

This Foolishness of Preaching

A Fellowship of
Pulpit and Pew

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Why Do Preachers Want Crowds?

WHY do preachers want crowds? They do, but why do they? The fact that preachers want crowds is so obvious that it does not need to be established. Preachers advertise in papers (if the advertising is free), they use bulletin boards (that no-advertising agency would rent), they spend time on Sunday coaxing people to come back the next Sunday, they beat the vocal drum on Sunday morning to get a crowd out on Sunday night. In the presence of their fellow ministers they gloat over crowds like a savage counting scalps. If the crowd does not come, they berate, publicly and privately, the fallen standards of their parishioners.

Without being unjustly critical, it would seem that preachers take credit for every crowd that assembles where they are to preach, and they blame the times in which we live for every occasion when empty pews are the rule and a full pew the exception.

Why do preachers want crowds and expect crowds? The politician wants crowds so that he can sell himself or his party. The street vendor wants a crowd so that he can dispose of his wares. The movie theater wants a crowd so the business will be profitable.

There are many answers, probably as many as there are preachers, to the question. Some preachers want crowds for crowds' sake. They will do anything to get a crowd. They will review novels, give prizes, hire entertainers or insult their neighbors, if the multitude will listen. When the seats are full, they have their reward, for they have accomplished all that they set out to do.

Some preachers are like drug fiends; the presence of a full house gives them a feeling of exhilaration, but, as in the case of all drugs, the dose needs to be increased from time to time or it loses its effect, and reaction sets in. The narcotic effect of crowds can produce a craving that becomes so strong that it will demand satisfaction even at the cost of the wrecking of moral standards and the breaking of wise social restrictions.

Great leaders of crowds are sometimes personal weaklings. The sense of power, accomplishment and high purpose is present only under the stimulus of a crowd mind. When alone, they are not sure of themselves, for the very presence of numbers gives confidence. A crowd feeds the ego and convinces the leader that he is a great man. Otherwise, why would the people congregate about him?

Then, of course, there is the preacher who sees the size of the crowd as an indication of the size of the collection. Small crowds mean small collections, small collections mean small pay for the preacher, small pay for the preacher means lean living. Self-preservation is the first law of nature.

Of course, every preacher denies that he is guilty of any of these low motives. Without doubt the other fellow is guilty, but he is clean. He has high and holy motives. He wishes to preach Christ. He wants to bring in the kingdom; his only desire for an audience is that he may exalt ideals in a materialistic world. But wait a minute. If what we preach is the important thing, why are we not satisfied to preach it to those who will listen, regardless of the fact that only a few do listen? What do we mean by "preach Christ," or "the kingdom" or "ideals"?

Could we give an exact definition of what we mean? Not a definition that can be understood, but one that can not be misunderstood. The answer is probably a loud YES. It may be much too loud to convince any one but ourselves. Let's define our motives.

There is no disgrace in wanting a crowd except the disgrace of not knowing exactly why we want a crowd. It is a disgrace not to know what we want from them and what we expect from them. The thing we need is not a crowd, but a definite aim or goal for ourselves when we do get the ear of the crowd. This has been a distinguishing mark of a good preacher from the day of Pentecost to the present time.

The manager of your local movie house wants the patrons' money to be his money. He wants the patron to enjoy himself so that he will come back again. The politician wants a crowd so that he can influence their votes. The side-show barker wants a crowd because the more people he gathers around the more tickets he will sell. The merchant wants a crowd at his sale because he wants to sell them his goods.

Every one who expects crowds has a definite end in view. It may be some low, materialistic aim, but nevertheless it is a definite, conscious and well-defined aim. Not only do these crowd gatherers have an aim, but they do not make the mistake of confusing the end with the means of obtaining the end.

The politician is not satisfied if the only accomplishment is that some one enjoyed the speech. He wants his results in the ballot box. For him, the crowd is an opportunity and not an accomplishment. Praise of his effort is empty and galling if it does not denote new voters for his cause.

With a crowd present, the merchant sees his big chance. He does not gather a crowd for the sake of the thrill crowds give him. He wants sales, and anything else is failure.

THE preacher wants a crowd, but why does he? Has he an aim for them? Does he know what he wants and is his goal so defined that he can make a tool of his sermon to accomplish his goal?

We have for so long listened to prattle about the sermon being a work of art that we have come to believe it. The sermon should not be a work of art; it should be a tool and the art should be the work it accomplishes. Tools are made to do a job. Art is to be admired and appreciated. No matter how much the tool is admired, it is for the scrap heap if it does not lend itself to the uses for which it was designed.

If the preacher is the man of high ethical and moral sense he claims to be, and if he is the man of good common sense that every one hopes he is, he will never want a crowd for the sake of having a crowd. In fact, he will not want a crowd until he has decided just why he wants it. Then he can make the sermon what it was intended to be—a well-chosen means of accomplishing a definite end.

The end in view will not be to get something off his chest. He will not tell them just for the sake of having them told. He will not seek to entertain or amuse in the hope of getting them back next time. He will aim

to do something this time so that there will be no regret if there is no next time.

This kind of preaching will eliminate many of the preachers' best sermons; that is, it will eliminate many of the sermons that get the most compliments at the door of the church. It will also eliminate many of the sermons that are best for some other occasion. It will mean that, when a crowd comes to hear, if the preacher is truly successful, they will go away so different that they never will be the same again.

The apostles had this technique of preaching. On the day of Pentecost, Peter had a definite goal. He wanted the Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah, repent of sin and be baptized. A study of his sermon will show it a well-calculated effort to reach that goal.

PAUL, on Mar's Hill, had a different audience. He had a general aim similar to Peter's, but his specific definition of it was different. He wanted a group of pagans to see Jesus as Lord. He began differently and developed his theme differently, but he had a different specific aim. The difference in the audiences accounted for the difference in the sermons. The general aim in both cases was the same, but each avoided the pitfall of making the sermon an end in itself.

The preacher will stand before groups who have a Christian background and who make a Christian profession. What are their needs? Are they discouraged, heartsick, vacillating or self-satisfied? In the light of who they are and what they are, let him set his mark and take aim. Certainly he will preach Christ, but it will be the Christ of comfort, courage and consolation.

The preacher will face groups who are pagan, sensuous and sinful. His goal will change. Again he will preach Christ, but it will be as atonement for sin, holiness of life and the hope of eternal life.

When the preacher sees the social structure and moral order becoming unsocial and immoral, he will redefine his aim. Again he will preach Christ, but it will be with an aim comparable to his audience. If his purpose is definite he will not preach so as to send them away knowing what some one else should do, but knowing that as individuals there is something they should do.

Some one has suggested a moratorium on preaching. There should not only be a moratorium on some preaching, but a cancellation. The usefulness of the pulpit is in proportion to the purpose of the pulpit. We need a moratorium on purposeless preaching.

Merchants, radio stations, commercial amusements, political parties and advertisers want the crowds. But these children of the world want the crowd for some specific and definite purpose. They want to do something, to, for or with a crowd. Getting a crowd is not the end in view, and, needless to say, getting the crowd is not to satisfy the vanity of the promoter.

Truly the children of darkness are wiser in their generation than the children of light. Preachers need to become as little children. Little children continually ask "WHY?" Why do we feel that we are entitled to the time of people, and why do we preach to them when we get their time?