

THE AIM OF THE SERMON.

A Paper Read before the City Methodist
...Preachers Meeting, Elmira, N. Y., by
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The term sermon is one that is rapidly becoming obsolete. The people seldom use it to designate the discourse of the preacher. They prefer to call it a talk, and when they express appreciation it is by saying "we enjoyed your talk." Of course a bishop always preaches a sermon. He can afford to do so. One of his though not going as far as it used to still goes a long way. The district superintendent is expected to preach sermons, though they grow less common as his duties multiply and his territory extends. But the best the ordinary preacher can do is to give talks no matter how homiletically he constructs his discourse or accurately he gives the exegesis of the text.

I am to talk about the aim of the sermon. I cannot do that without talking about preaching. But I am not to preach. Talking about a sermon is no more preaching than talking about a song is singing.

I am not going to plead for the use of the term sermon for there is a word I like better and that is message. It means far more to be a messenger than to be a mere preacher, and a message has a deeper significance than the technical term sermon. The education and training of the schools, can make a preacher who can turn out acceptable and polished sermons; but it requires the divine equipment to make the true messenger of God. Isaiah had been a preacher for years, a graduate from the school of prophets, well satisfied with himself and probably quite satisfactory to the people before he deeply realized the sacred responsibility of his office and felt his own insufficiency for the task. But in the year that Uzziah the King died, Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up. The prophets eyes were taken off the temporal king, who had been brought down to dust to consider the great King of all. The Holiness of God was a mirror into which the prophet looked to see reflected his own pollution. That look extorted from his heart the cry, "Woe is me for I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for mine eyes have seen the King the Lord of hosts." Not for a moment do I believe Isaiah by that confession would have us infer that obscene storeis had defiled his lips. No not that; but he meant there had been a great deal of selfishness and vain glorious pride mingled with his service. He had been making the thought of pleasing the people. The aim of his preaching had been for God and a good deal for self. "Then flew one of the seraphims and touched his lips with a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar saying, to this has touched thy lips and thy iniquity is taken away and thy sin purged." By that purifying process the divided heart of the prophet became unified. The preacher was transformed into the messenger of God, who in response to the question, whom shall I send or who will go for us?" cried out with a glad spontaniety "here am I, send me!" That sanctified prophet received a stronger heart to deliver it. He before this had been getting his sermons up, now he was getting the message down. He before had been consecrated to a sacred office, now he becomes consecrated to a holy God, and having let God work in him to will and do his own good pleasure, he can deliver God's message whether men will hear or forbear.

It is far easier to get a sermon than it is to get a message. A preacher can borrow a

sermon, but like a man in a borrowed coat, he cannot feel comfortable and it seldom fits. A preacher can go to a homiletical bone-pile and carry off a skeleton upon which he may freeze some flesh, but he finds it extremely hard to create into it the breath of life. But a message is born in the heart experience of the messenger. It is a product of the heart and head and is prayed down as well as worked up. And the character of the message will be determined by the character of the man. If the preacher be a man in whom the intellectual is dominant, with whom cold reason and precise logic are more potent than vital faith and holy emotion, then the product will be intellectual, apologetical and philosophical, covering perhaps a wide range of literature, science and art; touching entertainingly some phases of revelation and on the whole an appetizing dish for those who admire intellectual gymnastics and oratorical pyrotechnics. It will be the work of a popular pulpiteer. But if the preacher be a man with soul aglow with a vital experience of salvation, like Isaiah received, that has burned out his quibbling and timeserving spirit, then no matter what his intellectual calibre may be or how great his mental furnishing, he will be more concerned about bringing to the people a message from God than he will be to make a sermon. He will not be all the time perplexed as to what he shall preach about; but with him the question ever is, "to what purpose shall I preach?" He cannot make the sermon and end in itself into which he crams so much knowledge that people wonder "how one small head can hold all that he knows?" The preacher who does this finds his highest reward in the gracious things the people say to him at the door, or the words of praise that appear in the Monday morning paper.

No nobler tribute was ever paid a faithful servant of God than that penned by the brilliant though dissipated Oliver Goldsmith in loving admiration for his saintly father, the "village preacher." "Unskill be to fawn or seek for power, by doctrines fashioned to the varying hour; For other aims his heart had learned to prize; more bent to raise the wretched than to rise." The print and power of his message are expressed in the words: "And fools who came to scoff remained to pray."

Dr. Jesse Peck, afterwards bishop, said the most searching words ever spoken to him were uttered by one of his members who had become insane and was confined within an asylum. Dr. Peck visited the patient one day who as soon as he saw him cried out, "whom do I see! Why great big Dr. Peck! What does he preach? Not Jesus Christ and him crucified, but by Big Jesse Peck and him dignified." The words of the insane man probed the heart of the self-satisfied preacher. He knew the man was only talking out in his insanity what he had deeply thought. When of sound mind his own conscience and the spirit of God told him there was too much truth in the accusation. Dr. Peck said this was one of the arrows that convicted him of his need of an experience like Isaiah received.

A Methodist preacher who occupied the biggest pulpit of our denomination in a city not far from here received a letter one day from one of his most influential and fashionable parishioners, in which she expressed her appreciation of his sermons, but she suggested. "I think you can make your evening services more interesting by following the example of Dr. so and so of such a church or Rev. so and so of another church and give us an hour occasionally with Shakespeare or Tennyson and not preach so much on the same old line as you do."

That preacher spread the letter on his study chair and kneeling before the Lord, thanked him for the accusation the woman had made, that he was preaching the gospel and then steadfastly resolved to continue preaching it, even though she left his church to go where she could bear less about Christ and salvation and more about Shakespeare and Browning.

I hear Rev. Samuel Chadwick, the eminent English Wesleyan preacher say at a great holiness convention held in Star Hall, Manchester, that when he sought the experience of entire sanctification he ran up against his sermons in his consecration. The impression was deeply made upon his mind that God would have him destroy them all. He tried to banish the idea as a trick of the devil to sidetrack him, but in spite of all his efforts the impression remained and he was powerless to exercise the faith necessary to receive the blessing. The Spirit showed him how much pride centered in those discourses he had so painstakingly preposed. They were the children of his brain and he thought of his heart and he prized them. They had been praised by many; some of them had found their way into print, in a measure he felt the blessing of God had been upon them. Then why should he destroy them. It seemed to carnal sight unreasonable. But God held him to it, and rather than miss the baptism with the Holy Ghost which he saw God was offering him, he resolved to pay the price. Into the fire went the sermons. Said he humorously "I didn't know they were so dry till I had put them in the grate. They made more heat there than ever before." And, he continued, "I have never regretted the act, nor doubted it was done under the direction of the Holy Spirit for into my soul came the fulness of the blessing. By that act I became crucified to my intellectual pride and my ambition to be a big preacher. Instead I became a messenger for God as never before. God has given me better sermons, and the real joy of preaching began that day when I counted the things that had been gain, but loss for Jesus' sake."

The preacher must have the heavenly vision, the inner experience of eternal realities to save him from secularizing the gospel. But the man who enters the ministry to please his mother, or because someone has told him his voice and physique would guarantee him success, or because he has a benevolent desire to be of service to his fellow men; such a man will see very few dangers or besetments. He will deal largely with the social and industrial aspects of the kingdom and fail utterly to grip the great eternal realities of sin and salvation. The ethical, the ecclesiastical, the recreational will be magnified. In other words the naturalistic and not the supernatural will be dominant. In his doctrine of Divine Immanence he will thin God out so that old Spinoza would be delighted with such ideas; and he will make the brotherhood of man so broad that all spiritual distinctions are abolished. With man-devised schemes and human combinations he brings in what he calls the Kingdom of God. He plans to save the individual by properly adjusting his environment. And so he has a good deal more to say about clean politics, and good playgrounds than he will about a clean heart. The sermon by Bishop Kilgo in a recent Christian Advocate is so pertinent and searching in its analysis of present conditions that I quote a couple of paragraphs without apology:

The Secularizing Spirit of the Age.

"But in the face of these positive and plain teachings of Jesus there has come among us a widespread disposition to secularize the gospel and to engage the thought and activities of the