

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

Guarding the Pulpit

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 18:1-3; 2 Chronicles 19:2; 2 Chronicles 21:4-6; Hosea 4:9; Ephesians 4:14; 2 Timothy 2:15

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By Cameron Buettel

The number of unguarded pulpits we see today in solid Bible-believing churches is quite shocking. Not unguarded in a physical sense but a spiritual one. Unguarded against those who pretend to deliver God's Word but instead deliver error.

Even in my own experiences with itinerant preaching, I've been surprised at the lack of careful scrutiny. As an unknown seminary student, I am exactly the kind of guy a senior pastor should thoroughly vet before I step into the pulpit. And even when the end result is sound exposition, it doesn't excuse negligence at the point of entry.

I've also lost count of times I have heard guest preachers deliver sermons that violated the doctrinal statements of the churches they were preaching in. It is painful to watch a senior pastor have to do damage control because he made the simple yet glaring error of not reviewing the sermon subject matter, or getting a character reference from the guest speaker's home church.

It is obvious that important questions need to be asked when choosing a doctor, lawyer, teacher, or accountant. We don't roll the dice when we need someone to perform surgery or defend us in court. Yet too many senior pastors happily take their chances with an itinerant. Moreover, many in the congregation blindly swallow whatever's served to them from the pulpit.

There is nothing new with this phenomenon—it played a major role in the decline of Puritanism more than 350 years ago.

Charles Spurgeon was deeply troubled by the theological trajectory of English Baptist churches in the nineteenth century. In March 1887, he enlisted his close friend, Robert Schindler, to help him research evangelical history from the early stages of Puritanism's decline (1662) into their day.

Much of what Spurgeon discovered was hardly surprising. The Protestant drift towards liberalism, the rise of rationalistic skepticism, academic snobbery, and the popular shift away from Calvinism (specifically God's sovereignty in salvation) towards Arminianism (human will as the decisive factor in salvation) all contributed to the decline. The surprising discovery of Schindler's research was the discrete entry point that heresy had gained into solid churches pastored by godly, Bible-believing

shepherds. As John MacArthur explains in his book *Ashamed of the Gospel*,

Many of those who remained true to the faith were nevertheless reluctant to fight for what they believed in. Evangelical preaching was often cold and lifeless, and even those who held to sound doctrine were careless about where they drew the line in their associations with others: “Those who were really orthodox in their sentiments were too often lax and unfaithful as to the introduction of heretical ministers into their pulpits, either as assistants or occasional preachers. In this way the Arian and Socinian heresies were introduced into the Presbyterian congregations in the city of Exeter.”

Thus within only a few decades, the Puritan fervor that had so captured the soul of England gave way to dry, listless, apostate teaching. Churches became lax in granting membership privileges to the unregenerate. People who were, in Shindler’s words, “strangers to the work of renewing grace” nevertheless claimed to be Christians and were admitted to membership—even leadership—in the churches.^[1] John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 235.

If history reveals a common chink in the armor of godly men, it would have to be their vulnerability to corruption through bad company. During the time of Israel’s division into two kingdoms (Judah and Israel), the godly king Jehoshaphat brought disaster on Judah because of his foolish marriage alliance with the evil king Ahab of Israel (2 Chronicles 18:1–3; 19:2). By allowing his eldest son, Jehoram, to marry Ahab’s daughter, Jehoshaphat failed to guard his family and monarchy from Ahab’s evil influence (2 Chronicles 21:6). In showing charity towards Ahab, Jehoshaphat reaped catastrophe upon Judah. By the time Jehoram ascended the throne in succession to his father, he instigated the mass murder of all his siblings (2 Chronicles 21:4) and triggered Judah’s long slide into apostasy.

Spurgeon and Shindler’s research was like a re-telling of that biblical account, as once-sound Baptist churches carelessly slid into the abyss of apostasy. Many of them were shepherded by pastors who fed the sheep well but were naïve concerning prowling wolves. They lived godly lives, proclaimed a godly message, but instigated disaster through foolish alliances with ungodly men. In April 1887, Schindler published more of his research. MacArthur recounts his findings:

He laid the blame for the downhill slide at the feet of the church leaders. Even those who were orthodox in their teaching were not earnestly contending (Jude 3), but were weak in defending the faith, Shindler said. As one example, he cited Philip Doddridge (1702–1751), best known today as the hymn writer who penned “O Happy Day” and “Grace, ’Tis a Charming Sound.” Doddridge, according to Shindler, “was as sound as he was amiable; but perhaps he was not always judicious; or more probably still, he was too judicious, and not sufficiently bold and decided.”

Doddridge had been principal of the academy where most non-conformist ministers went for training in the mid-1700s. Shindler’s judgment was that “[Doddridge’s] amiable disposition permitted him to do

what men made of sterner stuff would not have done. He sometimes mingled in a fraternal manner, even exchanging pulpits, with men whose orthodoxy was called in question. It had its effect on many of the younger men, and served to lessen in the estimate of the people generally the growing divergence of sentiment.”

In other words, Shindler felt that Doddridge’s tolerance of unorthodox teachers obscured from his ministerial students the awful reality that these men were guilty of serious error, and left the students exposed to the deadly effects of their heresy. But, Shindler hastened to add, no one could “insinuate even the suspicion of heresy” against Doddridge himself.

Because of the attitude of tolerance implanted by Doddridge, the academy at last succumbed to Socinianism, then was dissolved in the generation after Doddridge’s passing.

Shindler paraphrased Hosea 4:9: “Like priest, like people,” and wrote, “Little good can be expected of such ministers, and little hoped for of the hearers who approve their sentiments.” He warned against such tolerance, suggesting it is better to err on the side of caution:

“In too many cases sceptical daring seems to have taken the place of evangelical zeal, and the husks of theological speculations are preferred to the wholesome bread of gospel truth. With some the endeavour seems to be not how steadily and faithfully they can walk in the truth, but how far they can get from it. To them divine truth is like a lion or a tiger, and they give it ‘a wide berth.’ Our counsel is—Do not go too near the precipice; you may slip or fall over. Keep where the ground is firm; do not venture on the rotten ice.”^[2] *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 235–36.

Thankfully, Spurgeon and Shindler were also able to identify some rare exceptions to what they called “The Down-grade”: “Those churches willing to fight for the faith and uphold the doctrines of grace and God’s sovereignty had managed to avoid the fate of those on the down-grade.”^[3] *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 237.

If our zeal to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3) does not extend to securing the perimeter of our pulpits, then we become as vulnerable to apostasy as the many shipwrecks that have gone before us.

The same principle also applies to us as individual laymen if we are going to avoid the poisonous words of infiltrators—false teachers who gain deceitful access into the hearts and minds of an otherwise healthy church congregation. Churchgoers who have been hung out to dry under lax pastoral leadership may not have the means to secure the borders around the pulpit in their church.

But you can and must secure the borders around your own heart. Each of us is responsible to carefully evaluate the speakers, writers, and teachers we follow, and not be “tossed here and there by

waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, *by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming*" (Ephesians 4:14, emphasis added). We are never absolved of the responsibility to emulate the noble Bereans who "received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

How foolish would it be for us to ignore the discoveries of Spurgeon and Shindler's research? Their work furnishes a powerful lesson for modern churches still towing the biblical line. Furthermore, it reminds the members of those churches that a pastor who preaches with a high view of Scripture (2 Timothy 2:15) also needs to have a hardened resolve in deciding who can—and cannot—stand in his absence.

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