

How Free is the Pulpit?

By Lee C. Moorehead

Sometimes ~~one will hear~~ a particular church <sup>is</sup> singularly praised for its free pulpit. The implication is plain that it is outstanding because of this characteristic. Whenever I hear such a citation I wonder if this actually constitutes an invidious comparison with other churches. According to Protestant principles can there possibly be any churches lacking this distinction? Are there Protestant pulpits which are not free? Is the Bill of Rights as revelant to the pulpit as it is to the public park?

In these terribly trying times we churchmen ought to take a closer look at the freedom of the pulpit. As in so many other things we are pretty glib in taking ~~this~~ <sup>it</sup> ~~freedom~~ for granted. Just how free is the pulpit? As the preacher stands in his pulpit week after week is he truly free to preach the gospel as God gives him the light to understand it? If there are any shackles on his speaking ~~in the name of God~~ we ought to be finding out what they are.

Though the preacher himself may be slow to recognize it and hesitant to confess it, there is mounting evidence that the average pulpit is not free. It appears to me that the preacher's freedom is threatened both from without and from within. In these days of racial, political and economic turmoil powerful forces have made it plain that they do not want "issues" dealt with in the pulpit. The John Kaspars and Governor Faubuses can speak out as they will but many a preacher knows that he will be dismissed from his church if he uses his pulpit to plead for integration. Our great state of Ohio is ~~presently~~ being rocked presently from stem to stern <sup>by</sup> ~~over~~ a proposed Right to Work Amendment which will be voted on at the November election. Feelings are running extremely high and the people are under seige from both camps with a constant ~~xxx~~ bombardment of propaganda and counter propaganda. In this atmosphere one of our fine young preachers was warned by an industrialist and leading member of his church that if he dared to declare himself in opposition to the amendment he would immediately withdraw his subscription to the church.

Perhaps one of the most sincere and serious attacks upon the preacher's freedom was launched by Clarence B. Randall, a devoted churchman and Chairman of the Board of Inland Steel. Mr. Randall, ~~who is indeed a staunch friend of the church~~ who has been violently attacked himself ~~by~~ fellow businessmen who consider him too liberal, has nonetheless demanded that preachers desist from "social action" pronouncements. In his book Freedom's Faith Mr.



Randall declares that the church is "holy because it stands ~~serenely~~ serenely above all controversy." He also reveals that "The businessman wants no politics from his minister. Not for a moment does he wish to restrict his pastor from exercising his own privileges as a citizen by entering freely into every phase of American debate, but he expects him to come down out of the pulpit to do it." (page 173) Surely Mr. Randall is right in expecting his minister to take off his clerical gown when working in precinct politics, but would he tie the preacher's tongue in the pulpit when it ~~comes~~ to facing the overwhelming moral problems of our society? Can he really believe that the church is "holy because it stands serenely above all controversy"? Has he never heard of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah? Are preachers to keep silent while the controversial evils of racism, nuclear poisoning, and <sup>ism</sup> alcohol rage in the world? Just because every moral evil in the world gets entangled in politics is the preacher required to wash his hands of all moral ~~responsibility~~ concern, and while <sup>wrapped</sup> ~~snuggling~~ warmly in his ~~comfy~~ holy robes strike a pose of utter serenity far above the battle? If this is what men like Mr. Randall really expect ~~of their preachers, then the pulpit~~ and obtain from their preachers then the pulpit is not free. Its freedom is destroyed/ from without.

But far ~~far~~ more serious and tragic is the threat from within. The freedom of the pulpit is being destroyed by default/ and disuse. Make no mistake about it: preachers are being silenced by their own consent. We suffer from the inward disease of acquiescence. We have acquiesced in the spirit of our times. Here's a word we ought <sup>to</sup> understand. When we acquiesce to some demand, and so agree <sup>to</sup> it, we become relaxed and "at rest." This is what the original Latin word meant. The words "quiescent" and "quiet" are drawn from the same source. Apparently ~~the~~ freedom of thought and expression are not as important to us as building and pay <sup>ing</sup> for new churches, acquiring better personages, getting higher salaries, and driving <sup>classier</sup> ~~bourgeois~~ cars. The increasing material well being and social prestige of the clergy is tending to mute the prophetic <sup>Voice</sup> ~~power~~ of the pulpit. Our laymen have treated us to the advantages of "gracious living" which mark the middle class. But they have also tranquilized us into believing that all is well in Zion, and we have tricked ourselves by our delighted acceptance of all of this into surrendering the freedom of our pulpits. Though our profession has overcome much of its material poverty, it has nonetheless become increasingly disinterested in its glorious freedom. We enjoy a ~~degree~~ degree of material security almost unknown to our predecessors, but ~~now~~ this security is social, economic, ecclesiastical. It is not spiritual.



This is a clear case of capitulation. Life Magazine can <sup>Print</sup> carry a smart article on "Why Ministers <sup>Are</sup> Breaking Down," but our collapse is caused not by our anxiety to preach the prophetic truths of the gospel. Rather many of us are cracking up because we are neurotically involved in the superficial and secular concerns of our age. Still, the preacher who has the sturdiest mental and emotional health these days is not <sup>Necessarily</sup> the man with a ranch-style, two-car <sup>Garage</sup> parsonage, but the man who has inner convictions which cry out irrepressibly to be preached. There are plenty of drug-store clerks using the pulpit as a dispensary for "Peale Pills," ~~xxxxxxx~~ while there are all too few who fit John Hutton's definition of the prophet as "A man who, in the name of God, boldly contradicts the spirit of his time." (quoted in Christian Century, April 5, 1950, p. 431) A churchwoman complained to me recently that she was getting sick and tired of the "soft soap" which keeps <sup>bubbling</sup> ~~running~~ out of the pulpit. ~~Such~~ And surely such "soft soap" rots the pulpit's sacred freedom.

Near the end of his significant essay in American religious sociology, Protestant-Catholic-Jew, Will Herberg makes this damning observation:

In these circumstances, it would seem to be the office of prophetic religion to raise a word of warning against inordinate national pride and self-righteousness as bound to lead to moral confusion, political irresponsibility, and the darkening of counsel. But the contemporary religious mood is very far indeed from such prophetic transcendence. Aside from occasional pronouncements by a few theologians or theologically-minded clergymen, religion in America seems to possess little capacity for rising above the relativities and ambiguities of the national consciousness and bringing to bear the judgment of God upon the nation and its ways. (page 280)

This is surely a condemnation of those who could possess and use the freedom of the pulpit if they only would. The pulpit is never free when its occupants temper ~~their~~ and taint their messages with the prevailing spirit of the ~~the~~ times.

Now it should be admitted that thus far this discussion is an over-simplification. We need to move closer and analyze the freedom of the pulpit more critically. I want to suggest that the pulpit is free ~~xxxx~~ insofar as ~~these~~ these five ingredients are available:

First, ~~this~~ this freedom requires intellectual toil on the part of the preacher. <sup>He</sup> ~~The preacher~~ who preaches off of the top of his head is misusing his freedom. <sup>The preacher</sup> ~~He~~ has no rights in the pulpit ~~save those~~ which <sup>can be without</sup> ~~are won by~~ hard intellectual <sup>labor.</sup> work. Simone



Wail spoke a relevant word ~~which~~ in her book The Need for Roots. "There has been a lot of freedom <sup>of</sup> thought over the past few years," she declared, "but no thought. Rather like the case of a child who, not having any meat, asks for salt with which to season it." (page 33) The preacher's demand for freedom will look mighty silly if ~~xxxxxxxx~~ pap is all he can produce in the pulpit. <sup>And if such be the case</sup> ~~Otherwise~~ he will sound like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal - loud, but empty of meaning. Alexander Pope once said that "It is with narrow-souled people as with narrow-necked bottles; the less they have in them the more noise they make in pouring out." (From "Thoughts on Various Subjects," and quoted in Bartlett's, p. 217) An empty-minded preacher sounding off in the pulpit is abusing his freedom.

A poet, Frances Minturn Howard, has described superbly the intellectual structuring which ought ~~to~~ certainly to go into every sermon:

Beneath the flow of words

Light as lifted hair

Colored by the sun, /

Articulate with air,

There moves the bone of thought,

Socketed and clear,

On its fine-tooled joint

White, remote, austere.

Delight who will the smooth

Artifice of tongue,

The silver -bodied core

On which the flesh is hung

Is sweeter to the eye

That sees the naked skull

Luminous beneath

And knows it beautiful.

(in All Keys Are Glass, E.P. Dutton & Co.)

~~Indeed~~ The most perceptive persons in any congregation will see ~~beneath~~ beneath the surface of a preacher's words where either the disciplines or dissipations of preparation will be discerned. There is a vital stewardship of time and intelligence which a preacher must exert if



he is ~~going~~ to deserve to preach with freedom.

Second, to earn his freedom a preacher ought to observe the canons of good taste, judgment and discrimination. The pulpit is no place for loose and lascivious talk. <sup>Nevertheless</sup> One is surprised <sup>occasionally</sup> ~~frequently~~ by exhibitions of bad taste ~~in the pulpit~~. Humor can be nobly and effectively used, but it can also be puerile and degrading. Moreover the pulpit is no place for ~~xx~~ banal comments on the passing scene~~s~~. It is simply bad taste to deal with petty politics. Once I was embarrassed by a guest in my pulpit who went to great lengths to assure my congregation that the salvation of America lay in the hands of the Republican Party and that Robert A. Taft would be the next President of the United States. Even the most ardent Republicans present winced at that and one party regular confessed to me that he thought the preacher had spoken in extremely bad taste.

The determination of what constitutes good taste ~~is~~, of course, a delicate matter. Certainly a responsible preacher never uses his pulpit to berate an adversary personally, nor ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> reveal a confidence, no matter how juicily it might <sup>spice</sup> ~~garnish~~ his sermon. I personally believe there is a fine distinction <sup>which emerges when</sup> ~~between what are actually~~ petty political issues <sup>are</sup> ~~are~~ compared with great political principles. I should never recommend to my people the candidacies of any politicians, though I believe that a preacher in Ohio is fully within the limits of propriety this fall if he declares himself on the Right to Work Amendment. This amendment has been frankly presented to the electorate by its chief <sup>advocates</sup> ~~proponents~~ as a moral issue, ~~and how~~. How can a preacher remain silent on a moral issue which convulses the state when his very business has to do with morality?

For forty years ~~the great~~ George A. Gordon occupied the Old South Church pulpit in Boston. No preacher ever exercised his freedom with greater intellectual <sup>Power</sup> ~~diligence~~, nor did any ~~preacher~~ <sup>ever</sup> man preach more enduringly. He was concerned by what he called "the clowns and showmen" in the Christian pulpit, then posing as revivalists. He urged his people to form their judgments of such performers by asking two questions: "Does this new apostle deepen in the soul ~~of~~ the finest Christian feeling? Does he add to the power of the will against every kind of evil? Does he help one to hate not only lust ~~but~~ but lies, not only foul living but foul speech; does he exalt one's intelligence, elevate all one's thoughts of God and all one's thoughts of man's world as it lies in the sunlight of God's presence?" (Aspects of the Infinite Mystery, p. 89) Any preacher answering these requirements would surely be employing his freedom with good taste.



Third, it is ~~xx~~ essential that the freedom of the pulpit be exercised with love. There are many times when a preacher feels himself pitted in his pronouncements against the views of his people. If he does not then speak to them in love, if he has not loved them in all of the ~~m~~ dimensions of his ministry, he hasn't got a chance of being heard and heeded. But let him go with his people through the valleys of fear and sorrow, let him climb with them to the peaks of life's joy, let him live with them and know them and be their ~~friend~~ minister, and they will listen to him respectfully in whatever he has to say. I once heard the late Joseph M.M. Gray declare it to be his faith that a minister <sup>out of a pastorate</sup> can change the climate of a congregation's thinking if he will only preach to them ~~in~~ love. These lines of Henry Barnett, entitled "I Heard a Prophet," illustrate this truth:

I bowed to his words; they gathered; they broke  
Over cowering conscience and impulse; they drove  
In echoes of passions that cried in their pain,  
The thunder that ~~follows~~ follows the lightnings of love.

(professor, Florida Southern College, in motive,  
Oct. 1951, p. 31)

The thunder of prophetic preaching can be spoken to the hearts of man only if it is preceded by "the lightnings of love." For "if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

Fourth, a preacher ~~xxxxxxxx~~ cannot grasp the freedom of the pulpit and make the gospel of Christ a live issue without the catalyst of courage. It would be an utterly ~~un~~ unnerving ordeal for a preacher to stand in a free pulpit and contradict the spirit of his time without the enabling power of courage. (The exercise of freedom in any field demands manly courage. Yet I think it can be said that much preaching is puny these days because pusillanimity <sup>pervades</sup> ~~characterizes~~ the pulpit. The truth is that we are afraid to preach the gospel in the face of present realities. It takes immense courage, for example, to stare a mob in the face, as John Wesley did, and say that segregation is a sin. Yet here and there there are truly heroic ~~examples~~ of preachers who, under fire, and staring down into their open graves, refuse to be throttled down to the idling purr of innocuous and insipid sayings. Martin Luther once said that "A preacher must be both a soldier and a shepherd. He must nourish, defend, and teach; he must have teeth in his mouth, and be able



to bite and fight." (Table Talk, p. 240) We preachers have lauded the courage of young men who have gone off to Europe, the islands of the Pacific, and Korea to face the hellish flames of a war they neither started nor understood. There they have had to fling themselves against bombs, artillery shells, and fire jelly. They have been maimed, amputated, disembowled, and slain. Presumably we preachers have been preserved for some nobler witness and work. <sup>What is it?</sup> We have a Christ to proclaim and our pulpits are ostensibly free. But where shall we find the courage to preach as though they were truly free? ~~It needs to be said that~~ There will be no freedom of the pulpit until its occupants are free from fear.

Fifth, it ought to be recognized that the preservation of the freedom of the pulpit is ~~invariably~~ due to a kind of holy compact between a preacher and his people. However eloquent a preacher might be in his assumption of freedom he could not endure forever without the defense and support of his laymen. To maintain this freedom laymen have got to believe in it too. In Canterbury, England, several years ago I saw this notice ~~sign~~ on a church door: "The Word of God will be preached in this Room on Lord's Day at 6:30 P.M. - God Willing." Indeed God's Word cannot be preached unless He is willing, but it is also true that the people must be willing as well. For what good does it do to preach the Word if the people will not listen? ~~Behind every great pulpit there~~ Every great pulpit distinguished for its freedom exists in the last analysis only because of the faith of its laymen. The late Ernest Fremont Tittle shall be always for me a hero ~~of the pulpit~~. I heard him many times make the pulpit of First Methodist Church, Evanston, ring with the freedom of prophetic utterances. But I am convinced that this demonstration of greatness ~~cannot~~ cannot be finally accounted for save with reference to the valor of its <sup>lay</sup> leadership which <sup>the</sup> caused ~~its~~ <sup>of that church</sup> official board <sup>as</sup> to issue its historic statement when outside forces sought to remove its preacher. That statement said: "We stand for a free pulpit and a free church. We do not expect or desire a minister simply to echo the opinions of the congregation, and we do not assert our individual agreement with all of our minister's utterances. But we vigorously resent the effort of outside organizations to dictate to the church or to prescribe its message. . . ." (A Mighty Fortress, collection of sermons, with foreword by Paul Hutchinson, p. xxv).

That statement has a powerful meaning for me <sup>as</sup> for I too preach from a pulpit whose freedom has been vigorously and valiantly guarded by great laymen for over fifty years.



One day, many years ago, Dr. Robert Leonard Tucker, a predecessor, condemned from the pulpit the political practices of the Governor of the State of Ohio. Following the service a group of five lawyers was waiting for Dr. Tucker <sup>when</sup> after the church had ~~been~~ emptied. They informed <sup>him</sup> this young preacher that he was going to be in serious trouble because of that utterance. They gave it as their professional opinion that on the morrow he would be sued. Then they walked out of the church and left the young preacher shivering with apprehension. In a few minutes, however, they returned - all five of them. Their spokesman said: "Tucker, we want you to know that we think you are in ~~xxxxxxx~~ trouble. Yes, terrible trouble. But we also want you to know that we will defend you!" And to this day I preach from a free pulpit because there are still laymen who honor this sacred compact.

~~And still~~ there is one thing more to be said. It <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ the most essential of all. The pulpit is free only by the grace of God. The preacher experiences an existential moment when he ~~xxxxxxx~~ takes his place in the pulpit. On his human side, and understanding the nature of the gospel he is about to proclaim, he knows that he stands absolutely alone. And yet he is not alone, for he stands in the presence of God. Trembling in every limb he knows ~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> at that moment ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ "it is a terrible thing to fall into the <sup>hands</sup> ~~presence~~ of <sup>the</sup> God." He is under the absolute necessity of beseeching God for the outpouring of <sup>His</sup> grace. In that moment, if he truly preaches, a divine metamorphosis occurs. What he has prepared by the sweat of his brow, becomes <sup>something</sup> other than his own. His words bear the awful weight of the Word of God. Then he ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ knows what Paul meant when he said: "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me ~~not~~ ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (I Cor.9:15-23) And still from across the centuries come the words: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Since that truth is really Jesus Christ, he knows what makes and keeps his pulpit free.