

**Lessons From the Chair of Fire:
L. R. Scarborough's Legacy of
Evangelistic Preaching**

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Lessons From the Chair of Fire: L. R. Scarborough's Legacy of Evangelistic Preaching

One would find incredible difficulty overestimating the influence of Lee Rutland Scarborough over Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and the Southern Baptist Convention. He was the first man to occupy the seminary's Chair of Evangelism, or "Chair of Fire," – the first of its kind in theological education – and the second man to occupy the seminary's office of the president. In fulfilling his duties at Southwestern, he would leave an indelible impression upon all Southern Baptists as he sought to ensure that the hearts of a denomination burned with "holy fires of evangelism and a passionate concern for the salvation of the lost."¹

It is not surprising, then, that the vast majority of L.R. Scarborough's writings reflect his passion for leading the lost to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Christ's action on our behalf, he believed, "requires that we offer to Him our best and our all in reaching other men with this redeeming grace."² The intent of this paper is to present a brief examination of Scarborough's life and personal use of the marks of evangelistic preaching detailed in *With Christ After the Lost* and in his sermons "Prepare to Meet God" and "The Tears of Jesus."

The Influence of a Godly Heritage

L.R. Scarborough was born in Colfax, Louisiana to Rev. George W. Scarborough and Martha Rutland Scarborough on July 4, 1870.³ He was the eighth of nine children, though the youngest of five who would reach adulthood. Scarborough's family moved to Texas during his childhood and the boy grew to become a west Texas cowboy.⁴ Despite the rugged frontier, and the influence of the cowboy lifestyle, the faith of his parents shaped him most.

George Washington Scarborough had served in the Confederate army, but after moving his family to Texas, he gained a reputation as a pioneer preacher. It was in observing his father that the young Lee would develop an impression for what a minister of the gospel should be.⁵ Rev. R.T. Hanks, a pastor who observed the ministry of L.R.

¹H. E. Dana, *Lee Rutland Scarborough: A Life of Service* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1942), 86.

²L. R. Scarborough, *With Christ after the Lost: A Search for Souls* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1919), 10.

³Dana, *Lee Rutland Scarborough: A Life of Service*, 15.

⁴*Ibid.*, 28.

⁵Michael M. Hawley, "A Critical Examination of Lee Rutland Scarborough's Concept of Evangelism" (Thesis (Th.D.), New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992.), 20.

Scarborough's father, described him as "not only a good man and a good church member, but . . . also a good preacher."⁶

His mother, Martha, was as one might expect from the wife of such a man as George; she was "a quiet, plain woman, who had given her strong life devotedly and unreservedly to her family."⁷ She had committed her son to God when he was only three weeks old, and had prayed since that day that God would call her Lee to preach.⁸ He remembered the influence of his mother's prayers. "When I was three weeks of age she climbed out of bed and walked on her knees to my cradle and took me by the little hand and asked God in his good time to save me and call me to preach."⁹ It was that prayer on her knees that eventually led her to give all the money she and her husband managed to save over the years, with the intent of building a proper home on the prairie, towards the education of her beloved Lee. At that point, he had not responded in any sense to the call to preach, but she held fast to her prayers in full faith that God would give her the desires of her heart.¹⁰

During his childhood years, young Scarborough heard the gospel from the mouths of both parents. He recalled worshipping regularly as a family at the family altar, where George would read a passage of Scripture and the family would sing a song together and pray.¹¹ He heard his father speak of Christ and urge men to salvation from the pulpit and also remembered sitting at the feet of his mother hearing her tell him of Jesus. Thus began a series of moments that would etch themselves into his remembrance and culminate in his salvation while walking to a revival meeting when he was seventeen years old.¹²

While studying law at Baylor University, Scarborough was charged by his father to attend the preaching of B.H. Carroll at First Baptist Church of Waco and to send a report of each week's sermon home. Carroll had served on the ordination council of the elder Scarborough and was a respected name in the Scarborough household.¹³ Later, unable to complete his studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Lee Scarborough would declare those years under B.H. Carroll's preaching to be his theological education.¹⁴

Upon graduation from Baylor, Scarborough left for Yale in an endeavor to become a lawyer. It was during his studies at Yale that his dear mother's prayer would finally be answered. Wrestling with a call to preach, Scarborough had turned in his Bible to the story of Lazarus and the rich man.

As he read how the rich man from the dungeons of night appealed to Abraham to send Lazarus back to earth to warn his five brothers, Lee was

⁶Dana, *Lee Rutland Scarborough: A Life of Service*, 22.

⁷L. R. Scarborough, *Recruits for World Conquests* (New York, Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1914), 113.

⁸*Ibid.*, 114.

⁹L. R. Scarborough, *Prepare to Meet God: Sermons Making the Way to Christ Plain* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1922), 150.

¹⁰J. M. Price, *Ten Men from Baylor* (Kansas City: Central Seminary Press, 1945), 149.

¹¹Dana, *Lee Rutland Scarborough: A Life of Service*, 25.

¹²Scarborough, *Prepare to Meet God: Sermons Making the Way to Christ Plain*, 88.

¹³Dana, *Lee Rutland Scarborough: A Life of Service*, 16.

¹⁴L.R. Scarborough, "Dr. Carroll at Close Range," Typed Article, The Scarborough Collection, 6.

suddenly overwhelmed with an irresistible impression. The call of that victim of hell's despair seemed to be ringing out to him to go after these five brothers. He never got away from that vision. Amid tears and sobs and prayers he surrendered that night to preach the gospel, and so spent a long and marvelously fruitful life in quest of those in the plight of the five brothers of Dives.¹⁵

Lee Rutland Scarborough surrendered to God's calling on his life to preach on April 16, 1896.

The Pastor-Evangelist

Scarborough returned home shortly thereafter, and began preaching almost immediately. After only a few sermons, he was called to his first pastorate at the First Baptist Church of Cameron, Texas. During the five years he would pastor the church, he married Neppie Warren Scarborough, whom he would describe as, apart from God Himself, the primary reason he was able to accomplish all that he did during his ministry. It was also during his tenure in Cameron that Scarborough studied at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky for nine months. His studies were cut short due to the death of his brother, and he returned home with his wife and cared for his aging mother.

After five successful years in Cameron, Scarborough accepted the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Abilene, Texas and pastored that church for seven years. His ministry bore incredible fruit in both churches due in large part to the evangelistic fervor that resounded throughout his sermons. His church also extended to him the opportunity to preach at many revivals as an evangelist. Though caught up in the work as the pastor of a growing church, Scarborough was a much sought-after evangelist and revival preacher. H.E. Dana described him as "a successful and highly satisfactory pastor during those years, but at the same time devoted himself widely to evangelistic work."¹⁶

It was during this season of ministry that B.H. Carroll began approaching Scarborough with a request that he chair the department of evangelism at Southwestern Seminary—the first of its kind. Lee Scarborough declined the offer and continued to pursue souls through evangelistic preaching and the ministry of First Baptist Church of Abilene. However, Carroll's offer remained seared into his consciousness and would not relent. After wrestling with this offer for two years, while preaching a revival service in Pine Bluff, Arkansas on discerning the will of God, L.R. Scarborough was made certain of God's will for his life. He knew he was to accept Carroll's offer and he understood the ramifications of that decision. When asked about his decision, Scarborough replied, "It looks like this, I can stay in here and preach in this great church, perhaps the rest of my life. But if I go to the seminary, I can be preaching in a thousand pulpits after I'm dead and gone."¹⁷

¹⁵Price, *Ten Men from Baylor*, 151.

¹⁶Dana, *Lee Rutland Scarborough: A Life of Service*, 72.

¹⁷James Leo Garrett and C. W. Brister, *The Legacy of Southwestern: Writings That Shaped a Tradition* (North Richland Hills, TX: Smithfield Press, 2002), 20.

Seminary and Denominational Contributions

Lee Scarborough accepted his position in “The Chair of Fire,” Carroll’s favorite designation of Scarborough’s new role, in 1908.¹⁸ Charged with developing texts and courses in this new field, for Southwestern’s department of evangelism was the first of its kind, Scarborough became a prolific author. His second book, *With Christ After the Lost*, would become the primary textbook in the department of evangelism at Southwestern, but also in seminaries all over the world.¹⁹ He would go on to pen another fourteen books, all pertaining in one manner or another to his most passionate endeavor, evangelism.

L.R. Scarborough’s interests and contributions extended well beyond his department of evangelism. When the decision to move the seminary from Waco to its present location in Fort Worth, Carroll charged Scarborough to raise the funds and build the campus. In ten months, he had raised one hundred thousand dollars, and the school moved into a newly erected facility on the open prairie in 1910.

Only four years later, Scarborough’s spiritual father and friend B.H. Carroll passed on to his eternal inheritance and, as was Carroll’s wish, L.R. Scarborough became the second president of Southwestern Seminary. Without diminishing the incredible influence and impact Carroll had on the seminary that he founded, it was Scarborough “who developed its latent potential.”²⁰ He led the school through incredible hardships as well as tremendous growth. Even during this time, his passion for evangelism never waned. “During his years at the seminary, Scarborough averaged preaching over five hundred times a year.”²¹

He also became a highly influential figure in the life of the Southern Baptist Convention. While holding the office of the president of Southwestern Seminary, he led the Seventy-five Million Campaign to gather over ninety-two million dollars worth of pledges, sat on the committee that penned the first Southern Baptist confession—the Baptist Faith and Message—and was elected to the presidency of both the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptist Convention.

On April 10, 1945, Lee Rutland Scarborough went home to meet the Savior for whom he had labored for a lifetime. His legacy of winning souls to Christ and training men to preach the gospel continues to this day through his writings, the seminary, and the denomination that he so treasured.

The Marks of Evangelistic Preaching

L.R. Scarborough maintained a high view of preaching throughout his life and ministry. He wrote, “the preacher and his Gospel message are the primal human factors

¹⁸Joseph E. Early and Leon McBeth, *A Texas Baptist History Sourcebook: A Companion to McBeth's Texas Baptists* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2004), 183.

¹⁹Dana, *Lee Rutland Scarborough: A Life of Service*, 87.

²⁰Early and McBeth, *A Texas Baptist History Sourcebook: A Companion to McBeth's Texas Baptists*, 253.

²¹Hawley, 25.

in redemption.”²² He also wrote that “all preaching, whether didactic, apologetic, hortatory, expository, or soul-saving, should be in the evangelistic spirit.”²³

In Scarborough’s magnum opus, *With Christ After the Lost*, he offers eleven marks of evangelistic preaching. He believed that evangelistic sermons should be preached in “a positive note,” intending that each sermon should be delivered in a manner that communicated certainty and conviction. He wrote that evangelistic sermons should be “direct and pointed,” in order to convict of sins. They must be, “plain, bold, and simple,” and seek out the sinner’s innermost fears and doubts. He maintained that sermons must be “tender, full of love and tears.” The preacher must display the love of Christ in the manner in which he communicates the need for Christ. Sermons should be scriptural, for it is God’s Word that “cuts, breaks, burns, cleanses, revives, inspires and gives life to souls astray from God.” They should be “doctrinal,” even if subtly. “Flabby, spineless preaching will produce a soft and effeminate convert.” Evangelistic sermons should be “constructive,” for they must bring not only the lost to Christ, but the Christian to Christ for spiritual nourishment. These sermons should be “pre-eminently spiritual,” and marked by the zeal of Christ. They should be “dynamic,” and empowered by the Holy Spirit. These sermons should be “expectant” and give the lost an opportunity to respond to Christ immediately. Finally, evangelistic preaching should be “Christocentric,” ensuring that the crucified Lord is at the center of every sermon.²⁴

Scarborough’s sermons, published in *The Tears of Jesus* and *Prepare to Meet God*, give the reader insight into the manner in which he used these marks of evangelistic preaching. These sermons, by his own account, have been preached, “in some four or five hundred evangelistic meetings throughout the Southern States ... in which meetings there have been many, many thousands of people saved.”²⁵ For the purposes of this paper, the two title sermons of these volumes have been selected to examine his use of the above marks.

Prepare to Meet God

In his sermon, “Prepare to Meet God,” Scarborough expounds on a portion of Amos 4:12 and considers the necessity of humanity to encounter God in various spheres of life. He states that man will encounter God in life, in influence, in death, and at the judgment bar of God. He reveals the hopelessness of good works in preparation and the desperate need to repent and have faith in Christ in order to stand blameless before God. He concludes with the charge to prepare to stand before God, understanding that a life of faith will not be easy and can only be done by the power of Christ himself. This sermon stands as an example of virtually all of his marks of an evangelistic sermon, but especially in its tenderness, simple message, subtle doctrinal emphasis, positive note, and expectance of a response from the hearer.

Scarborough is a master of balancing strong appeals with a soft tenderness—his fourth tenet. He often finds this balance in his use of illustration. He speaks sternly to the unsaved husband or father who is leading his family astray, and yet speaks softly and

²²Scarborough, *With Christ after the Lost: A Search for Souls*, 128.

²³Ibid., 129.

²⁴Ibid., 130-132.

²⁵L. R. Scarborough, *The Tears of Jesus: Sermons to Aid Soul-Winners* (New York: George H. Doran, 1922), vii.

kindly of a mother's love and compassion. He illustrates his point that men must prepare to meet God in life by telling of a dying mother's last final charge to her husband: to raise their son in such a way as to ensure that he will one day meet her again in heaven. In telling the story, the soul-winner pulls at the heart strings and reveals a softness and tenderness that one would not expect to find in such a sermon.

"Prepare to Meet God," like so many other of Scarborough's sermons, is profoundly simple—basic in form and outline, while teaching eternal truth. He often breaks his major points down to very simple, memorable truths in order that every hearer might know with certainty what God commands. This accomplishes both the second and third marks of evangelistic sermons. This is clearly demonstrated in his reminder to fathers of the weight of their responsibility: "You have got to meet God with your influence. You cannot lead your child to hell and not have heaped on you at the Judgment Bar of God the responsibility for your neglect."²⁶

Scarborough's sixth mark of an evangelistic sermon is that it is doctrinal, if not outright, than "always latently and potently so."²⁷ In "Prepare to Meet God," he explains not only the need for preparation, but deftly teaches the inability of good works to save. He makes clear that Scripture teaches that "the way of salvation by Jesus Christ, by faith in Him, by the working of the Divine Spirit, by the new birth that comes through Jesus Christ, by His grace, by His imputed righteousness."²⁸

Scarborough concludes his sermon with an appeal for the unsaved to prepare to meet God, for they must. They have no other choice. "I have read the New Testament through looking for one thing and did not find it—a promise for the good of an unsaved man in the future tense. It is not there."²⁹ This is an example of what Scarborough treats as a positive note, his first mark, for he writes, "assurance and certainty of truth must live in the message that would carry life to the dead soul."³⁰ There is no room for doubt or hesitation in Scarborough's message. He pleads the sinner to repent with the conviction that God's promises to the unsaved are in the present. "They are NOW. Now is the day of salvation. Come to Christ *now*."³¹

This is also an example of the mark that he defines as expectancy. His final appeal in this sermon, as in so many others, is laced with anticipation that the hearer would repent and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. It is certain that Scarborough was confident that each time he preached, sinners would respond and be saved.

The Tears of Jesus

In "The Tears of Jesus," Scarborough considers three passages in which our Lord weeps: Jn 11:35, Lk 19:41, and Heb 5:7. In this sermon, he seeks to explain the nature and character of the Christ who would weep. He goes on to define what might cause Divine tears, and reveals the deep tenderness and compassion of the Lord Jesus Christ toward all of humanity. He concludes the sermon with a charge to his hearers to join in Christ's pursuit of lost souls. This sermon is exemplary in many facets, but specifically in

²⁶Scarborough, *Prepare to Meet God: Sermons Making the Way to Christ Plain*, 16.

²⁷Scarborough, *With Christ after the Lost: A Search for Souls*, 131.

²⁸Scarborough, *Prepare to Meet God: Sermons Making the Way to Christ Plain*, 21.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 26.

³⁰Scarborough, *With Christ after the Lost: A Search for Souls*, 130.

³¹Scarborough, *Prepare to Meet God: Sermons Making the Way to Christ Plain*, 26.

the marks of its Christocentricity, its doctrinal emphasis, its tender compassion, and its edification of the believer.

“The Tears of Jesus” is clearly a Christocentric sermon. Scarborough’s treatment of the man behind the tears is to describe him in terms plain and simple. “This man is the Son of God, is very God Himself.”³² This is a tremendous example of Scarborough’s belief that evangelistic sermons should “gather around Christ’s cross,” as here he gathers his hearers around the very Christ himself.³³ In a manner, this sermon seems less evangelistic, in that it is not a constant plea for the sinner to come to Christ, but it is a clarion call for the congregation to be moved towards being evangelistic themselves.

While many sermons have been preached in terms of Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection, in this sermon Scarborough emphasizes the care and compassion of the Savior. Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. He wept over a city that would reject his teachings. He wept in prayer on behalf of the world for which he would die. Christ’s compassion and concern is made evident by Scarborough’s emphasis that the tears were not for the immanent suffering that Jesus would suffer, but were on behalf of sinful man, destined for eternal punishment for their rejection of Himself. Jesus, out of his great compassion for their lowly estate, makes salvation available to them by his sacrificial death.

“The Tears of Jesus” is a sermon that, without care, could easily become a soft-spoken description of our Savior’s most human moments. But Scarborough does not allow the sermon to end with that point. His concern, and passion, for the salvation of lost sinners is the message that is emphasized to his congregation. This satisfies the mark of being constructive, for it takes the newborn Christian beyond the emotional milk of Christ in his sorrow for us, and on towards pursuing lost sinners with Christ.

Conclusion

Lee Rutland Scarborough’s legacy will forever be that of a soul-winner. His zeal for the pursuit of the lost with the gospel of Jesus Christ characterized his early ministry, defined his teaching ministry, and left an indelible mark on a seminary and denomination. His preaching led thousands to faith in Jesus Christ, and his instruction equipped hundreds of thousands with a passion for evangelism. His marks of evangelistic preaching are, to this day, a great tool with which preachers of God’s Word can ensure that the gospel is presented in a winsome manner, “in order that all men may know, love and serve him and his truth, always and for evermore.”³⁴

³²Scarborough, *The Tears of Jesus: Sermons to Aid Soul-Winners*, 17.

³³Scarborough, *With Christ after the Lost: A Search for Souls*, 132.

³⁴L. R. Scarborough, *My Conception of the Gospel Ministry* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1935), forward.

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