

Our Contributors.

The Preaching for Today.

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Every age of the world's history has its own needs, its own burdens, its own sorrows, and everyone requires its own special and appropriate remedy while one century has much in common with those which have preceded its certain features, certain characteristics are peculiarly its own. Now while it may be said that the gospel is the same for all ages and for all men yet at the same time it may with equal truthfulness be said that the form or presentation of the gospel has differed from age to age. The prophets, message to Israel was widely different in spirit and in manner from the Baptist's clarion call to repentance. The preaching of the apostles was different from that of the early Fathers; while the message of the reformers differs largely from that of the present day. While all have very much in common yet each addresses himself to the peculiar temper of his age, and fashions the form of his message to meet the needs of the people to whom he makes his appeal. Since then every age has its peculiar needs for which there must be an appropriate message what we might ask should be the predominant characteristics of the preaching for to-day. If we would give a right answer to this question it must be because we have made a study of the problems which face us, and are able to interpret aright the spirit of the age in which we live. It is ours to live in stirring times. The opening years of the twentieth century as far as the history of this country is concerned are years bustling with activity in every department of life. The spirit of commercialism is abroad in the land and men everywhere under the impulse of a new life are trying to ride on the crest of the wave towards prosperity forgetful of the fact "that a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." We have felt as other lands have felt the breezes of militarism arousing within the hearts of our people the warlike spirit, and causing many to put their trust in reeking tube and iron shard unmindful of the advent's sweetest message, "peace on earth and good will towards men." It is an age of scientific investigation when old theories are being tried and tested as they were never tried before. The searchlight of criticism which in the eighteenth century was turned upon the being and attributes of God and in the nineteenth on the sacred records is now directed to the authority and teaching of Christ. Although unbelief is not so blatant as it was a century ago yet it is present under a more insidious form. When concealing the dagger in a kid gloved hand it renders the wound none the less severe or the attack none the less incisive. That this is a time of earnest inquiry no one will venture to deny, and yet that inquiry is not always of the most reverent kind, on the contrary we sometimes find it at work with pick and shovel trying to undermine the foundations of truth, at work with scalpel and microscope and retort trying to explain on scientific principles the wonderful phenomenon of the Saviour's life, at work with keen literary skill trying to reduce all the miracles to a rationalistic basis. Situated as we are then in the midst of the world of sin, when the responsibilities of life are put as heavy as

ever, when the poor man's burdens are just as galling, when the claims of the rich are just as arrogant, when vice and oppression everywhere abound, when the competing elements of good and evil wage an incessant warfare, what kind of preaching is calculated to meet the needs of this century, what the form and spirit of the prophet's message to the people of to-day? In answer to this inquiry, I would say.

1. *The preaching for to-day should be plain.*

By plain I mean clear, intelligible, within the comprehension of those who hear it, easy to understand. It is nothing short of an insult to the people who hear and betrays a lack of common sense on the part of the preacher who instead of aiming to be clear, strives to be considered philosophical and therefore vague and incomprehensible to the ordinary mind. The day is past when to be dense and metaphysical and dull is a sign of profound wisdom and the sermon that smacks of the phraseology of the classroom is the sermon that is calculated to do little good. Instead of arousing the sense of wonder and admiration as is supposed in the minds of those who hear it the feeling that such a sermon is most likely to generate, is that of profound pity or contempt for the man who instead of aiming to be understood strives to confound and mystify his hearers. There is a good story told of one of Dr. Chalmers' parishioners, an old lady of very ordinary intelligence who on being asked if she understood the Doctor's sermon made reply, The Lord forbid that I should presume to understand such a great man. It is perhaps needless to say that in the present day, even the most profound respect for the preacher will not cause any of his hearers to excuse him on these grounds. No, the preaching of the present day must be plain, no metaphysical abstractions will do, no circumlocutions of voice or manner can atone for laziness of thought and vagueness of expression. Vague and aimless sermons are in a sense unworthy of the man who delivers them, undeserving of the attention of those who hear. As an example of clearness we need only refer to the teaching of our Blessed Master, who was able to make the profoundest truth clear to people of ordinary intelligence. I have no doubt that much of his popularity as a teacher was due to this. We are told the common people (literally the mob) heard him gladly. Why? Some may, from selfish motives because of the loaves and the fishes, but I don't believe it. They heard him gladly because he spoke to them in words which they could understand. Look at him by the sea shore in Galilee or Judea whenever he spoke to the people he was able to make himself clear. His words like the good seed might fall into good ground or they might cut to the quick and arouse the feeling of bitterness and hatred in the hearts of the people, but one thing we notice is that the meaning was made clear, his message was understood. This was also the aim of Paul the Apostle in writing to the Corinthians a people who at that day were the exponents of advanced thought. He says: "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound or voice who shall prepare himself for war, so also ye unless ye utter by the tongue speech easy to be understood how shall it be known what is spoken, for ye will be speaking into the

air." And no great battle was ever won by a parade of arms or by the blow of trumpets, and no souls were ever saved or congregations built up or edified by sermons delivered into the air instead of being with a true aim and plainness of speech directed to the hearts and consciences of the people. *In the present age* it is not an easy thing to make oneself understood. It is hard, very hard, for that which may be as clear as day to the preacher because he has made it a matter of study and reflection may at the same time be vague and meaningless to the hearer and therefore cannot act either as an arrow to convict or a stimulant to inspire to duty. Better, infinitely better, it is for every preacher to aim to be plain, clear and lucid in expression than to be metaphysical, vague, eloquent, even if by being so he be considered a giant in intellect. Brethren, let us be learned if we can, eloquent if God has given to us the necessary gifts, but in the name of all that is sacred let us every time we preach aim at being understood. Again.

11. *The preaching for to-day should be evangelical.*

This is just another way of saying that it should be from the bible or that it should deal with some presentation of spiritual truth. It should hardly be necessary to say this since the very vocation of the prophet of the good implies that he should spend his strength in setting forth the distinctive doctrines of sin and grace in proclaiming the crucified yet ever loving Christ as the only Saviour of men. And yet there is a strong temptation in the present day to preach on other themes. It would seem to some that the present would be a most opportune time to preach politics, hygiene, history, or philosophy, and perhaps at the proper time and proper place it would be a good thing if we had more sound teaching on these and other kindred subjects. But the Sabbath is not altogether the best time nor the sanctuary the appropriate place, nor is the Christian minister always the best qualified to speak with authority on these subjects. Better for us to leave the discussion of what we shall eat and what we shall wear to the doctors, and metaphysics to the philosophers while the preacher gives his time wholly to the preaching of the gospel and to the edification of the body of Christ. Now when I say that the preaching of the present day should be evangelical I do not mean that it should be an abridgement of the different authorities on systematic theology. It would be a grievous thing to make dogmatic theology our main subject of pulpit teaching, yet at the same time it would be as great a mistake to dispense with dogma altogether. A sermon filled with the dry bones of dogmatic theology might be a good thing for an ecclesiastical dissecting room, a good means of emptying the pews but a poor way of filling them, while on the other hand the preaching destitute of dogmatic teaching and made up of platitudes or ethical principles, so constructed and so worded as not to give offense to Greek or Jew, Mohammedan, or Buddhist, is a very poor substitute for the preaching of the Cross of Christ. To be evangelical in our preaching we must always give due prominence to two great authentic facts, the one the fact of sin, the other the fact of grace. The one should not be minimized any more than the other. Sin should never be represented as simply an error,