

A Minister's Obstacles

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Chapter 6 -

THE EVASIONS OF PREACHING

According to John Bunyan, Legality and Civility and Morality are all good and necessary in their own places; but he is a cheat who would send a guilt-burdened and sick-at-heart sinner to any or all of them. The Wicket Gate first, and then He who keeps that gate will tell us what to do, and where next to go; but any other way out of the City of Destruction but by the Wicket Gate is sure to land us where it landed Evangelist's quaking and sweating charge.

"I am convinced that the welfare of mankind does not depend on the State and the world of politics; the real battle is being fought in the world of thought, where a deadly attack is made with great tenacity of purpose and over a wide field upon the greatest treasure of mankind, the belief in GOD and the Gospel of CHRIST."

- Wm. E. Gladstone.

THERE ARE MOODS of the soul. There is a time when the preacher wonders if his work is worthwhile. Spiritual exhaustion is the periodic lot of one whose life is given in the service of GOD. 'Virtue going out of a man' means the expenditure of moral and spiritual reserves to, bless others. Paul reminds us in II Corinthians 4:1 that "**as we have received mercy, we faint not.**" In this connection there is the charge to us that we do not handle "**the word of God deceitfully.**" We commend ourselves in our vocation in the measure that we bring theology into living experience by the sincerity and steady habit of expounding the Book for every man. But sometimes no response is found to the message which clamors for consideration. Deaf ears and unattuned spirits are all around, and preaching seems not to touch any chord. In this state of mind the preacher is the prey of uneasy thoughts: questions run riot in the mind concerning the place of preaching to-day. There is the temptation to lose heart and succumb to a dull routine of other "good works," imagining that by this subterfuge we escape from our obligation to continue faithful in "**holding forth the word of life.**"

In comparison with lecturing or essay reading or the oratory of the statesman or the propaganda of the radio expert, the task of the preacher seems almost trivial. But we need not suffer any eclipse. No one commands audiences like the preacher. Where is the politician who would have the same constituency of interested people week by week, year after year? The politician's message is passing, ephemeral, but ours is eternal. No, preaching is a glorious thing, and to conjecture that people no longer relish preaching is a popular fallacy. In our age more "preachers" are heard than ever, and they reach multitudes throughout the world. By means of radio, books, magazines, newspapers, and even highway signs, their message reaches men. Not

that every preacher is a preacher of the everlasting Gospel. Long ago, Ezra, in the days of Nehemiah 8:3-8, read the Word of GOD in the presence of the people. He **"stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; . . . and Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people . . . So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."**

And our Lord at a later date "came... preaching." Magnify, then, the office and technique of preaching: it is divine and sublime work!

There is a tendency to forget that to trim the message to suit people's fancies and wishful thinking is the way of degeneracy of spirit. We must determine needs and not wants as we seek guidance in the choice of the word to be proclaimed. We are purveyors of truth and therefore need not live in a groove. Some have no difficulty in preaching and teaching along certain lines: they arrive with suspicious unanimity at certain conclusions agreeable to this class or church or party. It is easy to criticise the ways of others who do not speak or act as we do, and such criticism may be our own moral condemnation. Then we may be unreal and insincere, because we know the truth from the Word of GOD is challenging and calling us to a new word to be emphasized, and yet we omit it. We read and live and preach in certain favourite portions of Holy Scripture but evade the great stretches of revelation awaiting our mental and spiritual sweating in labour. When did we last preach concerning the decrees of GOD, His majesty as well as His mercy, or the message of the prophets alive for our contemporary scene, or the work and ministry of the CHRIST in His present eternal office and state, to mention but a few much neglected themes in the pulpit?

That prince of expositors, Dr. Alexander Maclaren, has called attention to the truth that we are neither priests nor lecturers, but heralds. He says:

"The Christian minister's business is to be ever learning and ever teaching more and more of the 'manifold wisdom of God.' He has to draw for himself from the deep, inexhaustible fountains; he has to bear the water, which must be fresh drawn to be pleasant or refreshing, to thirsty lips. He must seek to present all sides of truth, teaching all wisdom, and so escaping from his own limited mannerisms. How many ministers' Bibles are all dog-eared and thumbed at certain texts, at which they almost open of themselves, and are as clear in most of their pages as on the day when they were bought."

The preacher stands apart from all men in order to draw near to them with the Word given from the unseen. He is separated unto the Gospel of GOD in order to seek and to save all who hear his message. Personality is the way of transmitting that message. And those who listen are asking questions. To what spiritual country does the man belong when he preaches? It is not what college course has he taken, not how capable is he in the methodology of the church, but out of what realm does he come when standing to minister? His ministry may deal with hundreds of items; he will not think his duty undone if he fails to expound every doctrine in every sermon, or suppose that he has not preached the Gospel unless he has dealt directly with a particular emphasis of truth. But if he is a man whose native air is that of a redeemed experience of the soul, of which he is a witness and herald, then he will be free to deal with many truths. Whatever his subject or method of approach to others, the listening people will always hear the undertones of the essentials of the faith.

The power of the preaching and the preacher lies in the depth of his spiritual life. No one can really proclaim the mystery of the Gospel unless he understands the significance of the divine revelation. In motive and intent, we are not to discuss our own discoveries: we have received something from the illumination of the HOLY SPIRIT. Motives are revealing, especially in this vocation, and there will always be about us the air of one who has listened and heard: "**The Lord God hath spoken; who can but prophesy?**"

The trick of evasion in the handling of truth is in the minds of most ministers: it is sly and slippery unless we live at the heart of the "**glorious gospel of the blessed God.**" It may find expression in the round of engagements and the sin of overwork to the neglect of the intake of new illumination and understanding of that which has already been revealed. Every theological student and would-be servant of GOD should be aware that, first, we are men before ministers. Our Christian life is lived by the same sources of grace as others. Only we must enter upon a post-graduate course in the spiritual university. Here we do well not to confuse prejudices with our principles. The mysteries of our creed must needs be transmuted into the moralities of our conduct. That will mean a translucent life wedded to concrete convictions of faith.

Robert Browning has succinctly expressed in Blougram's Apology that

"In every man's career are certain points
Whereon he dares not be indifferent;
The world detects him clearly, if he dare,
As baffled at the game, and losing life."

We traffic in great themes, and are apart from those other "would-be preachers" already mentioned. We are not dealing with the temporal, the economic, the social, the political, the material things of life, except as they impinge upon the eternal in its application of divine principles for man's daily life. We must make up our minds upon many themes and relate them directly to the current needs of man. Ezekiel said, "**I sat where they sat**" (3:15), and truly nothing is more exhilarating than to find the Word of the Lord "catching the moment" of men's immediate life and thought. Nothing can supersede preaching. A sermonless world would not be a utopia! Phillips Brooks was right in describing preaching as truth passing through the medium of personality, for therein lies the secret of our mission and message. We bring the only message of eternal worth to meet the clamant needs of man's social, moral, and spiritual behaviour.

In this connection, we remind ourselves that we are under-shepherds of Him who is the Great, the Good, the Chief Shepherd. The flock looks to us to provide food and pasturage. We lead and are examples in faith and sobriety, even as we guide them to the one adequate source of supply. Emile Chartier ("Alain"), of France, has spoken of this principle in his essay on Sheep and More Sheep:

"Continuing my studies of sheepish policy, . . . I came to realise that the sheep have great power over the shepherd, almost limitless indeed. For if the sheep grow thin, or merely if their wool curls badly, the shepherd is unhappy and that with no hypocrisy. What if the sheep start dying? Straightway the shepherd seeks out the causes and makes inquiry into grass, water, and sheep-dog. And thus the shepherd would be in no wise a hypocrite were he to utter to his sheep such words as these: 'Gentlemen of the sheepfold, you who are my friends, my subjects, my masters, deem not that I can hold concerning grass or wind opinions other than are your own . . . I am

your memory and I am your foresight, or, more nobly speaking, providence."

This is an opportune time to stress the Christian message and to exalt the office and dignity of the preacher. People are not sure of themselves now. They are disturbed about the world in which they live. Cultured paganism is not a success. The idea of progress has been exploded. Science is not necessarily the chief benefactor of the human race, for man does not live by bread alone. The return to barbarism is evidence that men have turned away from the springs of eternal life. They have neglected the Bible, the charter of liberty, the foundation of civilization, the chart and compass of moral and spiritual life. This is the time to stress the great tenets and dogmas of the Christian faith. For a number of decades people have been suspicious of dogma and wistful for faith, but now we discover that true faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of GOD. This postulates the dogmas of Christianity in its unique and solitary claims as the last word of GOD. The Church has been tempted to dilute the message by throwing over dogmatic preaching to substitute nebulous meanderings and pious uncertainties in a world in quest of certitude. All these excursions have left men in a maze of bewilderment and destitute of authority. And all this time the truth remains unshaken and eternal. True, its garb and fashion finds infinite variety in expression, but the essential dogmas abide without revision or addition.

Every craft and art of man demands a creed or dogma by which these act and work. The surprising phenomenon in Christendom has been the custom of the Church, through her leaders and preachers, to disparage and overthrow creeds. Others have not been slow to seize the hiatus created in Christendom, and the brood of cults, theosophical and unscientific and pseudo-Christian, have rushed in with insistent propaganda concerning so-called truth. In this way large areas of the world's life have been inundated by the flood of dogmas, racial, blood, totalitarian, demanding and receiving whole-hearted allegiance of body and soul on the part of multitudes. These paganized creeds challenge the very existence of the Christian faith and its Gospel by the religious devotion and sacrificial zeal of their devotees. They are not foolish in disparaging creeds or decrying dogmas!

In an earlier period of scouting credal belief, Robert Browning sought to answer the skeptical friend in his Blougram's Apology:

"Why first, you don't believe, you don't and can't,
(Not stately, that is, and fixedly
And absolutely and exclusively)
In any revelation called divine.
NO DOGMAS NAIL YOUR FAITH; and what remains
But say so, like the honest man you are?
First, therefore, overhaul theology!
Nay, I too, not a fool, you please to think,
Must find believing every whit as hard:
And if I do not frankly say as much,
The ugly consequence is clear enough."

We put in a caveat, therefore, against this continual discrediting of a Christian dogmatic. We plead for a return to dogmatic preaching: not harsh, unlovely, and uncouth preaching, but gracious, persuasive, Christ-convincing preaching. This generation is one in which man's wisdom has failed to find any durable satisfactions and in which earth-bound philosophies are

bankrupt in saving power. In *A Preface To Morals*, Walter Lippmann, has pertinently said: "The irreligion of the modern world is radical to a degree for which there is no counterpart. The passion to disbelieve is so strong that they are unable to believe, no matter how perfectly their theoretical dilemmas are resolved." How strange that the witnessing Body of CHRIST should find itself stressing what it does not believe, emptying itself of creed and attempting revision of century-tried and demonstrated doctrines of the faith! If ever this age is to regain its moral and spiritual equilibrium, it will be by a revival of the apostolic tenets of the Church's faith.

The time is opportune for us to offset this subtle temptation by once more returning to the central themes of the Gospel. Probably, preaching as a method has been laughed at in a world given over to "power politics" and "earthly wisdom," but a true understanding of the "**foolishness of preaching**" is the only adequate way out of the present morass. The well-known passage from Paul (I Corinthians 1:18) is not an admission that preaching as a way of speaking is vanity and folly, but a glorying in the power of the paradox - "the sheer folly of the Christian message."

That word is the *kerygma*, the thing preached, and it was that which challenged the thinking and wisdom and religion of mankind then and challenges them now. This central affirmation is none other than the focussing of the Gospel in the redemptive Passion of our Saviour CHRIST. Here is judgment upon sin, sacrificial salvation, Cross, Resurrection, and always an enthroned eternal One active throughout the ages. From the scandal of the Cross issues the glory of the Gospel.

Every age in history has witnessed a breaking in by GOD's Spirit in the measure of the emphasis of this heart message. John Wesley writes in his Journal on May 27, 1742:

"We came to Newcastle-upon-Tyne about six, and after a short refreshment, walked into the town. I was surprised: so much drunkenness, cursing, and swearing (even from the mouths of little children) do I never remember to have seen and heard before, in so small a compass of time. Surely this place is ripe for Him who 'came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'"

"May 30, At seven I walked down to Sandgate, the poorest and most contemptible part of town . . . I suppose there might be twelve to fifteen hundred before I had done preaching; to whom I applied those solemn words: 'He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.'"

This miracle of grace is set forth in the Shorter Catechism: "GOD maketh the reading and the preaching of the Word a means of convincing and converting sinners." If this is the aim in the heart of the servant of GOD he will overcome any evasion of preaching the Gospel of grace. And there is every encouragement in reading the Westminster Confession of Faith (1:7), which refers to the Bible as claiming that "those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned but the unlearned in a due use of the ordinary means may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."

It is expected that every man will proclaim with emphasis this Gospel in his own accent and way. As we grapple with the deep mysteries of revelation again and again for our own profit, we

shall go forth to our auditors to

"assert Eternal Providence,
and justify the ways of GOD to men,"

so fittingly lined by John Milton in Paradise Lost. We shall be saved from the snares of substitutes and shun the trivial and passing subjects of the hour. Concentration upon the immortal themes will bring richness of knowledge and power to touch men's heart-strings. That everyone will recur often to special things is evidenced by Dr. J. H. Jowett, whose biographer tells how he expressed the Gospel by iterating and reiterating the word "grace." It was the "big theme" to which, above all others, he returned again and again, as if, of all truth, it was the one fact that entranced him. "Grace" was Jowett's sovereign word.

That which will save a man from this sin of evasion of essential truth is that heart-passion for the Gospel already experienced in personal life. A workman should step back at times to look at his task. The one to be pitied most is the man who has no love for his high calling. What drudgery! Norman G. Dunning, in his heart tribute to Samuel Chadwick, that soulful Methodist preacher of England, has disclosed Chadwick's secret of greatness:

"I have loved my job with a passionate and consuming love. I would rather preach than do anything else I know in this world. I have never missed a chance to preach. I would rather preach than eat my dinner, or have a holiday, or anything else the world can offer. I would rather pay to preach, than be paid not to preach. It has its price in agony of sweat and tears, and no calling has such joys and heart-breaks, but it is a calling an archangel might covet; and I thank GOD that of His grace He called me into this ministry. Is there any joy like that of saving a soul from death? Any thrill like that of opening blind eyes? Any reward like the love of little children, to the second and third generation? Any treasure like the grateful love of hearts healed and comforted? I tell you, it is a glorious privilege to share the travail and the wine of GOD. I wish I had been a better minister, but there is nothing in GOD's world or worlds I would rather be."

The true preacher is one who does not preach about things: he preaches out of the fulness of things because he lives at the heart of truth. Brethren, as ministers of the Word, we must eliminate the possibility of failure: the ultimate necessity is the summoning of the mind and will to do our duty of handling the Word of GOD without any deceit or evasion. We may well rise up these days to greater things and leave behind the lesser things. With such a vision of the regnant CHRIST whose Gospel we proclaim as His ambassadors, we need not lose heart with such *dunamis** and *sophia** of GOD.

**These are the Greek words for "power" and "wisdom" respectively.*

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