

The King's Highway

AN ADVOCATE OF SCRIPTURAL HOLINESS

VOL. XXXVIII

MONCTON, N. B., AUGUST 15TH, 1959

No. 568

BETTER LISTENING—GREATER PREACHING

By Norman R. Oke
in "Herald of Holiness"

It came from her lips more as a sigh than a complaint. She was a sweet-faced saint of God, and looking me right in the eye with a pleading tone in her voice, she said, "Oh, for greater preaching!"

I'm not sure what I replied, for my mind had been stabbed till it bled. For preaching is my job—pardon, I should have said preaching is my life. And it is. And her plaintive plea for greater preaching was aimed at me and every other man or woman who has felt the hand of God pushing him from the plow or the pencil to the pulpit. Her words stung us all to the quick.

My failure to remember my reply was only because my thoughts were making warfare on my consciousness just then. These questions marched before me, saluted, and demanded attention. Is preaching less great now than in former days? Are we preaching as well as our native talents and our prayer preparation could warrant? Was the dear lady, perchance, unfair with her evaluation of modern preaching?

May I admit to all who read that I, with 99 per cent of all preachers, weep over the fact that there is not more great preaching. I feel like saying also right in tune with the dear, sweet lady, and with as much feeling and sincerity. "Oh, for greater preaching!" I would gladly second her motion. I am as embarrassed as any layman at the ineffectiveness of our pulpit ministry. I wish that my very average messages could somehow climb to that level which can only be classified as "great preaching." But the stinging question is, How?

Now I come to the point of this brief article—the matter of listening. Put it like this: We can't have greater preaching until we have better listening. Much of the blame for below-par preaching can be laid at the door of below-par listening. What then, I ask, are the elements in good listening?

First, a good listening attitude which says, I want to hear. And if you will permit me to be confessional for you, listening is not naturally easy in our day. And it is getting harder all the time. We so easily forget that Jesus said over and over, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 11:15).

You see, it's this way. We live and labor in a nervous, hurried, chattery, impatient age. In such a time talking is more natural than listening. If you are a good listener in ordinary life you are a jewel, let me declare. Remember, lay friends, if you are good listeners on Sunday in church it will be because you by sheer self-discipline practice in church something most people don't practice all week long—good listening. Our lips abhor inactivity; we are eager-lipped, quick-tongued—for it's much easier to chatter than to listen; talking gives expression to our nervous impatience.

So there is problem number one in developing good listening in behalf of greater preaching.

Second, a good listening atmosphere which says, I'll do my best to make listening easy. The truth in here: while we at times decry our poor preaching we are, at times, asking preachers to operate in situations where Demosthenes would have failed. I have tried to preach in churches where the sheer absence of fresh air put good people to sleep—drugged by dead air. A few breaths of fresh air would have gone a long way toward elevating that poor sermon of mine upward a little farther away from drabness. In some cases preachers don't need more prayer; the congregation needs more air. It's hard to be a good listener when you are re-breathing the air that your neighbors all down the pew have already breathed and rebreathed a dozen times, and the last breath you took was screaming for an injection of oxygen.

Then, speaking of atmosphere, great preaching cannot be done in a church where parents make the aisles a race track for their small children. Maybe this is part of our problem: in the Sunday school hour we believe in learning through activity. Then we go to the worship service and our children rather like to carry over the idea and have their preaching amid activity. I make bold to declare that Truett or Dale or Jowett would have done poor preaching if they had been asked to preach to small crowds when perhaps one-fourth of the audience was small children who periodically walked across the aisle to visit Grandma, or chased from the front seats to the back of the church only to return down the same isle in a few moments. And all the while your God-sent messenger watches the adults turn their heads to see the procession. Meanwhile the sermon that was moving towards greatness slows to a sickening standstill.

God bless our nurseries. Mothers, with tiny babies, are wonderful to come to church at all. They should have nursery facilities or at least have the back pews reserved for them. They don't know why their baby decided to scream "blue-murder" just at the climax of a great evangelistic message. Apollos could not have done great preaching in competition with leather-lunged, healthy babies. A church that shrugs off the crying-baby problem should never complain about the quality of preaching from its pulpit.

Well, here it is: great preaching can be done only in an atmosphere conducive to good listening.

This is a double-pronged problem. We of the ministry need to bow our heads in confession that we must prepare better both in head and in heart. We must continually do better preaching. Our times and our listeners demand it and have a right to do so.

But the sheer fact remains that the listening done by any congregation is mightily important. Would you have greater preaching? You can have it. You can have it without calling a new preacher. You can have it without

(Continued on Page 4)