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A Plea for Extemporaneous Preaching.

BY THE REV. HAROLD FORD, M.A., LL.D., D.C.L.

AS an evangelizing power the Church of England is weakest in one of her main functions—viz., that of preaching. Not that human souls are not hungering now as ever for the Gospel of Christ, but that men inadequately equip themselves as ambassadors of Christ, and the kingdom of God is immeasurably the poorer for it.

A prominent leader of thought in the Church of England says, speaking of the clergy in general: "Until the Church pays more attention to her preaching, she must be content to see men drift, as they are drifting, away from her fellowship. The Church is bleeding to death among the masses, mainly on account of her incompetent preachers." Many causes combine to make present-day preaching morally and spiritually inefficient; but if there is one cause which more than any other detracts from the power of the pulpit, it is the stereotyped practice of *reading* sermons—that servile adherence to the manuscript—which stifles every germ of eloquence, thereby weakening the preacher's power of impressibility for good.

"Depend upon it," said Dr. Döllinger to Mr. Gladstone, "if the Church of England is to make way, and to be a thoroughly National Church, the clergy must give up the practice of preaching from written sermons."

Much of the teaching of the Church of England is by the aid of a symbolism through which devout spirits can the better discern their Lord, and the absence of which would denude its services of an element in worship which is at once beautiful, impressive, and devotionally serviceable. But if the Church is to be, as she is destined to be, that mighty moving force—the evangelizing power of the world—it is by the ministry of the Word, and not by her ritual, that that end is to be accomplished. Powerful, too, as is the influence of music, yet music with all her charms does not, and cannot, possess the subtle, irresistible power of the human voice as the exponent of the Divine will—*i.e.*, of preaching, when the preacher becomes the mouthpiece of God.

And is it not by the *spoken* word that the evangelization of the world is to be accomplished? The written word will never supersede the spoken utterance. There is a power, a potency in a living man and a living voice which, in a like degree, is possessed by nothing else in the world, as a method of communicating thought and feeling. Spirit reaches spirit through the *spoken* word more potently than is possible through the printed page, or through the medium of a manuscript, which interposes a more or less impenetrable barrier between the preacher and his hearers.

“The manuscript,” says Bishop Boyd-Carpenter, “acts like a screen, and seems to keep the fire off. A man needs a great deal of personal force and fire to make himself felt through it.” That extempore preaching carries with it a far greater power of impressibility than a sermon read from a manuscript is too obvious to need confutation. In preaching from a manuscript there is almost invariably a stilted manner, or unnaturalness of delivery, resulting in a drowsy uniformity of tone and cadence, which is more or less inseparable from the manner of a *reader*. Moreover, a reader as such never excites the same sympathetic impulse in the minds of his hearers; whereas, a *speaker*, untrammelled with a manuscript, has ample scope for the expression of the personal element in thought and feeling; hence he will speak with true naturalness, greater vivacity, and intenser earnestness and warmth of expression—qualities in which alone lies a speaker’s power of impressibility and influence over his hearers.

This is, of course, based on the assumption that he has to his utmost prepared himself, intellectually and otherwise, else he will court the failure he deserves. Further, a sermon preached without a manuscript must perforce be mentally absorbed before it can filter through the mind of the preacher. And it is this mental absorption and filtration alone that can impart to it the preacher’s vital force and intellectual energy which, to the same extent, is impossible to him who is rigidly confined to the use of a manuscript.

The real danger which besets most preachers who read their

sermons is that of not re-absorbing them in their minds. Such sermons have no vital virtue in them.

The tendency of reading habitually from a manuscript is to suppress the personal element in preaching, thereby weakening a preacher's power of impressibility.

To preach without manuscript is, moreover, the more Apostolic way of preaching. We cannot conceive of St. Paul taking out a Greek manuscript when he addressed the cultured and critical Athenians on Mars' Hill. "Oh, but St. Paul was inspired!" says an objector. Granted. So is every true preacher of the Gospel inspired, though not in the same degree. "There are diversities of gifts, but the same spirit;" and that self-same spirit which inspired St. Paul operates in and through every man who has at heart the salvation of human souls, the passionate desire to preach the living Christ. Not that every man may become a pulpit orator, or even a great preacher, for there are "diversities of gifts." Yet it is within the power of every man to become not only an impressive but an eloquent extempore preacher, if he fulfil the necessary conditions, and if by eloquence we mean no mere tricks of speech, or artifices of oratory, but the speaking out from the inner man of soul to soul with that burning fiery eloquence which is flung direct from the heart of the speaker into the heart of the hearer. We are well aware that the very word "extempore," and more particularly when applied to preaching, excites in the minds of many a feeling of suspicion, if not a positive prejudice against it, since it is too frequently associated with that fatal and debilitating fluency of words behind which there is an abject mental poverty, than which nothing is more disastrous to successful preaching. Nothing in a preacher is more deserving of condemnation than the miserable fluency of the mere hack of the rostrum.

Before proceeding further, let us endeavour to arrive at an accurate definition of terms. The connotation of the term "extempore preaching," as popularly understood, presupposes the absolute mastery beforehand of the substance of the sermon, leaving the language to the inspiration of the moment. To preach without any preparation whatever is "like a schism,

either a necessity or a sin." At times, of course, unforeseen circumstances may arise which justify it. But, in all other cases, it is little short of profanity to offer to God that which costs us nothing.

It is an unmistakable law that "in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." And to nothing is this law more applicable than to that of extempore preaching. There is no greater fallacy than to suppose it will save the preacher labour. It involves infinite labour to achieve anything approaching success. Now, there is a numerous class of men who, without submitting themselves to that patient, laborious preparation which is absolutely indispensable, attempt to preach without notes, but who ignominiously fail, as they deserve to do. These either culpably neglect efficiently to prepare themselves from sheer intellectual indolence, arising from a low conception of the ministerial office; or, they are those who, not without presumption, rely upon the unpremeditated speech which was promised to the Apostles in *emergencies*, as a gift of special inspiration. "But it is presumption, not faith," as Bishop Gott observes, "to expect help when we have neglected to prepare our best."

St. Paul's exhortation to Timothy conclusively indicates that premeditation and study were needed *ordinarily*. No uninspired men can, therefore, presume on the same promise without diligent study and prayerful meditation on *ordinary* occasions. It is the abuse, not the right use, of extempore preaching which has merited the scorn it so justly provokes.

Let a preacher bring to the pulpit a tithe of that preparation which is deemed indispensable for any other profession, and without which they dare not consider themselves duly qualified, and we shall soon cease to hear the outcry against the deficiencies and delinquencies of modern preaching. Let every minister henceforth regard himself as consecrated for the loftiest and most glorious purpose of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ, and the evangelization of the world will be immeasurably nearer its accomplishment, "when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."