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Editorial

INTEGRITY IN PREACHING

MOST preaching is based, in theory at least, on the Bible, however much the preacher is influenced by his own background and tradition. Unfortunately there is a good deal of confusion about the terms Scripture, Authority and Tradition, as illustrated by current discussion of the subject. The last few years has seen the publication of numerous books on these themes, and many church gatherings have addressed themselves to the problems. The Lambeth Conference, still in session as these lines are written, has the subject of the Authority of the Bible prominently on its agenda, and this in turn has led to numerous articles. The everyday life of the Church is affected by the uncertainty, as demonstrated by the rather confused state of many sermons.

In some contemporary preaching one hears a curious anachronism. It would sound as if the preacher were unaware that the last 200 years have radically altered our understanding of the Bible. This has nothing to do with the group commonly called fundamentalists, with whom we are not here concerned, and with whom a different problem exists. Unlike his conservative brethren, the preacher recognizes the results of scholarship in his study, but preaches as if Moses wrote the Pentateuch, David all the Psalms, and God created the world literally in six days. More subtly misleading is the type of sermon reminiscent of Deuteronomic theology, which affirmed that the good are rewarded, the wicked punished. In some way, whether explicitly or by implication, the congregation is assured that Christians are "better" than non-Christians, that the world is white or black according to one's acceptance or rejection of Christianity. In Christ, the believer has no problems, and he is promised a reward, probably a rather material one. This heresy may be carried to such an extent as to make denominational loyalty the basis for the promised reward.

We may suspect that this preaching is based on a limited range of Biblical themes. In a recent article in *The Journal of Bible and Religion*, John A. Cheek speaks of "functional" canons of Scripture. A denomination, a congregation, even an individual tends to limit itself to those passages of Scripture which appeal to it for sentimental or apologetic reasons. Anglicans and others who in theory read all of Scripture in the year's lectionary, are not saved from this error, since preaching tends to neglect the more difficult or less congenial passages. The functional canon may be quite vicious since it may encourage denominational prejudice, as opposed to the expression of worship through forms most familiar. If denominational reward is promised or implied, the vested interests, economic or emotional, in the denomination become that much more unreasoned and unreasonable.

The cause of the above situation, wherever it exists, are manifold. One is the tragic amount of time the clergy are expected to spend in activity and organization, with inevitable detriment to study and thought. Another is the fear of giving offence. Sometimes this is based on real gentleness, sometimes on less worthy feelings, such as unwillingness to "stick one's neck out." Granted that some matters of literary and historical criticism may be red herrings, nonetheless there come times when one must choose who is going to be hurt. The "simple believer" will raise a row with "heretical" or "liberal" preachers. The "pillar of the church" will withdraw his support when he hears what he regards as unbelief from the pulpit. But what about those who are weak in faith, but have learned something of scientific methods and results? They hear in church what they rationally or instinctively know to be at variance with reason and evidence. They can understand perhaps that the Incarnation and Resurrection are profound mysteries of faith, but creation in six days is hard to take. Deuteronomic theology does not fit the facts of the real world in which they must live. Since they are not articulate in religious matters, they do not raise any protest, but, puzzled and offended, quietly drift away.

More important is precisely the uncertainty regarding the nature of Scripture, and of its authority. It is easier to appeal to an apparently infallible book, without raising any questions of error. The rise of the physical sciences, and the permeation of their presuppositions throughout our culture, have made people dependent on concrete facts. A book is a fact and its authority may be weakened if its facts are incorrect. Here again one must risk speaking the truth. Our Lord the Spirit, to paraphrase Charles Williams, permitted sheer intelligence to exist. He permitted the rise of critical rationalism, and saw to its transformation into the exciting synthesis of scientific study and Christian belief. Our minds may not have forged the definition, but the Authority of Scripture is a reality, for in its own terms the Bible bears witness to God's saving acts. The thought-forms need to be interpreted for each new generation, in order that the whole Bible may speak to all men, to the whole man. If we deny our people what our faith and reason know to be true, we limit their grasp of His truth. The Dean of St. Paul's made a wise remark in *The Sunday Times* recently, "There is a danger that *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* may become divorced, which, in the long run, will infect our prayers with unreality." In this matter the verbal truism that the Church works in and for eternity must become a fully accepted fact. The person hurt by the truth is not necessarily lost, unless he chooses to be. It is not the numbers who are attracted or repelled by preaching which is important, but the operation of the Holy Spirit through proclamation of the Gospel. We present the truth; our Lord brings it home to His people in His own way and His own time.

Finally, confusion arises from inadequate evaluation of the tradition in which one is preaching. Protestantism has claimed that ecclesiastical tradi-

tion has little or no authority. If, as is often the case, there is an unconscious tendency to go a step further and deny that one is influenced by traditional patterns of thought, there is real danger. Two recent books, written from entirely different backgrounds, and dealing with different themes, contain important discussions of this issue.

Gabriel Hebert, a member of a religious order in the "High Anglican" tradition, has written *Fundamentalism and the Church of God*. Seldom has profound disagreement been handled in more irenic yet firm manner. The author allows fully for the serious emotional and intellectual gulf which separates schools of thought in the Christian world, but equally clearly shows that much of this is due to human pride and weakness. By insisting that members of a denomination or sect have authority, the sole authority, to interpret the Bible correctly, any group limits the operation of Scripture, and truncates its authority. The value of the differing traditions is that they each emphasize certain necessary truths, but no group can afford to neglect the fuller range of Biblical teaching. Each must learn to evaluate and use what is best in others.

J. D. Benoit, of the Reformed Church in France, points to a similar conclusion. His recent paper, *Liturgical Renewal: Studies in Catholic and Protestant Developments on the Continent*, discusses, among other things, the return of Biblical preaching to some sections of the Roman Catholic Church. This is in line with a number of Papal statements and Encyclicals which call for intensive study of the Bible, and for the reading of Scripture by the laity. The future of this movement is not yet certain since the Curia may at any moment take fright and stop it. Meanwhile, Protestants must recognize that the Word, as well as the Sacraments, is being given a prominent place by many Roman Catholics. Benoit goes on to discuss the power of tradition in non-Roman denominations, and believes that failure to allow for the influence of tradition helps to keep the churches from better understanding of their common bond in love and worship of God.

From these widely different traditions, Anglo-Catholic and Reformed, we are reminded that the ultimate authority is God's Word to man. The Word must direct us; it is not we who must direct the Word. It is a healthy sign that so many people are concerned with the question of the Bible's authority, and with self-criticism of their use of it in their own circles. By the time this issue is published, the Anglican Bishops will have released their report, which should be of interest to the whole Church. We look forward to the appearance of many more books and articles to help us interpret the great doctrines of Scripture, Authority and Tradition. Meanwhile all of us who preach or teach must examine our own attitudes. The practical issues of preaching and teaching need not wait for final conclusions enshrined in formulae.

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