

INTERMEZZO

No churches have placed such high premium on Gospel preaching as did the Reformed. This is evident already in the foundations laid for their corporate life by "the Convent of Wezel" (1568). This assembly of Reformed preachers and elders was held outside of the Netherlands because of raging persecution. Convinced that "the administration of God's Word" was indispensable for spiritual life and growth, much attention was devoted to the *what*, the *why* and the *how* of "edifying sermons," as well as to *who* would be permitted to discharge this office in the congregations.

Complaints about sermons are far from rare today. Some are undoubtedly justifiable; others quite unfair and unjustifiable. Both preachers and people would do well to reflect on what the early fathers had to say about this important work. Their provisional *Church Order* provides a norm or standard by which preachers, elders and church members can judge rightly.

Wezel insisted that only those called by God might be examined for this office. Such men and only such were to be admitted who wholeheartedly and in good conscience subscribed to the Confession and the Catechism as in complete accord with Holy Scripture. Soundness of doctrine and godliness of life, together with evidence of reasonable competence in explaining and applying the Word, constituted the foci of such examinations. In the presence of the congregations they were to pledge themselves "to spread the honor of God, the pure ministry of the Word, and the edification (*opbouw*) of the church" in their sermons.

The fathers, however, were not content with broad generalizations.

Every minister had to promise "at no time to twist the words of the Holy Spirit according to his own inclinations or to depart a hair's-breadth from the truth for the sake of approval or remuneration or fear." Also "every approved ordinance of the church, which

aimed at the good order and peace of the churches" had to be maintained by him. In all this "he must in the discharge of his office use all his power(s) to warn, rebuke, comfort and instruct, wherever necessary."

Nor "might the ears of the people be disturbed or upset by all kinds of questions either publicly or in private discussions" (II,21). No single sermonic style was prescribed. However, the articles insisted that every minister was to preach the Word "according to the gifts received from the Holy Spirit and appropriate to the understanding of the people." All "spiteful and odious" speech was to be avoided as well as "vain speculations" and "wanderings" (*omdwalen*) and "impressive exhibitions" of quotations from pagan or even Christian writings (II,22).

What, then, was expected of a sound and effective preacher?

Always he was to stress both repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as "the chief parts of the holy Gospel." And to this end sermons had to be soul-searching, "seeking to expose the secret depths of the human heart which often cherish wrong notions, heresies and bad morals" (II,23).

And how long should a sermon be? Well, on this the worthies refused to be specific. But, and this they felt compelled to say, "The preacher shall exert himself to limit his discourse to the length of an hour!" (II,24) Sermons lasting only fifteen or twenty minutes at the most were, apparently, unheard of.

Although endorsed more than four centuries ago, much of what these articles said about preaching is worthy of emulation today.

(References are to chapter and paragraph of P. Biesterveld and A. Kuyper, *Kerkelijk Handboekje* [Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1905].)

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Ours is an age in which people are far too preoccupied with themselves. Many, steeping themselves in popularly written articles on healthy-mindedness, tend to become emotional cripples. Soon they find themselves incapable of lifting themselves up by their own bootstraps.

What faithful Gospel preaching and teaching does is begin and end with the living God. By his Word he summons to a simple but

active faith and so surrounds them with all the pledges of his presence and power. This, rather than all the popular psychologies and psychiatries, truly “restores the soul.”

In I Peter 5:7 we are exhorted to “cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” Undoubtedly the apostle was thinking as he wrote of Psalm 55:27 and particularly of Psalm 68:19, in which the psalmist sings “praise to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burden.” Luther, you will remember, said he chased the devils of doubt and despair away by singing praises to God!

The Greek word *menimna* derives from a root meaning “to divide.” This accurately describes what goes on in the troubled mind and heart. It is divided, confused, distracted because of life’s perplexities and problems—a malady to which thousands in the churches are also highly susceptible. These people become *anxious*, driven and driving themselves into a narrow cul-de-sac from which they see and feel no hope of escape. Life then becomes a burden to heavy to bear.

How foolish and futile our efforts as believers when we look for the antidote to this strength-crippling and life-destroying condition in ourselves. The Word repeatedly commands us to “throw” these burdens not away, as if they did not exist, but upon our God and Savior. Such faith is never some vague feeling of dependence on a higher power. It is simple childlike trust that in Jesus Christ all our cares have truly become God’s care! Christians are a redeemed, reconciled, renewed people. Even faith no bigger than a mustard seed experiences that mountains of every kind are removed. The feeblest stirrings of such faith pay high dividends. A large measure of peace of mind and heart returns. Hope is revived. Strength to meet life’s situations is restored.

Such faith, however, never comes cheaply.

It demands the wrestling with self in obedience to the Word. It takes all sin seriously. It looks ever more deeply into the mirror of Scripture to see self for what it is. It “throws” itself with every life-situation into the hands of the God of salvation. And to such faith every sermon, in accordance with the text expounded and applied, must summon. Without sound biblical teaching (doctrine) we become false preachers who lead ourselves and others astray.

The Bible is the only source-book for a true and well-rounded psychology. It opens the way to practical wisdom concerning self, others, crises of every kind, and above all, God. So let ministers

preach and people appropriate such texts frequently. For multitudes of hurting people the triune God has provided it as the only effective "healing" ministry. And nowhere is it dispensed more effectively than from the pulpit which officially proclaims that Word in all its fulness.

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