

THE PRIORITY OF PREACHING

The Myron J. Taylor Preaching Lectures

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Some five million sermons a year are preached in this country. In almost every neighborhood and crossroads people gather each week to hear about the Christian faith and the Christian way of life. More people gather in our churches on a single Sunday in the United States than attend all the football, baseball and basketball games in an entire year. A preacher knows that every Sunday he/she can have uninterrupted access to the attention of a room full of people for twenty-five or thirty minutes. Some say you have to begin by trying to get their attention. That is generally not true. People in church are courteous and conditioned to give you their attention. What you have to do is to learn how to keep from losing their attention and put them to sleep. Preaching is as old as the ways of God with humankind and as new as the morning paper. Howard Hageman published an article in *Theology Today* (Jan. 1981) entitled, "Preaching Is Alive and Well." In that article Hageman said, "certainly there is everywhere a renewed interest in preaching. In spite of the beating that it took in the sixties, preaching still heads just about every list of talents sought by vacant congregations." Never in my lifetime has there been such a favorable climate for preaching and so much positive help for the preacher.

I stand here today to make a plea for the priority of preaching. I am sure you can say, "well, I have heard that before," and you certainly have. It would be nice if I could come to you with something cute and clever and original, if I could entertain you and keep you laughing. It is heavy upon my heart that I should talk with you about those things I consider of first rate

significance. For that reason I have chosen the theme "The Priority of Preaching; What and Why Come First." I want to talk about the preliminaries – the preparation for preaching – getting ready to get ready to preach. We will cover some old and familiar ground but hopefully with a new emphasis and a new passion.

The deepest commitment of my life for 44 years has been to the preaching of the Gospel, and I want to plead with you to make it the deepest commitment of your life. You know, of course, that means making Jesus the Lord of your life and indicating to Him your willingness to carry the Good News of the Gospel to a lost and alienated world. I carry in my wallet an old, yellow, faded card – by far the oldest and most faded card I have. I obtained it when I was still a student in Bible College. A friend of mine, a senior, had printed a calling card – a business card – and gave me one. On the back were printed the words of Richard Baxter, "Preach as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men." A number of writers I have read through the years have made fun of that statement – calling it sentimental and mushy and emotional – but I have taken it seriously. I left my home in the hills of West Virginia to become a preacher of the Gospel. I didn't have any idea what that meant at the time but I have never been sorry. I would still rather be a preacher than anything else in the world. I have been offered a number of other things along the way but none of them reached the depths of my heart like preaching. I have always wanted to be a preacher and am still trying to learn how to do it well. It is too great for any person, but what a blessed challenge to try to measure up to its demands.

It was early summer of 1942. I was 18 years old, had just graduated from High School, and was confronted with one of the most important decisions in my life – what I was going to do with my life. In earlier years I had thought about being a preacher – that was the way we referred

to becoming a minister in our little mountain community. The church was one of the most formative influences in my life. We only had a formal preaching service once each month – our dear old preacher was keeping eight mountain churches alive by preaching in rotation Saturday night, Sunday morning and Sunday evening. Some of the older women in church began saying, “Myron is going to be a preacher.” Gradually that kind of dampened my spirits and the vision faded a bit. But now I had graduated from High School and a decision had to be made. It was early summer and the corn was six or eight inches high and ready for hoeing. I had been working in the fields all day and had come to the house for supper. My father, who was a coal miner, seemed to sense the burden of my decision. On that particular evening he said, “Well, Myron, I think we ought to make arrangements for you to enter Concord College this fall and become a teacher.” I said, “No, daddy (I always called my father Daddy) I don’t think that is what I ought to do.” And he replied, “Well, you’ve got to decide what you are going to do.” It upset me that my father wanted to push me toward a decision. I said no more. I never talked back to my father even once in all my life. I went back to the field where I had been working and started hoeing corn again. Suddenly I straightened up, picked up my hoe, and threw it as far as I could down the hill. I turned and walked back up the hill to the house. I went straight to my father and said, “Daddy I want you to call Elton Dennis at Falls Mills, Virginia (he was minister there) and ask him if he will take me to Johnson Bible College. I am going to be a preacher.” That was fifty-six years ago and it still quickens my pulse and excites my mind. It was a decision good for a whole lifetime. I never looked back. I never doubted that was what I was supposed to do. I learned to be a minister, but preaching has had a dominate place in my heart and in my mind. I can truly say I never wanted to do anything else – to be a servant of the Word (which means

Christ) is the highest and the best. Obviously, I didn't know anything about what it meant to be a preacher or a minister. Later I would learn that "The preacher speaks for God, from the scriptures, by the authority of the Church, to the people.'" (James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 138). Theologically the preacher comes from the midst of the congregation and not to it from the outside. We always come from the pew to the pulpit, from the nave to the chancel, from the congregation to the place of leadership. Jürgen Moltmann says, "They come from God's people, stand up in front of God's people and act in God's name" (*The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 303). I didn't know that when I made my decision. But, as I have thought back about it, those little old women who irked me with their constant repetition of "Myron is going to be a preacher," were giving a kind of informal approval of the congregation to my ministry. We never want to forget where we came from when we stand up to preach. Later I did receive official ordination papers, and I have come to realize that among many of our Christian Churches a Call to serve is tantamount to ordination. In any case we preach with the approval of the Church. We minister with the authority of the Church.

John Stott begins and ends his book on preaching – *Between Two Worlds* – with these words: "Preaching is indispensable to Christianity" (15, 338). H. H. Farmer speaks of the rediscovery of "the indissoluble oneness of preaching and the Christian faith . . . whoso said Christianity, said preaching. . . . Bearing witness to the unique saving activity of God in Christ is now seen not as merely an adjunct, even an indispensable adjunct to, but as indispensably part of, the saving activity itself" (*The Servant of The Word*, 17, 19, 21). Without preaching there can be no authentic Christianity. It is a part of the saving event itself. "God therefore decided to save those who believe by the folly of the message we preach" (I Corinthians 1:21, Barclay). So far as

I know no one anytime anywhere has ever become a Christian without the telling of the story in some manner. Preaching is essentially the telling of the story of what God has done for us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth – the bearing witness to the saving event – the proclamation of the Good News. Wherever the story is told there is preaching. The great Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner used to say that the farmer and his hired helper may be down in the barn waiting for the cow to deliver her calf and while they wait the farmer tells his helper the story of Jesus – that is preaching. Preaching is the telling or the proclamation of the story. No telling of the story – no faith. No telling of the story – no salvation! No telling of the story –no Christianity! We always stand within one generation of extinction. William Willimon has written – "There is no church where the Name is not named, the story is not told, the word is not spoken" (*Integrative Preaching, 13*). Ronald Sleeth says, "Historically, we have affirmed that God is revealed in creation, Scriptures, Jesus Christ, sacraments, the church, the apostles, **and the mouths of preachers**" (*God's Word and Our Words, 4*). Dominico Grasso speaks of preaching as "revelation in transmission" (*Proclaiming God's Message Notre Dame, 1965, XXXi*). Preaching – the telling of the story is indispensable to Christianity. That is my thesis.

I. BIBLICALLY.

The New testament record of our Lord's Galilean ministry begins with the words, "Jesus Came . . . preaching" (Mark 1:14). That simple statement is full of meaning. It confronts us with a picture which dominates a large area of the Gospels. Jesus stands before us not simply as the mighty miracle-worker or the zealous social reformer but supremely as the bearer of good tidings from God to men. The Puritan Thomas Goodwin said, "God had only One Son and He made Him a preacher." No one can deny that Jesus himself attached priority to his preaching. When

He opened his ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth he took as his text the words of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . ." (Luke 4:18f.). As He spoke the eyes of all were fixed upon him, and they were astonished by the words of grace that fell from his lips. Jesus' sermon can be instructive and helpful to all preachers. It was liturgical – it took place in the context of worship and was itself a part of the worship experience. It was exegetical – it started from and expounded a text of scripture. It was prophetic – it was a message for the present time which made the biblical text a living word in the contemporary situation.

From that memorable occasion onward, right through his ministry, Jesus put preaching first. We see him preaching in the Synagogue at Capernaum on the Sabbath; we see him preaching by the shore of the Sea of Galilee; we see him going up the mountainside and preaching his memorable Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel writer said of him, "The common people heard him gladly"; and even his critics were compelled to admit, "No man ever spoke like this man!"

Jesus attached primary importance to his preaching rather than to his miracles. He refused to be diverted from his main work by the clamor of the crowds for spectacular signs. When, after healing the sick at Capernaum, he was told, "Everyone is searching for you," he said to his disciples, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out" (Mark 1:35-39). Before Pontius Pilate he declared, "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth" (John 18:37). And in sending out his disciples on their first mission tour it is noteworthy that he put preaching first, and healing second" (Luke 9:2).

It is quite clear in the synoptic Gospels that although he (Jesus) taught, healed, comforted, and fed, he was primarily a preacher – a man of words" (DeWitte Holland, *The Preaching Tradition*, 17). In fact, several New Testament passages state emphatically that Jesus' main commission was to preach. "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43). "That I may preach there also; for that is why I came out" (Mark 1:38). "Such a great salvation . . . was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested by those who heard him" (Hebrews 2:3). "You know the word which God sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ . . . the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea" (Acts 10:36-37).

From Biblical records, we can draw some important conclusions about Jesus' preaching. His central theme always concerned the Kingdom of God, and he said that he came to illustrate, explain, simplify, clarify, objectify, and make plain for all to understand, the nature of that kingdom. There was a simple, natural quality about both the content and the language of his messages; he used familiar forms of address, abundant illustrations, questions and answers, and frequent metaphors and parables. He taught profound truths simply, but often poetically. We never tire of his story of the prodigal, and the image of the sower going forth to sow is made real for us every springtime. His preaching was direct, tactful, courteous, kind, and full of sympathy with God. He sought to bring heaven down to earth, that he might lift earth up to heaven" (Holland, *The Preaching Tradition*, 17).

Christ's last great commission to his church was to evangelize the world. How was it to be done? By preaching! His apostles were to make disciples of all nations by preaching and

teaching the good news to all nations (cf. Matthew 28:18; Luke 24:47). That was the Lord's strategy for his Church in relation to the world. It is still his plan today.

From the very beginning the church was a preaching church. The apostles put preaching in the forefront of their program. Their priorities were clear: "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). The church was born by the preaching of the Gospel. Again and again in Acts the picture of the preaching church is brought before our minds. "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard," the Apostles declared to their judges. They were imprisoned and beaten and forbidden to preach, yet, "Every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus Christ" (Acts 5:42). Stephen preached with such power that those who disputed with him "Could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke" (Acts 6:10). Phillip proclaimed Christ in Samaria and to a single traveler on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza.

One thing is clear from Acts; persecution could not silence the Church's preaching. After the first opposition in Jerusalem we are told that they "spoke the word of God with boldness" and that "with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:31, 33). Later the pressure became so great that the Church was scattered throughout the region; but it was still a preaching Church. "Those who were scattered went about (through the country, NEB) preaching the word" (Acts 8:4).

In the second part of Acts the towering figure of Paul dominates the scene. He does so supremely as a missionary preacher. His extensive travels throughout the Roman Empire were not sight-seeing tours but evangelistic journeys, designed to blaze a trail for the Gospel.

Paul was a complex man of many parts with a varied and many-sided ministry, but first and foremost he was a preacher. "Christ sent me," he declared to the Corinthians, "not to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (I Corinthians 1:17). He said that not to disparage baptism but to magnify preaching. Preaching was his business. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (I Corinthians 9:16). Preaching the Gospel for Paul was a divine privilege, the thing he was born to do in the purpose of God. "In His good pleasure God, who had set me apart from birth and called me through his grace, chose to reveal his Son to me and through me, in order that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles" (Galatians 1:15, 16, NEB). Paul says much the same thing to the Ephesians – "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:7, 8). To the Corinthians Paul had written, "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching (the foolishness of the message preached) to save them that believe" (I Corinthians 1:21, NAS). Preaching the Gospel is a necessary part of Gods' mighty act of redemption.

Paul could never forget that he had been entrusted with the Gospel of Christ. That Gospel was to be preached. To preach it was the mightiest compulsion of his life. But the Church in every age has been intrusted with the Gospel. The Gospel by its very nature compels utterance – it must be preached. Jesus left the world saying, "Go disciple the nations" – that means preach the Gospel.

Preaching in the New Testament. There is Kerygma. Literally means a herald's announcement and is a plain statement of the facts of the Christian message.

There is proof that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Someone is coming (Old Testament). Someone is here (New Testament) and He is Jesus of Nazareth. The

early preaching on prophecy conserves and lays down one great truth – that history is not haphazard. History is going somewhere. There is a meaning and sense and a moral law at work in the universe. History is the arena in which God works. He is working out his purposes. Peter said in his sermon at Pentecost, "This is that."

In Jesus the Messiah has come, the messianic prophecies are fulfilled and the New Age has dawned. The early Church had a tremendous sense of Jesus as the hinge of history and the clue to the universe. Eternity has invaded time and God has entered the human arena. This is the visited planet. Therefore, life can never be the same again. With the coming of Jesus something crucial, final, unrepeatable has taken place.

Jesus was born of the line of David, that he had taught and performed many miracles, that he was crucified, that he was raised from the dead and now is at the right hand of God. The early Church was quite sure that the whole Christian religion had an historical basis, that it was based on the earthly life of Christ, and that the story of that life must be told. But it was also certain that the earthly life and death were not the end, but after them there came the resurrection. The most basic fact of the Christian religion is the resurrection of Jesus. The Christian religion is the religion of the resurrection. The Church is the community of the resurrection. To the early Church Jesus was not a dead fact stranded on the shores of the oblivious years, He was alive forevermore. He was in the midst of his Church.

The early preachers went on to insist that Jesus will return again in glory to bring to consummation what he has begun. The early Christians believed in hope. Promise, Fulfillment, Consummation were three great terms to them. God's ancient promise was fulfilled in Jesus (yet,

fulfilled without consummation) and will be finally consummated at the end of the age – the last day – the second coming of Jesus. History is going somewhere.

The early preaching finished with the statement that in Jesus alone is salvation. There was a call to faith and repentance and baptism. There was a promise of forgiveness, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. The call was urgent much like the voice Bunyan heard as if at his very shoulder demanding, "Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or wilt thou have thy sins and go to hell?"

There is didache. Didache literally means teaching and it elucidated and worked out the meanings, the significances, the implications of the facts which have been proclaimed. How am I supposed to live as a Christian in the Kingdom of God? The Sermon on the Mount and other great didache passages are the answer.

Preaching can be properly defined as both "that which is preached" and "the act of presenting the Gospel" (Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 108).

"The most serious objection to the split between kerygma and didache is that truncation of the gospel occurs. Without the proclamation of the good news, preaching becomes only good advice. Without ethical instruction, preaching becomes irrelevant. Preaching in this case is both/and, not either/or. Early Christian preaching soon fostered different forms of preaching. While the earliest preaching may be what Dodd calls kerygmatic or missionary preaching, there came later post-baptismal preaching which was catechetical or instructional, and still later when the church had become more established, the homily for believers became part of the service of Eucharist" (Sleeth, *God's Word and Our Words*, 24).

There is paraklesis or exhortation. That kind of preaching urges upon men and women the duty and the obligation of fitting their lives to match the kerygma and the didache which they have just received.

There is homilia which means the treatment of any subject or department of life in light of the Christian message. I Corinthians; household passages; relation to the State; Book of Revelation.

Fully rounded preaching has something of all four elements. There is the plain proclamation of the facts of the Christian gospel; the explanation of the meaning and the relevance of these facts; the exhortation to fit life to them; and the treatment of all activities of life in the light of the Christian messages.

II. THEOLOGICALLY.

It is probably safe to say that generally speaking many theologians have been more enthusiastic about preaching than many preachers. During the difficult days of the sixties it was the preachers who lost faith in preaching and looked frantically for some substitute. The preachers would likely reply that they were frustrated with preaching because they had to do it rather than write about it. But the theologians have regarded preaching highly. In fact, there is an amazing agreement among theologians of whatever persuasion (right, left or in between) on the place of preaching.

Someone proposed this theological riddle – What did Barth, Bultmann, Ferre, Ott, Ebeling, Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr, Farmer, Tillich, Wingren, Brunner and Gilbey have in common? The answer: They all have a high view of preaching. Listen to this quick survey:

BARTH – "Preaching is the Word of God which he himself has spoken . . . when the Gospel is preached, God speaks . . . the only thing that counts is to make the Word of God heard" (*The Preaching of The Gospel, 9,12,54,55*). Barth was a preacher. He served the congregation at Safenwil for a number of years. During the years he was a professor he preached regularly in the prisons and penitentiaries of Basel and Berlin. In the early 1960's he made his one and only trip to the United States. When he came to the University of Chicago Divinity School he asked to be taken to the Cook County Jail in order to visit with and preach to the "residents" of that well-known house of detention. I very much doubt that the Dean at that time had ever been to that facility or even knew its exact location. But he found the jail and arranged for Barth, the most famous theologian in the world at that time, to preach to the most lowly audience in Chicago. The title of one of Karl Barth's rare book of sermons, sermons preached to prisoners, is entitled *Deliverance to the Captives*. Ernest Payne, the great English Baptist, wrote of Barth, "To the end he remained a preacher of great power" (*Expository Times, April, 1970, 207*). Barth insisted that all his theology was addressed to the question, "What is preaching?" He said all 9000 pages of his dogmatics were written in behalf of the preacher and the Gospel. Barth believed in preaching.

BULTMANN – "The redemptive event is only present in the word of preaching, the word of address and claim and promise" (*The Theology of the New Testament, I, 297*). Similar to both Luther and Barth, Bultmann believed that preaching is God's Word in human speech. God through Christ speaks to us through the proclamation of the preacher:

". . . the sermon is the proclamation of the Word of God as attested in the Bible, that it must be understood as an address which strikes the heart and in that address Jesus Christ

himself speaks to us" ("General Truths and Christian Proclamation." To Friedrich Gogarten on his 70th birthday. Tr: Schubert M. Ogden, 1957. *The Word of God* comes through the Scriptures for Bultmann. Grobel makes the point adamantly in speaking of Bultmann's view of Scripture and preaching.

". . . Word of God . . . must be authorized. How can it be? By humbling itself to be nothing but exposition of a Word of God that once occurred. To that Word of old the Bible bears witness . . . all preaching is either expository or simply is not preaching" (*Preaching: Genuine and Secularized*, 237).

Bultmann's lack of confidence in the historical roots of the Christian faith bothers us, but our point here is the high regard he had for preaching. Bultmann went to church (I am sorry we cannot say that about all theologians and scholars). He was a preacher. Ronald Sleeth says of Bultmann, "Whatever one's view of Bultmann's theological content and methodology, there should be no question whatsoever that he is an inveterate friend of preachers" (*Bultmann and the Proclamation of the Word*, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 1979, 153).

BONHOEFFER – maintained a view of preaching as high as anyone since Luther. Eberhard Bethge writes: "Bonhoeffer loved to preach. When he found out that a relative of his might have a few months to live, he wrote, 'What would I do if I learned that in four to six months my life would reach the end? I believe I would still try to teach theology as I once did and to preach often'" (*Gesamette Schriften*, 5 Vols., 4:7).

EBELING – "Proclamation is the alpha and omega of the church's praxis . . . theology is necessary only to the extent that it makes itself superfluous and makes proclamation necessary" (*Word and Faith*, 425).

TILLICH – "Sees the value for every theology as determined for what it can do for preaching" (quoted from Heinz Zahrut, *The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 299). One of the best introductions to Tillich is to read his sermons. He was a preacher.

WINGREN – "The Word exists to be made known; only when it is preached is its objective content fully disclosed" (*The Living Word*, 13).

FORSYTH – Begins his great book on preaching, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, with the statement, "It is, perhaps, an overbold beginning, but I will venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stands or falls" (p. 3).

BRUNNER – Claims that wherever there is true preaching and the Word of God is genuinely proclaimed, "in spite of all appearances to the contrary, the most important thing that ever happens upon this earth, takes place" (*Revelation and Reason*, 142).

H. H. FARMER – Says that for the church "the prime task is to preach the gospel." (*The Servant of The Word*, 24). Farmer discusses at length the claim which the Christian revelation makes for itself and the place of preaching in that revelation:

"It claims to rest on something unique, decisive, critical which God Himself did 'for us men and our salvation.' Its fundamental dogma (doctrine), in which all other dogmas are implicitly contained, is that in Jesus Christ God came into human history took flesh and dwelt amongst us, in a revelation of Himself, which is unique, final, completely adequate, wholly indispensable for man's salvation. It all begins in an Event, or rather The Event, God's Event. The essential content of Christianity therefore is not something, which men, even of superlative intellectual and spiritual power, could ever discover by the exercise of

their own powers. **For reflection can never establish the actuality of a historical event.** The most it can establish is the possibility of an event. . . . An event can only establish itself by happening, by being given. And it can only become generally known by being borne witness to, by being proclaimed, by the story being told" (18). Bearing witness to the unique saving activity of God in Christ is now seen not as merely an adjunct, even an indispensable adjunct to, but an indispensably part of, the saving activity itself" (21). **"Witnessing to the event was indeed part of the event from the very beginning"** (22). Farmer was a preacher and has a book of thoughtful sermons entitled, *The Healing Cross*.

What conclusion can we draw from this impressive testimony? What is it about preaching that causes it to be regarded with such seriousness? Two elements appear to be indispensable to the answer, preaching bears (gives voice to) the eternal Word, and preaching touches the living situation. "Faith comes by hearing" (Romans 10:17 KJV); "Faith comes from hearing the message" (NIV); "Faith comes from what is heard" (RSV). The theologians speak with one voice – preaching has priority. Preaching is indispensable to the Christian faith.

III. THE HISTORY OF PREACHING.

Look at the history of the Church and you will see that the high times – those periods when the church was at its best – were times marked by strong preaching. Leander Keck says, "Every renewal of Christianity has been accompanied by a renewal of preaching. Every renewal of preaching, in turn, has rediscovered biblical preaching" (*The Bible in the Church, II*). The mighty reformations and the stirring revivals have been marked by great preaching. In his book, *Preaching Unashamed*, Joseph Sizoo reminds us that "When Isaiah stood up to preach, a whole

new concept of holiness was born in the earth. When Jeremiah walked out of the fields of Anathoth to prophecy, a new morality came to a whole nation. When Amos left his plough in the furrows of Tekeo and began to preach, there emerged a new social justice. When Augustine proclaimed the Holy City, there came with it the dawn of a new conscience. When Francis went up and down the village streets preaching, there came a new compassion for the poor and underprivileged. Through the preaching of Luther there blossomed in the earth a spiritual emancipation. The preaching of Calvin brought into being the birth of modern democracy. Through the preaching of John Wesley there was ushered in the age of the common man" (pgs. 12-13). Our own Reformation of the Nineteenth Century was marked by strong preaching of the Gospel. The early leaders were editors and writers and scholars and debaters and educators--but they were preachers. The Campbells, Stone, Scott, John T. Johnson, Raccoon John Smith, the Haydens, John P. Thompson, Elijah Goodwin, and a host of others – were preachers. George Sweazy writes, "All the great upsurges in the church's history have been heralded by a new enthusiasm for preaching. . . . The health and vigor of a church will always be related to the health and vigor of its preaching" (*Preaching the Good News*, 7).

DeWitte Holland has written a book entitled, *Sermons in American History*, in which he records the effect preaching has had in every major period and on every major issue in the life of our nation – including separation of church and state (Roger Williams); revivalism; slavery; naturalism; social reform; war and peace, Christian unity; race relations and secularism. When the story of this century is finally written the preaching of the black preachers in the South will fill one glorious chapter. They had a cause which was just, they had courage to buck the tide, they paid the price in prison and in death. Most white preachers of our time are too much a part

of the establishment – too much acculturated – adapted to the culture – to deliver the message our nation and our world needs to hear. One example is the lack of preaching and of action in behalf of the growing numbers of the poor in our land and around the world. Read your Bible again with a view to seeing what it says about the poor.

The low periods in the history of the church have been the low periods for preaching. In their encyclopedic study of preaching Fant and Pinson say that in all the history of preaching only one era has no representative in their study – "With the death of Chrysostom (407 A.D.) and of Augustine (430 A.D.), a long dark night came upon preaching; the golden age of preaching in the early church came to an end. . . . Not until the twelfth century does the darkness begin to lift. . . prior to Bernard (of Clairvaux) there stretches a span of seven hundred years of preaching void" (*Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching, Vol I, 57-58*). It was called The Dark Ages and it was the dark age for preaching as it was for everything else.

The constraints of time only allow me to say this: when a congregation calls a minister today, they always hope they have a preacher.

Elizabeth Achtemeier, a fine scholar and one of the best women preachers in the world today, has written: "The Bible became the authority for the church because the church learned, over decades of worship and practice, that the biblical story was the one story that created and sustained its life. (1) Through no other story did groups of sinners find themselves transformed into forgiven communities and empowered to live new and godly lives. (2) Through no other story did God and his Son draw so near in the Spirit to those little communities of faith and guide and overshadow their daily existence. (3) Through no other story was the church given such

unassailable hope and the assurance of eternal life. (4) Through no other story was the life lived by Jesus Christ made a possibility for imitation by his followers.

This last portion of Priority of Preaching is dropped from the manuscript for The Myron Taylor Lectures on Preaching.

The fall of Rome in A.D. 476 marked the end of classical civilization and the settling in of a period in the West called, for several reasons, the Dark Ages. Drastic political social change occurred, resulting in profound alteration in the lives of the people. Cities and towns suffered losses of population and wealth; agriculture became the main productive occupation; feudalism began to emerge; travel became extremely hazardous; war, arson,

and plundering became common practices; famines were frequent, and plagues destroyed people and livestock; education and the arts suffered tragically. The nomadic German invaders, vigorous though they were, differed greatly from the cultivated people of southern Europe, and they succeeded in destroying most of the cities Rome had built in western Europe.

For the reasons we have noted, by this time the prominence of preaching was already diminishing, and the sermon was being replaced by more formal liturgies and an increasing emphasis on the mass. The kerygma, or basic proclamation of the gospel, was largely ignored as sermons/homilies focused on the importance of churchly duties, special observances, relics, and the like. Christianity ceased to be basically an enthusiastic lay movement and became more and more an ecclesiastical institution. No immediate successors to the great preachers of the patristic period emerged, and during the early dark years preaching reached the lowest point in history. DeWitte Holland, *The Preaching Tradition*, 31-32.

What Led to this terrible decline in preaching?

1. Asceticism – Monasticism – Hermits. Christians are urged to be in the world, but not of the world. This view retreats from the world – rejects the world – withdraws into a life of solitude, silence and contemplation. The life of service is forgotten for the inward life of penances and self-torture. Preaching and service are neglected or rejected. They became simply hermits much like those of ancient Egypt.
2. Ceremonialism (preside over the liturgy). Liturgy communicates, but only with the initiated. It is not designed to be persuasive to the uninitiated. It reaches no one new for

the kingdom. More and more the clergy presided over the liturgy and preaching was left to the bishops. Liturgy increased; preaching decreased. "The problem was not that the power of preaching failed; it was that the clergy were not equipped to exercise that power" (Holland, *The Preaching Tradition*, 28).

3. The emergence of Christianity as the state religion. The church ceased to be a voluntary society and became coextensive with the civil community. In 313 the Emperor Constantine decided to make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire (not the only religion; that came later under other Emperors). "From him the church acquired the disposition to be authoritative and unquestioned, to develop a centralized organization and run parallel to the empire" (H G. Wells, *The Outline of History, Vol I, 439*). The world influenced the church more than the church influenced the world.
4. The growth of the secular power of the church. As the official state religion the church established and administered ecclesiastical courts, levied and collected taxes, planned and executed vast charities and exercised considerable political power. Heresies had to be smoked out and offenders punished. Being so occupied, the church had little time, need, or disposition to preach.