

**REVOLUTIONARY PREACHING
FROM
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**

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Abstract

This short paper summarizes three of the experiences Benjamin Franklin had in church as told by himself in his autobiography. As homileticians begin charting the uncharted waters of a new millennium, we do well to remember some timeless lessons from previous experiences. The issues that faced Franklin are as timely today as ever. Perhaps this submission will fuel the growing interest in historical exposition and culminate in a book.

Ben Franklin (1706 - 1790) gives unique insights into preaching and pastoring in his autobiography. Three of these are included in this paper.

The first insight gained from the American legend is **the importance of preaching expository sermons.**

At length he took for his text that verse of the fourth chapter Philippians, "Finally brethren, whatever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, or of good report, if there be any virtue, or any praise, think on these things." And I imagin'd, in a sermon on such a text, we could not miss of having some morality. But he confin'd himself to five points only, as meant by the apostle, viz.: 1. Keeping holy the Sabbath day. 2. Being diligent in reading the holy Scriptures. 3. Attending duly to publick worship. 4. Partaking of the Sacrament. 5. Paying a due respect to God's ministers. These might be all good things; but, as they were not the kind of good things that I expected from that text, I despaired of ever meeting with them from any other, was disgusted, and attended his preaching no more.¹

Mr. Franklin was an intelligent man. He was indeed one of the founding fathers of the United States of America. When he went to church, he expected to hear a sermon based on the passage

¹Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. P.F. Collier & Son Corporation. New York. 62nd Printing, 1969. p. 77-78.

of scripture that was read. To his own dismay, he experienced a problem that has plagued the pulpit for centuries...namely that many “sermons” are not really sermons at all but rather “opinions” of the person in the pulpit. The text is read and then whatever is on the preachers’ mind is given as “meant by the apostle”. Ben Franklin walked away “disgusted” and never went back while that pastor was there.

Let’s be honest with ourselves and give our lay people the benefit of the doubt. They can tell when the sermon comes from the text and when it is simply a collection of thoughts rambling in the preachers’ mind. Perhaps if Franklin had heard a sermon that was even remotely related to the text, he would have remained in church. As it was, he was insulted and “attended his preaching no more”. Lesson No. 1 - Make sure your sermon is based on your text.

The second insight gained from this great layman is **the importance of giving credit for resources utilized in sermons...i.e. don’t plagiarize**. To sum up this next story, Franklin’s church attendance was revived with an exciting young pastor from Ireland who could preach up a storm. Crowds gathered weekly to hear his inspiring sermons. Then the denomination began to oppose the young man. Franklin championed his cause writing leaflets in his defense and recruiting others to support the young pastor with their attendance on Sundays.

After hearing one of the young pastor’s messages, one person mentioned that he thought he had read the sermon somewhere previously. An investigation was launched and it was discovered the fiery young man was waxing eloquent with plagiarized sermons. Franklin quit church and never went back. He gave it his best effort twice and left disappointed both times.

During the contest an unlucky occurrence hurt his cause exceedingly. One of our adversaries having heard him preach a sermon that was much admired, thought he had somewhere read the sermon before, or at least a part of it. On search he found that part quoted at length, in one of the British Reviews, from a discourse of Dr. Foster’s. This detection gave many of our party disgust, who accordingly abandoned his cause, and occasion’d our more speedy discomfiture in the synod. I stuck by him, however, as I rather approv’d his giving us good sermons compos’d by others, than bad ones of his own manufacture, tho’ the latter was the practice of our common teachers. He afterward acknowledg’d to me that none of those he preach’d were his own; adding, that his memory was such as enabled him to retain and repeat any sermon after one reading only. On our defeat, he left us in search elsewhere of better fortune, and I quitted the congregation, never joining it after, tho’ I continu’d many years my subscription for the support of its ministers.²

Ben Franklin was trying desperately to find a pastor who would preach honest and sincere messages from the Bible but his attempts were weighed in the balances and found wanting. Let’s

²ibid p.94.

give our laity what they deserve, honesty in the pulpit. If the sermon is not yours, please, please give credit to the author. Lesson No. 2 - Don't plagiarize.

The third insight gained into preaching from Franklins' autobiography is **the tremendous power of an anointed sermon**. George Whitefield and Ben Franklin discussed the building of an orphanage in the state of Georgia. Franklin opposed the idea preferring the structure to be located in Philadelphia. Whitefield was determined to build the orphanage where the children lived but Franklin made sure Whitefield knew he would not give any financial support to the venture.

The two men were at friendly odds. They disagreed sharply about the orphanage each asserting his desire to the other. Then Franklin heard Whitefield preach about the need of the children. He had occasioned his sermons before as they were often the open air type. Mr. Franklin wandered the streets during one of Whitefield's addresses and concluded that he might be heard by thirty thousand as his voice carried well.

Ben Franklin determined in his heart not to give any money to the collection for the orphanage. However, when the sermon was through, Franklin emptied his pockets and gave all he had. This is the difference the anointing of God makes on the delivery of a sermon.

I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably, that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all.³

When God's preachers share the truth in the power of the Holy Spirit, the hearts of their listeners are strangely warmed. Lesson No. 3 - Anointed preaching transforms the hearts of listeners some of whom will support that which they originally opposed.

Benjamin Franklin is one of the most loved and respected forefathers of America. His discoveries and organizational skills helped shape a new nation. God help us to learn from his church experiences.

Three lessons from Franklin:

- 1) Preach expository sermons.
- 2) Don't plagiarize.
- 3) Seek the anointing it makes all the difference.

³ibid p.101-102.

Bibliography

Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. P.F. Collier & Son Corporation.
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