

PREPARE AND PREACH PROPERLY
OR PERISH

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

In the last few months a two-fold phenomenon has impressed itself on my mind. The first is the emptiness of some of the sermons I have heard. They have been well constructed, and delivered with a good deal of eloquence and ability, but they have had no content; they have been empty. Though the structure was good, and the vocabulary and delivery shewed that the preachers were experienced, they were saying nothing of any significance. I am not surprised that no-one comes to hear them. The reason for this emptiness is that there has not been proper preparation, because the ministers are so busy in other excellent things that they have not the time for preparation. They learn to deliver sermons with a minimum amount of preparation but with a lot of experience and skill in delivery. But however well polished, an empty sermon will result in empty churches. The sermon that is full of teaching about God cannot be delivered without thorough preparation. First there is required the long term preparation of constant reading and thinking about God and the world, and our relationships with God, and His purposes. Secondly there is required the intense short term preparation that needs to go into each sermon.

But these days ministers are so busy building up their congregations by every other method than by the preparation of their addresses that they have not time to prepare properly. Twice this last week I have heard the

miserable sophism that the best preparation for a sermon is knocking around the parish getting to know people. Of course a minister must know people but he learns this by being a person. The just claim on his time is to seek to understand the mind of God through prayer and reading, and then secondly to prepare his sermon so that he has something to say when the people come to hear him. Otherwise they won't come, and who blames them?

The second phenomenon is what may be called the flight from the parish ministry to special ministries and chaplaincies. I learnt this week that in one of the largest American theological colleges there is not a student who proposes to enter the ordinary parish ministry but they are all keen to do one of these specialised helping ministries. And closely related is the fact that many ministers in the parishes are anxious to leave the parish ministry for some helping ministry. Yet these helping ministries are not ministries of the Word of God though they doubtless provide opportunities for Christian witness just like any other job provides the opportunity from time to time for a man to witness to his faith. The essential Christian ministry is preaching the Word of God, as an evangelist or as a parish minister or both. St Paul told Timothy that those ministers who labour in the Word and in teaching are specially worthy of double honour (I Tim. 5:16). The

reason is because the knowledge of God's Word is the basis of Christian faith and Christian fellowship. This is why the ministry of God's Word is so important and so honourable. It is the essential ministry. Without faithful, true, and thoughtful preaching or teaching of God's Word, the Christian church will evaporate.

In the sixth chapter of Acts we have an interesting illustration of the supreme importance of the parish ministry of preaching and teaching the Word of God to the people of God. The young Christian church in Jerusalem was growing in numbers, and the growing fellowship called for new patterns of service. Some members of the church were being neglected in the distribution of financial help. Now to assist in relieving the poverty of widows is a noble, loving, helping ministry; but the apostles, who had been called to the ministry of the Word of God, steadfastly refused to be drawn into this helping ministry or to allow their time to be absorbed by it. They said that they would leave it to others to look after the widows; but that they themselves would concentrate on the essential ministry to which God had called them. This ministry was twofold, preaching the Word as opportunity occurred (as on the Day of Pentecost and preaching in the Synagogue) and teaching the Christian group from the Word of God and prayer. We read in Acts 12 that the Christian converts continued in the apostles'

teaching. It was this ministry of teaching that the apostles were determined to protect by refusing to allow other things, excellent though these were, to crowd it out. The reason is simple, the Word of God is vital for evoking Christian faith, so that if there is no Word of God preached, there will be no Christians, however busy people may be discharging these helping ministries. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ, but how shall they hear, asked St Paul, unless people preach. The Christian religion is a religion of faith; faith in Jesus as Lord, faith that God has raised Him from the dead, faith that our Lord is coming again to be the judge and rewarder of those who seek Him, faith that we will share in that coming kingdom. From this faith, this Christian world view, this recognition of Jesus as Lord, flows out Christian living in business and in the home. But this faith needs constant nurture from the Word of God, and God calls ministers of the Word to this task and they in turn need to give themselves to it and to the preparation which it requires if it is to be fulfilled. The Christian church is nothing else than fellowship in God, and this fellowship is deepened and maintained by the teaching of the Word of God by the minister. Without this teaching there can be no fellowship, that is, no church.

The ministry of the Word of God is a supernatural ministry. Its

message is about supernatural things and its power depends on God's Spirit. If this ministry is to be persevered with to the end of the minister's life he himself will need constantly to be revived in faith. Paul said in Romans 1 he was not ashamed of the gospel as it was the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes; which showed that he recognized its supernatural character but that he also knew the temptation to be ashamed of it and to give it up, but he persevered and finished the course, as he put it, sustained by faith in God's promised reward, the crown of life.

To preach the Word of God requires faith on the preacher's part. Now this is not needed to the same extent in the helping ministries, as here you can see the good that you are doing. In Acts 6 those who undertook the ministry of distributing money to the widows could see the joy on the widows' faces and hear their words of gratitude. They had also the satisfaction of healing the wound in the Christian fellowship. It was a real service, and its fruits were plain. Yet the apostles refused to be drawn into this helping ministry, saying that they would give themselves to the ministry of the Word of God and prayer. This is a ministry in which the minister himself may often see little fruit. He will only maintain his ministry if his own faith in the supernatural world and in Christ as Lord remains bright. For this he needs to give time to

Bible reading and prayer.

The apostles told the Christian church that they would continue steadfast in prayer and ministering the Word of God. Both are supernatural activities, prayer and preaching God's Word. They both go together, for without prayer on the minister's part his own faith will grow dim, and his words will be without power, for it is the Spirit of God who applies the words to the hearts of the hearers to bring forth fruit for eternal life, and unless the minister's words arise from prayer they will not be the words which the Spirit can use, for they will not be the words which God gives.

Persevering in prayer is difficult; it takes time, and the preparation of the message takes time. If a minister believes he is called to the ministry of the Word of God he would do well to follow the example of the apostles and curtail other activities, even though they are excellent ones of helping other people in their need. That must be left to others who are not called to the ministry of the Word of God. But this line of action can only be followed if the minister himself is seized with the reality of the supernatural world and with God's supernatural purposes. He must be conscious that the Gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes. And our Lord has a word of encouragement and warning: He said to His disciples "Who then is the faith-

ful slave whom his Lord shall put over his household to give them their food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his Lord when he comes shall find so doing. Truly I say to you He will set him over all that he has". In addition to this promise of reward for faithfulness, Jesus added a warning to the servant who neglected the ministry to which God had appointed him. Jesus compared him to a human slave whom his master found negligent and unfaithful who was severely scourged and rejected as a hypocrite, and Jesus added "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 24:51).