

## EDITORIAL

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In the March edition of 'LIFE AND WORK' the Editor wonders if congregations are sometimes "listening silently to ministerial statements (in the form of sermons) which would be none the worse for a bit of questioning" . Such a statement is bound to send shivers down the spine of any preacher who is deeply conscious of the divine given-ness of his subject matter, and firmly convinced of its faithfulness to the Word of God. The thought that such preaching might be worthy of questioning in a negative or critical sense must surely repel all who stand within the orthodox and biblical tradition and who are faithful to it in their pulpit utterances. Anything which would lend encouragement to those who have a totally relativistic and time-bound understanding of truth, and who deny the absolute and binding nature of divine revelation, is to be deplored. In 2 Timothy 4, 3 we read of the coming time "when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears....will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings..." The Church of Christ is not a debating hall; nor is it a place where one man's opinion is as valid as that of the next. Some are called by God to preach the Word; the great majority are summoned by God to listen to the Word. By one and all the Word is something to be believed and obeyed, not questioned. If the form or content of the sermon is to be dictated by those who are called only to listen, then true preaching shall have died.

But we must not be too hasty in sweeping aside all that the Editor of 'Life and Work' is saying. He goes on to outline two clear circumstances in which he feels there is a need of questioning:

Firstly, there is the occasion when the meaning of the sermon is unclear. In 2 Peter we read of Paul's letters that there are "some things in them hard to understand.." (3, 16) This is true, to a greater or lesser extent, of all God's Word - hence the necessity for preaching in order to elucidate it. But sometimes preachers seem incapable of expressing themselves in terms which the average man or woman can grasp. There is, of course, a basic Christian vocabulary which is unavoidable and which the people in the pews must assimilate, but there can be no justification for demanding of folk an acquaintance with technical theological or philosophical jargon, however appropriate that might be in the class-rooms and corridors of a theological faculty. And even where there is an absence of such jargon, the matter of the sermon can sometimes be so condensed (one of the principal pitfalls of preparing a full script), so imprecise (a pitfall of the more extemporary

style of preaching), or so diffuse (a common fault of both styles), that the hearers are reduced to a state of perplexity. In this whole context of meaning, a healthy spirit of questioning, outwith the act of worship, can only be for the good of everyone concerned - perhaps most of all the preacher himself. The exploration and further wrestling over the matter of a minister's sermons is surely, even where they are eminently accessible, one of the principal goals of the pastoral ministry. When a minister denies his people such an opportunity, he is failing in his duty to God, whose Word he is called to communicate.

But, secondly, there is the situation in which the listeners find that a sermon contains ministerial opinions which they "may find it hard to recognise as the preaching of the Word of God." This can happen where a preacher betrays gross ignorance of the true circumstances of his hearers or of what is going on in the world at large. But, more seriously, there are those who are prepared, either blatantly, or with the most sophisticated verbal equivocation, to deny or distort the great catholic doctrines which are fundamental to the Christian Faith - the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the Atonement etc. . Again, there are some preachers with 'bees in their bonnets' , either so etherial that they never say anything remotely related to the world of space and time, or so obsessed with socio-political matters that they leave out God altogether. Is it fair that a captive congregation should have any of the aberrations in this second category inflicted upon them week after week without ever being granted the opportunity to challenge what is being said? And is the Church not failing lamentably in that it does so little to grapple - even pastorally, to begin with - with the problems here identified?

There is perhaps a danger that the Editor of 'Life and Work' has opened up a Pandora's box, thereby multiplying the problems of those who are subjected to criticism precisely because they are faithfully preaching the Word of God, but to those who are not prepared to hear it. But there are also positive lessons to be derived by all from what he has written.