

# Lectures on Preaching

*A condensation of a series of three lectures by Dr. Faris D. Whitesell of Northern Baptist Seminary, Chicago, given at Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, December 2-3, 1959, as the Fred Rutz Foundation Lectures. Dr. Whitesell is the author of VARIETY IN YOUR PREACHING.*

## I. PREACHING THE BIBLE TODAY

WE ARE using the theme, "Preaching the Bible Today." We understand what that means: The written Word of God, Scripture given by divine revelation. The Bible may not all be written to us, but it is all written for us, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. I believe with you that the Bible is verbally inspired and is infallible in all its parts when rightly interpreted and understood.

I wish to discuss three factors involved: First, the handicaps; second, the encouragements; and third, the methods of preaching the Bible today.

### *Handicaps To Preaching The Bible*

The first handicap to be encountered in preaching the Bible is ignorance of the Bible. People today are generally Biblically illiterate. They lack firm hold of the unfolding history of the Bible; they do not know the messages of the books of the Bible; they cannot locate the great personalities of the Bible correctly as to time and to contributions they have made; they fail to grasp the ruling lines of doctrinal truth in the Scriptures; and many would be hard put to locate even a dozen of the great verses in the Bible. We must patiently and carefully explain what we are trying to preach, when we preach the Bible.

The second handicap that we face is that of perverted notions about the Bible. The Bible is the most accessible of all books, yet people seem content much of the time to receive their ideas about it from second-hand sources—popular magazines and articles, religious movies, radio broadcasts of the cults and isms, or some religious fanatic. These erroneous notions prejudice people against the real truth of the Scriptures. Yet truth is stronger than error, and the Bible is the only remedy. We must keep on preaching it. The Prophet Jeremiah said that the Word of God burned like fire in his bones so that he could not withhold it. So it ought to be with us when it comes to preaching the Bible.

Shallow thinking on the part of the people is another handicap to preaching the Bible today. People seem to have no time for meditation, no time to talk, to argue, to listen to debates and to weigh the merits of issues, to think below the surface. So we must keep the material pitched to the popular level. We must explain carefully and illustrate adequately or our people will fail to follow our thought. They will lose interest and miss the benefits of the sermon.

Still another handicap is the increasing dullness to spiritual realities. There is a lowering sensitivity to sin. People read the daily news accounts of immorality, lust, lawlessness, crime, bestiality, murder, robbery, and they say that they are not guilty of sins like these. They consider themselves to be relatively upright, good, honest, and respectable. The Lord ought to be proud of them! They overlook the divinely condemned sins of selfishness, pride, covetousness, lustful thoughts, and sins of omission. The only remedy for this is preaching the Bible. It condemns sin in all its forms. It exposes and reveals sin like a searchlight turned into dark places, revealing all that is there.

Another handicap is the easy tolerance of all religious views. People have been conditioned to believe that all religions are of equal value; that it does not make much difference what one believes or what he practices religiously, so long as he is sincere and satisfied with his own beliefs. So our problem today is not only to get people to accept the Bible as the Word of God, holy and unique among books, but to accept it as worth investigating, believing, practicing, living by, and dying for.

Still another handicap is materialism. People become so satiated with material possessions that they lose their sense of spiritual values; lose the power to discern between good and evil. They lack the moral and spiritual integrity to choose the good against all odds. The Kingdom of God seems so remote and unrealistic that it is difficult to induce people to take the Bible seriously, to believe that it is relevant for our time.

Still another handicap is conformism. We wish to do what other people are doing, have what they have, live as they live, pattern our lives after the trends of our fellow-citizens. Certainly this is not all to be condemned, but when it lowers our morals,

deadens our conscience, takes our eyes off Christ and His claims, it is wrong.

The final handicap I would mention is scientism, the idea that science is God, that science supplies all we need. For many people the Bible is out-dated, unscientific, full of faults, myths and miracles which could not happen in a universe of law and order such as science presents. Since religion cannot be put into a test-tube and analyzed, its value is questioned.

### *Encouragements to Preach the Bible*

Now the other side of the picture—the encouragements to preach the Bible today. The first one I suggest is the hunger for reality. Our age is becoming tired of sham and tinsel. People realize that they need something more than this world affords. Many persons recognize a deep longing in their hearts to be relieved of frustration and dread, but they bury it beneath other concerns. However, once the subject of vital religion is discussed and men know that they are not to be propagandized or victimized, they will open up and talk freely and eagerly. It seems to me that we can capitalize on this hunger for reality, for the Bible presents reality. Its message strikes deep chords of responsiveness.

Another encouragement for the preaching of the Bible is the sense of insecurity which we encounter. In spite of all the scientific advancement, the new drugs, the elimination of disease, the lengthened life span, the fear of death is still with us. War is still a possibility. Tragedy lurks in our streets. Lawlessness, crime and delinquency appear to be getting out of hand. A hidden super-government of gangsters and racketeers has imposed itself upon the government of our cities. We are neither safe in body nor in possessions when we leave our homes and walk our streets. Any of us could be attacked any time, anywhere. There is reason back of this sense of insecurity that prevails today.

But the one who believes the Bible and accepts it knows that in spite of shattered faith in people of our time we can still trust the God of the Bible. Men in high places in business may go wrong; television idols may fall; disc jockeys may be bribed; and government officials may link themselves with crime; our educators become prophets of doom; and even some ministers compromise moral standards. But there is One whom we can trust, the God of the Bible.

His words and His promises need to be proclaimed in this day in which we live.

As our scientists seek to explore outer space in our day, the minds of people have been lifted somewhat off this world, to think of what might be "out there" on those other planets. Surely this gives us opportunity to say that our God is an omnipresent, omnipotent, transcendent God who created all of this and who guides all of this for His own honor and glory. It gives us opportunity to say that the Christ of the Bible is the first and only true "space man." He came down from heaven and He has returned to heaven, where He is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. He is in control of all these planets and all people and all time in this universe and any other universes that might be.

There is also the menace of Communism. Practically one-third of the population of the earth is in countries under Communist control. It is reaching out its tentacles to enlarge its dominion. We have an incentive to preach the Bible today as never before since the sweep of Islam across the world.

We have an encouragement in the new translations of the Bible that are appearing today. As people read the Bible in the more recent versions, they see that the Bible can speak to us today, that it does have relevance.

We are also living in an age of new discoveries about the Bible. The Bible has come alive under the impact of new archeological discoveries. It is being recognized as a book that has solid historical foundations, a book of unquestioned reliability in its picture of the life, times, and people of its age . . .

The final encouragement I would mention is the reappearance of the Near East in the headlines. Today we read about Israel, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Cypress, the Dead Sea, Lebanon, about Jerusalem and Galilee, and all these familiar biblical places. People are having to learn the geography of the Bible today if they are to understand what is going on in the news. Surely this is an encouragement to preach the Bible.

### *Our Method of Preaching the Bible*

I say first that we should preach it generously. By that I mean that we ought to preach it in large portions, whole messages on a

book of the Bible, or a series of messages from books of the Bible. We ought to preach it by chapters, by great events and movements, on the great personalities, by great thematic units, by great doctrines. And I believe also in preaching it by the Christian year plan as many of your ministers do.

In the second place, we ought to preach the Bible intelligently; put all of the scholarship back of it that we can command; explain its customs, places, thought-forms and the connections of every passage. We ought to preach it from a careful study of the original languages, so we will be fresh and original in our preaching.

We ought also to preach the Bible spiritually. We ought to disclose the deepest spiritual meaning in each passage we expound. This does not mean allegorical, esoterical, symbolical, fanciful meanings. No, we should stay with the literal, primary, grammatical, historical, contextual meaning for every passage we discuss.

Then, we ought to preach the Bible respectfully. That is, we should respect the personalities, the minds, and the rights of our hearers. We owe it to people to give them the right explanation of the Scriptures as far as we can ascertain it. But when it is debatable, we owe it to them to give them the option of choosing between two or more views that may seem to be equally valid.

We need also to preach the Bible popularly. We must simplify it, illuminate it, translate it, clarify it, if we wish to reach the popular mind.

Again, we need to preach the Bible honestly. We do not want to remove the ancient landmarks that our fathers have set. Certainly we must have respect for the men who have gone before us and left the bright fruits of their meditation and study. On the other hand, we need liberty enough to face every Bible passage with the honest purpose to find its true meaning and with full commitment to accept that meaning as our interpretation for that sermon. A proper use of modern facilities and of language study would certainly help us to do this.

Then, finally, we need to preach the Bible relevantly. This is one of the prime concerns in preaching literature and homiletic fields today. It is amazing how relevant the Bible is when once we understand it. It fits ancient times, two thousand years ago. But in another sense it is timeless. It cannot be dated to one par-

ticular point in history. In our study of the Bible for sermonic purposes, we have to dig below the surface and get underneath local and temporary meanings and find those timeless and universal truths which stand against life today as they stood against life in that day. So, let us preach the Bible today as never before.

## II. IMAGINATION IN PREACHING

Imagination plays an important role in modern life, especially in those pursuits requiring creativity. The poet, the fiction writer and most all writers, the architect, the sculptor, the artist, the painter, the advertiser, the educator—all must lean heavily upon imagination if their work is to be well received.

It is not surprising that all homiletical authorities mention that imagination has an important role in preaching. The truth is that neither artist nor poet need so ready a use of imagination as the public speaker. In the pulpit, everyone who has excelled as a biblical preacher has done so largely through his appeal to the imagination. Doubtless also, everyone who has failed as a popular preacher has been lacking this.

### *Imagination Defined*

Imagination is the image-making factor of the mind. It puts abstract ideas into pictures. It deals with reality and is under the control of facts. Thus it is to be distinguished from fancy, for fancy soars into areas completely beyond the realm of human experience and out of touch with reality. But imagination never does. Stories of planet people who invade our world in strange modes of transportation are purely in the realm of fancy. But imagination stays within the hard concrete facts of human existence. It fights shy of all daydreams and all losing of contact with reality.

### *Types of Imagination*

Imagination is one faculty of the mind, but for purposes of how it functions we might think of it as types. I suggest the most common is historical imagination. It is an imaginative revival in a preacher's mind of historical events and narratives of the Bible. It makes them live by putting them in living pictures, filling in the blank spaces in the Biblical account, entering into the life of the past by hearing the conversations, seeing the people in action, suffering and rejoicing with them. Historical imagination needs to be based upon careful study of the history, customs, geography,

social, political, and religious conditions of the time. With all the wealth of background material available, there is little excuse for perverting the material by fancy rather than re-creating by sound imagination.

A second type is sympathetic imagination—the use of imagination to enter into the experiences of others and see life through their eyes. To put ourselves in the place of others will give their needs a new importance and urgency, compelling us to speak not of some pet interests of our own, but of living issues that touch upon our hearers, thereby holding attention.

A third type of imagination—and perhaps the highest type—is called creative. This type takes hold of all materials and puts them in new relationships so as to create an entirely new approach and appreciation. It may be used to create illustration where no actual ones are ready at hand. Preaching on an abstract truth and lacking a good illustration, the preacher imagines one. Such, it seems to me, were the parables of Jesus.

A fourth type of imagination I would call prospective or futuristic imagination. This deals with things of the future but predicted in the Bible as certain to occur. Most preachers like to preach about heaven. But Scripture gives few details, so we may rightly use our imagination to fill in and add to the details of what the Scripture says, as long as we do not contradict any of the statements in the Scriptures. The same applies to the final judgment and the return of Christ. In order to present such truths imaginatively, we will use figures of speech, similes, metaphors, comparisons, contrasts, personifications, apostrophes, dramatization, imaginary conversation to concretize our ideas.

#### *Imagination Needs to be Cultivated*

Every person of normal capacity has imagination, but our educational system usually does not develop the imagination as it does the logical faculties. Theological students receive training in analysis and synthesis, but little in creative imagination. As a result, their sermons are often factual, abstract, and drab. We can, however, cultivate the imagination.

The first and best way of cultivating the imagination is by mastering the Bible. The Bible is full of imagery, colorful events,

and dramatic scenes. The student learns to see the pictures in the original languages of the Bible and his imagination is bound to be stimulated. Hebrew is a language of pictures, strong on nouns. The Greek is a language of pictures, strong on verbs, action and movement. The Bible is a great stimulant to imagination.

Then, by ministering to others we can cultivate our imagination. As we counsel with people, visit with them in their homes, help them in their troubles, our minds are stimulated, our sympathies are stirred, and we begin to imagine how we may help these people, how they may do better for themselves and live more victorious lives.

We cultivate our imagination also by reading poetry, fiction, and especially biography for information, for stimulation, for illustration; by studying the works of art; by listening to good music, letting it carry us away into the realms of harmony and meditation; by listening to sermons and lectures, letting our imagination fill in between what is said; by vocabulary development; by writing with the purpose of using our imagination, and, of course, by careful observation.

#### *Benefits of Using the Imagination*

The right use of imagination clearly makes preaching more interesting; gives it more vitality, color, vividness and movement. Imagination helps the hearer to remember what he has heard in the sermon.

Imagination gives the preacher enthusiasm for his sermon. If he takes time to put imagination into it, he puts his heart into the message. It takes hold of him and he preaches more vigorously and earnestly. It makes sermonizing easier. It is in that creative realm that gets away from the "grinding" side of it.

If we use imagination, I think we are more likely to rely on prayer and on the Holy Spirit in our sermon preparation. There is something about imagination that is like the divine creativity, and we need the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit to do our best work in biblical preaching.

The Bible will also become more attractive to the audience if they can hear sermons that bring it back to life and see the scenes somewhat as they were in that day. I trust that all of us understand the power of imagination and will give it a larger place in our preaching.



### III. VITALIZING EXPOSITORY PREACHING

The preachers who have made the most lasting contribution to the ages have been expository preachers. We think of such names as Origen, Chrysostom, Savanarola, Luther, Calvin, Knox, Zwingli, Bunyan, John Owen, Matthew Henry, F. W. Krumacher, Andrew Fuller, F. W. Roberts, W. M. Taylor, Joseph Parker, John A. Broadus, Alexander McLaren, F. B. Meyer, John Henry Jowett, and Campbell Morgan.

Homiletical authorities quite generally rate expository preaching as best for the pastoral situation and that for a number of reasons: It gives the people more of God's Word; it builds them up in the faith; it makes the preacher a more Biblically informed man of God; it creates an appetite for the Word of God in the people; it lays more solid foundations for Christian character; it enables a preacher to handle minor subjects which he might pass by altogether, unless they are treated in a passage of Scripture with others; it provides all the variety of emphasis that is needed in a preaching program; it helps the preacher to know what is coming up Sundays ahead, particularly when he is preaching through a book of the Bible; and it does give the preacher an opportunity to make some permanent contribution, if he can get his sermons into book or tract form. . . .

In spite of the ideal, not as many preachers follow the expository method of preaching as we would like. Perhaps they have not been taught the ideal and techniques of expository preaching in their seminary days. I am glad that this is not true of you.

I trust that you young ministers will determine to become effective expository preachers. No ideal, it seems to me, can be more challenging and rewarding. In order to do this you will need not only the necessary training in the seminary, but also the necessary tools for proper textual study, especially the great exegetical books which go down into the exegesis and interpretation of the Word of God. We ought to avoid homiletical commentaries that provide ready-made, pre-digested sermons and outlines. For expository preaching is an honest and faithful effort to unfold the basic, pri-

mary, grammatical, historical, contextual meaning of a passage of Scripture, and to make that meaning relevant to life today by the best possible use of all homiletical skills.

But how shall we vitalize expository preaching? What can we do to put life and color and flavor into it so people will like it and want more? I have five suggestions:

First, vitalize your organization, your outline, your structure. Get an underlying, timeless, eternal truth as your theme. Let it branch out through a bright refrain, thesis, or proposition which summarizes the whole sermon in one sentence into a structure that is coherent and logical, harmonious, and meaningful. The main points in the sermon should give thrust to the sermon. They need to be words that have vitality and life in them, verbs or nouns or both, stirring sentences or questions, so that every point makes an impact. That rules out an outline that is simply a jotting down of the main ideas of a passage of Scripture in the order in which you find them. Points should be linked together meaningfully. Every point should have significance and permit proper development.

Then vitalize your explanation. People want explanation, but nothing dead and dry and dusty. Unfold the meaning of your passage as vividly as you can. Use the word pictures you get from your study of the original languages. Bring in material from geographical, historical, and archeological sources that help you set this meaning in a life-like situation. Be on fire with the greatness of your message. Let your imagination soar. Let your style concretize and dramatize your ideas. This is explanation indeed!

Vitalize the application. Application means putting the truth to use. This is most important. First explain, then apply. Then gather it up in the conclusion into a final burning focus and appeal for vital response.

Vitalize also by appropriate illustrations. People are picture-minded. We must use illustrations if we are to arouse interest and

move our hearers. Use enough illustration to let in the light, but do not overload the message with stories. One illustration for a point is sufficient, but let it be rightly adjusted to the sermon.

Finally, vitalize expository preaching by doing it in the power of the Holy Spirit. We should seek to be filled with the Spirit as a continuing daily experience, walking in the light of God's Word. We should seek to prepare the sermon in the power of the Spirit. Then we can certainly count on that same Spirit to help us, both in preparation and delivery. For this we must live in the Book for our own spiritual guidance and nourishment and preach it to God's people to bless them and establish them in the faith.