

Preaching To The Man In The Pew

Andrew W. Blackwood

On the human level three men enter prominently into many an orthodox sermon today. In the order of accepted importance these three stand out: first, the man in the pulpit; second, the man in the Bible; and third, the man in the pew. "First" here means most important. In some pulpits, and in pastors' studies, the order may differ. According to books about preaching, the man in the pulpit stands out first. The Bible character about whom he preaches, whether it be Jacob or Zacchaeus, usually comes next, and the friend in the pew emerges a poor third. Indeed he may not appear at all, not prominently. The sermon may begin with "I" and deal with what "I" think about Jacob or Zacchaeus. The hearer may never come into view until the last few sentences of a conventional conclusion, which few hearers remember.

This account deliberately ignores the divine. The man in the pulpit, the one in the Bible, and the friend in the pew -- like the sermon itself -- all exist for the glory of God. By this I mean the God of the Bible, revealed in Jesus Christ, under the guidance of the Spirit, with the stress falling on our Lord's Incarnation and Deity, Death and Resurrection, Living Presence and Final Return. Even in a pulpit with such a Christian philosophy, the question still remains: "Among the three men on the human level, which one ought to stand out first, and which one last?" Whatever the answer, why should every minister take the matter seriously? Why not merely "preach"?

Personally, I have come to believe that the man in the pew ought to come first; the man in the Book, second; the man in the pulpit, third and last. By this I mean last in thinking of the interpreter as he sits in the study and prays about the sermon, and as he stands in the pulpit to voice the kerygma, which signifies "preaching Christ." According to the Written Word of God, why did Ezekiel preach (33:30-33), and Paul (I Cor. 2:1-4)? Like our Lord, every true prophet or apostle uttered words of promise and rebuke for the sake of the hearer. Otherwise, there would have been no preaching. As James Denny used to say, "no preacher can call attention to Christ and himself at the same time." Neither can any minister today preach well about Jacob or Zacchaeus unless the sermon somehow makes clear the relevance to the needs, the problems, and the interests of the lay hearer. My young reader, before you adopt a working philosophy for life, search the Scriptures and see whether or not these statements ring true. If

they do not, revise your scale of values.

Sometimes a reader of my books wonders why I write more or less about liberals, especially Fosdick. Often I wonder myself. One thing I have learned from a careful study of Fosdick's sermons, and of his practical philosophy. On the human level he always strives to deal with the problems and interests of the lay hearer. Strange as the statement may seem to his critics, Fosdick usually preaches about the interest and problems of one person, rather than of a group. He preaches little about "man," a term not clear to many persons "non-theologically minded." With a different theology and a loftier idea of Holy Scripture, I wish I could learn from Fosdick how to make the interests and the problems of the hearer prominent. I do not believe in having any one kind of sermons all the time. As an evangelical interpreter James S. Stewart makes it a working rule to start a sermon with something about the hearer. Often this preacher addresses the hearer directly. So does Billy Graham. In his book, *Peace with God*, there follows the opening sentence of the first sermon: "You started on the Great Quest the moment you were born" (Jer. 24:13).

In seminaries we professors should quit glorifying the pulpit orator, who calls attention to himself. Where does the Bible ever sanction self-centered preaching? To a lesser degree the same negation holds true about a sermonizer. Where do the Scriptures approve any man who makes a sermon an end in itself, rather than a means of grace? Surely the Book holds up as an ideal the interpreter whose voice never is heard, and whose sermon calls no special attention to himself. Ideally, both preacher and message exist for the sake of two persons: the Lord and the listener. At his best, the man in the pulpit serves as a lens in which rays of light from above converge so as to set the heart of the lay hearer on fire. Afire with what? With a new sense of divine glory and of personal need. For an example of such a "preaching psychology" study Isaiah 6:1-8.

What then have the needs and interests of the hearer to do with a minister's sermon today? The answer would call for a book, which until recently no person ever attempted to write. The works on the subject, books not from my pen, have opened up the field. Here let me answer my question briefly; the reader can fill in the gaps. For one thing, the needs of the hearer ought to guide and restrain the man in the study when he determines what to preach on a given day. To take a controversial subject, from which a timid interpreter shies away, think of race prejudice. With Negroes moving into the community, and wishing to be treated as human beings, what should a lay church member do? This question no minister can answer for anyone save himself, but he can guide the

hearer in seeking the will of God as revealed in the Book. Not belligerently, dogmatically, or apologetically, but as the local interpreter of Christian doctrine, no man with courage enough to become a preacher can ignore this issue today.

Again, the right sort of concern about the hearer aids a minister in choosing a passage from the Bible. Especially in dealing with a delicate issue, about which good men differ widely, he wishes to have a "sure word of prophecy." For example, after Easter he may be preaching here and there from the Acts, "the most exciting book in the New Testament." When he comes to the tenth chapter he has to choose between preaching about God's way of removing race prejudice, or else passing by the experience of Peter at Joppa and later in Caesarea.

Once more, the needs of the hearer guide a man in determining what materials to use, or not to use. In dealing with "The Bible Cure for Race Prejudice" the main part of the sermon, the warp, may come from the chosen passage. Since the hearer may have a Bible that he has only begun to read, the interpreter may deal with only this one passage. Here he can find all the biblical materials he can use, more than he can make interesting and clear. As for the sermon's woof, part of it may come from South Africa, in a well-known novel by Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

Negatively, contemporary material need not come from the home community, or even from our country. Forgetting that he is called to preach the Gospel -- not to argue, debate, or attack -- the man in the pulpit might collect up-to-date racial materials from the *United States News and World Report*, which many of us find invaluable. Or he might attack local churches, including his own, for practicing "segregation on Sunday," and all through the week. If wise, he plans to "pass by on the other side" of things so close at hand that few can appraise them fairly. All the while he should depend on the truth of God's revealed Book to do its own office work in the heart of every believer, since a believer in Christ wishes to do God's will on earth as it is done in heaven. Yonder there will be no segregation among the redeemed children of the Heavenly Father.

This kind of hearer-directed sermon may arouse more questions than it answers. If so, thank God! For the answers, the layman should turn to the Written Word, in the spirit of prayer, with the desire to do the will of God himself, and have it done by others. He may also come to the pastor for counsel. According to a distinguished exponent of pulpit counseling, the chief test of a sermon's effectiveness appears in the number of requests for private interviews, each from a hearer who wishes to know the truth in hand more perfectly, and to do it more fully. Like many another

issue about which a man preaches, this one of race prejudice and its cure is not so simple and easy as we ministers often make it seem. The solution is not easy, but it is possible. For every human need, God's Book has a supply, in the form of a Christian doctrine, which centers at the Cross.

Still further, the welfare of the hearer should guide a pastor in making plans for a sermon. Ideally, plans for structure ought to come late, rather than early. Actually, the way of handling the facts in a case may come to mind as soon as one decides on a project and chooses a text. Even so, one ought to leave the matter open until the facts are all in hand. Then if the first idea still seems to be best, let it prevail, but not otherwise. For example, in preparing to address a college group who need to know part of what the Book says about fear, one may turn to Mark 4:35-41, with stress on this verse: "Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?" Here our Lord speaks to a group of young men who as human beings have many reasons to feel afraid. After a prayerful study of the passage, and a careful consideration of the reasons why college young folk today yield to ungodly fears, one may decide that the best way to deal with the passage is to follow the original impulse, which called for a textual sermon.

With Frederick W. Robertson in any of his Sunday morning sermons, let the two-fold form of the text lead to a message with "two contrasting truths," and only two. In keeping with the text, let the first main part deal with "The Meaning of Faith as Victory over Fear." Obviously, faith means far more, but in any one sermon a minister can not tell all he knows about faith, or anything else. According to experts in secular writing, "exposition means the simplifying of experience." Skill in exposition means "ability to select and omit, in order to make the facts in hand clear and luminous." As Plutarch once wrote, "a (hearer's) soul is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled." The fire has to do with faith in the Christ of Today.

In the hands of an amateur the first part of the sermon would be human and negative. Forgetting that the words of the text come from Christ, and that they all point to belief in Him as the way to escape from understandable fears amid a storm, a man who "preaches from the Bible" may waste precious time telling young hearers what they already know about the occasions of their fears, and the folly of fears that make them unhappy and may cause stomach ulcers. Why not follow the text, in its setting? It shows that the wrong sort of fear means lack of faith in Christ as present -- as concerned -- and as able. Able to do what? Everything! In other words, deal with the truth first of all as it relates to Christ. "Ah, yes, but what about the hearer?" The introduction has to do

with him, briefly. The latter part of the sermon, the climactic portion, may bring out the truth more fully, as it relates to him and his fears.

Faith means victory over fear. This relates to the practical result. As for faith itself, which leads to triumph over fear, faith means trust in the Living Christ. Here an amateur would go over much the same ground as in the first main part: faith in Christ as here -- as concerned -- and as able. All true, thank God! A master preacher could say it the second time, and more than twice, without anticlimax. Many another would do well, in the second main part, to deal with the needs of the hearer. Faith means trusting the Present Christ for victory over fears relating to Self, to Money, to Marriage, and to the Unknown Future. Since the sky is the limit here, a minister has to select and omit, being careful all the while to keep Christ in the center of the picture, with the light full on His blessed face.

In a recent review of a book about preaching, a distinguished New York pastor objected to any such use of the case method, either in class or in print. He said, correctly, that it might encourage a student, or young pastor, to borrow another man's outline instead of making one to fit the needs of the home listeners, especially the man one is most anxious to help. All of us teachers recognize the possibility of "spoon-feeding," and deplore it. We see no harm in borrowing another man's outline, occasionally, unless the borrowing is surreptitious. As a rule every man should plan his own way. But we wonder why the reviewer objects to another writer's "spoon-feeding" by using cases, and then sends out from New York City a book of sermons to be scooped up with a shovel, being pilfered without credit and preached without change? Is a spoon worse than a shovel? It is as hard to write about preaching without reference to sermons as to discuss the art of Michelangelo and Raphael without reference to the statue of Moses and the painting of the Transfiguration.

Last of all, for the present, the needs of the hearer guide a minister in delivering his message. If only for the sake of boys and girls, and older folk with childlike minds, he plans to make every sermon clear and simple, interesting and appealing, from beginning to end. He starts with something sure to interest the normal hearer now, something about the subject, preferably as it concerns a layman's interests now. The pastor speaks as a friend, a friend of the Lord Jesus, and a friend of the listener, who ought soon to become a sharer in the sermon, "as a co-operative enterprise," a friendly conversation about one of "the things that matter most."

All through the discourse a skillful interpreter engages in

"animated conversation." Like Spurgeon, he never speaks at the same rate in any two quarters of a discourse. Even a horse would tire if he had to proceed for a mile at the same speed. In preparing to speak from the pulpit the minister plans carefully. He aims to let the spirit of what he is saying control the tone color of his utterance. In other words, the popular effectiveness of the spoken word, under God, depends more on how a man speaks than on any other human factor. Like his Lord, the interpreter should feel able to say, humbly: "The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak" (Isaiah 50:4 - not a close rendering of the original).

Once in class at Princeton a senior asked me to name a man then living who seemed to embody all these ideals. Thinking only of ministers whom I had heard a number of times, I mentioned George W. Truett. Like Billy Graham, and other men on abiding influence, Truett spoke better than he wrote; he preached to be heard by living beings, one by one, not to be admired as a master of the King's English. The facts about Truett appear in a biography by his son-in-law, Powhatan W. James; in printed volumes of sermons; and best of all, in the lives of an untold host whom he blessed through mastery of the spoken word. No matter where Truett preached, or how vast the throng, he always made me feel that he was concerned about me personally, and that he wanted me to live close to his Lord and Savior. Not as a pulpit orator calling attention chiefly to himself, not as a sermonizer calling attention almost exclusively to my Savior and my sins, Truett showed me how to put God first, the hearer second, and the speaker last. So did Spurgeon, and Brooks, neither of whom I ever heard.

In two respects the young minister today needs to remember conditions that differ from those when Truett or Spurgeon began his life work. Today there is in many a layman's hands a new copy of the Bible. To the average purchaser it will remain a closed book, unless someone like Philip comes along to tell a layman like the eunuch how to read this Written Word of God. To render such a service the young pastor may not have had the proper sort of training. In many a seminary of yesterday an earnest student did not gain a working knowledge of the Bible. He did not learn to look on every sermon as an opportunity to help the hearer use a chosen part of God's Book. In all these matters I am not thinking about a seminary course or two on methodology, but of the fact that a training school for ministers ought to send forth a graduate who has learned how from the pulpit to guide a layman in reading Isaiah 53, or any other important passage in the Bible. A seminary graduate should go into the pulpit thinking first of all, under God, about the needs of the hearer, not about the merits of

the sermon, or the prowess of the preacher. In short, his ideals ought to be Christian, his methods practical, and his spirit contagious. Like the Apostle of old he should have a practical philosophy of preaching. Writing to laymen, full of needs arising from sin, thinking of himself as an earthen vessel flooded with heavenly light (the Gospel), the Apostle declares: "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (II Cor. 4:5).

Another factor enters into the picture today, more than at any earlier time in our century. Almost everywhere our country has witnessed a "theological renaissance," if not yet a doctrinal Reformation. Among the fifty per cent of American adults who read books, many have been buying and vainly trying to understand all sorts of works about religion. Feeling confused, some of these laymen come to church hoping to find a minister who has wisdom and training enough to preach doctrine, making it interesting to a man who has no biblical background and no theological acumen. Except in a few fortunate communities here and there, a layman has to look far to find a pastor who can make the Bible live and speak in the best language of today. Perhaps not in the same sermons as above, many a layman wants his minister to preach Christian doctrine so that any businessman or housemother, with any lad or lass ready for junior high school, can utter the Lord's Prayer intelligently, and even the Apostles' Creed. "Thy Kingdom come," for instance. To a mature layman, who has attended church regularly all his life, and has done everything the minister has encouraged him to do, how much do these familiar terms mean? In other words, a minister can scarcely preach to laymen in 1956 unless he knows how to preach from the Bible, and how to preach one at a time the doctrines of our holy faith. In order to meet such needs in any community now, a man ought to have more than one service every Lord's Day. He ought to excel both as a winner of souls and as a feeder of the sheep already in the fold.

With some exceptions, the seminaries of yesterday did not send out a typical graduate with a Christian philosophy of preaching, with an adequate introduction to the Bible, and with ability to show the present-day values of a Christian doctrine. Of course a divinity school can not "give" any future graduate such information, or any such mastery of "what to preach." After three years under pious men, some of them erudite, I had to learn in the next three years, and all through my later years as a pastor, what I might have learned while in the divinity school. I refer to setting up lofty ideals, working out a method of my own, and learning how to work in preparing to meet the needs of the hearer by preaching from the Bible, and by explaining Christian doctrine.

Today the Holy Spirit stands ready to guide any young ministers, or any one more mature, in getting his bearings, and in meeting the needs of any layman who comes to church for a living message from the heart of God, (Isa. 55:10, 11).