

A Destructive Ministry Also is Necessary - J. Edwin Orr

From the book, *The Church Must First Repent* (1937)

"See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant." (Jeremiah 1:10)

To the preacher who is very much concerned about effectiveness in his type of message, the Prophecy of Jeremiah is a mine of help.

Some preachers are definitely called to a pastoral kind of preaching. They are adept in delivering a sermon calculated to bring comfort to the bereaved. They know how to put together addresses for the saints. They talk interestingly to children. They are marvelously effective in their sphere---pastoral care of the Church. God's blessing rests upon them. The Church could never get on without them. They are beloved of the people.

But these men, already used of God, are often envious of other preachers who gain evangelistic success. They try hard to obtain the same results themselves, but try as they will, they cannot set the Thames on fire. They get discouraged.

Now the first thing that a preacher has to consider is - "What is my sphere?"

Think of the busy world. How does it get on? Not every electrician is a good gardener. Nor is every farmer a good dentist. Sometimes a man combines two spheres of usefulness in his business and his hobby. But the so-called Jack of all trades is unusual, save when we limit its

meaning to a handyman's activities. The world gets on by specialists - those who master their job and are thoroughly effective in it. So also with the work of God. We are all members of one another. One member cannot do without the other.

If you feel that God has given you the precious gift of making a church, full of varied temperaments, thoroughly harmonious, don't despise that gift of God. Your spiritual children will, in future years, rise up to call you blessed. God may not intend you to be a revivalist. But if you feel called to be a revivalist, a man who specializes in the work of curing Church decline, remember that pastoral methods will not always be successful. Something more drastic is required. Just as in medical practice. A dietician can help a man's digestion and benefit more than his stomach thereby. But in cases of pneumonia, better call in a physician. Methods are certainly important. And if you are really trying to be an effective revivalist, I counsel you to consider your methods.

Some iconoclasm is necessary. The first thing that we notice about the call of Jeremiah, is his extreme youthfulness. When God called him, he cried in his great distress : "Ah, Lord God I behold I cannot speak: for I am a child." It is remarkable to find how many revivalists were really young when they were called to be God's mouthpiece in a special way. We think of the disciples...young men, contrary to popular belief based on Italian art. We think of the judges and prophets - Gideon and Samuel, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and many more. We know of Wesley, and Spurgeon, and Moody, and Finney, and Booth, and Hudson Taylor, and Judson, and a host of modern and recent examples.

Why are God's special instruments young, as a rule, and not old as in the known exceptions ? Probably the answer is to be found in the fact that young men are more malleable than old. Most people are converted when young, and the Lord loves to get His man before backsliding or prejudice can spoil him. The fact remains. And God overruled Jeremiah's objections, saying "Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I

shau send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces for I am with thee to deliver thee. Then the Lord touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold I have put my words in thy mouth."

Then follows a thought-provoking form of commission: "See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to toot out, and to Pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build and to plant." Of this six-fold commission, four injunctions are destructive: and only the latter two are constructive. "To build and to plant " - surely a great work. But it had to be preceded by a rooting-out and a pulling-down, destruction and demolishing. Surely this sounds drastic! But it was very necessary, as the historical background shows. The Jewish kingdom had become overgrown with weeds, overbuilt with traditional superstructures. They had to go first. Some iconoclasm was necessary. Some destruction was required.

An Illustration: Planting a Garden

Let us look in the garden for a parable. We walked round a beautiful garden which occupied a former piece of waste land. The gardener showed us round. "Those are beautiful roses," we said to him. " I planted them," replied the gardener, with justified pride. "What a beautifully-cut hedge!" we remarked next. "I trimmed that," he said.

At the garden gate, we found an old fellow watching a smoking heap of refuse. "What have you been doing?" "Working at the garden," he said. "Well then, what have you to show for your labour?" "Nothing, Sir," he replied. "Then you cannot have been working!" we told him. "Sir," he asserted " When we came here, this garden was a piece of waste land, overgrown with weeds, full of stones and sand, swampy in one corner, and pretty hopeless all round." We got interested. "Well, sir," he went on, "I broke up the land, and I destroyed the weeds, and dug out the stones, and carted away the sand, and it was my job to drain the

swampy corner." We listened with growing appreciation. "I am saying nothing against the other fellow who planted the garden. He did his job well. But where would his planting come in if I hadn't first rooted out and destroyed the weeds?"

Both men's labour was necessary, but the rooting-out and destruction of weeds preceded the planting of flowers and shrubs.

Another Illustration: Demolition and Construction

Again, let us walk around one of London's congested areas. A huge block of up-to-date, working-class flats catches our eye. A nicely dressed gentleman offers to show us around and explain things. We are amazed with the modernity of these flats. "I wonder who built these flats?" we ask. Our guide smiles. "As a matter of fact, I'm the building contractor who put every brick and stone in place..." "Sir," we tell him, you have raised a monument to your own skill." "But," he tells us, "I didn't do everything. There was another contractor, and his job was to pull down and throw down the slums that used to be here. And without his good work of clearing the ground, I could never have built this block of flats here."

And if we are to plant a garden for the Lord, a place of delight abounding in roses of holiness and love, hedged about by faith in the promises of God, bordered with sweet praise . . . Or if we are to build a palace for our King, a house of living stones, a place of service and adoration . . . Let us remember the first work of rooting out the weeds and utterly destroying them. Let us appreciate the value of slum-clearance.

One Of the great weaknesses of many forms of ministry today, especially Convention ministry, is the attempt to sow good seed among thorns. The thorns generally continue springing up, and the seed is choked thereby, despite the good intention of the human sower. Seed

sown in a prepared ground requires only the action of the elements to produce fruit in season. Seed sown by the wayside, or in stony places, or among thorns, will have its prospects of life severely threatened almost immediately. Likewise, changing the mode of illustration, a Christian who is in proper relationship with God is generally hungry for the great truths and affirmations of the Gospel.

Destructive Ministry Must Precede Constructive Ministry

A constructive message is then not only desirable, but necessary. Good food, the finest of the cream of the wheat of the Gospel of Christ, is eagerly assimilated by the Christian who lives in harmony with God. But all Christians are not in proper relationship with their Lord. The present obvious dearth of revival is largely due to the fact that the majority of Christians are out of touch with the source of Divine power. And even at Conventions, the first work needed is to get things put right in the lives of those attending.

To give a sick stomach an overdose of cream is to risk indigestion. Even a sick stomach prefers the taste of cream to the flavour of the bitter medicine. But the bitter medicine is necessary, and it does not prevent the enjoying and digesting of good food afterwards---rather it creates the actual appetite of good health, which is quite distinct from the false cravings of indigestion.

For instance, the glorious message of the position of every believer in Christ is a comfort to many souls. But it cannot bring much blessing to a stubborn Christian living in disobedience and conscious sin. He needs to act on the teaching of repentance and confession and cleansing first, and then he may comfort himself with other truths. I heard once of a church which had the cream of doctrine given within its walls, week in and week out. Judging from the quality of the upbuilding ministry given there, one would have expected to find the church members on the highest heavenly plane. But in this instance, they had a church

quarrel ,which resulted in the bread and wine being spilled in a scuffle: the police were called in to restore order. They obviously needed more than cream. Medicine was wanted badly.

Positional truth cannot be profitably taught until conditional teaching has had its effect. Cast no pearls before swine. So great is this problem, that when the preacher hits out against sin among believers and urges purity of life, critics cry "Introspection" and some insist that he is trying to divert the eyes of the people away from Christ towards self and shortcomings.

It was my happy experience once, to speak at a great Convention well-known in England. It was arranged with the council members that if blessing came through in the degree hoped for, I would be at liberty to continue for double the time. Beginning with destructive ministry, the Lord used His word to create deep conviction of heart. The place was thronged. Christians were stirred to confession and repentance, and many souls were saved. The meetings continued in a larger hall. By contrast, I was speaking at another Convention, not so far away. It was a Convention of good standing. I felt led to speak first of the short-coming of believers and the need of getting right before enjoying the good things of the feast. The next speakers seemed to doubt the worth of such a method, and their message seemed to be: "You are complete in Christ, so don't worry about these trifles. God accepts you in the Beloved, and you needn't mind."

For days there was that cross-current of message. I believed with all my heart in the truth of their message but I thought that the time was unripe for its application. With a burdened heart, I prayed for clear guidance regarding continuing my message. The Lord put a text...into my heart, and I preached it. Before I preached it, a speaker dwelt on the glorious promises of God, promises meant for obedient children. Then followed my opportunity. "Having therefore these promises dearly beloved, let us

cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

It gave the connection at last, but we had no great revival. It drove home many truths to me. Let us comfort one another with the grand truths of our position in Christ. But let us not make excuse by saying that our "completeness in Him" permits us to wink at known sin.

First Rebuke...Then Edification

It is generally conceded that the great problem of today is the lack of the sense of sin among believers and unbelievers alike. The consequent need must be met. It is a need of a message of strong rebuke first, and upbuilding can follow afterwards. "See," said the Lord to Jeremiah, "I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, to build and to plant." Jeremiah's prophecy immediately runs along the line commanded by the Lord. The words put into his mouth enable him to fulfill his six-fold commission. "Wherefore I will yet plead with you, saith the Lord, and with your children's children will I plead."

This verse is significant to English-speaking people. When we seek an explanation of God's goodness to the British and American peoples, we must consider the declaration: "Know therefore that the Lord thy God, He is God, the faithful God which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations," and contrast it with "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me." Scarcely an Anglo-Saxon can say that he has had no ancestors who feared God and served Him. Practically every atheist has had a praying great-grandfather or forbear of some sort. And the lives and prayers of generations gone by bring us the blessing of the smile of God upon unborn generations to come.

"For my people have committed two evils ; they have forsaken Me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water." How true of us to-day. But people cannot go on for ever in sin without feeling some pangs of conscience. "Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backsliding shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord of hosts."

Backsliders

Backsliders are the most miserable class in the earth. They cannot fully enjoy the pleasures of sin, as the worldling does. They certainly cannot enjoy the things of the Lord. Their joys are transient, and their moods are like the headaches which follow hectic revelry. And yet, backsliders continue to rebel. They persist in their disobedience. They keep up an appearance of religion: and perhaps they will be ardent advocates of one aspect of truth, or peace, or temperance, or social justice, or modesty or even church attendance. They develop a boldness based on an attempt to balance their inferiority complex. And so Jeremiah makes clear the message of the Lord, the rebuke that cannot be misunderstood. And the remedy is likewise made clear. "Only acknowledge thine iniquity that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God..."

Again it is open confession that is required. Again a broken and a contrite spirit God will not despise. Confession is the first step in penitence. But the people have got to be told that. A faithful Jeremiah is required nowadays. All through the prophet's pleading is the challenge: "God says that if you do this, He will bless you and restore you ; but if you do the other, misery will continue."

We must likewise tell the people: "If you repent and acknowledge your sin, God will send revival; if you don't, He won't send it, and your backslidings will go on." A black-and-white picture is needed. No room

should be left for ambiguities of expression. "Get right with God " should be the clarion cry.

The great apostle of revival, Charles Grandison Finney, adopted the Jeremiah approach and preached an unmistakable, faithful message. Perhaps we could say that his favourite verse was: "Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns!" "Fallow ground," he wrote, "is ground which has once been tilled, but which now lies waste, and needs to be broken up and mellowed before it is suited to receive grain. To break up the fallow ground is to break up your hearts, to prepare your minds to bring forth fruit unto God. The mind of man is often compared in the Bible to ground, and the Word of God to seed sown therein, the fruit representing the actions and affections of those who receive it."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, preaching on the same text, declared: "Do you know what happens to a fallow field ? All the friable qualities seem to depart, and it hardens as it lies caked and unbroken. And if a man will not sow wheat, he shall have a crop...for the weeds will spring up and increase till the fallow field shall become a wilderness of thorns and briars!"

Heart-searching always produces conviction. "General confessions of sin," says Finney, dealing with the results of heart-searching, "will never do. Your sins were committed one by one, and as far as you can come at them, they ought to be reviewed and repented of one by one." We started to consider the necessity of destructive ministry, and it has led us along the same lines as before - faithful preaching, is followed by heart-searching, heart-searching by repentance and open repentance, repentance by revival.

Destructive ministry is therefore necessary.