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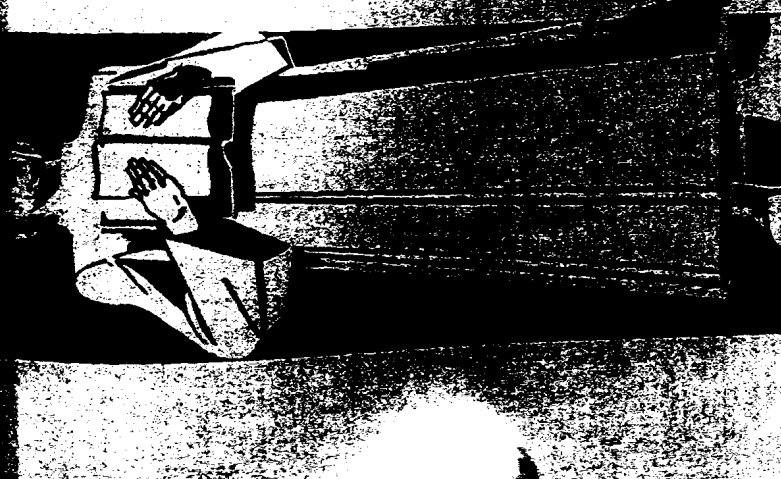
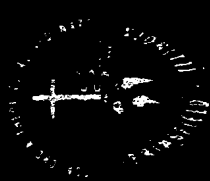
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Ignorance About Preaching

WILLIAM F. MEYER

IN A RECENT ARTICLE (*Ignorant Preachers*) which appeared in the January 2, 1970 issue of *Christianity Today*, the author attempted to demonstrate that the reason for non-Biblical preaching in American today is simply due to the demise of the Biblical languages, substituted by an intense study of man in his world and secondary translations and exegetical studies (commentaries). The author's attempt to revitalize a concern for the knowledge of Biblical languages is noble, but it leaves much to be desired.

The assumption that an understanding or knowledge of the Biblical languages provides the preacher with the wherewithal to be a Biblical preacher is entirely ignominious. The world is full of preachers who have devoted the best of their ability and energy to the study of Biblical languages, but many of them simply could never be included in the category of "Biblical Preachers." The fact that this is true does not find its basis in the superstition that their theological training was ineffective or simply too traditional. If this criticism were valid, theological educators, even though they appear to be a day late and a dollar short, would have reluctantly modified their curriculum before the climate of student demands was the order of the day. The problem finds its center totally removed from the educational institutions that prepared them for the task of preachers. It is deeply concealed in the individuals we call "our preacher."

If preachers were prophets and apostles, they wouldn't have to study Biblical languages. They could use their language to write a Bible! As preachers, we probably bemoan our inefficiency to use the Biblical languages effectively, especially those moments when we are unable to sufficiently interpret or analyze a difficult text. But the moment we rely totally on our language ability for an effective interpretation of the Bible, we find ourselves as uncomfortable as the seven footer in a VW. Just because it is a theological tool it doesn't always crack the nut. Luther's reformation paved the way for personal study of the Bible by the non-theological student, but he did not include a study of Biblical languages as a prerequisite for such a study. Today we still maintain that Biblical illiteracy is partially the cause of irreligiosity in America. Perhaps the underlying cause is obvious, but one which we refuse to admit. It appears that preachers, as well as the hearers, refuse to commit themselves to what is generally known as an antiquated holy tradition or holy book, the Bible.

In our culture, the preacher who devotes the majority of his working week to a study of the Bible would never be in demand. Not only would he feel horribly useless and depressed but even the

people he spoke to would consider him an insincere fool. The demands on involvement in our age excuse no one, not simply because it is the tenor of our culture but because there is so much with which to be involved. But involvement without a commitment or an ideology is the same as a struggle without a strategy. Every lasting or significant "ism" to which man adheres demands his personal commitment. If preachers are the prophets and apostles of God today, then obviously their commitment must be the same as their predecessors, the acceptance of God's self-disclosure through His Word. Their allegiance must be demonstrated by their proclamation of God's salvatory commitment to man, that their activism is their responsibility as servants, and that the Biblical message is their only relevant point of departure. Without this commitment, the preacher is the same as a Fuller Brush salesman with a bag full of cosmetics.

To be a Biblical preacher demands much more than a knowledge and application of the Biblical languages—they aren't even correlatives! The knowledge and faithful application of the Biblical languages to the preaching process can serve only as another tool for interpretation. Either it is employed to unlock the insight which one's own language fails to convey or as a restrictive measure which forces the preacher to think in terms of the originally conveyed message. But it can never be said that Biblical languages make a Biblical preacher. Anyone who has written more than one sermon immediately will be aware of this obvious observation. The greatest Biblical preachers have never been acclaimed great because they faithfully applied their knowledge of the Biblical languages. Their greatness was evidenced always by commitment and conviction that the Bible is relevant for modern man, and they made it speak in the language of the listener. But if the question is raised how could they understand the Bible in order to preach relevantly, the answer cannot be traced to their understanding of the Biblical languages, even though this no doubt played a vital part. However, the answer must include the time-worn phrases of study, observation, analysis of man's needs, confidence, pride, and fearlessness.

To be a Biblical preacher demands study, a constant perusal of the Bible for personal growth in one's relationship with God. Only after the preacher has totally committed himself to the Word as the source of his message will the Word release its intended meaning for his own life. His responsibility to the people he serves is the assurance that his understanding is correct, as far as this is possible. Here it must be admitted the Biblical languages provide him with that assurance, but again they are not the only tool. His search of the Bible must be both general and specific. It must be general enough so that sweeping impetus of that message dominates his thinking and is specific enough so that each individual part will relate to an overall understanding. But all of this comes only through study of the Word as it has been preserved and shared with the reader.

Any study without constant observation of the world around us is much like a dog in his pen. The dog is at home only as long as he is in the pen. To make the Biblical message relevant for those with whom we share it, the preacher must search for correlations between the insight gained from his research and the perceptive observations he is able to make from his observance of the boundless areas outside his profession. To speak of God as relevant for the 20th century can only imply that the relevant preacher finds God in the 20th century.

The observation that man is in need of God is an understatement. Man has been and still is in need of God, but too often the preacher makes God unrelated to the needs of man. Part of the problem lies simply in the fact that preachers preach to what they think is the need of man, rather than to man's real need. This often occurs when preachers rely totally on the observations they make about the people to whom they preach, rather than carefully analyzing their own need for the Word. The Word of God can only speak to the needs of man when the preacher is able to understand his own need for that Word. Most often this need will not be discovered merely by an analysis of the preacher's own life, especially if it is exemplar. The preacher will better understand himself as a man if he shares man's needs as they arise in his treadmill situations. An hour in a factory, lunch with the executive, or a few rounds on a tractor will vividly reveal the humanness of both the pew-warmer and the pulpit-climber.

It has often been said that preachers are the most apologetic salemen; they know they have something to sell but never quite get to the point of selling it. Maybe their theological training should include a course in salesmanship. But countless salesmen have sold products without training, simply because their livelihood depended on it. If there is a need to sell, there generally is confidence that the sale will be made. But the majority of American preachers lack that significant commodity. They have been indoctrinated or overexposed to the idea that mere proclamation of the Word opens an avenue for the Spirit, who then is left with the inept responsibility of clinching the sale. Without undermining the power of the Spirit, the Spirit generally can complete His part of the bargain more effectively if He has been able to dominate the man designated to sell in the first place. Where there is no confidence, there can be no production.

If humility is a virtue, most preachers should be able to join the ranks of Elijah for a swift ride to heaven. It takes a great deal of pride to do the best one is capable of doing. But pride need not be the mortal scar that seals off the gates of heaven. Any man who has accomplished even a humble feat knows that he arrived at that point only because he had enough pride to ferry forth in the first place. The pride of a preacher must be clothed in humility, but if he lacks pride in his task, he is less a man than the men he confronts.

Of all men, the preacher must be a man who knows what he is about, where he is going, and why he chose that route. The preacher's inability to confront man with a significant message hinges most often on his lack of personal pride, his self-acceptance.

Coupled with confidence and pride, the characteristic of fearlessness must dominate the preacher's approach to his task. He must be a man convinced that what he has to share is worth the time of sharing it, without concern for his personal status. If fear of ineffectiveness, failure, and apology riddle his personality, the people he serves will detect and despise his timidity. The message he shares is unique, and the preacher does well to consider his role as proclaimer just as significant as the role fulfilled by any other professional.

When these characteristics dominate a preacher's personality, he will be a relevant Biblical preacher. His understanding and application of the Biblical languages is not a necessity, even though there is no attempt being made to minimize their usefulness in assisting the preacher fulfill his role as a Biblical preacher. The old argument against the necessity of learning Biblical languages—translations, commentaries, monographs, etc. — is valid if the preacher keeps in mind that they must be applied to his study of the Bible. No tool is worth its time and energy unless it is carefully applied, and most often Biblical languages are applied carelessly! This must be said since many preachers rely totally on their theological training as a sufficient background for their use of the Biblical languages. Even the best scholars, who constantly review and continue their study of the Biblical languages, constantly admit that they are at a loss for an insight into a passage simply on the basis of the language. Language is a means of conveying concepts. The understanding of these concepts only comes through constant research of the culture in which these languages lived and a vivid awareness of how they relate to our culture. There is no need for theological institutions or preachers in the field to undermine the tools available as resources in order to further the cause of Biblical language study. Every preacher must evaluate himself and discover what tools provide him with the insight that make his preaching truly relevant and Biblical. Maybe the time has come for theological institutions to re-evaluate their traditional demands for Biblical language study and admit that the tools available today far exceed those available a few centuries ago and careful use and study of these tools can and will provide the preacher with the ability and understanding essential for Biblical preaching. But at the same time theological students must be confronted with the possibility of studying Biblical languages as one of the finest or most useful tools at their disposal for relevant Biblical preaching.

Biblical preaching? Language ability will never assure this result. The preacher must recommit himself to the Bible and fearlessly accept the Biblical message as a relevant message for his time.

If he is convinced that God can and does make Himself known to man through the Bible, more than likely he will feel the urgent need to revitalize his language ability to assist him in better understanding his personal commitment. The preacher who advocates the Biblical languages as the prescription for his non-Biblicalness is an ignorant. Most often he is just the preacher who is most ignorant of what that language can or does mean!