reformation, after solemn acknowledgments and private vows; thinking ourselves exonerated after confession. Readier to search out and censure faults in others than to see or deal with them in ourselves. Accounting of our condition and way according to the estimation that others have of us. Our estimation of men depends on whether they agree with us or not.

Not fearing to meet with trials, but presuming, in our own strength, to go through them unshaken. Not learning to fear, by the falls of gracious men; nor mourning and praying for them. Not pointing out particular deliverances and punishments; not learning from them, for the honor of God and the edification of ourselves and others. Little or no mourning for the corruption of our nature, and less groaning under, and longing to be delivered from that body of death, the bitter root of all our other evils.

Foolish jesting away of time with impertinent and useless discourse, very unbecoming the ministers of the gospel. Fruitless conversations with others, for the worse rather than for the better. Foolish jesting away of time with impertinent and useless discourse, very unbecoming the ministers of the gospel. Spiritual purposes often dying in our hands when they are begun by others. Carnal familiarity with natural, wicked, and malignant men, whereby they are hardened, the people of God stumbled, and we ourselves blunted.

Loving pleasure more than God

Slighting of fellowship with those by whom we might profit. Desiring more to converse with those that might better us by their money than with such as might edify us by their graces. Not studying opportunities of doing good to others. Shifting of prayer and other duties, when called thereto—choosing rather to omit the same than that we should be put to them ourselves. Abusing of time in frequent recreation and pastimes and loving our pleasures more than God. Taking little or no time to Christian discourse with young men trained up for the ministry. Common and ordinary discourse on the Lord's Day. Slighting Christian admonition from any of our flocks or others, as being below us; and ashamed to take light and warning from private Christians. Dislike of, or bitterness against, such as deal freely with us by admonition or reproof, and not dealing faithfully with others who would welcome it off our hands.

Not praying for men of a different opinion, but using reservedness and distance from them; being more ready to speak of them than to them or to God for them. Not weighed with the failings and miscarriages of others, but rather taking advantage thereof for justifying ourselves. Talking of and sporting at the faults of others, rather than compassionate toward them. Not taking pains in religious ordering of our families, nor studying to be patterns to other families in guiding ours. Hasty anger and passion in our families and conversation with others.

Covetousness, worldly-mindedness, and an inordinate desire after the things of this life, upon which followeth a neglect of the duties of our calling, and our being taken up for the most part with the things of the world. Lack of hospitality and charity to the members of Christ. Not cherishing godliness in the people; being afraid of it and hating the people of God for piety, and studying to bear down and quench the work of the Spirit amongst them.

Trusting in our own ability

Not entertaining that edge of spirit in ministerial duties which we found at the first entry to the ministry. Great neglect of reading, and other preparation; or preparation merely literal and bookish, making an idol of a book, which hinders communion with God; or presuming on bygone assistance, and praying little. Trusting to gifts, talents, and pains taken for preparation, whereby God is provoked to blast our good topics, even though they are so well-ordered and worded.

Careless in employing Christ and drawing virtue out of Him, for enabling us to preach in the Spirit and in power. In praying for assistance we pray more for assistance to the messenger than to the message which we carry, not caring what becomes of the Word. Neglect of prayer after the Word is preached.

Neglect to warn, in preaching, of snares and sins in politics; and too much, too frequent, and unnecessary speaking by others of public business and transactions. Exceeding great neglect and unskillfulness to set forth the excellences and usefulness of (and the necessity of an interest in) Jesus Christ, and the new covenant, which ought to be the great subject of a minister's study and preaching. Speaking of Christ more by hearsay than from knowledge and experience, or any real impression of Him upon the heart. The way of most ministers' preaching is too legal. Lack of sobriety in preaching the gospel; not savoring anything but what is new; so that the fundamentals of religion bear but little bulk.

Not preaching with bowels of compassion to them that are in danger of perishing.

Not preaching Christ in the simplicity of the Gospel, nor ourselves the people's servants, for Christ's sake. Preaching of Christ, not that the people may know Him, but that they may think we know much about Him. Preaching about Christ's leaving of the world without brokenness of heart, or stirring up of ourselves to take hold of Him. Not preaching with bowels of compassion to them that are in danger of perishing. Preaching against public sins, neither in such a way, nor for such an end, as we ought—for the gaining of souls and drawing men out of their sins; but rather because it is to our advantage to say something of these evils.

Attitude toward our opponents

Bitterness, instead of zeal, in speaking against evil people, sectarians, and other scandalous persons. Not studying to know the particular condition of the souls of the people, that we may speak to them accordingly; nor keeping a particular record thereof, though convinced of the usefulness of this. Not carefully choosing what may be most profitable and edifying; and lack of wisdom in application to the several conditions of souls; not so careful to bring home the point by application.

Choosing texts whereon we have something to say, rather than those suited to the conditions of souls and times, and frequent preaching of the same things, that we may not be put to the pains of new study. Such a way of reading, preaching, and prayer as puts us in these duties farther from God. Too soon satisfied in the discharge of duties, and holding off challenges of conscience with excuses.

Indulging the body, and wasting much time idly. Too much eyeing our own credit and applause; and being pleased with it when we get it, and unsatisfied when it is lacking. Fearfulness in delivering God's message; letting people die in reigning sins without warning. Studying the discharge of duties rather to free ourselves from censure than to approve ourselves to God.

Not making all the counsel of God known to His people; and particularly, not giving testimony in times of defection. Not studying to profit by our own doctrine, nor the doctrine of others. For most part, preaching as if we ourselves were not concerned in the message which we carry to the people. Not rejoicing at the conversion of sinners, but content with the unthriving of the Lord's work amongst His people, as suiting best with our minds; fearing, if they should thrive better, we should be more put to it, and less esteemed of by them.

Not knowing how to speak with the tongue of the learned a word in season to the weary.

We preach not as before God, but as to men; as doth appear by the different pains in our preparation to speak to our ordinary hearers and to others to whom we would approve ourselves. Negligent, lazy, and partial visiting of the sick. If they be poor we go once, and only when sent for; if they be rich and of better note, we go oftener and unsent for. Not knowing how to speak with the tongue of the learned a word in season to the weary.

Lazy and negligent in catechising. Not preparing our hearts before, nor wrestling with God for a blessing to it, because of the ordinariness and apprehended easiness of it; whereby the Lord's name is much taken in vain, and the people little profited. Looking on that exercise as a work below us, and not condescending to study a right and profitable way of instructing the Lord's people. Partial in catechising, passing by those that are rich and of better quality, though many of these stand in great need of instruction. Not waiting upon and checking up on the ignorant, but often passionately upbraiding them.

Confessing our shortcomings

(The rest of the article is not part of the Church of Scotland's original confession, but are Horatius Bonar's thoughts.)

We have been unfaithful. The fear of man and the love of his applause have often made us afraid. We have been unfaithful to our own souls, to our flocks, and to our brethren; unfaithful in the pulpit, in visiting, in discipline, in the church. In the discharge of every one of the duties of our stewardship there has been grievous unfaithfulness. Instead of the special particularization of the sin reproved, there has been the vague allusion. Instead of the bold reproof, there has been the timid hint. Instead of the uncompromising condemnation, there has been the feeble disapproval. Instead of the unswerving consistency of a holy life whose uniform tenor should be a protest against the world and a rebuke of sin, there has been such an amount of unfaithfulness in our walk and conversation, in our daily deportment and intercourses with others, that any degree of faithfulness we have been enabled to manifest on the Lord's Day is almost neutralized by the lack of circumspection which our weekday life exhibits.

Worldliness stunts the conscience

We have been carnal and unspiritual. The tone of our life has been low and earthly. Associating too much and too intimately with the world, we have in a great measure become accustomed to its ways. Hence our tastes have been corrupted, our consciences blunted, and that sensitive tenderness of feeling has worn off and given place to an amount of callousness of which we once, in fresher days, believed ourselves incapable.

Perhaps we can call to mind a time when our views and aims were fixed upon a standard of almost unearthly elevation, and, contrasting these with our present state, we are startled at the painful changes. And besides intimacy with the world, other causes have operated in producing this deterioration in the spirituality of our minds. The study of truth in its dogmatical—more than in its devotional—form has robbed it of its freshness and power; daily, hourly occupation in the routine of ministerial labor has engendered formality and coldness; continual employment in the most solemn duties of our office, such as dealing with souls in private about their immortal welfare, or guiding the meditations and devotions of God's assembled people, or handling the sacramental symbols—this, gone about often with so little prayer and mixed with so little faith, has tended grievously to deprive us of that profound reverence and godly fear which ever ought to possess and pervade us. How truly, and with what emphasis, we may say: "I am carnal, sold under sin." Ro. 7:14 The world has not been crucified to us, nor we unto the world; the flesh, with its members, has not been mortified. What a sad effect all this has had, not only upon our peace of soul, on our growth in grace, but upon the success of our ministry!

Up to the point where a sacrifice was demanded, we may have been willing to go, but there we stood ... We have been selfish. We have shrunk from toil, difficulty, and endurance, counting not only our lives dear unto us, but even our temporal ease and comfort. We have sought to please ourselves, instead of obeying Romans 15:2: "Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification." We have not borne "one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Ga. 6:2 We have been worldly and covetous. We have not presented ourselves unto God as "living sacrifices," laying ourselves, our lives, our substance, our time, our strength, our faculties—our all—upon His altar. We seem altogether to have lost sight of this self-sacrificing principle on which even as Christians, but much more as ministers, we are called upon to act. We have had little idea of anything like sacrifice at all. Up to the point where a sacrifice was demanded, we may have been willing to go, but there we stood; counting it unnecessary, perhaps calling it imprudent and unadvised, to proceed further. Yet ought not the life of every Christian, especially of every minister, to be a life of self-sacrifice and self-denial throughout, even as was the life of Him who "pleased not himself"?

We have been slothful. We have been sparing of our toil. We have not endured hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. Even when we have been instant in season, we have not been so out of season; neither have we sought to gather up the fragments of our time, that not a moment might be thrown idly or unprofitably away. Precious hours and days have been wasted in sloth, in company, in pleasure, in idle or aimless reading, that might have been devoted to the closet, the study, the pulpit, or the meeting! Indolence, self-indulgence, fickleness, and flesh-pleasing have eaten like a canker into our ministry, arresting the blessing and marring our success. It cannot be said of us, "For my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted." Re. 2:3 Alas! we have fainted, or at least grown "weary in well-doing." We have not made conscience of our work. We have not dealt honestly with the church to which we pledged the vows of ordination. We have dealt deceitfully with God, whose servants we profess to be. We have manifested but little of the unwearied, self-denying love with which, as shepherds, we ought to have watched over the flocks committed to our care. We have fed ourselves, and not the flock.

We have been cold. Even when diligent, how little warmth and glow! The whole soul is not poured into the duty, and hence it wears too often the repulsive air of routine and form. We do not speak and act like men in earnest. Our words are feeble, even when sound and true; our looks are careless, even when our words are weighty; and our tones betray the apathy which both words and looks disguise. Love is lacking, deep love, love strong as death, love such as made Jeremiah weep in secret places for the pride of Israel, and Paul speak "even weeping" of the enemies of the cross of Christ. In preaching and visiting, in counseling and reproving, what formality, what coldness, how little tenderness and affection!

Afraid to tell the whole truth

We have been timid. Fear has often led us to smooth down or generalize truths which if broadly stated must have brought hatred and reproach upon us. We have thus often failed to declare to our people the whole counsel of God. We have shrunk from reproving, rebuking, and exhorting with all long-suffering and doctrine. We have feared to alienate friends, or to awaken the wrath of enemies. Hence our preaching of the law has been feeble and straitened; and hence our preaching of a free gospel has been yet more vague, uncertain, and timid.

How deeply ought we to be abased at our levity, frivolity, flippancy, vain mirth, foolish talking, and jesting, by which grievous injury has been done to souls.

We have been lacking in solemnity. In reading the lives of some past saints, we are in company with men who in solemnity of deportment and gravity of demeanor were truly of the apostolic school. We feel that these men must have carried weight with them, both in their words and lives. We see also the contrast between ourselves and them in respect of that deep solemnity of air and tone which made men feel that they walked with God. How deeply ought we to be abased at our levity, frivolity, flippancy, vain mirth, foolish talking, and jesting, by which grievous injury has been done to souls, the progress of the saints retarded, and the world countenanced in its wretched vanities.

Preaching self instead of Christ

We have preached ourselves, not Christ. We have sought applause, courted honor, been avaricious of fame, and jealous of our reputation. We have preached too often so as to exalt ourselves instead of magnifying Christ, so as to draw men's eyes to ourselves instead of fixing them on Him and His cross. Nay, and have we not often preached Christ for the very purpose of getting honor to ourselves? Christ, in the sufferings of His first coming and the glory of His second, has not been the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, of all our sermons.

We have used words of man's wisdom. We have forgotten Paul's resolution to avoid the enticing words of man's wisdom, lest he should make the cross of Christ of none effect. We have reversed his reasoning as well as his resolution, and acted as if by well-studied, well-polished, well-reasoned discourses, we could so gild and beautify the cross as to make it no longer repulsive, but irresistibly attractive to the carnal eye! Hence we have often sent men home well satisfied with themselves, convinced that they were religious because they were affected by our eloquence, touched by our appeals, or persuaded by our arguments. In this way we have made the cross of Christ of none effect and sent souls to hell with a lie in their right hand. Thus, by avoiding the offense of the cross and the foolishness of preaching we have had to labor in vain, and mourn over an unblessed, unfruitful ministry.

Too little emphasis on God's Word

We have not duly studied and honored the Word of God. We have given a greater prominence to man's writings, man's opinions, man's systems in our studies than to the WORD. We have drunk more out of human cisterns than divine. We have held more communion with man than God. Hence the mold and fashion of our spirits, our lives, our words, have been derived more from man than God. We must study the Bible more. We must steep our souls in it. We must not only lay it up within us, but transfuse it through the whole texture of the soul.

We have not been men of prayer. The spirit of prayer has slumbered amongst us. The closet has been too little frequented and delighted in. We have allowed business, study, or active labor to interfere with our closet hours. And the feverish atmosphere in which both the church and nation are enveloped has found its way into our closet, disturbing the sweet calm of its blessed solitude. Sleep, company, idle visiting, foolish talking and jesting, idle reading, and unprofitable occupations absorb time that might have been redeemed for prayer.

Time for everything but prayer

Why is there so little anxiety to get time to pray? Why is there so little forethought in the laying out of time and employments so as to secure a large portion of each day for prayer? Why is there so much speaking, yet so little prayer? Why is there so much running to and fro, yet so little prayer? Why so much bustle and business, yet so little prayer? Why so many meetings with our fellow men, yet so few meetings with God? Why so little being alone, so little thirsting of the soul for the calm, sweet hours of unbroken solitude, when God and His child hold fellowship together as if they could never part?

... God is nigh; when His presence alone, like the desert air in which there is mingled no noxious breath of man, surrounds and pervades the soul.

It is the lack of these solitary hours that not only injures our own growth in grace but makes us such unprofitable members of the church of Christ, and that renders our lives useless. In order to grow in grace, we must be much alone. It is not in society—*even Christian society*—that the soul grows most rapidly and vigorously. In one single quiet hour of prayer it will often make more progress than in days of company with others. It is in the desert that the dew falls freshest and the air is purest. So with the soul. It is when none but God is nigh; when His presence alone, like the desert air in which there is mingled no noxious breath of man, surrounds and pervades the soul; it is then that the eye gets the clearest, simplest view of eternal certainties; it is then that the soul gathers in wondrous refreshment and power and energy.

And so it is also in this way that we become truly useful to others. It is when coming out fresh from communion with God that we go forth to do His work successfully. It is in the closet that we get our vessels so filled with blessing, that, when we come forth, we cannot contain it to ourselves but must, as by a blessed necessity, pour it out whithersoever we go. We cannot say, as did Isaiah: “My lord, I stand continually upon the watchtower in the daytime, and I am set in my ward whole nights.” Is. 21:8 Our life has not been a lying-in-wait for the voice of God. “Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth” (1 Samuel 3:9), has not been the attitude of our souls, the guiding principle of our lives. Nearness to God, fellowship with God, waiting upon God, and resting in God have been too little the characteristic either of our private or our ministerial walk. Hence our example has been so powerless, our labors so unsuccessful, our sermons so meager, our whole ministry so fruitless and feeble.

Seeking the Spirit’s strength

We have not honored the Spirit of God. It may be that in words we have recognized His agency, but we have not kept this continually before our eyes, and the eyes of the people. We have not given Him the glory that is due unto His name. We have not sought His teaching, His anointing—the “unction from the Holy One, ye know all things.” 1 Jn. 2:20 Neither in the study of the Word nor the preaching of it to others have we duly acknowledged His office as the Enlightener of the understanding, the Revealer of the truth, the Testifier and Glorifier of Christ. We have grieved Him by the dishonored one to His person as the third person of the glorious Trinity; and we have grieved Him by the slight put upon His office as the Teacher, the Convincer, the Comforter, and the Sanctifier. Hence He has almost departed from us, and left us to reap the fruit of our own perversity and unbelief. Besides, we have grieved Him by our inconsistent walk, by our lack of circumspection, by our worldly-mindedness, by our unholiness, by our prayerlessness, by our unfaithfulness, by our lack of solemnity, and by a life and conversation so little in conformity with the character of a disciple or the office of ambassador.

Too little imitation of Christ

We have had little of the mind of Christ. We have come far short of the example of the apostles, much more of Christ; we are far behind the servants, much farther behind the Master. We have had little of the grace, the compassion, the meekness, the lowliness, the love of God’s eternal Son. His weeping over Jerusalem is a feeling in which we have but little heartfelt sympathy. His “seeking of the lost” is little imitated by us. We shrink from His unwearied “teaching of the multitude” as just too much for flesh and blood. His days of fasting, His nights of watchfulness and prayer, are not fully realized as models for us to copy. His counting not His life dear unto Him that He might glorify the Father and finish the work given Him to do is but little remembered by us as the principle on which we are to act. Yet surely we are to follow His steps; the servant is to walk where his Master has led the way; the under shepherd is to be what the Chief Shepherd was. We must not seek rest or ease in a world where He whom we love had none. ~

Adapted from Words to Winners of Souls by Horatius Bonar.