

## **Focus In Preaching**

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Because of the complex functioning of the modern ministry many churchmen feel that the role of preaching calls for some re-assessment. Not a few speak disparagingly of preaching, notwithstanding its "rediscovery" in recent years. For instance, one man, himself a specialist in ministering to the sick, asserts that preaching as the principal method of carrying on the work of the church is fast declining.<sup>1</sup>

It is not the writer's purpose to present here an extended apologia on the primacy of preaching. This much is true: something of the significance of preaching becomes obvious when it is remembered that preaching and its message are bound together inextricably. As Professor H. H. Farmer says, "the means and the content are indissolubly one and cannot be separated from one another. The activity of preaching is to the faith as the blossom is to the plant: it is part of it."<sup>2</sup> Preaching is the divinely appointed instrument of divine-human reconciliation. By the "foolishness of preaching" men are to be saved.

If it is true that a man's first calling is to preach, it is equally important that he possess a clear awareness of the essential message of the preaching. In this regard, much contemporary sermonizing seems to be out of focus. For is not the essential task of the pulpit that of mediating a sense of God to the man in the pew? Is it not true that preaching that fails to bring about a point of contact between man and God is something less than Christian?

It was never intended that preaching should be the only "saving activity" of the church. Works of compassion, for example, were certainly included. "Yet preaching, in one form or another," insists Professor Farmer, "is obviously the basic, the pivotal thing, without which other activities have little power, and that only in a very indirect and uncertain way, to serve the saving, divine purpose which has entered history in Christ."<sup>3</sup> It is not without significance that the Gospel record of Christ's commission to His

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<sup>1</sup>Russell Dicks, *Pastoral Work and Personal Counseling*, p. 195

<sup>2</sup>*The Servant of the Word*, p. 14

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 23-23

disciples put preaching first and then the healing of the sick. We are apt to forget that the Christian minister is essentially God's ambassador, that notwithstanding his imperfections and inadequacies he is himself in some sense a revelation of God. In this, Christianity is unique among the world's religions. Its messenger is not only an interpreter of God; he is a reflector of God. And more than this: for we believe that God is actually in the messenger. The Divine Presence is suffused with the human personality. As one contemporary New Testament scholar puts it, "God really becomes the preacher. The sermon is no longer the effort of a man to speak moving words; it has become the deed of God."<sup>4</sup> The preacher standing before his congregation can truly say, "As though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead be ye reconciled to God." Much indifferent preaching would suddenly come to life if this identification of the Divine and the human were more frequently felt at the seat of the preaching consciousness. It is this Godward aspect of the sermon that calls for sharper focus in many a contemporary pulpit.

And from the manward side, there is always the restlessness, the hunger for God. Recently a layman expressed it thus, "The layman goes to church because he hungers for God. He believes that he can be drawn to God through Jesus Christ. Theology will not do it. Nice literary style will not do it. But divine love will do it, and the task of the minister as we laymen see it, is to work into his sermons a warmth, a devotion, a deep conviction, a passion, that will strongly draw them toward God through the grace of Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps it is in compensation for our failure to mediate God that we are tempted to lean unduly upon technique. Once we find the right approach, men will the more readily enter into the Kingdom! High-pressure salesmanship, psychological maneuvering, life-situation procedures, modern business tactics -- these are the ways to reach men! Whatever virtuous use the pulpit make of these strategies they do but reflect, after all, the temper of the times, and should never be the major concern of the spokesman for God.

Some men seem to feel that the chief value of the Gospel lies, not in its mediating God to man, but in its pragmatic usefulness to society. It is true that preaching in the best tradition has always spoken to the condition of men. But never at the expense of the objective truth of the Gospel! He who habitually derives sermon topics from his hearers may be highly popular as a preacher but

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<sup>4</sup>Donald G. Miller in "Interpretation" April 1952, 1. 135

<sup>5</sup>Dr. Wilbur LaRoe in "Monday Morning," February 27, 1956

he is hardly in the New Testament tradition. For in that tradition man's estate is never the primary thing. It is first, "Hallowed be thy name;" and second, "Give us this day our daily bread." "The minister," writes Henry Sloan Coffin, "is not a physician equipped with an ample pharmacopeia from which he takes remedies for their varied ills. He is the personal envoy of the all-sufficient God; and His sole aim is to let God draw near in His word and minister out of His unsearchable riches to needs which He, and He alone, fully understands."<sup>6</sup>

We are to make no mistake about it. God is to draw near in His word. Christ is God's word to men. In his recently published lectures on preaching, Ian Macpherson comments on the fact that there is really no warrant for the distinction made in our English Bibles between the term "Word" spelled with a capital "W" and "word" spelled with a small "w", as illustrated for instance, by the expressions, "preaching the word" and "the Word was made flesh." The change from the capital to the small letter is without the slightest support in the original; for in both contexts it is the same Word. This author points out the importance of this knowledge for the study of preaching: "It regulates and reorientates the whole subject. For, if this be a fact, it follows that preaching is not the feeble thing for which all too frequently it passes, but a tremendous thing -- nothing less than the communication through the utterance of a consecrated personality of the eternal Christ."<sup>7</sup>

The Godward aspect of the sermon is obscured not only by our preoccupation with method of communication and with the practical considerations of the Gospel. It suffers for other reasons. For instance, some congregations are surfeited with a kind of inspirational sermon in which the idea of God is dissipated in a flood of rhapsodical effusions about the goodness and love of God. Such preaching reminds one of Adelina Patti's description of her home in Wales: "Twenty miles from everywhere and very beautiful." Then there is the congregation that endures each Sunday morning a type of moralistic preaching reminiscent of Puritanism at its worst. And what of the people whose minister feels that he must on no account permit the social conscience to slumber; who plays from Sunday to Sunday on the theme of the Parable of the Good Samaritan -- with variations! And still the hungry sheep look up, and are not fed.

Whether it be good counsel on the ethics of daily living, a clever diagnosis of the temper of the times, or a stirring appeal to

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<sup>6</sup>Communion Through Preaching, pp. 11-12

<sup>7</sup>Ian Macpherson, *The Burden of the Lora*, p. 7

personal holiness of life, the sermon is inadequate and unworthy if it fails to bring God and man together. Not just God as abstract truth, but God in the person of Christ. It was old David Hume the skeptical philosopher who said of John Brown of Haddington, "Yon's the man for me; he preaches as if Jesus Christ were at his elbow." In one message men confront Him evangelically as Savior, and Lord; in another, ethically as Teacher and Example; and in still another, pastorally as Shepherd and Comforter. And yet whatever the particular theme of the message, its drawing power can be as wide as the needs of men; for Christ cannot be confined to the bounds of a sermon.

Preaching then, is always Christ, always Christianity. "Whoso said Christianity, said preaching."<sup>8</sup> It is Christ inviting men to comradeship -- and to ever-closer comradeship. "I will come in to him and sup with him, and he with Me." The "foolishness of preaching" is God's way of opening up a soul to flood it with light. First always, light about God; and secondarily always, as a result of the first, light about man -- his nature and his need.

The high seriousness of preaching may well be frightening to the preacher. It is no wonder that nearly all the great preachers of history shrank from the call to preach. Once a week for a precious twenty minutes, or twice that much, a man stands before a hungry people to mediate God to men. There is no more solemn task under the sun; none more rewarding.

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<sup>8</sup>H. H. Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 19