

Chapter One

PREACHING BEFORE CALVIN

WORSHIPPERS of the Reformers are prone to claim too much for their heroes. Such partisans often speak as if the Bible were an unknown book before 1515, as if sound and living theology had slumbered between Paul and Luther (though occasionally turning in its sleep) and as if true preaching hardly existed after the voice of the last Apostle was silent, and before Luther, Calvin, and Latimer entered their pulpits. We shall certainly not understand Calvin's preaching if we consider it in isolation or even only in the setting of his contemporary pulpit. He did not burst upon the world as a preacher, like Pallas Athene fully armed from her father's head. Before him there was a Luther, a Bernard, an Augustine and, above all, an Origen. When he came to preach there was ready to hand a medium that perfectly suited his concept and his aims. It is necessary, therefore, that we should glance at the history of Christian preaching,¹ so that we may see how it was moulded, by influences both within and outside the Church, into the form that Calvin used when he came to the pulpit of St. Peter's Cathedral in Geneva.

The Apostolic Church was not slow to obey the command of its Lord when He ascended, to preach the Gospel. All the disciples were concerned to witness by word of mouth to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Apostles themselves regarded "the ministry of the Word," along with prayer, as their principal duty, to fulfil which they laid aside other and apparently more immediately important tasks. (Acts 6: 1-6.)

They did not, however, claim a monopoly in preaching, for the deacons also, and even, it would appear from Acts 8: 4, the commonalty of the Church took part in this work, which only gradually became an organized office. They preached to

¹ For a full treatment see E. C. Dargan, *History of Preaching*, 2 vols., or J. Ker, *History of Preaching*. The latter is the better work but only goes up to the Reformation on general preaching.

crowds and to individuals. They preached in the open air, in the synagogues, and in the Church, wherever it might meet. But always the essence of their preaching was the same—the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the interpretation of this as being the work of God on behalf of man's salvation. Preaching to the non-Christian world, whether Jew, Greek, or barbarian, was preaching in the proper sense of the word, i.e. it was *kerygma*, the proclamation by the herald of his lord's decree.¹ As such, it was more prophetic and aggressive than the *homilia*, which was addressed to the Church alone. Compare, for example, Peter's sermon at Solomon's Porch (Acts 3: 12 ff.) or Paul's in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13: 16 ff.) with such an epistle as Ephesians, which is, strictly speaking, *didache* and *paraklesis*, but which may be considered as a homily of much the same type as the so-called Second Epistle of Clement, since it was intended to be read to the Churches in a certain district. Thus *kerygma* is primarily an announcement of what God has done in Jesus Christ, and, arising out of that, a call to repentance, while the homily consists of doctrinal instruction and exhortation to holiness. Yet what makes the homily preaching is precisely the element of *kerygma*—"Thus saith the Lord"—which is the determining factor of Christian preaching.

So little is known about preaching between the Apostolic Age and Origen that it would be rash to be dogmatic. It seems, however, that the homily was read, that it had no text, although Scripture was incorporated in it, and that it was read by the president of the assembly. Christian preaching in the synagogues died out as the gap between Christianity and Judaism widened. It is reasonable to suppose that preaching otherwise retained, broadly speaking, the same two-fold nature that characterized it in New Testament days.

With Origen in the third century, however, comes an exceedingly important and far-reaching change in homiletic methods. It would be difficult indeed to over-rate the influence of this great thinker on preaching. When Christlieb calls him "the Father of Greek preaching" he is guilty of an understatement, for Origen not only set the custom for Greek as well as Western preaching, but also for what is usually regarded as

¹ For all this paragraph, see C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching*.

specifically Protestant preaching. Before him the preacher had not taken a text, but spoke upon a theme, selected by himself, which he illustrated and “proved” by quotations from the Scriptures.¹ When the preacher had a sound understanding of the nature and limits of the Gospel (as with the Apostles, who themselves used this method) this form was perfectly satisfactory. But it was open to the obvious danger of heretical or dull-witted preachers choosing a theme outside the scope of the Gospel. Origen made the sermon an exposition of Scripture,² using as his form the homily in its modern sense—a continuous commentary upon the individual parts of the text. Dargan, citing Nebe, gives us an interesting sketch of Origen’s general views on preaching: “He believed both in the divine call and qualification of the preacher, and also in the need of human effort to acquire and improve the divine gift of prophecy. He cared little for heathen rhetoric and art in speech, but much for the simple, clear, forcible exposition of God’s word. He insisted that the preacher should himself be pure and reverent that he might properly teach his hearers the truth of God. . . . As the source of the sermon must be the word of God, so its supreme end must be the spiritual edification of the hearer, and to this end there must be both instruction and exhortation. So he insists that the preacher should know both the word and the hearts of men.”³ Origen laid the foundation of preaching in the Church which has lasted to our own day. There was, however, another side to his method which has had unhappy results. This was his allegorical interpretation of Scripture, which also continued as a tendency in later preaching and ran wild in the extravagances of the Middle Ages.

The emperor Constantine’s toleration of Christianity in 313 had a profound effect upon preaching, and, on the whole, a bad

¹ Good examples of this are Peter’s sermon in Acts 3: 11–26, and the Second Epistle of Clement.

² It seems that others were feeling their way towards the homily, notably Clement of Alexandria. There may be the germ of the homily in Acts 2: 14 ff., and, more clearly, Acts 8: 32 ff.: “And Philip . . . beginning from this Scripture, preached unto him Jesus.” The homily was made possible, perhaps inevitable, by the acceptance of most of the N.T. writings by the end of the second century. A homily on the N.T. would have been impossible at the time of the Apostolic Fathers.

³ *History of Preaching*, I. pp. 51–52.

effect. While the Church was a minority, living in the insecurity of possible, or the terror of actual, persecution, the preacher had no temptation to amuse or please his hearers, who were for the most part either believers desiring to be taught more about Christ and their faith or earnest seekers after the truth. Those who attended the meetings of the Church had braved, as likely as not, official displeasure or social derision. They did not look for an interesting sermon, but for instruction and enlightenment. The result of Constantine's toleration, however, was to make Christianity not only the official but the popular religion. Hence the character of the congregations changed, and there now came crowds of "baptized pagans" wishing (at best) to be interested, (at worst) to be amused. The preachers could not help being influenced, and many, perhaps most of them, were carried away by the new popularity and set out to answer the frivolous demands of their hearers with interesting, ephemeral, and eloquent sermons. In many places the sermon sank to the level of an entertainment, and the audience would even applaud the preacher. It was fortunate for the Church that there were two such men as Chrysostom and Augustine at the end of this century. In practice and in theory¹ they confirmed and developed Origen's work. Like him, they regarded preaching as essentially an exposition of the Scriptures. In their use of the homily (the form was used generally by now) they carried it a stage further by preaching more or less consecutively through whole books of the Bible.

But they were the last of the great patristic preachers, and after them there was a marked decay in preaching both in the East and West, which lasted for some hundreds of years. Although the form of the sermon did not vary generally from that set by Origen, the other side of his influence was shewn in the prevalence of wild allegorical interpretations of Scripture. The substance of preaching also departed from the Apostolic *kerygma*, and found refuge in exhortation to morality. Certainly preaching was never entirely dead during these five centuries, but (borrowing Hardy's phrase) we might say that it was not "alive enough to have strength to die." There were, however,

¹ They both wrote homiletics: Chrysostom, *Περί Ἱερεῦς*, Book 4. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book 6.

certain forces at work preparing for the great preaching movements of the later Middle Ages. We find injunctions on preaching for the clergy, such as the *Regula Canonicorum* of Chrodegang of Metz, in which preaching is ordered at least twice a month, if not every Sunday, and the *Capitularia* of the emperors themselves, in which the clergy are forbidden (Calvin seven hundred and fifty years before Calvin!) "to feign and preach to the people, out of their own understanding and not according to the sacred Scriptures, new or uncanonical things."¹ On the whole, missionary preaching was the most important factor in this period, though even here the understanding of the Apostolic Gospel was very imperfect.

In the eleventh century came a revival of preaching, partly owing to the revival of learning, partly to the ecclesiastical reforms of Pope Gregory VII, and partly to the enthusiasm engendered by the Crusades. In the Church there was a renewed interest in preaching on the part of both clergy and laity, and great preachers like St. Bernard could draw large crowds to their sermons. The form of the homily was still commonly used, though a more artificial arrangement began to show itself in the sermons of the scholars. Along with this, allegorical interpretation got more and more out of hand, and doctrine departed still further from the Fathers and the Scriptures. But the new life continued, and mediæval preaching flowered in the thirteenth century. The most potent force in its development was the foundation of the two religious orders of the Dominicans and Franciscans, which were both established as preaching orders. The friars' preaching was simple, lively, and straightforward; they generally used the vernacular, and were very popular with the common folk, who flocked in enormous crowds to hear some of their famous members. Indeed, Dargan says that Berthold and Antony of Padua drew larger crowds than Whitefield or Moody. In spite of weaknesses (such as the "yellow-press" sensationalism into which many of the friars degenerated) the very existence even of the orders shows a good apprehension of the place of preaching in the Church.

Besides this movement, there was another factor in the evolution of preaching in scholastic theology. The Schoolmen

¹ *Capitularia* for A.D. 789. As quoted Dargan, *op. cit.*, i. p. 134.

discarded the homily and employed a formal arrangement in their sermons. The scholastic form was universally used in academic sermons, and, since students were trained in this method in the universities,¹ it was widely used in the parishes as well, though the homily never died out entirely. Only the barest outline can be given here of this amazingly complicated and subtle form. The sermon was divided into five parts:

Theme, or text.

Ante theme, to awaken the people's interest.

Introduction of theme, to explain its meaning.

Division into parts.

Development of parts.

There was considerably more to it than this, however, for strict rules governed each of these sections. Thus, the theme should contain three outstanding words, and the division should be into three parts—and that in such a way that certain rhymes and rhythms should be employed. The punctiliousness of the scholastics seems ludicrous to us to-day, but their work was an important new departure in homiletics. And it must be remembered that even a Calvinist writer on the art of preaching, Andreas Hyperius, had close affinities with them.² Some writers regard the schoolmen as saviours of the sermon, in that they freed it from the bondage of the homily. But the form they gave it was far more rigid and artificial, and not so well suited to the purpose of preaching. "Such preaching," says Canon Smyth, "may be extremely clever and ingenious, but its connection with the Word of God, though undeniable, is purely superficial and purely formal."³

In the two centuries immediately before the Reformation, mediæval preaching decayed and lost its former seriousness of purpose and content. Many preachers, of course, were zealous in their office, but often enough preaching sank into humour and burlesque; and, as Richard Rothe says, "even earnest preachers did not consider this drollery beneath their dignity."⁴

¹ A number of homiletic text books—*Artes prædicandi*—were written for this purpose. For detailed treatment of scholastic preaching, see C. H. Smyth, *The Art of Preaching*, and (in full) T. M. Charland, *Artes Prædicandi*, and G. R. Owst: *Preaching in Mediæval England*.

² See pp. 123 f.

³ *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁴ *Geschichte der Predigt*, p. 261.