

THE LASTING POWER OF REFORMED EXPERIENTIAL PREACHING

While I was on active duty in the U.S. Army Reserves, a big, black sergeant laid his hand on my shoulder one day and said, “Son, if you ever have to go to war, there are three things you must remember in battle: what tactics you need to use, how the fight is going (which is usually very different from how it ought to go), and what the goal of the battle is.”

That sergeant gave me an experiential approach to fighting. His three points also provide insight into how experiential religion and preaching ought to go. There are five questions I would like to consider as we address the important subject of Reformed experiential preaching:

- ♦ What is experiential religion and preaching?
- ♦ Why is the experiential aspect of preaching necessary?
- ♦ What are the essential characteristics of experiential preaching?
- ♦ Why must a minister be experientially prepared for the ministry?
- ♦ What practical lessons on Christian living can we learn from the experiential

preaching of our predecessors?

The Definition of Experiential Religion and Preaching

The term *experimental* comes from the Latin *experimentum*, meaning trial. It is derived from the verb *experior*, meaning to try, prove, or put to the test. That same verb can also mean to find or know by experience, thus leading to the word *experientia*, meaning knowledge gained by experiment. John Calvin used experiential and experimental

interchangeably, since both words in biblical preaching indicate the need for measuring experienced knowledge against the touchstone of Scripture.

Experiential or experimental preaching addresses the vital matter of how a Christian experiences the truth of biblical, Christian doctrine in his life. A working definition of experimental preaching might be: Experimental preaching seeks to explain in terms of biblical truth how matters ought to go, how they do go, and what the goal is of the Christian life. It aims to apply divine truth to the whole range of the believer's personal experience, including his relationships with family, the church, and the world around him.

Paul Helm wrote about such preaching: "The situation [today] calls for preaching that will cover the full range of Christian experience, and a developed experimental theology. The preaching must give guidance and instruction to Christians in terms of their actual experience. It must not deal in unrealities or treat congregations as if they lived in a different century or in wholly different circumstances. This involves taking the full measure of our modern situation and entering with full sympathy into the actual experiences, the hopes and fears, of Christian people."¹

Experimental preaching is discriminatory preaching, meaning that it clearly defines the difference between a Christian and non-Christian, opening the kingdom of heaven to one and shutting it against the other. Discriminatory preaching offers the forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who by a true faith embrace Christ as Savior and Lord, but it also proclaims the wrath of God and His eternal condemnation upon those who are unbelieving, unrepentant, and unconverted. Such preaching teaches that unless our religion is experiential, we will perish, not because experience itself saves, but

because the Christ who saves sinners must be experienced personally as the foundation upon which our eternal hope is built (Matt. 7:22-27; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2:2).

Experimental preaching is applicatory. It applies the text to every aspect of a listener's life, promoting a religion that is truly a power and not mere form (2 Tim. 3:5). Robert Burns defined such religion as "Christianity brought home to men's business and bosoms" and said the principle on which it rests is "that Christianity should not only be known, and understood, and believed, but also felt, and enjoyed, and practically applied."²

Experiential preaching, then, teaches that the Christian faith must be experienced, tasted, and lived through the saving power of the Holy Spirit. It stresses the knowledge of scriptural truth "which is able to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). Specifically, such preaching teaches that Christ, the living Word (John. 1:1) and the very embodiment of the truth, must be experientially known and embraced. It proclaims the need for sinners to experience who God is in His Son. As John 17:3 says, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." The word *know* in this text, as well as other biblical usages, does not indicate casual acquaintance but a deep, abiding relationship. For example, Genesis 4:1 uses the word *know* to suggest marital intimacy: "And Adam knew Eve his wife Eve; and she conceived, and bare Cain." Experiential preaching stresses the intimate, personal knowledge of God in Christ.

Such knowledge is never divorced from Scripture. According to Isaiah 8:20, all of our beliefs, including our experiences, must be tested against Holy Scripture. "If I can't find my experiences back in the Bible, they are not from the Lord but from the devil,"

Martin Luther once said. That is really what the word *experimental*, derived from experiment, intends to convey. Just as scientific experiment means testing a hypothesis against a body of evidence, so experimental preaching involves examining experience in the light of the teaching of the Word of God.

Reformed experimental preaching grounded in the Word of God is theocentric rather than anthropocentric. Some people accuse the Puritans of being man-centered in their passion for godly experience. But as J. I. Packer argues, the Puritans were not interested in tracing the experience of the Spirit's work in their souls to promote their own experience but to be driven out of themselves into Christ, in whom they could then enter into fellowship with the Triune God.

This passion for fellowship with the Triune God means that experimental preaching not only addresses the believer's conscience but also his relationship with others in the church and the world. If experimental preaching led me only to examine my experiences and my relationship with God, it would fall short of affecting my interaction with family, church members, and society. It would remain self-centered. Instead, true experimental preaching brings a believer into the realm of vital Christian experience, prompting a love for God and His glory as well as a burning passion to declare that love to others around him. A believer so instructed cannot help but be evangelistic since vital experience and a heart for missions are inseparable.

In sum, Reformed experimental preaching addresses the entire range of Christian living. With the Spirit's blessing, its mission is to transform the believer in all that he is and does so that he becomes more and more like the Savior.

Until early in the 19th century many Reformed ministers preached experimentally. Francis Wayland wrote in 1857 in his *Notes on the Principles and Practices of the Baptist Churches*:

From the manner in which our ministers entered upon the work, it is evident that it must have been the prominent object of their lives to convert men to God. They were remarkable for what was called experimental preaching. They told much of the exercises of the human soul under the influence of the truth of the gospel. The feeling of a sinner while under the convicting power of the truth; the various subterfuges to which he resorted when aware of his danger; the successive applications of truth by which he was driven out of all of them; the despair of the soul when it found itself wholly without a refuge; its final submission to God, and simple reliance on Christ; the joys of the new birth and the earnestness of the soul to introduce others to the happiness which it has now for the first time experienced; the trials of the soul when it found itself an object of reproach and persecution among those whom it loved best; the process of sanctification; the devices of Satan to lead us into sin; the mode in which the attacks of the adversary may be resisted; the danger of backsliding, with its evidences, and the means of recovery from it... these remarks show the tendency of the class of preachers which seem now to be passing away.³

How different experiential preaching is from what we often hear today. The Word of God is too often preached in a way that will not transform listeners because it fails to discriminate and fails to apply. Such preaching is reduced to a lecture, a demonstration, a catering to what people want to hear, or the kind of subjectivism that is divorced from the foundation of Scripture. It fails to biblically explain what the Reformed called vital religion: how a sinner must be stripped of his righteousness, driven to Christ alone for salvation, and led to the joy of simple reliance upon Christ. It fails to show how a sinner encounters the plague of indwelling sin, battles against backsliding, and gains victory by faith in Christ.

By contrast, when God's Word is preached experimentally, it is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16) that transforms men and nations. Such preaching proclaims from the gates of hell, as it were, that those who are not born again will walk

through those gates to dwell there eternally unless they repent (Luke 13:1-9). And such preaching proclaims from the gates of heaven that those who by God's grace persevere in holiness will walk through those gates into eternal glory, where they will dwell in unceasing communion with the Triune God.

Such preaching is transforming because it accurately reflects the vital experience of the children of God (cf. Rom. 5:1-11), clearly explains the marks and fruits of the saving grace necessary for a believer (Matt. 5:3-12; Gal. 5:22-23), and sets before believer and unbeliever alike their eternal futures (Rev. 21:1-9).

The Necessity of Experimental Preaching

Preaching today must be experiential for the following reasons:

1. Scripture commands it. Preaching is rooted in grammatical and historical exegesis, but also involves spiritual, practical, and experimental application. In 1 Corinthians 2:10-16, Paul says that good exegesis is spiritual. Since the Spirit always testifies of Jesus Christ, sound exegesis finds Christ not only in the new covenant but also in the old. As all roads in the ancient world once led to Rome, so the preaching of all texts today must ultimately lead to Christ. Jesus Himself said, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). Likewise, when He spoke with the travelers to Emmaus, Jesus said, "These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me" (Luke 24:44-45).

Spiritual exegesis is thus Christological exegesis, and, through Christ, it will be theological exegesis, bringing all glory to the Triune God.

Exegesis offers sound analysis of the words, grammar, syntax, and historical setting of Scripture. Experiential preaching does not minimize these aspects of interpretation, but neither is it content with them. Words, grammar, syntax, and historical setting serve God in exegeting the Word of God, but they are not enough.

Exposition alone is not preaching. A minister who only presents the grammatical and historical meaning of God's Word may be lecturing or discoursing, but he isn't preaching. The Word must also be applied. This application is an essential characteristic of Reformed preaching. Without it, vitality is quenched.

Jesus shows us how to preach experientially in the Sermon on the Mount. He begins the sermon by describing the true citizens of the kingdom of heaven through the beatitudes, which also are a beautiful summary of the Christian experience. The first three beatitudes (spiritual poverty, mourning, and meekness) focus on the inward disposition of the believer, the fourth (hungering and thirsting after righteousness) reveals the heartbeat of experiential faith, and the last four (merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted) show faith in the midst of the world. The beatitudes thus reveal the marks of genuine piety. The remainder of Jesus' sermon shows the fruits of grace in a believer's life.

2. True religion is more than notion. Because true religion is experimental, preaching must relate to the vital experience of the children of God. Consider the experience of affliction. Romans 5:3-5 says, "We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed." In this passage, Paul regards experience as an important link to the blessings that flow out of sanctified affliction.

Paul's epistles are filled with experiential truth. Romans 7, for example, shows that human depravity forces a believer to groan, "Oh wretched man that I am!" and Romans 8 leads a believer to the heights of divine riches in Christ, revealed by the Spirit in all its comfort and glory. Paul concludes by saying that nothing we experience in this life can separate believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Experiential preaching shows the comfort of the living church and the glory of God. How could a minister preach the opening words of Isaiah 40 without an experiential emphasis? "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (vv. 1-2). A unexperiential sermon fails to offer life and power and comfort to the believer. It also fails to glorify God as Isaiah so eloquently does in the remainder of the chapter.

3. Without such preaching, we will everlastingly perish. Experience itself does not save. We cannot have faith in our experience or faith in our faith. Our faith is in Christ alone, but that faith is experiential. Unless we build on the Rock of Christ Jesus (Matt. 7:22-27), our house of hope will crash. Some preachers may not know what it means personally, vitally, and experientially to build upon that Rock. Yet if they are to lead others to Christ, they above all must understand experientially what Paul declares in 1 Corinthians: "But of him [God the Father] are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.... For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1:30; 2:2).

The Characteristics of Experiential Preaching

Experiential preaching includes the following characteristics:

1. God's Word is central in it. Preaching flows out of the scriptural passage by expounding it in accord with sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles. As Jeremiah 3:15 says, God has given preachers to His church to "feed them with knowledge and understanding." Proper preaching does not add an experiential part to the text being preached; rather, with the Spirit's light, it draws the true experience of believers from the text. The minister must bring the sincere milk of the Word in order that, by the Spirit's blessing, experiential preaching will foster true growth (1 Pet. 2:2; Rom. 10:14).

Centering on the Word preserves experiential preaching from unbiblical mysticism. Mysticism separates experience from the Word of God, whereas historic Reformed conviction demands Word-centered, God-glorifying, Spirit-wrought experiential Christianity. That kind of preaching is essential to the health and prosperity of the church. As Calvin says, God begets and multiplies His church only by means of His Word (James 1:18).

2. It is discerning. A faithful minister rightly divides the Word of truth to separate the precious from the vile (Jer. 15:19), emphasizing law and gospel as well as death in Adam and life in Christ for that purpose. Grace is to be offered indiscriminately to all (Matt. 13:24-30); however, the divine acts, marks, and fruits of grace that God works in His people must be explained to encourage the elect and uncover the false hopes of the hypocrite.

Biblical experiential preaching stresses what God does in, for, and through His elect. As Philippians 2:13 says, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to

do of his good pleasure.” Expounding the divine acts, marks, and fruits of grace is critical in our day when so much passes for genuine Christianity that is man-glorifying. We must preach about the fruits of grace that distinguish true belief from counterfeit Christianity. We must be obedient to 2 Corinthians 13:5, which says, “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves,” as well as to James 2:17, which says, “Faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.”

3. It explains how things go in the lives of God’s people and how they ought to go (Rom. 7-8). Telling how matters go without indicating how they should go lulls the believer into ceasing from pressing on in his spiritual pilgrimage. He will not press forward to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18). Only telling how matters should be rather than how they really are discourages the believer from being assured that the Lord has ever worked in his heart. He may fear that the marks and fruits of grace are too high for him to claim. The true believer thus needs to hear both: he must be encouraged in spite of all his infirmities not to despair for Christ’s sake (Heb. 4:15). He must also be warned against assuming that he has reached the end of his spiritual pilgrimage and be urged to “press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14).

Every Christian is a soldier. To win the war against evil, a believer must put on the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:10-20). Experiential preaching brings the believer to the battlefield, shows him how to fight, tells him how to win skirmishes, and reminds him of the victory that awaits him in which God will receive the glory. “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

4. It stresses inward knowledge. The old divines were fond of stressing the difference between head knowledge and heart knowledge in Christian faith. Head knowledge is not enough for true religion; it also demands heart knowledge. “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life,” says Proverbs 4:23. Romans 10:10 adds, “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness.”

To illustrate, consider the minister who went to a Christian bookstore where a book he had written was being sold. The storekeeper asked the minister whether he knew the book’s author. When the man said yes, the storekeeper said that he also was acquainted with the author. The minister disputed that; the storekeeper looked puzzled and asked why he was being questioned. The minister replied, “Sir, if you knew the author, you would have greeted me as such when I entered your store!”

The storekeeper’s acquaintance with the author was mere head knowledge. Despite his claims, he did not truly know the author; he didn’t even recognize the man when he met him. His knowledge of the author was not experiential; it was not the fruit of personal communion with the author. It lacked the kind of heart knowledge that would have made it authentic.

Heart knowledge of God in Christ results from a personal, experiential encounter with Christ through the wondrous work of the Spirit. Such knowledge transforms the heart and bears heavenly fruit. It savors the Lord and delights in Him (Job 34:9; Ps. 34:7; Isa. 58:14). It tastes and sees that God in Christ loves lost, depraved, hell-worthy sinners (Ps. 34:8). Heart knowledge includes an appetite for tasting and digesting God’s truth. As Jeremiah says, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the

joy and rejoicing of mine heart” (Jer. 15:16). Heart knowledge feasts on God, His Word, His truth, and His Son (Ps. 144:15; 146:5).

Heart knowledge does not lack head knowledge, but head knowledge may lack heart knowledge (Rom. 10:8-21). Some people pursue religion as an objective study or to appease their conscience without ever allowing it to penetrate their heart. They have never felt guilty and condemned before the holy justice of God. They have not experienced deliverance in Christ, so they are unaware of the kind of gratitude for such deliverance that masters a believer’s soul, mind, and strength. By contrast, those who experience saving heart knowledge find sin such an unbearable burden that Christ is altogether necessary. The grace of deliverance through the Savior is then so overwhelming that their lives shine forth with gratitude.

Head knowledge is not evil in and of itself. Most of our Reformed and Puritan forefathers were highly educated; the Reformers never tired of stressing the value of Christian education. But this education must be empowered by the Holy Spirit and applied to the heart. Head knowledge is insufficient without the Spirit’s application to the inward man.

5. It must be centered in Jesus Christ (John 1:29, 36). According to 1 Corinthians 2:2, a true preacher must be “determined not to know anything... save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” Or, as William Perkins once said, the heart of all preaching is “to preach one Christ, by Christ, to the praise of Christ.”⁴

Christ must be the beginning, middle, and end of every sermon (Luke 24:27; Acts 5:5, 35; 1 John 1:1-4). Preaching must exalt Christ for awakening, justifying, sanctifying, and comforting sinners (Eph. 5:4; 1 Cor. 1:30; Is. 61:2). As John says, “In Him was life;

and the life was the light of men. . . . The word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth” (John 1:4, 14; cf. Ps. 36:9; 119:130).

Experiential preaching must stress what Rowland Hill calls the “three Rs” of preaching: Ruin by the fall, Righteousness by Christ, and Regeneration by the Spirit. Experience does not save the sinner, but Christ saves in an experiential way (Phil. 1:6). Christ is the divine fulcrum upon which genuine experience pivots.

Experiential preaching teaches that a Christian must not be separated from Christ. Though conviction of sin cannot save us, it is nonetheless critical. Under the Spirit’s tutelage, conviction of sin and misery lead us to the Savior, where we cry out, “Give me Jesus else I die.” As Martin Luther once said, “Being saved is going lost at Jesus’ feet.”

6. Its aim is to glorify the Triune God: the Father’s eternal love and good pleasure, Christ’s redemptive and mediatorial work, and the Spirit’s sanctifying and preserving ministry. The minister’s goal in preaching is to help people fall in love with each person of the Trinity. As Samuel Rutherford said, “I know not which divine person I love the most, but this I know, I need and love each of them.”

Experiential preaching stresses the God-centered nature of each benefit of salvation: internal calling, regeneration, faith, justification, sanctification, and perseverance. It differentiates between what is of man and what is of God. It exalts what is of God and abases what is of man (John 3:30).

Let us seek grace daily to experience the saving work of the Triune God. We can offer no better petition than the simple prayer of Moses, “Show me now thy way, that I may know thee” (Exod. 33:13b). As Sukey Harley prayed, “Lord, make me to know

myself; make me to know Thyself.” Knowing the Triune God is the marrow of genuine Christian experience (cf. Jer. 9:23-24; John 17:3).

Preparation for the Ministry

It is impossible to separate godly, experiential living from true experiential ministry. The sanctification of a minister’s heart is not merely ideal; it is absolutely necessary both personally and for his calling as a minister of the gospel.

Scripture says there should be no disparity between the heart, character, and life of a man who is called to proclaim God’s Word and the content of his message. “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee” (1 Tim. 4:16).

Jesus condemned the Pharisees and scribes for not doing what they proclaimed. He faulted them for the difference that existed between their words and deeds, between what they professionally proclaimed and how they acted in their daily life. Professional clerics, more than anyone else, should consider the scathing words of Christ: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not” (Matt. 23:2-3). As ministers, we are called to be as holy in our private relationship with God, in our role as husbands and fathers at home, and as shepherds among our people as we appear to be on the pulpit. There must be no disjunction between our calling and our living, our confession and our practice.

Scripture says there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the character of a man’s life as a Christian and his fruitfulness as a minister (Matt. 7:17-20). A minister’s

work is usually blessed in proportion to the sanctification of his heart before God.

Ministers must therefore seek grace to build the house of God with sound experiential preaching and doctrine as well as with a sanctified life. Our preaching must shape our life, and our life must adorn our preaching. As John Boys wrote, “He doth preach most who doth live best.”

We must be what we preach, not only applying ourselves to our texts but applying our texts to ourselves. Our hearts must be transcripts of our sermons.⁵ Otherwise, as John Owen warned, “If a man teach uprightly and walk crookedly, more will fall down in the night of his life than he built in the day of his doctrine.”

Lessons from the Experiential Preachers

The old experimental preachers were masters at applying truth to their own hearts as well as to those of others. Here are some lessons from the divines that will serve us well today.

1. Live close to God. You can’t fake Reformed, experiential living anymore than you can fake Reformed, experiential preaching. As people see through ministers who don’t live up to what they preach, so we must live close to God in order to show others that Christianity is real and experiential. For our words and actions to convey godly piety, our very thoughts must pulsate with that piety which only flows out of a close life with God. As a man thinketh, so is he.

2. Pursue godliness in dependence on the Holy Spirit. The way to godly living is surprisingly simple: We are to walk with God in His appointed way (Mic. 6:8), diligently using the means of grace and the spiritual disciplines, and waiting on the Holy Spirit for blessing. Note that godly living involves both discipline and grace. This emphasis on

duty and grace is fundamental to Reformed, experiential perspective on godly living.⁶ As John Flavel wrote, “The duty is ours, though the power be God’s. A natural man has no power, a gracious man hath some, though not sufficient; and that power he hath depends upon the assisting strength of Christ.”⁷

Likewise, John Owen wrote, “It is the Holy Ghost who is the immediate peculiar sanctifier of all believers, and the author of all holiness in them.” The Spirit supplies what we lack so that we may press toward the mark of holiness, enabling us as believers to “yield obedience to God . . . by virtue of the life and death of Jesus Christ.”⁸

The believer then is empowered, as Flavel said, with “a diligent and constant use and improvement of all holy means and duties, to preserve the soul from sin, and maintain its sweet and free communion with God.”⁹ We can also be encouraged by Owen's advice: “If thou meanest to enlarge thy religion, do it rather by enlarging thy ordinary devotions than thy extraordinary.”

Reformed experiential preachers frequently advised listeners to exercise spiritual disciplines that would promote experiential and practical Christian living. Specifically, they advised to:

- ♦ Read Scripture diligently and meditatively (1 Tim. 4:13). Richard Greenham said that we ought to read our Bibles with more diligence than men dig for hidden treasure. Diligence makes the rough places plain, the difficult easy, and the unsavory tasty.¹⁰

After reading Scripture, we must ask God for light to scrutinize our hearts and lives, then meditate upon the Word. Disciplined meditation on Scripture helps us focus on God. Meditation helps us view worship as a discipline. It involves our mind and

understanding as well as our heart and affections; it works Scripture through the texture of the soul. Meditation helps prevent vain and sinful thoughts (Matt. 12:35) and provides inner resources on which to draw (Ps. 77:10-12), including direction for daily life (Prov. 6:21-22). It fights temptation (Ps. 119:11, 15), provides relief in afflictions (Is. 49:15-17), benefits others (Ps. 145:7), and glorifies God (Ps. 49:3).

♦ Pray without ceasing. We must sustain the habit of secret prayer if we are to live experientially before God. The only way to learn the art of holy argument with God is to pray. Prayer helps us cling to the altar of God's promises by which we lay hold of God Himself.

Failing to pray is the downfall of many Christians today. "A family without prayer is like a house without a roof, open and exposed to all the storms of heaven," wrote Thomas Brooks. If the giants of church history dwarf us today, perhaps it is not because they were more educated, more devout, or more faithful as much as because they were men of prayer. They were possessed with the Spirit of supplication. They were Daniels in the temple of God.

Let us cling to the refuge of the inner prayer chamber, for there experiential Christianity is either established or broken. Let us refuse to be content with the shell of religion without the inner core of prayer. When we grow drowsy in prayer, let us pray aloud, or write down our prayers, or find a quiet place outside to walk and pray. Above all, let us continue to pray.

We should not give up regular times of prayer, but we should also be open at the slightest impulse to pray. Conversing with God through Christ is our most effective antidote to spiritual backsliding and discouragement. Discouragement without prayer is

an open sore ripe for infection, whereas discouragement with prayer is a sore lifted to the balm of Gilead.

Keep prayer a priority in your personal and family life. As John Bunyan said, “You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.... Pray often, for prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan.”¹¹

♦ Study Reformed experiential literature. Books that promote godly living are a powerful aid to experiential living. Read the spiritual classics, inviting great writers to be your spiritual mentors and friends. The Puritans excel in such writing. “There must scarcely be a sermon, a treatise, a pamphlet, a diary, a history, or a biography from a Puritan pen, which was not in one way or another aimed at fostering the spiritual life,” said Maurice Roberts.¹²

Read sound experiential books on various topics to meet a variety of needs. To foster experiential living by remaining sensitized to sin, read Ralph Venning’s *The Plague of Plagues*. To be drawn closer to Christ, read Isaac Ambrose’s *Looking Unto Jesus*. To find peace in affliction, read Samuel Rutherford’s *Letters*. To gain relief from temptation, read John Owen’s *Temptation and Sin*. To grow in holiness, read John Flavel’s *Keeping the Heart*.

Read as an act of worship. Read to be elevated into the great truths of God so that you may worship the Trinity in Spirit and in truth. Be selective about what you read, however. Measure all your reading against the touchstone of Scripture. So much of today’s Christian literature is froth, riddled with Arminian theology or secular thinking. Time is too precious to waste on nonsense. Read more for eternity than time, more for

spiritual growth than professional advancement. Think of John Trapp's warning: "As water tastes of the soil it runs through, so does the soul taste of the authors that a man reads."

Before picking up a book, ask yourself: Would Christ approve of this book? Will it increase my love for the Word of God, help me to conquer sin, offer abiding wisdom, and prepare me for the life to come? Or could I better spend time reading another book?

Speak to others about the good books that you read. Conversation about experiential reading promotes experiential living.

- ♦ Keep a journal. Keeping a thoughtful record of your spiritual journey can promote godliness. It can help us in our meditation and prayer. It can remind us of the Lord's faithfulness and work. It can help us understand and evaluate ourselves. It can help us monitor our goals and priorities, as well as maintain other spiritual disciplines.¹³

- ♦ Keep the Lord's Day holy. We ought to view the Sabbath as a joyful privilege, not as a tedious burden. This is the day on which we may worship God and practice spiritual disciplines without interruption. As J.I. Packer says, "We are to rest from the business of our earthly calling in order to prosecute the business of our heavenly calling."¹⁴

- ♦ Serve others and tell them about Christ. Jesus expects us to evangelize and serve others (Matt. 28:19-20; Heb. 9:14). We are to do so out of obedience (Deut. 13:4), gratitude (1 Sam. 12:24), gladness (Ps. 100:2), humility (John 13:15-16), and love (Gal. 5:13). Serving others may be difficult at times, but we are called to do so, using every spiritual gift that God has granted us (cf. Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:6-11; Eph. 4:7-13). One of our greatest rewards as Christians is to serve people. If it allows us to see them

drawing closer to Christ through the Spirit's blessing upon God's Word and our efforts, what more could we possibly ask for? It is a profoundly humbling experience that can only draw us closer to God.

3. Aim for balanced thinking. The great Reformed experiential preachers aimed for balance in Christian living in three important ways:

- ♦ Between the objective and subjective dimensions of Christianity. The objective is the food for the subjective; thus the subjective is always rooted in the objective. For example, the Puritans stated that the primary ground of assurance is rooted in the promises of God, but those promises must become increasingly real to the believer through the subjective evidences of grace and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit's application, the promises of God lead to self-deceit and carnal presumption. On the other hand, without the promises of God and the illumination of the Spirit, self-examination tends to introspection, bondage, and legalism. Objective and subjective Christianity must not be separated from each other.

We must seek to live in a way that reveals Christ's internal presence based on His objective work of active and passive obedience. The gospel of Christ must be proclaimed as objective truth, but it must also be applied by the Holy Spirit and inwardly appropriated by faith. We therefore reject two kinds of religion: one that separates subjective experience from the the objective Word, thereby leading to mysticism; and one that presumes salvation on the false grounds of historical or temporary faith.¹⁵

- ♦ Between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Nearly all of our Reformed forefathers stressed that God is fully sovereign and man is fully responsible. How that can be resolved logically is beyond our finite minds. When Spurgeon was once

asked how these two grand, biblical doctrines could be reconciled, he responded, “I didn't know that friends needed reconciliation.”

He went on to compare these two doctrines to the rails of a track upon which Christianity runs. Just as the rails of a train, which run parallel to each other, appear to merge in the distance, so the doctrines of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, which seem separate from each other in this life will merge in eternity. Our task is not to force their merging in this life but to keep them in balance and to live accordingly. We must thus strive for experiential Christianity that does justice both to God's sovereignty and to our responsibility.

♦ Between doctrinal, experiential, and practical Christianity. Just as Reformed preachers taught that experiential preaching must offer a balance of doctrine and application, Christian living also involves more than experience. Biblical Christian living is grounded in sound doctrine, sound experience, and sound practice.

4. Communicate experiential truth to others. Reformed experiential preachers applied their sermons to every part of life, all of Scripture to the entire man. They were unashamedly doctrinal. We can learn much from them on how to evangelize, such as:

♦ Speak the truth about God. That seems obvious. But how often do we speak to others about God's majestic being, His Trinitarian personality, and His glorious attributes? How often do we tell others about His holiness, sovereignty, mercy, and love? Do we root our evangelism in a robust biblical theism, or do we take our cues from modern evangelism which approaches God as if He were a next-door neighbor who adjusts His attributes to our needs and desires? How often do speak to others about how God and His majestic attributes have become experientially real to us?

♦ Speak the truth about man. Do you talk to others about our depraved nature and our desperate need for salvation in Jesus Christ? Do you say that you are no better than they are by nature; that we are all, apart from grace, sinners with a terrible record, which is a legal problem, as well as a bad heart, which is a moral problem? Do you talk to them about the dreadful character of sin; that sin is something that stems back to our tragic fall in Adam and affects every part of us, so dominating our mind, heart, will, and conscience that we are slaves to it? Do you describe sin as moral rebellion against God? Do you say that the wages of sin is death, now and for all eternity?

♦ Speak the truth about Christ. Do we present the complete Christ to sinners, not separating His benefits from His person or offering Him as a Savior while ignoring His claims as Lord? Do we offer Christ as the grand remedy for the great malady of sin and repeatedly declare His ability, willingness to save, and preciousness as the exclusive Redeemer of lost sinners?

Do you exhibit the way of salvation in Christ in your faith and repentance? Paul said, “I testified to you publicly and from house to house repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20-21). Do you likewise evangelize your friends and neighbors when God offers that opportunity? Do you explain to them what faith and repentance are in a born-again sinner?

♦ Speak the truth about sanctification. Do you tell others how a Christian must walk the King’s highway of holiness in gratitude, service, obedience, love, and self-denial? Do you tell how he must learn the art of meditation, of fearing God, and of childlike prayer? How he must press on by God’s grace, seeking to make his calling and

election sure? Do you disciple your associates in the need for habitual, experiential faith, repentance, and godliness?¹⁶

♦ Speak the truth about eternal consequences. Do not be afraid to speak about the consequences of despising the blood of Jesus Christ. Do not flinch from describing damnation and hell. As one Puritan wrote, “We must go with the stick of divine truth and beat every bush behind which a sinner hides, until like Adam who hid, he stands before God in his nakedness.”

We must speak urgently to people around us because many are on their way to hell. We must confront sinners with the law and gospel, with death in Adam and life in Christ. Let us use every weapon we can to turn sinners from the road of destruction so they may, through grace, experience a living, experiential relationship with God in Jesus Christ. We know from Scripture and by experience that an omnipotent Christ can bless our efforts and rescue a dead sinner, divorce him from his sinful lusts, and make him willing to forsake his wicked ways and turn to God, fully resolved to make God his goal and his praise. Acts 5:31 says, “Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.” Praise God for the experience of His amazing grace toward us in Christ.

¹ “Christian Experience,” *Banner of Truth*, No. 139 (April 1975):6.

² *Works of Thomas Halyburton* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1835), pp. xiv-xv.

³ Cited in Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), pp. 321-22.

⁴ *Works of William Perkins* (London: John Legatt, 1613), 2:762.

⁵ Gardiner Spring, *The Power of the Pulpit* (reprint Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), p. 154.

⁶ Daniel Webber, “Sanctifying the Inner Life,” in *Aspects of Sanctification*, 1981 Westminster Conference Papers (Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1982), pp. 44-45.

⁷ *The Works of John Flavel* (reprint London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 5:424.

⁸ *The Works of John Owen* (reprint Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 3:385-86.

⁹ *Works of Flavel*, 5:423.

¹⁰ *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull Servant of Iesvs Christ, M. Richard Greenham*, ed. H[enry] H[olland] (London: Felix Kingston for Robert Dexter, 1599), p. 390.

¹¹ *Prayer* (reprint Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), pp. 23ff.

¹² "Visible Saints: the Puritans as a Godly People," in *Aspects of Sanctification*, 1981 Westminster Conference Papers (Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1982), pp. 1-2.

¹³ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), pp. 196-210.

¹⁴ *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 239; Errol Hulse, "Sanctifying the Lord's Day: Reformed and Puritan Attitudes," in *Aspects of Sanctification*, 1981 Westminster Conference Papers (Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1982), pp. 78-102.

¹⁵ Joel R. Beeke, *Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), pp. 125, 130, 146.

¹⁶ Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Evangelism: A Biblical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), pp. 15-16.