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THE PLACE OF PREACHING IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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THE PLACE OF PREACHING IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

The title contains just a hint that perhaps preaching has had its day. This is an unsettling implication. After all, preaching has been so much a part of the life of the believing community. What is more, we are a people of the Word, and the Word has come to us in preaching. Furthermore, the history of the church is tied up with great preachers. Some of our M.B. history, too, ^{is} measured in sermon lengths.

As for us who are ministers, our identity would suffer a severe shakedown if we were suddenly informed that we could no longer preach. And anyway, what would we do with our fine books on homiletics, our professional training, and our newest "department" at M.B.B.C.?

Yet we must face squarely the fact that preaching as we have known it is by many considered suspect. Already a century ago Herman Melville in Moby Dick asserted that the platitudes of preaching were the bore of the age. Protestant preachers have joined him to decry mediocre and unauthentic sermonizing:

Harry E. Fosdick: "It is pathetic to observe the number of preachers who commonly on Sunday speak religious pieces in the pulpit, utterly failing to establish real contact with the thinking or practical interests of their auditors" (1928).

George A. Buttrick: "The preacher mounts steps, hurls his anathemas with all the dogmatism alleged to be characteristic of the calling, and brings down his fist with a resounding thump To many he is a pathetic figure, an anachronism . . . wearing the expression of a startled rabbit" (1931).

Helmut Thielike: "Actually preaching is relegated more and more to the

margin of things and it has decayed and disintegrated to the point where it is close to the stage of dying" (translated 1965).

The radical theologians, if they have paid any attention to preaching at all in their unchurching of the church, have advocated a congregation without a pulpit. {

The critics who disavow any oneness with the Christian faith are more pointed:

Pierre Berton: "That sermons of today tend to be spiritless, irrelevant, dull, and badly delivered, there can be little doubt It is a saying among ecclesiastics that most ministers preach to the right of their theology." This suggests, of course, that the preacher is at least insincere, if not phony.

When men who do the proclaiming have criticized the mediocre preaching to which the believers are subjected, and men outside the pale of Christianity have said that virtually all preaching is of that caliber, and when the radical theologians have given to it but a passing nod of disdainful recognition, can we wonder ~~then~~ that for our young adults the understanding that the preacher has authority by virtue of his function is a foreign idea?

After the missionary conference held recently at M.B.B.C. we heard casual discussion about the various speakers. One is labeled good, the other dismissed as indifferent; one turns this young man on and turns the other off. The value of the man is determined subjectively on grounds of personal taste and sentiment. There is with these here referred to little question of whether the preacher had a word from God, or whether he was God's man for us for this occasion. ✓

Let me hasten to add that a critical stance toward the ministry is not the unique distinction of the young and the radical. They have been taught, indeed are now being taught. Where the one generation may write the pastor off because he hails from antiquity, his peers and his elders may criticize him even more severely because he is unsettling the age-old customs. "The old people in our churches have had to make so many adjustments in this country in terms of culture in all of its facets; surely they can be left in peace in their religion. Why can you not leave things as they are?" Some carry their criticism to the point of withdrawing from the group, or at least withholding their support. The understanding that the ministry is in a real sense an authority, indeed that he represents God to us, is largely lost to the middle-aged as well. The understanding of the authority of the man of God has been replaced by a mis-understanding of the priesthood of all believers. We have generally accepted democracy as a Christian institution, have dragged a rather individualizing version of it into the church, and have crossed it with Christian brotherhood. The hybrid which has emerged is at best sub-Christian. Nor have we been spared the vocal minorities which mushroom in democratic freedom. Such vocal huddles are not restricted^{to} the younger generation either. Knotted advocates of changelessness may be as guilty as proponents of revolution.

A. FINDING A WAY BY BEGINNING WITH THE PROBLEM

We could seek a way for ourselves by approaching the matter from the premise of contemporary criticism. The criticism is more threatening when it comes from our own ranks:

"Burn the church down!" explodes a young Christian University student. (One wonders whether the church fires in Winnipeg are part of a renewal program.)

"I give the church as we know it 10 years to die out," predicts a religious spokesman.

"Remove the pulpit!" demand the rebellious.

"We need the priest of the streets," suggest the guilt-encumbered intellectualizers and the snug professionals.

"Let's get back to the apostolic structure -- back to cell groups," cry the advocates of fellowship.

1. A number of alternative responses are possible. We could become defensive. We have seen our pulpit as a fortress -- impervious, sacrosanct. It was such a wonderful way to attack others, because they came unarmed within easy range. Our kingdom is threatened, and its authoritarian ecclesiastical monarch now trembles. We were largely combative in our "ministry," and now we are baffled by counter-attack, are made insecure, and become reactionary. We pick up the stones that are hurled at us, feed them into our sermon-building mechanism, and (serve them up as bread. We stifle all impulse to change.

2. On the other hand we might take a philosophical (popularly understood) attitude and an historical perspective. After all, cell groups are as old as the N.T. church. The apostles moved from house to house to teach the clusters of believers. Even those early Christians soon found it advantageous to structure larger groups in order to do better what they felt needed to be done at a worship gathering and in the fulfilling of the mission mandate. That will happen

Christian year

again no matter what revolutionary changes occur. As the organist said: "When I am 90, they will dig me out of the moth balls and re-instate me at the instrument."

Such hope leaves several decades hanging limp, to be sure, but it is some hope for those who have time to wait.

3. Another response might be a philosophical (also popularly understood) attitude from a psychological perspective. Let them establish cell groups and discard the larger church body, and the building, and the preacher. They will soon have trouble with their children. The younger ones will be stuffed into the kitchen, and the adolescents shunted to the recreation room. Each group will be small and the teen-aged will ask to join with the group from the next street. Anyway, the brother several streets over seems to be able to expound Scripture exceptionally well. Why not all join to hear him sometime? And the move to the larger body and the distinguished preacher is on again.

4. Rather than this disdainful distance we may choose to join the movement and say what everybody else is saying. We may speak in the measured cadences of criticism which Thielike uses or the flamboyant neon barbs of Pierre Berton. Or, in more contemporary jargon, we may call it Christian radicalism. If less discerning, biblical radicalism. With the radicals we may quiver with excitement at the possibility of another reformation, and feel like a magnanimous hero stepping down from the preacher's pedestal. We look at Acts 8:1 and almost pray that God may blow the whole ~~Chr~~istian structure sky high and fling his folk to the ends of the nation so that everywhere the church may get into cells.

5. Some of us who see our leadership position in the present structure threatened may decide to become leaders in the movement. We develop a skill in giving^{to} every new wind that blows a religious label and every new cry a spiritual overtone. We become the mouth-piece of the movement, and delude ourselves and others by posing as the prophet of God. Like the captain abandoning a sinking ship we jump from the pinnacle of the temple which we consider doomed. We are hailed as a prophet resurrected and are carried on the applause of the crowd, unharmed -- no bone broken.

6. The chronic hesitators among us will be less imaginative. We want to hop on the band wagon too, and consequently become mildly negative about all structure as it now exists. As we read the manifestos and the barbed articles we feel strangely that there is a great new spiritual kingdom coming to life. Yet we are not sure whose voice it is in our ears saying, "Do you see all these kingdoms and their glory? All these I will give you if you will bow down and worship me." Could this be the shepherd's voice? The doubts are not allayed when we see that those who demonstrate, do not demonstrate the fellowship they advocate.

7. There is another alternative. We can allow the tremors to turn us to essentials, particularly in our preaching. Even though our fundamental commitment be to Jesus Christ and his cause, it is difficult to disallow peripheral interests or to discern subsidiary concerns which steal subtly in to rob our time, sap our strength, and weaken our preaching. We wanted the cross to be the focus of our proclamation and the pattern of our service. We know that this is the means by which

God has chosen to save the world. Even where this direction is fixed, the focus may become blurred. It needs periodical sharpening. Unsettling disturbances such as the present stirring, are the occasion for such focusing.

Thus the tremors need not be so much threatening as alerting. We can remain open to those who disturb, because their approval or disapproval is not determinative for our sense of identity. We are men speaking on behalf of God for the sake of men. Every disturbance among men, therefore, even among believers, helps us to see man and his fundamental needs and makes possible a vision of the eternal God and his unchanging message from a new vantage point.

B. WE CAN APPROACH THE MATTER FROM THE PREMISE OF THE WORD.

1. The O.T. resounds with the call to proclamation. Not always is success assured, but it is clear that this is a significant way by which God has chosen to address men.

The prophet of Tekoa did not call the men of Samaria to a discussion period in which they would air their opinions about God. The prophet was a man bursting with a message. He had gained insights into God's dealings with men in history, and he interpreted events as God saw them. He declared what God wanted communicated, and he spoke the word in the confidence that through it God would achieve his purposes.

2. Jesus himself came preaching. His first impact on the people was through his message of the kingdom. His call to discipleship was sharpened and clarified in his preaching. For all his deeds of kindness, his healing ministry, his individual conversations, his small group

teaching, he was a proclaimer. The message came largely in parable and story, but Jesus knew God wanted something said to the multitudes, and he said it. Here is noble precedent for the Christian preacher.

3. Certainly the early church saw the ministry of words as supremely important. The book of Acts presents a wide spectrum of method and style of verbalizing the gospel. There are words that indicate that the preacher is engaged in a struggle for truth, argue, dispute, confute, prove. There are other terms that suggest a magnetic drawing: evangelize, urge, persuade, plead. Other words indicate that the preacher is telling what happened to him: testify, witness. At times the preacher becomes conversational: speak, say. At other times he simply announces the facts concerning God: tell, preach, declare, proclaim. Or he may come alongside a believer to help him toward insight or toward the goal: teach, command, exhort. One cannot read the book of Acts and not be impressed with the inestimable value which is ascribed to the verbalizing ministry, both formal and incidental.

4. The recorded experiences and writings of the apostles give ample evidence of the success of the proclaimed word. When Peter preached, the Holy Spirit fell on the believers in Caesarea. Through the proclamation of the gospel Paul fathered the Corinthian church.

The commission of Jesus to the apostles, and of Paul to his deputies, includes the mandate to preach. Since the word of God claims to be sharper than any two edged sword and as effective as a scalpel, certainly the proclamation of that Word will not suddenly, in our generation, have exhausted its usefulness or its creative power.

*creative
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*the richness
and suggestive
overtones of the
Scriptures
part of the miracle
of its
inspiration,
surely.*

5. Therefore, we can sit back and relax. Our job is secure; our calling is not in jeopardy!

Careful now! If we look to the prophets, to Jesus, and to the apostles for support in this hour of testing, we must be prepared to measure our preaching by their standards.

There is a kind of preaching that must be given to the stormy winds of today's upheaval. The kind of preaching that is pompous, that flouts its authority, that seeks refuge in a narrow tradition, cannot survive here. The kind of preaching that demands respect regardless of its quality, and that consequently becomes thin and weightless, must disappear in today's fires. The kind of preaching that does not seek honesty to challenge a mind which in all integrity is seeking an anchor for life and a goal to which one can worthily give that life, must be run out of town in the next demonstration. All mediocrity, all slipshod preparation, all laziness which masquerades in the pious faith that the Spirit of God will pour words into an empty head -- all these and the sermons they produce must be ousted at the hands of honest biblical radicals. All pomposity, all pride in position and status, all insincerity that seeks in the Holy Book but a new dosage to administer with a flair of personal importance -- all these must die the death at the hands of those who knock the institution. All use of the pulpit to vent personal grievances, to achieve personal ego, gratification, or to spew out in religious mask the venom which unconscious fears or secret sins produce -- all such practice must cease in the attacks of those who advocate true Christian fellowship and brotherly intimacy.

C. THE PREACHING THAT WILL SURVIVE

Survival alone is shoddy ambition. Preaching must have a reason for surviving. It must achieve among men what God wants to achieve among men. The kind of preaching that will both endure the present uneasiness and do the work of God is what I have chosen to call contemporaneous preaching. Indeed it will enter with confidence into the uneasiness, and will give shape and direction to the church in this generation.

1. Such preaching demands that the Bible be made contemporary in the proclamation.

A biblical event is, of course, historical. But the sermon which is effective will not allow a gap between the person of the biblical narrative and person now in the pew. The Peter who sat out in the middle of Genesareth in the middle of the morning when everything in him shouted to his better judgment and everyone on the shore whispered to each other that this was utter folly, is a man of like passions with us. He is flesh of our flesh, and marrow of our marrow. His fears, his resolves, his failings and faith, are ours.

The sermon must not exhaust itself on the circumstances of the biblical narrative account, but on the persons in it. When we deal with the fears and joys of the biblical personalities, with their doubting and believing, with their sense of worthlessness and their resolves, then we are dealing with the men sitting before us. Genesareth may then become the labor market, the school, or the sea of vocational possibilities, but the happening is the same, and the ✓ biblical event becomes contemporary.

The Bible is not truth preserved in history like a cozy sweater in moth balls. It is rather truth demonstrated, with the promise that it will be demonstrated again. Truth is preserved through life and in living, not primarily in archives. And since the lives in which the truth was demonstrated then were not different from ours in the deep reality of their humanity, the truth that was demonstrated in their living is accessible as a functional truth for us.

Living truth, however is not limited to narrative passages which describe man and demonstrate how God deals with him. All scripture was given purposefully, and is profitable for what God wants to achieve in man. The non-narrative portions, too, must become contemporaneous; that is, the truth of the word must come to life in the proclamation.

This calls for sound expository preaching. I am here not so much concerned about the neat distinction between the exposition and the homily. Whether one finds in a passage a dominant thrust and arranges the other elements so that they support it, or whether one moves from verse to verse following the thought process of the writer, is not the important issue here. What is significant is that the truth emerge from the page and be made free to do its redeeming and nourishing work.

A common error of the exegetical preacher is to bind himself to the technical elements of his text. He brings into the pulpit what should have remained grist for the mill of his study. Exegetical spade-work is a preliminary to proclamation, not a substitute for it. Much exegetical preaching is largely an intellectual exercise, frequently reserving for the conclusion the kind of material that

should have comprised the sermon.

Exegetical spade-work is hard work, but is indispensable. The preacher who is lazy, or who keeps failing to organize his time well, will find his proclamation wearing thin. Each word, and phrase, and sequence of thought in the text is soil for digging. What the preacher uncovers he must digest in his own being, and project upon the life portrait of the members of his flock. He must stay with the truth and the text until he is enthralled by both, and feels the unmistakable call of God to proclaim their message. When the preaching becomes in very fact a declaration of this living and life-giving word, then the preaching is contemporaneous.

2. Contemporaneous preaching speaks this living Word to real-life situations.

Whatever the significance of objective truth, or objective historical redemptive event, these are important for the proclamation in terms of their relation to men's lives. Certainly God has objective existence, but what is of significance to us is how he relates to men. If he is gracious, he is so in relation to men who sin; if he is longsuffering, he is so in relation to men who sin again and again.

The proclamation is directed to men who are in desperate need of God. Whether they know it or not, they need God's grace; whether they admit it or not, they live by God's patience; whether they interpret it correctly or not, they thirst for God's love. God wants to enter in ~~to~~ where he is needed; to accomplish this he asks men to proclaim him.

Should preacher begin with text or with a life situation?

It is necessary, therefore, that the man who preaches know something of the rough edges of human life, the point at which God will be allowed to enter. He must know where pain throbs, where fear lurks, where hope lingers. When he has seen these, and has found the resources of the word which can bring healing and peace and encouragement, then he can preach to life as it is. If, he takes this human need seriously (as a priest does), and if he takes God's provision so seriously that he will stake his life on it (as a prophet does), then his preaching will become contemporaneous. God will enter into the needs of men.

If it be argued that some men are called to be priests and some prophets, or in N.T. terms, that some are called to be pastors and some teachers, and that, therefore, the pastors must be concerned about the life situations and the teachers be permitted undisturbed pursuit of the text alone, then it certainly must be granted that the welfare of the church of Jesus Christ demands a close co-operation and a shared ministry of the two.

3. All of this points up the understanding that contemporaneous preaching is an event.

The event is in the preaching. The sermon is not mere priming for further living, re-loading for further action. If the Word is living, active, and sharp, then the life-giving, and the acting and the cutting will go on during the preaching event.

In Bible study one may consider the word as written document, dealing with each word, explaining the syntax, illuminating the parts of speech, and making the whole a study of a literary deposit. The assumption in such a study is that each person is open to what God

wants to say to him at every point. He himself sets the stage for the contemporaneity of the word. He allows it to be a present word to him at various points through the study.

P. Burke Proclamation varies from Bible study in that the stress is not on looking at the written symbol but on hearing God addressing men through personality. The hearers are not merely loading their wagons with the raw materials of information and prescription which they can grind up during the week and utilize for purposes of spiritual well-being and ethical rectitude. Jesus assured his disciples that if men heard them, they were hearing him, indeed God. In the proclamation, then, God is addressing men, and man must respond. This interaction is event, and when preaching achieves this, it is contemporaneous.

The preacher understands, of course, that a response of the heart must be allowed overt expression. Because of our deep reverence for the Word of God and the importance we have consequently ascribed to preaching, we have wanted to make the sermon the climax of the worship experience. Everything preceding it was often termed preliminary, and what followed it was limited to a brief soft-spoken prayer of benediction, and perhaps a choir response in modestly pious half voice. We did not wish to disturb the impression the sermon had created. We even asked people to leave quietly lest the solemnity of the hour be lost. Implied in this procedure is the understanding that if anything has happened in terms of personal response the expression of it will come later.

If we could structure the worship experience so that the climax occurred earlier we could give the hearer an opportunity to express

in some meaningful way the response he made in his heart during the proclamation. Such response might be corporate, or perhaps vicarious, but it would serve to verbalize and reinforce the personal response which was made as part of the sermon event.

Implied here is the view that the contemporaneous sermon is a part of a dialogical worship. God addresses man, and since he is a personal God, he demands response. The preacher who is concerned about this dialogical event, will seek to find man where he is so that God through the sermon can address himself to man where he is, and that man can respond genuinely and totally.

In another sense the sermon must be an event, namely that the happening is taking place in the preacher as well. He not only talks about the truth; the truth he declares is a present personal reality to him. In the sermon he is working out his own salvation with fear and trembling, but also with joy and confidence.

The truth he is proclaiming is truth for him; he is accepting it and responding to it. This is contemporaneous preaching.

To make it a present event for the preacher himself, he may find it helpful to use some organic or dynamic form of sermon development rather than arranging several related ideas that give to a concept a sense of completeness. If there is a dynamic movement through the sermon, the preacher is more likely to be personally engaged in the process of the developing truth. This will heighten the sense of event in the sermon.

4. Contemporaneous preaching sees the church as the proclaimer.

The task of declaring is not solely that of the preacher. In a

real sense he stands over the congregation as one speaking to them on behalf of God. At the same time he sees himself as standing with them and proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ on their behalf. Thus the congregation becomes a participant in the preaching event in another sense. The contemporaneous preacher will take the biblical understanding of the body of Christ seriously. Each believer is united to the head; in each the Holy Spirit dwells; consequently, each has some contribution to make to the proclamation. Each has his unique perspective and is obligated to contribute the light given him.

Congregational participation may be solicited in various ways. Some ministers meet with interested persons after the preaching hour in order to discuss the sermon and air issues with which it dealt. Thus the preacher will experience the congregation as a disciplining presence while he prepares. In the proclamation itself the congregation will see itself as responsible for what is preached. Thus the preacher will be aided in introducing the truth of the revelation into the life-situation of his congregation.

Perhaps a better way is to study the text of the sermon with a group of interested persons of the congregation prior to the preaching event. The preacher will indicate what his exegetical spade-work has revealed, and the group will evaluate the preacher's findings in the light of their situation and experience. They can give direction to the sermon's major thrusts, can add necessary insights for the application of truth to life, and they can sensitize the preacher to human need. Thus the sermon will be focused on life where it is, and the congregation will know themselves to be participants in the proclamation.

Another alternative is that of dialogue preaching. Most of us have men in our congregations who are gifted speakers (modestly gifted will do). Let the brother set forth the situation as he experiences it and observes it. Then let the preacher direct the text to that situation. Such a shared sermon would have to be carefully planned to keep it from losing thrust and direction. In such an exchange the congregation would see itself vitally involved both because of the representative who portrays their situation, and because of their commitment to, and trust in, the word which the preacher presents.

Some of us will find such procedures difficult. Ample and careful preparation is essential. The suggestion here is not to drag discussion into the preaching service. We have sufficient difficulty keeping that from becoming aimless or monopolized in smaller groups.

Let us admit that we will feel threatened when first we attempt such shared preaching. Especially will this be so if we have made of preaching an ecclesiastical idol. We have said that we love preaching, when in fact we may love the security of the pulpit. The preacher is not monarch for a day, or tyrant for an hour. He does not cease being a part of the congregation when he mounts the pulpit, nor does the congregation at that point renounce all responsibility. Where the preacher will humbly and deliberately draw the believers into the proclamation, the preaching will become contemporaneous.

5. Contemporaneous preaching is weighted with the believer's possession in Jesus Christ.

Where preaching has dwindled to a carping criticism it has lost

touch with life. For all the boasting of such a preacher that he is realistic and that he sees life as it really is, he is losing sight of the gift of redemption in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, by his whipping practice he is disallowing the congregation's participation in the preaching. He is denying them their part in a shared responsibility, and is missing out on the fellowship which is based on the great redemption which he shares with his hearers.

Contemporaneous preaching puts the emphasis on Jesus Christ, and what has come to us in redemption through him. Salvation is a present reality; it is going on now. In the proclamation Jesus Christ comes to his own, and his own receive him. The preaching event is the occasion for this fellowship with God's Son.

If we will make the sermon the occasion for such fellowship, the members of our congregations will find it easier to invite the newly converted or the uncommitted to attend the preaching event. They will not be anxious and embarrassed as they are when the minister spends the hour denouncing the failings of his flock. On the other hand, for the preacher to know that in his audience are two or three who are in the first thrilling moments of their life in Christ, or a few who are seriously considering turning their lives over to him, it will encourage him to put Christ and his salvation at the heart of his message. The truths we know so well will then move from platitude to testimony, and the preaching will become contemporaneous. Indeed, when by the grace of God things are happening in the church, and the preacher is sensitive to it and rejoices in it, his preaching will be contemporaneous. His message will be related to the present divine happening. Of course, the preacher's sensitivity to sin and failing,

to sorrow and despair, among his charges, will give to his sermons the same note of immediacy.

Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would testify of him. It is, then, the Holy Spirit who contemporizes the word of revelation. Through the work of the Spirit of God, the uttered word of the sermon which uses the written word of revelation, embodies the living word, Jesus Christ. Whatever is achieved in the preaching event, it is the Holy Spirit who achieves it.

A disturbing problem of the preacher is that he does not expect much to happen. We are afraid of being disappointed, so we do not expect to take even Ai, let alone Jericho. We will not risk failure even in our expectations, consequently we preach on the edge of life's centre, or even on the periphery. We proclaim and claim in vague generalities and with the shabby support of qualifying if's and then's.

He who has confidence in the word and the Spirit of God, will risk the foolishness of contemporaneous preaching. He will not confuse his expectation of the happening in the preaching event with a presumptuous prescription for what God shall do, but he will with confidence make room for the creative dynamic of the Holy Spirit. The power that is released in such a preaching event does not stop at influencing men; it attains a power over men and changes them into the image of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

He who preaches contemporaneously will not be hung up on a particular form of service, place of meeting, position of pulpit,

or style of garb. The when, the where, and the how of meeting he will regard as functional matters which take their significance from the fundamental purpose of preaching. He will look one way and see God who has a message of life and a warning of doom for man, and he will look the other way and see men to whom that message must come, and who in response to it must come to God through Jesus Christ. He will lay hold on the message as a truth on which he would stake his life. He will carry that message into the life situation of his hearers and stand with them under the grace and judgment of the message. He will see the preaching event as the occasion when God and man meet in message and response. This is the divine happening, the goal of contemporaneous preaching.

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