

## **How Can the Word of God Be Preached so as to Result in Awakening and Conversion?**

**A lecture delivered at an annual conference of 'The Brotherhood of Pastors Faithful to the Confessions' in Norway.**

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IT is generally conceded to be an incontrovertible fact that there has been, and is, very little spiritual awakening as a result of the preaching of the ministers of Norway. A generation or two ago there were, it is true, a number of spiritual awakenings as a result of pastoral preaching. But then, too, the pastors of that day had themselves experienced a spiritual awakening, an awakening the burden and the leadership of which took place in the theological auditorium of the Royal Frederick University.

When I see the feeble spiritual awakenings which result from the activity of Norwegian theologians, who on the whole are both capable and conscientious, then the question which arises: why is there so little spiritual awakening resulting from ministerial preaching becomes very serious and humiliating to me indeed.

My brethren, I would not hereby seek to disparage in the least the solid and faithful inspirational and educational work done by our pastors, and least of all would I hereby seek to add a single stone to their burdens—already difficult and heavy enough to bear. Nor am I forgetting that a believing pastor in many ways does the preparatory work for many a spiritual awakening which God calls into being and leads through others. And I know, of course, that a believing pastor now and then is also permitted to lead individuals to conscious life in God.

But, having been asked to say a few words here about the subject given me, I can get no peace until I have brought this question into the foreground,—because it burns within my soul. I have in reality two questions to ask:

1. Do we theologians and pastors desire spiritual awakenings? Is it a matter of vital concern to us that we might experience what we speak of as a general and far-reaching awakening of the consciences of men?

If you answer my first question in the affirmative, that very fact will make my second one more burning than ever:

2. If we desire spiritual awakenings, if we pray for such awakenings, if there is a cry in the souls of our pastors for spiritual awakenings, why then cannot God make use of us to bring them about? Is there something about our *training*, is there something about our *preaching* or is there something about the *life* we live that hinders God from using us?

I know very well that the gift of spiritual awakening, in the sense in which I am now speaking of it, cannot be and is not given to every preacher. But to us theologians it is an exceedingly humiliating fact that God during the past 125 years has had to seek evangelistic preachers that He could use *outside* of our ministerial circles as a rule.

We are now praying for a nation-wide awakening. My brethren, let us pray that this awakening may begin with us, pastors and theologians. What would not such an awakening mean to our beloved nation! Six hundred men, scattered abroad throughout Norway's cities and communities, glowing with love for God and zeal for souls!

The history of spiritual awakenings in Norway, it seems to me, falls into two periods. Each of the two is characterized by different types of evangelistic preaching. From the days of *Hauqe* to the close of the Johnsonian awakening it was a full and authoritative preaching of the law which brought forth and which characterized the awakenings. This preaching attacked in a most severe manner the *consciences* of men and plunged their souls into distress and despair such as we seldom see in our day. In those days they did not feel the need of a variety of outward means of gaining access to souls during an awakening. They came of their own accord, driven by their inward despair, and united with the believers.

During this period the law and the *Gospel*, *sin* and *grace* were preached. It may be that the preachers of those days were better able to preach the law than the Gospel, that more souls were awakened than they were able to lead into the full light of the Gospel. Consequently the Christians developed by this type of preaching were somewhat somber in character. Many of them remained under the law the greater part of their life and only with great difficulty attained to a life of Christian liberty in the clear and evangelical light of the Gospel.

Then came the change In the 70's, brought about chiefly through the influence of C.O. Rosenius of Sweden. His clear and psychologically fine preaching of unmerited grace set the souls of men free from the bondage of legalism. This newly recovered evangelical liberty resulted in the gradual development of a new Christian type, with a brighter and broader outlook upon life. The legalistic pietism of a former day was succeeded by a more evangelical view of the world, of human relations and of the problems of life. It was during this time that love of country and nationalistic feelings were accorded a conscious and conspicuous place in the hearts of the Christian laity.

Whereas the preaching of an earlier day had mastered the law better than the Gospel, men now spoke more about grace than about sin. As a matter of fact, it was now out of the question to speak about the law; most people thought that it was disloyalty to the Gospel to preach the law. For the time being the effect of the one-sidedness of this preaching could not be discerned. As a result of the Haugean and the Johnsonian awakenings the consciences of men had been bound. Now they were set at liberty, by the clear and joyous preaching of the free Gospel. The generation of Christians which came into being from the crossing of the types of preaching which characterized, these two periods was particularly rich in deep Christian personalities, who by their spiritual independence and authoritativeness left deep marks upon Norwegian Christian life.

But as the younger generation became of age, without having had their consciences influenced and judged by the old authoritative evangelistic preaching, the new and freer preaching encountered a number of difficulties. To comfort those whom the older evangelistic preaching had filled with despair, that the later type of preaching could do exceptionally well. But, now it became necessary for the newer preaching itself to awaken those who were spiritually asleep, arouse those who felt secure and bring despair to the indifferent. However, this preaching possessed few if any of the qualifications necessary for accomplishing this end. It spoke at all times as though the meeting places were full of people all of whom were anxiously seeking the grace of God.

What good did it do to pour out the free grace of God and the most glorious Gospel promises of the Scriptures upon such impenitent souls? They had no use whatsoever for anything of the kind. And the constant refrain, "Come as you are," had an effect which was nothing short of morally confusing, inasmuch as these people had not been led by the preaching to see what they were. Hence it became evident here and there that type of evangelistic preaching was leading people to conclude that they were saved by believing the promises, that is, by holding them to be true, although they continued to live in open sins, without trying to be set free from

them.

In order to overcome the indifference of impenitent souls toward the free grace of God, this type of preaching turned instinctively to religious emotionalism. By sad stories and other kinds of sentimentality they appealed to the unregenerate man's purely natural religious emotions. And when these emotions had been brought to the melting point, the preacher would try in good faith to weld them together with faith in the free grace of God. But naturally this welding gave way under the impact of the very first strain that it encountered.

This preaching resulted in great awakenings but few conversions. It produced "backsliders," as they were designated by an exceedingly unfortunate misnomer. The emotional aspect of the love of Christ and His willingness to be sacrificed, has a purely esthetic appeal to the natural man. He can easily be made enthusiastic for Christ, even to the point of seeking Him both in prayer and in His Word. Naturally, too, such people prefer to hear about Him at meetings. Moreover, the natural man is more than eager to believe that this is true Christianity.

I am afraid that evangelistic preaching by ministers is weakest at this point. Really it is not that their preaching is exceedingly sentimental, although many pastors have been enticed into this snare—most of us have a weakness for tear-filled eyes, —not at all; the weakness in this respect in connection with pastoral preaching is, as a rule, that it appeals to man's natural religiousness and his natural morality, and does not convince its listeners of the difference between *nature* and *grace*, between the natural man's worship of God and the new, regenerate man's worship of God.

This does not mean that these preachers refrain from speaking of conversion and the new birth; they do this both earnestly and very impressively. But if they do not hold forth clearly and convincingly that which is the natural man's real and basic sin, that he loves himself and hates God no matter how much he prays, reads the Bible and goes to church and to the Lord's Supper, then the conversion appeal will sound to their hearers like an admonition to *self-improvement*, and the new birth like God's gracious help toward making this selfimprovement. If our preaching is not clear on this point, it will produce churchly duty-doers, religious day laborers, whose relationship to God is founded upon a peculiar mixture of law and grace. Grace, to such people, means that God does not require a greater fulfilment of the law on the part of the individual than the individual by his best efforts is able to achieve.

Evangelistic preaching of this type has taken the sharp edge of offense from the sword of the Word. It has lost the hammer which breaks into pieces the selfrighteous and rebellious human heart. It can be as earnest and as strict as it will; the natural man is only pleased with that, as long as the preaching does not draw the Biblical line of demarcation between the converted and the unconverted, by showing the natural man's aversion to God and the full truth of the Bible.

There are many reasons why pastoral preaching has been tempted to permit itself to be less exacting in this respect. It has been easy for the pastors to feel that the average evangelist's treatment of souls has been schematic and brutal. And this has aroused his feelings of chivalry toward all small spiritual beginnings. He would not quench the smoking flax. Furthermore, he has assured himself that a pastor should be a pastor for all the people, not only for the awakened souls. It has been easy for the pastors to feel that they would be driving the unconverted away from themselves and from the church completely if they should make the line of demarcation so clear that both the unconverted themselves and others as well might see that they were outside of the kingdom. Moreover the state church arrangement makes it difficult to speak the full Biblical truth relative to these things. After all, are not these people members of the Norwegian State Church, even voting members? They must feel that it is inconsistent for a pastor in his sermon to speak of them as unregenerate men and women and then during the baptismal ceremony address them as "dear Christians." That, at least, can be easily understood. Finally, I must say that there are pastors who have lost some of the moral courage which is required to swing the sharp sword of the Spirit, because they, in their own lives, have given up the Biblical distinction between the converted and the unconverted. The fact that one is a pastor is looked upon as assurance in itself that one is converted. To speak of unconverted pastors has gradually come to be a mark of unchurchliness.

The aim of Christian evangelistic preaching is to bring forth a *Christian awakening*.

Wherein does such an awakening consist?

It does not consist in awakening the natural man's moral and religious sense in such a way that he begins to undertake in a very conscientious way the task of self-improvement. Neither does it consist in recommending to this individual that he should seek Christ as the supernatural means of accomplishing this selfimprovement. It is, on the other hand, an awakening of the conscience whereby the natural man becomes inwardly convinced that his own religion and morality are not only self-deception, but deliberate untruthfulness, both toward himself and God—now that he as a result of his awakening has begun to see his dislike of God and his love of sin. Only so can the natural man's confidence in himself be broken in such a way that he becomes aware of his need of the unmerited grace of God. Only in this way can frivolous man

be filled with such a fear, yea, horror, of sin that he will desire salvation, not only from the perilous consequences of sin, but from sin itself, salvation from that heart whose worst failing is that it desires to evade the clear truth and be false both to itself and God.

But a Christian awakening of this kind can be brought about only by an evangelical preaching of the law.

There is no lack of the preaching of the law. Very recently there has been a cry for a more ethical type of preaching. It appears, however, that this kind of preaching has tended away from, rather than toward, a more evangelical preaching of the law. One hears evangelical preaching of the law very seldom. It consists simply in bringing the natural man face to face with the law of God as Jesus has expounded this law both by His words and by His life. He has showed us, as we know, that the requirements of God's holy law are directed first and foremost toward our *attitude of heart*, not merely toward our outward acts or words. And at the same time he has told us that our sinfulness really consists in a wrong attitude of heart, that is, that our motives are evil and unethical.

Evangelical preaching of the law, preaching which would bring about a spiritual awakening, consists, therefore, in nothing more complicated than to make concrete and to express graphically to the natural man what motives lie back of all, even the best, of his deeds and words. Now, attempts that are both energetic and successful are undoubtedly made to show the unethical motives back of men's outward words and acts with respect to their fellow men. But, on the other hand, these preachers take for granted, strangely enough, that the words and deeds of the natural man with respect to God, spring from the right motives. If a person prays and reads the Bible and goes to church and communion, some preaching immediately takes for granted that this man's motives are entirely ethical.

Here it is the duty of evangelical preaching of the law to expose unequivocally how unethical that worship is in which the natural man engages, by revealing the unethical motives which urge him to seek God. At the same time it is our duty to expose the inner falsehood and deceit of which such a person makes himself guilty, both toward God and himself, his insincerity in trying to make both himself and others, and even God, believe that he loves God and hates sin, when he in his conscience through the Word of God has long since become convinced that his relationship to God is all wrong, from the bottom up, and that conversion and a new birth must take place if he is to be saved.

Permit me to illustrate this by an example from the evangelistic preaching of Jesus. I am thinking of Jesus' conversation with the so-called rich young ruler, recorded in Matthew 19:16-22. This man corresponds no doubt to those whom men of late have begun to designate as *Christians by upbringing* or *baptismal Christians*. The young man himself says that ever since his youth he had kept all the things that he through his religious teachers had learned to know as the will of God. But now, notwithstanding, he; has become disturbed about his relationship to God. It was no doubt because he had met Jesus that he experienced this restlessness, and therefore it is to Jesus he now turns.

Let us now, in the first place, notice that Jesus does not deny the truth of that of which the young man is seeking to convince Him with regard to his keeping of the law. In the second place, let us note, moreover, that Jesus does not have a single word of consolation to offer the young man. On the contrary, Jesus tries to drive him into a position from which he cannot extricate himself. With his perfectly aimed reply: "sell that which thou hast," He struck the weakness in the man's life which convinced him more quickly than anything else could have done that, notwithstanding his godliness and his moral life, he did not love God, but loved himself above all else. That the man went away sorrowful shows that the *awakening* was successful: he became convinced of Jesus' words. But this awakening was not followed by the man's *conversion*, at least not then. This we are told in the brief, pathetic words: "he went away sorrowful." Let us, in the third place, note that not even then did Jesus send a word of consolation or encouragement along with him. He wanted to pin the man down. As the young man went his way, convicted in soul, but without having chosen Christ, Jesus deliberately let him go, bound in his conscience. Here we observe no sentimentality, no maudlin desire to put a plaster on a sore which should first be thoroughly lanced.

I am prepared to hear some one ask: but should we not preach *Christ*? Can anybody become awakened in the Christian sense unless we preach Christ? No, very true, Christ must be the center also of our evangelistic preaching. And that is, of course, what I have desired to emphasize as I have tried to present the evangelical preaching of the law as the great Christian emphasis in all evangelistic preaching. For we cannot preach the law in its evangelical or New Testament depth and earnestness unless we preach not only the words of Christ but also His life and death.

If we present the clear, two-edged message of Christ, if we preach His unselfish life of service, if we preach His lifelong suffering unto a death which was not only bitter but also without honor, and if we in so doing rightly divide the Word of God, that is, if we do not make use of this to awaken sentimental sympathy for Jesus in His sufferings, but turn the edge of it toward the consciences of men, then the life of Christ will in turn convince men of the selfishness and falsity of their own lives. And the sufferings and death of Christ, from which not even His Almighty Father could exempt Him, will convince them of the gravity of sin and impart to

them that holy fear of sinning which alone can drive a sinner to pray wholeheartedly for salvation from sin.

At the same time this type of preaching will, by driving the sinner to Christ, make it clear to him that there is no certain *measure*, even less any certain *form*, of penitence and sorrow that must be presented to God before he can be saved: but that the sinner is saved when sin has become so unendurable to him that he desires a complete reconciliation with God and desires to be saved from his sins, not only from his anxiety and his restlessness.

Only by this type of evangelical preaching of the law will those to whom we are speaking feel the impact of our evangelistic message. I feel not a little desire to emphasize this point. Both in the evangelistic preaching of the laity and of the clergy, the people who are most often addressed are those who are not present, namely, the gross sinners. They very rarely come and listen. Our audiences usually consist of good people, moral folk, in fact, even religious people. And we make these people even more self-satisfied Pharisees than they are if we speak only of gross sins and do not attack their real sins, their inner sins, which are doubly difficult for these people to become aware of because of their moral life and their religion.

By an evangelical preaching of the law such as this our evangelistic preaching will also continue to *awaken the believers*, which we all need in order that our inner life in God may be preserved without guile. This type of preaching will also cause us to appreciate ever anew the free grace of God, an appreciation which will decline and disappear entirely if we do not continue to submit our consciences to merciless self-examination.

With this I must leave the consideration of that type of preaching which seeks to awaken the souls of men, and say a few words also about the type which seeks to bring about their *conversion*.

So far as I am acquainted with its history, this type of preaching, has had four difficulties with which to content, all of which are associated, though in somewhat different ways, with both clerical and lay preaching.

The weakness of *pastoral* conversion-preaching as a rule has been that the pastors have succeeded very little in appealing to the wills of men to come to a clear cut and conscious

decision. Their preaching has concerned itself more with the heavenward side of conversion, with conversion as an act of God performed within the sinner's heart. Consequently, clerical preaching has found it difficult to bring the awakened soul beyond that spiritual state which we might designate as "marking time." It has been easy for this type of preaching to overlook the psychological moment in the life of awakened souls, when a spiritually authoritative word and clear guidance would have led the awakened persons to make a definite decision and thereby brought them into conscious fellowship with God.

Lay preaching, on the other hand, has tended in the other direction, and emphasized one-sidedly the human side of conversion. This one-sidedness has come to expression in three different ways:

1. In the Haugean and Johnsonian awakenings man's activity in connection with the bringing forth of true repentance and sorrow for sin was emphasized so strongly that the seeking soul was given a distorted view both of conversion and of the unmerited grace of God. In the leaders themselves, Hauge, and especially Johnson, we find less of this one-sidedness, however. The *place* of repentance, the measure and *amount* of repentance and the *form* of repentance were all put in a less evangelical light than they should have been. Consequently awakened souls were often led into futile struggles and great mental anxiety.

2. The aforementioned evangelical or free preaching, which succeeded the Johnsonian awakening, broke resolutely with these legalistic efforts toward producing remorse. It held forth clearly that conversion consists in the sinner's surrendering himself to the grace of God in Christ. With the sinner it was only a question of faith. However, strangely enough, this school of preaching also fell into the error of emphasizing man's own self-activity in a way which easily tended to bewilder the seeking soul. They confused faith and *assurance*, and did not look upon the sinner as saved or converted until he had attained perfect assurance. Their admonition to the sinner to believe, became, therefore, an admonition to become assured. Hence the seeking soul circled unceasingly about his own heart, seeking there the assurance to which he could not attain.

3. During recent decades we have observed a type of preaching, influenced most likely by American Reformed preaching, which looks upon conversion essentially as a whole-hearted choice, by which the sinner determines to break with sin and his former manner of life. As a result of this kind of preaching the honest soul is led into the performance of an endless Sisyphestask [*American Heritage Dictionary*: A cruel king of Corinth condemned forever to roll a huge stone up a hill in Hades only to have it roll down again on nearing the top]. The more honest he is, the clearer he will see that it is his former manner of life, his love of self and

his dislike of God, with which he is unable to break. If he now hears the preacher tell him that a man who is whole-hearted in his decision can and should be able to do this, he will quickly be driven to a thought which lies very close at hand, namely, that he has sinned against the Holy Spirit. Then he gives up entirely.

If, after this historical sketch, I were to say a few words in a more positive way about conversion preaching, I would begin to speak about the *choice* involved in conversion. We can never emphasize this choice too strongly. However, as just indicated, we can put the emphasis in the wrong place. No awakened soul becomes a Christian without making a personal decision. And it is this decision from which the natural man shrinks more than anything else. This *we* should know, and therefore help such a soul to avoid *postponement*, which is the most dangerous temptation confronting an awakened soul.

That pastoral preaching, mentioned above, has been so ineffective in compelling the awakened soul to make a decision can be attributed to several causes, which I can account for easily enough, but of which I cannot approve. There has been a reaction against lay preaching, which precisely at this point has been found to be too insistent. To the psychological pressure exerted by lay preaching men attribute the many instances of backsliding, contending that the conversion decisions have been forced under the high pressure to which the soul-life of awakened men and women is subjected in large audiences as well as under the influence of the authority and the strong will of the preacher. In contrast to this, it is contended that clerical preaching would not force the psychological process, but give the awakened soul time and opportunity to count the costs before making his decision.

It is true that an awakened soul *should* count the costs. But that is what we should help him do by our preaching. Moreover, we should never exhort our hearers to make the decision involved in conversion before we have shown them what the consequences of this decision will be as far as their future life is concerned. But after we have shown them the revolution in their life to which this decision will lead, then we should also impress upon them the necessity of making a *decision*. If we do not do that, our preaching *will* lack an essential element in Biblical conversion preaching: "choose you *this day* whom ye will serve." (Joshua 24:15); "*today*, if ye shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts." (Hebrews 4:7); "behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation." (II Corinthians 6:2).

With regard to the influence of the audience and the preacher, I desire to make the following statement of principle. I am certain that this influence is in accordance with the will of the Lord and is a part of God's plan for the salvation of the individual. It is true that it is possible for this influence to emanate only from the spirit of man, in which event the results also will only be

human. When this is the case, the results may also be injurious. But this should not be allowed to blind us to the fact that the Spirit of God does not make use only of men's words, but also of their wills and their feelings, as means of exercising a saving influence upon others. The influence which both audience and preacher exert upon an individual affects both his conscious and his subconscious soul-life. Its purpose is not to help the awakened soul to *evade* a personal decision, but to impel him to make a decision, and to help him to decide right.

The period of spiritual awakening is the season of good resolutions. The awakened soul makes one resolve after another. Each time he hopes that he is making the decision which will result in his conversion. And every time that he is disappointed, he is tempted to give up the whole thing as impossible—at least for him. It is at this point that we should make things so clear to the awakened soul that he will understand what a conversion decision is, a decision which transforms him in an instant from an unsaved to a saved person.

What is involved in this decision?

On this point there has been, as already indicated, a great deal of uncertainty. Permit me, therefore, first to answer in a *negative* way.

The conversion decision does *not* consist in this, that I by the power of my own will decide to wet myself free from my former sins and my former life. *Nor* does it consist in this, that I by my own will bring forth remorse and sorrow for sin in my own heart. *Nor* in this, that I bring forth in my own heart true love to God and hatred of sin. And *not* in this, that I force myself into being assured of the forgiveness of my sins. All these things *God* must do.

Not at all, that part of conversion, of change of heart, which devolves upon me, consists in the simple but definite decision by which I decide to tell everything to God, without artifice' or compromise of any kind, and ask Him to accomplish within me that which I now see that I myself am not able to do.

I tell God that I am chained fast to my sins. And I ask Him to set me free.

I tell God that I love sin and not God. And ask Him to create a new heart within me.

I tell God that I cannot by any means repent of my sins sufficiently. And I pray for forgiveness for Christ's sake.

Briefly stated, I acknowledge that God is right in all things. I ask Him for two things: to forgive me for the sake of Christ, for all the sins I have committed against Him, and to keep me from sinning in the future.

Not until we preach conversion in this way will we place the full weight of responsibility upon the awakened soul. He will now begin to see that it is not a question of how much he is able to do, but only of what he wills. And so he will also lose one of his chief reasons for postponing the conversion decision.

In the second place, conversion preaching of this kind will set free souls that are bound. They will now realize what is meant when it is said that salvation is *unmerited*. To be saved one need only be a sinner who realizes his sinfulness and confesses to God every sin of which he is aware.

In the third place, as a result of this kind of preaching, the awakened soul will learn to know what his part is in connection with conversion and what it is that God does. It is God who brings forth within him a new attitude of heart, with its resultant love of God, hatred of sin and true remorse because of sin. He himself needs only see and acknowledge the truth, that he in himself does *not* possess this attitude of heart.

A little remark in closing. It is by no means my intention to say that clear and precise argumentation on the part of the preacher will result in the awakening and conversion of his listeners. By no means. Both awakening and conversion come as the result of the sinner coming into contact with the supernatural powers of salvation which emanate to him from Christ through the Word.

But inasmuch as the Word of Christ is the means through which the supernatural work of the

Spirit is accomplished, it is important that we preach this Word in all its fullness and that we rightly divide the Word of God. It is this phase of the question concerning which I have now expressed myself by way of a brief introduction to our discussion.

This is my theory concerning awakening and conversion preaching. And because I have none better I have, upon request, presented it here to you, my brethren. But I would not neglect to say that every time I try to practice this theory in my own preaching I become greatly humiliated and feel very much as though I were a beginner.

--Ole Hallesby