

“We Preach . . .”

IT is customary to emphasise the latter part of this text, yet the first two words are also significant. They are a revelation of a large part of early Christian life, they suggest the secret, on the human plane, of much of Christianity's progress in the world, and they bring a very necessary reminder to us in this modern world.

The subject of this article, then, is preaching; and the article is written because preaching, which has been the glory and the power particularly of the Free Churches, is subject to much criticism and doubt to-day. Are we justified in giving the sermon such a central place? Is it right to demand so much of the minister's time and strength for the preparation of preaching? Or must we, as Free Churches, reorientate all our conceptions of worship?

We should surely think of this problem in the light of history, so we turn first to the New Testament. We can no longer claim that the injunctions of the New Testament are authoritative for every detail of our Church organisation, regardless of changing habits of thought and differing circumstances. But we cannot afford to neglect the emphasis of the early Church and the results which issued therefrom. And the emphasis of the early Church was on preaching.

The “Formgeschichte” method of approach to the New Testament has done us good service in making this emphasis clear. In his book, *From Tradition to Gospel*, M. Dibelius traces the preservation of many of our Gospel narratives to this widespread preaching. He quotes the opening verses of Luke's Gospel and then stresses the phrase, “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.” These were the people who had delivered the stories of Jesus, and they formed one group. The eyewitnesses were the ministers of the word, i.e., “they were missionaries, preachers and teachers who carried the Gospel of Christ abroad in order to win the world” (p. 12). Dibelius adds, “missionary purpose was the cause and preaching was the means of spreading abroad that which the disciples of Jesus possessed as recollections” (p. 23). This is printed in italics, and thus is emphasised.

This is perhaps one of the least disputed and disputable parts of the method of “Formgeschichte.” It means that the Gospels themselves are evidence of the immense preaching activity in the early Church. The picture which it gives is in thorough agreement with the picture drawn by Luke in Acts. Luke will tell the story of the disciples as they fulfil the com-

mand, "ye shall be *witnesses* of Me . . ." Then throughout Acts we see what a large place preaching had in Christian life. Luke takes the trouble to give long speeches, e.g. Peter on the day of Pentecost (ii. 14-36), Peter after the healing of the lame man (iii. 12-26), Stephen (vii. 2-53), Paul at Antioch in Pisidia (xiii. 16-41). Several shorter speeches are also recorded, and together these examples of preaching occupy a comparatively large part of the story of Acts. Luke surely gives the feeling of the early Church in the answer of Peter to the council, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (iv. 20). Is Luke exaggerating or writing sober history when he states, "And daily in the temple and in every house they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ" (v. 42)? The apostles refused to let the burden of a growing organisation distract them from preaching. "It is not reason that we should leave the word of God and serve tables" (vi. 2). Persecution gave the opportunity of more extensive preaching. "They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word" (viii. 4 cf. viii. 5, xi. 20). Immediately after his conversion, Paul "preached Christ in the synagogues" (ix. 20), and after that Paul is always the preacher. So Luke leads on to his triumphant conclusion—Paul in Rome, "preaching the Kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him."

It may be argued that in the letters of Paul, which are our earliest Christian documents, this picture is not so clear, that there we see a greater concern about affairs of Church organisation and discipline, about sacraments, about conduct and beliefs. But against that we have to remember that the epistles themselves are a substantiation of the emphasis on preaching. For the epistles are the addresses of the absent Paul to the Churches. They bear all the marks of preaching. They were dictated and all the passion and tenderness, the love for Christ and the love for men which must have thrilled in Paul's preaching, shows itself even in the written word. Is not the conclusion of Romans viii. great preaching? There is no doubt at all about the emphasis in Paul's ministry. It was upon preaching. "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel" (1 Cor. ix. 16). "We are ambassadors for Christ as though God did beseech you by us" (2 Cor. v. 20). Sacraments were subordinate to preaching. Paul says "Christ sent me not to baptise, but to preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. i. 17). And it is not without significance that Paul can speak of the Lord's Table as a proclamation of His death (1 Cor. xi. 26). He uses the word *καταγγέλλω* which is a common word for preaching, c.f. Acts iv. 2, xiii. 5, xv. 36, xvi. 7, 1 Cor. ii. 1, ix. 14.

This emphasis was, of course, not peculiar to Paul. Even when preaching ceased to be entirely missionary and was devoted also to the instruction of the increasing number of converts, it still held its central place. Scholarship has now recovered from the disease occasioned by the increased knowledge of the Mystery Religions and it is recognising again the quieter and healthier elements which were the chief elements in early Christian life. These quieter, and therefore little mentioned, elements centred in what the Germans call the "Wortgottesdienst," which is usually inaccurately translated, "Word-of-God service" and possibly means no more—and no less!—than "preaching service." This was modelled on the synagogue worship where the chief place was given to prayer, Scripture and preaching.

So from all sides we get a consistent picture. The early Christian Church was a preaching Church, gaining its successes by preaching, and to a large extent maintaining its faith through preaching. In this, as in so much else, the Church caught the prophetic note of the Old Testament and followed the example of Jesus Himself, who came "preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God."

There is no space here to deal with the history of the Church adequately, but the thesis could well be argued that the chief power of the Church, humanly speaking, has been the power of preaching, and that where this power has been emphasised and developed the Church has made abiding contributions to our humanity and has extended the Kingdom of God most rapidly. In saying that, of course, one naturally refers to preaching which is something more than eloquence and learning. The preaching which is the power of the Church is that preaching which is created when men fulfil the highest vocation of the preacher, feeling themselves to be indeed the messengers of God charged with the universally valid, necessary and unique message of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ. Where this conviction has been a burning and shining light in the souls of men, whether they have been learned or not, there the Church has possessed a tremendous power.

We take a rapid glance through some sections of the Church's history. At the opening of the Middle Ages it was missionary preaching that to a large extent gave the Church its power. "There is no more striking proof of the vitality of the Church in the collapsing Empire and the opening Middle Age than the vigour and success with which it undertook the extension of Christianity." (W. Walker, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 195.) It is at this period that we read of the glorious work of the Irish and Scottish monks in spreading the Gospel in these Islands and also on the Continent. Columba, Columbanus.

and with them Boniface are names which stand out. This period witnessed, too, missionary work from Rome, extending even to this country. At a later date were constant revolts against the deadness and laxity of ecclesiastical religion, and all expressed themselves in fervent preaching. Their climax is perhaps to be seen in Bernard of Clairvaux. “The first preacher of his age and one of the greatest of all ages, he moved his fellows profoundly from whatever social class they might come.” (W. Walker, p. 247.)

Humbler movements, too, can be traced, bringing a simple non-ecclesiastical faith to men. So we find a genuine Christianity in the movements of the Cathari and Waldenses, movements which were increased almost entirely by earnest preaching. The power of this popular preaching was far from negligible. “The Cathari and Waldenses profoundly affected the mediæval Church. Out of an attempt to meet them by preachers of equal devotion, asceticism and zeal, and of greater learning, grew the order of the Dominicans.” It was the aim of the Dominicans to win the world by preaching. The earlier days of this order illustrate the power of preaching and the order produced some illustrious names, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas among the theologians, Eckhart and Tauler among mystics, and Savonarola, of whom it has been said, “at the end of the fifteenth century the angry voice of the Old Testament prophets sounds again the Dominican Savonarola of Florence, the stern champion of God and freedom, whom God had set in grand antithesis to the most reprobate of all popes, Alexander the Sixth.” (H. v. Schubert, *Outlines of Church History*, p. 242.) With the Dominicans we associate the Franciscans and we think especially of “that greatest and most lovable saint of the Middle Age, St. Francis of Assisi.” Here again is the emphasis on preaching and so on missionary work, Francis himself setting the example by his missionary tour in Egypt. Out of these two orders came the preaching friars, who exerted a great influence during the age preceding the Reformation, not the least being “a great strengthening of religion among the laity.” As the Reformation draws nearer this popular preaching becomes more widespread, e.g. Wiclif and the Lollards in England, John Huss in Prague. The influences of this preaching are probably incalculable. Throughout Europe also the Anabaptist movement, which included many fiery and strange fanatics, but also many sincere and genuine disciples of Christ, was spreading. This was essentially a popular movement, and its increase was due in large measure to the humble preachers who spread its ideas.

But all this popular and spontaneous emphasis on preaching reached a climax in the new conception of worship which the

Reformation brought. Luther himself was a fine preacher and he put preaching now in the centre of worship. Worship in the evangelical Church was growing chaotic, so in 1523 Luther issued his "Ordering of Worship." In this he emphasised the central place of preaching. "Luther held that great freedom was permissible in details of worship so long as the 'Word of God' was kept central" (W. Walker, p. 352). This emphasis on preaching was shared by the other reformers, Zwingli and Calvin. Geneva, of course, became a centre for the training of ministers and in 1559 Calvin founded the "Genevan Academy," a Seminary from which ministers were sent throughout Europe. The fresh revitalising experiences, the rediscovery of a personal faith in Christ and of New Testament teaching inevitably led to and found its expression in preaching. A new centre was thus given to worship, and over against the former centrality of sacrament and priest, the Reformation brought this new emphasis on preaching.

From this time onwards in England preaching plays a great and dominant part in religious life. The strength of the Independents was in their preaching, which showed strong fundamental thinking, and a personal grasp of a great message. The reality of faith, which ritual and sacraments had failed to impart, was given through preaching. The Methodist revival is, of course, an outstanding example in this country's history and indeed in all history of the power of preaching. And in spite of all modern criticism of Victorian religion, we have still to acknowledge the greatness of many of its preachers, to whose labours much that is permanent in our Christian life to-day must be attributed. The strength of the remarkable Group Movement to-day lies in the fact that so many of its adherents are willing to bear their testimony—and that is preaching! It is surely significant of the power of preaching that those Churches and times in which it has been emphasised, have witnessed great missionary activity. The preaching Churches are the missionary Churches. And in all missionary work obviously the proclamation and teaching of the Gospel plays a dominant part, together with the practical demonstration of the message in medical and other work.

Now to sum up this brief survey of history, it may, I think, rightly be claimed that effective preaching has been a mark of vital Christianity. The best periods of the Church have been those times when preaching has taken a central place; and preaching has been in itself a great power in further kindling true Christian life. Preaching demands personal experience, strong thinking and genuine conduct; thus it has held a commanding position in the life of the Church. Christianity has

been strongest when Christ's disciples have striven to fulfil their Lord's command, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations."

Finally, we think again of our own age. No one, I think, would dare to claim that this age is in every respect unique. We may have our peculiar problems and difficulties, but the motives and responses of human hearts are the same to-day as they have ever been. We can still read the tragedies of Greece, the Book of Job and the plays of Shakespeare and find ourselves reflected therein. It is a common fallacy to talk of the modern world as if it had no connection with preceding ages. Therefore, it is the argument of this article that the real power of the Church to-day is still in sincere and vital preaching. In view of the essential likeness of human nature in all generations, we may surely claim that the strong living proclamation of the great Christian message, personally experienced and related to pressing problems, will still exercise all its power in human life. This has been the distinctive feature and contribution of our Free Church worship, and we need to preserve it!

Now if this principle of the centrality of preaching in our Church life is accepted, it will obviously influence many of our activities.

- (a) It is a principle upon which the elaboration of worship can proceed. The bare worship of former Independency was perhaps nearer true worship than the curious jumble of nice customs, which is sometimes and not infrequently presented to the worshipper in the modern Free Church; for that bare service was the clear, however inadequate, expression of a definite conception of worship. Poverty of worship no one desires, but elaboration must be based on firm principle.
- (b) It provides a standard by which to estimate the various activities of the Church, of the individual members within the Church, and especially of the minister himself.
- (c) It will determine the structure of our buildings. If preaching is to have a permanent home it must be an auditorium, a place where listeners can both see and hear easily. The old Baptist Bethel was ugly but its simplicity and the central position of its pulpit did symbolise its inner conception of worship. Symbolism is not elaborate ornament, but the expression of spiritual conceptions in visible things. We should express our conception of worship in simple, dignified chapels, in the centrality of the pulpit, and that means Scripture and preacher. There is no lack of beauty here, and we need not be afraid of being out of touch with modern life. Indeed, modern buildings themselves are

notable for simplicity and strength of design, and that is true dignity.

We have a great heritage of preaching and of Church life centred upon preaching. In this we are building upon the foundation of Apostles and Prophets. A firm foundation.

L. G. CHAMPION.

Some Baptist Hymnists from the Seventeenth Century to Modern Times, by Carey Bonner (Kingsgate Press, 3s. 6d.).

Here is an admirable gift book for ministers, choirmasters and others. In part it consists of the four articles contributed to our pages in 1937, but there is much new material, including chapters on American hymn writers. In addition, in place of the first lines of many hymns, full texts are now given. Our readers appreciated the four articles; this volume will give them even greater pleasure.

Heroes of the Baptist Church, by Ronald W. Thomson (Kingsgate Press, 2s.).

Mr. Thomson believes that the story of the growth of the Baptist Church in this land is one of absorbing interest, and that it is more interesting still when seen through the great personalities concerned. He possesses an attractive style, and his sketches of the pioneers, of the men who suffered persecution, of the men who led the advance, of those who bore the torch, and of others, will fascinate the young people for whom the volume has been written. It is sound historically, and can be commended without reserve.