

PREACHING AND THE FELLOWSHIP

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These are days in which it is becoming increasingly more popular in theological and sociological circles to disparage that ministry of the church called preaching. The criticism runs a wide gamut of thought from those who would argue simply that one must change his vocabulary to facilitate dialogue with twentieth century man to those who would argue that the gospel can no longer be communicated through preaching and that, therefore, this traditional method must be replaced by something more contemporary, such as varying approaches to group dynamics. Still amidst the noise and din, there comes echoing through the halls of history a clear and distinctly New Testament note which reminds us that when Jesus Christ began to spread the message of the living God, He began to "preach." Wuest expands the idea inherent in the word as follows from the passage in Matthew 4:17, "From that time on, Jesus began to be making a public proclamation as a herald with that formality, gravity, and authority as must be listened to and obeyed. . ." (The Gospels).

It is always wise at the beginning of any discussion to define terms, and the two which appear in the title of this study must come under scrutiny at this point. There is already inherent in Dr. Wuest's expanded translation a significant idea of what is conveyed in the New Testament use of the word or words rendered in the English text as "preaching." The basic meaning of the word is not changed by the content of that which is preached. Whether one is considering euangelizomai, katangellō, or kēryssō, the idea of public proclamation of the message of God is still in focus. It should be noted that the kind of preaching under consideration in these paragraphs is to be always Biblical and most often expository. Preaching that is Biblical will always find its source and content in the words of Holy Scripture. Preaching that is truly expository will take as its objective and its method the explanation and application of the written Word of God in the tradition of such expositors as Alexander Maclaren and G. Campbell Morgan.

The word "fellowship" is not so easily defined. It might refer to the mystical union which unites those who through participation in the finished work of Christ have entered into a relationship with each other in His body, the Church. The word might be used in reference to the people of God themselves, and here koinōnia would become almost synonymous with ekklēsia. The emphasis on koinōnia might be a horizontal one which is viewed in the Word as a "share" or "partnership" between two members of Christ's Church. On the other hand, the focus might be vertical in which the communion of the Christian with his God is the perspective.

Suffice it to say here, that the emphasis of this study will be sufficiently general to include all of these uses of the word koinōnia. Indeed, there is not one of them that cannot and should not be touched by the ministry of preaching.

The problem that precipitates these thoughts is one of relationship between "preaching" and "fellowship." The presupposition involved assumes that there is a need for God's people today to recapture a sense of koinōnia. This recapturing must include not only a renewed understanding of relationship between believers, but also an appreciation of the church at work in the world. Here again, ekklēsia and koinōnia join hands and march in review before the ranks of the redeemed. To understand the purpose and practice of koinōnia, one must recognize and appreciate what it means to be the Church. The question actually then might be worded, "What can preaching do to make God's people aware of their responsibility and privilege as the ekklēsia in koinōnia?" This question may be answered in the form of a number of propositions.

PREACHING THE NEW TESTAMENT LEADS TO AN AUTHORITATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT THE CHURCH IS

If people are to know how to become part of the church and how to act after they have become part of the church, this knowledge must be gained from a source of truth. Now all truth ultimately is God's truth, and when the scientist discovers some new feature of biological life which hitherto had been unknown, he is merely uncovering another facet in the magnificent universe created and controlled by the God of the Bible. The need for the information which he has discovered may have come from a number of different sources, such as the world of medicine or even anthropology, but the answer had to come from an investigation in the realm of biology for here alone lay the authoritative answers to the questions of physical life.

In like manner, the Christian may listen to the multitudinous voices of sociology and psychology raised in chorus to analyze the maladies of the twentieth century church, but ultimately he must be driven back to the discipline of theology and, more specifically, to the New Testament itself for the cures and remedies for the ills of the church. The "organization man" of the 1960's needs to hear God speaking and telling him what it means to be the church. He can never appreciate the significance of "fellowship" until he recognizes that koinōnia in Acts and also today is the direct result of the Holy Spirit's working in the church. It is a natural reaction of the Christian's regenerated spirit to God's Holy Spirit.

How can God's people be brought to a recognition of the challenge inherent in the church's mission in the world? They see it in the preaching of the book of Acts as the Spirit of God motivated the early church to evangelism and proclamation, throughout the then known world, of the gospel of the resurrected Lord. How can the members of the modern day ekklesia understand and deal with the many problems which beset their local assemblies on every hand? They can see their problems mirrored in the church at Corinth as the expository preacher takes them, chapter by chapter, through the two epistles which deal so completely with the problems of a local church. How can Christians today enter into the spirit of the doctrine of the Christian faith upon which the walk and the work of the church is founded? They can hear God speaking

as the preacher echoes the Word in an ecclesiological explanation of Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.

This is a mere introduction to the preaching of koinōnia from the New Testament. One could go on to examine the comparison between the old covenant and the new covenant in the book of Hebrews or the description of the pastoral ministry in the books of Timothy and Titus. Let it be believed that when God's chosen preacher enunciates the meaning of ekklēsia from the pages of the New Testament the Holy Spirit can illuminate the minds of God's people to see themselves as the church in koinōnia.

PREACHING IS A BASIC COMPONENT OF TRUE WORSHIP

A major goal of preaching in the church is worship. Christians can only bring themselves into a proper koinon relationship with each other when they have first brought themselves as individuals into a proper relationship with God. The apostle John reflects the significance of preaching to these relationships when he says,

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ (I John 1:3).

First proclamation of the truth, then a koinōnia with the Father through the Son, and finally a horizontal koinōnia between and among those who have a like relationship to God. Like Isaiah of old, the mid-twentieth century Christian must first see his relationship to a God of holiness, reflect then upon his own sinfulness, and finally be ready to reach out to others with a commitment that allows no reservations.

But what does preaching have to do with worship? One's concept of worship may be said to be sacramental and sacrificial. It may also include mutual edification and outreach to the unsaved. But at the root of the tree is the food source for the whole process: the Christian hearing from God about Himself. Only then can he react in adoration and thanksgiving; only then can he share with his brethren those mutual blessings of the most holy faith; and only then is he ready to reach out to a needy world with a message which is the "good news."

PREACHING UNLEASHES THE SUPERNATURAL POWER OF THE WORD OF GOD WHICH IS ABLE TO BRING ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE LIVES OF THE HEARERS

The current civil rights problems in the United States are ample evidence that morality cannot be legislated. Man's attitudes are merely the product of a heart and mind given over either to Christ or kosmos. The Word of the living God has in its application by the Holy Spirit, the supernatural power to change the minds and the hearts of men from hate to love, from selfishness to sharing, and from isolation to koinōnia. The apostle Paul had this power in view

when he wrote,

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (I Cor. 1:18-25 RSV).

Here again, preaching inculcates the concept of koinonia. God is thus at work in our preaching (Phil. 2:13, I Thess. 2:13), so that to reject preaching is to reject God Himself (I Thess. 4:8). Preaching is an event in which God acts. The Bible leads us honestly to expect miracles through our preaching. Lives will be changed and therefore the church will be changed. The transforming power of expository preaching may not appear immediately, but ultimately the sowing of the inscripturated Word will come to fruition in the lives of God's people as they begin to act like the ekklēsia in koinōnia.

PREACHING IS THE NEW TESTAMENT PLAN FOR CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

If koinōnia and ekklēsia are to be as closely allied as has been viewed in these paragraphs, then that which ultimately builds the church (both in size and in quality) must also build the fellowship. Although preaching may not be the only means of such edification, it certainly is one of the primary means available to the church down through the years of its history.

We must never overlook the fact that the miracle of God through preaching is as great a miracle when it results in the edification of the saints as when it draws people into the church initially. As the people of God grow in the grace of God, they develop perspective which can build their understanding of what it means to be the church. When they have seen this they begin to sense and practice the spirit of koinōnia.

One of the mountain-peak passages of the New Testament speaking to this aspect of the ministry of preaching is the fourth chapter of the Ephesian epistle which Wuest "expands" in this manner, beginning at verse 12:

For the equipping of the saints for ministering work with a view to the building up of the Body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the Faith and of the

experiential, full, and precise knowledge of the Son of God, to a spiritually mature man, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of the Christ, in order that we no longer may be immature ones, tossed to and fro and carried around in circles by every wind of teaching in the cunning adroitness of men, in craftiness which furthers the scheming deceitful art of error, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, who is the Head, Christ, from whom all the Body constantly being joined closely together and constantly being knit together through every joint of supply according to the operative energy put forth to the capacity of each part, makes for increased growth of the Body resulting in the building up of itself in the sphere of love. (The Gospels)

Here the preacher is viewed as being concerned with the maturity of the saints, their knowledge in the things of the gospel and their likeness to Christ. These things precede the unity of koinōnia and, yet, are parallel with it. As the individual believers "grow up into Him in all things" so the Body is being "joined closely together." In this sense, therefore, koinōnia is the result of a carefully designed program of edificational preaching.

PREACHING IS THE FOUNDATION UPON WHICH ALL THE OTHER ACTIVITIES OF THE CHURCH ARE BUILT

Proclamation of truth is foundational in the church. By it the church lives and moves and has its being. However, the twentieth century parish has made the pulpit only one of many avenues along which God's people walk to growth in fellowship and service.

The educational program of the church, for example, is an increasing outreach of didachē through classroom and counsel. What is the relationship of preaching to teaching in the local assembly? In the ministry of our Lord, they were inseparable. Even so in our day the evangelical church cannot afford to build unreal competition between pulpit and classroom but must see the harmony of these basic aspects of the church's unified program of communication.

Consider further the mission outreach of the church. If American Christians, for example, are going to enter into the spirit of a koinōnia relationship with African or Australian Christians, there must be a challenge of universality resting upon the absolute basis of truth in God. In other words, God's truth is proclaimed in different languages by preachers with varying colors of skin, but the truth is singular and therefore the adherents to the truth can be singularly drawn together under one Lord.

A healthy re-emphasis in the evangelical church today is a return to the Christian family as basic to all fellowship in larger groups. Here again, the preacher has the responsibility of stimulating proper family attitudes and behavior by clearly conveying the emphasis of the Word of God on the Christian home.

Perhaps a clear picture of the centrality of proclamation comes in St. Paul's words to Timothy, the young pastoral leader in the early church. There were many specific organi-

zational and personal problems with which Timothy had to deal in his overseeing responsibilities. The aged apostolic prisoner speaks to many of them in the course of his two epistles to his son in the faith. When all is said, however, there remains one final charge which encompasses the broad spectrum of Timothy's activities: "Preach the Word" (II Tim. 4:2).

There is one word in the contemporary jargon of preaching which has not yet been mentioned. Its absence would most certainly label these thoughts inadequate. Reference is made, of course, to the word "relevance." Let it be understood that the Biblical basis and expository method for which this writer appeals must also be accompanied by a preaching that reaches the mind of the "organization man" in the cosmopolitan world of the 1960's. Relevancy, however, must supplement authority and not displace it lest the trumpet give forth an uncertain sound.

The evangelical preacher must never lose sight of the fact that the gospel is relevant for modern man. There is no other God-given way whereby the church can be drawn together in a koinōnia which defies the naturalistic analysis of human behavior. If one surrenders preaching, one surrenders the method of Peter, Paul, Chrysostom, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Edwards, and of our Lord Himself. It is not a substitute for proclamation that is needed in our day to build the fellowship of Christ's church; it is a return to Biblical, expository, life-related, and Spirit-filled preaching which has always characterized the church at its best.