

Messenger and Visitor

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The Preaching of the Present Day.

Hasty generalization is a human weakness. It is remarkable how many persons are ready to base conclusions of the broadest character upon a few casually observed facts. So it comes to pass that too much of what is generally accepted as a real addition to human knowledge and a secure basis of further induction is in reality little more than more or less probable guesswork. The statements which we here put forth so confidently from time to time in reference to the preaching of the present day is not unlikely to be very much of this character. If those who express so emphatic opinions upon this subject were required to furnish the data upon which their opinions are based, they would probably find the demand a very embarrassing one. The subject in itself, however, is so important that it would seem worth while to investigate it in accordance with methods of a kind to inspire some confidence in the value of the results arrived at. With a view to such an investigation the *Standard* of Chicago, one of the leading Baptist newspapers of the United States, a few weeks ago sent out requests to 500 Baptist pastors representing every section of the United States, asking for the texts and the subjects of the sermons preached by them on the Sunday preceding, with enough of the outline of the discourses to show the general method of treatment. The request was so far complied with that the information sought was obtained from 304 pastors in reference to 607 sermons, preached for the most part on March 9th, and in the case of a few on the Sunday preceding. In reference to the sources from which replies were obtained the *Standard* says:

Geographically, all parts of the country are represented, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the lakes to the gulf; nearly every State and Territory is included, though the replies from the South were relatively few. There are replies from pastors of great city churches, and from those who labor in obscure country parishes and get their mail by the rural free delivery. There was no discrimination in the distribution of the requests with regard to the theological bent, liberalism or conservatism of the pastors. The list includes men who are commonly thought of as 'advanced' in their views, and others who set themselves firmly against change in doctrine or method. In short, so far as was possible by the method adopted, the results may be accepted as fairly typical of contemporary preaching in the denomination."

The results obtained from the basis thus afforded for a study of present day preaching, the *Standard* elaborates in an article of considerable length. Some of these results may be briefly indicated here.

Variety was one of the indications of the discourses received. In the selection of texts the preachers took a wide range, there being only eleven books of the Bible which were not drawn upon. These books were, in the Old Testament, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Obadiah, Micah, Habakkuk and Zephaniah, and in the New Testament, Philemon, Third John and Jude.

"An analysis shows (1) That 26 per cent. of the texts were from the Old Testament and 74 per cent. from the New. (2) That the favorite books in the Old Testament, as might be expected, are Psalms and Isaiah, the one providing twenty-seven sermons, the other twenty-two. And so far as the subjects and outlines based upon these texts inform us, the sermons from Psalms are chiefly upon phases of divine grace and human experience, while those from Isaiah are nearly confined to the Messianic passages, and really should be called New Testament sermons, since they are wholly about Christ."

In general, it may be said, that the two classes of Old Testament texts which seem to find most favor with the preachers are (1) Those in Psalms and

Isaiah, which afford subjects for what may be called evangelical discourse and (2) passages in the Pentateuch, Samuel and Kings, which afford matter for character studies. The lack of texts taken from the Prophets is suggestive, and would seem to indicate that the rich field for expository preaching which these Scriptures afford is being to a considerable degree neglected by the Baptist pulpit of the United States. This may be, as the *Standard* intimates, a difficult field. Expository sermons dealing with these Scriptures "presuppose a familiarity with the history of Israel which, we fear, involves more labor than some preachers and many congregations care to expend. The preacher cannot make a genuinely expository sermon from the Old Testament interesting unless he has the facts so thoroughly in mind that he can set them forth touched with imagination and picturesqueness. If he tries simply to impart information about some Assyrian invasion or political quarrel in Jerusalem, and expects his hearers thereby to become interested in Isaiah or Jeremiah, he will fail." This is doubtless true, but it is also true that no part of the Old Testament is richer in sermonic material adapted to the needs of the present time than the neglected "Prophets." The largeness of the proportion of New Testament texts goes to support the general opinion that the preachers of the present day go much less to the Old Testament for subjects than did their fathers in the ministry. Of the 458 texts taken from the New Testament 217 were from the gospels. "Thus 35 per cent. of all the sermons were based directly on texts chosen from the words or works of Jesus." In addition to these 217, probably 100 more have reference to our Lord in some phase of His redeeming work. These facts seem to leave no doubt as to what is the central theme of Baptist preaching in the United States.

Among things which happily were not found indicated in the sermons are mentioned (1) the disposition to bring critical questions and processes into the pulpit, although in many cases the analysis of a text, by the evidence it gave of scholarly labor, showed the preacher to be familiar with those questions and processes, (2) the use of accommodated or "motto" texts or such as would offend the sense of reverence or propriety and (3) the use of sensational topics for the sake of attracting attention. But of course it is open to question how many preachers among the 200 who did not respond to the *Standard's* request may have employed motto texts or sensational subjects or have indulged in critical disquisitions in the sermons of which they did not choose to give an account.

As to positive characteristics it was found that the great majority of the sermons were what may be called 'plain gospel sermons,' full of sound teaching and helpful counsel, not apparently distinguishable one from the other by any special characteristic, but indicating the impressive bulk of evangelistic and edifying preaching which is moulding the life of the churches. In the fact that fifty of the 607 sermons were expositions of connected passages—from three or four verses to a chapter—there is evidence that expository preaching is to a considerable degree finding place in the American Baptist pulpit.

As to the extent to which preaching is addressed to the unsaved the evidence afforded is not very definite. Eighty-two of the 607 sermons were evidently evangelistic from beginning to end, and there were many others the principal bearing of which must have been on the persuading of the unregenerate, but on the whole it would rather seem that the preaching is not so generally of that character as would be expected in connection with a strongly and aggressively spiritual religious life and ministry. Among the sermons there were five on hell and five on heaven, evidence which, so far as it goes, does not bear out the conclusion that the pulpit of the present day, in dealing with the relations of men to the hereafter, prophesies only smooth things.

The evidence gathered goes to show that doctrinal preaching has not gone out of fashion, although it is doubtless much less in vogue now than it was half a century ago. Some doctrines much dwelt upon in the past are now seldom discussed in the pulpit. Out of the 607 sermons gathered by the *Standard* there was but one on predestination and one on free will, but there were twenty-five on sin, eleven on the atonement, and six on the person

and work of the Holy Spirit. Two ministers preached on the Fatherhood of God, and one vehemently denounced 'the present day popular idea of the universal fatherhood of God as a black lie by means of which Satan would smite sinners with the blindness of a false security. All not begotten of God are children of the devil.' The ten or twelve who preached on the parable of the Prodigal Son, the *Standard* says, "probably did not preach diabolic fatherhood." There were sixteen sermons on missions. Of others quite a number had particular reference to the church, its character and work. Seven preachers chose the Bible for a subject, and these probably dealt more or less with the subject of inspiration, but there was no sermon on that specific topic. A large number of the sermons dealt with Christian experience and spiritual culture. A note of high moral earnestness ran through the whole collection. There were more than a score of the sermons which especially emphasized duty, conscience, and obedience, and nearly as many more on character, its culture and importance.

Editorial Notes.

—Those who pretend to think that the demand for a weekly day of rest secured by legal sanction, is made only on religious grounds and as prompted by ecclesiastical interests, should make note of the platform recently adopted by the Socialists of France in their Convention lately held at Tours. One of the demands incorporated in their platform is "a day of rest in seven." It is unnecessary to say that in this case the demand for a day of rest is not made on religious grounds, but on the ground of its being necessary to human welfare and therefore a part of the provision which every well-regulated State should make for the present well-being of its people.

—A youth who was acting as clerk for his father who kept a branch Post Office in Toronto, has been sentenced to six years in Kingston Penitentiary for stealing money from letters. The Judge felt that it was necessary to make the sentence severe with a view to its deterrent effect. It is a sad thing to see a young man who by honest industry might have pursued an honorable and successful career thus disgraced and ruined. It ought to be an effective warning to every lad who hears of it—not to swerve from the path of honesty. Apart from those high moral and religious considerations which should always control conduct, it is folly and madness for a boy to allow himself to put forth his hand to that which is not his own. Discovery and disgrace are the inevitable result.

—It is a matter for profound regret that Canadians should be called upon to go to South Africa, or anywhere else, to engage in the terrible business of war. War is that same horrible thing today which a general of the United States Civil War described with awful emphasis when he said—"War is hell." It cannot, however, but be a matter of patriotic pride to us that, when the young men of Canada are called upon to fight for the Empire, they are able to demonstrate to the world that the King has no braver soldiers than they. Again at Hart's River, as before at Paardeberg and elsewhere, Canadians have given a good account of themselves. But the praise for gallant conduct has been won at the expense of blood. More of our brave fellows are finding graves in South Africa, and there are many sad homes and anxious hearts in Canada because of the war.

—The Emperor of Germany is reported to have said, in the course of an address delivered not long since at Gotha, that it was a consummation devoutly to be wished that the various Protestant State churches of the Empire should constitute a powerful federation just as the different states have been united politically. The idea is not new, having been advocated during the past century by many prominent theologians, but the Emperor's public advocacy of it appears to be new and it is said that his words have made a profound impression. In connection with this subject *The Independent* says: "There are about four dozen different state churches in the country, some of the States, such as Prussia, still retaining the ecclesiastical organizations which such newly acquired territories as Hanover, Schleswig-Holstein and Hesse had before their union with that Kingdom in 1886. The confessional differences between these State churches are also marked. . . . However it is proposed that these confessional differences shall not be touched by the new federation which is to be one rather for defence and aggressiveness *ad extra* than for the harmonizing of inner differences."

—The statement that there is this spring a remarkable movement of population from the Northwestern States into Manitoba and the Northwest Territories receives daily confirmation. As to the general character of this inflowing population we are not definitely informed. Some of those who are crossing the national boundary—perhaps a good many of them—are no doubt people of