

“True vs. False Preaching” From God’s Prophet Jeremiah

Based on commentary by John Calvin
Edited by Wabash Bible Ministries

In Jeremiah’s day corruptions had so prevailed among the chosen people that no servant of God could peaceably perform his office. When prophets and teachers are sent to a teachable people, they have no need to fight; but when there is no fear of God and no regard for Him, yes, when men are led away by the violence of their lusts, no godly teacher can exercise his duty without being prepared for war (Jer. 1:8).¹

God reminds the Prophet Jeremiah that there would be sufficient protection in His power, so that he had no need to dread the fury of his own nation. It was, indeed, at first, a formidable undertaking, when Jeremiah saw that he had to carry on war, not with a few men, but with the whole people; but God sets Himself in opposition to all men, and says, *I am with you*, do not fear.²

The Biblical Regulative Principle of True Preaching: A rule is prescribed to all God’s servants; God’s servants must not bring their own inventions, but rather they must simply deliver, as from hand to hand, what they have received from God.³

Scripture is sufficient for preaching and teaching.

True teachers in Christ’s church bring nothing of their own. Peter says, “Let him who speaks, speak as the oracles of God” (1 Pet. 4:11).

The tongues of the ministers of the word must be consecrated to God, so that they may not mix any of their own fancies [ideas] with His pure doctrine.⁴

Jesus Christ is the Word of God. To teach the whole counsel of God is to teach the one, true God and His revealed will. To deny any part of Scripture is to deny God Himself.

God is not to be separated from His word.⁵

The Bible is God’s appointed means of *salvation*.

Why has God appointed the ministers of His gospel, except to invite us to become partakers of His salvation, and thus sweetly to restore and refresh our souls? And thus the word of God is to us like water to revive our hearts; it is also a fire, but for our good, a cleansing, and not a consuming fire; but if we obstinately reject this fire, it will surely turn to answer another end, even to devour us, and entirely to consume us.⁶

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, Vol. I, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 41.

² Vol. I., 42.

³ Vol. I., 43.

⁴ Vol. I., 43.

⁵ Vol. I., 45.

⁶ Vol. I., 284.

The Bible is God's appointed means of *judgment*.

Jeremiah says that true teachers have in readiness vengeance against all the unbelieving, however proud they may be; and though their height may terrify the whole world, yet we have a sword in our hands which will slay them; for God's word has sufficient power to destroy the rebellious (Jer. 1:11-12).⁷

Who are true preachers or teachers?

➤ **True preachers are men ordained and commissioned by God.**

As then Jeremiah was thus bold, as a celestial herald, to announce on them this dreadful calamity, we hence learn that he was endued with the power of God, and that he did not speak as one commissioned by men; for had he not been sustained by God's power, he must have been a hundred times disheartened, nor would he have dared to speak a word.⁸

➤ **True preachers are *heralds* who proclaim war against sin and Satan.**

Jeremiah was the herald of God's vengeance.⁹ He undertook an office in no small degree disliked; for it was the same as though he was an herald to proclaim war in the name of God.¹⁰ For forty years Jeremiah ceased not to proclaim war against the Jews, and also openly to name their enemies; we yet see that so much preaching was without fruit (Jer. 6:22-23).¹¹

The prophets were the heralds of God's vengeance; and as their doctrine was often despised, so at this day also the world obstinately rejects it; and as it often now derides all threatenings, so it happened then.¹²

Religious hypocrites were always armed with objections in their mouths, that they might be at liberty to despise the Prophet's teaching, as though it did not proceed from God. This then was the reason why God declared that Jeremiah was like a citadel, and that a fortified one; he was made so, that he might observe and know the way of the people. Hence it followed, that however obstinately they might defend themselves, it availed them nothing; for Jeremiah was endued with the highest authority, even that which was divine, in order to perform his office of a judge in condemning them.¹³

➤ **True preachers preach the word of God in its *purity* and *simplicity*, neither adding to nor taking away from it.**

The Corinthians, being inflated with pride on account of the opulence of their city, despised the simplicity of the Gospel; they looked for refined things, and were much

⁷ Vol. I., 48.

⁸ Vol. I., 477.

⁹ Vol. II, 127.

¹⁰ Vol. I., 62.

¹¹ Vol. I, 350.

¹² Vol. I., 243.

¹³ Vol. I, 356.

addicted to novelties. Hence Paul, seeing that they despised the grace of God, ironically reproved them, and said, that they wished to be rich and to be kings without him, to whom yet as an instrument they owed everything (Jer. 2:31; cf. 1 Cor. 4:8).¹⁴

Jeremiah introduces God as the speaker, as though He had said, "My servants have been despised by you; but they have said nothing but what I have commanded them. I am therefore the author of that sentence by which you ought to have been moved and roused." God transfers to Himself what the Jews thought proceeded from the prophets, and hence supposed that they were at liberty to regard as nothing what the prophets pronounced against them. (Jer. 4:28)¹⁵

➤ **True preachers preach *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.***

All who are called to rule the Church of God cannot be exempt from blame, unless they honestly and boldly proclaim what has been committed to them. Hence Paul says that he was free from the blood of all men, because he had from house to house and publicly declared whatever he had received from the Lord (Acts 20:26, 27), and he says in another place, "Woe is to me if I preach not the Gospel, for it has been committed to me." (1 Cor. 9:16) (Jer. 1:17)¹⁶

The duty of a true Prophet [is] to turn his eyes from men, to heed neither favor nor hatred, but to fix his attention only on the truth, not only to approve of what is right, but also to defend it at the peril of his life, and further, not to spare vices, but freely to reprove them.¹⁷

The covenant LORD instructed Jeremiah, "Stand in the court of the LORD's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah, which come to worship *in* the LORD's house, all the words that I command you to speak to them. Do not diminish a word." (Jer. 26:2). To diminish something from the word was to soften what appeared sharp, or to suppress what might have offended, or to express indirectly or coldly what could not produce effect without being forcibly expressed. There is then no doubt but that God anticipates here this evil, under which even faithful teachers in a great measure labor; for when they find the ears of men tender and delicate, they dare not vehemently reprove, threaten, and condemn their vices. This is the reason why God added this, *Diminish not a word*; as though he had said, "Declare with closed eyes and with boldness whatever you have heard from My mouth, and disregard whatever may tend to lessen your courage."¹⁸

➤ **True preachers preach against sin.**

God abhors sloth [laziness] in the ministers of His word, in those whom He appoints as teachers in His Church, while they connive at wickedness, and heedlessly pass by adulteries and fornications and perjuries and frauds and other kinds of wrongs; for if

¹⁴ Vol. I., 136.

¹⁵ Vol. I., 243.

¹⁶ Vol. I., 61.

¹⁷ Vol. II., 295.

¹⁸ Vol. III, 308.

there were even the least particle of religion in their hearts, they would certainly have been moved and could not have been for a moment silent (Jer. 23:10).¹⁹

- **True preachers are men of prayer** (cf. Acts 6:4).

These two things are united—teaching and praying. God would have him whom He has set a teacher in His Church, to be diligent in prayer. As so the Apostles said, when they spoke of appointing deacons, that they could not attend to tables; for they said that they were sufficiently engaged in teaching, and they mentioned also prayers (Acts 6:2-4). Jeremiah also ascribes the office of interceding to God’s true and faithful servants who conscientiously discharged the office of teaching (Jer. 37:18).²⁰

How must true preachers and teachers preach and teach?

- **True preachers preach with authority, as Jesus did** (cf. Matt. 7:29; Mark 1:22).

All who go forth to teach ought to be so sure of their calling as not to hesitate to appeal to God’s tribunal whenever any dispute happens. It is indeed true that even the best servants of God may in some things be mistaken or be doubtful in their judgment; but as to their calling and doctrine there ought to be that certainty which Jeremiah exhibits to us here by his own example (Jer. 20:7).²¹

- **True preachers do not flatter; they are not men-pleasers. They must contend with the world!**

God does not send true preachers and teachers to flatter or to please the world; they must therefore contend with the world, for no one is brought to a right state, so as to undertake the yoke of God willingly and submissively, until he is proved guilty. Hence men will never obey God, they will never submit to His Word, until they know that they are in a manner condemned; and for this reason have I said, that this hardship is common to all the prophets—that they have to contend with the world (Jer. 15:10).²²

All flattery must be excluded. God forbade the Prophet Jeremiah to deal gently with the people or to be influenced by favor so as to spare their vices (Jer. 15:19).²³

- **True preachers preach with boldness, fearing God not men.**

Jeremiah said in effect, “Here I come forth boldly in the name of God, for I fear not that any defense can be brought forward by you to disprove the justice of God’s reproof; and I confidently wait for what you may say, for I know you will be silent. I then loudly cry like a trumpet and with a clear voice, that I have come to condemn you; if there is anything which you can answer, I give you full liberty to do so; but the truth will constrain you to be mute, for your guilt is extremely odious and capable of the fullest proof” (Jer. 2:4-5).²⁴

¹⁹ Vol. III, 154.

²⁰ Vol. III, 380.

²¹ Vol. III, 28.

²² Vol. II, 268.

²³ Vol. II, 295.

²⁴ Vol. I., 75.

True preachers must preach with boldness towards all, even kings and queens: All who are chosen to the office of teaching cannot faithfully discharge their duty except they boldly and with a fearless spirit, dare to reprove both kings and queens; for the word of God is not to be restricted to the common people or men in humble life, but it subjects to itself all, from the least to the greatest (Jer. 13:18).²⁵

- **True preachers reprove and threaten, speaking strongly and vehemently to the rebellious and obstinate; they preach with mildness and kindness to the meek, humble, and teachable.**

The Prophets, when they exhorted the people to repent, at the same time brought to light their sins. Were there in men frankness and honesty, there would be no need thus to charge them; but as they either boldly deny their sins or are so callous as to be moved by no fear, it is necessary to prick them sharply and even deeply to wound them (Jer. 3:13).²⁶

Why are prophets and teachers sent? That they may reduce the world to order; they are not to spare their hearers, but freely reprove them whenever there may be need; they are also to use threatenings when they find men perverse.²⁷

At this day there is no less dullness than among the Jews. It is therefore not enough to summon the ungodly and the wicked before God's tribunal, but such metaphorical language ought to be employed as may strike terror, and constrain them to fear, though they may endeavor in every way to harden their own consciences and stupefy themselves, so as to be capable of easily despising God. It is then necessary, that at the present day the servants of God should also speak more strongly and vehemently, that they may rouse hypocrites and the obstinate from their torpor [sleep].²⁸

It is no surprise that the Prophet is so vehement; for we know that men would have heedlessly received all threatenings, except they were violently roused. And this mode of teaching ought to be well known to us; for all in any degree acquainted with the writings of the prophets must know that they especially pursued this course, in order to rouse hypocrites and the despisers of God, who, with a stiff neck and a hardened heart were not moved by any apprehension [fear] of punishment (Jer. 4:23-26).²⁹

Jeremiah said in effect, "If I address you with great vehemence, do not think that as a man I forget moderation, being influenced by wrath; but rather the Spirit of God leads and impels me. Whatever indignation [holy anger] then is found in my language, whatever vehemence and sharpness and menacing, all this is from God's Spirit and not from my own feelings as a man (Jer. 6:11)."³⁰

²⁵ Vol. II, 183.

²⁶ Vol. I., 175.

²⁷ Vol. I, 44.

²⁸ Vol. I., 232.

²⁹ Vol. I., 236.

³⁰ Vol. I, 331.

As then, the same impiety prevails now in the world as formerly, we may hence learn what vehemence they ought to use whom God calls to the same office of teaching.³¹

Jeremiah's preaching inflamed no doubt the fury of the whole people, or at least most of them; but it was necessary thus forcibly to address them; as they submitted to no kind and wholesome warnings and counsels, they were therefore to be forcibly stimulated and urged by such reproofs as these (Jer. 9:2).³²

Had the Jews been teachable and submissive, God would have used a milder strain, and allured them by words of kindness and love; but as Jeremiah had to deal with perverse minds, he was under the necessity of addressing them in this manner, in order to strike them with terror, and to render them more attentive, and also to make them to hear with more reverence, as they usually treated with contempt what he had spoken before (Jer. 11:1-5).³³

True preachers must preach with vehemence, not violence: There are many foolish imitators, who always appeal to the vehemence which the Prophets showed, while they themselves are carried away by a violent rather than by a vehement impulse.³⁴

When therefore we have to deal with meek and modest men, vehemence is foolish; and they who thus bestir themselves, and seek through great ambition to show very fervid zeal when there is no need are nothing but apes; but when things are in disorder and confusion, then vehemence is necessary. (Jer. 23:10)³⁵

True preachers must reprove and rebuke *all* sinners, without discrimination: As to teachers, they ought, small and great, to teach after the example of Jeremiah; they ought to reprove and to rebuke, when necessary, without showing any respect of persons (Jer. 19:3).³⁶

Jeremiah in effect said, "I could not mildly and peaceably teach them, for their disposition and temper prevented me, but their wickedness compelled me to treat them with severity, as all God's servants ought wisely to consider what the state of the Church requires (Jer. 20:8-9)."³⁷

As then the land was polluted by adulteries and perjuries [falsehoods and lying], as they all gave themselves up to do evil, it was by no means to be tolerated that the prophets should not be indignant, as though things were well ordered and peaceable.³⁸

True preaching incites hatred and rebellion in the hearts of religious hypocrites and the reprobate. True Christian servants must fight courageously and unwaveringly the battle to which they have been called.

³¹ Vol. I, 457

³² Vol. I, 459.

³³ Vol. II, 73.

³⁴ Vol. II, 375.

³⁵ Vol. III, 154.

³⁶ Vol. II, 436.

³⁷ Vol. III, 31.

³⁸ Vol. III, 154.

The Jews slandered Jeremiah claiming that he was moved by anger to treat them sharply and severely.³⁹

The religious people of Jeremiah's day said the Lord's ways were crooked, because they, being soft and delicate, could not endure those severe rebukes, which their own wickedness forced from the holy Prophets. God answers them, and says, that His ways were not crooked, nor thorny, nor tortuous, but that the fault was in the people themselves (Jer. 15:16).⁴⁰

All Christian teachers are reminded here of their duty not to vacillate when they have to deal with proud and intractable men and women. God commanded His Prophet to put on a brazen front, that he might boldly encounter all the insults of the people (1:18). Hypocrites vent their rage not only against God's servants, but against God Himself. (Jer. 16:10-13)⁴¹ There is no doubt but that Pashur was more exasperated when he heard these grievous threatenings; but it was right thus to inflame more and more the fury of all the ungodly. Though, then, they may a hundred times raise a clamor, we must never desist from freely and boldly declaring the truth (Jer. 20:5).⁴²

The more liberty men take in sinning and the more audaciously their impiety and contempt of God break out, the more sharply prophets and faithful teachers must reprove and condemn them. It is the time for fighting, when the world thus presumptuously and furiously rise up against God.⁴³

True preachers must discern when God calls them to shake off the very dust of their feet and depart when their preaching is rejected by men (cf. Matt. 10:14; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; Acts 13:51).

When, therefore, the Lord opens our mouth, no difficulties ought to restrain us so as not to speak boldly; but when there is no hope of doing good, it is better sometimes to be silent than to excite a great multitude without any profit. True indeed is the saying of Paul, that we ought to be prepared out of season (2 Tim. 4:2), but he means that the ministers of Christ though they may sometimes offend and exasperate the minds of many, ought not yet to desist but to persevere. But Jeremiah had no hearers, and the whole people were so incensed, that he could do nothing against that impostor [Hananiah] even if he exposed himself to death. Jeremiah therefore was silent, for he had already discharged the duties of his office (Jer. 28:10-11).⁴⁴

FALSE PREACHING

False preaching is usually just positive and encouraging, for this is what unbelievers' ears itch to hear.

A woman with child may be very cheerful and quietly enjoying herself and yet a sudden pain may seize her. So also it will be with the wicked; they cannot now bear to hear

³⁹ Vol. II, 110.

⁴⁰ Vol. II, 285.

⁴¹ Vol. II, 314.

⁴² Vol. III, 21.

⁴³ Vol. III, 155.

⁴⁴ Vol. III, 403-404.

anything sad or alarming, and they drive from them every fear as far as possible; but the more they harden themselves, the heavier is God's vengeance which follows them, and which will overtake them suddenly and unexpectedly (Jer. 13:21).⁴⁵

False preaching invents *new and novel* methods of preaching and teaching and promotes new fads and methodologies (often through religious seminaries and bookstores, etc.), which contradict the Biblical model.

The ungodly and the treacherous, that they might obtain credit among the simple and unwary, consulted together and devised all their measures craftily, that they might not be immediately found out; and thus one took from the other what he afterwards announced and published (Jer. 23:30-32).⁴⁶

Now under the Papacy, the monks and unprincipled men have their own false doctrines [teachings]; and when they ascend the pulpit, every one speaks as though he was endued with some special gift; and yet they steal every one from his friend, for they are like the soothsayers or the magi, who concocted among themselves their own falsehoods, and only brought out what they deemed necessary to delude the common people.⁴⁷

False preaching is *effeminate*, appealing to the *feelings* and *emotions* rather than the mind and intellect. False preaching often employs images and drama.

When the unprincipled men who occupy the pulpits under the Papacy speak with weeping, though they produce not a syllable from God's word, but add some spectacle or phantom, by producing the image of the Cross or some like thing, they touch the feelings of the vulgar [common people] and cause weeping, according to what actors do on the stage. A faithful Christian teacher ought to respond, "Let any one come and set before your eyes the image of a dead man, or say, that you must all shortly die and be like the carcass shown to you, and you will cry and weep; and yet you will not consider how dreadful God's judgment is, which I declare to you. I show to you faithfully from the law, from the prophets, and from the Gospel, how dreadful is God's vengeance, and set before you what you deserve; yet none of you are moved; but my doctrine is a mockery to you, and also my reproofs and threatenings: go then to your [false] prophets, who show you pictures and the like trumperies [nonsense]." So the Prophet says now, "I see that I can do you no good; the Lord will therefore give you no teachers but women." (Jer. 9:17-24; cf. Isa. 3:12)⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Vol. II, 188.

⁴⁶ Vol. III, 201.

⁴⁷ Vol. III, 202.

⁴⁸ Vol. I, 488. Isaiah 3:12 "As for My people, children *are* their oppressors, And women rule over them. O My people! Those who lead you cause *you* to err, And destroy the way of your paths."