

# What Is Wrong With Preaching Today?

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“The greatest need of the contemporary Church is the strengthening of the local pulpit.” So speaks a foremost city pastor in explaining why he has chosen not to receive election as a bishop of the Methodist Church. The present article proceeds on the theory that the work of the Kingdom, under God, depends primarily on the local church, and that the most important man on earth today ought to be the local pastor, or the missionary abroad. In as far as all this relates to preaching, wherein does the pulpit in our country today need strengthening? In at least five respects, all of which go back to one central source. Many a preacher today seeks—

## I. HUMAN INTEREST INSTEAD OF DIVINE POWER.

No man’s pulpit work can have too much human interest, but never at the risk of giving a secondary place to divine power. Instead of dealing with such matters theoretically, let us think about concrete cases. Young men use cases in the study of medicine, law, and business management. Why not also in preaching from the Bible? Is it not largely a “Divine Library” full of cases? For example, suppose that between the New Year and Easter a minister asks his people to read the Gospel According to Mark, “The Gospel of the Busy Man.” Then the minister preaches every Lord’s Day from a paragraph in this most practical of the four Gospels. Does he stress the divine or the human? The Gospel itself is about Christ as the Son of God (Mark 1:1), and almost every paragraph centers around Him.

In the second chapter the opening paragraph deals with our Lord’s healing of the paralytic. In the seminary, when I assigned this passage I received interesting discourses about oriental architecture, overcoming obstacles, Gospel teamwork, the meaning of faith, paralysis as a type of sin, and the relation between sin and suffering. All of this holds true, but why not put the first thing first? The paragraph stands in the Gospel to teach a central truth about Christ: “That ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (He saith to the sick of the palsy), ‘I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house.’ ”

Where do our young men learn to stress “human nature in the

Bible” when the Book itself stresses the grace of God in the Person of His Son? As pastors and writers we older ministers have set the example. In sacred art, at least from other days, wherever the Lord Jesus appears in a picture, the light shines full on His blessed face. But many a pastor can go through the Second Gospel with fifteen consecutive sermons, all religious, and never a one mainly about Christ as Saviour and Lord. Yet we pride ourselves on “preaching from the Bible.” That phrase, I believe, originated with me. But what do we preach from the Book? About men like ourselves, or about Christ as God’s Son?

Once a student said to his professor, “Why do you have us read the sermons of Dr. X? Don’t you know that he is a humanist?” “Yes, I know that, but I think we ought to make our biblical sermons as interesting as he makes something else.” In a few weeks the student handed in the manuscript of a sermon for delivery in class. The message began with a text from St. Mark, a text directly about Christ. In class the professor spoke about the sermon as a good piece of work, at the present stage, and of its kind. When the two sat down later for a private conference, he began as follows:

“Mr. B., in class I told the good things about your sermon. Now let us think about it from another point of view. Please go through it by paragraphs. If a paragraph is mainly about Christ, or anything divine, mark it D; if mainly about us, or something human, put down H.” The first paragraph he marked H, the second one H, and so on through the sermon, with never a D. At last he exclaimed, “Why, professor, I have been doing what I found fault with Dr. X for doing. I have been stressing the human rather than the divine.” Said the professor, “My dear young man, the difference between you and many others is that you now see where you stand. You have discovered what is the matter with much of the preaching in evangelical churches today.” We stress the human or other than the divine. We also stress—

## II. HUMAN PROBLEMS INSTEAD OF DIVINE POWER.

Many a preacher today starts with a human problem rather than a divine promise. Personally I believe that we ought often to use the problem approach. Our Lord did so in much of His preaching and teaching. The pulpit today suffers at times through absence of such problems. But all too often the sermon as a whole throws the stress on the human problem rather than the divine solution.

Anyone who makes a study of our Lord's questions will find that the stress there falls on the answers, which have to do mainly with the things of God.

For an example, turn to II Corinthians, the spiritual biography of the Apostle Paul. A Bible-believing pastor makes ready to preach about the opening paragraph of the twelfth chapter. Of course he starts with the thorn in the flesh. This proves interesting especially to every hearer beyond middle age. Who of us does not have his thorn in the flesh? This means something physical, painful, even excruciating, which may interfere with a man's work for God and people. Anyone who knows his Bible, with the facts about Paul, can have a "good time" in the pulpit talking about the thorn. Just one thorn, though one of many! But that Bible paragraph does not center around Paul and his thorn! The problem leads to a solution, but not in terms of psychology. "My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness." After any such sermon, will the hearer go away thinking mainly about his thorn or about his God?

In other days when a minister spoke about prayer he discussed it largely with reference to God. "If ye then being evil know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" Here the stress surely falls on God, though a man might with wisdom preach about the Holy Spirit, or about prayer as it relates to God. There is no prescribed way of dealing with such a golden text. Even so, one rule ought always to hold: wherever a man's passage stresses the grace of God, nobody but a misinterpreter would substitute a problem of men.

In a certain large city the ablest pulpit master there dealt one day with "The Problem of Prayer." First he set forth three arguments against prayer. According to the Bible, and modern psychology, a man tends to put first what he considers most important. So this preacher began with prayer as a problem. After years of trying to forget those three arguments, I still remember them clearly. I had never dreamed that there was so much to be said against prayer, and I never before had found it so hard to pray as after hearing that sermon. A masterly effort, at least in the first half, where the speaker knew what he was talking about. But to this hour I never have been able to recall from the second half of his message one of the three arguments in favor of prayer.

The next day in class I asked a group of twenty-five graduate students how many had heard that sermon. Almost everyone in class had been there. All of them agreed that it was the strongest discussion of prayer to which they had ever listened. Every man could tell at once those three arguments against prayer. Not a man could state or even suggest one of the three "answers." Why not? Perhaps for two reasons. First, because the "answers" did not really answer. Second, the speaker had put the big thing first. The big thing in that sermon was, why unbelievers did not pray. The problem! Can anyone prove that such preaching does more good than harm? Can any one of us plead that he never has been guilty of such pulpit work?

In college many of our young people now study *Practical Psychology* (1945), by F. J. Berrien, of Colgate University. His closing chapter deals with "Effective Speaking and Writing." Dr. Berrien writes:

Every bit of speaking that must gain attention on its merits should drive immediately to the point. Each opening not only ought to arouse interest but also give more than a broad hint of the essential content of the discourse. The theme is established either in the opening sentence or in the first paragraph.

The importance of driving to the point early in one's presentation was revealed in a study of the memory value of several different kinds of emphasis available to the public speaker. The investigator prepared a short biography which he presented to ten different groups of college students, each time in a different way. The results showed that statements made at the beginning were remembered seventy-five per cent better than those in the middle of the speech.

The significance of this fact for the public speaker is obvious. If he is sure of the good will of the audience, he can safely present the salient feature of his address at the start, with every good reason to expect that it will impress his listeners. It is certainly true, also, of good speaking that the opening lines must not only compel attention but must in addition provide a peg on which the subsequent story is hung.

In keeping with a certain custom today, let us close this part of the discussion with a text. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." Homiletically this might mean: in a sermon put the main thing first, and then all the other things will find their places, provided you keep that main thing uppermost. In every such message, as in the Bible, more about the promises of God than about the problems of men! Perhaps for this reason the word "problem" does

not appear in the Bible! Why then do we stress human problems rather than divine promises? Once again, the preaching of our day tends to use—

### III. THE BIBLE AS A SPRINGBOARD INSTEAD OF A SOURCEBOOK.

With the Apostle I believe that "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable." In these words to a young ministerial friend Paul stresses the fact that the Bible is all inspired and all profitable, in order that "the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." In view of my insistence on putting the first thing first, perhaps I should have begun with this section, but thus far I have been thinking mainly about those who try to "preach from the Bible." This custom does not seem to be universal today. Where Spurgeon or Jowett would have tried to discover the meaning of his text, the preacher of today may repeat it at first, and then bid it farewell.

This holds true even of Dr. James S. Stewart in Edinburgh. As a rule in both his volumes of published sermons he strives to set forth what his passage teaches. But in *The Gates of New Life* he has a springboard sermon about "Anchors of the Soul" (Acts 27:29). The chapter itself is the world's supreme account of a storm at sea. Everywhere these inspired words teach the Providence of God, and in places, the Presence of the Living Christ. But the Scotsman deals with four anchors: Hope, Work, Prayer, and the Cross. Someone else might use another set of anchors. Even so, it is hard to see why we ought to "cast them out of the boat"! This kind of pulpit work affords a man untold opportunities for indulging his fancy, but does it tend to interpret and exalt the Written Word of God?

A recent book about *The American Mind* (1950), by Dr. Henry S. Commager, a foremost professor of history, says that both the minister and the church have suffered a loss of prestige. He attributes the loss largely to "the steady secularization" of the church and the ministry. To all of this many of us must assent. We feel too that the loss has come because the Bible has not had a place of supreme importance in the pulpit of our day. Where it has been used, it has often served as a springboard, and not as our sourcebook. Partly for this reason many of us today—

IV. STRESS THE NEGATIVE INSTEAD OF THE POSITIVE.

As a rule the Bible puts the stress on the positive. In the first Psalm the fruit tree stands over against the flying chaff. The house on the rock precedes the house on the sand. The positive comes first. All sorts of exceptions will occur to the student of the Bible. But in general, I think, this rule holds true in the Bible, as elsewhere: the wise man puts first what he wishes the reader or hearer to remember most clearly. From this point of view more than one popular preacher today seems to deal largely in religious negations.

A few years ago I prepared a book of representative sermons, *The Protestant Pulpit* (1947). Perhaps unwisely, I tried to have certain denominations represented in proportion to their size. In volume after volume of recent sermons I searched for messages mainly positive with a view to using them in the book. After awhile I could find what I was looking for, only to discover that the brilliant divine did not agree with my choice of the sermon in hand. Why not? Because it lacked the sort of contemporary time-interest that comes from stressing the negative side of things today. I do not refer to a discussion of sin as it appears in Psalm 51, but to the fashion of talking about goodness in terms of badness. More than one popular pulpiteer begins almost every paragraph with some sort of "No" or "Not."

Once I assigned the text, "What must I do to be saved"? Of course I expected a message based on the answer, in the light of the context. The young student began with ten minutes about the importance of the question: more important than any problem relating to community, nation, and so on. The rest of the discourse had to do with various wrong answers, such as the Aristotelian, the Stoic, the Epicurean, and so on. Evidently he had been busy digesting *The Five Great Philosophies*, by Wm. DeWitt Hyde, and had not taken time to study Acts 16:25-34. In that whole sermon, too long for use in class, there was not a word in answer to the question.

What if a man has a spot on his face, and fears cancer? He goes to a specialist. The expert talks for half the time about the importance of that spot on the face, and the other half of the time about the difficulty of removing such a spot, in the light of what history shows about medicine and surgery. Nobody but a dunce would deal that way with a spot on the face—or with a cancer in

the soul. Negations have their place, with the specialist on diseases of the skin, as with the specialist in diseases of the soul, but the Gospel itself does not consist of negations.

Now for an example in print from one of our ablest pulpiteers. He is dealing with Psalm 121, especially with the opening verse: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills." The psalm consists of Bible doctrine set to music, and not with negations. It sings about the Providence of God in the life and work of a man. In the Psalm as a whole, and not least in this opening verse, God has the place of honor. To the poet of old the hills stood as symbols of God and His power to "keep" the pilgrim as he journeyed through this life towards the world to come.

Adopting a phrase from the title of a current book, the minister speaks brilliantly about "Molehills and Mountains." The psalm in question does not say or suggest anything about molehills, but the sermon devotes the first fourteen paragraphs to the molehills that we mortals make. All negative! Clever! Ingenious! Fascinating! Highly original! Yes, but why not preach what the psalm was written to reveal? Why wait until paragraph fifteen to introduce God, and then devote to him only three paragraphs? In a study of *Hamlet*, or *Othello*, a professor of English might as well wait unto near the end of the lecture before he introduced the main character. In the drama of redemption, God first! The God of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ! Why then do we stress human negation, rather than God's Everlasting Yea? Once more, we tend to employ—

#### V. THE PLURAL INSTEAD OF THE SINGULAR.

Many a preacher today takes refuge in weak plurals, instead of using the strong singular. Here again, only a dunce would do the same sort of thing all the time. Even so, a man who believes in "preaching from the Bible" should learn to interpret what he finds there. In speaking to King David, what if Nathan had employed the plural? In addressing a man fifty years of age who had committed adultery, murder, and practical treason, the prophet had courage to say, "Thou art the man." Nathan had never been guilty of adultery and murder. Even in speaking about matters where he has had experience, why should a man use the editorial "we" and keep dragging himself into the picture? Be modest, of course! In the use of pronouns, as in everything else homiletical, one ought to secure

variety, but not at the expense of dodging what the Bible clearly teaches. Here speaks one of our ablest writers about preaching, in a book more or less Barthian, which I am not. Dr. H. H. Farmer writes, as a professor of theology, in *The Servant of the Word* (1942):

Do not be afraid to use the pronoun You, which is our common usage for Thou, and restores at once the directness of the I-Thou relationship. . . . It would be wearisome to speak thus in the second person right through the sermon. Indeed it would be impossible if there is any development of a theme. Moreover, used too persistently, and in the wrong way, it might give the impression of nagging or browbeating, and of the preacher's setting himself on a pedestal. Yet I am confident that such address should never be entirely omitted. . . . If there is no place where you can say You, then it is strongly to be suspected that your discourse is not a sermon, but an essay or a lecture.

In the parable about the two houses, why does our Lord picture *one* man building *a* house? No doubt because it is easier for the hearer to picture one man at work on a single house. And yet nine out of ten of us would begin talking about ourselves as building all sorts of houses on surrounding hillsides. Again, our Lord has *one* farmer sowing seed. At other times the Master Teacher deals with the plural, just as the first psalm pictures worldly people in terms of chaff, "gone with the wind." The interpreter who forms the habit of bringing out what he finds in his passage will have refreshing variety. Also, he will do what our Lord did in the days of His flesh: throw the stress mainly on God's dealings with His children, one by one. Occasionally preach from a passage (Psalm 2 or 85) about the Nation. But study your sermons of late to see whether you have kept bringing out the personal quality in Holy Writ.

For another example of the personal emphasis, turn again to one of the Psalms, in this case one full of difficulties. As a whole, psalm 139 deals with "A Soul Under the Searchlight." One soul under the eye of the all-seeing God. The psalm is mainly about God. He knows you just as you are. He goes with you wherever you go. He has made you what you are; that is, apart from sin. He wishes you to battle on His side. This is a quick survey of the four main parts, each of them about God and one of His children. And yet most of us would translate this psalm into what Sir Arthur T. Quiller-Couch would call "pulpit jargon." We prate about omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, and transcendence. According



to wise old James Denney of Glasgow, the important thing in this psalm is not that God is everywhere, but that wherever I am, God is with me. In this case the person "I" ought to be the man who hears the sermon.

One of our ministerial sons recently dealt with this psalm as a whole. He knew that the people had wondered what it meant, and that they would like a simple, 1952 explanation. The resulting sermon seems to have impressed and pleased them more than any other message in a long time. Why? Because he dared to be simple and personal, not abstract and philosophic. On the other hand, one of the ablest living theologians has in print a semi-philosophic discussion of Psalm 139, "How Man Escapes from God." The psalm is mainly about God, no "man," and about one person, not some philosophic abstraction. Everything in that strong sermon rings true, but it shows how we of today tend to ignore what the Bible clearly shows on many a page: at heart Christianity consists in the right relation between one man and his God, through Christ and His Cross. Even in John 3:16, about God's love for the world, the driving force at the end comes through the word "whosoever." That word is singular, not plural.

This whole article may seem to ignore or minimize the importance of climax. "Why not keep the main thing until near the end so as to insure climax!" Perhaps so, but I should never sacrifice the truth of God for the sake of an immediate effect. I too believe in securing climax, though not in the current fashion of dealing with molehills when the passage tells about mountains. Strange as it may seem, the most interesting part of a sermon may not be the most important doctrinally. Climax has much more to do with psychology. Rightly or wrongly, what most interests the hearer? Himself!

Suppose that a pastor discusses "The Kingdom of God in (name of city) Today." "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done in XXXXtoday as it is done in the City of God." This is a paraphrase of Matthew 6:10. First of all, because most important, the Kingdom is divine. Next in importance, the kingdom is human. Divine in its source and power; human in its field of operation. Last of all, and most interesting to the hearer, the kingdom is practical. It calls for something to be done. When the subject requires three main headings, dare to have three. Sometime make a drawing of a ser-

mon about this text, or about John 3:16. Let the first main part serve as the base of a pyramid, and the last as the apex.

I. GOD'S LOVE FOR OUR WORLD

II. GOD'S GIFT OF HIS SON

III. GOD'S CALL TO WHOSOEVER

Where is the most important part? First! In the New Testament almost every supreme text about redemption starts with God the Father. In the heart of the text, as in the heart of Christianity, stands the Cross. The most interesting part—psychologically climactic—comes at the end. Whosoever! This shows the bearing of all the truth on the man in the pew. If a minister knows how to preach, anti-climax need never appear in a sermon that dares to put the first thing first. This holds true of the Ninth Symphony by Beethoven, or of the Fifth. The first movement basically determines the spirit and the power of all that follows. The second and the third movement bring out the motif in ways distinctly their own. The closing movement rises to new heights of emotional intensity and power. Why? Because it has grown out of all that has come before. In a diagram it is easier to deal with three movements than with four. In John 3:16, as in a three-movement symphony by Beethoven, listen once again to the symphony of redemption.

III

GOD'S  
WHOSOEVER

II

GOD'S  
GIFT OF HIS SON

I

GOD'S  
LOVE FOR OUR WORLD

THE REMEDY FOR OUR SERMONIC ILLS

Let no one put me down as a pessimist. I have been trying rather to serve as a reporter, and I believe that a change for the

better has begun. If I have reached a certain diagnosis, I have also spent most of my life in trying to remedy such ills. I do not believe in quick and easy cures for deep-seated diseases. Neither do I think that any one way of working will solve all such problems. Even so, I feel strongly that the surest way to avoid these weaknesses in our time is to become a preacher of the Bible. I believe strongly in expository pulpit work, but I am not now pleading for that. Whether the form be expository, textual, or topical, let the substance of every sermon come from a certain passage in the Bible. In every sermon deal with the Bible unit fairly. Make clear and then stress what it teaches, and nothing else.

When you preach from the Bible, deal with it as it was written, book by book, and as a rule, paragraph by paragraph. Instead of conducting every Lord's Day a sort of Cook's Tour through the Holy Scriptures, single out some literary unit and help the layman to see what it means in terms of today. Do intensive farming, or gardening. Between Christmas and Easter, get the layman to read the Gospel according to Mark. Then Sunday after Sunday bring him face to face with the Son of God as He lives and moves in this Gospel for the Busy Man Today.