

Part 3 of a Series on the Preaching of the Word

The Goal of Preaching

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We come to a consideration of one of the most important passages in the New Testament relating to the nature of true ministry. At the beginning of this series mention was made of the recovery of biblical exposition of a sort that allows the vital thrust of the Word to do its costly work in men's lives for the production of Christian character and wholeness. This is well underlined in Ephesians 4:8-16, and what the Apostle says in these verses provides a fair description of the sort of ministry that the present writer has been committed to in the past twenty-five years.

The context of the passage is, as always with Paul, significant for a full understanding of his meaning. He follows his usual method of presenting first of all the great fundamental truths of the gospel, in the first chapters of the epistle, and then proceeds on the basis of these to make his exhortations to holiness in life: first the great indicatives of the faith, the wealth of our position in Christ, then the grand imperative to walk worthy of our vocation. Paul invariably passes from doctrine to duty, and requires of us that our position in Christ should become our possession in experience. 'Becoming what you are' expresses the idea perfectly. And this passage tells us that the supreme, the chief, means by which this moral transformation takes place is the ministry of the Word, bestowed as a gift upon the Church by the risen and ascended Christ.

We could put this in another way: we observe how Paul ends the previous chapter in Ephesians (3:20, 21) with the glorious doxology which includes the words "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end". What follows in chapter 4 shows in practical detail how that glory is to be rendered to God — by the saints being 'perfected', that is, being brought into their proper condition, in maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

It is important to see, then, that the gifts spoken of here as given to the Church — apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers — are given on the basis, and as the fruit, of Christ's ascension and coronation. The Apostle's picture is of the activity of a risen, glorified and victorious Lord on the initiative to bless and sanctify His people. One is reminded of our Lord's own parable about first binding the strong man, then spoiling his house (Mark 3:27): first He leads captivity captive, then He proceeds to take Satan's prey from him, loosing the shackles that have bound them, healing the wounds and scars that dark bondage has inflicted upon them, and restoring them to freedom and human personality once again.

The gifts Paul mentions in these verses are spoken of in the context of the theme of diversity in unity within the body of Christ, which occupied us so substantially in our last study in I Cor. 12: "Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" — here he deals with it in a particular way, in relation to particular gifts of ministry with which some members of the body are endowed.

Before we go on to discuss these varying gifts, it would be well to look on to the purpose and intention for which the gifts were

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given. This is expressed in vv. 12-16 as being to furnish God's people, every individual believer among them, for their particular service and their particular contribution to the building up of the body of Christ, the building up of the house that God wants to dwell in. It is here that we see something of the bigness and grandeur of Paul's doctrine.

It will help us, also, in this connection, to look even further back in the epistles; for Paul speaks here of our sharing in Christ's ascension and exaltation, and we need to think of this in the terms in which it is spoken of in Ephesians 1:19, where he prays for the eyes of our understanding to be opened that we may know... "the exceeding greatness of His power to usward who believe", the very power which wrought in Christ when he was raised from the dead, and set far above all principality and power. It is this that the Church, the body of Christ, shares and participates in, through the ministry instituted by the ascended Lord.

The list of gifts Paul gives here is not of course exhaustive, and should be compared with those given in Romans 12:6-8 and I Cor. 12:27. Every gift plays its part in the edifying of the body, and each has its unique and distinctive contribution to make. Nevertheless, Paul concentrates here on those gifts relating to the ministry of the Word; for him, they are clearly of paramount importance.

Furthermore, these gifts are not necessarily mutually exclusive, in the sense that a man may be endowed with only one. It is true that some men, in the history of the Church, have been obviously and pre-eminently raised up as, say, evangelists, or prophets, or teachers of the Word; but this does not mean that their work is exclusively evangelism, or prophecy, or teaching. It was not so in the New Testament itself. Paul claimed to be an apostle (I Co. 9:1), but he was also more — he was a preacher and a teacher (I Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). He also claimed to have the gift of prophecy (I Cor. 12:2); and who would deny that he was an evangelist, when his labours were so signally blessed among the Gentiles? The same can be said of Timothy and Titus, who were pastors and teachers in their fellowship, and yet Paul could say to Timothy, "Preach the Word . . . do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry" (2 Tim. 4:2, 5). It is fair to say, in the light of this, that men called to the ministry today should be considered as called to an all-round ministry of prophetic utterance (in the sense of forthtelling the word of the Lord), evangelism, teaching and pastoral work, although some may have a predominant emphasis on one rather than the others.

Let me say something, then, in detail about the various 'gifts'. First of all, 'apostles'. We can discern a twofold meaning of the word in the New Testament, first of all referring to the Twelve, and Paul. In this narrow and exclusive sense, the qualifications were: to have seen Jesus (I Cor. 9:1), and to have been a witness of the Resurrection (Acts 1:21, 22). On this construction, the apostles were bound to die out and never be replaced. There could only be twelve apostles in this sense, for later generations could not possibly 'see' Jesus in the way they did, or be eye-witnesses of His Resurrection in the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension. But the word 'apostle' is also applied to others than the Twelve in the New Testament — to Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14), James the brother of our Lord (I Cor. 15:7, Gal. 1:19), Silvanus (I Thess. 2:16), and others. These, in fact, may well have 'seen' Jesus in His earthly ministry, and been witnesses of the Resurrection also.

What is important for us to recognise is the fact that to these men was given by Christ the responsibility of establishing the norm of the apostolic gospel, by their preaching and by their writing. In this, they were unique, and unrepeatable. There are no apostles in this sense today, nor could there be — nor need there be — since the revelation is now complete. No new revelation is possible, or necessary, although new illumination is always needed on what was originally given.

In a wider, more generalised and less precise sense of the word, however, there is a 'sending' which is 'apostolic' today, in this respect: "He who would teach Christ must still know Christ; and he who would bring the power of Christ to others must still have experienced Christ's power" (Barclay).

Next, 'prophets'. There are several things to be said about the New Testament prophets. First of all, there seems no good reason for not assuming that they stand in integral relation, and succession, to the Old Testament prophets. In the Old Testament, the norm of prophecy is Moses (Deut. 18:15-19). The prophets forth-told the Word of God, and sometimes foretold the future, a combination of proclamation and prediction. This we see likewise in the New Testament prophets, for example, Agabus, in Acts 11:28, 21:10, 11, on the one hand, and Judas and Silas in Acts 15:32 on the other.

In the New Testament every Christian is a potential prophet — the pouring out of the Spirit carries with it this result, 'and they shall prophesy'. Moses had said 'Would God all the Lord's people were prophets'. Yet, in the New Testament there was a special class or group known as 'the prophets', as mentioned here and in I Cor. 12:28. Theirs was a work of edification, exhortation and comfort. It is clear that in the New Testament they were an important group. With the apostles, they laid the foundation of the New Testament Church (Ephesians 2:20, 'built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets'). One all-important aspect of this was the establishing of apostolic doctrine, the formulation of the teaching of the gospel. In this respect, both apostles and prophets would necessarily pass from the scene, for there is a 'once-for-allness' about this. The New Testament canon was eventually completed, and no more 'revelation' was needed. It had all been given.

Also, with the establishment of settled ministries under 'pastors and teachers', the prophets became progressively unnecessary and 'redundant', and their special office superseded, with ministers taking over their ministry of exhortation and instruction.

The ministry, or at least the name, of prophet also soon died in the Church. Their work, receiving and declaring the word of God under direct inspiration of the Spirit, was most vital before there was a canon of New Testament Scriptures. We read of

prophets in the second century, but they had diminished importance. The apostolic writings were coming to be read widely, and accepted as authoritative, and this tended to replace the authority of the prophets. At the same time, the local ministry was assuming greater importance than that of itinerant ministers, and there was the added problem that there were many false teachers and self-styled 'prophets', who went from place to place to peddle their wares. (Foulkes, Tynedale Commentary, pp. 118f).

The prophetic function today must therefore be seen as that of contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints. This is what we mean by a 'prophetic' ministry — the recovery of old, lost values, the rehabilitation of a true ministry of the Word in the Church.

Next, 'evangelists'. What is evangelism? On scriptural grounds, it is misleading to identify 'preaching a gospel message', as if only the latter were true evangelism. Men who labour to expound the Scriptures are sometimes criticised for not making pointed enough appeals to the unconverted, and the implication is that only the pointed appeal constitutes true evangelism. There is a whole philosophy behind this attitude, but it must be asserted that all the available scriptural evidence stands in contradiction to it. According to the New Testament, the preaching of the gospel is the proclamation of the mighty acts of God, not a series of exhortations and entreaties to get right with God. All the characteristic preaching of the gospel in the Acts of the Apostles bears witness to this. The Apostles preached doctrine. Modern scholarship has established that there was a well-defined apostolic 'kerygma' which formed the foundation and basis of all their ministry. And it was objective proclamation in this sense, not subjective appeal, that God was pleased to bless. A careful and unbiased reading of the New Testament will surely make it clear that the apostolic evangelism consisted of the exposition and interpretation of the Scriptures concerning Christ. Paul reasoned with men out of the Scriptures

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(Acts 17:2), opening up and unfolding their meaning in such a way that their message in all its virtue and power got home to mind, heart and conscience. It is precisely the lack of this kind of preaching that has so often brought evangelistic work into such a parlous state today. We need to be clear that it is the law of the Lord that converts the soul (Ps. 19:7), not the earnest pleading of men, and this means that it must be proclaimed and expounded objectively, and trusted in — whether it be John's gospel, Romans, Genesis or Numbers — as having converting power, if the Spirit is in the preaching of it.

Then, 'pastors and teachers'. This, as the Greek makes clear, constitutes a combined office. This is significant, and it is possible to see a reason for such a union. The teaching of the Word, the exposition of Holy Scripture, is something that probes men's hearts and lives, and unearths and brings to the surface human problems and needs that lurk hidden in the recesses of the soul. It is this fact that necessitates pastoral care

and help in order to resolve them and bring relief and blessing. According to the narrative of the gospels, the presence of Jesus seemed again and again to draw into the open the demons that hitherto had remained concealed in the dark and hopeless depths of men's lives, in order that they might be challenged and cast out of them. In the same way today, the Word exposes the works of the evil one in human experience, to enable wise pastoral care to be exercised for the establishment of spiritual health.

It is here that we see the true understanding of 'crisis' in spiritual experience. It is true that the illumination of the Word can bring sudden enlightenment — 'I see it now', we say, as the light floods in. That is a crisis, if you like, in our thinking. But with the therapeutic action of the Word, crisis can be very much more acute. 'If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off' says our Lord. That is crisis indeed, just as abdominal surgery is crisis therapy in the medical sphere. The diseased organ must be cut out if health is to be preserved.

But this surgery, it must be realised, is essentially a negative

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thing, and preparatory. It is not health itself; it simply removes that which makes good health impossible. So also, in spiritual life, the therapy of the Word does not in itself constitute growth and upbuilding; it simply makes growth possible, by removing and dealing with things that have hitherto prevented it. Crisis, in the spiritual life, means just that. And we should not confuse it to mean that a man who has had a crisis-experience has 'arrived' in the spiritual sense, or is on a higher plane spiritually than others, any more than we can suppose that a man who has had a surgical operation is superior to those who have not. Indeed, a man who has undergone a spiritual crisis has only now begun: real, meaningful Christian experience has only now become possible, now that hindrances to growth are out of the way. It was, in fact, only because he had fallen away from his original, first consecration that this crisis-therapy became necessary. Something went wrong. But in those for whom something has not gone wrong, this kind of therapy is not necessary. This is why it is a misleading assumption (as well as an irritating one) to suppose that everybody is sick, and needs soul-surgery, thus making this therapeutic aspect of ministry the "all in all" in one's work. Too many have thought so, to the impoverishment of spiritual life. Pre-occupation with it leads to ecclesiastical valetudinarianism!

Over against this, however, Paul sets yet a further aspect of ministry: 'edification' (v. 12b). There is such a thing as growth in maturity, as well as growth toward it, as there is in natural, physical life. We develop, both in natural and spiritual life, from childhood (and childishness, with all its problems and its need for therapy, as Paul indicates in v. 14), to adult life, then there is development of stature in adulthood, through the edifying ministry of the Word. Illumination for the ignorant and confused; therapy for the sick; and now food for the healthy. When everything that hinders growth in the believer is removed — ignorance, on the one hand, and disease on the other — he can then begin to grow. For good pot-plants, you have to remove the worm at the root, — this arrests the disease that has blighted the flower — and then you apply fertilizers.

This is how to promote good blooms.

And here, it is the steady process of growth that is important, not an experience marked by crisis. Nor is there any short-cut to such maturity. No simple, three-point plan that by-passes the serious business of Christian discipline, with its wrestling and battling and striving, with its daily obedience and daily dying to sin. Our Lord's parable of the seed growing secretly has relevance here — "first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear". This is the pattern for positive Christian growth. Only by a steady submission to the gracious discipline of the Word in all its fulness, as it ministers to us the riches of Christ, and as it steadily and progressively masters us — only thus do we develop the lineaments of Christian character. And for this, Christ has appointed in the Church ministers, prophets, teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, to bring them to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

The 'growth towards maturity' referred to, and spoken of, in v. 13, is described in strong terms, for the Greek word for 'come' has the force of 'reaching one's destination' as a 'full-grown man'. The reference is a collective one, and applies to the Church as the body of Christ, although it applies also to the individual believer. The idea of growth ('stature' in v. 13 refers to height or growth, rather than age) is continued and further emphasised in v. 15. The verb translated 'speaking the truth' has in fact a wider meaning than the A.V. gives it. Alford translates 'being followers of truth', but better still would be 'cherishing the truth'. The Christian, as Moule says, is to 'cultivate an instinct for Divine truth as against its counterfeits, in thought and in life'. Here the attitude of the saints to the ministry of the Word is in view (in terms of our Lord's warning "Take heed how ye hear"). It is by cherishing the truth and receiving it as one would receive a welcome guest into one's home (1 Thess 2:13, where the word Paul uses of receiving the word of God has precisely this force — *edexasthe*), that we grow up into maturity in Christ 'in all things'. This last phrase is important, since it indicates all-round, balanced growth, emotional, intellectual, moral, spiritual. This is the great desideratum in spiritual life, and nothing less can properly be called the development of true Christian stature.

To complete this marvellously full and comprehensive discussion of the nature and purpose of the ministry of the Word, Paul adds a final word about the inevitable outcome of the whole operation. The A.V. translation of v. 16 is somewhat cumbersome, although its general meaning is really quite clear. The essential idea is the inner harmony and coherence of the body and the common growth of the limbs through individual connection with the Head (fitly "framed together and compacted"). The phrase "by that which every joint supplieth" has been variously rendered, but is probably best taken as "through every contact with the supply", that is to say, through the union of every member of the body with the Head. This is further suggested in the next phrase, "according to the proportionate workings of each several part". Each member of the body of Christ has his contribution to make to the harmony and well-being of the body, and will make that contribution when he responds without reserve to the ministry of the Word. And this will result in the glad, spontaneous and inevitable increase or growth of the body. Here is the true, New Testament conception of evangelical outreach — the Church as the body of Christ energised and vitalised by an unreserved reception of the word of ministry, healed, equipped and built up into maturity and balanced development, and thus made self-propagating and fruitful in the service of the gospel.

This, then, is the service for which the saints are to be equipped, this is the final purpose and goal of the ministry of the Word in the Church of Christ.