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# 1

## Preaching on Problems

There is a problem in every pew. Our people need help. We have said through the years that Jesus saves, keeps, and satisfies. Our people are now asking that we make good on our proclamation. Therefore, we must feed the appetite we have created. Preaching must recognize people and their problems. The preacher stands between the demands of God and the needs of man. When faith and the issues of life come together, light comes. It is as though two great electrodes have met and the fire has ignited.

Let us say that a hypothetical minister serves a congregation of five hundred adults representing a cross section of the American population. Based on various research studies, it could be estimated that approximately twenty-five of his members have been hospitalized for major mental illness in the past, twenty-four are alcoholics, another fifty are severely handicapped by neurotic conflicts, and another one hundred afflicted by moderate neurotic symptoms.<sup>2</sup>

One hundred fifteen members of this hypothetical congregation would answer "yes" to the question, "Have you ever felt you were going to have a nervous breakdown?" Seventy would have sought professional help for a personal or marital problem in the past.<sup>3</sup> Approximately six of the parishioners will be hospitalized for mental illness in any given year. One member of his congregation will attempt suicide every other year. Eight members will be involved in a serious crime in a given year. If the married persons in the congregation were

2. W. L. Holt, Jr., "The Mental Disease Problem as Seen by the Practicing Physician," *Health Week*, November 1955, pp. 17-18.

3. Gerald Gurin, et al., *Americans View Their Mental Health* (New York: Basic Books, 1960), p. 304.

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asked to rate the relative happiness of their nuptial relationship, fewer than half would rate it as "very happy."<sup>4</sup>

One study of a cross section of the American adult population revealed that one out of every seven Americans has sought professional help concerning a personal problem. Of those, 42 percent went to clergymen, 29 percent went to family doctors, 18 percent to psychiatrists and psychologists, and 10 percent to a special agency or clinic.<sup>5</sup> The pastor has a unique opportunity. Of all the counselors in modern society, he is the only one who also preaches. He appears before his people once a week with the opportunity to speak to them on the issues of life.

According to some experts, the approximately 235,000 parish clergymen are seeing approximately 6,570,000 persons each year. It would require approximately 65,000 specialists to replace the counseling done by those parish ministers. The wise preacher will use this opportunity in the pulpit to establish a precounseling relationship.

Killinger makes the following claim:

The sermon ought always to constitute a precounseling situation and prepare the way for the most effective personal confrontation between the minister and the counselee. It should set up a relation of confidence between the clergyman and the person in the pew so that the person in the pew realizes that he may approach the clergyman about any problem, however delicate or distasteful, and find reflected in him the same kind of magnanimity and graciousness of spirit as that characterizing the gospel he proclaims.<sup>6</sup>

Leslie J. Tizard believes that if people do not come to the minister with their personal problems, he should ask himself this question: "What is wrong with my preaching?"<sup>7</sup> There are always some people in every congregation who need to talk over their difficulties with one who is understanding and helpful. The preacher can win the troubled person's confidence by conveying certain things in his pastoral sermons. He must show through the way he preaches, by the things he

4. Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *The Mental Health Ministry of the Local Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), p. 22.

5. Gurin, *Americans View Their Mental Health*, p. 307.

6. John Killinger, *The Centrality of Preaching in the Total Task of Ministry* (Waco, Tex.: Word Bks, 1969), p. 63.

7. Leslie J. Tizard, *Preaching: The Art of Communication* (New York: Oxford U., 1959), p. 95.

says, and the revelation of his personality that he is approachable, human, and knows his job.

The help that can be given in any one sermon is limited for two reasons. First, a sermon deals with personal problems in a general way only. And second, the wrong person does the talking in preaching. Pastoral preaching, however, can do these things: prepare the way for personal dealing; assure people that they are not alone in their difficulties and troubles; help people to see the constructive possibilities in every experience; and give the assurance that God is available.

#### THE NATURE OF LIFE-SITUATION PREACHING

One of the best discussions of life-situation or pastoral preaching is that of Ilion T. Jones.<sup>8</sup> Such preaching is directed to people in definite situations with specific needs. Jones shows how both a loose definition and a narrower definition are implied by different authors and preachers. He points out that life-situation preaching is considered by some to be identical with topical preaching. But Jones argues that topical preaching can rightly be called life-situation preaching only when it deals helpfully with the practical problems and questions people face.<sup>9</sup> He also distinguishes life-situation preaching from preaching on contemporary social problems.<sup>10</sup>

Other labels have been used to refer to life-situation preaching. Frank Hill Caldwell points out that the life-situation sermon is also identified as the "problem-solving sermon." He quotes Harry Emerson Fosdick, who made the following statement:

Start with a life issue, a real problem, personal or social, perplexing the mind or disturbing the conscience: face that problem fairly, deal with it honestly, and throw such light on it from the Spirit of Christ that people will be able to go out able to think more clearly and live more nobly because of that sermon.<sup>11</sup>

"Bifocal preaching" is the term that James T. Cleland uses. He talks about the "Good News immersed in a contemporary situation." According to Cleland, "The preacher is obviously aware of the contemporary situations which confront his people: individual and

8. Ilion T. Jones, *Principles and Practices of Preaching* (New York: Abingdon, 1956), pp. 39-43.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

11. Frank Hill Caldwell, *Preaching Angles* (New York: Abingdon, 1954), p. 109.

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social, national and international. . . . He is aware of the milieu in which they live both from his reading and from his pastoral visiting. The preacher then relates those situations to the 'Good News' or some aspect of it."<sup>12</sup>

The life-situation preacher is symbolized by Casey, a character in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. The author portrays a preacher named Casey, who goes up and down the road and sees the empty houses from which families are moving west. Casey decides he must leave, too, because "I got to go where folks is going." Pastoral preaching is specific preaching that attempts to deal with where people are "going" in life.<sup>13</sup>

George M. Gibson speaks of "personal-problem preaching." He observes that "the preacher who knows and loves his people will have them in mind whenever he preaches and will deliberately plan some sermons directly around their personal needs."<sup>14</sup>

Charles F. Kemp has written *Pastoral Preaching*, which is a sequel to his book *Life-Situation Preaching*. Written seven years later, it is, in essence, another volume of life-situation sermons. He defines pastoral preaching as "an attempt to meet the individual and personal needs of the people by means of a sermon."<sup>15</sup>

Edmond Holt Linn's book is a study of the method of preaching used by Harry Emerson Fosdick. Linn describes Fosdick's search for a kind of preaching that would be satisfactory to the known needs of the audience.

This would be personal counseling on a group basis, a conversational message from soul to soul. Here, he felt, was the answer to his searching. A great gulf between the needs of individuals and the unsearchable riches of Christ could be bridged by sermons based on the idea of personal counseling. Fosdick called this development of preaching as counseling the "project method." It is also known as the "counseling sermon."<sup>16</sup>

Many authors have defined life-situation preaching specifically. Robert J. McCracken gives a specific definition. He includes the preaching of Jesus as an example.

12. James T. Cleland, *Preaching to Be Understood* (New York: Abingdon, 1964) p. 37.

13. Robert D. Dale, *Growing a Loving Church* (Nashville: Convention, 1974), p. 37.

14. George M. Gibson, *Planned Preaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), p. 74.

15. Charles F. Kemp, *Pastoral Preaching* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1963), p. 12.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 15.



Seeking to avoid the remoteness and irrelevance, not to say unreality, which are the bane of much biblical exposition, it starts with people where they are, which was what Jesus did over and over again. The point of departure is a live issue of some kind. It may be personal or social; it may be theological or ethical. Whatever it is, the preacher makes it his business to get at the core of the problem, and, that done, he goes on to work out the solution, with the biblical revelation, and the mind and Spirit of Christ, as the constant points of reference and direction.<sup>17</sup>

It is the view of Halford E. Luccock that the life-situation sermon is the kind of sermon "which originates in the experience of the people to whom it is preached, with the specific aim of bringing help to that situation."<sup>18</sup> Such preaching begins with the problems of people. Luccock goes on to say that that kind of preaching "cuts across the traditional classifications of sermons into doctrinal, biblical, ethical, or topical."<sup>19</sup>

Ilion T. Jones says that "every preacher should certainly do some preaching on personal problems, if for no other reason than to give variety to his preaching."<sup>20</sup> Such preaching is preventive as well as remedial. "By preaching sermons that deal with personal needs, or by dealing with biblical statements concerning spiritual growth, the church is often able to prevent problems that might otherwise arise."<sup>21</sup> Collins believes that "the prevention of problems may be even more important than the solving of problems, and such preaching will contribute to the greater psychological stability of people in the church."<sup>22</sup> If the preacher does that, he will be a therapist engaged in "the cure of souls." David A. MacLennan uses the word "cure" to describe this function of the pastor-preacher.<sup>23</sup> That is the name by which a priest is known in French Canada and in all other places where French is spoken.

Unfortunately, many sermons do not enhance personality health. A

17. Robert J. McCracken, *The Making of the Sermon* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. 62.

18. Halford E. Luccock, *In the Minister's Workshop* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1944), p. 51.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

20. Jones, p. 41.

21. Gary Collins, *Man in Transition: The Psychology of Human Development* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Creation House, 1971), p. 21.

22. Gary Collins, *Search for Reality: Psychology and the Christian* (Wheaton, Ill.: Key, 1969) p. 198.

23. David A. MacLennan, *A Preacher's Primer* (New York: Oxford U., 1950), pp. 48-49.

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cartoon depicting a woman shaking hands with a minister as she left the church had this caption: "Thank you for your sermon. It was like water to a drowning man."

Preaching on personal problems need not differ greatly from the rural parish to the city or suburban parish. Arthur W. Hewitt pointed that out when he made the following statement:

My deepest conviction is that the church of God is one, in whatever variation of circumstance it may be found; that the principles of preaching and of pastoral work are the same for city and country—for love is the same, and hearts are the same.<sup>24</sup>

William L. Malcomson suggests that the kind of preaching needed today is "invitational preaching."<sup>25</sup> Such preaching must start with human need or men's problems, focus on the gospel in the Bible, and end in an invitation.

Whether one calls preaching to meet people's needs "invitational" preaching, "life-situation" preaching, "problem-solving" preaching, "therapeutic" preaching, or "pastoral" preaching, the name is not as important as the content. What matters is that shortly after the sermon begins, one listener after another finds "the preacher bowling down his alley."<sup>26</sup>

The church's task has been divided into three categories: (1) *kerygma* (teaching and preaching the gospel), (2) *koinonia* (the establishment of a fellowship with a vertical dimension), and (3) *diakonia* (the implementation of the faith in loving service). Although pastoral counseling is primarily an expression of *diakonia*, the ministry of service, it is also a means of communicating the gospel and establishing *koinonia*.

### DANGERS OF LIFE-SITUATION PREACHING

The preacher must be careful lest he divulge, in his preaching, information that his parishioners have shared with him in confidence. There is also the danger of starting a sermon on the discussion of a problem for which the sermonizer has no solution. As he deals with a life-situation problem from the pulpit the sermonizer must beware of

24. Arthur W. Hewitt, *God's Back Pasture: A Book of the Rural Parish* (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1941), p. 20.

25. William L. Malcomson, *The Preaching Event* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968) pp. 115-20.

26. J. Winston Pearce, *Planning Your Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), p. 76.

handling it inadequately, for to do so might cause far more damage than good. He must remember that to merely talk about a problem does not solve that problem. Instruction and illustration are insufficient without personal application.

The sermonizer must also avoid the tendency to substitute psychology for Christianity. We attend church to hear something about a God who makes sense out of no sense, a God who cares for us in spite of everything, and who says "I love you and forgive you." Instead, the sermon frequently is a psychological dissertation lacking biblical foundation and content. The preacher should beware of setting himself up as a psychoanalyst rather than guiding those with special needs to professional help. He should refer anyone who shows signs of possible neurological disease to a physician.

The preacher's message may be distorted by some emotional need of his own demanding satisfaction. He should ask himself, "Am I preaching on the needs of my people, or on my own needs?" There is always the danger of dealing with a problem that is not actually faced by the local congregation. Too many problem-centered sermons might put problems into people's minds that were not there previously. A listener might begin to imagine the symptoms of the problem under discussion.

Life-situation preaching is an attraction for the preacher; therefore, he should beware lest he fall into the trap of preaching only this type of sermon. Too much of life-situation preaching might force the people to give too little attention to God and His provision for their needs. Because of the abundance of materials available to the preacher from extrabiblical sources that deal with each kind of problem, there is the danger of allowing biblical and doctrinal content to be crowded out of the sermon to the detriment of the congregation. An overemphasis on the problems of life-situation preaching could make the preacher wholly occupied with the issues of time rather than the issues of eternity. He would thereby become merely timely, not timeless.

There is the danger of confusing Christian morality with natural virtue. Such preaching can result in only mild editorializing on a problem, with a religious flavor added. The preacher must never come to the point where he feels that life-situation preaching adequately takes the place of pastoral care. The two go together.

A need exists for studying the Bible in the light of people's problems. The individual who aspires to be a preacher must feel the needs of mankind until such needs become an oppression to his soul. But how can a man preach effectively to people he does not know?

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How can he bring the gospel he is commissioned to declare to bear upon experiences with which he is not acquainted? A prerequisite to success in the pulpit is a knowledge of the human heart. The physician must understand, not merely the nature of the remedies that he is to employ, but also the symptoms and workings of the diseases that he desires to cure. He must "walk the hospitals" as well as study the pharmacopoeia.

Healthy prescription always depends on good diagnosis, and a preacher who does not know both the ideal man and the actual man is no more fitted to preach than a physician is to practice who is not familiar with anatomy and physiology, both normal and abnormal.

The gospel is a remedial measure, and therefore, it is essential that its preachers should be acquainted with the nature of man, as well as with the means which, as the instrument in the hands of God's Spirit, he is to use for its transformation and renewal. Hence, he who wishes to become an efficient minister must be a diligent student of people.

The knowledge of mankind may come from many sources—the characters of the Bible, the people whose lives are described in secular history, the characters of secular literature. But the most productive source of all is man himself. To know people deeply, the minister must live among them, observing every phase of human behavior. Only by living close to people can he learn the innermost workings of their minds and know how to take aim with the message of God.

The interpretation of religious truth involves the understanding of the minds to be reached as well as of the truth to be declared. A preacher may have a clear and right understanding of religious truth, but he will still fail in the interpretation of it if he does not know and estimate the state of mind before him. Of the criticisms leveled at the ministry, none is more serious than that which charges that the minister is too preoccupied with books.

Phillips Brooks laid down three rules that bear upon the preacher's need of a knowledge of his people.

These three rules seem to have in them the practical sum of the whole matter. I beg you to remember them and apply them with all the wisdom that God gives you. First, have as few congregations as you can. Second, know your congregation as thoroughly as you can. Third, know your congregation so largely and deeply that in knowing it you shall know humanity.<sup>27</sup>

27. Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: Dutton, 1898), p. 190.

Also, from *The Cure of Souls* we read:

The minister ought to be soaked in life; not that his sermon may never escape from local details, but rather that, being in contact with the life nearest him, he may state his gospel in terms of human experience.<sup>28</sup>

"The proper study of mankind is man." The preacher will obtain his best material from his reading in human nature. The pastoral and preaching offices are indubitably intertwined. We must know some people to preach to anybody; and we must know our own people to preach to them. We must start where people live, then lead the questioning soul to the doctrinal and biblical sources, instead of the traditional expository type of preaching that spends the first paragraphs explaining the Hebrew and Greek roots while the listeners' minds are in greener pastures. The sermon must arrest the attention of the hearers with a real issue of life.

This preaching does not begin with large religious doctrines and then bring them down to their particular applications. It begins with the living person and his confused but vital impulses; and it explores their possibilities, until at last it shows the frustration of the irreligious life and reveals the great highroads of religious faith.

All preaching, if it is to be genuine preaching, should be to personal needs. It is the transmission of God's truth through a person to a person. Preaching includes instruction, interpretation, and inspiration, but we must be sure to include application. The wise preacher will not only study books but people as well.

#### THE BIBLE AND LIFE-SITUATION PREACHING

Dr. Jay Adams has provided some helpful guidance for the use of Scripture in counseling, which is also applicable to life-situation preaching.<sup>29</sup> *Moralistic* use of the Scriptures usually involves at least two faults. The first is a failure to show that the intended action must be done, not merely to remove some grief or trouble from the counselee, but primarily to please God. Second, the Scriptures are used moralistically when biblical principles or practices are enjoined to achieve a reformation apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ.

28. John Watson (Ian Maclaren), *The Cure of Souls* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1896), p. 55.

29. Jay Adams, *The Use of the Scriptures in Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), pp. 89-91.

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*Illustrational* use of the Scriptures consists of prooftexting ideas set forth by the preacher or someone else.

*Prescriptional* use of the Scriptures reminds us that the Scriptures cannot be given out to a counselee as if they were a magic potion that (understood or not) will do him good. On the contrary, they must be explained and concretely applied to the specific problems he encounters.

The *abstract* use of the Scriptures is closely related to the last error mentioned above. Setting forth principles and truths alone is often insufficient. The counselee usually does not know how to apply them to his life. While it is important to teach principles so that they may be known and later applied in various circumstances, it is essential to show how those principles work in the present.

The proper use of the Scriptures in counseling and preaching is very effective and satisfying, because by such usage one does many things at once. He brings God's sure Word to bear on the listener's problem. He honors God by pointing away from human wisdom to Him. He shows the counselee the rich wealth of information contained in the Bible, thus encouraging him to turn more often to that source. He instructs the listener in the ways and means of personally using the Bible in days ahead. Thus, by the use of the Scriptures problems may be solved and prevented from recurring in the future.

### THE PREACHING PROGRAM AND LIFE-SITUATION PREACHING

A minister had a series of life-situation sermons on Sunday evening in a semiresidential, urban area on the general theme of "Good News."<sup>30</sup> The Sunday bulletin announced specific days in which that minister would be available for consultation. The thought was that persons wishing to see him should telephone for an appointment. After the second sermon, and for the remainder of the series, he received many requests for interviews. The notes in the bulletins and the series of messages together were the steps that opened the door for a counseling ministry.

Andrew W. Blackwood said that "in summer more than any other season good people suffer from disorders of the soul."<sup>31</sup> If the pastor takes his vacation during August, then the months of June and July are

30. Simon Doniger, *The Application of Psychology to Preaching* (Great Neck, N.Y.: Pastoral Psychology, 1952), pp. 12-13.

31. Andrew W. Blackwood, *Planning a Year's Pulpit Work* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), p. 187.

especially suited to inspirational messages. That is the time for the "pastoral sermon," the name that Blackwood employs for the life-situation sermon, meaning "one in which he employs some portion of the Bible in meeting the needs of the Christian soul."<sup>32</sup> That is a good way to attack the summer slump in a church's program. A series of these messages at that time could be an annual affair.

Pearce suggests eight different plans that a pastor can use in planning his preaching, one of which is preaching to meet people's needs.<sup>33</sup> Because every congregation is made up of diverse characteristics and different needs, the plan of preaching should take those facts into consideration. Pearce suggests a whole year's preaching program based on the people's needs.<sup>34</sup>

Sangster believed that many advocates were too critical of pure exposition. Overly critical advocates may be right in suggesting another approach, but they err "in supposing that their approach is the only one."<sup>35</sup> There must be a balance in the pastor's preaching program, so life-situation preaching must be kept in its place.

Personal problems can never be the whole staple of a congregation's diet. There are not enough of them (thank God) for fifty-two Sundays each year after year . . . and if there were, they would leave people terribly preoccupied with themselves. Imagine it! No exposition of the Word: no high doctrine; none of the deeper philosophic problems; no evangelism.<sup>36</sup>

The Holy Spirit should be relied on for His part in planning the preaching program. Blackwood has written a "creed of the pastor-preacher," in which one of the statements is: "I believe in prayer for the leading of the Holy Spirit that I may sense the needs of the people in this community, and make ready to meet their needs through the prayers of the sanctuary, and through the preaching of God's Word."<sup>37</sup> Thomas Hywel Hughes has given an excellent treatment of the relationship of the Holy Spirit to preaching, including its planning.<sup>38</sup>

32. Ibid., p. 189.

33. Pearce, pp. 74ff.

34. Ibid., p. 83.

35. William E. Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Construction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), p. 121.

36. Ibid., p. 124.

37. Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (Great Neck, N.Y.: Channel, 1962), p. 311.

38. Thomas Hywel Hughes, *The Psychology of Preaching and Pastoral Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 115-22.



## COUNSELING AND LIFE-SITUATION PREACHING

The minister as counselor is perhaps the one role in which the relations between religion and mental health are most sharply illuminated. Wayne Oates suggests that helpful messages of comfort, reassurance, inspiration, and teaching can frequently be communicated more effectively through preaching than through counseling.<sup>39</sup> Those who view preaching as counseling are not saying that preaching merely opens the way for subsequent counseling sessions. Nor are they saying that preaching involves wise counsel along with proclamation, exhortation, instruction, and prophetic witness. Rather, they are saying that preaching is fundamentally an act of pastoral counseling.

Many of life's problems are insoluble on their own terms. Triumph comes as a result of the transformation of the person so that he can creatively deal with any situation (Phil. 4:13). Pastoral counseling is rightly understood only in the context of pastoral care. Most ministers who take counseling seriously find that it deepens their preaching. In his Yale lectures on preaching some ninety years ago, Phillips Brooks declared, "The work of the preacher and the pastor really belong together, and ought not to be separated."<sup>40</sup>

In counseling, the relationship between counselor and counselee communicates the love of God. In preaching, that same love of God is announced in a clear, decisive proclamation. Thus, pastoral counseling and preaching communicate the same reality, but preaching does it through the spoken word, while counseling does it through the relationship of counselor and counselee. If the preacher will talk in terms of everyday feelings, habits, aspirations, commonplace life situations, and familiar biblical scenes and sayings rather than in technical formulations of a theological or psychological nature, he can accomplish a great deal to help his people to a better understanding of themselves and better adjustment to each other.<sup>41</sup>

The churches have face-to-face relationships with over 120,000,000 adults and youth—more than any other institution in our society. In the study referred to at the beginning of the chapter, University of Michigan investigators found that fifty-four percent of the Protestants who attend church at least once a week went to a minister when they sought personal help. Even among those who attend church less

39. Wayne E. Oates, *The Christian Pastor*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), pp. 62-65.

40. Brooks, p. 75.

41. Thomas A. C. Rennie and Luther E. Woodward, *Mental Health in Modern Society* (New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1948), pp. 262-63.



frequently, 33 percent who went for help chose a clergyman.<sup>42</sup> In light of those findings there is no doubt that ministers occupy a central and strategic role as counselors in our society.<sup>43</sup>

What do preaching and pastoral counseling methods have in common? A good approach to that question is to identify similarities in the sermon and the counseling session. Admittedly, we do not normally think of the sermon and the counseling session as similar. The sermon is public; the counseling session is private. The sermon is delivered to a congregation; the counseling session involves ministry to as few as one parishioner. The sermon regularly is given on a Sunday morning. The counseling session is specially arranged. The list of differences could go on and on. Are there any similarities? Yes. An important similarity, often unrecognized, is that both the sermon and the counseling session have a formal structure. When the minister enters the pulpit to deliver his sermon, the congregation expects to be spoken to for a reasonably predictable period of time. When pastor and parishioner set up a counseling session, they expect to talk together for about an hour and then take their leave of each other. During the sermon, the congregation remains silent while the preacher talks. During the counseling session, pastor and parishioner converse with each other.

In their compendium of pastoral care source material from the pages of church history, William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle identify four pastoral care functions: healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling.<sup>44</sup> Each function has its counseling aspect in that within each, one-to-one or small group relationships are used to help people handle problems constructively and improve their relationships.

Many ministers have experimented with techniques for creating homiletical dialogue, direct feedback, and grass roots congregational involvement. For a number of years, Leslie Weatherhead had a question-and-answer period following his Sunday evening sermon. Post-sermon discussion groups immediately following the service and during the week is a device frequently used. During series of sermons on Christian beliefs, it is also useful to have a five-minute period for question writing immediately after the sermon.

A sermon is group counseling when it communicates to a supportive

42. Gerald Gurin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Counseling* (New York: Basic Books, 1960), p. 319. (Some of the respondents had gone to more than one source of help.)

43. *Ibid.*, p. 319.

44. William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (New York: Aronson, 1964), p. 33.

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religious group the healthy values of the tradition. Many people who have unreliable inner controls need periodic reinforcement of their value structure to help them maintain constructive limits in their behavior.

In his autobiography, Harry Emerson Fosdick describes the focus of effective preaching:

Every sermon should have for its main business the head-on constructive meeting of some problem which was puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives, and no sermon which has met a real human difficulty, with light to throw on it and help to win a victory over it, could possibly be futile.<sup>45</sup>

Fosdick recalls the decisive turning point in his own preaching. He had known for some time that counseling could achieve results. He writes: "It was a great day when I began to feel that a sermon could be immediately creative and transforming."<sup>46</sup>

The sermon offers a minister one of his most valuable opportunities to enhance the mental and spiritual health of his people. As in group counseling, effective preaching offers an efficient means of helping a number of individuals simultaneously. From a mental health viewpoint, the sermon has both preventive and therapeutic potentialities. It offers the minister a superb opportunity to communicate the Christian message in a supportive, life-affirming, and growth-stimulating way.

Preaching is proclaiming the good news of transforming love, but the proclamation can be heard only if it is directly related to the dilemmas, problems, and decisions that people face in their daily living. A church should become an island of sanity in our neurotic society, avoiding thing-centeredness and keeping people at its heart.

45. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Living of These Days: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. 94.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 99.