

Rediscoveries About Preaching

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PREACHING stands higher in the esteem of churchmen to-day than at any time since the turn of the century. Forty years ago I was ordained. More than half of the intervening years I have spent in teaching ministers of tomorrow. Especially in recent days I have noted five trends that make me hope for better preaching in years to come. If anyone felt disposed to look on the darker side of things he could point out ways in which pulpit work still falls short. As a man grows older, however, he ought to think much about Carlyle's "Everlasting Yea." So let us consider five ways in which preaching tends to become relevant to the needs of our day. Since no one of the five seems wholly new, we may call them rediscoveries.

I

At many a divinity school note the rediscovery of the preacher. In the eyes of both professors and students he bids fair to become the most important figure in the Protestant Church. His work in the pulpit seems to many of us the most important thing he does for God and men. Forty years ago a teacher of practical theology in the States would scarcely have made such a claim. In those days many of us kept trying in vain to discover or devise acceptable substitutes for preaching as the main concern of the parish minister. Now we know better. In every divinity school abreast of the times, this rediscovery has begun to affect each of the major departments.

Let us begin with the teaching of theology. Contrast the methods of instruction to-day with those of forty years ago. For example, listen to Professor H. H. Farmer, of Westminster College, Cambridge. As a professor of theology he has written one of the ablest modern books about preaching. In the first chapter, and in the opening paragraph, this divine speaks to students of theology. Other theologians, such as Dr. F. W. Dillistone, would agree heartily :

" If one were asked to indicate in the briefest possible way the most central and distinctive trends in contemporary Christian theology, one would be tempted to answer, ' The rediscovery of the significance of preaching '."

Most professors of the New Testament would agree with Dr. Farmer. To many of us Professor C. H. Dodd, of Cambridge University, stands second to none in this field. In his book, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*¹, he has led readers everywhere to look on the apostles first of all as preachers, and on the New Testament as largely the fruitage of apostolic preaching. This book also throws new and welcome light on other things practical, notably evangelism.

Old Testament teachers have followed George Adam Smith and other British scholars in making a similar rediscovery. These scholars

¹ See *The Servant of the Word*, by H. H. Farmer.

² Hodder, London, 1936.

look on the prophets as the mightiest men of the olden time, and first of all, as preachers. Dr. Raymond Calkins, of Cambridge, Mass., has sent out an able work on *The Modern Message of the Minor Prophets*¹. In the spirit of this and other current books we often sing at an ordination service a hymn by Denis Wortman, "God of the prophets, bless the prophets' sons." In that prayer set to music we ask the God of wisdom to make the ordinands first of all preachers.

Church historians have made a similar rediscovery. At Duke University Professor Ray C. Petry has issued in translation a substantial volume of medieval sermons, under the strange title, *No Uncertain Sound*². He rightly insists that both teachers and students of preaching ought to know its history, not least during the Middle Ages. Forty years ago a professor of church history in the States would have had difficulty in finding a publisher, and a publisher would not have expected such a volume to pay the cost of production. How the times do change, and often for the better!

Only one department remains, and that the practical. In most divinity schools of other days this seemed much the weakest part of our seminary work. Now we practical men give thanks that our colleagues no longer look on the study of preaching as almost a waste of time, and on practical theology as a sort of comic supplement to the curriculum. In fact, we hope to see the day when they will look on some of us as intellectually their equals.

II

In the pastor's study, note the rediscovery of the teacher. Forty years ago professors and students thought about preaching largely in terms of great sermons, or else as pulpit oratory. Now the man in the pulpit tends to look on his work there as the interpretation of life to-day, in light that comes from God to-day. This rediscovery of an old truth has come partly because of World War II. There our chaplain sons found among Protestant young men an appalling degree of religious illiteracy. Hence one of our ablest preachers and writers, Dr. Bernard Iddings Bell, reports many a returning chaplain as declaring:

"If ever I get back into a parish again I shall teach and teach and teach. Everything that goes on that does not teach I shall regard as superfluous. I shall not call except to teach, nor preach except to teach, nor pay attention to guilds except to teach, nor go into a vestry meeting except to teach."³

From a different point of view many of our laymen sense the need of a popular teaching ministry, especially in the pulpit. They have enjoyed the sort of inspirational messages they have often heard during the last generation or two. Even so, many laymen now insist on bringing their brains to church, and on keeping them busy there. They wish to know what modern men and women should believe; how they ought to live, and what they can hope for amid these dreadful

¹ Harper, N.Y., 1946.

² Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1948.

³ See *The Christian Century*, Chicago, October 11, 1944.

days. Something of their feeling appears in a book by a seminary professor of sociology, Murray H. Leiffer, of Chicago.¹

This book grew out of the replies to a questionnaire that the professor sent to Methodist laymen throughout our Middle West. Four out of five of those laymen expressed a desire for sermons from the Bible. One response seems typical of many: "We want well-prepared, well-presented sermons, mostly biblical in nature." They make clear, however, that they desire no post-mortem preaching. They wish the man in the pulpit to present the truths and the duties of the Bible in the best terms of our day, and then to show what practical difference these teachings ought to make out on the farm or up in the office, here and now. In short, more of a popular teaching ministry!

In order to do this kind of pulpit work many returning chaplains have come to our divinity schools for "refresher courses." Never have so many mature men crowded into our classrooms. Never have our students shown so much concern about "what to believe," and "what to preach." Now that these men have been going out into parish work they have begun to set forth Christian doctrine in terms of to-day. For various reasons they have found the task both difficult and fascinating. They have met the difficulty of translating theological abstractions into the "plain talk" of the man in the street. They have also tasted the joys of feeding minds and hearts with something more satisfying than the inspirational talks of days before World War II.

The same holds true of sermons about Christian ethics in terms of to-day. Partly because of the War, pastors everywhere find a host of lax ideas about gambling and relations between the sexes. These young interpreters may not talk much about the Social Gospel, under that heading, but they feel a concern to make every community a worthy place to rear little boys and girls. These pastors also wish men and women of every race to share equally in the bounty of God's good earth, and to bask equally in the sunshine of His favour. Difficult as these interpreters find the task of dealing with Christian doctrine, still harder do they find that of setting forth Christian duty in terms of to-day. But when has the difficulty of a task prevented a brave man from doing his duty?

The resulting sermons about what to believe and how to live often leave much to be desired. When a young man engages to deliver at least one teaching message every week—except during the mid-summer holiday season—he soon finds that he needs something he has not received in school. He needs to know God, and to understand people, as neither God nor men appear in many of our books and in much of our teaching. Somehow or other he must learn with Ezekiel of old how to make dry bones live and march.

III

In the Church at large behold a trend that seems to many of us the most important of all. Note the rediscovery of the Bible. This we have already seen in passing, and we shall continue to refer to it, for

¹ See *The Layman Looks at the Minister*, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, New York and Nashville, 1947, p. 50.

it has to do with all the other aspects of the present subject. Forty years ago at the divinity school we devoted much attention to the Holy Scriptures. Rightly we sought to discover who wrote the various portions, and many other facts of both the higher and the lower criticism. Now we insist that with these tools in hand the young minister ought to become an interpreter of the Book. Alas, many an older minister discovers that he never has learned how to preach from the Bible. "With joy shall ye draw water from the wells of salvation." Yea, verily; but "thou hast nothing to draw with, and that well is deep." Note here "the preacher's forgotten word, How?"

According to Dr. W. R. Matthews, Dean of St. Paul's :

"The whole Christian faith has to be thought out again in the light of the new knowledge and has to be stated in terms more intelligible to the man of to-day. Nothing could be more evident to the one who moves about among his fellows than that, to the majority of them, the traditional phrases and concepts of theology are almost unmeaning. They ring no bell in the thinking of our contemporaries. The first necessity for any Christian advance is to make clear what Christian belief means and what kind of life it involves. . . . We need preachers who could do for this generation what Robertson of Brighton did for his."¹

What did Robertson preach, and how? During his six years at that seaside resort young Robertson preached regularly from the Bible, always in terms of his day. In the morning he would take a text, and deal with it in its setting. At the second service he would single out a longer passage. In true expository fashion he worked his way through Genesis, Samuel, the Acts, and Corinthians.

Whatever the biblical source of the sermon, that young interpreter used it as a message from God to the friends in the pews. Thus he ministered both to the élite, such as Lady Byron, and to the common folk, including many housemaids. During the past hundred years he has become probably the mightiest influence for good in the pulpit of the English-speaking world. His *Sermons*, four volumes now available in one, afford young students of preaching a succession of object lessons showing how to use the Old Book in meeting the needs of men and women.

Not every young pastor has made this rediscovery of the Bible as an inexhaustible source of materials for sermons to-day. Many clergymen, some of them old enough to know better, keep scurrying hither and thither in quest of something to preach. They attend conferences and devour books, in the hope that someone will uncover a lode of preaching ore, and perhaps do all the spade work that enters into the making of a sermon. Such dealers in second-hand goods know little about the joys of the man who fences off a part of the Bible and then does his own digging.

Over at Princeton University the newer buildings resemble those at

¹ *Strangers and Pilgrims*, Nisbet, London, 1946, p. 6.

² See *The Soul of Frederick W. Robertson*, by my son, James R. Blackwood, Harper, N.Y., 1947.

Oxford. The stone all comes from a quarry here in town, within a mile of the University. Nowhere else could the architects and the contractors find stone that would lend itself so admirably to the needs of those edifices. Forty years ago, alas, other men erected on that campus a number of structures that do not compare with the recent buildings. For those older halls the men in charge imported stone from another state. All of this suggests a lesson for the young minister; but in one of those older buildings the late Henry Van Dyke used to insist that a wise man never tells a tale without having in view a moral, and that he never has to tag the moral on at the end of the tale.

IV

The next rediscovery may seem anti-climactic. Even so, it calls for attention. In the place of worship note the hearer; that is, the friend in the pew. (We ought also to think about him at worship, and about the sermon as a part of public worship, but that would lead us into fields where the readers of *THE CHURCHMAN* have much to teach many of us over here.) In earlier days we thought of preaching as "truth through personality." The teaching of the subject had to do mainly with the substance of the sermon and the personality of the preacher. If the man in the pulpit stressed the former, he strove to become a sermonizer; if the latter, a pulpit orator. Consciously or unconsciously, one man preached for the salvation of his sermon, and the other for the prestige of the preacher.

At last many of us have begun to rediscover what we never should have forgotten: the preparation of a message for the pulpit ought always to begin with a sense of some need that fills the heart of the friend in the pew. Of course, the man in the pulpit ought to preach about God in Christ, whom we mortals know through the Holy Spirit. At the same time the interpreter ought to sense the needs of the world for which the Redeemer died, and over which He longs to rule. All of this ought to relate itself to the interests of the lay hearer. At times the pulpit may deal with world brotherhood or world peace, the Christian cure for race prejudice or the Bible antidote for fear. Whatever the issue, the man in the study ought to put himself in the place of the friend who will sit in the pew next Sunday morning, and listen for a word of hope from the written Word of God. For this point of view hear Dr. George A. Buttrick:

"'If religion ends with the individual, it ends.' Verily! But if it does not begin with the individual, it never begins, and has no being. The seed of all things human is selfhood. Personality is the pole around which the electrons of the social life revolve."¹

In the proper sense of the words, the best preaching of our day has become hearer-centred. In other days a pulpiteer may have thought of himself as a central sun, with the lay officers and the common people as a lot of satellites. If so, he may not in youth have heard the warning of James Denney at Glasgow: "No man can bear witness to Christ and to himself at the same time."¹ To-day a self-respecting

¹ See *Jesus Came Preaching*, Scribner, N.Y., 1931, p. 115.

preacher calls no special attention to himself. With the late Charles E. Jefferson the interpreter feels that the best speaking voice never is heard. A man prepares the sermon and then delivers it so as to guide the hearer in doing the will of God.

All of these matters have much to do with psychology. Partly for this reason Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick has written about them with practical wisdom. In *Harper's Magazine* for July, 1928, he published an article that has done much to change the trend of preaching in the States. Under the heading, "What is the Matter with Preaching?" he called for "co-operative" pulpit work. By that he meant "animated conversation" that consists in talking things over with the friend in the pew. This kind of sermon has to do with a problem that concerns the hearer to-day, either at his work or at his fireside. The problem may seem vast, but the interpreter shows how it relates to the individual to-day.

This rediscovery has come in part because of the emphasis on pastoral counselling with burdened souls, one by one. In the latter part of that magazine article Dr. Fosdick speaks about "the final test of a sermon's worth: how many individuals wish to see the preacher alone?" How many of the hearers long for more light and leading about the truth or duty that shone out through the sermon? From this point of view, how many of us preach effectively? If we do not, as a rule, perhaps we have never learned from the Lord Jesus the "art of plain talk." "He that received the seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word and understandeth it" (Matt. xiii. 23).

V

In the pulpit note the rediscovery of the speaker. By this I mean the pastor who delivers the message. As a teacher of homiletics, and not of public speaking, I believe that the popular effectiveness of many a sermon depends more largely on the delivery than on anything else. The value, under God, lies chiefly in the truth from the Book and also in the spirit of the interpreter, but the effect on the hearer depends largely on the skill of the speaker. This fact our divinity schools have begun to rediscover. They no longer look down on the professor of public speaking as an inferior teacher who has no right to sit at the main table.

Our laymen have become increasingly critical of sermon delivery. As a witness, hear Bishop Fred P. Corson of the Methodist Church. In the Philadelphia area he has jurisdiction over more than a thousand ministers and pastoral charges. He says that laymen object to preaching mainly for three reasons. First, and most of all, because of weakness in delivery; also because of undue sameness, or lack of variety; and because of weakness of style. Often these faults go together. If anyone wished to ascertain the reason for much non-attendance at church, he might find that men object to the way the parson delivers his message. In almost every city they flock to hear the man who can say: "The Lord God hath given me the tongue of

¹ See *Studies in Theology*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1895, p. 161.

the learned, that I should know how to speak" (Isa. l. 4, a free rendering).

Why do the laymen of to-day feel more critical about preaching than the hearers of other days? Partly because of the radio. During the War they could sit at home and hear Mr. Winston Churchill, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, or President F. D. Roosevelt. To-day over the air anyone can listen to metropolitan divines who know how to speak. Now that television has been coming into home after home, the local pastor must also meet that form of competition. Even if he loves the Lord and loves the Book, if he loves people and loves to preach, still he should know how to speak. Otherwise more than a few of his own church members will give the House of the Lord "absent treatment." On the other hand, if the man in the pulpit has mastered the fine art of public address, he need not fear the competition of any brilliant stranger who speaks over the air from a distant city. In time the local pastor may even learn to thank God for the radio and for all it has done to make his lay friends love the right sort of public speaking.

In view of all these facts and trends, what shall we conclude? We have been listening to voices more than a few. Now let me speak out of my own heart. As a friendly observer of pulpit and pew I feel that the time has come for a revival of preaching as the finest of all the arts. Looking out over the Church, both at home and abroad, I believe that the day of better preaching has already begun; but I hope that we who teach in divinity schools shall not rest content with the sort of Lilliputian advances we have made in recent years. What then can we do to ensure better preaching in the Church of tomorrow? I speak mainly about my homeland, but I have reason to believe that much the same conditions prevail over in Britain.

Let us begin by strengthening our schools of theology. This should hold true in every department, and most of all in the practical. In many a divinity school the ablest teachers occupy other chairs. For example, two of the leading ecclesiastical statesmen in one of our major denominations recently told me that none of their seminaries had been doing a first-class piece of work in homiletics. Who can wonder? Often we elect to this chair a man of middle age, gifted as a preacher, but with no experience in the classroom, and no mastery of church history as it relates to preaching. For some strange reason, the man who excels as a concert singer, or in any other art, scarcely ever knows how to teach others in his chosen field. Prudence forbids me to point out examples of this fact as it applies to preaching. Of course, anyone can think of occasional exceptions.

Let us also insist that our divinity schools improve their methods of teaching the ministers of tomorrow. In other days we looked on homiletics as a science which called for lectures, largely abstract. To that method of approach some of us attribute the low estate of many a pulpit to-day. With wooden ways of teaching, should we not expect wooden ways of preaching? To-day many of us have begun to rely largely on the sort of methods that wise men use in teaching any other art, such as painting, or sculpture. The professor has the students work in the presence of masterpieces, one at a time. In like manner

we lead a young man to study the sermons of Robertson, or Brooks, or some other master. Then, too, the up-to-date teacher relies largely on man-to-man coaching. In short, no one has yet discovered an easy way of preparing a young man to preach the Gospel.

At the same time we should encourage and help ministers out on the field. Judging from letters that come to me from the British Isles, young men on both sides of the water feel that they ought to become better preachers. They ask, "How?" In answer no one can lay down rules, but still I can hold out hope. Up in Kilmany did not Thomas Chalmers learn to preach after seven years of "pulpit work" as ineffectual as "the quacking of ducks on a mill-pond"? Out at Indianapolis did not Henry Ward Beecher learn to preach in a far different fashion? Neither pastor left his home. In like manner, any young minister whom the Lord has called to preach can learn how. "He that willeth to do His will shall know."

Who then will join me in beseeching the Lord to raise up a generation of ministers who will do for our time what young Robertson did in Brighton a hundred years ago, and what Phillips Brooks did in Boston in the days of our fathers and mothers? Why not prayerfully lay plans for training young custodians of God's super-atomic power? At last we have discovered that no one but the Almighty can meet the needs of our age, and that He chooses to do so largely through the preaching of the only Gospel that can transform a man or a church, a nation or a world.

"Ye shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses unto me."

The College of Preachers and the Art of Preaching

BY THE REV. T. O. WEDEL, Ph.D.

THE College of Preachers of the Washington Cathedral in America's capital city boasts of being a unique institution, although daughter or sister institutions are being founded here and there, and are sharing with us our peculiar vocation. The College of Preachers probably has the distinction, however, of being a pioneer in its particular field of academic endeavour.

This is no place for a history of the College or the moving story of its founding. Nor shall I discuss the details of its liturgical and prandial routines. Suffice it to say that, since its inception some twenty years ago, it has maintained, with only a few minor changes, a pattern of disciplines once inaugurated by a master pedagog, the College's first Warden, Bishop Philip M. Rhinelander. Within a setting of worship (including a daily half-hour meditation), groups of clergy, numbering from 25 to 30, invited from all sections of the country, spend from a Monday to a Saturday in submission to the College's admittedly strenuous schedule. Morning and evening sessions are in the hands