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Theological Concerns and the Preacher's Task[1]

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THERE IS a great divorce evident today in the minds and practice of many of the graduates of our theological colleges between the disciplines to which they were subjected as theological students and the disciplines (pressures might be the better word) to which they are subjected as "working" ministers. This divorce may have its beginnings in the theological college itself, for too often there has been a lack of community between the teaching of homiletics on the one hand and the teaching of the other theological disciplines. The "big five" of theological education have sometimes looked upon the so-called "practical" department as lacking in academic respectability, and, thus snubbed, the professor thereof has turned his back upon these other disciplines and has taught his students how to preach, teach, and administer without too much concern for the content of his preaching and teaching or the why of his administering, all the time finding solace in the thought that he alone has his feet on the ground and really knows what this ministry is all about. No doubt this is a caricature, and fortunately an increasing rarity. It is now recognized as a strange and inappropriate anomaly indeed that it should ever have been thought possible to teach a man how to preach without reference to the other disciplines which presumably teach him what to preach. But if we have eliminated it in the theological college, it still exists between the concerns of the college and the concerns of the pastorate.

The results of this divorce are many and varied. Two only I would suggest. On the one hand, the graduate may try to effect a relationship by turning his pulpit into a lecture platform—a procedure usually confined to more recent graduates. His sermon takes the form of a lecture, not by virtue of its erudition necessarily, but in so far as he addresses himself to ideas rather than to people. And if that be judged a sin, the sin is compounded because the ideas to which he addresses himself have been lifted bodily from the classroom and injected as almost wholly foreign matter into the minds of his people. Thus, he lays himself open to the oft-repeated charge made against the preacher: that he is continually answering questions that the pew has never asked.

Perhaps it should be noted in passing that there may be times when this is precisely what the pulpit should be doing. There is no doubt that our

1. An address delivered by Dr. J. Charles Hay in the fall of 1964 on his induction into the Chair of Homiletics, Evangelism and Church Administration in Knox College, Toronto.

people should be encouraged to ask questions which they have never asked, to show concern for matters which heretofore have been of no interest to them. Only thus can the status quo be challenged and progress—however defined—be encouraged. Did not our Lord do this to perfection? How often did he throw the question back at the enquirer for reformulation, thereby challenging the cherished presuppositions of the questioner. The Synoptics bear witness to this in their accounts of the man who asked him to arbitrate in the matter of the inheritance, the many encounters with the Pharisees and scribes, the disciples' concern with position and precedence. But it is the Fourth Gospel that drives the point home. Indeed one might just manage to make a case for the claim that the Fourth Gospel is a treatise on learning to ask the right questions, if one may judge on the basis of the conversations there recorded between Christ and the many individuals and groups who crossed his path. In almost all these situations Jesus answered questions that they had never asked. But—to return to our former concern —they were not academic questions solely. They were questions designed to face them with himself.

There is a second result proceeding from this divorce, and this one is more common, more prolonged, and more serious. The graduate may instead give up any attempt to effect a meaningful relationship, and turn his back in large measure on the theological disciplines to which he was subjected as an undergraduate. He cannot of course turn his back completely on these disciplines. Their influence can never fully disappear. But the tools of biblical research are not utilized in his analysis of a text, the insights of systematic theology are not developed, the lessons of church history are not applied, the light thrown upon the contemporary scene by philosophy of religion is ignored. And more and more as he becomes involved in the multitudinous details of congregational life he will concern himself with the so-called practical disciplines, on the assumption that these alone are relevant to his work as a minister.

But if the preacher has surrendered to the temptation to turn his back on the theologian, the theologian has not turned his back on the preacher. There may be a minimum of concern in the pulpit with Barth or Bultmann, but both Barth and Bultmann have been very concerned about the pulpit. Barth the theologian was born in a small town in Germany where Barth the preacher was struggling with the problem of what to preach. Bultmann's sophisticated theology of the New Testament was born of the desire not only to make the Gospel relevant but to enable the preacher to do so, to enable him to present to the man in the pew what is the real challenge of the Gospel. There is among contemporary theologians a high view of the pulpit. This high view of the preacher's task is seen in the insistence, heard like an antiphonal chorus on every hand, that preaching is not just a testimony to the saving action of God in Christ, but is itself part of that saving action. This, of course, is not a new emphasis. Luther made it, even if he did push

the matter to the borders of extremity. He refused to let any distinction be made beween the work of the preacher in the pulpit and the work of the Holy Spirit through the preacher. Of the preacher in the pulpit one can only say that "God himself preaches, threatens, punishes, frightens, comforts, baptizes, administers the Sacraments of the Altar and absolves."[2] And Calvin (commenting on 1 Peter 1:25) tells us, less extremely: "It is indeed certain that those who plant and those who water are nothing: but whenever God is pleased to bless their labour, he makes their doctrine efficacious by the power of His Spirit; and the voice which in itself is mortal, is made an instrument to communicate eternal life."[3] More contemporary theologians have emphasized this same truth. John Knox, in commenting on Romans 1:16, reflects this thought: ". . . preaching itself participates in that power. The preaching is an extending of the event itself, not merely of the knowledge of it. . . . It is Christ crucified and preached who is the power of God and the wisdom of God."[4] It has been stated in almost identical vein by H. H. Farmer: "Bearing witness to the unique, saving activity of God in Christ is now seen not merely as an adjunct to . . . but as indispensably part of, the saving activity itself."[5] It has been stated controversially by R. Bultmann: "Christ meets us in preaching as crucified and risen. He meets us in the word of preaching and nowhere else."[6] And it has been stated most effectively by P. T. Forsyth: "The Gospel of Grace . . . is an eternal perennial act of God in Christ, repeating itself within each declaration of it . . . it is this act that is prolonged in the word of the preacher, and not merely proclaimed."[7]

If texts are demanded to support these assertions, then it is fairly easy to marshall them. Of course, it may be taken for granted that marshalling texts is not the way to provide a Biblical basis for Biblical teaching. But the texts are there. It is the word of the cross that is the power of God to those who are being saved (1 Cor. 1:18). It is through the foolishness of preaching that God saves those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21). By virtue of this Paul can claim to be their Father in Christ (1 Cor. 4:15), and on another occasion usurp the role of mother, in so far as he claims to be in travail until Christ is formed within them (Gal. 4:19). It is because this ministry has been committed to him that Paul can make the daring claim that he—on behalf of Christ—beseeches men to be reconciled to God. Thus, by the preaching of the Gospel the redemptive act of Christ becomes not just a matter of historical record but redemptive power and experience.

2. T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947), p. 47.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
4. John Knox, *The Integrity of Preaching* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), pp. 92–3.
5. H. H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1942), p. 21.
6. *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch, translated by R. H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), p. 42.
7. P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London: Independent Press, 1957), p. 3.

But this kind of process does not take place automatically. The mere recitation of the Gospel, however biblical in content, cannot in itself have any power to save. Other factors, surely, must be present. May I suggest then some factors which I think must be present in order to constitute the declaration of the Gospel by the preacher an extension of the saving action of Christ? It is, I think, through consideration of these factors that theologian and preacher confront each other, converse with each other, support each other.

I

Let me suggest the obvious first. The preacher himself must be one who has heard the Gospel, and who seeks through every possible means to keep himself within the hearing of it. The man who is called to be a servant of Jesus Christ must be in constant quest for the mind of Him who Himself of his own volition took upon Him the form of a servant. It is the minister immersed in this quest whose preaching is most apt to be a prolonging of the redeeming action of Christ. That quest is, of course, pursued through many channels, but for the preacher the primary channel must surely be the Scriptures. It is there that he is brought most immediately face to face with the radical challenge of the Gospel, and through his immersion in them that he is best equipped to transmit that challenge to his people. And it is through the tools provided by the biblical disciplines that he is best equipped for this task.

It is at this point that one finds a very ambivalent attitude being adopted by many graduates in theology. They are for the most part prepared to recognize the validity of these tools in the analysis of a text, and even their usefulness in sermon preparation. But in any personal quest for the mind of Christ, any seeking of grace through the medium of the Scriptures, it is assumed that these tools may be laid aside and all that is required is the English text open before them. It is in the corner alone with their Bible that inspiration comes, and if one can proceed from that corner directly to the pulpit, so much the better. It would be presumptuous to deny that inspiration can come in this way. The wind bloweth where it listeth. But it would also be safe to suggest that what is far more likely to come from that corner is some very poor exegesis and worse theology. Would it be misleading to suggest that these very tools of exegetical study are themselves media of inspiration? Perhaps so. But they are at least hearing aids, and a failure to use them will mean that the challenge of the Gospel will be heard more faintly by the preacher and proclaimed less effectively by him.

II

There is a second factor which, when acknowledged, will lead to further conversation between the preacher and the theologian, and will at the same

time help to make of preaching "an instrument to communicate eternal life"; the preacher must confess his involvement in the church.

It is trite to remind him that he is not a free-lancer, much as he might like to be and much as he might sometimes act like one. He may often envy the free-lancer—in TV or radio or journalism. He has no sins to answer for but his own; he is free to criticize without commitment; to judge without consequence. But the preacher is in bonds; he is bonded to the church. He can never speak of it as something apart from himself. He can never denounce its shortcomings as if he had no part in them, or rail against its sins as if he had no part in them, or work in isolation from it as if he had no need of its resources. He can never be a spectator. He is always a participant. He is involved.

That means of course that he is involved in its history. He cannot turn his back on it even if he wanted to. "Culturally and intellectually we live in furnished apartments with very few pieces we can call our own."[8] We cannot understand ourselves if we turn our back on history. We cannot understand the church if we do so. And without it we cannot understand the task to which as preachers the church has called us. We all recognize the value of personal experience. Through it we can see the end result of many of the choices that are before us, and therefore we are enabled to make them more intelligently and with greater ease and confidence. And yet many a man who would extol the value of personal experience will readily ignore the corporate experience of the church. "History maketh a man old, without either wrinkles or gray hairs; privileging him with the experience of age; without either the infirmities or inconveniences thereof."[9] But more importantly, perhaps, it is church history that enables us to see the way in which the preaching of the word prolongs the redemptive activity of Christ. James D. Smart has reminded us that "The story of the church is the story of the continued work of Jesus Christ in and through His church."[10] It has been said that the "Acts of the Apostles" could properly be called "The Acts of Jesus Christ through the Apostles." But we must be prepared to recognize the fact that the acts of Jesus Christ did not stop with the Apostles. He continued to act through his church, and the whole of church history may properly be viewed in this light. "Perhaps the neglect of Church History and the ignorance of the Holy Spirit by Christians are closely related, for the Church is peculiarly the instrument through which, since Pentecost, the Spirit of God has shown its power in the world."[11] Hence, one of my venerated teachers used to call church history "Word of God" history. And in all this we are involved, for history, church history included, is not a book of illustrations properly cross-indexed to be used at will for the purposes of

8. Sidney E. Mead, *Divinity School News* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), Vol. XX, No. 1, p. 8.

9. Thomas Fuller, quoted in *Divinity School News, ibid.*, p. 1.

10. James D. Smart, in an article entitled "Why Study Church History," published under the auspices of the Board of Christian Education, Presbyterian Church in Canada.

11. James D. Smart, *ibid.*

sermonizing, but a stream of consciousness helping to make the cross and resurrection a present power. To be in this stream consciously gives us confidence that it is truly on behalf of Christ we may beseech men to be reconciled to God.

Thus the preacher is not alone when he stands in the pulpit. He is surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Only in acknowledgment of this dare he address the Gospel to the pain and the agony of the world, for he speaks not as an individual only but in the name of the Christ who himself suffered, and under authority of the church which has incorporated all the suffering of man in its own experience. Thus it is really the church that speaks. "The one great preacher in history, I would contend, is the church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the church to preach."[12]

III

If, however, it be accepted as true that the preacher is involved in the ongoing experience of the church in terms of its history, it must also follow as the night the day that he is also involved in its faith. He is involved in that faith articulated in its creeds and confessions, and interpreted by the fathers and the theologians of the church. In a word, he must be involved in systematic theology. The church's history and the church's faith may readily be distinguished from one another but they can never be separated from one another.

The motivation behind some course of action or choice of academic concern can sometimes be a curious thing. My own field of studies has been the New Testament. I remember well the consideration that led me to pursue these studies. It was as an undergraduate that I began to feel that too many theologians developed their particular theological predilections without specific reference to the Bible. I decided therefore that I would get at the real source of the church's faith and concentrate on the Bible, at least within the limits of New Testament studies. I did not intend to ignore the theologian forever, of course. Indeed, I planned to return to him later armed with the weapons provided by my biblical studies, and put him in his proper place. Oddly enough, it was these very studies that soon convinced me that his proper place was alongside biblical studies. For, as every second year theological student now knows, a study of the New Testament is really a study of the theology of the primitive church. Thus, biblical studies can never be simply an empirical science, even though the tools of biblical research must be used in as objective a manner as possible. But the Bible is the product of faith, and its significance is known best, and its power felt most effectively, by those who are prepared to involve themselves, in study and in committal, in the faith of the church. Systematic theology not only enables us to understand the theology of the New Testament, but enables us to see where it leads.

12. P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 59.

There is an assumption voiced commonly that a preacher need only be a man of the Book and a man of the people. Like all such assumptions, it may lead us closer to the borders of error than the borders of truth. A man of the Book he must be; but he is only a man of the Book when he has mastered the tools of biblical research, has placed himself intelligently in the stream of the church's consciousness of itself, and struggled in dedication of spirit with the corporate confession of the church's faith through its theological formulations.

IV

We began with the obvious. Let us close with the obvious. If his preaching is to be "part of the saving activity itself," the preacher must also be a man of the people. Here the preacher will immediately feel at home, for this he is. Does he not move in and out among them continuously? Pastoral visitation and pastoral counselling, committee meetings, organizational endeavours—all provide him with a host of contacts. Not for a moment should these contacts be underestimated. This does give him some advantage over the theologian, whose contacts are confined largely to students—who presumably are not people. It is the constant temptation of the academician to think of men according to classification: psychological, sociological, theological. But man cannot be known by classification alone. He must be known by name. Hence the great significance of the pastoral call. Here is a key to understanding that we dare not throw away, however frustrated the pastoral call may sometimes leave us. If we would know what man is, we must know him by name. But if we only known his name, we do not know what man is. For there are too many factors external to him which help to make him what he is: the presuppositions of the society in which he lives, the norms of the culture in which he shares, the prejudices of the group to which he belongs, the one hundred and one sociological factors that help to make him think as he thinks and do what he does. It is this area, with all the challenges to Christian faith that issue from it, that is explored by philosophy of religion. It is the insights that accrue from this discipline that help us to understand this world to which the Gospel must be addressed. When Professor Joseph C. McLelland was inducted into the Chair of History and Philosophy of Religion at Presbyterian College, Montreal, he promised that he would consider Philosophy of Religion and Christian Ethics as the "bridge between church and world, so that Philosophy of Religion would be looked at in terms of evangelism and Christian Ethics in terms of Social Action." Dr. McLelland himself would admit readily enough that the equations are not quite adequate, but nonetheless they serve to emphasize the concerns of these subjects, and they serve also to remind us that the preacher who would truly be a man of the people ignores them to the detriment of the Gospel.

These then are some of the factors which bring theologian and preacher

together in conversation, and which also make preaching "indispensably part of . . . the saving activity itself." This is not intended to be an apology for these fields. Neither these disciplines nor the professors thereof need any help from this direction. They are quite capable of standing on their own feet. But the point is—*Homiletics and Evangelism cannot*! Interests of their own they have; but independence they have not! They draw their sustenance from these disciplines, and to that extent are at their mercy. But if there is to be a bridge between the discipline of Homiletics and the other disciplines of the theological college, it will not be found by promoting the practical, but by intensifying the dialogue with the other disciplines.

Responsibility for this dialogue must be accepted by the "working" minister. The preacher concerned about relevance may too readily dismiss the theological tasks as irrelevant, and immerse himself, both in and out of the pulpit, in the practical on the assumption that this constitutes relevance. To be in touch with people at this level at the cost of being out of touch with these sources of spiritual insight and spiritual power is surely an exercise in futility. The key to relevance is not a flight to the practical but a deeper plunge into the Gospel. It is not by running from these disciplines but by subjecting oneself to them that relevance becomes a possibility.

John Knox writes of a woman who turned from the church because it seemed to her to have little contact with either the first century or the twentieth—to say nothing of all the centuries in between.[13] Homiletics and Evangelism dare not lose sight of this continuity. Neither may the preacher. It is consciousness of this continuity that will serve to bridge the gap between the lectern and the pulpit, and will help to make the preaching of the Gospel participate in the power of His Cross and Resurrection. Then on behalf of Christ we may beseech men to be reconciled to God.

13. John Knox, *The Integrity of Preaching*, p. 22.