

Editorials

FOCUS ON OBERLIN

OURS is an age of transition, not least in the area of that "common study" characteristic of our "post-Lund" era. So far as the work of the Faith and Order part of the ecumenical movement is concerned, the age of world conferences appears to have passed, and with it that abstract and generalized thinking which usually attended them.

For the above reason, the regional conference to be held at Oberlin, Ohio, in September is a significant experiment. The focus will be on the common experience of the delegates—on the North American scene, as it were. It has been defined as a conference to "engage in concentrated study of the forces in North America which bind the Churches together and which drive them apart." Now these forces will be, in the nature of the case, *accidental* elements of unity and disunity. And the promise that lies in the strategy of Oberlin consists in this very fact, that the conference is being planned in terms of these "non-theological" factors of which we hear so much today.

Oberlin will explore a theme which is really the basic question of the whole ecumenical movement: What is the nature of the unity we seek? Its exploration is mapped out in three broad Divisions: the nature of the unity we seek in faithfulness to the eternal gospel, in terms of organizational structure, and in view of cultural pressures. Within each Division are four Sections, the basic study groups of the conference, with about thirty delegates in each.

Sixteen study groups have been preparing for Oberlin during the past two years, including three Canadian—Toronto, Saskatoon and Vancouver. There have been an estimated two hundred and twenty-five "conversational groups" as well, studying related aspects in terms of local problems, but all oriented in this direction.

The Canadian Council of Churches is one of the sponsors of the conference, and the delegates and consultants from its member Churches are expected to make a vital contribution. This expectation rests partly upon the high percentage of delegates drawn from the actual study groups, as compared with the American representation, and partly upon the fact that the Toronto study group (the original Faith and Order Commission of the Council) is responsible for one of the Sections at Oberlin, on "The Variations in Denominational Politics." This Section is in one sense the key to the problem which Oberlin poses, for it deals with the distinction between "order" and "organization"—of that essential ordering of the life and work of the Church, as distinct from those elements which can be classed as "indifferent."

From this basic distinction, it is hoped that certain criteria may be developed, to assist in the evaluation of the sociological and other influences

which affect the faith and practice of the Church. No doubt the study at Oberlin will remind us all that the definition of "non-theological factors" is itself a theological one! That is, what we are dealing with is actually the humanity of the Church, its involvement in the life and times of its generation. The problem of the Church is a reflection of the "problem" of its King and Head, Jesus Christ. The primary question for the Christian concerns the Kingdom of Christ—how He reigns in this present age, and what are the signs which we are called to erect, that men may enter His Kingdom and prepare for its unveiling.

Ever since Lund, we have understood that Christology is more than doctrine, it is the key to our problem of reunion. But perhaps we have still to learn just how far this key will carry us as it opens one door after another. Oberlin, for instance, will endeavour to show that "things which we do not like in other communions are not first of all problems to be solved. They are rather varying solutions of problems which no church can evade." Christ acts, man reacts—our common study must aim at revealing just how far the great variety in our reaction is the result of factors in our personal and group life rather than in the life of Christ Himself and of the Apostolic group He created.

Perhaps our North American focus on Oberlin will also prove the truth of this cautionary word issued to the study groups as they plan their debates and prepare their reports: "The Church lives as one, not by specifying points of agreement however helpful this may be, but by embodying its oneness amid the tensions created by diversities and even by schisms."

J.C.M.

PREACHING AND RHETORIC

IN our modern vocabulary *rhetoric* has become almost a naughty word. It is associated in our minds with sinister attempts to support weak causes with strong arguments. Since the days of Plato rhetoric has been under suspicion as an instrument which can be used to make the worse appear the better reason. Many would be inclined to agree with Jeremy Bentham's definition of rhetoric as "the art of misdirecting the judgment by agitating and inflaming the passions." To a generation which remembers the speeches of Adolf Hitler the argument of Quintilian that only a good man can be an orator is not particularly convincing.

An attitude of disdain towards the art of rhetoric is particularly prevalent in the church. St. Paul's words concerning his coming to Corinth "not with excellency of speech or of wisdom" (I Cor. 2:1) have been misused to imply that the content of preaching is all that matters. Preaching which rejects "enticing words of man's wisdom" is not necessarily preaching which will be "in demonstration of the spirit and of power." In our theological curricula little emphasis has been placed on instruction in public speaking.

Our students spend years of study upon the content of preaching and give comparatively little attention to its form. We accumulate knowledge, and make little provision for its transmission or communication. We learn *what* to say, and neglect *how* to say it.

For this neglect we pay a high price. The secondary meaning given for the word *sermon* in the *Oxford Dictionary* is: "a long, or tedious discourse, or harangue." The verb *to preach* is defined as meaning "to proclaim by public discourse . . . to give moral or religious advice in an obtrusive or tiresome way." One of the perils of the preacher's calling is that what is supposed to be the proclamation of truth by public discourse can degenerate into the giving of advice in obtrusive and tiresome ways, in tedious discourses and harangues.

The success of even a jest, as every comedian knows, depends not only on what is said, but on how it is said. The dependence of effect upon form as well as content holds true of all human discourse. To express ourselves we can concentrate attention upon the content and neglect the form. If we want to communicate thought or emotion to other persons, if we want to transmit to others the convictions we hold, the form of the communication is almost as important as the content. When Keats described how he felt on first looking into Chapman's Homer, he succeeded in expressing what he felt, and he also succeeded in communicating something of the thrill of a great discovery. The charm of poetry lies in its ability to communicate, as well as to express, the heart-aches, the homesickness, the sorrows and the ecstasies of our existence. The expression in words, the form, is an essential part of the communication.

The motivation behind the sermon is persuasion rather than self-expression. The sermon will express what we believe and feel and hope, but it is a form of communication in which we seek to persuade others to embrace what we believe, and to share the passion which moves us. The people who spoke in tongues at Corinth had found a satisfactory form of self-expression, but it was not a form which edified the church.

Preaching which is to edify the church cannot afford to neglect the art of speaking well. As Hugh Blair pointed out, the subjects of pulpit discourse are noble and important, but they are also trite and familiar.

They have for ages employed so many speakers and so many pens; the public ear is so much accustomed to them, that it requires more than an ordinary power of genius to fix attention. Nothing within the reach of art is more difficult than to bestow on what is common the grace of novelty. No sort of composition whatever is such a trial of skill as where the merit of it lies wholly in the execution; not in giving any information that is new, not in convincing men of what they did not believe; but in dressing truths which they knew, and of which they were before convinced, in such colours as may most forcibly affect their imagination and heart.

The many tongues and pens employed on the themes of pulpit discourse since Hugh Blair wrote have added strength to his argument.

A hundred years ago most of the public speaking which people heard was heard in church. There were occasional visits to the theatre and political meetings, but ordinarily the best public speaking they heard was what they heard from the pulpit. This is no longer so. Through radio and television people have become accustomed to hearing the trained voices of actors and speakers who have taken considerable pains to learn the art of speaking well. The average actor has spent much more effort in training his voice than the average minister, and the difference is only too apparent.

Rhetoric and preaching, form and content, matter and delivery, are things which are inseparably joined together, and which no man can put asunder. The sermon preached in a setting of the liturgy of the church, addressed to a group of worshipping people is a distinctive form of communication. But it is a form of communication through the spoken word, through public discourse, and if it is to be done effectively all that we can learn of the art of rhetoric will be an asset to us.

A good man is all the better for fulfilling the ancient ideal of the rhetoricians, a good man skilled in preaching.

N.G.S.