

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE SENSE OF VOCATION IN PREACHING.

BY THE REV. S. NOWELL-ROSTRON, M.A., Vicar of
St. Matthew's, Bayswater.

IT is well for those to whom preaching is a constantly recurring responsibility to recollect from time to time the motives that alone justify a preacher in exercising his office. Such a consideration is particularly urgent to-day for many reasons. Preaching is to some extent under a cloud. The very word is often used as a term of contempt. People are impatient of long sermons, and will not tolerate dull ones. Indeed, speaking generally, in the scale of modern values, as has been the case in every period of history when licence of morals and of manners has been prevalent, dullness is the one unpardonable sin in literature and in speech. Our restless, cynical age prefers the dangerous glitter of the swiftly moving shallows to the quiet safety of the deep mid-stream. Vice is condoned and even admired and petted if it be clever. Simple goodness has no beauty that the world should desire it. It is the sport of the licentious wit of the theatre, the cinema, and of a hundred novels. Religion is, with significant frequency, explicitly and implicitly pilloried and condemned as unattractive and hypocritical, and preaching shares inevitably in the general disdain.

I am not concerned here with an attempted analysis of this widespread attitude. But, in passing, two causes may briefly be mentioned. First, the newspaper habit, by which the mind is fed on a conglomeration of sensational, often unsavoury and always tersely expressed, tit-bits of news, together with the press and hurry of modern life, have created a demand for the short, pointed addresses which now commonly go by the name of sermons. Secondly, the revolt from dogma and ecclesiasticism and from organized Christianity has given the cheery, ethical optimist the popular ear. Dr. Dale tells us that, when still a young man, just after he had gone to Carr's Lane, Birmingham, he met one day a Congregationalist minister whose preaching was greatly admired for its humour, pathos and passion. He began to speak to Dr. Dale about his ministry, and amongst other things said: "I hear that you are preaching doctrinal sermons to the congregation of Carr's Lane; they will not stand it." "I answered," said Dr. Dale, "'They will have to stand it.'" "There was too much of the insolent self-confidence of youth in both the temper and form of my reply," wrote in after-years that great scholar and preacher, though we may note that, from Dr. Dale himself, they *did* stand it: and few pulpits in England had greater influence than his. Nevertheless, it was true then, and it is still more emphatically true of the post-war world, that the average preacher, with the average

congregation and in the regular preachments at his popular services, cannot depend upon his audience to make the effort to follow deep or closely reasoned arguments. He can do little more than touch briefly upon and try to express in simple language the great religious themes, which both merit and require concentrated and prolonged thought that their importance in the realm of truth may be grasped and their application in the issues of human life understood.

Nevertheless, preaching is to-day, as it always has been, one of the many ways by which God expresses Himself, His will and His appeal to the soul of man. There are, of course, many forms of Divine ministry to human need, but this is clearly indispensable. Thomas Carlyle asks in *Signs of the Times*: "How did Christianity rise and spread among men?" He answers: "It arose in the mystic depths of man's soul, and was spread by the preaching of the word; by simple, altogether natural and individual efforts; and flew like hallowed fire from heart to heart, till all were purified and illuminated by it." Preaching has always had a vital part in the coming of the Kingdom of Christ upon earth. The immediate herald and forerunner of that Kingdom was John the Baptist, who "came preaching in the wilderness of Judæa." Our Lord Himself "went about in all Galilee, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom." He chose twelve "that they might be with Him and that He might send them forth to preach." "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation," was His commission to the eleven, and probably to the five hundred; and through them to the whole Church. We think of the preaching of St. Peter at Pentecost; of St. Paul's words, "Christ sent me to preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. i. 17); "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, was this grace given, to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. iii. 8). We remember the pointed argument, "How shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. x. 14); the Apostle's advice to Timothy, "Preach the word: be instant in season and out of season" (2 Tim. iv. 2). We see the place preaching held in Christian worship in the sub-Apostolic age, and in the evangelization of the ancient world. All the great revivals of spiritual life throughout the centuries, though they were begun in the silence of men's hearts and nurtured often in quiet thought and prayer, yet invariably and inevitably swayed the multitudes through the spoken word uttered by men on fire with their message. Is it not clear that God has honoured this method of work for Him in a signal and remarkable manner? To untold numbers of human beings it has been the door through which they have seen the vision of the love and holiness of God, and have themselves entered into the treasury of the inexhaustible spiritual wealth of Christ. A Church which neglects its opportunities of preaching is a Church which is unresponsive to the Divine leading, and neglectful of a Divinely chosen method. It leaves one of its most effective sources of inspiration and spiritual vitality unused, and allows one of its most potent weapons for the cause of Christ to lie rusting in its sheath.

What then is preaching? We need not search far for a definition. In the New Testament (A.V.) various Greek words are translated by the word "preach." The general idea underlying them all may be quickly reached by examining the words used: "to announce thoroughly" (*διαγγέλλω*); "to give a reasoned exposition" (*διαλέγομαι*); "to tell good tidings" (*εὐαγγελίζω*); "to proclaim as a herald" (*καταγγέλλω*); "to discourse" (*λαλέω*). Add to these a verse such as 2 Corinthians v. 20, which is full of synonyms for preaching: "We are ambassadors (*πρεσβεύομεν*) on behalf of Christ, as though God were entreating (*παρακαλοῦντος*) by us. We beseech you (*δεόμεθα*) on behalf of Christ, be ye involved to God." There can then be little doubt as to what is involved in the New Testament conception of the office and responsibility of the preacher. One of the most famous preachers of the last generation, Bishop Phillips Brooks, in his delightful *Lectures on Preaching*—a book which should be on everybody's bookshelf, and often in our hands—defines it thus: "Preaching is the communication of truth by man to man," or as he puts it again, "It is the bringing of truth through personality." Is it impertinent to offer a criticism of the definition of one who felt the sacredness of his preaching office as few preachers have done, and who made it so potent an influence for God? There is perhaps need for closer and further elaboration. It is true that such a definition obviously and rightly rules out from our consideration such purely poetical conceptions as "sermons in stones." Great creations of human skill, of the sculptor and the painter, and the beauty and the majesty of Nature can speak and do speak to us of the things of God. They do not preach to us. Their message does not come to us directly through the medium of human personality. Even so, I venture to suggest, the Bishop's definition is still too wide. Man may convey to man through his personality—and through the spoken word—the truths of science, art, mathematics, philosophy, even of ethics and theology, yet we could hardly term such communication preaching. Or again through the human personality truth may be conveyed without the spoken word. The silent influence which one life exerts upon another is one of the greatest forces in human experience. It is not preaching, though we sometimes incorrectly so describe it: "What he is speaks louder than what he says"; "His life is his best sermon." Preaching, as I conceive it, for purposes of our thought may be described, if somewhat clumsily, yet I think more accurately, as the passing on to others, at the call of God, of divinely-revealed truth through a consecrated personality by the spoken word. It will at once be seen that this marks off the sermon from the lecture scientific, literary, theological; from the debate and the discussion; from the essay, whether written or spoken; and takes us right to the heart of our subject by bringing before us the intimate and essential relationship between the human and the Divine in all true preaching, and that sense of vocation which is the main subject of this paper.

Very simply, therefore, we may approach this theme under

three headings: The Divine summons, the revealed truth, the human personality; or the call, the message, and the messenger.

I. Every true preacher is called of God. Every true sermon originates in Him. What is the nature of that call? The Ordinal helps us here as far as the ministry of the Church of England is concerned. Ordination is very clearly the giving by the Church to the ordinand of an authorization and commission to preach. It is true this is only part of the ministry, which is twofold—that of the Word and the Sacraments, and that the relation between these two elements of the ministerial office is very variously interpreted. There are some who exalt the one almost to the exclusion of the other, concentrating on the ministry of the Sacraments to the neglect of the ministry of the Word, and vice versa. In Dr. Gott's well-known book, *The Parish Priest of the Town*, I read: "The sermon is lower than the Absolution and the Blessing: the pulpit has not the same rank as the Font or the Altar." There are those who go further and regard any special prominence of the sermon in common worship as a Protestant error. There can, however, be no doubt as to the true relationship. Neither ministry, of the Word or the Sacraments, should be allowed to overshadow or conflict with the other. They are co-ordinated ministries, both to be used in building up the Church of Christ. At the same time—and here is a point of special significance—wherever in the Prayer Book the two are found conjoined in one phrase, it is the ministry of the Word that comes first. "Take thou authority to preach the Word of God, and to minister the Holy Sacraments." "Be thou a faithful dispenser of the Word of God, and of His Holy Sacraments." To the ordinand is given a Bible, not a Chalice and Paten. In other words, our Church sets the ministry of preaching in the foremost place amongst the responsibilities and duties of her clergy. Every ordained priest goes forth with this laid upon him as a solemn obligation to which he is pledged to give the most earnest attention and the utmost care. But it will be noted that the Church of England gives that authorization on one ground only. It is one of its glories that the Church of England insists ever upon spiritual as well as official qualifications. The Ordinal takes us back to the fundamental and essential call. "Do you think in your heart that you be truly called according to the Will of our Lord Jesus Christ?" It is not our own will, not even the will of the Church, but the will of Christ that separates the preacher for his office. It is this that fills the soul with a sense of utter unworthiness for so lofty and so responsible a vocation, with all the awe of a great privilege bestowed, with the thrill of a great trust committed to one's care. It is this that keeps us humble when we think we may have done well, and keeps us calm and undepressed when we might easily be burdened with the sense of failure.

Such a commission marks out the ministry of the Church of England as, whatever else it may be, essentially prophetic in type and function. We hear too much to-day about our problematical apostolic succession and too little of our undoubted prophetic

succession. If indeed the modern preacher is called to fulfil in the Divine purpose and in human affairs the office of the ancient prophet, how clear should be his sense of vocation, and how deep his understanding of the sacredness and meaning of his work! The prophet may in some instances have been commissioned only for a special task, while the office of a Christian minister is a "calling" rather than an isolated "call"; a lifelong vocation, not an occasional mission. But the essentials of the two offices are the same. The prophets prophesied because they were moved by the spirit of God. They spoke what it was given them to utter. They preached because they had to preach, or be false to their true selves and to the Divine summons. Always there was in heart and conscience the sense of a God-given mission. Deliberately, definitely, whole-heartedly they yielded themselves instruments of God's purpose. His Spirit directed them, His word came through their lips. They spoke on His behalf. It was always: "The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" "Hear ye the word of the Lord." "The word of the Lord of hosts saith." It was not a mere emotional or ecstatic state that was thus produced. Nothing could be further removed from the ecstasy of the ancient "vates" or the trance-like and unnatural semi-consciousness of a modern spiritualist medium than the vigorous, eager and vital personality of the great Canonical prophets, with every faculty quickened by the Spirit of God, glowing with life and passion, delivering a message, conceived not in their own hearts and minds, but taking shape from them as it passed through them to the souls of men. There was an immense and overwhelming sense of urgency possessing them: a divine necessity not dissimilar perhaps in kind from that which bound together the whole of the earthly life of our Lord to the accomplishment of that task which He "needs must" carry to its completion.

Unless there be in his own experience some degree of definite realization of such a call and mission from God Himself, I do not see how any man can be a preacher. Preaching is the utterance of a soul to whom God has given, in its own communion with Him, some truth to declare to the world. The true preacher must experience something of the conviction that formed itself in the heart of Savonarola as he knelt before his open Bible, "without preaching I cannot live." In my old church of St. Andrew in Liverpool is a pulpit fashioned in exact facsimile to that which Bishop Ryle had had made for himself, and round its ledge are carved these words that every preacher might see: "Woe is unto me if I preach not the Gospel." Indeed, that cry of St. Paul is as a window into his soul and into the soul of every true herald of the Kingdom. You remember how F. W. H. Myers writes of the great Apostle:

Oft when the word is on me to deliver,
Lifts the illusion and the truth lies bare;
Desert or throng, the city or the river
Melts in a lucid Paradise of air.

Only like souls I see the folk thereunder
 Bound who should conquer, slaves who should be kings,
 Hearing their one hope with an empty wonder,
 Sadly contented with a show of things.

Then with a rush the intolerable craving
 Shivers throughout me like a trumpet call.
 Oh, to save these! to perish for their saving,
 Die for their life, be offered for them all!

It is surely this that makes the preacher and constitutes his call. The vision of the needs of men: the vision of the all-sufficiency of Christ: the readiness to spend and be spent for Him and for them. It is no erratic impulse this—but the steady flame of a constant devotion. In Wesley's diary there is an account of an experiment he once made. It was suggested to him that he should not speak to any one of Christ unless he was conscious of a special summons. He rode from London to York, and when he reached York found he had not been conscious of any call at all, and had said no word of Christ to any one. He concluded that such a suggestion was a device of the devil.¹ Preaching must not be allowed to depend on feeling. Here are men and women needing Christ. There is Christ needing them. In the preacher's heart the Holy Spirit has brought the conviction that Christ depends on him to be His voice, and he "can no other" but speak, not depending on his own inclination but upon the opportunity and the Divine leading.

2. What is the message the preacher has to proclaim? What has he to say? We may put it shortly thus: "Christ," "the Gospel," "the Word of God," "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." The modern prophet is the interpreter and ambassador of Christ to the age. The Ordinal by the phrases it uses, and by the delivery of the Bible into the hand of the priest, quite clearly indicates what is to be the great treasure-house of the preacher's themes. But when we have said that, how much more there is to say! The preacher must relate his message to the outlook of his hearers. The Student Christian Movement has recently published a book by Dr. J. Fort Newton entitled *The New Preaching*, where it is pointed out with considerable force and truth that in an age where life moves "to the rhythm of motors, movies, and jazz," where vast and increasing masses of people are growing up in almost entire ignorance of the Bible, where "a spirit has been released wild, restless, ruthless, realistic, rebellious, disillusioned, sad, making mock of chastity, reverence, restraint and even Truth itself," there seems to be an ever-decreasing scope for expository sermons like those of the great expositors of the last generation. The very terms we use in proclaiming the central truth of salvation, like "grace," "faith," "justification," "repentance," are but vaguely intelligible to numbers of our people. This means there is to-day urgent need of clear, simple, unhesitating

¹ Quoted by T. R. Glover, *Jesus in the Experience of Men*, p. 194.

guidance, in a word, of the prophetic voice. Yet the pulpit seems too often to lack the accent of conviction. It gives the impression of a preacher himself perplexed, uncertain, unable to find his way. The spirit of the times easily invades our studies and breathes in our utterances. It is no wonder that so many of our Church people are bewildered. "If the trumpet gives an uncertain voice, who shall prepare himself for the battle?" (1 Cor. xiv. 8). As soon as a preacher loses his sense of vocation and his grip upon his message, his preaching loses its power. He begins to try to substitute his own ideas. His sermons may be suggestive and interesting, possibly rich in beautiful and helpful thoughts, but not in the eternal verities by which the soul lives. God does not call the preacher without giving him a message to deliver. He does not send any man forth to proclaim his own poor ideas and little schemes as the panacea for the world's ills. The preacher's function is the transmission of a message infinitely greater than himself. To remember this is to guard oneself from wild and wanton speculation, from preaching about Christianity instead of "preaching Christ," from feeding those who listen on the husks of one's own miserable rhetoric.

There is then available, obtainable, within our reach a clear, authoritative message for every preacher. It is a necessary part of his task to work out that message in terms of modern life. Never was there an age more scornful of mere empty solemnity. To use the happy illustration of Bishop Phillips Brooks, we dare not stand before others like the chest of drawers Mr. Bob Sawyer showed to Mr. Winkle. "Dummies, my dear boy. Half the drawers have nothing in them, and the other half don't open." The preacher must have a soul "opendoor'd to God," and quick and responsive to human need, lest Milton's words be true of him: "the hungry sheep look up, and are not fed."

But he must not be under any delusion as to how his message comes. It will not be written in the skies. It will not flash, fully developed, into the mind, in a moment, through some supernatural vision. Its substance will be the truths of the written Word. But these will only become to us a message for others by prayer, meditation, reading and concentrated thought. Nothing is more needed to-day than a fresh presentation of old truths to a new world. So many lose the old truth in trying to make it modern. One of the movements I hope to see amongst us is the counterpart of that spiritual movement on the Continent, which, while proclaiming as a living message for to-day the essential doctrines of the truth of the Scriptures as emphasized at the Reformation, is abreast of modern thought, and avoids the intellectual stagnation of the obscurantist, "the petrification of Christianity" (as some one has called it) on the one hand, and the destructive criticism of the modernist, which is "the dissolution of Christianity," on the other.

3. And that brings me to the messenger. It is through a consecrated personality that God speaks. "Here am I, send me."

The prophet offers himself to be God's instrument first, and then comes to him the Divine message for his lips to utter. It is perhaps amazing that God chooses to work so—in and through human personalities. But so it is. The highest instance of this method is to be found, of course, in the Incarnation, where God and man are in perfect union. We see it again in the Bible, the Book which being human is yet Divine. So a sense of vocation for preaching must include the preacher's consecration of himself to the Divine purpose as God's fellow-worker—and this must be a consecration of the whole personality. Preaching makes the utmost demands upon every part of one's nature, physical, mental and spiritual. It calls upon every power and faculty of the personality, and gathers them all into its service. All the force and vitality of the body, all the intellectual grasp and all the powers of insight and imagination of the mind: all the emotional, mystic, passionate nature of soul go to the shaping of the Divine message and the passing of it on to others. To be mentally careless and slovenly in preparing to speak for God, to be indifferent and casual as to the manner in which it is done, to subordinate the spiritual aim and purpose to lower ends, is to degrade the whole office of the preacher. It is in this personal element that there lies our chief peril and difficulty. A youthful curate once asked Bishop Wilberforce for some advice about preaching. The Bishop was grave for a moment and then said, "Some men prepare their sermons and others prepare themselves." It is this, the discipline of self-preparation, that is so largely in our own power. Dare I say it is this that is so often the weak spot in the preacher's ministry? Nothing can take the place of hard, it may be toilsome, and concentrated quiet prayer and thought, or of the preparation of character behind the spoken utterance. The sermon has its origin in God, but it passes through the medium of a human personality. If it is to be clear, logical, earnest, winsome, sincere, these qualities must first be in the preacher himself. The message must have gripped him and become impregnated with the characteristics of his own personality. It goes forth still a Divine message but in human dress—a dress given to it by the preacher's own humanity.

Is there then not something to add concerning the instrument the preacher uses to convey his meaning? I mean human speech. One is often amazed at the careless and irresponsible use of words in common speech. It is tragic when that invades the pulpit. The snares of speech are so numerous, so disastrously easy to fall into, that one order of monks takes the vow of silence lest they should offend with their speech. Silence is forbidden to the preacher. His only alternative is a careful, close and prolonged study of the meaning of words. "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" must have a special application to those whose words are to be the vessel of the water of life to thirsty souls. The vessel must not be despised. Water is infinitely more attractive and sweeter to the taste in a clear, clean and beautiful goblet than in a broken bit of dirty earthen-

ware. The mastery of words has had no small part in the success of most of the greatest preachers. The biographer of Newman tells us he would spend hours, and even days, searching for the correct and apt word. It is related of the late Dr. Jowett that on one occasion he spoke at an important meeting at Birmingham Town Hall. He spoke only seven minutes, but made an immense impression. After the meeting three men waited on him to ask him to come to a meeting in a neighbouring town. They pleaded that it would not be a tax upon his strength—only six or seven minutes such as he had given that night. A look of pained amusement came over Jowett's face: "That is all you ask; you will probably not believe me when I say that behind those seven minutes were seventy hours of the hardest work I ever did."¹ That is only an illustration, but it shows how in the estimation of great preachers the office of preaching is worthy of infinite pains. Like every other part of God's service it must bear the marks of sacrifice. A preacher must give his life with his message. As I think of all the preparation demanded by most of the professions, and of the scant preparation many preachers do or can give to their sermons, I am astonished, not by the poverty of these but by the high level so frequently attained. It is a tribute to that deep underlying earnestness that communicates itself by a power greater than the power of words alone to those who listen. For reality is always effective, even when voiced by a stammering tongue. A preacher who has been forgiven can speak movingly about forgiveness. To know in one's whole nature what it is to live in Christ, to be His and not our own, is the first condition of our bringing others to Him. Nothing but fire kindles fire. And yet when all this is said we are unfaithful servants and presumptuous if we constantly depend upon the inspiration of the moment to do what ought to have been done before. In Matthew Arnold's words:

We cannot kindle when we will
The fire that in the heart resides.

Only the Holy Spirit can do that. But we must provide the material—and it must be there. The Holy Spirit will give us in every moment of sudden emergency the word that we ought to speak. The Holy Spirit will take our feeble and unworthy efforts and make them mightier than we dared to dream. The Holy Spirit will not do our work for us: the work of earnest and faithful preparation. I tremble when I remember how much depends upon oneself. Shelley said:

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity.

How distorted must the Gospel be at times as it passes through the lives and speech of those who proclaim it! As the second Epistle of Clement expresses it: "When pagans hear from one's lips the oracles of God, they marvel at their beauty and greatness; afterwards when they discover that our actions are not worthy

¹ Quoted by the Editor of *The Joyful News*, February 27, 1930.

of our utterances, they betake themselves to blasphemy, declaring that it is all myth and delusion."

And yet, though no sermon can pass through a human personality without having attached to it something of the weakness and fallibility of the messenger, there is this to say by way of encouragement: where there is a deep sense of vocation, the preacher forgets himself, and is forgotten in the truth he declares. God chooses many preachers, for there are many aspects of truth to reveal. He chooses frail and sinful men that the brightness of His glory may be the greater, that perhaps our very faults and failings may not repel but reveal what Christ has done and can do in and through human lives. As Alexander MacLaren beautifully puts it: "Many weak eyes that would be dazzled and hurt if they were to gaze upon the sun may look at the clouds cradled by its side, and dyed with its lustre, and learn something of the radiance and the glory of the illuminating light from the illuminated vapour." So they themselves may come to live in the splendour of Christ's presence. If indeed the ministry of preaching so results, it brings to the preacher one of the purest and most precious joys the soul can know. But whether it is given to him to see such fruit or not, there will assuredly be the final and perfect joy of faithfulness to his calling and his message, and the "Well done" of Christ Himself. It is this that will be the preacher's certain crown of glory and his exceeding great reward.

The Starting-Place of Prayer, by N. C. Sherwood (W. Heffer & Sons, 3s. 6d. net), is one of those records of spiritual experience which have a special value for any who are passing through a stage of doubt. With frankness the writer tells of the problems which she had to face and of the various steps by which she was led back to faith. For those who find themselves compelled "to think out their position and to begin at the beginning" the account of this spiritual pilgrimage will help them on their way. The writer does not profess that she has reached the final stage, but she has arrived at a real sense of God in Christ which is the sure foundation.

A third edition, revised and enlarged, of a little book which has had a deservedly wide circulation has been issued. *Is Infant Baptism Scriptural?* by the Rev. Thomas S. Hall, B.D. (Elliot Stock, 1s. net). The value of the book is attested by the unsolicited testimony of a number of those well qualified to judge. The Archbishop of Armagh says: "I have never seen anything on the subject so good, so clear, so convincing." It is a most useful summary of necessary information on a subject which exercises the minds of not a few.

Those who desire in brief form information as to the origin and purpose of the Lambeth Conference will find in "as simple and popular form as possible the main facts relating to the Lambeth Conferences" in Bishop Heywood's little book, *About the Lambeth Conference* (S.P.C.K., 2s. and 3s. 6d. net).