

PROBLEM PREACHING

HARRY T. MORRIS

Preaching as a method of propagating religion is on trial today before the bar of public opinion. Perhaps it has been forced to stand such a trial in every age. But today in a special way this is so because the supports for preaching upon which our fathers depended, are no longer present. For instance, the preacher no longer has a monopoly on Sunday which he once had. Countless interests are bidding for the people on the Lord's day. The preacher is in open competition with those interests and whether or not he successfully competes must depend upon the effectiveness of his preaching. If he can supply the spiritual needs of the people in his community through his preaching, he will have a congregation. The thesis of this article is that preaching today will rise to its highest level of efficiency if and when preaching is directed toward a solution of the problems of our people.

Most sermons fail to turn out right because they started out wrong. All preachers have had the experience of preparing a sermon which seemed to them, before delivering it, to have been a good one. It was well organized, well balanced, had literary finish, contained illuminating illustrations, and yet it flattened out in the delivery. What was wrong with it? If we probed far enough into the background of such a sermon we probably discovered that it was preacher-centered rather than people-centered. It started out with a peculiar interest of the preacher.

Here is the way most sermons are germinated. The preacher being a sort of "homiletic hound" is always on the hunt for sermonic ideas. Reading a book he comes across an arresting phrase; or listening to a radio program

he hears an unusual sentence; or reading his Bible he discovers a text which leaps out of the page into his mind. In these and other experiences he eagerly grabs at such ideas and says to himself, "Now there's a sermon in that." And straightway he begins sermonizing. What's wrong with that, somebody asks. The fault lies in the preacher-interest rather than the interests of the people in the pew. And after all, sermons are presumably prepared and delivered not for the preacher's sake but rather for the benefit of the people. Their interests, their problems, their needs, should provide the germination of effective preaching.

The difficulty in changing to such a principle lies in the habits of the preacher himself. Being ordinary mortals we tend to justify the things we are now doing and the way we do them. To change our minds or our methods is a tacit admission that we have been wrong and who wants to make such an admission? Perhaps some reader of these lines is ready to say at this very point, in justification of preacher-centered preaching, "This man is trying to tell us to give the people what they want." But there is a real difference between giving them what they want and what they need. This is not a proposal to please the vanities of our flocks nor to tickle their fancies. Or again, we still find representatives of arbitrary authoritarianism whose axiom is, "Tell 'em what they need, don't ask 'em." But the day has gone when the preacher can exercise such authority. Democracy has become more than a system of government, it is a prevailing attitude today. So no matter how much we contemporary preachers desire to defend ourselves, we must come face to face with the needs and problems of our people.

The chief benefit resulting from a problem-centered program of preaching is the fulfillment of the function of the pastor. Traditionally we have characterized the ministry of a man under two categories so far as his preaching went. We called a man a priest or a prophet, neither of which is adequate for a Protestant ministry. The pastoral function is the chief one both traditionally and functionally in the actual practice of the Protestant minister. The trouble has been that we have too often been moderately good, conscientious pastors six days a week and something else on Sunday. In our pastoral calling and counselling with our people we have ferreted out the spiritual needs and ministered to them as best we could. But our concept of the preaching function left the pastoral function to one side. Problem preaching, dealing from the pulpit with those spiritual and mental ills from which our people are suffering, that kind of preaching makes the preacher a pastor in the pulpit as well as out of it. Such preaching will seek out those problems which are found to be fairly common among our folk and suggest solutions for them. When we have done that we all well know that we somehow felt that an electric line had been established between preacher and people, a line through which vitality flowed to the people and back again to the preacher. Perhaps that was what the fathers meant when after a successful sermon they said to their wives, "Well, I had great liberty this morning." They sensed a vital relationship between what was said and the heart hungers of the congregation. It always works out that way when preaching is geared to human needs. That kind of preacher feeds his flock seven days a week, rather than six.

This kind of preaching is sorely needed in these present times. Most of our people are bewildered and confused. We are all suffering a sense of frustra-

tion through a refutation of our ideals. We Christians had for several decades been building up a case for a decent world order, when the war broke. We saw hopes and dreams receding. At first we were stunned, then bewildered and perhaps a little angry. In that kind of world our laymen must live, live in it and with it, whether they like it or not. Then there are tensions and anxieties of greater severity than any generation has ever suffered. Anxiety over loved ones on the battle fronts, anxieties over the outcomes of economic trends, anxieties over the moral holiday in the present scene — all these and many others provide a set of problems with which every true pastor will want to deal as he preaches. Then there is the present recurrence of millennialism, always present in the religious scene in times of crisis. And there are quacks and frauds masking their true natures and posing as saviors of the hour. And there is the tendency toward a fatalistic philosophy always present in time of war. The soldier puts it like this, "If the bullet has your number it'll get you." These and many other problems of the mind and spirit are the ones an alert preacher will find as he calls on his people and counsels with them in his study. If he really desires to feed his people at their points of need he will keep a little notebook in which he will jot down from time to time these common needs of his people. However, the technique of discovering human needs by the pastor is a matter that deserves more detailed study than is possible here. Suffice it to say that this is a good time for us preachers with a shepherd's heart to purposely point up our preaching by dealing with the problems of the hour.

A common pastime of many a preacher is the decrying of the religious listlessness of the masses of people today. Some men even use their pulpits to spank the people not present in church. If the pews are empty it might

be a good idea to examine the pulpit. Never was it as true as now that if you "wish to warm up the congregation, build a fire under the pulpit." It will avail us nothing to scold the people. And we certainly will never drive folks to attend worship. Protestants have adopted the "please-me" policy about going to church. They go if they please, and when they please, and where they please, pretty largely upon whether the preacher pleases them. That prevalent attitude calls for either a cheap showmanship from the preacher or an honest attempt at treating human ills. The former has never been the solution for thoughtful and conscientious, well-trained ministers. The latter has not had the attention it deserves.

A few years ago the writer was calling on a western rancher and in walking about the ranch we saw cattle pawing the snow off the ground to nibble at the short grasses, while in the same field were racks filled with what looked to be hay. I asked the rancher why the cattle were grubbing away like that when there was hay, and he replied, "That hay's nothing to brag about, just filling and not much nourishment. Cattle are smart enough to know the difference." Thinking back upon that I have come to feel that if the preacher with a pastor's heart, anxious to feed his flock like a shepherd, will put the

right kind of homiletic hay in the pulpit the people will come and get it. If he doesn't then he needn't expect them, for after all if cattle are smart, as the rancher said they were, then maybe people are smart enough to distinguish between filling and nourishment. And nourishment is determined by the degree of satisfaction a diet renders a deficiency.

This writer does not insist that all preaching should be the direct treatment of problems; perhaps our best preaching like the best teaching is what we commonly call incidental. And variety should be one of the objectives of a well-planned preaching program. But running all through our preaching today there needs to be a recognition that the human family is hungry for the Bread of Life. It is not only our duty, it is our high and joyous privilege to feed them on that bread. If we do, we shall have an increasing number of people as they leave the sanctuary, saying to us in honesty and sincerity, "Pastor, that sermon this morning was meant just for me." When spoken from the heart, that means to the preacher that he did not preach in vain. He helped at least one person at the point of need. That is the most effective preaching and it comes from dealing with our people's problems.