Sermons Classified According to Psychological Method

Progress In a Sermon Is Not Merely the Unfolding of an Idea, but the Emotional Involvement of as Many of the Listeners as Possible

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When the subject matter of the sermon is clearly determined and the preacher's object in his message plain before his eyes; when the structural type, or combination of types, has been definitely fixed because that one is clearly the best means of conveying the truth, there still remains the question: What is to be the mental and emotional relationship between the preacher and people? How are the little tendrils of personality which reach out from one to another to touch, engage, and hold firm?

Some people would brush such questions impatiently aside. They might even tell us that they have been delivering powerful sermons for years and never thought of such a thing. In their opinion, a man makes up his mind what he wants to say, stands up with a modest bearing, and gets it said as clearly as he can. Having said it, he sits down. That is all there is to it. Discussion about psychological method seems to them a darkening of counsel with words.

There is more in it than that. Even the man most scornful of talk about psychological method is aware, if he is a powerful preacher, that there is a moment when he makes real contact with his congregation, and a moment later when he takes tight hold of them, and a climactic moment when he can do with them almost anything he likes. He may never have analyzed in his own mind how he does it. The Spirit of God working upon a gift of God in nature may enable him to do it without ever considering the "how" of it at all, but he would be foolish to assume that there is nothing to study and nothing to learn.

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There is a psychology in actual preaching quite apart from the preparation to preach. Why do some men “grip” and others fail to grip? The answer to that question may be difficult, but the person who just patters about “magnetic personality” is not even trying to answer it. Moreover, the man with the gift may not himself be aware how he uses it, but none of these objections debars us from attempting to understand it ourselves.

The progress of a sermon may be measured two ways: mentally and emotionally. One can test it by the unfolding of the thought; one can test it by the mounting tide of feeling. Some sermons, it is true, make a far lower bid for feeling than others, but no real preaching excludes it. Not even the profoundest philosophers achieve “pure thought,” and our congregations are never composed entirely of philosophers. Moreover, a “manifestation of the Incarnate Word” cannot be given without feeling—feeling in the herald and feeling in the hearers. The progress of the sermon, therefore, can be measured in either of those ways: How does the thought march? How does the feeling mount? Clearly, the two should be related. A bad order in the importance of the argument will create chaos in the rhythm of the feeling. Many a prentice preacher must have wondered, after a good start to his sermon, why the thing began to sag and the people to fidget uncomfortably in the pews. Were the people to blame—or he himself? Having got their attention, how ever did he come to lose it? Ought he to be able to say to the people in his heart, “Give me your attention for five minutes and take it away afterward if you can”? Then what happened today?

Maybe he has forgotten that if you start on the top rung you cannot go any higher and that all your “progress” must be downward. The reaction in the feelings of the people was entirely normal. They were going down with him, but they reached the bottom before he reached the end.

The relation between the mental and emotional progress of the sermon may be tested in another way. People whose main interest in life is in ideas, and who go only occasionally to public worship, sometimes complain at the slow progress in the unfolding of a preacher’s thought. To them the preacher seems to hang on to an idea overlong. He may, in fact, keep returning to the same idea down different avenues of thought, and hanging, as it were, a single truth in varied lights. “I’ve got that,” they say to him in their minds. “I got that five minutes ago. So what? Get on!”

Theological students often react in similar ways. All their time is being given to ideas, and religious ones at that. They want the thoughts of the sermon to march, not like infantrymen, but like riflemen. It must be a quickstep to suit them. They have no wide experience of handling a large and varied congregation. They do not understand, as yet, the psychology of the mixed crowd. When the argument hangs awhile, time is not being lost. If an experienced craftsman is at work, it is instructive to observe what he is doing. He is resting the congregation, perhaps, after that harder bit of thinking. He is repeating the point in a fresh way for the sake of the slower members of the flock. He is picking the gallery up and piquing the interest of those whose minds are distracted by the cares of the week. He is keeping the mental and emotional progress parallel. He will not move to the next point until they