

The Marks of Effective Preaching

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IT is becoming rather commonplace and trite to say that we are witnessing a religious heyday in America. Indeed most of us have ceased to wonder at rising statistics and constantly expanding plans and programs. Any set of comparative tables shows distinctive gains in church membership, safe financial balances, and more than casual interest in what religious leaders are saying and thinking. Consequently there has grown up a disposition among church folk to greet these indices with a smile of satisfaction and to take them in their stride.

There is, however, one curious aspect of all this, and indeed in many ways a disturbing one: that this expansion has not been due in a clearly definable sense to preaching, except in some isolated cases. The burgeoning interest in religion in contemporary American suburbia is traced sometimes more easily to "me-too-ism" and "the socially acceptable thing to do" than to the drawing power of the preacher's Sunday morning sermon. There seems to be "something in the wind," whether it be community pressure or the desire for social recognition, that wields a stronger influence than the exactness of the preacher's exegesis or the orthodoxy of the doctrines he presents.

Certainly no preacher among us can remain happy or at ease in the face of this situation, especially when he considers the implications that lie beneath the surface. Moreover, it leads him to ask questions which can bring uncomfortable answers. He cannot, for example, avoid the query, How goes it with preaching? And for the answer he need not go any further than to review certain facts that are written large across the face of every parish. People are attending worship in very sizeable numbers, yet religious illiteracy is widespread and is increasing at an alarming rate. Less than a fraction of those who sing with apparent abandon on Sunday morning, "O use me, Lord . . . Just as Thou wilt, and when, and where," ever realize they have thereby committed themselves to live by Christian precepts during the week. Indeed more than one preacher has felt a chill of futility when a parishioner remarked at the door, "Yes, what you say is true, but who can live up to it?"

All this drives the preacher back to his study to search his own soul and to grapple with further questions: Why isn't preaching making the impact it ought on this twentieth century society? Why isn't preaching moulding and giving some meaningful direction to this revival of interest in the church and religion? Is the efficacy of contemporary preaching of so little consequence that most of us agree with John A. Mackay, when he said, "The forces that are moulding the opinions of youth in America today are not the churches, nor the universities, nor the schools, but secular powers that portend no good"? These questions indicate that the preacher is confronted

with the biggest problem ever, not of empty pews, but of sanctuaries full of people whose day to day attitudes and moods are shaped by forces which seem to be stronger than preaching and which preaching does not touch.

Edwin C. Dargan, in the Introduction to *A History of Preaching*, writes, "Preaching has profoundly and for the most part wholesomely influenced the morals and customs of mankind." Then in a review of the preaching of the centuries he presents a thousand pages of evidence to strengthen his thesis. Is the present day, then, to be an exception? Or, may it not be more appropriate to ask: In what way has contemporary preaching been ineffective? In the confrontation of these great congregations with the voice from the pulpit, has the latter been at fault or unequal to its opportunity? Now it is not easy either to praise or blame within the limited perspective of the present, yet there are certain answers we can give and observations which justifiably we can make.

First of all, there is a sense in which much contemporary preaching has been ineffective simply because of an effort on the part of the preacher always to be popular. By "popular" we do not refer merely to the "catchy topic" of a sermon or the presence of the "glamor boy" in the pulpit, but rather a type of preaching that says what people want to hear, that hesitates to uncover basic human needs and to prescribe how to treat them. What do people want generally to hear? Almost invariably they clamor to be given some neat and succinct formula, some simple technique, that can always be counted upon to produce an answer to what they consider to be their best desires. Among these is the desire for authority, but an authority of a special type. It is not an authority with a demand, but one in which they can rest comfortably. There is also the desire to be in with the crowd, not to be its higher conscience, but to have its shelter. As for salvation—well, it must be by a quick decision with a touch of glamor here and there, with guilt disposed of almost by fiat, and certainly without lonely hours in which the soul, shaken by tears, stands stripped of all twentieth century advantages and comforts. Preaching that refuses to disturb this type of mind and its fictitious wants will undoubtedly be popular, but at the same time exceedingly ineffective.

Again, there is a sense in which much contemporary preaching has been ineffective because it has been devoid of emotion. Now there is an obvious difference between preaching with emotion and emotional preaching. Sheer emotionalism that is an end in itself has done much to discredit preaching, especially in the eyes of intelligent people. But equally ineffective has been preaching that has lacked emotion entirely. Recently someone asked the Moderator of the United Church of Canada what he thought of the preaching he heard across the country and he replied that much of it was competent but "not very inspiring." And W. B. J. Martin in his recent book, entitled *The Diary of Peter Parson*, writes, "The sermon in the typical Protestant Church is an argument to be followed, whereas it ought to be an event to be experienced." The affirmation of great Christian certainties from

the lips of men who have lived by them, who therefore endorse them with flaming conviction, would counteract any tendencies in contemporary preaching to fall short of its full effectiveness.

Further, it may be said that whenever preaching is divorced from the total context of worship its nature and impact are weakened. Now worship, to put it simply, is the church's response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It is man's overture of thanks and faith and obedience to the proclamation of the mighty act of God. As in Isaiah's moving experience in the Temple, the vision came first and then by means of its authentic note the prophet was moved to respond with his whole being. By the same token, if preaching that is within the context of worship is not of a quality similar to that blazing unveiling in the Temple, the response to it may not seem worth making. This indicates therefore that preaching takes on its highest significance only within the framework of a genuine act of worship.

But it is just here that much preaching has run into ineffectiveness. Divorced from the constraint and demand of the context of true worship, the role of the preacher and the calibre of his preaching have deteriorated in meaning and quality. With the risk of being dubbed as old-fashioned, one cannot help expressing apprehension over the new concept of the preacher as a sort of "pastor-director" of the congregation or as a sanctified manager of the organization. In this capacity it is so easy for the warrant and thrust of his preaching to become blunted; he may not appear to be saying to his own soul what he says to the souls of others; he seems to lack that deep and fearful sense of responsibility for what he addresses to men. Somehow we miss here the "ambassador for Christ" who comes out from another level of life with good news for those whose daily routine is a losing battle with secular powers that are too much for them.

Here then are several reasons why much contemporary preaching has been ineffective: the effort to be popular, not entirely in the wrong way but for the wrong reasons; the absence of that emotion that is kindled by the tremendous facts of our message; and the separation of preaching from the context of true worship. There are doubtless other reasons, but these are sufficient to indicate where we are.

What can be done then to make preaching more purposeful? Or, to put it another way: What are the marks of effective preaching?

In our search for answers it is natural to go to the Bible. It must be made clear, however, that we do not go there for homiletical theory, because (1) most sermons recorded in Holy Scripture must be regarded not as whole accounts, but as excerpts; and (2) whatever homiletical patterns were useful and effective in those days could hardly be employed in ours. What we look for are characteristics and principles which were not only sufficient to cause these original messages to be written down, but to achieve among the hearers the phenomenal results they did.

The first necessity for effective preaching is the element of proclamation. James S. Stewart was right in selecting for the title of his book on preaching,

The Heralds of God. There are other things the preacher is, but first and last he must be a herald; he has good news to declare concerning something accomplished, something done by God in the realm of spiritual conflict which has had tremendous consequences for every man's life in every age. Moreover, in this capacity the preacher is playing his highest role because his is a timely proclamation to an anxious humanity which cries, "Is there any word from the Lord?" And what is more, this proclamation has its own peculiar character; it speaks of a thing done, a victory won, but within it is a *decisiveness* that alters forever the character and destiny of all who hear and accept it. When the famous American contralto, Marion Anderson, made her recent goodwill tour throughout the Orient, she was discussing with a group of children in Bangkok the emancipation of her own race by Abraham Lincoln, and in order to make clear to them what a proclamation meant she described it as a paper which says, "Now, we'll do things differently." The New Testament proclamation is "Because I live, ye shall live also." The fact is there: "Because I live." "Ye shall live also" means that from now on, everything will be different.

The handling of this proclamation can make the difference between effective and ineffective preaching. Some simply shout it without any concrete embodiment of its moral and spiritual implications in their own life and character. They are not convincing examples themselves of Christian truth alive. Speaking of his own early preaching, Emil Brunner remarked, "I was like a sandwich man carrying boards advertising a square meal while I myself was starving." Others take some human need and diagnose it thoroughly, and then go to the Bible to find some specific religious truth that seems to be the solution to the problem. But the unfortunate result of this procedure is that they never present a *whole* gospel because the many and complex needs of men dictate and control the range and thrust of their preaching.

How very different in their methods were the preachers of the early church! Their proclamation was "Jesus and the Resurrection." And their character was an intimate reflection of the essence of this proclamation. This is why they moved the world and set into motion forces that have moulded the temper of generations. Therefore the truly effective preacher today must know basically the substance of his proclamation and must be himself a living endorsement of its truth. Then he need never be concerned about its relevance. Irrelevant preaching is the fault of those who do not know what the Gospel really is or how actually to live it. The man whose message is merely a watered-down brand of moral ethic to which he gives assent has nothing to say, nothing to declare, to this generation. Effective preaching begins with the man who claims that God's "word was in mine heart as a burning fire" (Jer. 20:9), and who cannot be restrained from preaching its redemptive efficacy for every man, regardless of his peculiar need.

The second necessity for effective preaching is the element of interpretation. The preacher must proclaim the message, but an interpretation of it is essential also. Interpretation means presenting the unknown in terms of the known, the unseen in the garment of the seen, or the abstract by means of the concrete. In preaching this operation can have its perils, and among them is the danger that the preacher may distort the proclamation and preach himself and not Christ. To prevent any such happening he must not overlook the fact that in preaching there is a further side to interpretation: it is not complete until the hearer examines his life in the light of the Bible's terms, and is thus forced to a decision about himself. It is a matter of seeing life against what Sidney Berry called "the great objective backdrop." Against the backdrop of the proclamation, the preacher must lead his hearers to ask: What are all my moods and hopes and desires in the face of this? Take, for example, Jesus' parables. They are not just simple stories intended to illustrate how God might act in a given life-situation. As such they would be a weak and faulty method and vehicle of interpretation, as any similar sermon might be. In every New Testament setting that gave rise to a parable, over and above everything was the proclamation that the Kingdom was present, and then the parable became the means of interpreting the hearers to themselves. In each of these situations men were confronted by God and by themselves, and in this great experience they decided for or against embracing the new life of the Kingdom.

This further aspect of interpretation must be brought into contemporary preaching in order that its ends may be realized. Far too many preachers have become merely illustrative addicts and therefore (to quote George Johnstone Jeffrey) "their method of sermon preparation seems to be the search for three anecdotes, setting them down like three islands in a homiletical sea, the rest of the sermon consisting in swimming breathlessly from one to the other in the lively hope of coming safely to land." Now illustrations are necessary in preaching to a generation that thinks in pictures, but they must be employed within a proper understanding of pulpit interpretation. They must not be moralistic stories that point up a technique by which to get through another day. Illustrations should be only a means to assist the hearers to see their common identification with the situation to which the Gospel is proclaimed. Illustrations are part of the machinery of that interpretative process that is completed only when the hearer sees the blazing truth of God's proclamation and his own deep need of salvation.

The third necessity for effective preaching is to have the prophetic accent. For modern folk who are caught up in the stern business of daily living, preaching that is not prophetic does not claim their interest or response, nor can it elicit the dedication of their will. The prophetic quality gives to preaching that peculiar challenge that prevents people throwing up their hands and remarking, "He's got nothing to say to me." It puts into preaching the very thing that people need from preaching. After reading

the morning newspaper with its parade of all the ugly sins and tensions of mankind, a man said, "When I go to church on Sunday I hope my minister will tell me whose world it is—God's or the devil's."

Now what is meant by "prophetic preaching?" Its two main ingredients are the first two necessities we mentioned: proclamation and interpretation. The prophetic preacher sees God and he sees man. From God he catches the authentic note "Thus saith the Lord"; and with his knowledge of the deeper levels of human conscience he says to men, "Thou art the man." To use a phrase from Otto Baab, the preacher proclaims "a commanding truth to lift men up to God" and "to reveal them to themselves." After all, the aim of the prophetic preacher is to change the world, not God. His message therefore will have a cutting edge which will expose and score evil and warn against its inevitable consequences. He will not be daunted by the overwhelming odds of moral indifference among everyday people, but will preach with such a sense of urgency that men and women will be moved to search their own inner being and to take positive action towards personal and social betterment. To quote Dr. Baab again, "The prophet's task is so to preach as to keep himself and his people in constant tension with the world and to help them maintain a constant maladjustment to the evil that besets it." He will have vitality also which is not merely a matter of churning himself up physically or emotionally, but which comes from a keen awareness of the indispensability of the Christian Gospel for life and from the conviction that it provides the only solution to the sense of "nothingness" and "way-out-less-ness" of this hour. And with this sense of what is vital there is the conviction that this Gospel is final, that it saves men from their helpless moral condition to a life which eclipses the best the world can afford.