

Editorial

EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

THE following lines open a little known biography of an evangelist who spent a forty-year ministry in Prince Edward Island in the last century:

Early one morning in the autumn of 1827, a man wearing a shabby Clan-McDonald-tartan cloak and a tall 'beaver hat' stood by the Malpeque Road a few miles north of Charlottetown. A thin column of smoke arose from a heap of manuscript before him. It was the Reverend Donald McDonald, Minister of the Church of Scotland, on the morning of his conversion burning his old sermons. [*The Rev. Donald McDonald. Glimpses of his Life and Times.* M. Lamont. Charlottetown, 1902.]

We question whether all converted ministers should destroy their whole sermon "barrel," but we fully understand why Donald McDonald took such impetuous action on that eventful day. A new revelation of the grace and wisdom and power of God in Jesus Christ has an immediate effect on the witness of the one who receives that revelation. In the case of a clergyman this experience may indeed lead to the conviction that his former preaching has been "foolishness" in the most literal sense, and that he must make a completely new start in proclaiming the Word of God. Further experience will often correct this impression. The preacher, if he has been at all faithful, and truly called, must believe that he has all along been making the Gospel known, but now, with his new insight, he will also rightly feel the need of transposing his proclamation to a higher key. As he himself has tested the swordlike sharpness of the Word, and learned its power, so he will resolve to use it more aggressively for the salvation of souls.

This thought has relevance to the current revival of interest in evangelism. It is probably true that Canadian churchgoers of today hear better moral exhortation from the pulpit than ever before. But it cannot be denied that they, and particularly the unchurched, need to hear more mission preaching, more evangelizing, more proclamation of the Gospel in its ancient simplicity and potency. This renewed emphasis must inevitably lead to heart searching in the parson's study, and to revision, if not destruction, of sermons "written aforetime."

The primitive Christian *Kerygma*, following Jesus' own preaching of the Kingdom of God, led up to a forthright challenge to the hearer, either as a definite command, "Repent," or in the form of a solemn proclamation that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ could alone give salvation. This final call, which, when responded to, led many into the fellowship of the Church, is less frequently and earnestly sounded in modern preaching. Commenting on this point Bryan Green writes in *The Practice of Evangelism*:

It is here that many a good Gospel sermon fails to be thoroughly evangelistic. The preacher concludes with some pious platitude or kindly hope that

everyone present will realize his responsibility to give an answer to Christ. Often one hears closing words like this: "So let us all now. . . ." The bite and challenge of the message are completely ruined.

In his remarkable little book *The Great Divorce* C. S. Lewis pictures the spirits of the departed being presented with the choice between "Heaven" and "Hell." They had presumably refused to make that choice in the days of their earthly pilgrimage, but now they can no longer postpone a final decision. The author uses all his skill as a narrator—and at times he rivals William Law and John Bunyan in his ability to depict character—to tell how human beings will argue in their own defence and refuse to humble their pride, even though nothing less than their eternal destiny is at stake. The book is fanciful of course, but it is packed with illustrations of that truth which often finds better embodiment "in a tale" than in a sermon, and which, just because of its storylike presentation, can more easily "enter in at lowly doors." It is a truth which the preacher of the evangel must realize intensely if he is to present it with telling force. The homely words of George Macdonald provide the text on which *The Great Divorce* is but a commentary:

No, there is no escape. There is no heaven with a little of hell in it—no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather.

Effective evangelistic preaching must confront the hearer with the need of ultimate choice. Modern prophetic voices must, like Elijah, point out the folly of halting between two opinions. Such a fearless setting forth of the Christian Good News will demand both humility and courage from him who speaks and him who listens. Part of the preacher's humility may consist in a willingness to learn how to prepare and deliver more frequently the kind of sermon which may be used by the Holy Spirit to bring sinners to repentance. Thus to cause "joy in heaven" should be the aim of Gospel preaching in this year of grace.