

# The Bible and the Pulpit

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Much modern preaching is weak and ineffective, disappointing and unconvincing, because of a lack in the preacher of adequate conviction concerning the place of the Bible in the pulpit. Those of us who are called to this task of preaching greatly need a new awakening to, and a consequent compelling awareness of, the character of our stewardship. For, "*it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful*" (1 Corinthians iv. 2).

## I

The Christian preacher has something unique to offer to men—the proclamation that God has acted in human history, both to reveal Himself and to redeem mankind. So our Gospel for men ought not to be found in human philosophy and man-made ideas, and still less in our personal preferences and prejudices, but in the declaration of God's self-revealing and saving acts.

These acts of God, because they are acts in history, possess the character of particularity and once-for-all-ness. God is not repeating them in each fresh generation. If, therefore, they are to fulfil their universal and age-long purpose of speaking to all men, and bringing to them light and hope, worthy record, appropriate interpretation and effective announcement of them are indispensable. Nor has God left such necessary complementary ministries to chance. Prophets and apostles were raised up of God to provide both the record and the interpretation, and preachers are continually being called to utter the Word of God thus entrusted to them in living application to the present generation—and all under the compulsion and enlightenment of the inspiring Spirit.

"Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets"; so Amos saw. "The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" So Amos spoke. Such particular confessions indicate and illustrate the general method of divine revelation. God's special acts in history to reveal and to redeem have also been accompanied by the raising up of prophets to record and to interpret. Their words, significantly fixed in permanent written form, are for all subsequent generations doubly indispensable. Without them the acts of God would not be known; still more without them the acts of God would never be understood and appreciated in all their unique and supernatural significance.

What was true of the preparatory disclosures of God in Old Testament times when He spoke to men "by divers portions and in divers manners", here a little and there a little, is still more true of the crowning act of revelation and the final work of redemption through the incarnation of God the Son. Through special chosen witnesses God, acting in sovereign providence, secured the writing down of a record of these events of revelation and redemption in ways which throw into relief their true significance, together with a fuller interpretation for the responsive of truths concerning God and man therein revealed. The writings thus inspired also provided manifold indication both of the dynamic outworking of

the benefits of this Gospel in the lives of men, and of the final consummation in which it will inevitably issue. Thus the New Testament Scriptures were added to the Old.

It is through these Scriptures and through these alone that the true God can now be known and His saving purposes for men discerned. Here only can we find the true Christ in all the fulness of both His divine person and His saving work. To quote Dr. Alan Richardson, “The Christian understanding of historical revelation is that it was given through certain historical events as interpreted by the faith and insight of the prophets and apostles of the Bible”. “Christians believe that the perspective of biblical faith enables us to see very clearly and without distortion the biblical facts as they really are.” “The interpretation of the biblical facts, as it was given to them by those who recorded them in the biblical history and apostolic witness, is necessary to a true seeing of the facts themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

What is more, it is God’s further complementary purpose that in each fresh generation and in every Christian congregation this written testimony should fulfil its illuminating and saving ministry among men through the present confirming witness of God the Spirit, and through the Spirit-enabled exposition and relevant practical application of the written Word by the faithful preacher. So these three should agree in one common witness to convince the hearer—the written Word, the illuminating Spirit and the faithful preacher. But here, too, since the preacher is the appointed “voice” to give utterance, if he does not fall into proper line in his ministry, not only is the Word of God not heard, but men are compelled to listen to a disappointing counterfeit. “The hungry sheep look up and are not fed.”

It is, therefore, for the man who would worthily occupy the Christian pulpit to recognize, first, that he is called to serve God and to promote God’s glory and men’s good by preaching Christ; second, that he is called to serve Christ and to present Him truly and fully to men by preaching that Word which has been written to set Him forth; third, that he is called to serve God the Spirit by seeking His guidance, and following His illumination and leading, both in discovering within the written Word the truth of God which is relevant, and in declaring its relevance to his waiting audience; and fourth, that he is therefore called by the whole Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, to serve God by becoming a servant of the written Word, a man whose utterances are wholly determined both in content and aim by the written Word’s plain statements, and not by his own independent prejudices, and preferences.

Would that the many who enter Christian pulpits week by week could be made to feel the amazing wonder of their high privilege, and the full burden of their solemn responsibility, as ministers of the God-given Word. Then they would unquestionably give a new priority to the worthy discharge of their stewardship. Nor is there any one accession that many congregations need more than the advent of a preacher who, in the face of all the temptations to do otherwise, can but re-echo the apostle Paul’s words, “Necessity is laid upon me, yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel” (1 Corinthians ix. 16).

## II

Such use of the Bible in the pulpit by the preacher is not likely to be adopted, and still less to be faithfully maintained in season and out of season, unless the preacher is convinced of, and compelled by, certain fundamental truths and consequent obligations with regard to his task. Let us, therefore, seek to make ourselves aware of some of these more in detail.

(A)

The preacher ought always to be constrained by the recollection that the Church is “a witness and keeper of Holy Writ”. To quote the late Professor E. J. Bicknell, “The Church exists to propagate certain beliefs. . . . Her message is sufficiently set forth in Scripture. . . . Her primary function is that of witness. . . . As witness she cannot alter or add to the truth: she is the servant and not the mistress of her message.”<sup>2</sup>

Before a congregation of Christian believers the preacher who would be faithful has, therefore, no right to choose what he will say according to his own fancy or personal interest, nor to make brief quotations from the Scriptures serve as pegs on which to hang his own ideas. In the pulpit, if he is to be true to his calling, he must be a minister or servant of the God-given Word. He should make it his business solely to set forth for men’s edification what can be got out of God’s Word written rather than what can be independently devised by the initiative of his own reasoning or imagination.

In this connection there is arresting and appropriate significance in the custom which obtains in some Reformed Churches, that before the minister enters the pulpit the Bible should be solemnly carried in and placed upon the rostrum, as a visible sign and freshly acted witness that the Holy Scriptures are the one authoritative text-book that is revered, and that is to be read and expounded, in this congregation.

On the other hand, with us “a text” has come to mean something short, something which belongs to the preacher—“*his* text”—something which, because it is more or less just an indication or introduction of his subject, he can use or depart from, as he will. Such a preacher makes the Word serve his ends instead of himself becoming a true servant of the Word. Whereas originally and properly the word “text” (as in the reference to the text of ancient manuscripts) describes simply the actual statements to be found in the Holy Scriptures in any particular passage, whether short or long; and the proper business of its preacher is to stick to that passage, and to set forth exclusively what it has to say or to suggest, so that the ideas expressed and the principles enunciated during the course of the sermon are plainly derived from the written Word of God, and have its authority for their support and enforcement rather than just the opinion or enthusiasm of their human expositor.

It is thus the preacher’s privilege and responsibility continually to bring his hearers into the light and under the judgment of the God-given Word. To quote Professor Oscar Cullmann, “The written witness of the Apostles is for us the living element which continually sets us anew face to face with Christ. If we realize the magnitude of this miracle . . . we can no longer speak of the dead letter of the Bible. Yet this presupposes that we share the faith of the first Christians that the Apostles are not writers like other authors of antiquity, but men set apart by God for the execution of His plan of salvation by their witness, first oral, then written.” “The apostolic witness has a double role: it engenders inspiration and acts as its controller, since in all inspiration there is a risk of other spirits putting themselves in the place of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

Here we sometimes need deliverance from prevailing but misleading traditional interpretation of Scripture. For instance, in His condemnation of the rabbinic interpretation of the commandment to honour father and mother (Mark vii. 9-13), as well as in the antitheses of

the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord was significantly indicating “the necessity of returning to the Word itself to get from it the divine intention”.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, we equally and more often need deliverance from the temptation to impair the distinctive witness of the God-given Word through following some prevailing fashion of academic scholarship or popular thought. For instance, “If the texts have to be manipulated previously, when historical witnesses are interpreted as myths, or when the scholar decides beforehand how much of the text he is to regard as ‘eternal truth’ and how much as ‘historically conditioned’ and therefore valueless material, the experience he looks forward to will not be related to the God of our salvation but rather to the theologian’s own views of what salvation ought to be”.<sup>5</sup> Or again, “In our eagerness to evangelize, we may actually distort the Gospel by identifying it with a programme or ideology which is already acceptable”. “To make the Gospel relevant according to our views of relevancy is to manipulate God’s revelation to suit ourselves—but then we do not allow God to speak to us in His own way.”<sup>6</sup> If, therefore, God’s voice is to be properly heard in the congregation of His people the preacher must be a whole-hearted and uncompromising servant and expositor of the God-given Word.

#### (B)

The preacher should believe and become increasingly aware that there is a vital Christian significance for present-day hearers to be found in Scriptures written long ago. This particularly applies to the Old Testament—as the apostle Paul explicitly and repeatedly testifies.<sup>7</sup> These Scriptures can and should mean more to us than they did or could to the men of Old Testament times; for we live in the light and experience of their Christian fulfilment. Also, they were written for our instruction; they have been divinely prepared and provided for our benefit, to help our understanding and enjoyment of salvation through faith in Christ. For instance, “St. Paul (1 Cor. x. 11) says that the events of the Exodus happened to Israel *τυπιχως*—by way of type.” “For the exodus-theme (with its associated thoughts) provides the clue for the interpretation of each successive stage in God’s redeeming acts.” “The earlier story not only shows a correspondence with the later; it provides the imagery, the authoritative categories, by which alone the true meaning of the later can be understood.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore the Old Testament stories ought to be used and expounded as divinely provided material for the better preaching and appreciation of Christ and the Gospel.

In this connection, as Professor C. H. Dodd has significantly shown<sup>9</sup>, striking illustration of this method of exposition is to be found in the use of the Old Testament which is made by the New Testament writers. According to their judgment through the ancient Scriptures the Holy Spirit speaks to us “to-day” (see e.g., Heb. iii. 7ff). They appealed to the ancient Scriptural history and statement to confirm the divine origin of, and to interpret the divine purpose in, the events of the Gospel or the experience of Christians. Paul thus “found a securer basis than his own ‘experience’ for the theology he taught”. “He expressly bases his theology upon the *kerygma* as illuminated by the prophecies of the Old Testament; or, in other words, upon the historical facts which he had ‘received’ from competent witnesses, set in the larger historical framework, witnessed, both as fact and as meaning, by the prophetic writers.”<sup>10</sup>

Appreciation of the place and need for this kind of preaching use of the Old Testament in our pulpits is the more urgent because the literary and historical criticism of the Old Testament, engaged in by ordinands in training more than by others, has developed in the preachers-to-be

of our churches a critical scientific attitude to the Old Testament documents, and has actually inhibited rather than encouraged their use of these Scriptures in the way in which a Christian preacher should handle them. For “the Bible has become too much a book for specialists; a book on the serious discussion of which men are hesitant to embark, lest they trespass on some technical preserve, and be condemned out of hand for some highly technical errors”. “It is the great immediate loss produced by the historical study of the Bible that it has destroyed the old common believing use of the Bible.”<sup>11</sup>

Preachers, therefore, need to return to a proper Christian attitude to the Old Testament, and to a proper believing use of it in Christian preaching and teaching. What is more, to get to the root of the matter, men being trained as preachers in the theological colleges need to be set free from absorption in the study of the prevailing scientific and historical criticism of the Old Testament, which is for them not only so largely profitless but also so grievously deadening; and encouraged to study the Old Testament with its Christian application and use fully in view.

(C)

The preacher ought to prepare for his task as one who believes that it is within the Canon of the Old and New Testament Scriptures that God’s present Word for men is still to be found and heard; and that it is through the faithful exposition and vital application of these Scriptures to the congregation that this present Word of God is to be expressed, and made living and intelligible to men, by the quickening and illuminating Spirit. This means in practice that, when considering what to preach, the preacher-to-be will prayerfully wait upon God with and in His Word. In other words, it is to the Scriptures that he will turn; it is in them he will tarry; it is at them he will toil; constrained by the belief, and encouraged by the unfailingly renewed experience, that God still has much light waiting to break forth from and through His written Word.

Not only so; he will seek in this way the more exclusively and diligently to discover the message to be preached, because he knows it to be his calling thus to minister the God-given word rather than to give to men what they may imagine, or what he may think, they need. For neither the people in the pews, nor the man in the pulpit are the best judges of what is truly relevant to the needs of the congregation.

Men and women, living as we all do so sinfully and selfishly, need the breaking in from outside of a word announcing a staggering objective truth, relevant to us because we are inevitably related to it, and of such a kind as will alter our whole present circumstance and our whole future behaviour. The Christian preacher should be like a telegraph messenger bringing to the hearer in person, and not least to the wholly indifferent and unsuspecting, the kind of news that completely alters his position and his prospects—like the bringing to light of evidence making one chargeable with a capital offence, or the news of the death of a relative by whose will one is richly to benefit, provided one goes to live on his estate. Such is the news which the preacher is called to find for men in the God-given Word, and commissioned authoritatively to give to men in God’s Name.

(D)

The preacher can only adequately discharge his responsibility if he recognizes that he is called to preach the whole Bible and the Christ of all the Scriptures. There is no justification for deliberately leaving some out or carelessly disregarding its witness. In a sermon on 2 Timothy iii. 16, 17, John Calvin wrote: "That no man might take the liberty to choose what he pleaseth and so obey God in part, St. Paul saith the whole Scripture hath this majesty of which he speaketh, and that it is all profitable. . . . When he speaketh of the Holy Scripture, . . . he doth mean the Old Testament. . . . Thus we perceive that his mind was that the law and the prophets should always be preached in the Church of Christ". Or, to quote two modern writers: "In any merely human system of truth . . . obsolete ideas are discarded, new ideas are incorporated in the light of fresh discoveries. But no part of the divine revelation can ever become out of date, nor does it need to be supplemented from outside. Hence the place assigned to Scripture".<sup>12</sup> And again, "The Bible is a vehicle of revelation, and it is not open to a believer to select from it only such passages as suit his personal taste".<sup>13</sup> So the faithful steward of the mysteries of God must preach the Scriptures, the whole Scriptures, and nothing but the Scriptures.

### III

One last word needs to be added. Such preaching requires in the preacher personal qualifications of a moral and spiritual order in the realm of his own faith in Christ and his own obedience to God's Word. To the proclamation of the message the effective preacher, whom the Spirit uses to enlighten and to inspire men, commonly sets the seal of his own testimony that God's Word is true. This he does both by the confession of his lips and by the correspondence of his life. For the God-given Word is made by the Spirit present saving Gospel to the hearer who believes, as it is preached with conviction and urgency by the man who himself believes it and has experienced its power. Similarly the God-given Word becomes challenging and compelling teaching to the hearer, who is prepared to obey, as it is presented in exposition and exhortation by the man who has himself worked out its meaning and entered into its practical application in his own daily living.

By all means, therefore, let us preach the Word, in season and out of season. In other words, in the pulpit let us confine ourselves to Biblical exposition. For we are stewards of divinely-revealed truth; and "*it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful*". But to our faithful stewardship let us add faith in our divine Fellow-Worker and the obedience of wondering fellow-workmen. Let us, as we preach, ourselves be doers of the Word and not preachers only. Let us, as we preach, never cease to believe that, if the Word be God-given, He will cause it to prosper in the thing whereto He sends it. Such labour cannot be in vain.

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##### Endnotes:

- 1) *Christian Apologetics*, pp. 92, 105.
- 2) *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles*, p. 317f.
- 3) "Scripture and Tradition," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (June 1953), pp. 119, 121.

- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- 5) Professor Otto A. Piper, "Mysticism and Christian Experience", *Theology To-day*, July 1953. p. 168.
- 6) Hugh T. Kerr, Jr., "Revelation and Relevancy", *ibid*, pp. 145, 147.
- 7) See Rom. xv. 4; 1 Cor. x. 11; 2 Tim. iii. 15-17; cf. 1 Pet. i. 10-12.
- 8) W. M. F. Scott, "The Christian Use of the Old Testament", *The Churchman*, Vol. lxi, No. 4 (Dec. 1947). p. 177f.
- 9) *According to the Scriptures*, Nisbet, 1952.
- 10) *Ibid*, p. 135.
- 11) H. Cunliffe-Jones, *The Authority of the Biblical Revelation*, p. 35.
- 12) E. J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles*, p. 317.
- 13) W. J. Phythian-Adams, *The People and the Presence*, p. 86.