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The Evangelical Quarterly

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THE PREACHER'S TASK IN THE MODERN WORLD

IT is impossible within the limits of a single article to deal adequately with so vast and crucial a subject as the preacher's task in the modern world. The books which have been published in this generation alone on homiletics and kindred topics would fill a library of very respectable proportions, and when one takes into account all that has been written on the subject, from the earliest times down to the present, one might well feel abashed at the thought of attempting to say anything original, or even helpful, in the space of a few pages.

At the same time there are few things more likely to help those of us who are engaged in what is rather ambiguously called the "working" ministry than a review, however fragmentary, of the aims and objects which we as ministers of Christ's word and sacraments ought continually to have before us in all our work in the pulpit and out of it, and an assessment of the methods best calculated to further those aims and objects. And deeply conscious though we may be of failure in our task as preachers we may comfort our hearts with Dr. John Hutton's assertion that "the one thing which a man knows anything about is some craft or mystery in which, with all his love for it, he knows that he has failed".

I

Two words in the title of this article call for special emphasis. The first of these is *preacher*. The choice of the word is deliberate, because to many of us the task above all others to which we have been called is that of the preacher. In our view it is impossible to over-estimate the importance and relevance of preaching in this or indeed in any age. "Preaching", as Dr.

David Smith once said, "is both a divine and a human necessity since only through a human medium is man accessible to God or God intelligible to man. . . . God never acts on men directly, but always through a human personality." Ministers who do not visit their people as often as they are expected to have become accustomed to the reminder that "a house-going minister makes a kirk-going people". But it is sometimes forgotten that the same Thomas Chalmers who was responsible for that sage remark, with which none of us is in the least inclined to quarrel, also said that "only good preaching makes the minister's visit prized". Not for a moment do we wish to convey the impression that we regard as of little importance our other tasks in the ministry, our duty as pastors, for example, or as leaders of the people's worship. But we hold that in preaching we have a duty which transcends all the rest, and if we fail here we fail more or less all along the line.

The second word calling for particular notice is *modern*. When we speak of our task in the *modern* world we are not unmindful of the fact that fundamentally and in essentials the function of the preacher is the same whether exercised in the first century or in the twentieth. But it is surely obvious that each age requires of the preacher a special approach, as well as a particular presentation of the message with which he is entrusted. "To-day is not yesterday." The type of preaching which changed lives in the first century of the Christian era may not be the type best fitted to reach the hearts, and touch the consciences, of the men and women of our generation, though the message itself may, indeed must, remain unaltered. The presentation is conditioned in various ways; the content is fixed and unvarying.

II

It is of importance to define our aim in preaching. In a notable book published in 1891 one of America's foremost pulpit orators, Dr. Theodore L. Cuyler, of Brooklyn, posed the question, "What is the chief object of the Christian ministry?", and answered it by saying that "it is to win souls to Jesus Christ". One obvious criticism of that definition, admirable as it is, is that it is an over-simplification of the problem which confronts the preacher. A more recent book from the same side of the Atlantic offers a somewhat fuller answer when

the author lays it down that the preacher "must declare the Faith, proclaim the purpose, and enlist the individual in the redeeming adventure of following the way of Christ". Dr. R. C. Gillie, in his *The Minister in the Modern World*, says that "our work is to give God to men, and to bring men to God. On the one hand we are to be transmitters of truth through whom God may get into closer communication with men, we are to be conductors of the Divine Energy, in some humble sense prophets of the Divine Word. On the other hand, we are to be shepherds, seekers of men who have strayed, bringing them home to the Saviour of the world. We are to be pastors in the full significance of that somewhat shrunken word".

For our present purpose it will be sufficient if we accept as a basis of discussion a two-fold definition of the preacher's aim which, though simple, is not inadequate. In the first place, our task is to bring Christ to those of our fellow-men who as yet are strangers to Him; in the second, it is to build up Christ in those who have already accepted Him. As we seek to fulfil our ministry to these two classes of men we shall find that in each case there are two main lines of approach. In dealing with those who are still outside the Christian fellowship we have at our command two mighty weapons in *declaratory* and *evangelistic* preaching; and in the case of those who are already within the fellowship, two equally effective instruments when rightly used, namely, *expository* and *doctrinal* preaching. These words, *declaratory*, *evangelistic*, *expository*, and *doctrinal*, have an old-fashioned sound. But we have yet to find more expressive terms, and until we do the old ones must once more be pressed into service.

III

As Christian ministers we are called, first and foremost, to a *declaratory* ministry. We are heralds of good news, men entrusted with the greatest and most momentous message the world has ever heard or is ever likely to hear. Our primary function is nothing less than the presentation of God to our fellow-men, and in particular of God as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. For that presentation a preacher is essential, and, be it added, a preacher conscious of a Divine mission, and of Divine empowerment. "How shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in

Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent? ”

Our message is the Gospel, and the word itself is a message. As Adolf Deissmann has reminded us, the possession of this word *gospel* is one of the greatest spiritual treasures entrusted to English-speaking Christendom. And it is a gospel—“ glad tidings of good things ”—that men need to-day more than ever before; not our theorisings and suppositions about life and the universe, interesting and profound as these may be; but a definite message, clear and authoritative, of which, in the first instance at any rate, we are nothing more than the channels by which it is to reach our generation. “ We are not appointed merely to give good advice,” said Dr. J. H. Jowett, “ but to proclaim good news.” Our first duty is to be heralds, not apologists; and it is precisely here that we make some of our most tragic mistakes, and fail most conspicuously. We are so much in love with our splendid arguments about the validity of this, that and the next doctrine that we fondly imagine that by the road of argument we are going to lead men out of the barren wilderness of a God-less existence into the Kingdom of heaven. We need the warning which Dean Swift gave when he said that “ you cannot argue a man out of that which he has not been argued into ”. For every individual who can be convinced by argument there are at least ten, and more probably a hundred or more, who will be won by the Gospel declared as a message to be received, and a fact to be accepted. “ Waste no time in defending your Bible,” said an old worthy, “ *preach* it, and let it defend itself.”

Dr. Gillie, in the book already cited, tells the story of a certain gifted literary critic who was once asked what quality in a preacher he desired above everything. His reply was: “ I want a man who has been with God during the week and who will bring me great chunks of truth about Him on Sunday.” Measured by that standard how far short most of us fall, not only in our week-day living, where failure will scarcely be condoned by the man in the street, who still expects much of a Christian minister, but also in our Sunday preaching, where failure may well have much more serious consequences! Can we honestly say that we have “ great chunks of truth about God ” to offer to our people Sunday by Sunday? Have we a

real gospel to proclaim to them? Some years ago Dr. J. H. Oldham, in his presidential address to the New College, Edinburgh, Theological Society, spoke about "Modern Society and the Task of Theology". In the course of his remarks he expressed the conviction that theology must be developed in certain clearly defined directions if it is not to fail in its task in the present age. He suggested first of all that the basis of Christianity in historical fact as expressed in the doctrine of the Incarnation must be stressed, and secondly, that the Christian mind must recover the truth that the Christian message is primarily a gospel. Many people, he went on to point out, have the misconception that the Christian faith is merely an ethic, and so miss its true significance. That is a salutary reminder, and there are few indeed of us who do not need it to-day.

IV

Evangelistic preaching and *declaratory* are closely akin. Proclamation and evangelism are bound up together, and any attempt to separate them is mistaken, and in the end certain to fail. When we proclaim the Gospel, what we are trying to do is to bring men into touch with Jesus Christ, and in evangelism our aim is the same. In so far as a distinction can be drawn, evangelistic preaching is simply declaratory preaching with an added note of urgency; it is what Richard Baxter had in mind when he spoke of preaching "as a dying man to dying men". All preaching ought to have this note of urgency somewhere in it, but by evangelistic preaching we usually mean that type of preaching in which this note is predominant.

Dr. H. S. Coffin goes so far as to say that "evangelism is the supreme duty of the Christian preacher". In St. Paul's memorable phrase, we must all regard ourselves as "ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us"; and the advice given to Timothy has not yet lost its point: "See that you do the work of an evangelist." To say the least of it, it is nothing short of a tragedy that evangelism has so often been associated with theology of a rather narrow type, and that in most cases evangelistic services mean nothing more to the majority of people than the preaching of a gospel which fails to commend itself to their intelligence, coupled with the singing of hymns even less attractive, and a crude kind of button-holing

utterly repellent to ordinary men and women. That, of course, is a caricature of true evangelism, but we might as well face the fact that in many quarters to-day there does exist a very real prejudice against evangelism, and evangelistic services. It is for us to do what we can to reinstate evangelism in the place of honour which belongs to it by sovereign right. In a deeply spiritual and profoundly practical book published not long ago the author declared that "men are seeking faith as blind men search for light, but the faith they seek must be one that commands their utter allegiance and promises to satisfy their needs of mind and soul and body here and now". It is of the utmost importance that in our evangelism we should offer men just such a faith.

The preacher's task of evangelism finds its classic expression in Bunyan's picture of the man of God in the house of the Interpreter. "Christian", says Bunyan, "saw the picture of a very grave person hang up against the wall; and this was the fashion of it: it had eyes lifted up to heaven, the best of books in his hands, the law of truth written upon his lips, the world was behind its back; and it stood as if it pleaded with men, and a crown of gold did hang over its head." Dr. Robert Stevenson, who takes rank with the finest of Bunyan's commentators, called that passage "one of the most memorable and striking pictures of the Gospel ministry which even English literature—rich on this subject—contains". By way of commentary on the phrase, "it stood as if it pleaded with men", Dr. Stevenson recalled that John Wesley, in his *Journal*, speaks of crying out to a large congregation on one occasion "with all the authority of love"; and of being able to record of another sermon, "My heart was filled with love, my eyes with tears, and my mouth with arguments". Dr. John Kelman, another of Bunyan's more recent commentators, stressed the same point when he wrote, "there are many things that go to make up the work of the ministry, but its essential use is practical. More now than then, perhaps, a many-sided interest and acquaintance with human affairs is involved in its work. All the more necessary is it to remember that the essential reason of this profession is to persuade people to do certain things, and especially one great thing. However wide may be the horizon of its interest, evangelism is at the heart and centre of the ministry".

At the 1937 Oxford Conference on Life and Work, in the

section devoted to the international problem, Viscount Cecil began a notable speech by saying that in his judgment the most important duty of the Church was that of evangelism. He insisted that in a world which denied the chief and central teachings about God, men and the nature of society, by which the Christian religion stands or falls, the first duty is to seek to enlarge the numbers of those who do accept those central truths. The late Dr. William Paton, referring to this speech by Viscount Cecil, said that it was not uncommon to find other lay voices urging this central duty of evangelisation with a simplicity and forthrightness not always found in clerical circles.

V

So much for preaching, whether declaratory or evangelistic, which has for its immediate object the bringing of men into touch with the living God as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. But as has already been indicated, to bring men into touch with God can never be more than half our task as preachers. We must also strive to build men up in the faith, and so we pass to the consideration of what is generally known as *expository* preaching.

Here again there will always be a certain amount of overlapping. Expository preaching, by which is meant the deliberate, careful and continuous endeavour to make plain to men the way and will of God, more especially as these are revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, may be, and indeed should be, declaratory preaching in every sense of the word. In skilful hands it will also be evangelistic preaching of the finest and most persuasive type. Sermons having as their primary aim the nourishing of the saints have before now been the means of awakening some sinner whose slumbers have not been disturbed in the very slightest degree by a score or more of evangelistic sermons specially meant for him. But that does not alter the fact that expository preaching is primarily designed to build up the Christ-life in those who have already accepted Christ and His way.

That such preaching is necessary to-day surely requires no proof. It has become a truism to say that the men and women of our generation do not know the Bible as their fathers did. That is a fact which we as ministers must face, and we shall

deal with it most effectively when we begin by frankly confessing that to some extent we ourselves share in the general ignorance. None of us knows his Bible as he ought to; in more senses than one it is a closed book to us all. Most of us are familiar with Bruce Barton's *The Book Nobody Knows*. "Here is a book," writes Mr. Barton, referring to the Bible, "or more properly a collection of books, which is beyond comparison the world's best-seller. . . . Nearly every home has a copy. . . . It is a book that everybody buys and concerning which almost everybody is ready to engage in debate at the drop of a hat. Yet how many read it? How many know what it really contains?" More recently, Professor Kenneth S. Latourette, of Yale, in a review of the condition of the Church in the Anglo-American world, said concerning the situation in Great Britain: "As a result of the loss of contact with the Church, the majority of the population have become essentially pagan. They have only the vaguest and most inaccurate conception of the Gospel. To them the language of the clergy and of most convinced Christians is meaningless. Because of this religious illiteracy the gap between clergy and laity has widened and historic Christian ideas and phraseology are incomprehensible to all but a minority."

What are we to do about this almost universal ignorance of the Christian faith so characteristic of our age? One thing we can do, and that is to make expository preaching an integral part of our pulpit work; and to make expository preaching really effective we must ourselves have a clear understanding and sure grasp of the Word of God. We cannot make men sure about anything, and least of all about God and His will, until we ourselves are convinced; until, in the words of St. Peter, "we believe and are sure". You may have heard Rousseau's recipe for a love-letter: "To write a good love-letter you will begin without knowing what you are going to say, and end without knowing what you have said." That may be good advice for a love-sick swain, but not for the Christian preacher. Those who approach their task in that spirit will have only themselves to blame when their attempt at expository preaching proves a dismal failure, as most assuredly it will.

As expositors we require both knowledge and conviction. And our knowledge—and this is vitally important—must be more than mere acquaintance with the Bible as a literary document, though that also is requisite. "No man", said Matthew

Arnold, "who knows nothing else, knows even his Bible." We must make ourselves familiar with God's working down through the ages, and particularly with what He is doing in our own day, for example, in the building of the World Church. This knowledge involves a close acquaintance with history, science, literature, biography, art, and indeed every department of human activity. Above all, it calls for a first-hand experience of the life of the ordinary men and women who make up nine-tenths of our congregations. In short, no type of preaching makes greater demands upon the Christian minister than exposition.

VI

Many ministers find *doctrinal* preaching the most difficult of all, but few will deny its importance and urgency. In our generation there is, as has just been pointed out, an almost universal ignorance of the Bible. There is also an abysmal ignorance of the great doctrines of the Christian faith, and for this the ministry must bear no small share of the blame. To repeat the Apostles' Creed is a good thing, but it is a better to make each article of the Creed a living reality for the people who sit in the pews in front of us Sunday by Sunday, and few of us are succeeding in doing that. Because the teaching of doctrine has well-nigh ceased in so many of our churches, "We have", says a recent writer, "an ill-informed Church, often ignorant of, and groping after, fellowship with the Invisible".

How often do we make a sustained effort to familiarise our people with the cardinal tenets of the faith? One continually hears the cry for practical sermons, not theological essays, but as Dr. Coffin once pointed out, "nothing is so practical as doctrine of the right kind. . . . To teach doctrine which sets forth what God is and does opens doors into ampler life with Him". What people object to is not so much the preaching of doctrine as its presentation in a dull, uninteresting way, and wrapped up in technical or archaic language, and the task which confronts us here is the preaching of doctrine in such a way that our people cannot fail to see how important it is, and how closely related to the living issues of the day. Doctrine must be preached because a solid substratum of belief is essential if men are to enjoy the abundant life which is God's intention for them.

We fight shy of the preaching of doctrine because it does require a real effort to deal with some of the great themes involved in such a way as to keep people's attention, and also because those great themes seem by reason of their very immensity to induce in us a kind of inferiority complex. Who are we to presume to deal with such great mysteries? we ask. Ought we not rather to confine ourselves to the simpler things, and the ordinary duties of every-day life, and leave the high themes to those specially qualified to deal with them? It was said of Bishop Phillips Brooks—most unjustly—that “he was a first-rate preacher of second-rank truth”. Many of us seem to have made something like that our ambition. We are content with second-rank truth, and happy if we feel that we are meeting with a fair measure of success in the preaching of it. But surely something more than that is expected of us. “I have been most in the main things,” said Donald Cargill, the Scottish Covenanter, “not that I esteemed the things concerning our times little.” With all our preoccupation with the things of our time, the problems of this present dark and foreboding hour, with all its uncertainty and unsettlement, we are still under a solemn obligation to deal with the main things, the things of eternal significance. To do so is not the least of the duties we owe our people. “I intend”, says Dr. F. W. Boreham in one of his essays, “to proclaim the magnificent verities of the Christian gospel. I shall talk with absolute certainty, and with unwavering confidence, about the sin of man, the love of God, the Cross of Christ.”

Some years ago, Dr. George F. Macleod wrote: “In a day when the Shorter Catechism is no longer taught and the generality of folk have no conception of the ‘scheme of salvation’ (which was an open book to our forefathers), we must discover alternative ways of presenting the Faith as a consistent whole; perhaps by creeds, perhaps by fuller use of the Christian Year, perhaps by the more dramatic presentation of worship.” Whatever the methods we adopt we must ensure that the great truths are being preached and taught so consistently and so convincingly that our people are becoming familiar with them, and that ultimately they will be woven into the very texture of their lives. This is no easy task. A course of sermons on the Apostles' Creed, for example, will demand of the preacher a great deal of hard thought and close concentration, but there

are few things more rewarding either for him or for his people.

Think for a moment of one of the articles of the Creed—that in which we affirm our belief that “Jesus Christ . . . sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead”. How easily the words slip from the tongue! But how often, let us ask ourselves, have we presented our people with a reasoned doctrine of future judgment? Have we been at pains at regular intervals in the course of our ministry to set the doctrine in the light of our teaching of our Lord, or of that of St. Paul? Have we tried to show how the teaching of the Church on this subject has developed through the centuries? At a conference held at Cambridge some time ago, Dr. Welch, the former Director of Religious Broadcasting, said that of six thousand talks and sermons which it had been his duty to read while with the B.B.C., only one had said anything vital about life after death. The late Dr. David Christie of Winnipeg, whose little book on *The Service of Christ* is worth its weight in gold, confessed that his preaching had two focal points, and the first of these was: “What Jesus says about judgment.” He quoted a passage from Dr. Norman Maclean’s address in the Cathedral of Geneva at the opening of the eleventh assembly of the League of Nations on 14th September 1930: “The great truth of the judgment of God is the truth we specially need to grasp in our day. In it lies the whole hope of the world. . . . The Creator of heaven and earth is not a weak sentimentalist, incapable of vindicating justice by visiting the lawless with condign punishment. Justice and judgment are the foundation of His throne.”

We must present our congregations with a reasoned doctrine of judgment. But we must also lead them to consider the meaning, implications and practical bearing of all the great doctrines of the Christian Faith. These are things which closely concern every one of us, and for that reason alone if for no other, doctrinal preaching will always remain an important part of the preacher’s task.

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