

APOSTOLIC AND PRESENT DAY PREACHING.

REVEREND W. E. HENRY, EVERETT, WASH.

The Mediterranean world of the middle of the first century did not present an easy field for the preaching of the gospel. The broad reach and perfection of the divine preparation for the coming of the gospel were indeed marvelous, but not all difficulties had been removed by that preparation. Business demands were scarcely less pressing, economic and religious conditions less disturbed than today, nor was the craze for pleasure less dominant. Apart from the more recent applications of science to the work of the world, and the disturbances of the Great War, at many points the life of the first century and that of the twentieth are strikingly alike.¹

“The foolishness of preaching” was God’s chosen way to save those who would believe, in the first century and while the modern printing press has come to be of great help (and a great hindrance) in the proclamation of the gospel today, there is no indication that preaching has served its purpose in the divine economy, and is about to be discarded. The pulpit is still a place of power, and it may safely be said that it will always be true in the history of “the church militant” that, “If a man seeketh the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work,” a work that is worthy of his best.

If, then, preaching is God’s chosen way of bringing the gospel to men, and the conditions obtaining in the world today are essentially much like those of the first century, the outstanding features of apostolic preaching would seem to be sufficiently worthy of the very careful attention of the ministry of today to justify once more passing them in review.

¹See “Christianity and the City” in *Review and Expositor* for July, 1915.

I

The apostolic sermon, as far as reported to us, was always fitted to the occasion. This is so evident to any thoughtful reader of the Acts that there is scarcely need of amplification. Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost and Paul's on Mars' Hill are so different that the merest novice must be impressed by their unlikeness. How impossible to substitute one for the other! And to note the difference between the two discourses is almost equivalent also to a discernment of the reason for it. This characteristic of apostolic preaching so flaunts itself in one's face that it simply cannot be overlooked, yet one may fail to see how uniformly it obtains in the discourses reported, and how significant a sign-board it is for the preacher of today.

To set forth in detail how this characteristic of apostolic preaching is evident in every discourse reported in the book of Acts would require too much space, especially since the reader may so easily satisfy himself; but the significance to the preacher of today of the fact that every apostolic sermon was fitted to the occasion may not be so lightly passed over.

Beecher said to the students at Yale, "*Adaptation to the times in which we live*, is the law of Providence. The Apostles were adapted to their times. We must be similarly adapted,—not in a passive, servile way, but in a living, active way, and by taking an interest in the things men do now."² Apostolic example, however, demands an adaptation far beyond that simply to the "times" in which we live. The preacher must adapt himself to the particular community the life of which he happens at that particular time to be sharing; yea, even to the particular situation of the group of people to whom he happens to be speaking. The ideal sermon is not an imported article, but a local product. The *Zeitgeist* may give it tone and

²"Yale Lectures on Preaching," First Series, p. 81.

color, but local factors will determine its form and contents. Phillips Brooks declares, "Preaching . . . has in it two essential elements, truth and personality."³ It is not enough for the preacher to express himself in his sermon. He really cannot help doing that. Nor is it enough for him to express the truth through the medium of his own personality to a group of very different personalities, so that, under the particular circumstances which are theirs, they shall be most benefitted thereby.

Such adaptation is no mean feat. It may be accomplished in some cases by a sort of instinct, but most men under most circumstances will attain it only because it is deliberately and even laboriously sought. Only wide acquaintance with literature and with men will make and keep the preacher sufficiently familiar with the spirit of the age, and only intimate acquaintance with his field can bring him sufficiently into touch with the local factors. Evidently, therefore, neither a book-worm nor a bell-ringer can be a really good preacher. The ideal is always such a blending of the two as leaves no disproportion of accumulated knowledge at the time of preaching. But the mere gathering of this knowledge will not, in itself, guarantee the needed adaptation. Purposed gathering of knowledge of conditions must be supplemented by purposeful effort to adapt both personality and message to the occasion. Some personalities are not easily adaptable, and the effort required is correspondingly great. Happy indeed is the preacher whose personality responds to the touch of circumstance as the reed to the touch of the breeze. He is one of the favored of the Lord. For with the preacher's personality *en rapport* with the occasion, the proper adaptation of the message will be comparatively easy and certain.

³"Lectures on Preaching," p. 5.

II.

Another thing worthy of note with respect to apostolic preaching is the basis of the appeal. Always the real preacher has been seeking results. The tickling of "itching ears" finds no place in his task. He aims at nothing less than the transformation of character through belief of the truth and action in harmony therewith. The thing he seeks cannot be secured except men be moved to action. The emotions must be stirred and the will brought to decision. There must be some adequate basis for the appeal which will so stir the emotions and bring the will to action.

The basis of the appeal in apostolic preaching proves to be at least three-fold, viz., the Scriptures, experience and Gentile literature. These divisions are not entirely distinct. The Scriptures appealed to were, of course, the Old Testament writings, and the experience drawn upon was, in large measure, the substance of the New Testament writings. However, the classification cannot be accused of falsity, and is sufficiently accurate for the purpose in hand. As far as the records go, the appeal to Jews and proselytes is limited, very naturally, to the Scriptures and experience; but that to the Gentiles was evidently drawn from all three sources, chiefly, doubtless, in the first presentations of the gospel, from the broad field of experience.

The preacher of today, therefore, following apostolic precedent, may feel at liberty, yea, should feel even under obligation, to draw widely from the various fields of knowledge for the enforcement of his appeal. He but follows his predecessors of the first century when he brings under requisition for the strengthening of his message all life and all literature. If any objection should be made to this statement, it would doubtless be on the ground that present day science is strictly modern, and that there was nothing in the life of the first century of

even a really similar nature which could have been used in a gospel appeal. But it needs to be borne in mind that while present day science is, indeed, strictly modern in a very real sense, there nevertheless were developments closely akin to it in the first century. "The intellectual atmosphere of Alexandria," declared John Fiske, "for two centuries before and three centuries after the time of Christ, was more modern than anything that followed down to the days of Bacon and Descartes."⁴ Stobart furnishes some details: "In such matters as transit, public health, police, water supply, engineering, building and so forth, Rome of the second century left off pretty much where the reign of Queen Victoria was to resume. The modern city of Rome is obtaining its drinking water out of about three of the nine great aqueducts which ministered to the imperial city. The hot-air system which warms the hotels of modern Europe and America was in general use in every comfortable villa of the first century A. D. Education was more general and more accessible to the poor in A. D. 200 than in A. D. 1850. The siege artillery employed by Trajan was as effective, probably, as the cannon of Vauban."⁵ If the apostolic preachers drew freely from the life of the world about them in order to make the presentation of the gospel timely and effective, then, although laboring so many hundreds of years before the days of "modern science," they must have drawn from its very border-land. And the preacher of today may feel the safe ground of apostolic precedent under his feet as he draws upon the vast field of scientific discovery in the presentation of the gospel message to this age. In fact, so large has become the place of science in the life of today, that the preacher who in any wise ignores its presence and fails to use the materials it supplies ready to his hand for the illustration and confirmation of the gospel would seem to be worthy of censure.

⁴"Idea of God," p. 73.

⁵Quoted by Angus, "The Environment of Early Christianity," p. 15.

III.

The last thing to be noted is that the climacteric fact in apostolic preaching, as set forth in the book of Acts, is the resurrection of Christ. It was to this that Peter led up on the day of Pentecost. This he stressed before the multitude in Solomon's porch, before the Sanhedrin, and in the presence of Cornelius and his household. Paul presented the resurrection to the Jews in Antioch in Pisidia as the basis of his proclamation of the remission of sins, and it formed the climax of his sermon on Mars' Hill. In fact, all through the Acts the burden of the preaching was "Jesus and the resurrection." So true is this fact, "If you blot out from the Acts of the Apostles every paragraph in which the idea or the fact of the risen and living Lord Jesus is either plainly affirmed, or necessarily implied, you would practically abolish this portion of Holy Scripture."

Is the resurrection of Christ the climacteric fact in the preaching of today? Surely not. Here, beyond question, we find the most striking difference between apostolic preaching and that of today. It is difficult to discover just how great that difference is, and the difficulty is no little increased by the fact that the terms "resurrection," "risen Christ," etc., are used today with meanings which did not belong to them in apostolic days. When the apostles used the term "resurrection" with respect to Christ, they meant a coming forth from the grave of the body of the Lord Jesus. They saw the prints of the nails in His hands and feet and of the spear in His side. They "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." Today, however, preachers speak of the resurrection of Christ and mean nothing more than that His spirit survived death just as ours shall. In the last century a succession of efforts was "made to account for the belief in the resurrection without accepting it as a fact,"

⁶"Paton, "The Glory and Joy of the Resurrection," p. 17.

⁷Sanday in Hastings, "Dictionary of the Bible," Vol. II., p. 641.

and the present century has witnessed no cessation of these efforts. The most persistent theory is that the post-resurrection appearances of our Lord were simply "visions." They were not objective phenomena, but subjective, beginning in the diseased mentality of Mary Magdalene and spreading, under the peculiar and intense excitement of the period, through the group of Christ's followers. It preserves the sincerity of the apostles, but leaves them the mistaken victims of their own hallucinations. It seems impossible that a view which requires so marked a critical emendation of the texts of the Gospels and Acts, and leaves the bold and sorely tested confidence of the early church hanging upon an airy imagination of diseased minds could long endure, yet unquestionably there are many today who accept it, and use the terminology of the resurrection in the old way with this new and emasculated sense.

If it be true that the resurrection is not, in the preaching of today, being given so central and emphatic a place as in that of apostolic days, the question arises as to whether such place should be accorded it. Possibly such stress upon the resurrection belonged only to the initial stage of the gospel's progress, and has properly given way to a stressing of other matters. Perhaps to have continued to give the resurrection such a central place in Christian preaching would have retarded the progress of the gospel. Can any data be gathered that will afford us any light at this point?

If the emphasis of other things at certain times has been more conducive to the advancement of Christianity than the stressing of the resurrection, then nearly twenty centuries of Christian history should afford some proof. But an examination of these centuries of Christian history seems, rather, to furnish evidence decidedly against such a supposition. At least it must be admitted that those periods during which Christianity has been most triumphant have been the periods wherein the thought

of the Church has been most directed towards and centered upon the risen Christ. During the first six centuries Christianity made astonishing progress. By the middle of the fourth century it had triumphed in the Roman Empire. This triumph seems to have marked the real beginning of a long period of declension, but the momentum of the past joined with an even rapidly waning vitality made possible still further achievement during the next one hundred and fifty years. A study of this period reveals two facts of prime importance to us in this connection. The first may be stated in the words of Edgar: "During this period it may be safely said, *the thoughts of the greatest minds in the world were occupied for the most part just in determining who the risen Jesus really was!*"⁸ It was the period of the great Christological controversies. Whether the thinker may have been a Jew or a Gentile, whether his thoughts are recorded in the "Didache" or in the "Apology" of Aristides or in some other of the many later works of the period, the uppermost question always was, Who is this Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified but is now risen and ascended into the heavens? And more may be said than that this was the question of the period. The various endeavors to answer the question brought a nearer and nearer approximation of the truth. Indeed, so effectual were the efforts of these early theologians that an eminent author of the last century wrote: "The results to which these two councils (one at Ephesus in 431, and one at Chalcedon in 451), came are to this day regarded as correct, and the theological mind has not ventured beyond the position established at this time, respecting the structure and composition of Christ's most mysterious person."⁹ The second fact to be noted has to do especially with the martyrs. Dr. Maitland says: "Primitive martyrdom appears to have contributed largely to the conversion of the world;

⁸"The Gospel of a Risen Saviour," p. 210.

⁹Shedd, "History of Christian Doctrine," Vol. II., pp. 438, 439.

for the rapid extension of Christianity almost ceased within a few years after the persecution.¹⁰ And if we inquire why the blood of the martyrs thus became the seed of the church, what other reply can be given than that it was because the risen Christ, to whom the martyrs looked in the hour of their extremity, marvelously sustained them, as He had promised to do, and that in the midst of their sufferings they triumphantly testified to His sustaining power?

This period during which the achievements of Christianity were so marked was succeeded by another designated by historians as the Dark Ages. It was a time of darkness for the Church as well as for the world. The night settled down gradually and became blacker and blacker with every century until the Reformation brought back the light. And here let these significant facts be noted. During this dark period the thought of the Church was not directed towards the person of her risen Lord. This is preëminently the period of ecclesiasticism. The Church as an organization became more and more the center of thought. Men argued as to the supernaturalness of Christ's birth, as to the immaculateness of His conception, as to the actual presence of His body and blood in the bread and wine in the communion, but the risen Saviour was neglected and lost from view. They devoted their time, their money and their energies to the building and decorating of great cathedrals and the comparatively fruitless religio-military movements called the Crusades. The Roman See put forth its claims and had them accepted. The Church came to be regarded as the medium of salvation rather than the Christ. How dense the darkness became it is very difficult for us now to appreciate. And while it would not be true to say that this turning of the thought of the Church from its proper center in her risen Lord accounts entirely for the pall that settled down upon Christendom, yet it is certainly very

¹⁰"Church in the Catacombs," p. 195.

significant that the darkness grew as men turned in their thinking farther away from the early center of Christian thought. And this significance is much heightened when we consider the complementary fact that the light returned as the thought of men was directed more and more to their risen Saviour with the coming of the Reformation period.

Luther's cardinal doctrine was justification by faith alone. Neither works nor the Church could avail anything in securing salvation. Eternal life came by faith in Jesus Christ. The faith that saved found its center in a Christ who died, but not in a dead Christ. "The revelation of God for the salvation of the soul he found *in* Christ, the historical but ever-living Saviour, and he could find certainty of salvation only by venturing upon Him, by a personal appropriation of His merits by faith."¹¹ Zwingli and Melancthon shared with Luther this same intensified interest in the Christ, and Calvin is declared by one with no special sympathy with his system to be "the first theologian, since the days of Greek theology, to bring out the spirit that was in Christ." Thus the risen Saviour began again to be admitted to His proper place in human thought, and man's life began again to be lifted out of the depths.

Still another striking manifestation of the power of the preaching of the resurrection is seen in the developments of the eighteenth century. This was the era of that great "revolt against revealed religion" called Deism. According to the deists God dwells apart from the world. Having set it going, He has left it to go on as it will. Nature speaks of Him, but the idea that He became incarnate and entered into the world system historically cannot be entertained. But deism did not live out the century. Its agitation called forth a counter agitation. Not

¹¹Quoted from Sprecher's "Groundwork of a System of Evangelical Lutheran Theology," by Edgar in "The Gospel of a Risen Saviour," p. 219.

only was the folly of the reasoning upon which it was based presented in a matchless way in Butler's "Analogy," but the divinity of our Lord was vindicated afresh, and the evidence for His resurrection was restated and emphasized in a marked way. And this emphasis upon the risen Christ in the literature of the period was mightily complemented by a living demonstration of spirit and power in the Methodist movement which sprang up in 1739. The very air became "vocal, as it were, with the praises of a risen Saviour," and Deism could not live in such an atmosphere. Like the errors of earlier ages it added its dying testimony to the power of the preaching of the resurrection—a power which we may well believe the world has yet to see made manifest in all its fulness.