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the Local church elder

What Is Preaching?

STEVEN P. VITRANO

WHAT is preaching all about anyway? The question has been asked again and again, and answered as often in one way or another. But when you have been ordained as a local elder and you realize that one of your responsibilities is to preach a sermon when the pastor is not present on Sabbath morning or Wednesday evening or on other occasions when preaching is called for, then quite suddenly the question is *your* question and it becomes critically relevant for *you*.

To begin, let us consider the "what" of preaching. It is imperative that we do this, because our attitude toward preaching is really more important than how we preach. The "what" should cause us to take more seriously and give better attention to the "how." In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians he makes a significant statement as to what preaching is all about: "For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we *preached* to you the gospel of God . . . ; for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

"And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it *not as the word of men* but as *what it really is, the word of God*, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:9-13, R.S.V.).

When Paul preached the gospel, he was not preaching the word of men but the word of God.

This suggests that the preach-

ing of the gospel is not only a communication of truth about God and the Christian way of life, but is a phenomenon, a holy event, in which the same word that is at work in the heart is now heard by the believer. There is here something living and vital, something dynamic and moving. In consideration of this some have asserted, as does Robert H. Mounce in his book, *The Essential Nature of New Testament Preaching*, that in preaching God reveals Himself, so that it can be said, "Preaching is revelation"—the revelation of God.

We may consider that point in need of some modification because of its relationship to the whole doctrine of revelation, but we must not lose its force with respect to the importance of preaching. Note what Ellen G. White has written in volume 5 of the *Testimonies*, pages 298, 300:

Many do not look upon preaching as Christ's appointed means of instructing His people and therefore always to be highly prized. They do not feel that the sermon is the word of the Lord to them and estimate it by the value of the truths spoken; but they judge it as they would the speech of a lawyer at the bar—by the argumentative skill displayed and the power and beauty of the language. The minister is not infallible, but God honored him by making him His messenger. If you listen to him as though he were not commissioned from above you will not respect his words nor receive them as the message of God. . . . We are never to forget that Christ teaches through His servants.

Have we lost this concept of preaching? Do we still consider the sermon the "word of the Lord"? Do we believe that in preaching Christ is teaching His people through His servants? Is the Holy Spirit present and active in the sermon—do God and man come together? Something wonderful can happen if preaching is God's appointed means of saving souls. Should we approach the pulpit with the expectation that it will happen?

I miss the attitude of reverence for the pulpit I was taught as a boy. I was never allowed to walk

carelessly behind the pulpit, to stand in the pulpit for "the fun of it." I was taught that it was dangerous to "fool" with sacred things, and the pulpit was one of these. It is from the pulpit that God speaks to men. It is in the sermons that God and man come together.

In his book, *The Art of Illustrating Sermons*, Ian Macpherson tells the following story which has some bearing upon what we are considering:

Picture an old lady living in London about the middle of last century. Her hero, we will suppose, is the Duke of Wellington, and when we first see her she is sitting in her drawing room, a copy of his biography open in her hands. She is reading the account of the Battle of Waterloo, and as she reflects on the role the duke played in that famous engagement, and on all that the victory he then won has meant for her as an Englishwoman, she is overwhelmed with gratitude and devotion to him. Every now and again she lifts her eyes from the page and looks up at an etching hanging on a wall of the apartment. It is a pen-and-ink drawing of Apsley House, Wellington's London residence; and as she gazes at it, she says to herself: "How wonderful to think that the great duke lives there!" Then, all at once, her reverie is broken into by a sharp rap on the door. She rises to respond to it and, when the door is opened, there confronting her in living presence is the duke himself! In a flash, book and building—fascinating though they are—are alike forgotten, for the conqueror meets her face to face!

Something far more marvelous than that frequently happens in a Christian church. People go there to listen to the reading and exposition of a Book, which tells of a triumph immeasurably surpassing Waterloo, or to gaze with rapture on the stately fabric of some glorious cathedral. And, all at once, there comes a knock on the door of their hearts. There before them is none other than the risen Christ himself!

Will something like that happen when you preach next Sabbath? It can. How does that possibility strike you as you prepare the sermon? Are you motivated to do your best? Do you begin your preparation on your knees?

We are not sufficient for all this. But God is able. He has called you, and He wants to use you. It is a high honor to be called to preach the gospel. □