

PREACHING TO THE CONSCIENCE OF THE NATURAL MAN

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Introduction:

In one of his theological articles, B. B. Warfield wrote, "As we sweep our eyes over the world lying in its wickedness, it is the valley of the prophet's vision which we see before us: a valley that is filled with bones, and lo! They are very dry. What benefit is there in proclaiming to dry bones even the greatest of redemptions? How shall we stand and cry, 'O ye dry bones, hear ye the word of the Lord!' In vain the redemption, in vain its proclamation, unless there come a breath from heaven to breathe upon these slain that they may live. The redemption of Christ is therefore no more central to the Christian hope than the creative operations of the Holy Spirit upon the heart: and the supernatural redemption itself would remain a mere name outside of us and beyond our reach, were it not realized in the subjective life by an equally supernatural application"¹.

As such, Warfield gave nearly poetic expression to the hope every preacher should have in the Holy Spirit's supernatural quickening and renewal work in bringing dead sinners to life in Jesus Christ, using the means of the preaching of Christ and Him crucified. This effectual calling is described in the Savoy Declaration of Faith as, "*enlightening their mind spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace*"². But in this description, the writers were careful to qualify this supernatural understanding of the things of God as being not only a "spiritual", but a "saving understanding" as well. The natural man, as the Apostle Paul termed him, is dead in his sins and trespasses, and walks in the futility of his mind, having his understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in him, because of the blindness of his heart"³, and yet the Savoy implies that for the natural man there is still *an* understanding of the things of God. It is not a spiritual or saving understanding because he is not yet quickened and renewed, but it is an understanding nonetheless.

This is a critical insight into the natural man that needs to be incorporated into the preaching of the gospel by Christ's ministers. The preacher is called to present the "things of God", and to direct them to the conscience of every hearer, whether he be the

¹ B. B. Warfield, Studies in Theology, Banner of Truth Trust, "Christian Supernaturalism", pages 43-44

² The Savoy Declaration of Faith, Chapter X., Of Effectual Calling, paragraph I.

³ Ephesians 2.1, 4.17-18

new man, or the natural man. It is in this built-in courtroom of man's God-given conscience where God prosecutes His case against the offending sinner. Here God holds His image bearers accountable for their rebellion as He holds up the pristine mirror of His law as it is presented in the gospel, and convicts them as they are confronted with the corrupted reflection of their fallen image. For those who are effectually called, this leads to confession, repentance, and the embracing by faith of Jesus Christ as Savior, and the obeying of Him as their Lord. As such, this preached gospel becomes for them the aroma of life leading to life, and the power of God. To the unrepentant sinner, however, it is foolishness, and an aroma of death leading to death⁴. As such it can be said that the natural man is indeed impacted, as is the regenerate man, in that there is a real response.

One should not conclude from the vision of the dry bones that the natural man takes in nothing from the preaching of the gospel. If one were to speak to a physical corpse in the morgue, there would undeniably and absolutely be no response. It has no soul. The natural man, however, "is one that hath all that is or can be derived from the first Adam, one endowed with a 'rational soul,' and who hath the use and exercise of all its rational faculties"⁵. For the natural man, his soul's faculties, his understandings, will, and affections are exercised to discern and judge what he hears in the gospel, even if it is not a saving understanding.

Moreover, one should also not conclude that the preaching of the gospel to the natural man who remains unregenerate is in vain. "Exhortations, promises, and threatenings respect not primarily our present *ability*, but our *duty*. Their end is, to declare unto us, not what we *can* do, but what we *ought* to do"⁶. God uses the means of preaching in His supernatural application of the work of Christ to the elect, and He is glorified for His exceedingly abundant grace to unworthy sinners. God also uses the gospel message preached to expose the foolishness of the worldly wise and prudent, who remain unrepentant. Thus God is glorified in His wisdom in the gospel, and will seen to be just on that Day when the reprobate are sentenced to everlasting damnation. The Apostle asked, "What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory"⁷.

In light of the above, the intent of this paper is to explore the nature of preaching to the natural man's conscience with a view to smashing the façade of his conceit, and confronting Him with the living God whom he has grievously offended. This the basis upon which the preacher, speaking for God, calls men to repent and to be reconciled to Him on His terms, which are based on the finished work of Jesus Christ. The preacher must be like the little child who finally told the emperor that he had no clothes on! He must proclaim to the fallen sinner the way it really is! The preacher knows his efforts

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1.18, 2 Corinthians 2.16

⁵ John Owen, The Works of John Owen, Banner of Truth Trust, 1994, Volume 3, p. 257

⁶ Ibid, p. 289

⁷ Romans 9.22-23

are powerless apart from God's effectual calling of the sinner to Himself, but he must not in his preaching deal with the natural man on his ground, but on God's ground.

The Natural Man:

As regarding all things in this present fallen world, an examination of the work of preaching to the natural man should begin at the beginning when "natural man" came into existence. This of course brings us to the fall where Adam said "no" to God's rule. Satan, a product of his own self deception in thinking he the creature could be God, proceeded to tempt Eve with the same delusion. His technique in part was to create doubt surrounding God's intentions of good towards Adam and Eve, as well as to question the veracity of His word. It began by introducing uncertainty with, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'" , and ended with the blunt pronouncement, "You shall not surely die" , which was a complete denial of God's unambiguous word that, "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die"⁸. In this way, the serpent plainly intimated to them that God was knowingly holding out on them by forbidding access to further knowledge, which would supposedly be for their greater good and enjoyment. This was to say that God's good intentions towards them were not good after all. They were thus led to believe that only they could know what was best for them, as God could not be fully trusted in His intentions towards them.

But this exchange also rejected God's wisdom and knowledge regarding their greater welfare. Satan essentially "suggested to Eve that God's statement about the relation of one temporal fact to another was not determinative of the nature of that relationship. Facts and the truth about their relationships to one another can be known by man"⁹. That is to say, they were deceived into thinking that God's declaration that they would die would not necessarily be the outcome of their eating from the tree, but that they through their own reasoning could make the best decision. As Van Til wrote regarding man, "he had to choose between taking the divine mind or his own mind as the source of truth about the facts"¹⁰. And he chose the latter.

Man, thinking himself now to be self-sufficient and autonomous, turned against God and His claims for loving obedience and submission. He no longer viewed God as his greatest good, but forsook and left the fountain of living waters in God, and dug for himself broken cisterns that can hold no water¹¹. His mind was now at enmity with God, becoming blinded and unable to spiritually discern the things of God, thinking them to be foolishness. But greater than the corruption of his understanding was the corruption of his will and affections. Owen wrote, "no man doth actually apply his mind to the receiving of the things of the Spirit of God to the utmost of that ability which he hath; for all unregenerate men are invincibly impeded therein by the corrupt stubbornness and

⁸ Genesis 3.1, 4, 2.17

⁹ Cornelius Van Til, Christian Apologetics, P&R Publishing Company, 2003, p.34

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Jeremiah 2.13

perverseness of their wills and affections”¹². This bias and prejudice will override even the strongest convictions in the understanding. This distortion and corruption in man’s understanding, will, and affections became a permanent fixture in the makeup of man. And thus Adam, and all those bearing his fallen image became “natural man”.

The image of God in man, however, although radically corrupted and marred is not lost altogether. Like the sunken Titanic under miles of ocean water, never to sail again, but still bearing the image of its former glory, so too man, buried under miles of sin and corruption still reflects something of his once glorious state. Calvin, commenting on John 1.5, wrote, “the *light* of understanding is not wholly extinguished; for, amidst the thick darkness of the human mind, some remaining sparks of the brightness still shine... The *light* which still dwells in corrupt nature consists chiefly of two parts; for, first, all men naturally possess some seed of religion; and, secondly, the distinction between good and evil is engraven on their consciences...As he (Christ) is the eternal *Speech* of God, by him the world was made; by his power all things continue to possess the life which they once received; man especially was endued with an extraordinary gift of understanding; and though by his revolt he lost the light of understanding, yet he still sees and understands, so that what he naturally possesses from the grace of the Son of God is not entirely destroyed”¹³.

Calvin wrote further, “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops. Since, therefore, one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will”¹⁴. Paul wrote concerning all men that, “what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them”¹⁵. As such, natural man, still in possession of his rational faculties, is able to understand what God has embedded within him in his mind and conscience. But it is here that natural man displays and exerts his new fallen nature. The enmity of natural man towards God is exercised and made abundantly clear in his active “suppressing of the truth” about God. He knows of not just a god, but *the* God who created him, and he knows he has broken covenant with him and is under condemnation, but it is this truth about himself and his Maker that he hates and actively stifles. It wars against his preconceived notion about himself that he is autonomous and able to attain knowledge, wisdom and thereby fulfillment through his own intellect and abilities. He therefore sees himself as the point of reference in his world, and judges all else against that paradigm. For him, if there is a God, it is a god he can be in relation with on his own terms.

¹² Owen, III, p. 268

¹³ John Calvin, John Calvin Collection CD, Ages Digital Library, Commentary on Gospel according to John, pages 23-24, (parentheses mine)

¹⁴ John Calvin, Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1, Book One, Chapter III, pages 43-44

¹⁵ Romans 1.19

But the natural man cannot easily get away from his conscience. The Apostle Paul wrote of Gentiles without the law that they too are guilty and accountable before God because they “show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them”¹⁶. This work of the law in the conscience, therefore, is such that even the Gentile without the law knows he is under law in some measure. W. G. T. Shedd wrote, “The knowledge of the law involves the knowledge of God in an equal degree. Who can feel amenable to a moral law, without at the same time thinking of its Author? The law and the lawgiver are inseparable. The one is the mirror and index of the other. If the eye opens dimly upon the commandment, it opens dimly upon the Sovereign; if it perceives eternal right and law with clear and celestial vision, it then looks directly into the face of God. Law and God are correlative to each other; and just so far, consequently, as the heathen understands the law that is written on the heart does he apprehend the Being who sitteth upon the circle of the heavens, and who impinges Himself upon the consciousness of men”¹⁷. As such, the natural man’s conscience cries out to him that he is accountable to God, but because of the hardness and extreme prejudice of his heart, he applies all his efforts to either extinguish its verdict of condemnation, or to use his own wicked, deceitful, and biased understanding and wisdom to soothe it.

God has powerfully revealed himself to natural man outwardly through creation, and inwardly through the witness of the conscience and the placing of eternity upon the heart, but natural man, out the presumption of his own autonomy and self-reliance, has fashioned a god of his own imagination and sentiment. It is either a no god, or a god he can get along with and approach on his terms, created in his own image. One has said that God created man, and man has been returning the favor ever since.

This is the natural man to be preached to, who must be confronted with the reality he has sinfully suppressed. This reality is his broken covenant with his Creator, which places him under condemnation and justly subject to judgment. Anything less, is to appeal to the ungodly on their terms, attempting to take the sting out the truth about themselves.

The Rich Young Ruler:

The young man who came running and knelt before Jesus asking, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?”¹⁸, presents a vivid picture of the natural man’s disposition as regards his relation to God. Clearly the man was sincere in his inquiry. Luke, in his account, wrote that Jesus loved him. Yet, the man’s premise in his question was mistaken. He understood right and wrong from God’s witness of the law in his conscience, but mistakenly believed he could actually keep that same law, and thereby gain a right standing with God. This faulty sense of his own abilities and

¹⁶ Ibid, 2.15

¹⁷ W. G. T. Shedd, “All Mankind Guilty; Or, Every Man Knows More Than He Practices”, Sermons to the Natural Man, Project Gutenberg’s Sermons to the Natural Man, by William G.T. Shedd, <http://www.sakoman.net/pg/html/13204.htm>

¹⁸ Matthew 19.16

standing before God only exposed his prideful self-sufficiency, and the futility and blindness of his thinking. He had knowledge of the law and a measure of understanding as to what was outwardly required in it, but it was not a saving knowledge and understanding. When Jesus told him to keep the commandments, he responded with, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?"¹⁹, which showed he didn't know and understand that the purpose of the law in his present fallen condition was no longer a means of eternal life, but had become for him and all others, a word condemning him to eternal damnation.

Many who sit in pews, still unregenerate, come with the same inquiry of the rich young ruler. Their conscience still excuses or accuses, but they believe themselves to have the remedy for a quiet conscience, which is to follow the rules. When Jesus said to keep the commandments, the young man replied, "Which ones?"²⁰, as if the law was merely a simple list of outward do's and don't's. And so too, many of the ungodly are looking for a list of things to do, which they reason will keep them on good terms with God.

Preachers can easily fall into the trap of merely preaching the law on the natural man's terms. Owen wrote, "There are in the gospel, and belong to the preaching of it, precepts innumerable concerning moral duties to be observed towards God, ourselves, and other men; and all these have a coincidence with and a suitableness unto the inbred light of nature, because the principles of them are indelibly ingrafted therein. These things in some sense the "things of man", may be known by the "spirit of a man that is in him" (1 Corinthians 2.11): howbeit they cannot be observed and practiced according to the mind of God without the aid and assistance of the Holy Ghost"²¹. These "moralizing" sermons typically only consist in that particular week's admonitions to do this, and to do that. This type of sermon, however, only appeals to the natural man's pride in that he, like the young man, actually thinks he has done an acceptable if not exemplary job of keeping each point of the law. He may encounter one point in the sermon where he has fallen somewhat short, but he reasons that he'll simply try harder in the week to come. In this way, the natural man goes home self contented and puffed up with pride. He has indeed responded to God's revelation in the law, but it is a response that comes from the conceit of his presumed self-reliance and his own prejudiced understanding of what constitutes his relation with God.

Jesus, however, continued with this man by exposing the man's pride and false understanding of the law and his capability to keep it. He exhorted the man to sell all he had, to give to the poor, and to follow Him, but the young man simply went away "sorrowful". Jesus in essence said, "you say you keep the law. Let me test you on the first of these laws: 'you shall have no other gods before Me'". In doing this, Jesus ripped away the façade of this man's presumed ability and self-sufficiency to keep the law. It became clear he couldn't comply because he couldn't keep what is in fact the very essence of the law, which is love for God heart, soul, mind and strength. It was a holy confrontation which forced this man to choose whom he would love and serve, and thus

¹⁹ Ibid, verse 20

²⁰ Ibid, verse 18

²¹ Owen, III, p. 259, (parentheses mine)

his sin of idolatry was exposed. The man seeking to justify in his own mind the high regard he had for himself because in his supposed law-keeping, “went away sorrowful” because his notion of what constituted his relationship with God was smashed to pieces by Jesus, and he knew Jesus was right. But he loved his sin more. Naomi’s daughter-in-law, Orpah was faced with this same dilemma. She wanted to be with Naomi, but revealed her true heart when she went “back to her people and *to her gods*”, where her affections truly lay²². How striking indeed is the contrast with Ruth who “clung” to Naomi.

C. Van Til wrote, “It is a part of the task of Christian apologetics to make men self-consciously either covenant keepers or covenant breakers”²³, and so too the preacher must first expose the root of the natural man’s condition by getting to the very conscience of that man where God has indelibly placed the witness of Himself as Creator and Lawgiver. In this way, the law is not just presented as a list of moral duties, but as a mirror of God’s perfections in which one sees themselves in all of their deformities. Only then will the natural man be forced to meet head-on the infinite gap that exists between the duty of the creature created in God’s image to glorify his Creator, and his own character and conduct. The hearer must never be left with the impression that they are keepers of God’s laws apart from a true love for God, heart, soul, mind, and strength. Nor must they ever conclude that God will accept anything less than perfect conformity. These truths regarding a man’s origin, duty, and destiny, although actively suppressed and held in contempt by natural man, are common to all men, and must always be the canvas upon which the gospel is painted.

Paul In Athens:

The Apostle Paul’s preaching in Athens is very instructive regarding preaching to the natural man. Paul began to follow his usual pattern of teaching in the synagogue and marketplace, but was finally invited by some of the philosophers to come and address them. On Mars Hill, he spoke saying, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you”²⁴.

There in Athens were natural men with working faculties of the soul, understanding, will, and affections, and yet, “although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened”. Their idols demonstrated they had suppressed the truth about the one true Living God, but showed they were not able to fully suppress the God-implanted

²² Ruth 1.15, *italics mine*

²³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, P&R Publishing Company, 2003, p.62

²⁴ Acts 17.22-23

knowledge of His existence. Out of arrogance, and puffed up with their own presumed wisdom and knowledge, they created their own gods, and yet there was one more to the "Unknown God". Clearly, there was a sense in these pagans that in spite of their efforts, there was more. Calvin wrote concerning this text, "Though superstition be not always fearful, yet forasmuch as it is inwrapt in divers errors, it disquieteth men's minds, and doth prick them with divers blind torments. This was the cause that the men of Athens did mix their domestical gods (whom they thought they knew, because in their vain opinion they had invented them) with unknown gods. For thereby appeareth their unquietness, because *they confess that they have not as yet done as they ought*, when they have done sacrifice to the familiar gods, which they had received of their fathers, and whom they called their country gods"²⁵.

This knowledge of the "Unknown God" to whom they gave ignorant homage, became the point of contact for Paul. He immediately proclaimed that this God, whom they knew existed, was in fact their Creator, and that they were under obligation to seek Him. Further, by stating, "for in Him we live and move and have our being... therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising"²⁶, he essentially rebuked them for their attempts to use their own distorted ideas of worship, and clearly stated their utter dependence upon Him for their very life. As such, he exposed their wicked inclinations towards self-reliance, and autonomy, and their failure to glorify Him. These statements by Paul then became the foundation for His call to action. They had fallen short in their duty to their Creator, and now must repent or be subject to judgment "by the Man whom He has ordained"²⁷.

Here again is a case of natural man being brought to a to a point of confrontation with the truth about himself and his relation with his Creator, which is a truth he knows, but seeks to extinguish. We should not separate these ancient Athenians from so-called modern man. The natural man of the present day, as incurably religious as the Athenians, is equally guilty of erecting multiple idols in his heart, which are the objects of his affections. One way in which he too erects an idol to the "Unknown God" is to sit in a pew and listen to a sermon, because he cannot get away from the accusing voice of his conscience, which awakes within him the apprehension of a Day of Divine judgment. Using their natural reason they presume their attendance in church is a kind of sacrifice which he hopes will satisfy the offended Power. Preachers need to shatter that deadly and false illusion by strongly warning them that, "The great charge that will rest against the creature when he stands before the final bar will be, that 'when he knew God, he glorified Him not as God"²⁸. This must always be an essential part of the message of the gospel by God's spokesmen.

²⁵ John Calvin, John Calvin Collection CD, Ages Digital Library, Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, p. 589, *italics mine*

²⁶ Acts 17.28-29

²⁷ Ibid, verse 31

²⁸ W. G. T. Shedd, "All Mankind Guilty; Or, Every Man Knows More Than He Practices", Sermons to the Natural Man, Project Gutenberg's Sermons to the Natural Man, by William G.T. Shedd, <http://www.sakoman.net/pg/html/13204.htm>

Jesus' Teaching In John 6:

This discourse by Jesus to the Jews addresses another important element in preaching to the natural man, which is His use of the doctrine of election. It has been the experience of this writer that many, even among reformed ministers, do not think the doctrine of election is appropriate when preaching to the unconverted. The argument usually given is that it's too difficult to understand, and only brings up what they deem to be unnecessary objections by the hearer to responding to the gospel.

In response, it should be made clear that this doctrine is in no way difficult to understand. Numerous passages in God's Word clearly teach that God from eternity has predestined some to be the recipients of the blessings of eternal life, and all others He has passed over. In this discourse in John 6 for example, Jesus clearly refers to those whom the Father has given Him as the ones who will indeed come to Him (verse 37). To maintain that this doctrine is too complicated, or difficult to understand, is to indirectly question and bring into doubt the ability of the Holy Spirit to speak plainly in Scripture. What in fact is difficult for the natural is the acceptance of this doctrine as truth. Natural man, in his deluded view of autonomy from God and self-sufficiency, objects to it because it attacks everything he is persuaded of about himself. The idea that he is helpless to effect his salvation is repugnant to his fallen nature. For him to admit to it would be to acknowledge his utter dependence upon God, and that he is at the mercy of God's disposal of him as the creature.

In this passage, Jesus made plain the need for His hearers to come to Him for their greatest blessing such that they would never hunger or thirst. He proclaimed, "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day"²⁹. At this, His hearers complained in their unbelief, and Jesus declared, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day"³⁰. He then, having made clear their inability to come to Him, proceeded with a clear call for them to believe³¹. Jesus in essence clearly made known to them their duty to come to Him in belief for the blessing of eternal life, but also made clear their total powerlessness to comply.

This approach to preaching the gospel, exemplified by Jesus Himself, attacks the core of the natural man's stance regarding himself, which is the pride he feels in his supposed autonomy from God. Natural man reasons that if he is to approach God, it will be on his terms, and within the sphere of his own abilities and will. It is Jesus who provided His own explanation of His use of the doctrine of election when he stated to His hearers, "There are some of you who do not believe... therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father"³². His hearers had satisfied

²⁹ John 6.40

³⁰ Ibid, verse 44

³¹ Ibid, verse 47

³² Ibid, verses 64-65

themselves that what Jesus said was not believable. They had heard the truth, and although they possessed the working rational faculties of the intellect, they denied the truth because of the hardened blindness of their hearts which worked to darken their understanding. They, believing themselves to be wise, in fact displayed their foolishness in the things of God. But Jesus the preacher would not allow them to rest in their own understanding. Instead, He demolished the illusion they had in their abilities by pointedly telling them the reason for their unbelief was in reality their utter inability to believe. This was essentially to tell them that their supposed autonomy and self-reliance apart from God was in reality a delusion. And as a result, "many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more"³³. Jesus had spoken to the inner courtroom of their conscience in that He testified that they had not glorified God as they should by believing in Him as the Son of God. Jesus had called them to eat His flesh and drink His blood for eternal life, which was to say they must cast themselves entirely upon Him, but this they would not do because they were too proud to humbly acknowledge their dependence upon their Creator, and their obligation to obey Him in belief. But they blamed their unbelief here on Jesus, the very Son of God, when they said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?", and yet Jesus knew it to be pride when He asked, "Does this offend you?"³⁴

The Apostle Paul, having taught the doctrine of election in the ninth chapter of Romans, anticipated the natural man's objection to it when he wrote, "You will say to me then, 'Why does He find fault? For who has resisted His will?'" This response of natural man is consistent with Adam's justification of his rebellion. In response to God's question regarding eating from the tree, Adam replied, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate"³⁵. As such, Adam clearly placed the blame for his sin not only on the woman, but God Himself! So too, natural man reasons that if election is true, then he's justified in his unbelief because God is to blame. But it is in this way that God exposes him for what he is in his false and rebellious notion of self-rule. We should not be surprised that many will soon leave this form of preaching, which they will ultimately find to be insulting.

The Arminian preacher, however, is careful to not in any way disrupt what is in fact the hearer's idol of free will. In doing so, he presents Jesus as the poor hand-wringing helpless Savior who hopes the hearers will of their own ability come to Him. Thus these preachers are often forced to resort to coercive techniques, which if effectively applied, can in fact induce many to give expressions of what is in reality a spurious faith. Thus many are given a false sense of security because they at some moment in time made what they believe is a decision for Jesus Christ based on their so called free will. In this way, the natural man's pride in himself is left intact. Is it any wonder that many professing Christians show no evidence of new life?

After many of the disciples had left Jesus, He asked of those who remained, "Do you also want to go away?", to which Peter wonderfully responded, "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

³³ Ibid, verse 66

³⁴ Ibid, verses 60-61

³⁵ Genesis 3.12

You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"³⁶. Peter was at the earliest stages of His understandings and belief, but his faculties, identical to the faculties of the unbelieving disciples who had left, were now free of the oppressive blinding of the mind and hardness of the heart, which had formerly worked unbelief through the active suppression of the truth about himself and His covenantal God and Creator. He now saw the things of God truly, and responded in faith and obedience. This of course was the regenerating and illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, and for Peter and all true believers, "It is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"³⁷.

The disciples who left Jesus were ones who were more than happy to be recipients of the bread and fish miraculously served by Jesus to the 5000. So too, natural man is not repelled by being in proximity to Christ and His people. Many who sit in pews enjoy fellowship, singing, beautiful places of worship, etc., but a call to humbly come to God through Christ in confession, and a putting away of their self-serving practices, attacks the very foundation upon which they have foolishly placed their hopes for happiness, which is to obtain it upon their own terms and hang on to their sins.

John Bunyan caught something of this in his character Pliable in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian told Pliable of an "endless kingdom... everlasting life... Crowns of glory to be given us; and Garments that will make us shine like the Sun... no more crying, nor sorrow... there we shall see be with Seraphims, Cherubims, Creatures that will dazzle your eyes...", and so forth, to which Pliable replied, "The hearing of this is enough to ravish one's heart... how shall we get to be Sharers thereof?" Christian replied, "The Lord the Governor of the country, hath recorded that in this Book, the substance of which is, if we be truly willing to have it, He will be willing to bestow it upon us freely". And so they set out together, but there was a great difference in the two in that only Christian was laden down with the great burden of his guilt. When they both fell into the Slough of Despond, Pliable "began to be offended" and said, "Is this the happiness you have told me all the while of? If we have such ill speed at our first setting out, what may we expect 'twixt this and our Journey's end?"³⁸ And so Pliable returned to the City of Destruction. Pliable was like the wicked prophet Balaam who when he viewed the multitude of Israelites on the plain of Moab said, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!"³⁹ Someone has commented that Balaam should have instead desired *to live the life of the righteous*.

The picture of Pliable being offended tells us that he like natural men are carnally attracted by thoughts of contentment and satisfaction, and relief from their troubles, but are put off by the gospel which exhorts men not to see their chief good in these things in and of themselves, but to see God as their chief good. Owen wrote, "The mind, from the darkness that is in it, apprehends that spiritual things, the things of the gospel, as they

³⁶ John 6.67-69

³⁷ 2 Corinthians 4.6

³⁸ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Barbour Publishing, Inc., 1985, pages 7-8

³⁹ Numbers 23.10

are proposed, have an utter inconsistency with true contentment and satisfaction... If they might obtain more mirth, more wealth, more strength and health, more assurance of their lives, more power, more honour, more suitable objects unto their sensual desires, then they suppose it would be better than it is; but as for anything which differeth from these in the whole kind, they can entertain no respect for it"⁴⁰. Pliable interpreted Christian's description of the Celestial City as meeting his carnal desires, but he became offended by the calls of the gospel to die to self and live for Christ in true holiness in this life. In so doing, he refused to accept the truth that his true satisfaction and contentment was to be found only in submitting to God's call to repent of his sins and to believe in the atoning work of Christ as His only hope for reconciliation to God. The natural man, however, works to reconcile the world and God together, but for the preacher, "the league that is between the mind and these things in all natural man must be broken"⁴¹.

In his sermon on Christ's words in Matthew 11.25⁴² as regards the "wise and prudent", John Newton addressed the natural man who sought to hold both to God and the world with, "If a man should attempt to fly, or to walk on water, he would be deemed a fool. How is it that this endeavour, which is equally impossible (and expressly declared so by our Lord), should be more favourably thought of? The deceitfulness of the heart, and the subtilty of Satan, concur on this point. You will have a sort of religion, but then you take care not to carry things too far. You are governed by the fear and regard of men. Something you will do to satisfy conscience; but not too much, lest you hurt your interest, disoblige your friends, or draw on yourself reproach, or a hard name. *I must tell you, from the word of God, your attempt to halve things is an abomination in His sight.* Would it not be treason by the law, to pay the king an outward respect, and yet hold secret correspondence with his enemies? The decisions of the word of God are to the same effect in this instance. 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him'. 'Know you not, that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whoever, therefore, will be a friend of the world, is the enemy of God'"⁴³ In this way, using compelling argument and the word of God, Newton directly addressed the conscience of natural man. He ripped away the veneer of his faulty biased thinking, and told him the way it really is. As such, the preacher must directly expose as sin whatever it is that a natural man is falsely placing his hopes for satisfaction and contentment. The preacher must tell his hearers that their greatest good can only be found in God, who designed man to find the fulfillment of all his desires for quality, and meaning in life in God alone. This provides a motive to be reconciled to God by renouncing his previous pursuits as offensive to God, and embracing Christ as the One who has removed the barrier of sin, and now gives the repentant sinner abundance of new life, characterized by true satisfaction and contentment.

⁴⁰ Owen, III, pages 275-276

⁴¹ Ibid, page 277

⁴² "I thank You Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes", NKJV

⁴³ John Newton, The Works of John Newton, Volume 2, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988, p. 385, *italics mine*

Many so-called evangelist preachers, however, continue to appeal to the natural man's carnal desires of happiness and satisfaction apart from God. The world is filled with people who are hungering and thirsting for blessedness and happiness, and it is the nature of the deceitfulness of sin that it always offers happiness and fulfillment.

In the Sermon on the Mount⁴⁴, however, Jesus did not teach that we are to hunger and thirst for happiness, nor are we to hunger and thirst for blessedness. And yet, that is what most people are doing, including many professing Christians, and that is why happiness always eludes them. In the Bible, happiness is never something that should be sought directly. It is always something that results from seeking something else. Jesus taught that true blessedness and happiness is the direct result of hungering and thirsting for righteousness. For a man to put happiness first without righteousness is to put self first with its self-concern, pride, boasting, self-protection, sensitiveness, and a desire to protect and glorify self. This self-assertion always leads to quarreling, wrangling, upsets, "pity parties", and division. It happens in families, churches, and even among nations. It's the history of this fallen world.

But to hunger and thirst for righteousness, is to earnestly desire to be free of those selfish inclinations, to be loosed from every manifestation of self-concern. It is a desire to be released from the power of sin that always shows itself in the craving to serve self. The man who hungers and thirsts for righteousness has come to see that the world in which he is living is controlled by Satan and sin, and he no longer wants to be under that influence. He knows that he was not only born under the bondage of sin, but he has come to know and experience that "law in his members" that Paul speaks of in Romans 7 that works to drag him down in spite of himself. And further, to his horror, he finds that he often likes sin and wants it even though he knows it to be wrong. To hunger and thirst for righteousness, therefore, is to be, as J. N. Darby put it, "desperate, to be starving, to feel life is ebbing out, to realize my urgent need of help"⁴⁵. To hunger and thirst after righteousness is to be as, "as the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for the living God"⁴⁶. It is only in this state of desperation that one can see that true blessing and happiness can only be found in Christ Jesus. That's the gospel, and that's what preachers need to preach to natural men. All else is simply the false gospels of "health and wealth", and "name-it-and-claim-it".

When Natural Men Refuse the Gospel:

The prophet Isaiah received a very remarkable commissioning by God to minister to the disobedient people of Israel. However, one would wonder how many men would be encouraged in a calling to a place of service if they were to hear from God what Isaiah heard regarding his charge: "Go and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not

⁴⁴ The next several paragraphs are somewhat of a summary of part of M. Lloyd-Jones' commentary on Matthew 5.6, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1991, Chapter VII, "Righteousness and Blessedness"

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 81

⁴⁶ Psalm 42.1

understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed"⁴⁷. As such, God was telling Isaiah that his ministry would only result in the further hardening of hearts by many with only a remnant, or "holy seed"⁴⁸ of true believers. Today's modern church growth proponents would probably consider that to be a failed ministry.

However, we also read in Isaiah that God says of His word, "It shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it"⁴⁹. Clearly, therefore, God has purpose and is glorified not only in conversions, but also in the refusals of natural men to come to Him through Christ. This apparently includes those who come very close, such as "those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come"⁵⁰, or Felix who became afraid when Paul spoke "about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come"⁵¹.

During his itinerant preaching ministry, Jesus rebuked the cities that rejected Him and did not repent. And yet He offered up thanks to His Father for hiding these things from the wise and the prudent, and added, "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight"⁵². Paul wrote, "For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are that no flesh should glory in His presence... as it is written, 'He who glories, let him glory in the Lord'"⁵³. Clearly God is not only glorified in those who are His new creations in Christ, but is also glorified in contrasting His wisdom and power against the foolishness of fallen man. In this way, He has also graciously provided for His elect a clear manifestation of His mercy and grace so that they may more fully enter into praise and thanksgiving for so great a salvation that has been bestowed upon them.

Conclusion:

In preaching to the natural man, the truly biblical preacher must apply "atomic power and flame-throwers to the very presupposition of the natural man's ideas with respect to himself...assured of a point of contact in the fact that every man is made in the image of God and has impressed upon him the law of God"⁵⁴. The Apostle Paul deals with this

⁴⁷ Isaiah 6.9-10

⁴⁸ Ibid, verse 13

⁴⁹ Ibid, 55.11

⁵⁰ Hebrews 6.4-5

⁵¹ Acts 24.25

⁵² Matthew 11.26

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 1.26-29, 31

⁵⁴ Cornelius Van Til, Christian Apologetics, P&R Publishing Company, 2003, p.120

“point of contact” with the natural man in that, “He explicitly teaches that the pagan knows that there is one supreme God (Rom. i.20); that He is a spirit (Rom. i.23); that He is holy and sin-hating (Rom. i.18); that He is worthy to be worshipped (Rom. i.21, 25); and that men ought to be thankful for His benefits (Rom. i.21). He affirms that the heathen knows that an idol is a lie (Rom. i.25); that licentiousness is a sin (Rom. i.26, 32); that envy, malice, and deceit are wicked (Rom. i.29, 32); and that those who practise such sins deserve eternal punishment (Rom. i.32)”⁵⁵. It these truths about God and himself that the natural man hates, and seeks to suppress, but which must be brought to the surface through preaching. As Shedd wrote concerning the natural man, “He knows more than he practices”⁵⁶. The effectual calling of a sinner is ultimately the divine, mysterious, and powerful regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, but preachers must understand and not hesitate to attack the barriers and objections that natural man has erected and sought to surround himself with in order fend off the truth.

As such, this kind of preaching requires boldness because it is a message that attacks natural man at his core, which is his pride in himself and his sense of autonomy. Jesus Himself said that world hated Him “because I testify of it that its works are evil”⁵⁷. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others of God’s spokesmen have experienced this antagonism from their hearers, but the preacher must remember what God told Isaiah: “The Lord of hosts, Him you shall hallow; let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread”⁵⁸. Let every preacher therefore say with Paul, “I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God”⁵⁹.

But it can also be said that this kind of preaching ultimately elevates God in His sovereignty, because if there is ever any response to this true message of the gospel, it can only be the marvelous grace of God in the work of a new creation in the hearts and minds of otherwise hopelessly fallen men and women. And if a hearer remains impenitent, then the preacher can say with Jesus, “Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight”⁶⁰. In this way, the faithful preacher can rest in His sovereign God who will “let none of his words fall to the ground”⁶¹.

⁵⁵ W. G. T. Shedd, “All Mankind Guilty; Or, Every Man Knows More Than He Practices”, Sermons to the Natural Man, Project Gutenberg’s Sermons to the Natural Man, by William G.T. Shedd, <http://www.sakoman.net/pg/html/13204.htm>

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ John 7.7

⁵⁸ Isaiah 8.13

⁵⁹ Acts 20.27

⁶⁰ Matthew 11.26

⁶¹ 1 Samuel 3.19