

to hear our own failure described in the blunt but descriptive words of our own youth.

Endnotes

- 1 Randolph E. Neall, "An Essay on the Remnant," monograph, October 3, 1983.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Roger L. Dudley, "Why Teenagers Reject Religion," *Adventist Review*, (1978), pp. 20, 21.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 226.
- 6 See, for example, Woodworth and Schlosberg, *Experimental Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1956).
- 7 Ellen G. White, *Our High Calling*, p. 11.
- 8 Ellen G. White Comments, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 5:1085.
- 9 Ibid., 1:1105.

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 2/1 (1991): 181-187
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CHRIST-CENTERED PULPITS FOR CHRIST-CENTERED PEOPLE

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A coterie of literary men of the Romantic Movement is meeting in a London clubroom. The conversation has veered to a discussion of famous personalities of the past when one of them asks, "Gentlemen, what would we do if Milton were to enter this room?"

"Ah," replies one of the circle, "we would give him such an ovation as might compensate the late recognition accorded him by men of his day."

"And if Shakespeare entered?" inquires another.

"We would rise and crown him master."

"And if Jesus Christ were to enter?" suggests a third.

"I think," says Charles Lamb, amid intense silence, "I think we would all kneel and fall on our faces."

Christ deserves, and reverence demands, no less than this, that at His presence "every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10-11 NIV). Such reverence must be expressed in the bowed knee of every worshiper who adores Him, the bowed knee of every creature whom He created, the bowed knee of every angel who escorts Him. The occupant of every pulpit that proclaims Him must bow before Him, because Christ is center and circumference of the plan of salvation devised for us "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4).

Christ-centeredness has its detractors, of course, as was evidenced in the first real test of post-lapsarian loyalty to God. Cain and Abel were acquainted with the provisions God had made for the salvation of the human race (announced in Gen 3:15). They also understood that the system of offerings ordained by God invoked active faith in the atonement promised by the Saviour. (See Gen 4:3-5.) Abel responded as directed, but Cain contrived an alternative. Abel brought a blood offering, while Cain offered the fruit of the ground. Both men were challenged to Christ-centered living. One succeeded, the other failed.

The story of Cain and Abel contains a homiletic allegory. The sermon preached by Abel's actions was Christ-centered. The sermon preached by Cain's missed the mark like a drunken carpenter. In reference to the actions of these men, Ellen G. White observes that

Many of our ministers have merely sermonized, presenting subjects in an argumentative way, and scarcely mentioning the saving power of the Redeemer. Their testimony was destitute of the saving blood of Christ. Their offering resembled the offering of Cain. He brought to the Lord the fruit of the ground, which in itself was acceptable in God's sight. Very good indeed was the fruit; but the virtue of the offering—the blood of the slain lamb, representing the blood of Christ—was lacking. So it is with Christless sermons. By them men are not pricked to the heart; they are not led to inquire, What must I do to be saved?¹

This brings us right to the point. Putting Christ at the center of our preaching must not be thought a matter of window dressing or aesthetic taste. On the contrary, it is a matter of life and death—eternal life and eternal death. George Sweazey taught the meaning of putting Christ at the center of the sermon in these words:

When the minister from the pulpit tells of Jesus Christ, he is not talking of someone who is dead and gone, he is offering an encounter with the living Lord. Jesus Christ is present in the church, coming down the aisle, moving along the pews, entering into the consciousness of the people, ready to reconcile them with God and with each

other, to give new life, joy, beauty, and strength, ready to make their minds like Him. Christ can be the trademark on an institution that was named in grateful tribute to His memory, but with no more real connection with what happens in the church than Chief Pontiac has with the automobile factory, or William Penn has with the Penn Central Railroad. It is the business of the sermon, not to remind people of what Christ once did, but to tell them what he is ready to do now. The implied text of every sermon is "Behold, I stand at the door and knock."²

Spurgeon expresses the same point even more effectively when he admonishes preachers as they begin their sermons to make tracks as fast as possible to Calvary.

Enter Paul the apostle. Among the Corinthians, he is determined "to know nothing" among them "except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). But is it true that Paul never talked about anything else in Corinth but Christ? Of course not! Yet again, yes, it *is* true. From a mere topical point of view, the first epistle to the Corinthians mentions a galaxy of local concerns and problems, such as factious divisions, laxity in church discipline, lawsuits, incest, immorality, marriage, and food offered to idols. Nevertheless, while addressing these practical problems of life, Paul makes tracks as fast as he can to Calvary, focusing the light of the cross on the human situation. He attends to human problems only as a part of the fabric of Christian sanctification and holiness. He stitches the name of Jesus Christ into First Corinthians some sixty-four times. (He does so in Romans sixty-seven times.) As the Corinthians listened to their first epistle being read to them, they heard such phrases as "apostle of Jesus Christ" (1:1), "sanctified in Christ" (1:2), "Christ confirmed in you" (1:6), "the mind of Christ" (2:16), "ye are Christ's" (3:23), "ministers of Christ" (4:1), "the power of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:4), "the gospel of Christ" (9:12), "the blood of Christ" (10:16), "the body of Christ" (10:16), and "victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:57). Thus we can affirm that the only thing Paul really talks about in 1 Corinthians is "Christ."

What a pity that before Christ can get to the heart's door of our congregations and knock on it, He often has to stand outside the door of our sermons first and knock to get into our preaching. If, as Ellen G. White affirms, "The preaching of the gospel is God's chosen agency for the salvation of souls,"³ why must Christ have to plead and beg and cajole for even an edgeways entry into our sermons? Is it possible that the problem is related, at least in part, to our lack of belief in, respect for, or understanding of the centrality that preaching ought to characterize within the gospel commission? We know that preaching *per se* faces tough times if not stiff resistance on several fronts these days, even within the Seventh-day Adventist church.

According to my personal observation, preaching, as a subject, had to stand outside the door and knock on our ten volume *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, and apparently it failed to find abundant entry. Other than in brief, almost passing, comments on four New Testament texts, preaching as a subject for study and contemplation is conspicuous by its absence from the entire ten volumes. Alphabetized topics in volume eight, the *Bible Dictionary*, skip from "Prayer" to "Precept;" in volume nine, the *Bible Students' Source Book*, they leap from "Prayer" to "Predestination"; and in volume ten, the *Encyclopedia*, they bounce from "Prayer Meetings" to "Thomas Preble." Volume eleven, currently in process of production, by its very purpose of covering all our doctrinal beliefs promises nothing better.

However, I for one would like to go on record predicting that if volume eleven does not include, at least in its preface or in a special separate article, some clear and bold statement on the primacy of preaching those fundamental beliefs, then our church will continue with the not-so-subtle self-concept of being mere custodians of the truth of the gospel rather than proclaimers of the gospel. Flowing streams provide more life-giving nourishment than do grim self-contained Dead Seas.

Tough times for preaching reach even the halls of seminaries and religion departments when, occasionally, preaching finds itself in the peculiar stance of having to justify its reason for existence among the so-called "content disciplines." David Randolph takes a swipe at this tension between preaching and other theological disciplines by proposing that "ultimately . . . a good theological school does not have a 'chair' of homiletics, but a 'bench' of homiletics, on which the whole faculty sits."⁴ In saying this he advances the concept that all theological disciplines exist for the ultimate purpose of proclaiming the gospel of Christ and thus in this sense are members of the homiletical enterprise. C. K. Barrett claims that "scholarship waits upon preaching as its handmaid," and thus he would press the point further by declaring that:

Biblical preaching and biblical scholarship are not two things, but one. The biblical scholar is a preacher or he is no true scholar—he has not understood his own subject. The Bible demands to be preached. The scholar may not, of course, be good at the technique of preaching—that is quite another matter; God shares out his gifts as he wills. But preacher he must be. Again, the biblical preacher is a scholar, or he is unworthy of his office. He may not be a good scholar; he may have no head for Greek. But when he comes to the sacred office of expounding the Word of God he dare not do less than his honest best, with all the tools at his disposal, to find out what God wills to communicate out of Scripture, through him, to his congregation.⁵

Perhaps what I am describing is symptomatic of a deeper reality among the movers and shakers of Seventh-day Adventist thought. A candid look discloses a tendency more toward being doctrine-centered than person-centered. While doctrine-centeredness leads to knowledge, person-centeredness leads to a relationship. One Adventist mind-set will squirm anxiously to retort, "But ah-h, Christ is a doctrine." That's true; but only secondarily is Christ a doctrine. Primarily, after a salient manner of speaking, Christ is the Center of experience. Again, we draw from Ellen G. White, who declares, "Christ must be enthroned within. . . . The science of salvation cannot be explained; but it can be known by experience."⁶

In another setting she appeals for an effective balance between the faith of Jesus and the law of God (Rev 14:12) by asserting, "Faith in Christ as the sinner's only hope" has been "largely left out, not only of the discourses given but of the religious experience of very many who claim to believe the third angel's message." Consequently, she noted, their sermons were "Christless."⁷

She further states in her article entitled, "Christ the Center of the Message," that

The third angel's message calls for the presentation of the Sabbath of the fourth commandment, and this truth must be brought before the world; but the great Center of attraction, Jesus Christ, must not be left out of the third angel's message. By many who have been engaged in the work for this time, Christ has been made secondary, and theories and arguments have had the first place. The glory of God that was revealed to Moses in regard to the divine character has not been prominent. . . .

A veil has seemed to be before the eyes of many who have labored in the cause, so that when they presented the law, they have not had views of Jesus, and have not proclaimed the fact that, where sin abounded, grace doth much more abound. It is at the cross of Calvary that mercy and truth meet together, where righteousness and peace kiss each other. The sinner must ever look toward Calvary; and with the simple faith of a little child, he must rest in the merits of Christ, accepting His righteousness and believing in His mercy.⁸

"Abraham, . . . take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, . . . and offer him . . . for a burnt offering" (Gen 22:1, 2). "My father: . . . Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb?" (Gen 22:7).

We, too, have the *fire*—the feeling, the emotional attachment and response. We, too, have the *wood*—hard timber of theological thought and reason and intellectual genius. But where is the *Lamb*? Can He be found in our lives? Can He be found in our sermons? Can He be found in all forms of our witnessing, our *kerygma* and our *didache*?

Come with me to Calvary. There God provides for Himself (and for us) the Lamb. There, stretched between heaven and

earth, against the horizon of dark Golgotha, Christ *is* center! The center of controversy between Jew and Roman. The center of confusion between Jew and Jew. The center of salvation for you and me.

Endnotes

- 1 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 156.
- 2 George E. Sweazey, *Preaching the Good News* (Englewood Cliff: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), p. 18.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5: 87.
- 4 David J. Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 21.
- 5 C. K. Barrett, *Biblical Problems and Biblical Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), pp. 48, 49.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 494, 495.
- 7 Ellen G. White, Manuscript 24, 1888; *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, 1:203-229; and *Review and Herald*, Sept. 4, 1888.
- 8 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1: 383, 384.