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In Perils in the Pulpit

By RUDOLPH NORDEN

I

ASPECTS OF PHYSICAL JEOPARDY

OFFHAND, a person would consider the pulpit one of the safest places on earth. The sanctuary audience seated around this listening post is well behaved and for the most part friendly to the pulpit's occupant. No projectiles indicating forceful disapproval will be hurled. In this respect there is a difference between the church and the public forum. In the latter controversial questions in politics or labor relations are often discussed more in the heat than the light of intense feeling. Emotion, more frequently than thought, becomes father to ill-advised deeds, such as giving flight to overripe vegetables, empty beverage bottles, and sailing saucers. At times the speaker is not only a target to be thrown *at* but is himself the person thrown *out* of the assembly.

In earlier days, when the Gospel of the Kingdom worked with the ferment of new wine it was not uncommon for an angry mob to manhandle the preacher. In Luke 4 we have the account of the Preacher returning to the scenes of boyhood and early manhood. When He, Jesus of Nazareth, stood up in the synagog to read and then to expound the reading, He was first met by curiosity, then indignation, and finally physical violence. "To the precipice," shouted the excited hearers as they hustled Him to the brow of the hill, "that they might cast Him down headlong."

Reading the story of primitive Christianity as continued in the Book of Acts, one again comes upon riots touched off by the preaching of St. Paul. People took their religion seriously in those days. Perhaps also the fact that public preaching then was not scheduled for a set place and for a definite forenoon hour on the Lord's day had something to do with audience reaction. In our civilization we have the popular institution of the Saturday night with an appeal to church members as well. Those who have fatigued themselves on Saturday night will be in no mood to start something on Sunday morning. The deadest time of the entire week for the emotions and the mind is Sunday morning before church.

Nevertheless, there are today the physical perils of the pulpit, not the least of which is the nerve and heart strain of preaching. Added to an existing weakness of body, the fatigue of public speaking in not

a few cases has brought on an attack. This tension of preaching and of a physical collapse that sometimes follows is no laughing matter. The old formula of prevention being better than cure is applicable to the minister's health. At times a weary pastor is heard to say: "My doctor has forbidden me to preach for a while." He would much rather put it like this: "My parishioners have ordered me to rest." Thoughtfulness here on the part of the flock may obviate the permanent loss of the shepherd. Athletic coaches will not send an injured or ailing player into the contest. A game may have to be sacrificed for the sake of the season; at all events, for the sake of the individual's welfare. Parish constituencies ought likewise yield to their impulses of love and concern when they observe their pastors to be in physical peril while preaching.

However, actuarial figures released by accident insurance companies do not reveal that the parish ministry is a hazardous occupation. The work of a minister on civilian fronts cannot be classified with that of a technician handling high-tension wires or with the vocation of a coal miner. Though a calling and visiting pastor does share the hazards of the highways, he is not in dangerous traffic when he stands in the pulpit. If not primarily physical, what then are the perils of the pulpit?

II

THE PERIL OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD

With the purpose of enlisting the sympathy of the pew, let me point out the perils of the pulpit in the realm of spirit and mind. When the pew misunderstands the pulpit, a spiritual peril results. Misunderstood pulpit utterances may render effective soul work with the misunderstanding hearer difficult if not impossible. Language is at best an imperfect tool, particularly if language translations are involved. And we keep in mind that translations are certainly involved in the Book from which the parson reads.

The effective use of language in public speech, an ancient art, nowadays goes under the caption of "communication," a new discipline in school curricula. It deserves the attention of those who preach and of those who desire to benefit from preaching. The need for "open channel" communication was stated long ago by the Apostle Paul, who pointed out the uselessness of speaking in unknown tongues when the hearer does not understand. He asks: "How can anyone in the position of an outsider say the 'Amen' to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?" (1 Cor. 14:16, R.S.V.). The need for effective communication is implied also in this general

church prayer: "We beseech Thee, O Lord, to grant unto Thy Holy Church faithful pastors, who shall preach Thy Word with power; and help all who hear *rightly to understand* and truly to believe it."

Much has been said and written to facilitate clarity of diction. With this good end in mind, many have recommended "shirt-sleeve" English or have fallen victim to the cult of oversimplification in public speech. The mere use of simple words, however, does not guarantee conveyance of sense. C. Merton Babcock of Michigan State College writes in *School and Society*: "Nonsense, it must be pointed out, can be expressed in plain talk as well as in erudite terminology. A tendency to disparage the employment of multisyllabic words and to avoid discussion of abstract ideas by evolving a simplicity formula intended to insure clarity may be nothing more than avoidance of critical and creative thinking." Instead, says the writer: "A given communication is clear when it is meaningful; that is, when it derives from personal experience, when it is structured in significant symbols arranged logically, and when it is organized in terms of a controlling purpose." In other words, the cult of simple words, as also the cult of ponderous phrases as found in legal contracts and government directives, has no virtue in itself. Whatever words you use, the idea is to get the meaning across.

Specifically, there are various types of misunderstandings, all of them spelling out the spiritual perils of pulpit and pew. A case in point is the pulpit's pronouncement of an impersonal truth (impersonal in the sense that no one person in the audience was meant), with the individual in the shadow of yon pillar understanding it as a personal criticism. The latter interprets the remark as singling him out for a public soul washing. There are, for example, warning statements on the subject of divorces and broken homes. Perhaps reference is made to the fact that on the material side Chicago's 15,000 annual divorces, inasmuch as they involve legal procedure to undo what God has joined together, cost the taxpayers over a million dollars a year. Greater than the annual drain of two million dollars from the city's public funds and greater than the price in terms of tears and anguish are the moral losses suffered in the severance of the marriage bond. Comments of this kind, while in general statement, may strike fresh wounds in a worshiper who innocently or otherwise became the recent victim of matrimonial fracture. The opinion, "This was a thrust at me," precludes the "take home" blessings the sermonizer had intended. If the pulpit were to pull its punches in every round, whether on personal dishonesty, the intemperate tongue, or whatever men's and women's

shortcomings, it would have to confine itself to glittering generalities and to blunderbus blasts which strike no one. Jesus as a preacher was not fond of the scatter gun or the innocuous flit gun. He shot His words out of a rifle. They pierced their targets with bullet effect. At the same time He was also mankind's greatest lover. He dressed the wounds of the humble and penitent with the loving skill of the Great Physician.

Man does not always know where to draw the line and how to distinguish between words that wound and words that heal. Either choice may result in a peril for both pulpit and pew. Emerson would have no one intrude upon the spiritual estate of an artist. May the preacher "intrude" upon the spiritual estate of the sinner who comes to him for the words of life? A "no" is a vote for commonplace and nondescript preaching. A "yes" implies running the risk of having the pulpit's utterances misinterpreted to the potential loss of a church member and perhaps of a soul. That's why we refer to the eventuality of misunderstanding as constituting a peril of the pulpit.

III

THE PERIL OF STRIVING TO BE ALL THINGS TO ALL MEN

The desire to satisfy every listener but not being able to do so indicates another of the more intangible perils of the pulpit. Even in a homogeneous Sunday morning congregation there are many tastes and desires as to the sermon's content and the manner of its presentation. Hearers come out of a variety of experiences. Their background and personal make-up, not at all stereotyped by the common denominator of their religious indoctrination, are projected in the likes and dislikes of the pulpit discourse. Were a questionnaire circulated to invite suggestions, the results would show a wide range of preferences, all the way from shallow sentimentality to cold intellectualism. The one hearer likes his religion set forth in a set of principles without too much fill-in detail. He doesn't desire many illustrations, anecdotes, or to-life applications. Others prefer the skeleton to be clothed with much warm flesh. They don't like framework sticking out but want it hidden under plaster, wallpaper, pictures, draperies, and interesting knickknacks. Members of still another school of thought (or emotion) want religion brought down to earth, with its pertinence to situations in home, office, shop, and school specifically pointed out. Naturally, they are in opposition to the "sanctuary" people, to those who want the church to be a spiritual haven apart from the problems of the workaday world. Not the atmosphere of a spiritual workshop or clinic but of a candlelighted cathedral is desired. The pulpit in that

setting is asked to yield edifying meditation and (in a good sense) an "escape" from the toils and tribulations of life.

Then, as to content, there is a difference of opinion as to what the preacher shall stress, whether sin or grace, Law or Gospel, or whatever other theological opposites exist. Of course, some will want more preaching against sin, provided it is sin in the aggregate and not the transgressions of the individual. This desire for irrelevant preaching, which keeps the hearer undisturbed in his smugness, was more scored than described by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her well-known poem:

Preach about yesterday, Preacher!
 The time so far away:
 When the hand of Deity smote and
 slew
 And the heathen plagued the stiff-
 necked Jew;
 Or when the Man of Sorrow came
 And blessed the people who cursed His
 name —
 Preach about yesterday, Preacher,
 Not about today!

Every clergyman invites lay people to recognize with him the problem of trying to satisfy a variety of hearers. In leaning or in being pushed too far in any one direction he is exposing himself to the perils of the pulpit.

IV

THE PERIL OF DELIVERING AN INADEQUATE SERMON

Followers of baseball know that even good pitchers have their off days. For this weakness the reason may be as much psychological as physical. Also God's spiritual moundsmen will have a Sunday when he is not in his best form. The inadequate sermon on a given occasion may stem from insufficient time for preparation. Even the pastor who speaks fluently from what appears to be scant notes has spent much time in preparation. It is most rare that a full-bodied sermon is preached from inspiration alone, as though it were a fully armed Minerva springing from the Jupiter's brain. Under the press of parish duties the time for preparation must sometimes be cut short. Parishioners, of course, can help by supplying clerical assistance so that, after the manner of the Apostles, pastors may spend much time in meditation and prayer.

Granted that sufficient preparation has gone before, there may yet be an off-color sermon now and then. The French say the soup is never

as hot when it is served as it was when cooked. Between the time a sermon is prepared and the time it is delivered there is a cooling-off period, and this is in no sense derogatory to the sermonizer. It is one of those unpredictable human factors. Mood, or what in other eras may have been called "the spirit," is very germane to the delivery of a sermon. Mood is in turn closely related to such a physical factor as digestion or a good night's sleep. Reciprocally speaking, there are also moods in an audience, not at all unrelated to the emotional phenomenon vulgarly called "mob psychology." On Mother's Day, for example, the audience is warm and receptive because it is stirred by noble memories. It fairly comes forward and meets the preacher of the day. On the other hand, before a sermon on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity becomes effective, the audience has to be warmed up, and in that the preacher sometimes succeeds, sometimes not.

Kindred to the question of the preacher's mood is the psychological factor of an extended mental plateau. The human mind and the whole personality for that matter goes through cycles. Biographers of Charles Dickens find high and low degrees of fruitfulness in his literary output. A recent biographer referred to one of Dickens' books as written in the "wasteland" period of the author's life. A preacher, too, passes through wastelands and again through veritable Gardens of Eden in his career. This year, perhaps, his Lenten sermons were particularly fruitful. People tell him so, and of course he himself knows this best of all. In other years it was not so.

The inadequate sermon, whether isolated or in a series, constitutes a peril of the pulpit. This is definitely the case when a minister's over-all preaching ability is judged on the basis of one inadequate sermon. Pulpit procurement committees, if these must be, should bear this point in mind. The scouting committee cannot arrive at a fair judgment of a pastor's work unless it has heard more than one sermon and has investigated the entire parish ministry of which public preaching is but one facet.

V

THE PERIL OF THE OCCUPATIONAL DISEASE

Henry Seidel Canby once wrote: "Arrogance, pedantry, and dogmatism are the occupational diseases of those who spend their lives directing the intellects of the young." It is to be expected that occupational disease of one kind or another should try to fasten itself upon the profession of preaching. Just what it is would be hard to say. Certainly a phase of it is "getting into a rut," as the common phrase has it.

For the occupational disease of repeating clichés and commonplace truisms there is a cure. This balm in Israel that renews and refreshes is a greater personal study of the Bible, and for that parishioners should allow their minister undisturbed hours. Dr. Ernest C. Colwell, dean of Emory (Ga.) University, called attention to this need again in one of his recent lectures at Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Ill. The daily press quoted Dr. Colwell as saying: "We too often approach the Bible with minds already made up and look for passages backing up our conclusion. Even mature preachers can profit by an open-minded study of the Bible." As though heeding this speaker's counsel prematurely, Martin Luther read the Bible through twice every year, and in doing this discovered fresh treasures. He compares the Bible to a tree whose branches are laden with fruit. The more you shake the branches, the more fruit will they deliver.

The cure for perfunctory triteness lies also in a re-evaluation of the aims of preaching. What Thomas Aquinas called the three things necessary for salvation are also the preaching guidelines. They are according to Aquinas (1) to know what to believe, (2) to know what to desire, and (3) to know what to do. On these points the New Testament has its specific answers. Renewed Bible study is again just what the doctor ordered in combating the occupational disease of sometimes losing sight of goals.

This study has sought to show that the perils of the twentieth-century pulpit are closely related to the perils of the pew. Not as much space separates the two as is sometimes believed. When pulpit and pew work hand in glove to achieve a common goal, the perils enumerated are transformed into peace upon Israel. Understanding is a two-way street. As the man in the pulpit keeps his ear to the ground to catch all the signals of this age and interpret them to the benefit of the laity, so let the people in the pew maintain a sympathetic rapport with the pulpit. Then preaching becomes the two-way communication that God intends.

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