

ONE

Contemporary Criticisms

More than seventy-five years ago P.T. Forsyth started his lectures on *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* with the words: "It is, perhaps, an overbold beginning, but I will venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stands and falls".¹ A little later he calls preaching "the most distinctive institution in Christianity".² I think that at that time very few people, at least within the Protestant churches, would have contradicted him.

Of course, in those days, too, there were critical voices. Many people were dissatisfied with what they heard on Sundays. But their criticism concerned the *kind* of sermon they heard, rather than the sermon itself, the sermon as an institution. At that point they would most likely have agreed wholeheartedly with Forsyth's statement that with its preaching Christianity stands or falls. It is therefore not at all surprising that Forsyth nowhere in his book of over 250 pages offers an *apologia* for preaching as an indispensable part of the worship service of the church. He simply assumes it.

This situation actually prevailed right up to the sixties of this century. Admittedly, throughout the whole period many critical voices could be heard. At times the criticisms were even very severe. After World War I, for instance, Karl Barth severely criticized the preaching of his day. In a lecture on *The Need and Promise of Preaching*,³ in July 1922,

¹P.T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 1964, 1.

²*Loc. cit.*

³Originally published as 'Not und Verheißung der christlichen Verkündigung', in *Zwischen den Zeiten*, 1922, pp. 1-25. Afterwards published in English translation (by Douglas Horton) in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 1928.

delivered to a meeting of Swiss Reformed pastors, he expressed his fears that even Protestant ministers hardly knew any more what preaching really is. People come to church because they believe that something stupendous may happen there, namely, that God is present in his Word. But, asked Barth, do they really hear the Word of God? Or do they hear rather the minister's ideas about the Word of God, either orthodox or liberal ideas? Do they hear what they should hear, namely, God's redeeming and liberating Word in the real situation of their life? Or do they hear rather what the minister thinks their situation to be, to which he then adapts his message, either in an orthodox or in a liberal fashion? These critical questions which Barth and his friends posed to the preachers of their day were by no means superficial, but cut right to the very heart of the problem. Barth's own theology was virtually nothing else than one massive attempt to rediscover the secret of true biblical preaching. The same was true of other theologians of that period. However profound the differences may have been between Barth and Brunner, or Barth and Bultmann, or Barth and Tillich, it cannot be denied that in their theology they were all basically concerned with the self-same question: how can we preach today, so that modern man may really hear the Word of God? The same is also true of such post-Barthian and post-Bultmannian theologians as Gerhard Ebeling, Ernst Fuchs, Paul Van Buren, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and many others.⁴ None of them really questioned or questions the necessity of preaching as an indispensable function of the church.

Since the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties this situation has changed drastically following the appear-

⁴Cf. the following statement of Gerhard Ebeling: "The basic structure of theology is given by the movement from past proclamation to present proclamation. Accordingly, the task of theology is directed on the one hand towards past proclamation – and indeed there is a threefold division in this, its historical reference: to the Old Testament as testimony to the provisional proclamation, to the New Testament as testimony to the conclusive proclamation, and to church history as testimony to the subsequent proclamation. And on the other hand it is directed towards present proclamation – and indeed there is a twofold reference in this, its systematic and normative task: to what is to be proclaimed (dogmatics) and to the process of proclamation (practical theology)" (*Word and Faith*, 1963, 425). Here all theology is defined in terms of proclamation!

ance of a new critique. This critique was not aimed just at the form or even at the content of the sermon, but the whole phenomenon of the sermon itself was being questioned. In an article of 1959 A. Niebergall spoke of "*a deep sceptis[sic], a consuming doubt about the task and method, the meaning and purpose of the sermon in general*",⁵ and in his contribution to the Festschrift for Emil Brunner, also published in 1959, E. Schweizer asked the brutal question "whether or not the word 'preaching' has lost its original sound and has become useless".⁶

Now it cannot be said that similar questions had never been asked before. As a matter of fact they had. As early as 1880 the London *Times* began an extended discussion by asking: "Why not be content to worship only, when we go to church?". In 1890 a New England periodical created a stir with a symposium on: "Shall we go on preaching?" Around the turn of the century it was seriously questioned whether preaching would survive the new century. And in the 1920s a prominent Episcopal minister made headlines in the U.S.A. by demanding a "moratorium on preaching".⁷ Yet the situation today is different from that in 1880, 1890, 1900 or 1920 on at least two counts. In the first place, those earlier criticisms were exceptions to the rule. Hence the great stir they created. Today they are coming from all sides, not only from the social scientists and communications theorists, but also from the theologians, and above all from the ordinary people in the pew. All question the usefulness and validity of preaching in our modern day. The second difference is that the criticism goes much deeper. It questions the very existence of the sermon as an essential and indispensable part of the church's life and worship.

In this first chapter we shall analyse the various points of criticism put forward by these parties.

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⁵A. Niebergall, 'Die Predigt als Heilsgeschehen', originally published in *Monatschrift für Pastoraltheologie*, 48 (1959), pp. 1-17; afterwards republished in *Aufgabe der Predigt* (ed. Gert Hummel), 1971, pp. 295-320. The reference in the text is to found on p.295.

⁶E. Schweizer, in *Der Auftrag der Kirche in der modernen Welt*, Festgabe für Emil Brunner (ed. by P. Vogelsanger), 1959, 15.

⁷Cf. George E. Sweazey, *Preaching the Good News*, 1967, 7.

We begin with the critique of the *social scientists*. It is not surprising, of course, that they have made a special study of the sermon. It belongs to their task to investigate the place and role of the various institutions within human society. It is quite obvious that the church is such an institution and that the sermon, in its turn, is an important institution within the church. In their investigation of the sermon the social scientists point to several important aspects.

1. There has been a tremendous *shift in the position of the church within society*. Until the industrial revolution the church was at the centre of society. This appeared not only from the fact that the church building stood in the centre of each village and town, but even more from the fact that the whole culture was centred around the church, which functioned as the guardian of religion. Since the Middle Ages culture and religion had been intertwined, and this situation had not really been changed by the Reformation. Even in eighteenth century England we can still discover that the message preached by George Whitefield and John Wesley affected whole regions; eventually it even led to a national change of attitude to God. But, of course, these great Methodist preachers worked in pre-industrial Britain!⁸ A very definite change set in with the arrival of the industrial revolution. This was the more so, because it was accompanied by the steadily increasing impact of the Enlightenment, with its strong emphasis on the autonomy of man. Indeed, one could describe the Enlightenment as basically a movement of emancipation, seeking to liberate Western man from the authoritarian shackles of Scripture and the church. The result of this combination of factors was a process of secularization which deeply affected Western society and which in our day seems to have been almost brought to completion. In the course of this process the church has lost its hold upon large sections of society, notably the working class and the intelligentsia. In the meantime the church itself has largely become a typical middle class institution, the impact of which upon society as a whole has become minimal. In addition, due to changes in the rhythm of life,

⁸Cf. Gavin Reid, *The Gagging of God, The failure of the Church to communicate in the television age*, 1969, 22.

Sunday is no longer the important day of rest and worship. "Between staggered work schedules, on the one hand, and more long weekends devoted to recreation, on the other, regular church attendance has suffered markedly, especially in urban and suburban areas".⁹ Fewer and fewer people go to church and those who still do go often complain about the mediocrity of the sermons they hear.

2. There has been a tremendous *shift in our culture itself*. We already mentioned the continuing impact of the ideas of the Enlightenment, with their emphasis on the *autonomy* of man. Modern man who, to a large extent, is the final product of the Enlightenment movement, does not want to be told what is true and worthwhile, he wants to discover it for himself and, accordingly, he also wants to determine for himself what he should do. In Bonhoeffer's well-known phrase: man has "come of age". According to the social scientists this has far-reaching consequences for the sermon too. H.D. Bastian once put it thus: "Man not only has an ear, but a tongue as well!" Instead of being at the receiving end only he wants to join in the discussion. But the sermon provides no opportunity for discussion. As far as its structure is concerned, it typically belongs to the old paternalistic cultural pattern of the past, in which the preacher was the pastor who feeds his flock. But modern man does not want to be treated as a passive sheep that has to be fed. He wants to know *why* it is worthwhile to believe what the preacher tells him. He wants to hear arguments and then make up his own mind about their validity.

Moreover, believing is not a once-for-all happening, but a process in which the faith of the believer, by means of ever new experiences, continually changes and develops. In particular in our modern world with its abundance of beliefs, life views, ideologies, etc., the believer cannot make up his mind in a once-for-all decision, but to believe means to be engaged in what the German sociologist H. Schelsky calls a process of "Dauerreflexion", of continuing reflection.¹⁰

⁹Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit, The Renewal of Biblical Preaching*, 1978, 40.

¹⁰H. Schelsky, 'Ist die Dauerreflexion institutionalisierbar? Zum Thema einer modernen Religionssoziologie', in *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik*, I (1957), pp. 153-174. Cf. H. Goddijn, *Sociologie van kerk en godsdienst*, 1966, 59ff.

All this means that modern man increasingly becomes impatient, when he encounters structures that allow him to be a spectator only. He wants to be regarded as a partner rather than as a dependent and subordinate follower. Accordingly, he demands structures of communication that offer scope for participation not only to officer-bearers, but to members of the congregation as well. It is obvious that, within this frame of thinking, discussion is a much more suitable means of communication than the sermon. L.E. Keck describes this contemporary mood as follows: "If something is worth communicating, don't spoil it by preaching it! Let it emerge in the give-and-take of the group; celebrate it by music, dance or drama. In preaching, people are as passive as chickens on a roost – and perhaps just as awake. For whatever reason, the authority of the preacher has become problematic."¹¹

3. There is still another point of criticism often mentioned by the social scientists. Modern life, they say, has become *far too complicated* for a sermon prepared by one single individual. In pre-industrial society the minister probably knew all his parishioners and was acquainted with their overall situation: their family life, their working life, their recreational life (in as far as they had any!), etc. In most cases this is no longer so. The old situation may linger in some rural areas, but even there life is changing fast. Most people in urban and suburban areas live in various circles (family, job, club, church, etc.), which no longer overlap but are quite separate. Even a husband and wife often find it difficult to have a clear idea of what the partner is doing at his or her job. For a minister it is simply impossible to be acquainted with all these circles.

In addition, we are living in an age in which human knowledge increases at such a speed that no individual can keep abreast of all developments. Take, for instance, the increase of scientific knowledge. According to some experts, the knowledge of mankind doubled in the period between 1800 and 1900. In the next fifty years it doubled again. Since then it has doubled every fifteen years.¹² Now it may be said

¹¹Leander E. Keck, *op. cit.*, 41.

¹²Wolfgang Bartholomäus, *Kleine Predigtlehre*, 1974, 13.

that it is not the task of the minister to know and speak about all kinds of scientific developments. This is undoubtedly true. Yet among his parishioners he may find people who are deeply involved in these developments, and should not he, as their minister, at least be aware of the many existential and ethical issues they face?

The problem is aggravated still more by the fact that the life of the minister himself is becoming so complex that there is hardly any time left for preaching and the preparation required for it. On the basis of an extensive study of the lives of 1,600 clergymen of twenty Protestant denominations all through the U.S.A. Samuel W. Bizzard concluded even in 1955 that the traditional role of 'preacher' in Protestantism is of "declining importance. It is being relegated to a less important position, and the roles of pastor, counsellor, organizer, administrator, and promotor are consuming the major portion of the minister's time."¹³ How can a man in such a position deal with the concrete problems of his listeners, let alone with the many macro-ethical problems that vex our world? He most certainly cannot do it on his own, but needs the assistance of the members of his congregation who often know much more about these problems than he. In other words, there is hardly any place left for our traditional Protestant form of monologue preaching.

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Similar criticisms come from the side of the modern *communication experts*. They too are naturally interested in the sermon, because it is still one of the most common means of communication. Their evaluation and assessment, however, is largely negative.

1. They point to the great *changes* that in recent years have taken place (and that are still taking place) in the whole *structure of communication*. All kinds of new media have been introduced and each medium exerts its own influence

¹³Ilion T. Jones, *Principles and Practice of Preaching*, 1956, 28. Cf. Keck, *op. cit.*, 15.

upon its user. One of the merits of Marshall McLuhan has been that he has drawn our attention to this fact.¹⁴ First he has pointed out that the invention of book printing brought about a tremendous change in the way people absorb information. The printed page presents its case in a logical, sequential, linear fashion. It requires concentration and appeals to and develops the rational in man rather than the intuitive.¹⁵ The Protestant sermon started shortly after the invention of printing and it is no coincidence that it showed similar characteristics. It too placed much emphasis on the logical, well-developed argument and also appealed to man's rational rather than his intuitive faculty.

In our day, however, the new mass media, such as the modern popular newspaper, advertising and television, have become dominant in the Western culture (and at tremendous speed the same is happening in the non-Western cultures). McLuhan has characterized these new media as 'cool', over against the older ones as 'hot'. A book is a typical example of a 'hot' medium. It presents much material, which as we have seen, is set out in a clear, logical fashion. It requires little interpretation, but does demand concentrated attention. Television, on the other hand, is a typical example of a 'cool' medium. Although it also presents much material, it does this in quite a different way. It dumps a mass of facts and pictures into the lap of the viewer, requiring him not to search for the information, but rather to select from it whatever appeals to him. Putting him, so to speak, in the 'global village', it does not ask him to absorb a well-documented and well-ordered argument, but rather (as in the village of old) it invites him to participate in the process of learning that is set into motion by the non-linear presentation of the material.

It cannot be denied, I think, that there is a great deal of truth in McLuhan's analysis. Nor can it be denied that the modern mass media have deeply affected the way in which contemporary man obtains his information. "Indeed, in our

¹⁴Cf. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*, 1967. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village*, 1968.

¹⁵Cf. Gavin Reid, *op. cit.*, 27.

schools today new teaching methods are exploiting the non-linear, non-sequential means of conveying information. The class room is becoming the village with learning gleaned from projects and a high degree of participation from the pupil."¹⁶

It is no wonder that communication theorists who believe that this development will continue and even be speeded up by the new electronic technology, have a rather low appreciation of the traditional sermon. It seems to belong to a past period. Like the book, it presents its case primarily in a logical, sequential, linear fashion and appeals to the rational rather than the intuitive in man. But the man to whom this appeal goes out has changed in the meantime. Although he still reads books, he essentially belongs to the new communication era, the era of the 'cool' media.¹⁷

2. There is, according to the communication experts, still another inherent weakness in the traditional sermon. It belongs to the very structure of the sermon that it is a *monologue*, a one-way communication. There is hardly any feedback. The preaching minister has no real means to gauge the reactions of his listeners and to make the necessary corrections and adjustments in his approach. H.D. Bastian says in his book *Verkündigung und Verfremdung* (Proclamation and Alienation) that preaching, because it is non-cooperative communication, is no longer suitable for our time. It is like using a kerosene lamp in the age of electric light.¹⁸ Similar statements abound in present-day homiletical literature. Ilion T. Jones quotes Marshall L. Scott who, twenty-five years ago, at a meeting of the Association of Seminary Professors in the Practical Field, pointed out that in labour-industry relations "one-way communication ... is as outmoded as the model T", and added that traditional preaching will be less and less effective with men who are accustomed to two-way communication in other areas.¹⁹ Of course, one can put it much more bluntly too, as in the following definition of the sermon: it is "a monstrous

¹⁶Gavin Reid, *op. cit.*, 31.

¹⁷Cf. Gavin Reid, *op. cit.*, 32ff.

¹⁸H.-D. Bastian, *Verkündigung und Verfremdung*, 1965, 58ff.

¹⁹Ilion T. Jones, *op. cit.*, 30.

monologue by a moron to mutes".²⁰ But however one formulates it, it all boils down to the same; preaching, as we are used to it, has had its time.

It is not surprising, therefore, that recent years have seen attempts to find new forms of preaching which may help to overcome this inherent weakness of the traditional sermon. Sometimes it is done in the form of a dialogue between two persons during the worship service. In other cases members of the congregation assist the minister in the preparation of his sermon or receive the opportunity to ask questions after the sermon has been delivered.²¹ In this way, it is often argued, we can also do more justice to the Reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers.

3. Closely related to the foregoing two points is the third point of criticism coming from the communication experts. They point to the *low degree of effectiveness* of the traditional sermon. Of course, this too is not an altogether new discovery. Already at the end of the nineteenth century Henry Ward Beecher was complaining that "the churches of the land are sprinkled all over with bald-headed old sinners whose hair has been worn off by the friction of countless sermons that have been aimed at them and have glanced off and hit the man in the pew behind".²² The modern communication theorist would agree with him, apart from the last part. For he does not even believe that the man in the pew behind is hit (if there is a man sitting there at all)!

I must immediately add that this scepticism as to the effectiveness of preaching is not without foundation. Several recent studies-in-depth have shown that on the whole listeners remember very little of the average sermon. In his book, *The Empty Pulpit*, Clyde Reid states: "Preaching does not communicate". "Testing lay persons from a number of churches in the Detroit metropolitan area, Parsons found that the intended content of the sermon is very poorly communicated". He found that in meetings immediately following the worship service, *fewer than one-third* of the persons tested could give a reasonably clear statement of the

²⁰R.E.O. White, *A Guide to Preaching*, 1973, 5.

²¹Cf. J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, 1972, 261ff.

²²Quoted by Ilion T. Jones, *op. cit.*, 31.

primary 'question' of the sermon or the 'answer' suggested in the message.²³ In another research project the results were even worse: only 21 per cent of the 271 persons (who all felt that the sermon was either 'superior' or 'good') could reflect the minister's *central message* clearly and accurately.²⁴ A similar conclusion is reached in a Dutch study.²⁵ The author discovered that, even when people said they enjoyed the sermon, they quite often did not remember the content! At this point it could be objected that the cognitive level is not the only one to take into account. A sermon could well touch the listener on another level, for instance, the emotional or affective level. Undoubtedly, this is true. But one of the disquieting conclusions of the studies mentioned before is that on the whole sermons rarely lead to a change of mind or change in behaviour. Reid, for instance, is very pessimistic on this point. And he is not the only one, as appears from the fact that a conference of theologians in the U.S.A. also concluded that the sermon is "one of the least satisfying methods for extending religion's message to outsiders".²⁶

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Unfortunately, we have not yet come to the end of our sermon litany. In addition to the social scientists and the communication theorists, there is still a third group of people who voice severe criticism of the sermon. Perhaps they are the most unlikely members of the critical choir, for they are *theologians*, i.e., preachers themselves.

Again the critique takes various forms.

1. Especially among theologians of the post-Barthian era in Germany (but also in other countries, e.g. the U.S.A.), there is a rather widespread *reaction against the high view of preaching* advocated by Karl Barth and other champions of the so-called Theology of the Word of God. The post-

²³Clyde H. Reid, *The Empty Pulpit*, 1967, 29.

²⁴*Op. cit.*, 30.

²⁵C.J. Straver, *Masscommunicatie en godsdienstige beïnvloeding*, 1967.

²⁶Clyde H. Reid, *op. cit.*, 32.

Barthian theologians do not deny that dogmatically Barth's view is correct. On the contrary, they agree with him that our preaching can become the Word of God only "where and when it pleases God". But what they reject is that this is all that is to be said about our preaching. In the Preface to a symposium about the theory and practice of preaching the authors begin with the following quotation from Gerhard Ebeling's *The Nature of Faith*: "We have to bring a certain measure of good will to the average sermon, if we are not to be bored or furious, sarcastic or melancholy in our reactions. What an expenditure of effort is put into the preaching of the Christian faith up and down the land! But – with exceptions – is it not the institutionally assured platitudes which are preached?"²⁷ The post-Barthians wholeheartedly agree with these words and draw the conclusion that we should stop taking our homiletical starting point in such beautiful dogmatic views. In homiletics we have not simply to assume that our sermons participate in the mysterious activity of the Word of God, but we have to take them seriously for what they really are: human attempts to communicate the Gospel. Homiletics is quite simply the study of this particular kind of communication, and as a kind of communication it has to be tested by the laws of the science of communication. If such a test shows that the sermon is a totally ineffective kind of communication, we have to accept the consequences and replace it by more suitable means of communication. Some, though not all, of the post-Barthians do indeed come to this conclusion. H.D. Bastian, for instance, even goes so far as to question the whole concept of the worship service. According to him we may have to look for entirely different forms of proclamation and worship.

2. Another point of criticism, also coming from the side of the theologians, is that the traditional sermon is *far too introverted* in character. It concentrates almost exclusively on the religious needs of the individual member of the congregation, thus confirming and even supporting the social

²⁷Gerhard Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith*, 1961, 15. This statement is quoted in *Zur Theorie und Praxis der Predigtarbeit*, Predigtstudien Beiheft I, edited by Ernst Lange (in cooperation with Peter Krusche and Dietrich Rössler), 1968, 8.

and political *status quo*, while in actual fact our world cries out for new social and political structures. According to the advocates of so-called *political theology*, the church should first of all act as an agency for social and political change. Christ's gospel of the Kingdom is primarily a call to break down the structures of injustice that abound in our world, and to work for a new world of justice and peace for all. Both the traditional sermon and the traditional worship service are inadequate for this purpose. We have to look for new, alternative forms. Some years ago Dorothee Sölle and her friends experimented with such new forms in Cologne. Instead of the ordinary evening service they held meetings in which the main emphasis was on information, discussion and planning for action.²⁸ There was no preaching, but all participants were free to make their own contribution, which eventually led to the formulation of a plan for action. These experiments, however, have been rather short-lived, most likely because they were too radical. More successful at present, at least in Europe, are the alternative congregations which call themselves "basis groups", consisting largely of politically motivated Christians. They do retain the idea of the worship service and of the sermon, but preaching is no longer the prerogative of the minister or the leader, and its main purpose is no longer the building up of the personal faith of the individual believer, but rather the preparation of the whole congregation for social and/or political action.

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So far we have mentioned three categories of critics: the social scientists, the communication experts and the theologians. But the main category has not yet been mentioned. That is *the man and the woman in the pew!* They are the people who more than any one else (with the exception of the minister) are involved in and affected by preaching. What do they think about the sermon? Usually their voice is

²⁸Cf. *Politisches Nachtgebet in Köln*, edited by Dorothee Sölle and Fulbert Steffensky, Vol. I, 1969, Vol. II, 1971.

hardly heard. Here too we find a silent majority. But in this case silence cannot be taken to mean approval. In fact, there is much criticism among the listeners. Most of them do not object so much to the fact that preaching is still an integral part of the worship service, but they object to the *quality* of what they hear. Their main complaint is that many sermons are *so terribly boring*. Actually, this is the most crushing criticism of all! For let us face it, the church claims that its message of God's redemption in Jesus Christ is the most exciting message that has ever been proclaimed. Yet the people in the pew often feel utterly bored, when their minister speaks about this message. And since they have no real say in the matter – they are literally at the receiving end – they can make their disappointment and their dissatisfaction heard in only one way: by staying away!

Naturally, this is not the only reason for the current decline in church attendance and church membership. There are other factors as well. There is the growing impact of secularism. There is competition from the mass media and from recreational opportunities. There is also plain unbelief. Yet we should not underestimate the fact that many church people are deeply dissatisfied with the preaching of their minister. Apart from unbelief, boredom is the greatest enemy of the sermon.

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When we take account of all that has been said so far, we can only conclude that the situation is rather gloomy and that the future of the sermon does not look very bright. How bad it looks was brought home to me on Good Friday, 1980, when I listened to the Dutch radio. In the evening a Lutheran service was broadcast. It was a complete service, including the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Only one part was lacking: the sermon! The service of the Word was limited to two Scripture readings from the Gospel. For the rest there was much singing and praying, all leading to the service of the Lord's Table. But no sermon! I could not help

thinking of David's complaint after the death of Saul and Jonathan: "How are the mighty fallen!" (1 Sam. 1:19).

I recognize that even today there are still many people who speak highly of preaching. But – the problem is that these people are usually theologians, i.e. preachers themselves! In his book, *The Renewal of Preaching*, published in 1969, David James Randolph says that the civil rights movement in the U.S.A. has brought to light again that "preaching is the pivot on which the Christian revolution turns".²⁹ On the first page of his book he even dares to suggest that "the tired criticisms to the effect that preaching is passé, that the day of the preacher is past, that preaching is merely an 'auxiliary' function of the church – all this prattle about preaching's being obsolete is itself becoming obsolete".³⁰ Another homiletician, J. Daniel Baumann, acknowledges in the introduction of his book, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, published in 1972, that there is much criticism of preaching,³¹ but then replies with the personal testimony: "I have a profound faith in preaching".³² He supports this testimony by pointing out that the Bible is on his side and that church history validates his faith in preaching. He further believes, with John Killinger, that "people are not tired of preaching but of non-preaching, of the badly garbled, anachronistic, irrelevant drivel that has in so many places passed for preaching because there was no real preaching to measure it against".³³ Other writers, usually theologians too, claim that if we had a revival of oratory, there would be a bright future for preaching. George E. Sweazey, for example, rejects the statement: "One-way communication is as outmoded as the Model-T", out of hand. He simply declares: "Apparently the author has not seen the papers", and then goes on to say, among other things, that "it was by endless oratory and public indoc-

²⁹David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching, A new homiletic based on the new hermeneutic*, 1969, 3.

³⁰*Op. cit.*, 1.

³¹J. Daniel Baumann, *op. cit.*, 11. "Preaching is anathematized as boring, dull, uninteresting, irrelevant, void of courage, and incomprehensible".

³²*Loc. cit.*

³³The quotation is from John Killinger, *The Centrality of Preaching in the Total Task of the Ministry*, 1969, 21.

trination that the masses in North Vietnam, Cuba and China were made Communist".³⁴ I wonder whether Mr. Sweazey would still say this after reading in the papers of the many Cubans who have tried to escape from their communist paradise. Apparently this oratory was not very effective either!

I do not think that we can lightly brush off all these criticisms by suggesting some easy solution or by uttering beautiful phrases about the deep mystery of preaching. These criticisms have to be taken seriously, for the simple reason that they contain much truth. For example, it is a fact that our sermons often produce little effect. It is a fact that too often – to use the phrase of Ebeling – our sermons are little less than "institutionally assured platitudes". But, secondly, we have to take these criticisms seriously also for the sake of all those people who still attend our church services regularly. Kathleen Nyberg rightly observes: "When we consider the constant barrage of written and spoken words endured by modern man, one wonders with surprise about the large number of people who submit themselves Sunday after Sunday to the words of a preacher ... The sermon deserves to be taken seriously, therefore, and ought to receive first-class attention and labor".³⁵ And finally, there is still a third reason why we cannot and may not disregard these criticisms, namely, the fact that the decline or even dismissal of preaching would be detrimental to the life of the church. It has been rightly observed that the church has been most healthy when its pulpit was robust,³⁶

³⁴George E. Sweazey, *op. cit.*, 8.

³⁵Kathleen Neill Nyberg, *The Care and Feeding of Ministers*, 1961, 104. In this book Mrs. Nyberg wrote to other ministers' wives and emphasized that there are periods in a minister's life when he needs undistracted time for his sermon preparation. In particular in our day, when people are exercising "much prerogative in the matter of what they will and will not hear", we must make sure that any decline in attendance at our preaching services is not due to a lack of "first class attention and labor" on our part. Cf. James Earl Massey, *The Sermon in Perspective, A Study of Communication and Charisma*, 1976, 32f.

³⁶Cf. J. Daniel Baumann, *op. cit.*, 12. He quotes the following statement from H.C. Brown Jr., H. Gordon Clinard, and Jesse J. Northcutt, *Steps to the Sermon*, 1963, 28/29: "Whenever Christianity has made substantial progress, great preaching has led the way. In the history of Christianity there have been five great centuries of growth and development. These same five periods are the five centuries of preaching: the first with the apostles, the fourth with Chrysostom and Augustine,

and that across the centuries, whenever the church has been vital, there was a strong emphasis on preaching.³⁷ All revivals, including the greatest revival of all time, the sixteenth century Reformation, were the result of vigorous, Bible-oriented preaching.³⁸ It is therefore of vital importance for the church of our day to engage in a heart-searching reflection upon its preaching.

This book is intended as a small contribution to this reflection. It will be evident that it is impossible within its short compass to deal with the problem in its totality. We shall concentrate on some major aspects. In the second chapter we shall ask the fundamental question: *What really is preaching?* The third and fourth will deal respectively with: *Preaching and the Bible*, and *Preaching and the situation of the listener*, while finally we shall consider: *When is preaching relevant?*

the thirteenth with Francis of Assisi and Dominic, the sixteenth with Luther and Calvin, and the nineteenth with Spurgeon and Maclaren. Contrariwise, whenever preaching has declined, Christianity has become stagnant. In the Dark Ages, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in most countries preaching was weak and ineffective."

³⁷Cf. George E. Sweazey, *op. cit.*, 6f. "The flaming movements have been kindled and kept ablaze by preachers such as Ambrose, Augustine, Savonarola, Hus, Luther, Calvin and Wesley. Protestantism has never found a substitute for preaching, and it never can. Its whole life is bound up with the personal communication of Christian truth and guidance within the fellowship of worship. The health and vigor of a church will always be related to the health and vigor of its preaching".

³⁸Cf. R.E.O. White, *op. cit.*, 7f. "The truth is, that Protestantism flowered in preaching, as has every great Christian movement. The great Awakening, the Evangelical Revival in England with Wesley and his band of preachers, the Welsh Revival and the Scottish, all soared into fine sermons. The whole modern missionary movement may look back with gratitude to a single sermon preached by William Carey at Nottingham in 1792...And the same is true of each great evangelistic renewal; names like Wesley, Whitefield, Rowlands, Haldane, Drummond, Sankey, Moody, Graham leave no doubt that preaching has its place in God's plan of redemption."