

# EXPERIMENTAL PREACHING

Stanford, April, 1840

My Dear Friend,

I consider it the part of a friend to act as you have done in asking me for an explanation of what you consider me to err in, instead of following the multitude to do evil in spreading my supposed errors behind my back and concealing them to my face.

I am glad you have asked me for an explanation of my meaning, as it allows me to clear up a point on which I think you misunderstand me. What were my words? "There are but two healthy states of the soul- hungering and feeding, &c. All other states are maladies and sicknesses." Is this new or strange doctrine? My friend, what are we by nature but one mass of malady and disease? But this malady and disease are not felt but by the entrance of divine light and life into the soul. The entrance of these heavenly blessings brings what I may call a principle of health into the soul, which, as Hart sweetly says, "lives and labours under load." And it is the working of this healthy principle, this new and heavenly nature, under the blessed Spirit's operations, in which the greater part of experience exists. Darkness, deadness, aversion to all good, headlong proneness to all evil, pride, unbelief, infidelity, lust, covetousness, enmity to God and godliness, what are those but maladies and diseases? Sorrow of heart for sin, breathings after God, hatred of self, living desires towards the Lord of life and glory, separation of spirit from the things of time and sense, faith in exercise, hope casting forth its anchor, love drawing forth the affections; these, when felt, are states of health, that is, the healthy man of grace seems for a while (alas! for how short a while!) lifting up his head amidst diseases and sickness. Is this inconsistent with sound doctrine or sound experience? You and I would often much sooner read the Examiner than the Bible, and would sooner talk on indifferent subjects with our wives that seek the Lord's face. Is this deadness and coldness, and miserable aversion to all good health or sickness? I feel it to be my malady, and not my health. But again I feel what a base wretch I am. I hate myself for my base lusts; I sigh after the Lord to come down and visit my soul; I feel a little spirituality of mind, and taste a sweetness in the word of God. Is this a sick or healthy state of soul? I call my soul sick when sin reigns and rules; I call it healthy when grace more or less predominates. I may use wrong expressions, but you are not one who would make a man an offender for a word. Now let us come to experimental preaching. Does he preach experimentally who traces out the workings of corruption, or he who traces out the workings of grace in and under corruptions? I believe the latter. You know much of the workings of pride, lust, and covetousness; and you know something of godly fear, self-loathing, and contrition under them. Which am I to enter into? You are dead, cold, and lifeless. Am I to describe deadness, or trace out life working under deadness? Am I to describe pride, or the self-loathing of the soul when pride is discovered? Am I to say to my hearers, "You are cold, dead, hardened, unbelieving, proud, lustful, covetous. All these are marks and tokens of life?" Or am I to say, "Life struggling against death, godly fear leading to self-abhorrence, groans and sighs under a guilty conscience, cries for deliverance, pantings after God, and so on, are marks of life?" There is a precious experience, and there is a vile experience, and he that would be God's mouth must take the one from the other. I believe that to preach the corruptions of our nature

apart from the workings of grace in them and under them is to build up bastards. One is preaching the remedy without ever entering into the malady, thus bolstering up hypocrites and making the heart of the righteous sad. The other is this -to set forth corruption in all its workings towards evil, and leave out the workings of godly fear, in and under corruption. If I feel dissatisfied, burdened, grieved for my wicked and wayward heart and life, the very feeling marks the existence of life. But is a minister to build me up in this, that I am to take deadness as an evidence? Let him tell me to feel and hate myself, for it is a mark of life, and I may get some encouragement. But to tell me that deadness (that is, deadness unfelt) is a mark of life, is a pulpit lie fit only for the twice dead. You might write to me that you are quite tired of all religion, that you hate going to chapel, that you rarely pray, scarcely ever read the Scriptures, never feel a sigh or a groan, nor any pantings after Christ. Well, I should answer, I know what you mean, for I too am like you. But do you mean to bring this forward as Christian experience? If you do, you are deceived. For if it be experience, and to find it in its perfection I must go to the dead Pharisee or the twice dead professor. But tell me of some revival, of some brokenness, of contrition, of some glimpses of mercy, of some workings of life within, and I will say this is experience, and the more we have the better. I find the experience of the Scriptures that of mourning, complaint, sorrow of heart, pantings after God, hoping and trusting in His mercy. David in Ps 51 does not describe the workings of his lust towards Bathsheba, but cries and groans, "Cast me not away from Thy presence, &c." If the experience of corruption be good, why should not the practice of it be good too? If to have eyes full of adultery be experience, that is, Christian experience, why should not hands full of adultery be Christian practice? But on the other hand, if to sigh and cry to be kept from evil is Christian experience, then to be kept from it is Christian practice. What I call experimental can't is this. Professors without life say, "I am so dead, I am so dark, I am so unbelieving." "Are you ever otherwise? Are you resting upon that as an evidence? Is that your state for months together?" I would answer, "Then it is to be feared that you are a bastard and not a son." I once heard a person give a long description of what a proud, covetous, lustful, slothful, rebellious heart he had. Among other things, he said that he never saw a farm, or a nice field, but he coveted it, or a carriage in the streets that he did not want to possess it. This I suppose he called experience. I do not; for if it be, Nabal and the rich fool are the most experimental saints in the Bible. Suppose I coveted Woburn Abby, and the titles, estates, and the power of the Duke of Bedford, would you call that Christian experience? If so, there must be a throng of experimental saints every day in the week that the abby is shown. But suppose I were to walk in the park, and feel that I would sooner have Christ in my heart than a thousand dukedoms; suppose under that feeling I panted after Christ as the hart panted after the water brooks, and suppose that I dropped a penitential tear over my proud, covetous heart that ever coveted such toys, I might call that a Christian experience. If pride, lust, and covetousness are experience, then the greatest sinner is the greatest Christian. See, my friend, on what a shore error in this momentous matter leads. Had this person told us of his covetousness, and the checks, the sighs, the deliverances he experienced out of it, I should have called it experience; but to set forth corruption separated from the workings of grace under it, I call it a mistake altogether. Who paints corruption like Hart? But who paints more strongly the working of grace in corruption? I believe the malady should be described, but never apart from the strivings of godly fear, faith, &c, under it. Why do we preach experimentally? To find out the feelings of living souls and cut off dead professors. But to trace out sin without godly sorrow, guilt, or condemnation under sin, is to preach the experience of the dead, not the living.

I meant no more than this, and if you have understood me otherwise, it must arise from my want of expressing myself clearly. I believe I have advanced nothing here in which you will not agree. If there be, I shall be glad to explain myself more fully, either by word when we meet, or by letter. Remember me affectionately to Smart, who, I suppose is with you. I hope he and you will not set me down as wavering from the truth.

Yours sincerely and affectionately, J.C.P.