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The supreme aim in preaching

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Thesis:

The Supreme Aim in Preaching.

Fred C. Pillsbury. '86

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By Fred C. Pillsbury.

Never was there so much preaching as now. We have but to notice the multiplied accursions to the regular clergy, the agencies at work in lay circles - most of them of recent origin - the praying bands, the Christian Associations, the shouting regiments of the Salvation Army and we shall readily agree that, in some sense, religion is preached - heralded as never before.

Never were men addressed, in the name of preaching, from so many different standpoints as they are to-day. Recent times, more than any other, have witnessed a kind of religious exploration. New

issues have been urged; new theories have been paraded - and sometimes the skeleton from the closet. The principles of Buddhism find admirers on Back Bay. Christian Science is boasting in the name of religion. Almost numberless shades of religious belief, under the term "Independents" are pressed upon the popular mind. Add to all these the whole scale, from the lowest to the highest conceptions in evangelical preaching, and surely we take no venture in affirming that religious thought never was promulgated from so many standpoints as now.

The most casual observer cannot fail to mark a notable

unrest among the churches. Why do we not see greater results under the gospel preached from a hundred thousand pulpits? Probably the spirit of this question never occupied a more prominent place in Christian thought than at the present time. Some rashly infer that the church is disheartened at the state of things; not so. The question is not born of despondency, but of unflagging energy. Were ever the sinews of the church tugging at the question as to-day? Pen minds, on every hand, are filling the pages of books, homiletic reviews, magazines and religious papers, with symposiums, essays, letters, on "The Power of the Pulpit," "What Can the Church do to invigorate

the Ministry?" "How to Reach The Masses." and kindred themes ad infinitum. We discern here, not the sigh of despair, but the travail which must precede, and shall be followed by, new life.

These things all go to show that, if the Gospel is ever to be preached so as to effect the whole purpose of Christ, something more than random shots will have to be fired.

A clearly defined aim is of prime importance. It is not the subject of a sermon so much as the aspect which really moulds the character of the discourse. He only speaks forcibly who has clearly in mind the end to be gained. Clarity and sharpness of aim, therefore,

must be essential to any real power in preaching. Even though the aim be not the most worthy, the fact that the preacher has a clear, definite aim of some sort, will of itself afford him a certain kind of power which he could not otherwise have. How much more shall he be guided with power who is consciously guided by the highest aim!

Every sincere attempt to realize this will involve the banishment of every unworthy object. More than this - it demands an unsparring analysis of our motives; for he, who has not thus sought out the mal-incentives which were present to his mind, may be surprised to find that he had aimed -

unconsciously at being well received that while, on the whole, he meant to do good, yet he felt obliged, at all events, to fulfill the "expectation" of certain people, so that he was swayed by the "demands" of people of "taste" quite as much as by the hope of accomplishing any definite good. Although he did not dare define it too clearly to his self-consciousness, it was none the less real for being firmly held. How many, by this process, would awake to the consciousness that they had been beset at the same time by this would-be purpose of good, and this outward limitation, endeavoring to hold each by the hand: "until they answered to the 'house divided against itself'?"

But this double motive stamps everything with uncertainty, and therefore with weakness.

We will dismiss all confessedly unworthy aims, and deal only with those which have been looked upon as fit to occupy the highest place. We may look at the matter, in turn, from at least three different points of view, for even the mass of evangelical preachers are not a unit in their conception of what should constitute the highest aim in their public presentation of the gospel:

One class holds that the chief object of the preacher should be to unfold, as far as possible, the nature of God, emphasizing especially his wisdom and goodness. A celebrated preacher

of this city may perhaps be
justly regarded as the champion
of this ^{idea} of preaching. His public
utterances, and the general
trend of his work show that
he is dominated all the way
by this idea. We have heard
him state distinctly that if
men were properly instructed
about God, especially in
regard to his wisdom and
goodness, forthwith their
lives would go out in love
to him. To the mind of this
man there is but one thing
to be done, and that is to
instruct men about God.

This is the object of his teaching
(for his preaching naturally takes
the form of teaching) and he is not
alone. Multitudes of preachers
sit at his feet and pattern

more or less fully after his
model. The end of this
class, logically followed up, is
that truth will be embraced
at sight. Now this idea of
preaching assumes that really
the chief barrier between man
and God is that of ignorance.
Assault that and beat that down
and everything is gained. But
what of those who have ransack-
ed the field of literature high
and low till every intellectual
conception of God was published
to the world has come under their
observation, and still they remain
abdurate sinners? What of the
multitudes of men hardened
in sin, upon whose minds
the truth has borne down
with inconceivable force, and
who yet are unwilling to yield.

to what they know to be right, but fly in the teeth of their deepest convictions every day? What of those who look into the lives of their own lives, and then holding their thoughts on the most solemn warnings of God's word, declare, "It is true, it is all true," and yet, instead of loving God, turn again to their horrible mode of life to invent new sins? To that nation of preaching, which makes it the supreme aim to give instruction about God's nature and attributes, know not how to cope with the desperate nature of sin. Put over against the yoke of bondage which is upon the race, and weighed in that balance, it is found wanting.

A still larger number of

preachers, and perhaps the majority, have, as the main object of their ministry, the general idea of making men better, transforming them - saving them. Now this looks well - sounds well, but when we come to look into it, we find it like Noah's Ark - capable of carrying all manner of specimens. The expression, saving or transforming men, is too broad, too equivocal to be a good goal. It affords us free scope for the exercise of that singular tendency to disloyalty in our nature - the too free exercise of our own will. Even with this before us, as the supreme object of our work, there is nothing about such an object to forbid

are setting about the work
as we please. Plato and
Socrates sought to transform
men. There is nothing in
the aim of the preacher,
thus stated, to determine, in
anywise, his method of pro-
cedure. More than this,
it permits every one to form
his own opinion, or conception,
as to the nature and extent
of this transformation. It leaves
the whole question open, and
accounts for much of the
weakness which characterizes
the preaching of the present time.
It is if a hundred sculptors
should undertake to gather, from
history and tradition, a correct
idea of the personal appearance
of Alexander the Great, and each
independently should set about

the task of producing, in the form of a statue, his conception of this form and features - the very bearing and expression of the man - Each would be found to differ from all the rest in some particular. - So it is with this idea of the highest aim in preaching. Transformed character is a variable quantity, and will be sure to take a different form in the minds of different preachers.

Mr. Beecher is a good representative of this class. He distinctly states, in his "Yale Lectures on Preaching," that the sole aim of his ministry has been "reconstructed manhood." That has been his battle cry all his life long. In his strange career we see that

this aim has afforded him much of the latitude which we have affirmed such a conception might give. All the heresies, deflections, vagaries with which he has been charged, even his recent courting of revolution, are all reduced to consistency in his own statement of the supreme aim of his Ministry.

Again: The holding of such a conception of the highest end and aim of preaching permits all kinds of looseness of ideas in respect to God's word, and the interpretation of it. One might call in question, or even repudiate, large portions of scripture - smile on the idea of future punishment, and contend for a score of

probations, as to that matter,
and go on aiming at the
transformation of men.

Not is this all. The most
insidious fault of such an
aim, thus loosely stated, is
that it is very likely to
give to man the foremost
place. Not man but God
should be the center of the
system. "To the law and
to the testimony." Let us
appeal to the sermon at Pen-
tecost. This will lead us to
the third, and final view
of the matter in question.

These considerations may
well lead us to enquire into
the aim of the sermon preached
on the day of Pentecost. In
the first place it was attend-
ed by marvellous power - just

what we want to attend our sermons. It did tremendous execution. In the second place it was given under divine inspiration. And thirdly, this sermon undoubtedly served as the key note of the apostolic preaching. An analysis of that sermon cannot fail to aid us in determining what should constitute the supreme aim in preaching.

The apostle began his discourse by showing that the events of the morning transpired in fulfillment of prophecy. He then discourses concerning Christ, his death and resurrection, and quotes a portion of the sixteenth Psalm, showing that David wrote in relation to Christ, and through the gift of

prophecy spoke of his death,
resurrection, and glorification,
recognizing him as Lord. The
conclusion of the apostle's ser-
mon reveals unmistakably
his aim. "Therefore," said he,
"let all the house of Israel
know assuredly, that God hath
made that same Jesus, whom
ye have crucified, both
Lord and Christ." This
ringing proclamation, that Jesus
is Lord, is also a challenge
to submission. Here flares
out what God designed to be
the supreme end and aim
of all preaching, namely,
complete, irreversible, personal
submission to Christ, as a
personal Saviour and Lord.

This view harmonizes with
the nature of religion itself.

The very philosophy of religion demands, as the first great prerequisite of normal religion, a complete self-surrender; and so, from a philosophical standpoint, only that preacher can be said to have the true, and supreme aim in his work who keeps to the front the idea of personal self-surrender to a personal Saviour, Jesus, the Christ.

Moreover, the preacher who cherishes such an object will find himself, not only in accord with, but reinforced by the great doctrines of scripture - the doctrine of repentance, and the offices of the Holy Ghost.

He will find that he who comes convicted of sin has preceded him in this matter, and made his voice heard at the

door of every sinner's heart.

Such a preacher will find himself in agreement with the personal element in the scriptures. Everywhere the Bible honors the personal idea. It makes the terrible struggle with sin a thing personal to every one of us. In the whole matter of Salvation the personal element is made unequivocally prominent, from every point of view - subjectively, objectively and instrumentally. Thus the nature of sin, and the meaning of Salvation stand over against each other vivified, intensified, and perfectly consistent with this highest possible aim in the proclamation of the Gospel.

Nothing less than the lofty purpose of bringing man into complete obedience to Christ

is admitted in the divine commission to go & disciple all nations. In short, the very gist of the command is the divine idea of the true end of all preaching.

Unquestioning obedience to Christ—here is the goal upon which the eye can be fixed and the race run without wavering.

Such an aim is all-inclusive. It takes the whole train of spiritual blessings in its track. In fact, what many preachers have looked upon as worthy aims in their ministry are seen to be blessed results secured through the conscious pursuit of this grand aim now before us.

This our objective point, sharply defined and set before the mind will be.

found to be conducive to every
thing which should characterize
the ambassador of Christ.
Such a high purpose cannot
fail to give zeal - courage -
power, to the minister of the
gospel. He is commissioned, and
equipped to conquer. He stands
not on a par with men
who are merely searching for
truth, or even tracking truth to
others. His business is conquest.
Every soul brought into sub-
mission to Christ is an addi-
tional trophy to swell the
glory of his final triumph
before His King. His zeal
burns afresh at every step
of the way. The ever-repeated
commission is ringing in
his soul. His heart leaps
at the sound of a perpetual

and imperial, "Go." His courage
will be undaunted. It will
keep pace with his convictions.
A thing sorely needed to-day
is a courage that steps clear
to the front edge of our convictions.
The candidate for popular ^{favor} can
not have it. He alone can
have it who waits only for
the command of his king.

Such a man could not be
hired to crouch in a casemate
and squint through a loop-hole,
watching his chance to fire an
occasional shot. He prefers to
stand in the thick of the fight
and take the consequences: witness
Finney, Moody, Sam. Jones,
and Dr. J. O. Peck. Such
a ministry, history has always
marked as one of power, and
who shall say that such

a purpose, faithfully adhered to, would not increase ten-fold the present power of the Christian pulpit? If one man, under God, swayed by such a motive, compels the world to look on with wonder, the great host of Christian ministers, under the same conditions, would lift the nations off from their hinges of sin, and bring them over into immortality.

Finally, the aim of securing immediate submission in the soul to the complete Lordship of Jesus, is the complete corrective in all the world for the modern evil tendencies in the church. There is not a single mischievous tendency but would be checked by it. It would bring us to a faith-anchor sufficient to hold us

Without such a mooring, men
are prone to drift - doubt -
speculate. Many dare not
allude to the final judgment
because they cannot be supposed
to comprehend God's great thoughts in
regard to Eschatology. They dare
not believe in the efficacy of
prayer, in real whole-souled
fashion, because they have not
critically inspected the Divine
Administration from end to end.
They cannot believe in the atone-
ment until they have explain-
ed the atonement. But this personal
relation to Christ, which impresses
a man to bring others at once
into the same relation, brings
unquestioning assurance to the
soul in relation to these mighty
truths. Philanthropy and good-will
is not this the tendency, if left

to ourselves? Six grains of philosophy,
and ten grains of personal opinion,
to one grain of gospel - tickling the ear
and ruining the soul - But what a
transformer of all this is the Petrine
idea of the true aim of preaching! Let it
be enthroned, and how those pulpits
which are the scene of empty rhetorical
conversations - firebrands of blank charges -
would be turned into ringing
batteries to destroy the works of the
devil! - No uncertain sound; no ret-
rograding. The conscious aim of
bringing people into submission to
Christ, keeps the preacher himself
humble, and constant, and true! Amid
all the sad shifting and drifting
with "every wind of doctrine," he
will remain unmoved.

Class of 1886.