

Go Preach!

JAMES D. ROBERTSON

Never in the history of preaching have so many alluring by-paths of ministerial service sought to draw the Christian preacher from his task of preaching. It can hardly be said that these have contributed in any marked manner to the proverbial decline of the pulpit in modern times. Other factors in our day have been more crippling to the usefulness of the pulpit, not the least being the kind of content values of sermons themselves. Happily there seems to be a rediscovery of the central importance of preaching coming not only from "the so-called practical men of the church but from the theologians as well."¹ The frustration, however, being experienced especially by young men facing the bewildering variety of emphases in the church's program is such that some re-examination of the historic preaching credentials seems expedient. This calls for a brief excursion into familiar territory, even at the risk of seeming tedious.

Just as the prophet is the most arresting figure in the Old Testament so is the preacher in the New Testament. That preaching was central in the ministry of our Lord is made amply clear in the Gospel record. The first reference we have of Jesus' ministry is, He "came teaching the Kingdom of God." At Nazareth He revealed that His mission was "to *proclaim* good tidings to the poor to *proclaim* release to the captives to *proclaim* the acceptable year of the Lord." His initial charge to the Twelve at the beginning of their ministry was, "Go *preach*." So also His last words were a solemn injunction to "*preach* the Gospel and make disciples of all nations." It cannot be without signi-

ficance that Christ's commission to the disciples places preaching first. The apostles themselves were later to appoint deacons in order that they might give themselves wholly to the ministry of the Word. Paul was eventually to write to the Corinthian Christians that Christ sent him "not to baptize but to *preach* the Gospel." It was God's plan, he added, to save men "by the foolishness of *preaching*." Each of the New Testament words translated "preacher" contributes its shade of meaning to the whole and each has to do with the art of speech. The preacher is essentially a voice.

The Christian church was launched with preaching. On the Day of Pentecost men heard the Gospel, each in his own tongue; and on that day Peter preached his greatest sermon. From the time of Augustine and Chrysostom and Ambrose till the days of Beecher and Spurgeon, the church's greatest contribution to the world has been her pulpit ministry. Such names as Savonarola, Wycliffe, Huss, Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Wesley are effective witness to the value of preaching in bringing about great moral and social reforms. In fact, the spirit and life of the church and the quality of preaching have advanced or declined together.²

It was never intended that the ministry of the Word should be an adjunct to the great work of saving men. As Professor Farmer points out, preaching is "indispensably a part of the saving activity itself."³ To insist, as some do, that preaching finds its inception and inspiration in

¹Kennedy, G., *His Word Through Preaching*, p. 5.

²Broadus, J. A., *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, pp. 2, 3.

³Farmer, H. H., *The Servant of the Word*, p. 21.

the psychological nature of man, i.e. man's passion and compassion must find expression in action, is a totally inadequate explanation of this unique calling. It is enough to say that preaching had its beginning in the sovereign will of God, and is the expression of the Divine compassion. Farmer sees the distinctive nature of preaching as "that divine, saving activity in history, which began two thousand years ago in the advent of Christ . . . It is God actually probing me, challenging my will, calling on me for decision, offering me His succour, through the only medium which the nature of His purpose permits His to use, the medium of a personal relationship. It is as though, to adapt the Apostle's words, "God did beseech me by you."⁴

It would be foolish to insist that preaching should monopolize a man's ministry. Pastoral care is inseparably bound up with the work of the pulpit. Yet it can never be a substitute for pulpit power. Henry Sloane Coffin once remarked that great congregations are never built by ringing door-bells. Bishop Gerald Kennedy writes, "There is a saying that a house-going ministry makes a church-going people. If that was ever true, I do not believe it is today."⁵ In an age without hospitals, asylums, and sanitarium, Christ's own ministry might well have been monopolized by healing diseased minds and bodies yet the emphatic note in the Gospel is, Jesus came *preaching*.

Nor are the minister's obligations to be ignored with respect to administration, religious education, and worship. Each has its lawful demand on the time and energy of the man of God. The unwarranted em-

phasis being given to some parts of the Church's program is due partly to social seminary specialist's fondness for his own demands and partly, if inevitably, to the familiar sphere. It is the singular stress being given to these essential but subsidiary parts that is the source of so much bewilderment to the young preacher. Unless he keeps his call to preach crystal-clear, all too frequently he finds that numerous organizational activities and institutional interests are dissipating his energies and muzzling his prophetic voice. In consequence, on Sunday mornings the hungry sheep look up and receive but slender fare.

In our day of specialization, when congregations lack that community of interests which characterized the days of our forefathers, only the messenger of God is in a position to help men to see life steadily and see it whole. Without his interpretation of the Vision of God, men must become something less than men.

There is no danger of the work of preaching ever passing away although it may suffer periods of decline and may need to change its forms to meet new conditions. Its mission is perpetual in the mind of God. It will remain the church's greatest potentiality for attracting men regardless of times and seasons. Wherever a truly great preacher appears he will draw the people, irrespective of denominational lines. If the church is to command the respect she should, she must have men who above all know God. "But she must have men who shall hold preaching as the highest and most difficult art, who shall not be lazy or insincere, who shall bend themselves to its attainment." *

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

⁵Kennedy, *op. cit.* p. 3.

^{*}Hoyt, A. S., *The Work of Preaching*, p. 19.