

# Seven habits of Spirit-empowered preaching

Jud Lake

**T**he empowerment of the Holy Spirit is indispensable to Christian preaching. Preachers may be able to present the letter of the Word of God and hold the attention of audiences with interesting stories and PowerPoint presentations, but the sowing of the gospel seed will not be successful without the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Preachers have described this empowerment as “the sacred anointing,”<sup>2</sup> “divine unction,”<sup>3</sup> and “the smile of God.”<sup>4</sup> In recent years this subject has received significant attention in homiletical literature.<sup>5</sup> Arturo G. Azurdia III, for example, in his excellent work, *Spirit Empowered Preaching: Involving the Holy Spirit in Your Ministry*, writes that “the power of the Holy Spirit is the *sine qua non* of gospel preaching, the one thing without which nothing else matters.”<sup>6</sup> He then provides a helpful description of this empowerment: “It may be surprising for some to discover that when the Spirit of God powerfully attends the preaching of the word, one of the common indicators is a heightened sense of quiet; not shouts and ecstasies, but rather an unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases. The incessant movement of people is overcome by a dramatic stillness. And suddenly, though the features of the preacher’s face and the timbre of his voice are still identifiably his, the words coming forth from his mouth seem to have been sent from heaven itself.”<sup>7</sup>



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Recently while I was explaining and illustrating the heart of righteousness by faith in one of my classes at Southern Adventist University, the students became exceptionally quiet. I was caught up in my message at the time and didn’t really think much about it. Later my daughter, who was taking the class, told me that when I was explaining this subject something happened. “Dad, I sensed a strange silence in the room, and nobody around me moved. For the first time, I really understood an important aspect of righteousness by faith previously unclear to me.” Needless to say, this testimony deeply moved me and created in me a profound yearning for more of the Holy Spirit’s empowerment in my teaching and preaching.

What must the preacher do to experience the sacred anointing? I suggest seven weekly habits based on Scripture and the writings of seasoned preachers that will bring the smile of God on our preaching. It is vital to remember, however, that these seven habits are an expression of our desire to cooperate with the Spirit of God, to surrender to His divine guidance and empowerment, never to use Him for our own ends.

## **Habit 1: Make prayer and ministry of the Word preeminent in your weekly ministry.**

This habit reflects the practice of the apostles in the early church: “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4, RSV). Instead of giving in to the pressure of social ministries, which they considered important (Acts 6:3), the apostles established their priorities as prayer and ministry of the Word. As a result, “the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7, NIV; see also 9:31; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 13:48, 49; 16:5; 17:11, 12; 19:20).

These apostolic priorities should be our priorities. “If you are a pastor,” declares David Eby, “your priorities, your calling, your focus is determined. No ‘ifs,’ ‘buts,’ or ‘maybes.’ Preaching and prayer are ‘prime-time’ for you.”<sup>8</sup> So let us pray every day—passionately, earnestly, purposefully, and with determination. Let us make prayer a “conspicuous and all-impregnating force and an all-coloring ingredient” in our sermon preparation and preaching.<sup>9</sup> Let us work diligently on the sermon all week long without procrastination,

faithfully and accurately interpreting, applying, and illustrating the text. Let us live in the Word and preach out of it. Surely a habit such as this will lay the foundation for the Spirit's mighty work in our life and preaching.

**Habit 2:** *Keep a careful watch over yourself—daily, hourly.*

In his farewell message to the Ephesian elders, Paul admonished them: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28, NIV). Richard Baxter, the famous Puritan pastor in seventeenth century England, carefully expounded on this text in his classic work, *The Reformed Pastor*. Speaking forcibly to preachers he wrote, "See that the work of saving grace be thoroughly wrought in your own souls. Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim to the world the necessity of a Saviour, your own hearts should neglect him, and you should miss of an interest in him and his saving benefits."<sup>10</sup> These words ought to be memorized by all preachers of God's Word. How can one expect to be anointed with the Holy Spirit in the pulpit without a daily, hourly surrender to His transforming power? So "watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16, NIV).

**Habit 3:** *Uplift Christ and Him crucified.*

Apostolic preaching was permeated with the person and work of Jesus Christ (Acts 5:42; 8:5, 35; 9:20; 11:20; 17:2, 3). Paul's central focus was Christ: "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I

resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1, 2, NIV). So today our central focus should be the same. As we engage in weekly sermon preparation, let us keep uppermost in our minds the "one great central truth . . . in the searching of the Scriptures—Christ and Him crucified." Ellen White reminds all preachers that "every other truth is invested with influence and power corresponding to its relation to this theme."<sup>11</sup> Let us therefore make it a habit to lift up Jesus in our sermons and bring nothing into it to supplement Him, the wisdom and power of God.<sup>12</sup> Surely, maintaining this Christ-centered focus will result in "a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Cor. 2:4, NIV) during our preaching.

**Habit 4:** *Humble yourself before God in anticipation of the sermon.*

"I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor. 2:3-5, NIV). One of the most striking characteristics in these words is the absence of self-reliance. Putting his rhetorical skills aside and discarding his philosophical inclinations, Paul delivered his messages to the Corinthian church with exclusive trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to change lives. His preaching "was not a matter of enticing words or of human wisdom," exclaimed H.M.S. Richards, Sr., "but with demonstration, a showing forth, an evidence, a proof of the Spirit and of power."<sup>13</sup> As such, Paul humbled himself and put his trust in God's power rather than his own wisdom.

We must follow Paul's example. Power in preaching does not come from loud speaking, flinging arms, eloquent sermonizing, or brilliantly crafted arguments, but from "a demonstration of the Spirit's power."

The experience of this power, however, begins in the study when we humble ourselves, discarding self-reliance and surrendering to the power of the Spirit. There we must work hard on the sermon, but not rely on our own wisdom and homiletical prowess to the exclusion of the Spirit. "Our greatest strength is realized when we feel and acknowledge our weakness."<sup>14</sup> Then we can experience the smile of God, even before we get up to preach.

**Habit 5:** *Preach the sermon to yourself first.*

Richard Baxter was an enthusiastic advocate of preachers preaching to themselves. "Preach to yourselves first," he admonished, "before you preach to the people, and with greater zeal."<sup>15</sup> To preachers who fail to practice what they preach, he said: "If such a wretched man would take my counsel, he would make a stand, and call his heart and life to an account, and fall a preaching to himself, before he preach any more to others."<sup>16</sup> In *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, he maintained that every Christian should plead with his or her own heart "in the most moving and affecting language" and urge "it with the most weighty and powerful arguments." This "soliloquy," or "preaching to one's self," as he described it,<sup>17</sup> has a powerful application to contemporary preachers. We need to take our completed sermons and earnestly and passionately preach them to ourselves, heeding our own admonitions and allowing the Spirit to work on our own hearts before we bring the message to the people. This will prepare us to preach with greater passion and surrender to the Holy Spirit.

**Habit 6:** *Pray repeatedly and specifically for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit upon the preaching of your sermon.*

"If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your

Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13, NIV). While this promise applies to every Christian, it certainly has application to the preacher. Let us hold it up before God, therefore, and claim this great blessing for our sermon all week long. Never stop, never tire of asking specifically for this efficacious empowerment upon the sermon.

Renowned expositor D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, said it best: "Seek Him! Seek Him! What can we do without Him? Seek Him! Seek Him always! But go beyond seeking Him; expect Him. . . . This 'unction,' this 'anointing,' is the supreme thing. Seek it until you have it; be content with nothing less."<sup>18</sup>

**Habit 7:** *Affirm in your heart the ministry of the Holy Spirit immediately before and after you preach.*

The Metropolitan Tabernacle where Charles H. Spurgeon preached during the late 1800s contained 15 steps leading up to the pulpit on each side in a great sweeping curve. It has been said that as Spurgeon slowly mounted those stairs before preaching, he muttered to himself on each one, "I believe in the Holy Ghost."<sup>19</sup> In the backdrop of seeking the Spirit all week long, I suggest that as we approach the platform to preach, let us repeatedly offer to God this affirmation and prayer: "I believe in the Holy Spirit and claim His anointing upon me as I preach the Word." Then let us preach passionately in the confidence that God has heard our prayer. When the sermon is finished, let us thank God repeatedly for the gracious presence of His Spirit and leave the results in His capable hands. May these seven habits bring the mighty power of the Holy Spirit into our preaching of the Word. ■

- Zondervan, 1981), where he also describes the Holy Spirit's empowerment as "apostolic anointing" (45) and "the dew of heaven" (50).
- 3 E. M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 101.
  - 4 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones as cited in Sargent, 17; original source, *Revival* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1987), 295.
  - 5 See, for example, Dennis F. Kinlaw, *Preaching in the Spirit* (Nappanee, Ind.: Francis Asbury Press, 1985); James Forbes, *The Holy Spirit & Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989); Tony Sargent, *The Sacred Anointing*; William C. Turner, "Holy Spirit and Preaching," in *Encyclopedia of Preaching*, eds. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 227–229; Stephen Olford and David Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998); Arturo G. Azurdia III, *Spirit Empowered Preaching: Involving the Holy Spirit in Your Ministry* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 1998); and Roy B. Zuck, *Spirit-Filled Teaching: The Power of the Holy Spirit in Your Ministry* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998).
  - 6 Azurdia III, 100.
  - 7 *Ibid.*, 111, 112. For another vivid description of Spirit empowerment slightly different but more comprehensive, see D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 324, 325.
  - 8 David Eby, *Power Preaching for Church Growth: The Role of Preaching in Growing Churches* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 1998), 29.
  - 9 Bounds, 41.
  - 10 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, reprint (Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 56.
  - 11 *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1980), 6:1084.
  - 12 See White, *Gospel Workers*, 160; for very helpful pointers on preparing Christ-centered sermons from both testaments, see Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); and Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
  - 13 H. M. S. Richards, *Feed My Sheep* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958), 169.
  - 14 White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), 5:70.
  - 15 Baxter, "A Sermon Preached at the Funeral of Mr. Henry Stubbs," in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter in Four Volumes* (London: George Virtue, 1846; reprint, Ligonier, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 4:974.
  - 16 *Idem*, *The Reformed Pastor*, 55.
  - 17 *Idem*, "The Saints Everlasting Rest," in *Practical Works*, 3:316. For an enriching study of Baxter's thought on preaching, see Murray A. Capill, *Preaching with Spiritual Vigour: Including Lessons from the Life and Practice of Richard Baxter* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2003).
  - 18 Lloyd-Jones, 325.
  - 19 John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 334.

1 See Ellen White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1915), 284-289.

2 The first part of the title of Tony Sargent's *The Sacred Anointing: The Preaching of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994), is taken from Charles H. Spurgeon (iii). See Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*, reprint (Grand Rapids:

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### Local Church Prayer Coordinator

A congregation's prayer ministry undergirds all other ministries and provides opportunity for the church to become more intentional about prayer.

The prayer coordinator is a member who has a passion for prayer and has experienced what it means to connect with God personally.

**Job Description:** Help integrate prayer into the total life of the church and calendar of events.

**Qualifications:** Strong personal prayer life; spiritual maturity; spiritual gifts to organize, encourage, and assist others; a good reputation in the church, the confidence of church leaders, and sufficient time to attend key prayer events.

**Work Suggestions:**

- ◆ Identify people who have an interest in intercessory prayer.
- ◆ Research and evaluate the church's current prayer ministries.
- ◆ Establish a prayer group and plan prayer initiatives.
- ◆ Provide opportunities for participants to share their experiences.
- ◆ Organize prayer partners to pray for specific people or needs.
- ◆ Plan prayers for worship, prayer chains, prayer retreats, evangelism prayer groups, day of prayer activities, and prayer walks.

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