

CHARLES E. BRADFORD

Preaching to the Times

Ministry

Releases

Preaching to the Times

The Preaching Ministry in the
Seventh-day Adventist Church

Charles E. Bradford

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DEDICATED
to Ethel, faithful
wife, wise counselor, and gentle critic,
representative of that great unsung host—
“They also serve who only stand
and wait.”

The highest work of princes in Israel,—of physicians, of teachers in our schools, as well as of ministers and those who are in positions of trust in the Lord’s institutions,—is to fulfill the responsibility resting upon them to fasten the Scriptures in the minds of the people as a nail in a sure place.— *The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White comments, on 2 Kings 23:2, p. 1039.

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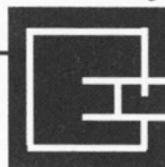
"Why Young Adventist Leave the Church," by Ila Zbaraschuk in *Insight*, vol. 4, pp. 13, 14, September 11, 1973.

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"Never think that you have learned enough, and that you may now relax your efforts. The cultivated mind is the measure of a man. Your education should continue during your lifetime; every day you should be learning, and putting to practical use the knowledge gained."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 561.

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Foreword

The place of preaching in the Advent Movement is secure. Hence, there is no need for me to go to great lengths to "make a case" for preaching among the group most likely to read these words. This ark needs no steady-ing or shoring up from our feeble hands. The movement (we need to recapture that word and all that it implies) owes its present position to the passion for preaching that compelled the pioneers to go and tell. The pioneers believed in preaching. They preached in churches, schoolhouses, town halls, railway stations, living rooms, barns, tents, the open air—in short, wherever they could get a hearing. And they were determined to get a hearing. In this connection one thinks of William Lloyd Garrison's memorable peroration that came out of that intense pre-Civil War abolitionist period, "I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch and I will be heard."

Our Preaching Fathers Took the Initiative

Picture I. H. Evans and his evangelistic team riding into town in a horse-drawn wagon. The iron tent stakes are loose, on purpose, in the bottom of the wagon, so that they make an awful noise as the driver gallops the horses down the main street. This is advertising suitable to the times! The tent is pitched in the town square and in a fortnight the message has been given, a company of believers formed, and the brethren move on to the next town.

The black fathers had an expression that described their pioneer efforts in the cities and towns of the South and Southwest: "We preached out a church."

There was a day when J. H. Laurence put up his charts in a railway station during a layover in Memphis, Tennessee, and preached to the passengers in the "colored" waiting room. A young black man who had a very good position with the railroad happened to pass through. He was impressed, he lingered, and got caught. That young man, M. M. Young, later became a respected worker in the cause.

I could go on and on, but to state it simply should be enough—without preaching the Seventh-day Adventist Church would not be what it is and where it is today.

If, however, anyone should need a bit of encouragement along these lines, ponder this:

We are never to forget that Christ teaches through His servants. There may be conversions without the instrumentality of a sermon. Where persons are so situated that they are deprived of every means of grace, they are wrought upon by the Spirit of God and convinced of the truth through reading the word; but God's appointed means of saving souls is through "the foolishness of preaching." — *Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 300.

The preaching of the gospel is God's chosen agency for the salvation of souls.— *Ibid.*, p. 87.

The world will not be converted by the gift of tongues, or by the working of miracles, but by preaching Christ crucified.— *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 24.

Many churchmen outside our circles are coming to recognize the close connection between preaching and renewal.

The current disposition to denigrate preaching—the formal act of heralding the good news to one hundred or one thousand people in a sanctuary—weakens the church's God-given ministry. Forthright biblical preaching which avoids the marginal (shallow moralism) and penetrates to the heart of man's profound dilemma (guilt and meaninglessness) and speaks to his loneliness persuades persons to repent, encourages them to trust God, and gives them identity. Linked with evangelical teaching, it motivates and equips them to exercise Christ's ministry in the world. Apart from biblical preaching, worship becomes esoteric or perfunctory; the sacraments are viewed as cultic rites or mechanical tests from membership; evangelism remains a human activity; stewardship is equated with "raising the budget." The neglect of biblical preaching weakens the church's witness because it violates the biblical image of ministry.—Wallace E. Fisher, *Preaching and Parish Renewal*, p. 17.

In your work as Seventh-day Adventist clergymen you exercise both priestly and prophetic functions. As priest you administer the sacraments, take care of the business of the temple, and do those necessary things that keep the wheels rolling. As prophet you declare the eternal word as gospel, not as a mere writer of sermons but, as James H. Robinson puts it, "a medium between the mind of God and the hearts of men."

Do not despise your priestly duties—the temple must have its priests—

but never lose sight of the fact that without the life-giving message of the prophets, with its incisive disclosure of the divine will, the services of the most splendid temple degenerates into lifeless forms and the cold dead ashes of formalism soon cover the altar. Says Gerald Kennedy:

Every now and then somebody comes along to predict the end of preaching. . . . But the Reformation was born of great preaching, and every important rebirth of faith has been associated with the rediscovery of the centrality of preaching. For the spoken word is still the most powerful instrument for shaping society and affecting human lives. The church needs all sorts and conditions of men to do its work. But it will die without preachers. . . .

I have been preacher and teacher. Preaching is better. I have been preacher and writer. Preaching is better. I have been preacher and administrator. Preaching is better.—Gerald Kennedy , *While I'm on My Feet*, pp. 139, 140.

When Columbia Union leaders invited me to prepare the 1972 H. M. S. Richards lectures on preaching, of which this book is an outgrowth, they suggested that I focus on two main concerns: (1) "Ministry to Youth" (how to be relevant and communicate), and (2) "Holding the Converts" (plugging the bottom of the barrel and holding the new believers). I had, as the saying goes, my work cut out for me. How does preaching relate to these concerns? Do we need a special approach for youth only? Can the quality of preaching help stem the tide of apostasy and defection?

In an endeavor to come to grips with the assignment, I did the usual (what else is there to do?)—that is, I corresponded with a cross section of clergymen, senior pastors, youth pastors, departmental leaders, homiletics teachers, and administrators. It was inspiring to see how willing these men were to share their convictions and counsel. I asked them, among other things, What is the current religious mood of Seventh-day Adventist youth, their attitude toward preaching? Is the traditional sermon form passé? What type of preaching is more helpful today—doctrinal, inspirational, life situation, personal experience, expository, et cetera?

In summary, their response to the questions indicated that there is a genuine openness to religion among our youth today. One preacher whose contacts are very wide, went so far as to say, "Youth are more receptive to the gospel and God's Word than in any time in the past that I have experienced, and they do not want to be entertained." Another whose specific assignment is youth ministry said, "The traditional sermon form is not passé, but the traditional terminology and clichés should yield to more contemporary rhetoric." Another added a wry comment that I had seen somewhere before: "They are not tired of preaching, just our preaching."

Insight magazine opened up the whole question in a series of articles

under the title, "Why Young Adventists Leave the Church," that should give every Adventist minister pause. "Young college graduates who have left the church often blamed the quality of Adventist preaching and the lack of opportunity to be used within the local church organization. The first evoked the more outspoken comments."—September 11, 1973, p. 13. A 29-year-old church-employed Ph.D. candidate thought of six of his college friends who no longer attend church. "Not one of them left for any doctrinal reason. To say the plain truth, they could no longer stand—in fact, became disgusted with—the quality of the sermons they were expected to listen to."

The writer of the article, realizing that this is "a strong statement," put a big question mark by it and submitted the rough copy to another young person who strongly urged that it be retained. "It's a real problem for a lot of young people," he said, "sermons that sound like reruns."—*Ibid.*, p. 14.

We must not be too sensitive about such observations. They may be a bit too harsh. But the pulpit must accept its Heaven-ordained responsibility for reaching, teaching, and holding.

While preaching is not all of ministry (I will be repeating this more than once), it is that ministerial function which more than any other gives the preacher authority, stature, and thus standing with his people. It therefore affects all facets of ministry and, to the extent that the preacher stirs up this "gift that is within him," enhances every other ministerial activity. This is why Ellen White counseled young ministers to seize every opportunity to speak. The ability to communicate effectively in the pulpit makes it easier to influence the thinking and acting of the congregation, to move them toward the achievement of worthy goals—in short, to exert positive leadership. This is true in a continuous way only as the preacher follows through, that is, develops skills as counselor, administrator, teacher, and organizer. The preaching gift will give him almost immediate acceptance, but this can be quickly dissipated through failure to attend to the business of God's house.

I am not the first nor will I be the last to quote the well-known passage from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, a classic tale of the sea. He puts Ishmael in the setting of a picturesque New England whaler chapel. Melville has Ishmael say, "The world's a ship on its passage out . . . and the pulpit is its prow." "The pulpit," like the prow of the ship, "leads the world."

The remnant church, good ship Zion, moves out to sea on its voyage, the pulpit is its prow. Like the prow of the ship the pulpit leads on, gives direction and guidance, and determines to a large extent its destiny. Let there be no downgrading of its role and function, for the fortunes of the vessel and those on board are bound up with that "pulpit is the prow." And let not the preacher abdicate his responsibility. Let him stand faithfully, with assurance, in that pulpit, and point the way.

Chapter 1

Sons of Issachar

And of the children of Issachar . . . were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do (1 Chron. 12:32).

It is recorded of the sons of Issachar that they were “sound judges of the times when Israel should take action, and the way to do it” (1 Chron. 12:32, Jerusalem). “Men who had understanding of the times” is the way the Revised Standard Version puts it. *The Living Bible* paraphrases it, “Men who understood the temper of the times.”

Conversant With the Times. The Seventh-day Adventist preacher must have a grasp of the times.

[He] should be able to feel the pulse and sense the mood of the age in which he lives. To do this, he must be in touch with the currents of life and thought. Such understanding will help him slant his preaching to today's world rather than to yesterday's.—Faris D. Whitesell, *Power in Expository Preaching*, p. 134.

But there is a danger here. It is possible for the preacher to become so submerged in the thought forms and ideas of his day and so impressed by the latest happenings that he becomes a mere reflector of the times rather than a prophet to the times. We are not called to preach the times. We are called to preach *to* the times. If we can keep this in mind, it will save our preaching from being a pedestrian running commentary on current events sprinkled with a few Bible texts and quotations from Ellen G. White.

Our ability to preach to the times does not necessarily depend on knowing every detail of current history, for example, how many wars are going on at the present time, how many earthquakes occurred last year, the percentage increase in major crimes during the past decade, or any other such data. In order to preach effectively to the times we must know what time it is. And that, as they say, is what being a Seventh-day Adventist preacher is all about. He must not only have a grasp of the times but a sense of time.

The Greek word *kairos* describes it best—a limited period of time marked by a suitableness of circumstances, a fitting season, a signal juncture, a marked season, a destined time. We stand in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets whose “Thus saith the Lord” was coupled with “the time is at hand.”

To a great extent our style is determined by this tradition. The Seventh-day Adventist preacher must give his message in the setting of time, eschatologically with apocalyptic overtones. “The time has come.” Our *raison d’être* is the prophetic forecast recorded in passages such as Revelation, chapters 12, 14, 18; Daniel, chapters 7, 8, 9; and Isaiah, chapter 58. At the right time in history, the decisive moment, at a signal juncture, *kairos*, a people arose with the message to meet the needs of that hour.

Now, if you do not believe this, it is better to go and preach for someone else. We have had some great scholars among us who have done just that—withdrawn from the organized work. One recently, because of his inability to believe in the predictive element in prophecy. The uniqueness and timeliness of our message is the only justification for organizing our activities along separate lines on a global basis.

Our concept of time is not cyclical, as classical Greek philosophy understood it, but linear, as in all Hebrew-Christian thought. To the Adventist preacher time can best be described as a line between two eternities with definite points of beginning and ending. He views time as that measured-off portion of eternity when God pauses to deal with the sin problem. Measured, I say, by epochs and seasons and generations. His understanding of the prophecies leads him to believe we are in the last measured-off section of that line, the time of the end. As far as he is concerned the news analysts, philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists describe the times and record helpful data, but only the prophets can interpret the times.

The secular theologians wrote the wrong scenario. It called for the emergence of modern man, man come of age, man grown out of his dependence on God, the supernatural. The whole idea of revelation was thrown overboard because post-Christian man was “turned off by such prattle.” John Charles Cooper is right when he says:

In a strange sort of way, the theologian can see that it has been precisely the attempts of modern theology to demythologize Christianity that have made it relatively ineffective as a satisfying system of spiritual guidance. Now that most theologians have stopped talking about the so-called three-storied universe of the Bible with its view of the world . . . , surprisingly the young are turning again to a supernatural vision of the universe as taught by astrology.—*Religion in the Age of Aquarius*, p. 27.

By endeavoring to divine the times on the basis of human intuition,

apart from the prophetic word, they construct their little inadequate theologies that must be changed like women's hats (when they used to wear them) or men's ties, which proves Dean Inge right when he said—

If you marry the spirit of your own generation you will be a widow in the next. . . . The votaries of progress mistake the flowing tide for the river of eternity, and when the tide turns they are likely to be left stranded like corks and scraps of seaweed which mark the high-water line.—Quoted in Donald G. Miller, *Fire in Thy Mouth*, pp. 99, 100.

There is an amazing residual deposit of fundamentalism in America. The liberals may have captured the leadership of the mainline churches, but not the minds of the common people. Any man who thinks that fundamentalism is dead needs to check up on which churches are full on Sunday morning, the churches that are growing the fastest. I am not saying that Adventists are to be identified with fundamentalists. I am simply submitting that the modern sons of Issachar must know the real mind-set of the people and address their message to "where it's at" rather than to some imaginary man dreamed up in some intellectual center.

Seventh-day Adventist preaching should be distinguished by something different. It must bring to the present situation those insights and understandings that are found only in the prophetic portions of the Bible. All true Seventh-day Adventist preaching has Revelation 14:6-12 as its frame of reference. As in England all roads lead ultimately to London, so in Adventist preaching and theology, all sermons and doctrines wind up somewhere in the neighborhood of this threefold message.

On the other hand, lest I seem overbalanced to one side or biased toward spiritual isolationism, we cannot afford to withdraw from the times. John the Baptist, who has been commended to us as a model for Adventist preachers, did not spend his life in "idleness, in ascetic gloom, or in selfish isolation. From time to time he went forth to mingle with men; and he was ever an interested observer of what was passing in the world. From his quiet retreat he watched the unfolding of events. With vision illuminated by the divine Spirit he studied the characters of men, that he might understand how to reach their hearts with the message of heaven."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 102.

"Moods of history do not validate or invalidate Christian truth, but moods of history throw certain Christian truths into focus and call forth their relevance."—Chevis F. Horne, "Preaching the Cosmic Christ to Cosmic Man," *The Pulpit Digest*, April 1971, p. 4. We teach, preach, and carry out our ministry perforce in the context of the times. There is a contemporary situation, a *sitz in leben*.

As he shapes and fashions his message, which is based on eternal truth,

the preacher must ask himself what is the contemporary mind? What are the ideas and ideologies that mold and motivate the people today? It is in the light of these questions that he benefits from a knowledge of current events, history, psychology, sociology, and the findings of science in all of its disciplines. He will need to sample what the thinkers are saying and take a look at the theological straws in the wind. Read *The Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*. Follow some good columnists like James Reston, Carl Rowan, or David Broder. (I don't buy any of them completely.) If you are situated near a university, take advantage occasionally of a lecture on current events. But take it all in stride. Be eclectic in the best sense of the word. Prove all things, hold fast only to that which is good.

But don't overdo this modern man thing. Don't get swept away with auguries about the future of man no matter how scholarly or well documented they may seem. The new psychology or behavioral science may yield limited insights into the human situation, but it has no chart or compass. The prophet's words are true, "It is not within man to guide his steps." The Seventh-day Adventist preacher must recognize both what time it is and where man is—hopelessly trapped in the cul-de-sac of his own devising, or to change the figure, cut loose from the moorings of divine absolutes and drifting hopelessly between the Scylla of atomic annihilation and the Charybdis of ecological extinction. Any attempt to understand his plight is to be confronted with words like alienation, polarization, fragmentation, estrangement, separation, depersonalization, withdrawal. Brash, self-assured, so-called objective post-Christian man has given way to fear-ridden, anxious, insecure, neo-pagan man; experience-oriented and subjective, who can at the same time live in a computerized society and daily consult horoscopes, astrological charts, and gurus.

Futurology is all the rage now. Note the rash of book titles containing the word *future*. But there is a vast difference between secular futurology and Christian eschatology. Says Karl E. Braaten, "The future in secular theology is *reached* by a process of the world's *becoming*. The future in Christian eschatology *arrives* by the *coming* of God's kingdom. The one is a *becoming*, the other a *coming*." In another work he states:

There are two Latin words for future: *futurum* and *adventus*. *Futurum*, the future principle of *fuo*, the same root from which we get our word physics (*physis* in Greek comes from *phyo*), is the future actualization of potentialities within things. *Adventus* is the appearance of something new that is not yet within things, not even as potentiality.—*Christ and Counter-Christ*, p. 11.

Futurum is what grows out of something that already exists, hidden away in it as an inner potentiality. An oak tree is the acorn's *futurum*. All that is needed for the future to be reached is more growth, development, maturation, actualization. If this model is

applied by theology, then the kingdom of God is something that is reached at last by speeding up the world's becoming from within. The kingdom of God comes when the world comes of age. . . . *Adventus* is the arrival of someone or something new, which cannot be extrapolated out of history as such.—*The Future of God*, pp. 29, 30.

It is the apocalyptic vision that liberates, motivates, and mobilizes the citizens of the New Jerusalem. We need to consider the liberating power of this vision. Seventh-day Adventists have been accused of taking the symbolism and imagery of the apocalypse too seriously. Humble men who have sought to proclaim the prophetic portions of the Word of God have been ridiculed. Scoffers and cynics have remarked, "All those beasts, horses, strange creatures, a harlot woman dressed in purple and scarlet, another woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, two mystical cities dominating the landscape—what significance could these crude representations have in this age of advanced technology and science?"

But this is precisely what one of the fathers of modern psychology, Carl Jung, called "a myth commensurate with the age." The apocalyptic portions of the Bible are like a huge panavision screen on which are flashed the images and symbols that are valid for these times.

In speaking of the books of Daniel and Revelation, Ellen G. White says they contain much "that is large with immorality and full of glory" (*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 114). "If our people were half awake, if they realized the nearness of the events portrayed in the Revelation, a reformation would be wrought in our churches."—*Evangelism*, p. 195.

"The book of Revelation opens to the world what has been, what is, and what is to come. . . . It should be studied with reverential awe."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, on Rev. 1:1-3, p. 954.

The apocalyptic vision destroys the myth that man can create Utopia through his own prowess and achieve immortality by his own skills. This stubborn myth of progress and evolutionary development has duped every civilization under one guise or another so that man, over and over again, like Prometheus, seeks to bring heaven down to earth. Time and again he is led to glorify himself and think that the kingdom, the golden age, is just around the corner. This is the spirit that moved Mark Twain to write to Walt Whitman on the latter's seventieth birthday:

"You have lived just the seventy years which are greatest in the world's history and richest in benefit and advancement to its peoples. These seventy years have done much more to widen the interval between man and the other animals than was accomplished by any of the five centuries which preceded them. What great births you have witnessed! The steam press, the steamship, the steel ship,

the railroad, the perfect cotton gin, the telegraph, the phonograph, photogravure, the electrotpe, the gas light, the sewing machine, and the amazing, infinitely varied and innumerable products of coal tar, those latest and strangest marvels of a marvelous age. And you have seen even greater births than these; for you have seen the application of anesthesia to surgery-practice, whereby the ancient dominion of pain, which began with the first created life, came to an end on this earth forever. . . . Yes, you have indeed seen much—but tarry for a while, for the greatest is yet to come. Wait thirty years, and *then* look out over the earth! You shall see marvels upon marvels added to those whose nativity you have witnessed; and conspicuous about them you shall see the formidable Result—man at almost his full stature at last!—and still growing, visibly growing while you look. Wait till you see that great figure appear, and catch the far glint of the sun upon his banner; then you may depart satisfied, as knowing you have seen him for whom the earth was made, and that he will proclaim that human wheat is more than human tares, and proceed to organize human values on that basis.”—Quoted in Rubem A. Alves, *Tomorrow's Child*, pp. 8, 9.

But the apocalyptic vision saves us from falling for this foolish, humanistic prattle. The vision calls for the sudden inbreak of the kingdom of God—a cataclysmic end. The vision sees that remedial efforts will not do; it calls for radical surgery, the total eradication of the root system that nourishes and supports what the biblical writers call this present world.

We who have received the vision realize that this is no time to spar with flesh and blood. We are engaged in mortal combat against principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

This vision liberates us from the limitations of time and space so that we may participate even here and now in the Lamb's victory. This vision made us the people that we are. Before we had anything we had the vision—before we had institutions, and organizations, and even a system of doctrine. It was this vision that drove the pioneers to their knees and to their Bibles to know the will of God, to seek to understand it more perfectly. If we lose this vision we have lost everything—the imperative to holy living, motivation to courageous deeds, and the incentive to mobilize for spiritual warfare.

Our preaching is not based upon the human situation or on the ebb and flow of the tides of history, past or current. Our message is simple—the kingdom of God is on its way—*Adventus!*

Years ago I wrote a sermon on Isaiah 21:11, “Watchman, what of the night?” It began something like this: In Unalakleet, Alaska, and Thule,

Greenland, the men of the United States Army signal corps keep a never-ending vigil. Peering into radarscopes, giving ear to huge, ultrasensitive listening devices, they analyze every sound. They sift and weigh ever signal that comes to them, trying all the while to discover whether there is a pattern, and if so what it means. It is their business to know what it means. In those days they called it the EW (early warning) and DEW (distant early warning) system. The safety of the nation depended on the correct deciphering of the signals.

You, oh Seventh-day Adventist preacher, are a watchman on the walls of Zion. You stand on the watchtower, Bible in hand, listening, scanning the horizons of our times, carefully observing the sensory signals that come to you from every direction. Then you analyze and interpret the signals by the eternal Word and you speak to the world from whence the signals come on the basis of that Word, "The morning cometh, and also the night" (verse 12). The safety of the inhabitants of the city and the eternal salvation of many outside the city depends on the word that you, by the mercy of God, are commissioned to give. Small wonder that the awesome responsibility of such a calling, our apparent inadequacies, and the terrifying consequences of misreading the times and giving the wrong message move us to cry out, "Who is sufficient for these things?"

Conversant with His People and Their Real Needs

Modern sons of Issachar must care about people and their real needs. Genuine concern is the great need of our day. This seems a better word to me now than that overworked, misused, greatly misunderstood word *love*. It is possible for preachers to become so involved with the care of the temple that they neglect the care of souls. If we do care about people, we will go to them, find out what their needs are, and minister to those needs.

The words of Jesus cannot be improved upon: "'But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.'" (Luke 10:33, 34, R.S.V.).

The priest was issue-oriented, the Levite was project-oriented, the Samaritan was people-oriented.

After a man has been continuously in school for eighteen years, he needs to get away from the academic setting and begin to learn about people. "He who seeks to transform humanity must himself understand humanity."—*Education*, p. 78.

Jesus mingled with people as one who sought to do them good. He took advantage of every opportunity to be with people, especially in social settings, one-to-one situations, large gatherings, such as religious festivals and wedding feasts. He welcomed those kinds of situations where interpersonal relationships are made possible.

This is the way to keep our preaching alive and vital. A good visitation program will prevent sterility in preaching, too much of an academic flavor. As we visit the people we should tactfully ask questions, listen to their conversations, observe their biblical needs, the doctrines that they have not grasped. Widespread doctrinal deficiency in the congregation is cause or opportunity for the preacher to instruct, not in hit-or-miss fashion, but to the point.

Some things are better said in a public setting. Of course we will avoid divulging secrets or breaching confidences, but there are some faults and sins common to mankind that can be spoken of in the sermon in such a way as to meet a particular case. Visitation can help us immensely in discovering where the spiritual needs of the people really are.

Merrill Abbey, Professor of Preaching at Garrett, tells of a gifted preacher who begins his sermon preparation each week by setting down on paper the initials of a dozen or more persons with whom he has had a specific pastoral relationship during the previous week. In each instance he puts opposite the initials a sentence summary of the situation or need of that person: a sense of failure, a grievous temptation, a grief, a feeling of rejection and isolation, a warped attitude, a besetting sin. Then he says to himself, "This is a cross section of next Sunday's congregation. These are the souls to whom the Gospel must be brought. Unless the sermon speaks to their condition, does redemptive business with their specific needs, it is not a sermon."—G. Paul Butler (ed.), *Best Sermons*, p. 361.

Love and genuine appreciation for people grow through visitation, personal contact. This interaction prepares the preacher for effective communication. He comes to respect the so-called common people. He learns from them lessons about real faith, the dignity of man, courage in the face of adversity. He comes to see people as more interesting than any book. Should it be his privilege to serve a humble folk-people he will not think it a waste of his superior training, as one young preacher armed with a sparkling new Master of Divinity degree indicated, when he remarked, "We expect to be in a better situation before too long, where our talents and training will be more appreciated."

The preaching should deal with the essential questions of life. But what are the vital questions and where are they being asked? Surely not in the slick magazines or the popular TV programs. The essential questions surface in real-life situations, in man's extremity, when the questions he has been fed by the media no longer seem relevant, when he is thrown suddenly into a foxhole situation. The vital questions are largely unspoken. They do not appear on the agendas of our times. Gnawing, disturbing,

they are hard to articulate.

We have in our possession the book that reads men, that articulates the basic questions and provides the truly satisfying answers. "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare" (Heb. 4:12, 13, R.S.V.).

And how many times have preachers stood up to deliver a message prepared without knowledge of any particular problem or difficulty that someone would bring to God's house that day, some unarticulated question that cries out for an answer, only to have one and then another come and say with deep gratitude, "Pastor, you were speaking to my special need today. The sermon was spoken directly to me. How did you know my problem?"

The preacher who knows the essential questions and speaks to them will never want for a hearing.

We must not only visit with our people, we must visit with our neighbors, the people of our community. Happy is the preacher who can take his Bible in his hand and speak to men in an unaffected way about their souls, about the signs of the times, about the will of God for the human family. But visitation should always be with a purpose. It should not degenerate into aimless conversation. It should not be allowed to drift without point. We are to study to be workmen who need not be ashamed. We should be specialists in communicating with people.

There was a time when some had psyched themselves into believing that it was no longer possible to do old-fashioned pastoral calling in a modern setting—people were too busy, too secular, not interested in spiritual things. What a pity! There has never been a greater interest in spiritual things than there is now. Even "cold turkey" visitation in a given neighborhood will turn up friends for the message. There are Adventist preachers these days who are winning their neighbors to Christ just by neighborly friendliness. There is a longing in the hearts of the people for someone to reach out and touch them.

One of the great problems of modern existence is loneliness, estrangement. People feel helpless to stay the forces that tend toward dehumanization and depersonalization. The preacher will therefore need to be a sociable man, not the glad-hander, back-slapper type, but a man who is genuinely interested in people. G. K. Chesterton could not understand how a woman could be interested in great causes and neglect the greatest cause of all—personal attention to the welfare of her own children. It is hard for me to understand the Seventh-day Adventist preacher who is interested in great doctrines and biblical themes, finishing the work, who knows all about ecclesiology, et cetera, and yet has no real interest in his own people.

Julia Ward Howe was puzzled by the response of her good friend, Senator Charles Sumner, a man of great causes, leader of the radical reconstruction group, when she said to him at a party that she gave in honor of the actor, Edwin Booth, "I do wish you to know Mr. Booth." Sumner's reply was, "I have outlived my interest in individuals." When he was safely out of sight, Mrs. Howe reacted, "Fortunately, God has not, by last accounts, got so far!"

People are our stock in trade. We cannot avoid interpersonal relationships with our flock. We must not take up the visitation ministry with an air of clinical detachment. We must have warmth in our souls. Bishop Palmer is right when he says, "Effective preaching grows out of sympathetic understanding. Empathy is an imperative for preaching that is worthy of the gospel." The preacher who carries out such a visitation program will never be at a loss for sermons, and his sermons will be like arrows that go straight to the mark. The visitation program will help the preacher to discover the theological gaps in the framework of the people's thinking and help him to fill those gaps.

We are discussing the visitation program here as it relates to the preaching part of a man's ministry, how it strengthens and undergirds it and makes it relevant. Visitation should be specific with purpose, some clear-cut objectives. We should not visit the same people all the time, just "our kind." Get out of the rut. Don't be chaplain to your own middle-class group, be a minister at large. Seek personal contact even with those who are hostile to the cause. Learn how to reach the so-called unreachable. Diversified visitation will make for rich diversity in your sermons. We'll not always be speaking to the same group mentality, unable to communicate with those outside our immediate circle.

John Wesley, Oxford don and proper Church of England cleric that he was by training, understood this. When he and one of his young lay preachers chanced to walk by a London fish market just as several women were engaged in vigorous discussion, using the colorful and somewhat off-color language of their group, his lay preacher wanted to leave forthwith, but Wesley stopped him, saying, "Stay, Sammy, and learn to preach."

Conversant with His God

We are all concerned about power in preaching and long to be able to communicate the gospel more effectively, to reach and move men for God. But first things must come first. P. T. Forsyth, the turn of the century preacher-theologian, was not far from the mark when he said:

Our great need is not ardour to save man but courage to face God—courage to face God with our soul as it is, and with our Saviour as He is; to face God always thus, and so to win the power which saves and serves man more than any other power can. We

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