THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER

(1813 - 1887)

by

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To

the Scottish Preachers

and

Theologians

who have helped to Light

the

Way

"Bis vivit qui bene"

(He lives twice who lives well)

Inscription on the
BEECHER
Coat-of-Arms

PREFACE

This dissertation is a study in the preaching of Henry Ward Beecher, a prominent preacher during one of the most crucial periods in American history. To study the preaching of one so skillful in his art is always a humbling experience. Perhaps, no other preacher has been such an illustrious example of the American pulpit. Beecher was distinctively American in his qualities, and undoubtedly for this reason has contributed more than any other single preacher in the producing of the modern type of American preaching. He characterizes both its strength and its weaknesses. Hence, to study Beecher's preaching is actually a study in miniature of American preaching.

The purpose of this work is two-fold. First, through the analysis of Beecher's preaching theory and practice, it is an effort to discover the principles which he believed were involved in effective preaching. Second, it is an attempt to determine and evaluate his contribution to the field of preaching. The study includes both the mechanics and the message of Beecher's preaching. However, special emphasis has been given to the former, the art of his preaching; for if Beecher has made a contribution, it is in this phase of his pulpit work.

The discussion of the subject is developed in five parts. The initial chapter is, by its very nature, introductory, but it is essential as a religious and biographical background for examining Beecher's preaching in its proper context. The second and third chapters are an attempt to get behind the scene and discover the genius of Beecher's preaching by analyzing his theory and practice according to technique and style. The fourth section is a survey of the message of Beecher's voluminous sermons. It includes an examination of the theological background of his preaching and an analysis of its main emphases. In the final division, a summary of the results of the study is made and an evaluation of the significance of Beecher's preaching for his own and succeeding generations is set forth.

With regard to the bibliography, no effort has been made to be exhaustive, but special discrimination has been exercised in listing only those books that have proven most profitable in the study of the subject. Entries are made according to primary and secondary sources and are classified as to types of publications.

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to the many who have assisted me with advice, information, and encouragement in the writing of this thesis. Especially do I wish

to express my thanks to the Very Rev. Prof. John Baillie, D.D., D.Litt.,S.T.D.,LL.D., for his help in guiding me to this interesting and inspiring study; to the Rev. Prof. W. S. Tindal, O.B.E., D.D., professorial adviser, for his patient guidance in the composition of this thesis; to the Rev. Prof. J. S. Stewart, D.D., professorial adviser, for helpful advice and encouragement; to the Rev. Prof. J. A. Lamb, M.A., B.D., Ph.D., Librarian of New College; to the Rev. J. B. Primrose, M.A., former Librarian of New College; to Miss Erna R. Leslie, M.A., B.Com., Assistant-Librarian and Principal's Secretary; to the staff of the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh; to the staff of the British Museum, London; and to the Secretary of the Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn, who gave me the keys to the Beecher Library and archives.

The spelling and punctuation in this work, with the exception of direct quotations which are true to the source, follow standard American usage.

1 May 1953 J. T.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

PREFACE iv

I. THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER: THE BACKGROUND

A. A Survey of the Religious Background 1

The Period of Settlement 1

A Period of Spiritual Decline 2

The New England Theology 3

The Beginning of American Liberalism 8

B. A. Biographical Sketch of Henry Ward Beecher 10

Birth and Heritage 10

Childhood Home 12

Early Days of Preparation 13

Amherst College 16

Lane Seminary 19

Preaching on the Frontier. 21

Ministry in Indianapolis 23

Pastor of Plymouth Church 27

Beecher's Role in the Civil War 32

Lecturing in Britain 33

Preaching in the Reconstruction Period . . . 34

II. THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER: THE TECHNIQUE

A. General Preparation 42

The Preparing of the Man 42

First-hand Study of Life 42

Interest in the Common Man 44

Page

Study of Nature 46
Materials: Books 47
World of Art 48
The Maturation Process 49
B. Particular Preparation 54
The Making of the Outline 54
Composing Before the Audience 56
Importance of Arrangement 59
The Relevance of a Definite Aim 61
Life-situation Preaching 62
The Instrument of Persuasion 67
The Sermon: Means not End 70
Beecher's Emphasis on the Application . . . 77
C. The Personal Equation 80
Ethical Proof 81
Delivery 83
The Minister's Health 84
Importance of Passion for Truth 85
The Influence of Training and Discipline. . 86

III. THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER: THE STYLE
A. The Qualities of Style 91
Perspicuity 92
In Language 94
In Sentence Structure 97
Energy 98
Concreteness of Terms 99

Page

Illustration and Animation of Style. . 100

Beecher's Use of the Illustration . . 101

Elegance 109

An Unstudied Beauty 110

Style of Rhetoric and of Poetry . . . 111

Principle of Economy and Style 112

Art of Word-painting 113

B. The Role of the Imagination in Beecher's Preaching 116

As Related to the Creative Process 118

As Related to Arrangement 118

Aids Rapport 119

IV. THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER: THE MESSAGE

The Theological Background 123

The Practical Emphasis of His Message 129

Making the Message Relevant 131

Social Emphasis 132

A Gospel of Love 136

The Changing Emphases of His Preaching 139

V. THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER: ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Represents the Water-Shed in American Preaching 144

Influenced Trend of Homiletical Method 148

Contribution in Yale Lectures 149

Estimates of His Worth 157

Evaluation Through Comparison 162

Page

A Critical Judgment 165

A Voice Not Yet Silent 168

BIBLIOGRAPHY 170

THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER

CHAPTER I THE RELIGIOUS AND BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

A. A Survey of the Religious Background

An appreciation or evaluation of a minister's preaching is possible only when we see it in the light of its context. This is especially true when a man's ministry is as closely interwoven with the religious and political life of a nation as was that of Henry Ward Beecher. To view his life and work in its proper perspective it is necessary to consider briefly the religious background of which he was a product. This preliminary survey will disclose the general direction of American Protestantism during its first three centuries and may be called "the story of the Pilgrim faith from Plymouth Rock to Plymouth Church."[1]

The Period of Settlement

With the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock in 1620, the story of American Protestantism began.[2] The religion which these early immigrants planted in the virgin

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[1]Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn, New York, is the church to which Henry Ward Beecher was minister for nearly forty years.

[2]An earlier settlement had been made at Jamestown in 1607, but the main stream of American Protestantism is generally considered to have had its genesis with the landing of the Pilgrims.

soil of the New World was essentially Calvinism. As a noted historian reminds us: "The settlers of New England were strict Calvinists. Calvinism was the creed of John Robinson, the pastor of the Leyden Church, from which the Pilgrims came over to Plymouth."[1] In 1648, two years after the Westminster Confession had been prepared in England, it was incorporated into the Cambridge Platform[2] as the general theological standard of the churches in the Colonies. The polity included in the Platform was the one which had been in general practice in New England from the beginning, Congregationalism. Thus, during the Colonial Period the most important religious body to develop in this "New England" was the Congregationalist, the direct offspring of the Puritan movement in England.

A Period of Decline

By the middle of the century (1650) the "faith of the Pilgrim Fathers" was encountering difficulty. The religious fervor which the Puritans had brought with them into the New World was not able to propagate itself, and with the passing of the first generation there was a marked spiritual decline.

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[1]George P. Fisher, History of Christian Doctrine (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1896), p. 394

[2]The Cambridge Platform is a landmark in American Protestantism for it was the first ecclesiastical constitution for New England Congregationalism. It was ratified by a synod representing the churches of the four confederate colonies met at Cambridge, Massachusetts. See Williston Walker, The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893).

A clear indication of this "cooling off" was the Half-Way Covenant adopted in 1662[1] which substituted a mere formal church connection for one previously based on an experiential faith. A further compromise indicative of the state of religion in New England was "Stoddardism",[2] the reception of unconverted persons to the Lord's Supper as a means of grace.

In addition to this general spiritual declension the influence of Arminianism was beginning to be felt with its emphasis on human responsibility as opposed to the strong emphasis of scholastic Calvinism on the sovereignty of God. Arminianism was more consistent with the new feeling of freedom which was stirring in the thought of the times, and it appeared that the Puritan experiment of founding a pure Church to sustain and extend vital piety and pure doctrine from generation to generation was near utter failure.[3]

Jonathan Edwards and the New England Theology

"More responsible than any other man for stemming the

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[1]Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana: or the Ecclesiastical History of New England, II (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), 279.

[2]This compromise doctrine has been called "Stoddardism" since Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729), minister of a church in Northampton, Massachusetts, and grandfather of Jonathan Edwards, was its most influential exponent. It led to stress the external means of salvation and has been termed an Arminian tendency by those who discount the use of such human means.

[3]Frank H. Foster, "New England Theology," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, VIII, 131.

tide of Arminianism and putting new life into New England religion was Jonathan Edwards."[1] In 1734 there started a revival in his church at Northampton, Massachusetts which marked the beginning of the Great New England Awakening. Edwards had no idea of starting such a religious upheaval as actually resulted from his preaching but rather to fortify the essential principles of Calvinism against its Arminian assailants. His effectiveness is noted by Walker: "The movement against Calvinism which was overspreading the land was in a great measure checked, and the elimination of Calvinism as a determining factor in the thought of New England, which seemed to be imminent in his day, was postponed for more than a hundred years."[2]

Edwards' attack on Arminianism was concentrated in his magnum opus, The Freedom of the Will. Foster characterizes this famous treatise as "not the work of an investigator . . . but that of an advocate."[3] Edwards was not an intentional innovator of Calvinism but a convinced defender. But in defending the historic faith he made use of a purely rational method and thus introduced a new element into American Prot-

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[1]William W. Sweet, Makers of Christianity (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1937), p. 75

[2]Williston Walker, Ten New England Leaders (New York: Silver, Burdett and Company, 1901), p. 232.

[3]Foster's treatment of this subject is concise and one of the best. For a pointed analysis of Edwards' contribution to New England theology, see Foster, op. cit., p. 132.

estantism that has led to tremendous consequences. Harriet Beecher Stowe has sketched this influence in bold outline:

> He (Edwards) was the first man who began the disintegrating process of applying rationalistic methods to the accepted doctrines of religion, and he rationalized for some time more boldly than any publishers of his biography have ever dared to let the world know. He sawed the great dam and let out the whole waters of discussion over all New England, and that free discussion led to all the shades of opinion of our modern days.[1]

Thus with Jonathan Edwards a new period in American Protestantism began. His distinct type of doctrine became known as the "New England Theology" and dominated the American religious scene for nearly a century. Edwards' influence was perpetuated through his disciples. And from their development of his thought there came the impetus for the strong social emphasis in New England through much of the nineteenth century.

Immediately following this period of unusual spiritual vitality which had begun with the revival in Edwards' church at Northampton, there set in a depressing and deadening reaction. Undoubtedly this was partly due to the effects of war (American Revolution 1776-1781), but also the influence of French infidelity was beginning to be felt in the New World. This period of extreme decadence which marked the close of the eighteenth century has been characterized as the

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[1]Harriet Beecher Stowe, Old Town Folks (Boston: Fields, Osgood and Company, 1869), p. 457. Harriet Beecher Stowe was a sister of Henry Ward Beecher.

"lowest ebb-tide of vitality in the history of American Christianity."[1]

Timothy Dwight, a grandson and also disciple of Edwards, came to "the Kingdom for such a time as this." As President of Yale College (1795-1817), he did a work for the American Church hardly second to that of his grandfather. Fearlessly he met the forces of skepticism on their own ground by encouraging free discussion of controversial theological issues in the classroom. From the college pulpit he preached a series of doctrinal sermons, Theology Explained and Defended, which he repeated every four years so that each student generation might have the benefit of the whole course. In 1801, largely through Dwight's efforts, there began a revival of religious interest which soon spread to every college in the land. From Yale College there poured a stream of devoted young graduates into places of church leadership among whom was Lyman Beecher. Thus, through his conciliatory ministry at Yale, Dwight not only did much to quicken the spiritual life of the youthful nation but also contributed to the continuance of the Edwardsian dynasty until the middle of the nineteenth century.

What Timothy Dwight did at the beginning of the nineteenth century, one of his students, Lyman Beecher, helped to do in the second quarter of the century. A new threat to

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[1]Sweet, The Story of Religions in America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), p. 322.

New England Congregationalism now came to the fore--Unitarianism. Its liberal forces had been at work for some time, but they had been contained in the pale of orthodoxy. But with the appointment of Henry Ware, a professed Anti-Trinitarian, to the Hollis Professorship in Divinity at Harvard College (1805) the break became inevitable. The "Magna Charta" of American Unitarianism was the Baltimore sermon (1819) of William Ellery Channing, "the most famous of the Unitarian preachers."[1]

To help curb the Unitarian tide Lyman Beecher was called to Hanover Street Congregational Church in 1827. His daughter later described the precarious situation of orthodoxy in this once Congregational stronghold: "It was the dethroned royal family wandering like a permitted mendicant in the city where it once had held court, and Unitarianism reigned in its stead."[2] Through his spirited and courageous work at "Brimstone Corner", as his opponents called his Church, he became the chief pulpit defender of the historic faith. His was a moderate Calvinism which took into full cognizance the ethical aspects of Christianity. After contributing much to checking the reactionary movement that had dealt such a staggering

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[1]Fisher, History of the Christian Church (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1887), p. 616.

[2]Quoted by Sweet, op. cit., p. 251 from the writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Few women on the American scene have had the grasp of theology of this woman who has undoubtedly been one of the most influential women in American history.

blow to New England Congregationalism he was called to the Presidency of Lane Seminary, Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1832.

Lyman Beecher seemed destined to a stormy life for at Lane he became involved in the controversy[1] that was dividing the Presbyterian Church. He became a leader in the "New School" forces of "free agency" in their opposition to the doctrine of "natural and moral inability" held by the more conservative "Old School".[2]

Horace Bushnell and the Beginning of American Liberalism

Since Edwards the main theological current had followed the New England School. But, with the publication of Horace Bushnell's Christian Nurture (1847) the Edwardsian dynasty came to an end. This revolutionary little book "marks the close of one era and the beginning of another."[3] Thus, Bushnell is as "truly the father of the later constructive development of American theology as was Jonathan Edwards of the earlier."

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[1]In 1801 the Congregationalists and Presbyterians adopted the Plan of Union to facilitate their work on the frontier; their ministers became interchangeable. But gradually an ultra-conservative group in the Presbyterian Church became suspicious of certain liberal tendencies in Congregationalism and this plan was abrogated, 1837. This resulted in the dividing of the ranks of the Presbyterian Church into "Old School" and "New School".

[2]Lyman Beecher's son, Henry Ward, was a student at Lane Seminary during this period and the effects of this and similar controversy can be traced in his thought and preaching.

[3]Ernest Trice Thompson, Changing Emphases in American Preaching (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1943), p. 9.

In his "epoch-making" book,[1] Bushnell voiced his reaction against the intense revivalism that had been so prevalent since the days of the Great Awakening. He presented the possibilities of Christian nurture and sharply censured an undue reliance on revivals as the only means of entering upon the Christian life. He attacked the New England theology, too, for its overemphasis on intellectual demonstration and substituted for it the validity of religious intuition. In repudiating the old mechanical theories of the atonement then in vogue, Bushnell advanced the "moral influence theory", by which he attempted to show that the atoning work of Christ falls under the law of self-sacrifice. For him, Christian doctrine was not a speculation which nicely fits into a theological system "but something to live by."

With his emancipation of the New England theology from much of the rigid scholasticism of the previous generations, Bushnell became the chief inspiration of the new liberalizing movement in American religious thought. However, it remained for others to popularize this revolt which he had begun. One of the most widely acclaimed preachers inspired by the essentials of Bushnell's message was Henry Ward Beecher who for forty years proclaimed this "enlarged Pilgrim faith" from the pulpit of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York.

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[1]Horace Bushnell, Christian Nurture, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923).

B. A Biographical Sketch of Henry Ward Beecher

Birth and Heritage

Theodore Parker is credited with the statement that "Lyman Beecher was the father of more brains than any man in America."[1] This recognition, made at a time when the Beecher family was very much in evidence, was not without warrant, for in the Dictionary of American Biography there are biographies of the father and seven of his children, a record unequaled by that of any other American family.

The outstanding member of this family was Henry Ward who became the famous "Plymouth Preacher". He was born June 24, 1813, during his father's second pastorate, at Litchfield, Connecticut.[2] His mother, Roxana Foote, died when Henry was only three. But her memory was a potent and constant influence throughout his life. As he expressed it, "I am conscious that all my life long there has been a moral power in my memory of her."[3] Again, "From her I received my love of the beautiful, my poetic temperament; from her I also re-

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[1]Lyman Beecher Stowe, Saints, Sinners, and Beechers (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1935), quoted in the "Foreword".

[2]William C. Beecher and Samuel Scoville, A Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1891), p. 41. American theology is especially indebted to Litchfield County for its many distinguished sons. Charles G. Finney was born there in 1792 and Horace Bushnell ten years later.

[3]Ibid., p. 67.

ceived simplicity and childlike faith in God." His stepmother came into the home only a year later but for her he never had the same kind regard, for she was more to be revered for her many excellencies than to be loved for her sympathetic understanding.

If it is true that "Lyman Beecher was the father of more brains than any other man in America," it is as equally true that those brains were used along lines which he laid down. Few fathers have left their imprint on their children in such a remarkable fashion as did the "father of all the Beechers." "Everyone of his exceptional traits were passed on to his children. He dominated them all, yet he never inhibited their initiative, usurped their individuality or shackled their independence. But the main ideas he held and the causes he espoused, they in turn held and carried on."[1] This strong parental influence is illustrated in the following incident.[2] One Sunday morning as Lyman Beecher was leaving Plymouth Church after his son had preached a very impressive sermon a friend remarked to him, "That was a magnificent discourse!" "Yes," replied the proud father, "but you wouldn't have had that sermon if it hadn't been for me." The son rec-

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[1]Sweet, Makers of Christianity, p. 247.

[2]Frank S. Child, Early Formative Influences in the Life of Henry Ward Beecher (n. p.). (Deposited with the "Beecher Collection" in the archives of the Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn, New York.)

ognized his indebtedness to his father for to him he dedicated his Lectures to Young Men with these words:

> To you I owe more than to any other living being. In childhood, you were my parent; in later life my teacher; in manhood my companion. To your affectionate vigilance I owe my principles, my knowledge, and that I am a minister of the Gospel of Christ, for whatever profit they derive from this little book, the young will be indebted to you.[1]

His Childhood Home

The home into which Henry Ward Beecher was born has been variously characterized. Robert Ingersoll described it as a "Puritan penitentiary, of which his father was one of the wardens . . . . In this prison the creed and catechisms were primers for children, and from a pure sense of duty their loving hearts were stained and scarred with the religion of Jesus Christ."[2] This distortion has been repudiated by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the most famous daughter of this family; she once wrote: "One of my most vivid impressions of the family, as it was in my childhood days, was of a great household inspired by a spirit of cheerfulness and hilarity, and of my father, although pressed and driven with business, always lending an attentive ear to anything in the way of life and social fellowship."[3]

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[1]Henry Ward Beecher, Lectures to Young Men (London: Ward, Lock, and Tyler, n. d.), "Dedication".

[2]Edward W. Bok, Beecher Memorial (London: James Clarke and Company, 1887), p. 28.

[3]Quoted by Beecher and Scoville, op. cit., p. 57.

Frequently the father encouraged theological discussion with his children by raising some point and then taking the wrong side of the question just to give them practice in logic. Some of these discussions of Calvinistic doctrines haunted the sensitive Henry Ward and contributed later to agonizing periods of concern over his unsaved condition. On the whole, however, there was quite a congenial atmosphere in this childhood home. Independency and resourcefulness were developed in a remarkable way. "I was brought up to put my hand to anything," Beecher later declared.[1] His childhood experiences in this large family undoubtedly did much to encourage his thinking along democratic lines; "it was a good soil, and a good exposure for planting a tree whose branches should spread abroad throughout the land and the whole earth."

Early Days of Preparation

"I have not a single pleasant recollection of my schoolboy days,"[2] is indicative of Henry Ward Beecher's sentiments regarding his early educational experiences. Part of his trouble was due to poor schools in which routine memorizing was the prevailing conception of education, but the major difficulty was Henry's diffidence and apparent backwardness. He had a defect in verbal memory which he never overcame and

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[1] Ibid., p. 64.

[2] Ibid., p. 53.

his speech was very indistinct. Of this latter handicap an aunt once said: "When he is sent to me with a message I always have to make him say it three times. The first time I have no manner of an idea, than if he spoke Choctaw; the second, I catch now and then a word; by the third time I begin to understand."[1] Such was the vocal promise of the man who came to be regarded as the "Demosthenes"[2] of his day.

At home he had even a greater trial--learning the catechism. His sister Harriet recalled:

> The other children memorized readily and were brilliant reciters, but Henry, blushing, stammering, confused and hopelessly miserable, stuck fast on some sandbank of what is required or forbidden by this or that commandment, his mouth choking up with the long words which he hopelessly miscalled, was sure to be accused of idleness or inattention, and to be solemnly talked to, which made him look more stolid and miserable than ever, but appeared to have no effect in quickening his dormant faculties.[3]

Perhaps, such an ordeal accounts for some of his disdain for the catechism in later life.

His early experiences in attending church did not make religion any more attractive to him. While his father was preaching his long, and to a small boy completely unintelligible sermons, Henry would fall asleep but his over-conscientious stepmother would rap him on his head until he

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[1] Ibid., p. 70.

[2] Lyman Beecher Stowe, op. cit., p. 236.

[3] Harriet Beecher Stowe, Men of Our Times (Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Publishing Co., 1868), p. 512. This dullness and slowness in learning is attested by various biographers.

woke up. For this unintentional unkindness he was never quite able to forgive her.

Although the usual formal methods of education had a singularly depressing effect on the young and sensitive Henry Ward, yet he was not growing up uneducated. The beautiful countryside surrounding Litchfield was to him a more inviting schoolroom. On the authority of his sister, he had a "peculiar passion for natural scenery." Thus, in one of the most picturesque parts of New England, he gained the habit of investigation into the things of nature, and of close observation, that distinguished him later on. One writer commenting on his education said: "His nature, which seemed almost to the verge of stupidity to the rules of syntax and the answers in the Catechism, was wide open and receptive to all the processes and influences of nature around him. . . ."[1] His love of nature is noted in his preaching as it colors his thought and lives in his speech.

In 1826 when Henry was thirteen the Beecher family moved to Boston, Massachusetts where the father had been called to become the minister of Hanover Street Church. The problem of Henry's education was now entrusted to the famous Boston Latin School. But he soon became convinced that school life was intolerable and began toying with the possibility of going to sea. His father, learning of his ambitions, astutely

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[1]Beecher and Scoville, op. cit., p. 32.

advised a thorough knowledge of mathematics for such a career and succeeded in getting his son to enroll in the Mount Pleasant Classical Institute, Amherst, Massachusetts. Elated with the success of his maneuver, the father shrewdly remarked, "I shall have that boy in the ministry yet."[1]

Now for the first time, at the age of fourteen, Henry's dormant faculties were awakened. Under the wise pedagogy of a West Point graduate, W. P. Fitzgerald, he learned how to study and soon made progress even in mathematics, the most abhorred of his subjects. Also John E. Lovell, a remarkable teacher of elocution, inspired the young student to practice long hours to overcome his serious speech defects. Latent powers of speech began to appear giving indication of what manner of man he was to become. Beecher never forgot his indebtedness to Lovell and all his life gave him credit for laying the foundations for his success as a preacher and orator.

Amherst College

After three years at Mount Pleasant he had forgotten his ambition to go to sea and entered Amherst College with the class of 1834. Amherst had been founded but nine years earlier to help combat the Unitarian influence of Harvard (then Cambridge).

At Amherst young Beecher made no reputation as a student,

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[1]Lyman Beecher Stowe, op. cit., p. 243

if his class marks are to be taken as an indication. He had learned to study, but he only indulged in those subjects in which he had particular interest. He said to himself: "I knew how to study and I turned it into things I wanted to know."[1] Latin and Greek were not among those things which he wanted to know, but English literature and natural science were. Milton's prose and poetry, Bacon, Shakespeare, and the writers of the Elizabethan period were works of his careful study. In his sophomore year he acquired considerable interest in phrenology. He found enough truth in this pseudo-science to make it helpful in the study of human nature which was already becoming one of his major interests. With phrenology he studied books on anatomy and physiology and formulated a physico-psychology when such a position was far in advance of others.

Through his frequent participation in college debates Beecher became a fluent extemporaneous speaker and a successful lecturer on temperance and phrenology. On one occasion he received ten dollars for delivering a temperance lecture. (By walking both ways he saved the entire fee.) He used five dollars of it to buy an engagement ring[2] and the rest to buy

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[1]Ibid., p. 246.

[2]He had become acquainted with Eunice Bullard while teaching school nearby during one of his vacation periods. See Beecher and Scoville, op. cit., p. 127

the works of Burke which formed the foundation of his library.[1]

Already Beecher was quite familiar with the technicalities of theology. As he later commented:

> Growing constantly and warmly in sympathy with my father in taking sides with orthodoxy, that was in battle in Boston with unitarianism, I learned of him all the theology that was current at that time. . . I got the doctrines just like a row of pins on a paper of pins. I knew them as a soldier knows his weapons.[2]

Although quite well informed on theological issues, he had not yet had a satisfying religious experience. Some of his father's sermons on election, foreordination, and reprobation haunted him. He became disturbed about his own salvation, but despairingly thought, "If you are elected you will be saved, and if you are not elected you will be damned, and there is no hope for you."[3] While at Mount Pleasant he had experienced what he had hoped was conversion, and his father had hurriedly ushered him into the Church. But later during his college days, he was beset with much uncertainty and doubt. Here, during another revival, he exper-

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[1]Two years later his library had grown to one hundred and thirty-five volumes (forty-two theological, seventy-one literary, ten scientific, and twelve miscellaneous). At the time of his death he had a library of fifteen thousand carefully selected volumes. See W. S. Searle, "Personality of Henry Ward Beecher," North American Review, XLCIV (May 1887) 487.

[2]Lyman Abbott and S. B. Halliday, Henry Ward Beecher (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Co., 1887), p. 490.

[3]Beecher and Scoville, op. cit., p. 78.

ienced a second "conversion" which proved no more satisfying than the first. When he graduated from Amherst in 1834 he still lacked any definite religious assurance. However, the next fall he enrolled in Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, where his father had been president for two years.[1]

Lane Seminary

At Lane the only prescribed course which particularly interested Beecher was one on the Bible taught by Calvin Ellis Stowe, his future brother-in-law. He later testified:

> He led me to an examination of the Bible and to an analysis of its several portions, not as parts of a machine, formal and dead, but as a body of truth instinct with God, warm with divine and human sympathies, clothed with language adapted to their fit expression and to be understood as similar language used for similar ends in everyday life.[2]

It is quite evident that at seminary Henry gave as much time to extracurricular activities as to his studies. He wrote articles for the Daily Evening Post of Cincinnati and for six months became the Editor of the Cincinnati Journal, a Presbyterian weekly, in which he wrote straight-forward anti-slavery editorials which were regarded, even by those who agreed with the young editor, as dangerous. And when a pro-slavery mob destroyed James G. Birney's printing office

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[1]J. T. Lloyd, Henry Ward Beecher, His Life and Work (London: Walter Scott, 1887), p. 23.

[2]Lyman Beecher Stowe, op. cit., p. 251.

he had himself sworn in as a deputy.[1]

Although he became increasingly adept in theological technicalities he was still uncertain about his call to the ministry. Actually his only interest in systematic theology was to equip himself to champion his father who was then on trial for heresy. Witnessing the unrelenting methods of the Old School Presbyterians in hounding his father, he became more and more convinced that theological controversies were futile and wrong. "By the time I got away from the theological seminary," he said, "I was so sick--no tongue can tell how sick I was of the whole medley. How I despised and hated this abyss of whirling controversies that seemed to me to be filled with all manner of evil things, with everything indeed but Christ!"[2]

Religious certitude finally came to the "would-be-preacher" through an aesthetic personal experience. One May morning, after reading one of the Gospels through at a sitting, he walked through the beautiful Ohio woods. As he later described it:

> There rose up before me a view of Jesus as the Savior of sinners--not saints . . . . And when I found that Jesus Christ had such a disposition . . . that it was Christ's nature to lift men out of weakness to strength . . . I felt that I had found a God . . . . Time went on, and next came the disclosure of a Christ ever-present with me--a Christ

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[1]Beecher and Scoville, op. cit., pp. 141-142.

[2]Abbott and Halliday, op. cit., p. 490.

that never was far from me, but was always near me, as a champion and friend, to uphold and sustain me. This was the last and the best revelation of God's Spirit to my soul.[1]

After being impressed by these two great truths that God as revealed in Christ loves a man in his sins to help him out of them and that Christ is an ever-abiding presence with individual men, he went to his ministry, says one biographer, with a zeal that motivated him throughout life: "God's love because of his fatherhood; man's worth and mutual brotherhood because of his sonship to God, there were the two halves of the one great theme which from that time to the day of his final silence, underlay his life, his words, his works."[2]

Henry Ward Beecher once fondly recalled: "I was like the man in the story to whom the fairy gave a purse with a single piece of money in it, which he found always came again as soon as he had spent it. I thought I knew at least one thing to preach. I found it included everything."[3]

Preaching on the Frontier

Graduating from Lane Seminary in 1830 Beecher was licensed to preach by the Cincinnati Presbytery and was soon

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[1]Beecher and Scoville, op. cit., p. 155.

[2]John R. Howard, Patriotic Address (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1899), p. 43.

[3]Harriet Beecher Stowe, Men of Our Times, p. 544.

called to serve the Presbyterian Church in Lawrenceburg, Indiana. This was quite a humble beginning as he described it in a sermon in later years, ". . . the flock which I found gathered in the wilderness consisted of twenty persons . . . . I was sexton of my own church at that time."[1]

Securing an advance on his first year's salary he returned to New England and married Eunice Bullard whom he had met seven years before while attending Amherst College. Back on the frontier the only accommodations for the newly married couple were two rooms over a warehouse. The salary was meager and Beecher was not too proud to wear castoff clothing, but sometimes wished that the donor was a little more his size.

After about six months he applied for ordination to the Oxford Presbytery, a staunch Old School body, which immediately suspected his orthodoxy because he was Lyman Beecher's son. However, the young preacher, answering their questions with more cleverness than candor, was discovered to be quite orthodox. But the following day the Presbytery passed a resolution requiring all candidates seeking ordination to prescribe strictly to the Old School Assembly; this Beecher would not do, and when they refused to ordain him he carried his church into the New School Assembly.

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[1]Lyman Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), p. 46, 47.

This incident is indicative of the division that was taking place in the ranks of the Presbyterian Church all through the West. Such contention and controversy left its mark on the life and ministry of this young preacher, for he once wrote: "Going into my work in the midst of that state of affairs, I made up my mind distinctly that, with the help of God, I would never engage in any religious contention."[1]

Beecher was popular in Lawrenceburg and the Church was usually filled, but he was dissatisfied with his preaching because of its seemingly lack of effectiveness. "For three years I did not make a sinner wink," he once said. Every Sunday night he had a headache and resolved that he would quit the pulpit and buy a farm. However, his work had not gone unnoticed, for after two years at Lawrenceburg, he was called to the Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis,[2] a New School congregation formed by those who had seceded from the Old School First Church.

Beecher's Ministry in Indianapolis

In 1839, when Beecher took over his new pastorate, Indianapolis had less than four thousand inhabitants and was a typical pioneer town with stumps still in many of its so-called "streets". As in Lawrenceburg, he soon became very

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[1]Beecher and Scoville, op. cit., pp. 167, 168.

[2]Abbott, op. cit., p. 50.

distraught because no apparent results attended his preaching. In his perplexity he turned to the book of Acts and systematically studied the method of the Apostles. He discovered that in their preaching they laid a foundation of historical truth that was common knowledge and then they made personal application of the truth presented--not in scholastic and scholarly language but in the language of everyday. He decided to try their method and present the Gospel truths in the "language of the modern Hoosiers who sat before him instead of that of the ancient Hebrews." After revising his homiletical method Beecher succeeded in "awakening" several people with his first sermon. He later commented:

> This was the most memorable day of (my) ministerial life. The idea was born. Preaching was a definite and practical thing. Our people needed certain moral changes. Preaching was only a method of enforcing truths, not for the sake of the truths themselves, but that the proper results might be sought in men. Man was the thing. Henceforth our business was to work upon man; to study him, to stimulate and educate him.[1]

Now, Henry Ward Beecher preached with a constantly increasing enthusiasm and a religious revival soon broke out. A member of his congregation described him in this revival, as "plunging through the wet streets, his trousers stuffed in his muddy boot-legs, earnest, untiring . . . the whole day preaching Christ to the people where he could find them, and at night preaching still where the people were sure to

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[1]Beecher and Scoville, op. cit., p. 188.

find him."[1] During one spring he preached one hundred and seventy successive nights in an evangelistic effort.

To be a child of Lyman Beecher was to be a reformer. The father's reforming zeal soon became evident in the ministry of his famous son. Drinking, gambling, and immorality flourished in Indianapolis "in typical frontier luxuriance." To strip these vices of their alluring disguise and to warn people of their devastating consequences he gave a series of Lectures to Young Men.[2] These were such a realistic treatment that following one lecture a young man cynically inquired, "How could you describe a gambling hell so accurately if you had never been in one?" To which Beecher candidly replied, "How could you know it was accurate if you had never been in one?"[3] In 1845 these lectures were published and by the following year they had sold sixty thousand copies.[4] This work has gone through various editions not only in America but also in England. It is said to be "the first book

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[1]Harriet Beecher Stowe, Men of Our Times, p. 544.

[2]These are the only extant sermons of Beecher's Indianapolic pastorate.

[3]Lyman Beecher Stowe, op. cit., p. 264.

[4]The popularity of these Lectures is noted in that in 1951 in America there were only three or four novels that sold over one hundred thousand copies. Moreover, in 1845 the population of the United States was only one-ninth of what it is today. Undoubtedly this work was a best-seller at that time. Such popularity for a religious work is no mean achievement.

by an Indiana author to be published in England."[1]

The most controversial issue in Indiana during Beecher's pastorates there was slavery. However, there is no indication that he preached a sermon on the subject until nearly the close of his second pastorate. He was not an abolitionist[2] and was opposed to the methods used by such extremists. No doubt he hesitated about becoming involved in anything that would jeopardize his opportunity of carrying through his main objective--"saving souls." Although intensely emotional in nature, Beecher possessed a strain of practical common sense which is best illustrated in advice given to his brother Charles on a related matter: "Preach little doctrine, except what is of mouldy orthodoxy, keep all your improved breeds, your short-horned Durhams, and your Berkshires way off to pasture. . . . I do not ask you to change yourself; but, for a time, while captious critics are lurking, adapt your mode so as to insure that you will be rightly understood."[3] In keeping with this advice, Beecher evidently

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[1]Ibid., p. 265.

[2]The abolitionists were revolutionaries and advocated immediate emancipation; they disclaimed any obligation to maintain the government and the promises of the constitution. Beecher was identified with the anti-slavery group who favored emancipation by a more circuitous and gradual influence. He thought slavery could be overthrown under the constitution and in the Union by trusting to an awakened conscience, enforced by an enlightened self-interest.

[3]Harris Elwood Starr, "Henry Ward Beecher," The Dictionary of American Biography, II, 133.

thought it expedient in his early ministry to move with caution in treating controversial questions, and it was not until his Presbytery advised all its preachers to devote one sermon a year to the issue of slavery that he made this social curse a theme of a sermon.

During his eight years in Indianapolis Beecher's fame had reached the Eastern seaboard and in 1847 he received a call to a newly organized Congregational Church in Brooklyn. This New Englander had learned to love the West and it was with some reluctance that he finally accepted this call.[1] Leaving the Frontier on the first passenger train to run out of Indianapolis, Henry Ward Beecher arrived in Brooklyn, October 10, 1847, to begin one of the longest and most influential pastorates in the annals of the American pulpit.[2]

Pastor of Plymouth Church

When Beecher became the first pastor of what came to be called "Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims," Brooklyn was a thriving city of sixty thousand inhabitants, but before the end of his ministry the population had increased to over half a million. The Church was only recently organized and had a

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[1]Most biographers give his wife's poor health as the decisive reason in influencing him to make this change. He thought that the better living conditions in the East would be advantageous to her in regaining her health. Evidently the decision was right for her health improved and she outlived him ten years.

[2]Beecher and Scoville, op. cit., p. 216.

membership of twenty-one.

From the very beginning of this new pastorate his primary purpose was "to preach Christ for the awakening of men, for their conversion." And here as in Indianapolis, he emphasized the importance of revivals in the development of the Church. "My desire," he commented, "was that this should be a revival church--a church in which the Gospel should be preached, primarily and mainly for the recreation of man's moral nature, for the bringing of Christ as a living power upon the living souls of men."[1]

The creed adopted by Plymouth Church was orthodox. It embodied essentially the theology of the New England Congregational Churches of the middle of the nineteenth century and was practically identical with that of the New School Presbyterian Churches. Its main tenets were the fall of man, the depravity of the human race, the Trinity, salvation through the atoning work of Christ, the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and future judgment with its final awards of eternal life and everlasting punishment. But, as a biographer has indicated, "Beecher's influence was steadily exerted in favor of substituting spiritual and ethical standards for intellectual standards of character."[2]

Beecher's preaching was not immediately popular in

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[1]Abbott and Halliday, op. cit., p. 243.

[2]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, pp. 83, 84.

Brooklyn. Perhaps his unconventionality shocked the Eastern sense of dignity, or his championing of unpopular causes alarmed people. But, after about six months the people came in ever-increasing numbers. After the second year the old church burned and a new one was built according to Beecher's own design. The auditorium was unusually plain[1] with a long platform thrust out into the midst of the congregation instead of the usual pulpit. Its size has sometimes been exaggerated; its legitimate capacity was two thousand fifty. However, within a few months the crowds were so large that the seating capacity was augmented by five hundred chairs. From 1850, until Beecher's death thirty-seven years later, this great auditorium was crowded morning and evening. Plymouth Church became so popular that the direction given to those wanting to reach it on a Sunday morning was to cross on the ferry and to follow the crowd.[2]

Beecher's influence was greatly enhanced by the press. His sermons were taken down stenographically (for he seldom wrote them) and published weekly in pamphlet form. He also became a regular contributor to the Independent, a weekly religious journal, which, thanks to his influence, became one of the leading journalistic influences in the country. His editorials, indicated by a star and hence known as his

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[1]Karl Baedeker in his United States characterized it as without architectural pretensions. See p. 76.

[2]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 77.

"star papers," were on a variety of subjects but predominantly on the great contemporary questions. In the Cambridge History of American Literature they are ranked as among the "strongest editorials in the American press."[1]

Increasingly through the Independent and from the pulpit Beecher expressed his views concerning the great moral issues of the day. It was a prevailing idea, then, that a minister should stick to the Gospel and not become involved in "politics". In most of the Protestant Churches the attitude was almost one of laissez faire toward political and social questions. It was thought that if men were converted in sufficient numbers the social problems would solve themselves.

It is no wonder then that Beecher's first sermon in Plymouth Church was regarded as a bombshell. He boldly, if not untactfully, announced that he would dynamite the conventions of the day by denouncing social injustices from the pulpit. In explaining his revolutionary conception of the function of the pulpit, he once said, "I hold that it is a Christian minister's duty not only to preach the Gospel of the New Testament without reservation, but to apply its truths to every question which relates to the welfare of men."[2]

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[1]William Peterfield Trent and others, Cambridge History of American Literature, III (Cambridge: University Press, 1921), 325.

[2]Henry Ward Beecher, Sermons (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1870), p. 14.

The fearlessness with which Beecher dealt with the public questions of the day had much to do with widening the range of the American pulpit and in pointing up the slavery issue. John Burroughs has written that the effect of his ministry "was to secularize the pulpit, yea, to secularize religion itself and make it as common and as universal as the air we breathe."[1] However, Beecher was not a preacher and a reformer, but he was a reformer because he was a preacher. His objective was not only to save people by bringing them to their best selves but also to change their social conditions so that they could stay saved.

The great social curse in the national life which Beecher hoped to eliminate was slavery. He believed the slave system to be fundamentally wrong. However, constitutionally it could not be interfered with where it already existed. Initially, he advocated a policy of "containment", for he felt that if it was rigidly confined to its present limits, it would soon die out. Furthermore, he vigorously opposed compromise, for he saw liberty and slavery as irreconcilable elements in a democratic system. Thus, on February 21, 1850, he published an editorial in the Independent forcibly opposing the Clay compromises[2] "which made him over-night a nat-

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[1]Quoted by Thompson, op. cit., p. 75.

[2]The Clay Compromise of 1850 provided for the admission of California into the Union as a free state and as compensation to the South the extension of slavery to certain newly acquired territories was to be permitted.

ional leader in the antislavery crusade."

From this time until the outbreak of the War, Beecher preached from the platform, pulpit, and press to awaken the conscience of the nation to all the evil implications of slavery. He contended that it was primarily a moral question. To impress the public with the evils of the system he began the practice of auctioning slaves from the pulpit of his church.[1] Although severely accused of sensationalism, Beecher was convinced that these auctions were effective object lessons that would leave a more lasting impression than the spoken or written word.

As noted, Beecher's vigorous championing of the antislavery cause did not make for universal popularity. Lyman Abbott has recorded an accurate description of the situation when he said that Henry Ward Beecher was "the most admired orator, and the most beloved preacher of his time," and also, with the exception of Theodore Parker, "the most bitterly hated."

Beecher's Role in the Civil War

Those present in Plymouth Church the first Sunday after the War finally broke heard a stirring sermon from Exodus 14:15, "And the Lord said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou

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[1]Actually Beecher brought slaves into the pulpit seeking to raise money from his congregation to purchase their freedom. This has frequently been referred to as Beecher's "auctioning slaves from the pulpit."

unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward." The conflict, he explained, "is not of our procuring." But now that it has come "we must not stop to measure the cost. . .we must put our honor and our religion into this struggle. . .this matter must now be settled. . . . There are many reasons which make a good and thorough battle necessary."[1]

Unceasingly, he urged a vigorous prosecution of the War. He wanted no "business as usual" and made use of every means at his disposal to arouse the North to will the war and to support it unreservedly. After war came, he advocated immediate emancipation of the slaves and criticized the President almost with virulence for his delay in this matter.

In 1863 after the Emancipation Proclamation had finally been issued, Beecher, feeling the effects of his ceaseless war labors, was persuaded by his congregation to go to Europe for a rest. Evidently he had no intention of lecturing,[2] but in visiting England he encountered such antagonism toward the North that he felt it his duty to try to break down this hostility by eliminating some of the prevailing misunderstanding concerning the Union cause. In the face of violent opposition he gave five remarkable ad-

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[1]Howard, op. cit., pp. 284, 285.

[2]There are some historians which state that Beecher was a paid envoy of the government. But the evidence given by biographers refute this interpretation of his trip to Europe.

dresses (Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool, and London), which did much to turn the tide of public opinion in favor of the North and to dissuade a Conservative ministry from recognizing the Southern Confederacy. A passage from his Edinburgh speech (October 14, 1863) is of special significance in the light of later developments. "The day is coming," he prophesied, "when the foundations of the earth will be lifted out of their places; and there are two nations that ought to be found shoulder to shoulder. . . for the sake of Christianity and universal liberty, and these nations are Great Britain and America."[1]

Returning home in November Beecher was acclaimed a national hero for his great service to the country in "her most imperiled hour." An estimate of the importance of his mission was given by Oliver Wendell Holmes in an article that appeared in the Atlantic Monthly, "a more remarkable embassy than any envoy who has represented us in Europe since Franklin pleaded the cause of the young Republic at the Court of Versailles."[2] Beecher's strained relations with the Administration, because of his bitter criticism of its conduct of the War, were forgotten and he came into close association with both the President and his Cabinet.

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[1]This address appeared in The Scotsman on October 15, 1863 in a lengthy report of nearly five columns.

[2]Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Minister Plenipotentiary," The Atlantic Monthly, XIII (January 1864), 11.

Raising the Flag on Fort Sumter and Reconstruction

Undoubtedly due to his English service, Beecher was selected by the President to give the address at the "raising of the flag" on recaptured Fort Sumter. In concluding this address he outlined the principles that should govern the Nation in the reconstruction period. "For the people misled, for the multitudes drafted and driven into this civil war, let no trace of animosity remain. . . . All the resources of the renovated nation shall be applied to their redemption. . . ."[1] Unfortunately Beecher's policy was not followed, for in juxtaposition to his conciliatory views there was a group of radical Republicans clamoring for vengeance against the fallen South.

One of the leaders of this radical group was Beecher's one-time friend, Theodore Tilton, who had recently succeeded him as editor-in-chief of the Independent. Tilton was very caustic in his criticism and even accused Beecher of deserting the Republican party. Soon the Independent discontinued the publication of Beecher's weekly sermons. Beecher, then, broke off relations with the paper which he had done so much to make famous; later he took up the editorship of the Christian Union which soon rivaled and threatened to surpass the Independent in popularity. When the Independent continued losing ground, Tilton was removed as editor. He blamed Beecher for this and apparently was deter-

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[1]Lyman Beecher Stowe, op. cit., p. 296.

mined to get revenge.

It is only against this background that we can understand the accusation that was later brought against the "Plymouth Preacher" by his former assistant and friend. For our purpose it is unnecessary to become involved in the intricacies of the scandal which resulted.[1] Beecher was finally exonerated but was censured for his mismanagement of his private friendships.[2]

Although Beecher's reputation and influence for awhile were effected, there was little noticeable decline in his productivity through this whole strenuous time. It was during this period that he gave the Yale Lectures on Preaching for three successive years.[3]

Extended Lecture Tours

After his trial (1875) Beecher launched on a series of annual lecture tours which continued until the time of his death. His purpose was not only to rehabilitate his reputation among the people but also to rehabilitate himself fi-

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[1]Apparently to ruin Beecher's reputation Tilton started rumors insinuating that Beecher had had illicit relations with Mrs. Tilton. Finally Tilton brought suit but Beecher was not convicted.

[2]Undoubtedly Edward Eggleston was referring to this incident when he said: "I never knew a person who knew man so well and men so ill as Henry Ward Beecher." See Lyman Beecher Stowe, op. cit., p. 322.

[3]Beecher's Yale Lectures are discussed in succeeding chapters.

nancially.[1] These tours under the management of James B. Pond were a national ministry for they extended West to the Pacific coast and as far South as Memphis, Tennessee. In an address before the Long Island Historical Society, Pond said:

> Between September 21, 1876 and May 14, 1877, thirty-three and a half weeks, Mr. Beecher, the formidable Brooklyn pulpiteer, delivered one hundred and thirty-five lectures, traveled upwards of twenty-seven thousand miles. . . . He lectured and preached two hundred and thirty-two times in two hundred and thirty-five days. The number of people that he addressed. . . was 460,000 in the short space of seven months. This is the most remarkable record of which I ever had any knowledge.[2]

A Changed Emphasis in His Preaching

At the beginning of his ministry Beecher's sermons had been mainly evangelistic; later they were more ethical in their emphasis; and in the years following the Civil War his preaching became more intellectual and philosophical. This changed emphasis was a deliberate attempt to adapt his preaching to new conditions. The doctrine, revolutionizing the theological and philosophical climate, was Charles Darwin's Evolutionism.

Most contemporary church leaders regarded this new theory as an attack on the Christian religion. And Henry Ward Beecher was one of the first ministers in America, if not

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[1]His trial alone cost over $118,000 and although his church raised his salary to $100,000 for that year, he was still heavily in debt.

[2]Lyman Beecher Stowe, op. cit., p. 325.

the very first, to "advocate the doctrine of evolution as a doctrine which, so far from being inimical to the cause of Christ, was certain to prove its friend and supporter."[1]

Beecher's acceptance of the evolutionary hypothesis subjected him to much criticism, even by ministers of his own denomination. And, on October 11, 1882, he formally resigned from the Congregational Association of New York and Brooklyn so that no one would feel embarrassed by the supposition that they were endorsing his views. Thus, the closing five years of his ministry were spent without denominational connection.

In 1886, at the age of seventy-three, Beecher revisited England. If any suspicions had been aroused by his trial, they were soon obliterated. As has been acknowledged, by a not too friendly biographer, this tour was a "personal triumph--a round of public receptions and of lectures."[2]

He returned to America apparently rested, and set himself to his many tasks with a renewed vigor and enthusiasm. He made preparations to complete his Life of Christ which had been interrupted by the trial. At this time he wrote to Joseph Parker at City Temple in London: "I have my

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[1]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 317.

[2]Paxton Hibben, Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1927), p. 112.

snug room upstairs, and am working cozily and every day on my Life of Christ, which, like the buds of spring, is beginning to swell, like the returning birds, is beginning to sing, like the grass, is beginning to grow, and is already very green! But I am hopeful."[1] He refused all opportunities to lecture that he might finish this work, but it was to remain unfinished.

For on Sunday evening February 27, 1887, the "great warrior" wielded the "Sword" from the pulpit of Plymouth Church for the last time. The following week Beecher suffered a paralytic stroke and a few days later died. It was as he had desired it, for in one of his sermons he had expressed the wish, "I would fain work to the end of my life. I live to work, and pray, that, as God's best gift to me, when I cannot work anymore, I may die at once. I desire to fall in the harness."[2]

On the Sunday following Beecher's death, from the pulpit of Trinity Church (Boston), Phillips Brooks paid these words of tribute to his fellow-laborer:

> I know that you are all thinking, as I speak, of the great soul that has passed away, of the great preacher, for he was the greatest preacher in America, and the greatest preacher means the greatest power in the land.
> To make a great preacher, two things are necessary, the

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[1]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 375.

[2]Henry Ward Beecher, Forty-Six Sermons, I (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1870), 51.

love of truth and the love of souls, and surely no man had greater love of truth or love of souls than Henry Ward Beecher.[1]

To examine, analyze, and evaluate this preaching that won Beecher such a place of distinction in the annals of the American pulpit is our task in prospect.

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[1]Alexander V. G. Allen, Life and Letters of Phillips Brooks, III (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1901), 229.

THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER

CHAPTER II THE TECHNIQUE

> ". . .we should labor at it night and day, sparing no pains to become skilled in our craft and to make the earthen vessel as worthy as we can of the treasure it contains." James S. Stewart

Of no other American preacher could it be said that over so long a period of time "the common people heard him gladly." For nearly forty years Henry Ward Beecher held the pulpit of Plymouth Church at the heart of one of America's great metropolitan areas. To preach successfully to one congregation for so many years is no accident. No one realized this more than Beecher. To him preaching was an art and it involved the mastery of certain techniques and principles.[1] In the immediate study the purpose is to investigate Beecher's preaching as an art and to discover, if possible, the underlying principles which led to his great success.

First, attention is given to his method of marshaling materials for the estimated seven thousand sermons[2] he

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[1]Henry Ward Beecher, Yale Lectures on Preaching, I (New York: J. B. Ford and Co., 1872), 15.

[2]This estimate is conservative for Beecher preached for over fifty years and during most of that period must have averaged over three speaking engagements a week. His extant sermons are almost entirely from his Brooklyn pastorate and most of these are stenographically reported.

preached during his lifetime. This process is discussed as part of his general preparation.

A. General Preparation

"My whole life is a general preparation," Beecher once told a group of students on a lecture tour of England.[1] It is interesting to note that this same thought is echoed by one of England's contemporary pulpit masters.[2] Beecher prepared the man rather than the particular sermon. He went everywhere gathering materials althoughhe never knew exactly when he would use them.

First-hand Study of Life

In his mustering of materials Beecher believed a first-hand knowledge of life was of paramount importance. His interest in life rather than in books characterized his entire ministry. It could be said of Beecher as Plutarch in his essay on Demosthenes spoke of himself: "It is not so much by the knowledge of words that I came to the understanding of things, as by my experience of things I was enabled to follow the meaning of words." Beecher, as a discerning student of human nature, became a familiar figure on the streets of Brooklyn and New York.

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[1] J. B. Pond, A Summer in England with Henry Ward Beecher (New York: Fords, Howard and Hulbert, 1886), p. 102.

[2] W. E. Sangster says: "All life is preparation for preaching." The Craft of Sermon Construction (London: The Epworth Press, 1951), p. 145.

He made special effort to talk with all kinds of people in order to learn life direct. Of such experiences he related:

> Now, I take great delight, if ever I can get a chance, in riding on the top of an omnibus with the driver and talking with him. What do I gain by that? Why my sympathy goes out for these men, and I recognize in them an element of brotherhood. . . . If ever I saw one of these men in my church, I could preach to him, and hit him under the rib with an illustration much better than if I had not been acquainted with him.[1]

This reminds one of Walter Scott who said that "he learned the secrets of human nature from talking to the man on the driver's box." With this eagerness to understand "all kinds and conditions of men" Beecher was able to keep his finger on the pulse of the people.

He believed that this first-hand knowledge of life was so important to the preacher that in his initial series of lectures to the students of the Yale Divinity School he devoted an entire lecture of twenty seven pages to the subject. In his early ministry Beecher's efforts had been largely unfruitful because he had not been cognizant of the needs of the people before him. It was, then, out of his own experience, that he said to the Yale divinity students: "A man may know the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, he may know every theological treatise from the day of St. Augustine to

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 98.

Dr. Taylor, but if he does not know human nature he is not fit to preach."[1]

Champion of the Common People

Especially was Beecher concerned with the common people. Frequently during his Yale Lectures he expressed his interest in them. He advised the young preachers before him: "If you are going to be a minister, keep very close to the plain people; don't get above the common people."[2] James Black similarly counseled young British preachers in his Warrack Lectures, "The secret of men like Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. . .lay in the fact that they had the 'key of the street'."[3]

Beecher's interest in the "rank-and-file" helps to account for his great influence among the masses. In this interest he reflects the social and political thought of the nineteenth century. This belief in the common man found expression in much of the contemporary poetry. Beecher praised Cowper and Wordsworth for their contribution in emancipating English literature from its contempt for the common people.

As late as the day of Cowper, English literature, from

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[1] Ibid., 85.

[2] Ibid., 98.

[3] James Black, The Mystery of Preaching (London: James Clarke and Co., Ltd., 1924), p. 39. This championing of the common man was the trend of the times although even in Aristotle's Rhetoric the necessity of knowing human nature is emphasized.

its day-dawn down through Dryden and Pope . . . was one that stung the under-classes with a perpetual contempt . . . to the days of its deliverance at the hands of such poets as Cowper and Wordsworth.[1]

This democratic emphasis was also championed by a contemporary and fellow-American whom Beecher is said to have influenced--Walt Whitman. Oliver Wendell Holmes, another contemporary, has lavishly praised Beecher's preaching to the common people.[2]

Beecher's belief in the common man became a controlling passion in his life and accounts for his great interest in social amelioration. In a sermon preached during the Civil War he revealed his quite revolutionary conception of the pulpit: "I have a right to introduce into my sermons all secular topics as far as they are connected with man's moral character and his hopes of immortality."[3] As will be noted in a later chapter his example in dealing with public

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[1]Henry Ward Beecher, A Treasury of Illustrations, ed. by John R. Howard and Truman J. Ellinwood (New York: F. H. Revell, 1904), p. 523.

[2]As recorded in his biography, Holmes once said, "Here is the most popular Protestant preacher, I think, that ever lived, a man whose church would be filled, if there was a bull-fight in the next street,--who gets a salary of twenty thousand dollars and is worth it to his church--who, as a lecturer, is handled by his impresario as if he were a prima donna--who has done more sensible, effective, good-natured talking and writing to the great middle class and the 'unknown public' than any man we ever had in this country." J. T. Morse, Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes, II (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1896), 209.

[3]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons (New York: J. B. Ford and Co., II, 199.

issues of the day had much to do with widening the range of the American pulpit. Although Goethe reminds us "there are many echoes in the world, but few voices," we are inclined to believe that Beecher was a voice at this point in nineteenth century American Protestantism.

Without this appreciation of Beecher's desire to meet the needs of the common people it would be impossible to understand the principles which underlie his preaching. However, his unusual powers of observation were not only employed in a first-hand study of human life, but also to gain a direct knowledge of nature.

Interest in Nature

Beecher believed in the literal "lifting up of his eyes unto the hills," for there he saw,

> Tongues in trees, books in running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

Following the example of the Master Teacher he drew much of the local color of his preaching from nature. No one knew better than he of the hosts of illustrations that could be drawn from a first-hand knowledge of "the Father's world". The spiritual laws are convincingly illustrated by natural phenomena, what Henry Drummond has called "the natural law in the spiritual world." Beecher's sermons strikingly reflect his great interest in the world about him as a characteristic illustration exemplifies: "Many results come so gradually, that we watch their unfolding as we do that of a flower

whose seed we plant, and all of whose stages we watch and help and whose blossoming, though it be a pleasure is not a surprise."[1]

Materials: Books

Although he encouraged his young auditors at Yale to get a first-hand knowledge of the world about them, Henry Ward Beecher did not neglect the possibility of gaining much knowledge from books. It is evident that he practiced what he preached in this matter, for his own library contained some fifteen thousand volumes.[2] Not infrequently did he pay tribute to the printed page in his own ministry. His sentiments are beautifully expressed in an excerpt from his essay, "The Duty of Owning Books":

> Books are not made for furniture, but there is nothing else that so beautifully furnishes a house. A little library growing larger every year is an honourable part of a young man's history. It is a man's duty to have books. A library is not a luxury, but one of the necessaries of life.[3]

He had a three-fold purpose in reading which he describes in some detail:

> I read for three things--first, to know what the world has done in the last twenty-four hours, and is about to do today;

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[1]Beecher, Forty-Six Sermons, I, 221.

[2]W. S. Searle, "Personality of Henry Ward Beecher," North American Review, XLCIV, 487.

[3]Henry Ward Beecher, Eyes and Ears (London: Sampson Low and Company, 1862), p. 155. As is true of this volume, many of Beecher's works had both American and British publications.

second, for the knowledge which I especially want to use in my work; and third, for what will bring my mind into a proper mood. Amongst the authors which I frequently read are De Tocqueville, Matthew Arnold, and Thomas a Kempis. . . . I should urge reading history. My study of Milton has given me a conception of power and vigor which I otherwise should not have had. I got fluency out of Burke very largely, and I obtained the sense of adjectives out of Barrow besides the sense of exhaustiveness.[1]

Later, included in the discussion of Beecher's sermon-planning and style, there will be the mention of other writers that influenced him.

The World of Art

A survey of the various sources of Beecher's sermonic materials would be incomplete without mention of his great interest in art. In counselling the young ministers at Yale, he urged them to recognize this aesthetic appreciation in people for not infrequently this is the only avenue through which they can be persuaded to a better way of life.

There are minds that open to spiritual things through the artistic side of their nature more readily and easily than through any other. This should be recognized. When I entered the first gallery of any magnitude in Europe, it was a revelation to me; I was deeply affected. It was at the Luxembourg. . . . I never felt capable of so nearly understanding my Master; never in all my life was I so conscious of such an earnestness to do his work, and to do it graciously and better than I had ever done it before, than while under the all-pervading influence of that gallery of beauty.[2]

In writing to a friend Beecher indicated that he considered

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[1]J. H. Handford, Beecher, Christian Philosopher (New York: Belford, Clark and Co., 1887), p. 39.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 171.

the opportunity to study art "was one of the compensations for living in a large city." Charles Dickens after visiting Beecher returned to England praising the Brooklyn preacher's great knowledge of art.[1]

To preach in the same pulpit for forty years at the very "crossroads of the world" required a vast accumulation of knowledge. But even Launcelot Andrews' often-quoted indictment, "He that preaches twice a Sunday, prates once," could never have accused the Brooklyn preacher of prating. With his inquiring mind and observing eye his mental reservoir was continually receiving new data and impressions that could be mustered for the proper occasion. This capacity of Beecher always to present something fresh and timely caused Abraham Lincoln to remark to Theodore Cuyler, "The most marvelous thing about Mr. Beecher is his inexhaustible fertility."[2]

The Maturation Process

Having considered some of the diverse avenues over which Beecher pursued materials for preaching, investigation will now be made of the ways in which he wielded these many ideas and impressions to serve his purpose. It was impossible for

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[1]John Forster, Life of Dickens, III (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1872), 416.

[2]Theodore L. Cuyler, Recollections of a Long Life (New York: Baker and Taylor Co., 1902), p. 215.

him to use these varied ideas as they came trooping into his mind. They must pass through the thought-process to emerge as parts of coherent discourses. To bring order out of chaos receptivity must give way to creativity. This latter process Beecher attributed to what he called the "imagination" and spoke of it as "the most important of all the elements that go to make the preacher."[1] Through this creative process various ideas are related to each other and from this synthesis a new concept emerges that seeks expression. Until these diverse ideas pass through such a thought-process, they are not really the speaker's own and therefore are incapable of being expressed convincingly.

Beecher realized the importance of this maturation process and would not preach on a subject that had not commanded his attention for some time. It has been noted that it was not the particular message but the man that he prepared. He went everywhere gathering materials for his "homiletical garden," and it was through the "ripening process" that they were prepared to be shared with others. His preparation for the Yale Lectures on Preaching was a striking example of this process as indicated in the following conversation recorded by Lyman Abbott. "When next I met him," Abbott records, "I asked him, 'Where is that sermon on pulpit dynamics?' 'It is not ripe,' he replied; 'but I shall get

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 111.

something out of it yet.' What he did get out of it was, ten years later, the Yale Lectures on Preaching, one of the best pieces of work he ever did."[1] Observations through long years of actual preaching went into the making of these lectures.

Some forty years later in his Yale Lectures a famous English pulpit-master stressed the importance of the minister allowing this maturation process to have its perfect work. He counselled ministerial students not to preach on a subject too soon after it had occurred to them.

> I think it frequently happens that we go into the pulpit with truth that is undigested and with messages that are immature. Our minds have not done their work thoroughly, and, when we present our work to the public, there is a good deal of floating sediment in our thought, and a consequent cloudiness about our words. It is a good thing to put a subject away to mature and clarify.[2]

This "thorough digestion of the truth" is the "ripening process" which Beecher emphasized to his young auditors.

There are many evidences of Beecher's use of this process. Some of his illustrations came to him from his early experiences. In the sermon, "The Background of Mystery,"[3] there is an illustration which grew out of his experiences at Mount Pleasant Academy some forty years earlier. His

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[1]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 120

[2]J. H. Jowett, The Preacher: His Life and Work (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), pp. 131-132.

[3]Henry Ward Beecher, Evolution and Religion (London: James Clarke and Co., 1885), p. 151.

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thoughts and ideas concerning slavery that culminated in his masterful "Liverpool Address" during the Civil War were not the result of a sudden whim but were the fruits of his thinking on the subject through the years. He had come into first-hand contact with this problem during his seminary days when he had shouldered a musket himself and patrolled the streets of Cincinnati to protect the Negroes. Thus when Beecher endeavored to convince his hostile audience at Liverpool that slavery is detrimental to a country's economy, he was using an argument that had matured through the years.

> A savage is a man of one story, and that one story is a cellar. When a man begins to be civilized, he raises another story. When you Christianize and civilize the man, you put story upon story, for you develop faculty upon faculty; and you have to supply every story with your productions. The savage is a man one story deep; the civilized man is thirty stories deep.[1]

There is a lifelong preparation behind many of his sermons and lectures.

There were other speakers who depended on this lifelong preparation for their messages. Samuel Coleridge in describing his preparation for lecturing emphasized this ripening process.

> I would not lecture on any subject for which I had to acquire the main knowledge, even though a month or three months previous time were allowed me; on no subject would I lecture that had not employed my thoughts for a large portion of my life since earliest manhood, free of all outward and particular purpose.[2]

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[1]Henry Ward Beecher, Patriotic Addresses, ed. by John R. Howard (Chicago: The Pilgrim Press, 1887), p. 523.

[2]S. T. Coleridge, Literary Remains, ed. by Shedd, II (New York, 1868), 2.

Oliver Wendell Holmes cited the importance of the integrated thinking that is a result of the maturation process. A long period of preparation permits the examining of an issue from every angle and thus results in a greater mastery of the subject.

> Put an idea into your intelligence and leave it there an hour, a day, a year, without ever having occasion to refer to it. When at last you return to it, you do not find it as when acquired. It has domiciliated itself, so to speak, become at home, entered into relations with your own thoughts and integrated itself with the whole fabric of your mind.[1]

Although many other speakers and writers have relied on this synthesizing power of the subconscious, few have ever controlled it with the "astonishing regularity of Beecher." Through the study of his own temperament he had learned how best to make use of this creative process. He was careful not to bring about the fusion of thought too early in his preparation and thus destroy the inspiration of the process. He explained it:

> I know what I am going to aim at, but, of course, I don't get down to anything specific. I brood upon it, and let myself dream over it, and pick up information about one point and another, but if I ever think I see the plan opening up to me I don't dare to look at it or put it down on paper. If once I write a thing out, it is almost impossible for me to kindle to it again. I never dare, nowadays, to write out a sermon during the week; that is sure to kill it. I have to think around and about it, get it generally ready, and fuse it when the time comes.[2]

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[1] O. W. Holmes, Autocrat of the Breakfast Table (New York: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1896), p. 134.

[2] Abbott and Halliday, op. cit., p. 211.

For Beecher there could be no completing the sermon during the week, let alone "the planning of a year's pulpit work"[1] in advance. His particular preparation was usually confined to an hour before the service on Sunday morning. To this immediate preparation attention is now given.

B. Particular Preparation

Broadus in his classic work on homiletics has made the general statement from his own experience "that the time required in immediate preparation is in inverse ratio to the time spent in general preparation."[2] This observation surely holds true when the preaching of Henry Ward Beecher is considered as an example. Beecher's immediate preparation for a specific sermon was usually no more than an hour just preceding the time of presentation. But behind this brief period of particular preparation was the lifelong general preparation which we have just observed.

The Making of the Outline

It was through Beecher's outlining of the specific mes-

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[1]This is the name of a book written by Andrew W. Blackwood who has undoubtedly influenced Protestant preaching in America more in recent years than any other single individual. For some two decades he was Professor of Homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary. In addition he has written fifteen books on preaching and related subjects. His Preparation of Sermons has recently been published in Britain.

[2]John A. Broadus, On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), p. 293.

sage on Sunday morning that the flow of materials from the subconscious to the conscious was started. He has described it as follows:

> I have a dozen or more topics lying loose in my mind through the week; I think of one or another as occasion may serve, anywhere, at home, in the street, in the horse-car. I rarely know what theme I shall use until Sunday morning. Then, after breakfast I go into my study as a man goes into his orchard; I feel among these themes as he feels among his apples, to find the ripest and best; the theme which seems most ripe I pluck; then I select my text, analyze my subject, prepare the outline and go into the pulpit to preach it while it is fresh.[1]

In examining some of his extant outlines one notes their brevity and lack of detail. Beecher merely jotted down broad paths to guide his thinking as he composed before the congregation.

Merely an hour of formal preparation before going into the pulpit had not always been Beecher's practice. In the early years of his ministry he had written most of his sermons out in full.[2] But he discovered that this practice was not in keeping with his temperament; it tended to kill his enthusiasm for the subject at hand. Thus, he schooled himself through the years to give to his creative powers more and more liberty until gradually his only formal preparation was an hour on Sunday morning. This gradual develop-

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[1]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 118.

[2]There is evidence that Beecher carefully recorded his sermons for the first ten years of his ministry. "It was not until after he came to Brooklyn that under the increased pressure of this larger field of work, he abandoned the habit. . . . The last recorded. . .were those of January 5, 1848." Beecher and Scoville, op. cit., p. 179.

ment of his method is embodied in his counsel to British students in 1886.

> I think in the earlier part of a man's ministry, if he is ever so qualified, it is a good thing to constrain a man's thoughts in a just mood of preparation and get the conception of a well-organized sermon; but after that is acquired, the larger the liberty is the more fruitful a man will be in his work.[1]

When Beecher had learned to woo the creative muse in keeping with his own temperament, he was careful to avoid anything that would stem the fusion of thought when he stood before the audience. From his study on Sunday morning he went directly to the pulpit with his heart throbbing with the message.

Composing Before the Audience

To Beecher the audience was an important element in bringing the whole creative process to fruition. The audience seemed to electrify him. "An audience puts me in possession of everything I have got," he told young British divines in 1886. Usually as he began his message he followed his notes closely. In fact, not infrequently he went into the pulpit with the introduction written out in full which he practically read. But as he proceeded to the main points of his sermon his thought began to crystallize and he soon cut loose from his outline giving full sway to his creative powers. Thus he composed in the presence of his audience "bringing from the depths the things that are hidden from the bodily

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[1]Pond, op. cit., p. 97.

eye and giving them distinct shape so as to be capable of being understood by others."[1]

This interaction between speaker and congregation was the vital element in Beecher's sermon production. Maxwell Anderson has spoken of a similar collaboration that is necessary in the work of the dramatist.

> A certain cleverness in striking a compromise between the world without and the world within has characterized the work of the greatest as well as the least of successful playwrights; for they must take an audience with them if they are to continue to function.[2]

Composing in the presence of the congregation gave to Beecher's preaching a spontaneity that it would not otherwise have had. In speaking of good poetry Wordsworth has spoken of this same quality as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."[3] Phillips Brooks in describing effective preaching has strikingly expressed the need for this characteristic: "A sermon should be like the leaping of a fountain not the pumping of a pump."[4] Beecher was careful not to restrain this "leaping."

Beecher's method in taking such little time for formal

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 111.

[2]New York Times, October 6, 1936.

[3]William Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, ed. by De Selincourt (Oxford University Press, 1926).

[4]Phillips Brooks, Lectures on Preaching (Manchester: James Robinson, 1899), p. 160.

preparation was not unique. Several outstanding ministers have believed that the less special preparation necessary, the better the sermon. Brooks, Beecher's famous contemporary, has so commented.

> I think that the less of special preparation that is needed for a sermon, the better the sermon is. . . . One preacher depends for his sermon on special reading. . . . All his study is with reference to some immediately pressing occasion. Another preacher studies and thinks with far more industry, is always gathering truth into his mind, but it is not gathered with reference to the next sermon. It is truth sought for truth's sake, and for that largeness and ripeness and fullness of character which alone can make him a strong preacher. Which is the better method? The latter beyond all doubt.[1]

Spurgeon, a British contemporary, spent an hour on Saturday evening outlining his sermon for the next day.[2] Coleridge in lecturing made little use of his outline and frequently composed before his audience. In a letter he has described this practice.

> Before I had proceeded twenty minutes, I have been obliged to push the manuscript away, and give the subject a new turn. Nay this was so notorious that many of my auditors used to threaten me, when they saw any number of written papers on my desk, to steal them away, declaring they never felt so secure of a good lecture as when they perceived that I had not a single scrap of writing before me.[3]

Because of the brief time spent in particular preparation, Beecher's preaching is often called "extemporaneous." If by

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[1] Ibid., p. 157.

[2] W. Y. Fullerton, C. H. Spurgeon, A Biography (London: Williams and Norgate, 1920), p. 217.

[3] Coleridge, op. cit., pp. 2-5. In his method of creativity Coleridge followed one that was very similar to Beecher's. Too, they both use the word "fuse" in describing the process.

this term is meant "without previous preparation," Beecher would decline such a description for his discourses.[1]

> No man can speak well, the substance of whose sermons has not been prepared beforehand.[2] Men talk of 'extemporaneous preaching,' but the only part that can properly be extemporaneous is the external form. Sometimes, indeed, one may be called to preach off-hand, ex tempore, and may do it with great success; but all such sermons will really be the results of previous study.[3]

Thus if the term "extemporaneous" is to be applied to Beecher's preaching, it must be in the sense that the thought has been previously prepared, but the external form is left to the inspiration of the moment. It is to this external form that attention must now be given.

The Importance of Arrangement

"No man ought to go into the pulpit with the direct kind

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[1]The Germans have a phrase for extemporaneous preaching that is very descriptive, "speaking from the stirrup," as when one shoots on horseback without dismounting.

[2]Calvin has written something on this subject to which Beecher's statement closely corresponds. "God has promised that His blessing shall be upon the hands of those who work. . . . If I should enter the pulpit without deigning to glance at a book, and frivolously imagine to myself, 'Oh well, when I preach, God will give me enough to say,' and come here without troubling to read, or thinking what I ought to declare, and do not carefully consider how I must apply Holy Scripture to the edification of the people--then I should be an arrogant upstart!" Quoted from Corpus Reformatorum: Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia, ed. by Baum, Cunitz and Reuss. See T.H.L. Parker, The Oracles of God (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947), p. 69. It has been suggested that Calvin believed that only extempore preaching could be the Word of God, but this has never been conclusively proven.

[3]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 221.

of sermon without having a definite reason why he selected one subject rather than another, and why he put in one form rather than another,"[1] emphasized Beecher many times in his lectures to students. He knew that the effective arrangement of materials in the discourse is almost as important as the materials themselves. Of course, Beecher's theory of arrangement was peculiarly conditioned by his practice of extempore preaching. However in analysis, there are two distinguishable factors that determine the plan of a particular discourse. In his initial series at Yale he commented on them.

> Much of the effectiveness of a discourse as well as the ease and pleasure of delivering it, depends upon the plan. Let me earnestly caution you against the sterile, conventional, regulation plans, that are laid down in books, and are frequently taught in seminaries. There is no proper plan. It is quietly assumed by the teachers of formal sermonizing that a sermon is to be unfolded from the interior, or from the nature of the truth with which it deals. That this is one of the elements, and often the chief element, that determines the form of the sermon is true; but it is also true, that the object to be gained by preaching a sermon at all will have as much influence in giving it proper plan as will the nature of the truth handled,--perhaps even more. Nay, if but one or the other could be adopted, that habit of working which shapes one's sermons from the necessities of the minds to which it is addressed is the more natural, the safer, and the more effective.[2]

Here the "nature of the truth" and the "object of the sermon" are noted as the determining factors in organization. Although acknowledging the first element, it is to the last that Beecher mainly gives consideration. This is in harmony

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[1] Ibid., p. 121.

[2] Ibid., p. 218.

with his emphasis that the audience is the determining factor in rhetorical theory and practice.

The Aim of the Sermon

Beecher had not always taken into account the role of the audience as the chief determinant of effective arrangement and for some time in his early ministry he was disappointed with the lack of response that accompanied most of his preaching. Seeking some suggestion for improvement, he made a renewed study of Apostolic preaching. He soon discovered the secret of the effectiveness of the Apostles' preaching; these men addressed themselves to the needs of their audience. When the young Beecher tried this strategy, the response was quite overwhelming.[1] This same principle he discovered in reading Jonathan Edwards' sermons.

> . . . After the light dawned, I could then see how plainly Jonathan Edwards' sermons were so made. Those gigantic applications of his were only the stretching out of the arms of the sermon upon the hearts and lives of his audience.[2]

Consequently, Beecher always adapted his aim and plan to the needs of the people before him.

This adjusting of the message to the hearers was central in his preaching theory. He was of such a sympathetic heart that at times when he looked out over his congregation, he would sense a particular need and, then, change his whole "line-of-attack" so as to address himself to that need. Commenting upon his extraordinary sensitiveness to the moods of

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[1]Pond, op. cit., p. 99.
[2]Beecher, Eyes and Ears, p. 111.

his hearers Beecher spoke to the Yale divinity students as follows:

> Hundreds and hundreds of times, as I rose to pray and glanced at the congregation, I could not keep back the tears. There came to my mind such a sense of their wants, there were so many hidden sorrows, there were so many weights and burdens. . .there were so many dangers, so many perils, there were such histories--not world histories, but eternal histories--I had such a sense of compassion for them, my soul so longed for them, that it seemed to me as if I could scarcely open my mouth to speak for them.[1]

This genuine concern to bring a message that is relevant to the people in their particular situation[2] is analogous to what is commonly called "life-situation preaching today."

Life-Situation Preaching

There is convincing evidence that Henry Ward Beecher was the forerunner of this trend in American preaching. In 1871 as he presented the Yale Lectures there is indication that he was already conscious of this new trend and evidently felt that he was contributing to it.

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, II, 46.

[2]Beecher's practice of abandoning one sermon plan for another is interestingly related by Knox. "One of the reporters of the Brooklyn Eagle was sent one Sunday night a few years ago to report Mr. Beecher's sermon. The discourse was one of singular power and force. . . . When the service was over the reporter encountered Mr. Beecher at the foot of the pulpit stairs, and knowing the small store he set upon his manuscript notes, asked him if he would be good enough to give them to him, as he desired to preserve them. . .as a momento of the sermon. 'Well,' said the Plymouth Church pastor, as he fluttered over the half-dozen sheets of notepaper, 'you can have them, but this is not the sermon I preached. I prepared this sermon intending to use it; but when I got in the pulpit I got to thinking of another subject and preached upon that.'" Thomas W. Knox, Life and Work of Henry Ward Beecher (Cincinnati: W. E. Dibble, 1887), p. 284.

Now, the school of the future (if I am a prophet, and I am, of course, satisfied in my own mind that I am!) is what may be called a "Life School." This style of preaching is to proceed, not so much upon the theory of the sanctity of the Church and its ordinances, or upon a pre-existing system of truth which is in the Church somewhere or somehow, as upon the necessity for all teachers, first, to study the strengths and weaknesses of human nature minutely; and then to make use of such portions of the truth as are required by the special needs of man, and for the development of the spiritual side of human nature. . . . It is a life-school in this respect, that deals not with the facts of the past, except in so far as they can be made food for the present and factors of the life that now is; but rather studies to understand men, and to deal with them face to face and heart to heart, yea, even to mold them as an artist molds his clay or carves his statue.[1]

Some seventy years later speaking in the same lectureship Sockman spoke of this method of preaching in language that is closely akin to the words of the first Lyman Beecher lecturer.

The Lord's roadmaker who watches and works for openings into the hearts of his people will naturally find that concern conditioning his messages. He will prepare his sermons with the needs of his people in mind. He will visualize individuals whose secret cares have been revealed to him. His messages will grow out of life situations. . .
"Life-situation preaching" strikes a responsive chord in clergy and people because of its realism. It confronts not theories but conditions.[2]

Other ministers participating in this famous lectureship have suggested this approach to effective preaching. Some typical comments are: "The preacher must learn to think

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 77-78

[2]Ralph W. Sockman, The Highway of God (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1942), pp. 118-119. Sockman has been one of the leading exponents of "life-situation" preaching in America during this and the past generation.

toward men and not away from them."[1] "Jesus ever approached society through the concrete individual as every effective minister must."[2] This method of preaching came to fruition in the famous ministry of Harry Emerson Fosdick at Riverside Church, New York City. He has reiterated this principle spoken by Beecher over half a century before. "When a preacher has got hold of a real difficulty in the life and thinking of his people and is trying to meet it, he finds himself not so much dogmatically thinking for them as co-operatively thinking with them."[3] This principle, so emphasized by Beecher, that "the preacher should study human nature and having found the needs of men to preach to them," has had tremendous consequence in the whole trend of American Protestant preaching.

The Relevance of a Definite Aim to Effective Preaching

In the preface to a volume of his sermons Beecher wrote:

> These sermons were prepared, week by week, for the wants of my congregation. They are, therefore, not only in theory practical sermons, but they have been drafted from the actual field of work. Had they been originally prepared for the press, I know not what difference that would have made

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[1]William Jewett Tucker, The Making and Unmaking of the Preacher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1898), p. 105.

[2]Charles D. Williams, The Prophetic Ministry for Today (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1921), p. 151.

[3]Harry Emerson Fosdick, "What's the Matter with Preaching?", Harper's Magazine (July 1928), p. 137.

in form and style. But, in fact, they are so many arrows shot in the day of battle, and everyone of them with a real and definite aim.[1]

The importance of a definite aim conditioned by the audience was his main emphasis in the thirty-three lectures which he delivered in the Lyman Beecher series. Many preachers discussing this subject since have quoted from the original lecturer. In his Warrack Lectures James Stewart advised his young auditors: "Make sure that every sermon you preach has a definite aim,"[2] and then to illustrate he quoted Beecher's cogent remark: "A sermon is not like a Chinese fire-cracker to be fired off for the noise which it makes. It is the hunter's gun, and at every discharge he should look to see his game fall." The importance of taking aim is so picturesquely illustrated in Beecher that it is difficult to refrain from including several of his quotations on this matter. But the following characteristic one will have to suffice at this point.

It is hardly an imaginary case to describe one as approaching the Sabbath day somewhat in this way: 'O dear me, I have got to preach! I have beat out pretty much all there is in that straw, and I wonder what I shall preach next'; and to the man takes the Bible and commences to turn over the leaves, hoping that he will hit something. He looks up and down, and turns forward and backward, and finally he does see a light, and he says, 'I can make some-

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[1]Beecher, Forty-Six Sermons, I, "Preface".

[2]James S. Stewart, Heralds of God (New York: Scribner's, 1947), p. 120.

thing interesting from that.' Interesting, why? For what purpose? What, under heaven, but that he is a salaried officer expected to preach twice on Sunday. . .and the time has come round when, like a clock, it is his business to strike, and so he does strike, just as ignorantly as the hammer strikes upon the bell! He is following out no intelligent plan. He is a perfunctory preacher, doing a duty because appointed to that duty.[1]

Not only did Beecher underline the importance of taking careful aim, but he also defined this aim. His definition of oratory as "the art of influencing conduct with the truth sent home by all the resources of the living man" is closely analogous with what he defined as the objective of preaching, "the formation of the perfect man in Christ Jesus."[2] To Beecher, then, the objective of preaching was to persuade men so as actually to effect transformation of life after the pattern of Christ. This aim has been variously put by the famous Brooklyn preacher.

No better definition of the sphere of the pulpit can be given than the Apostle's words upon the Sacred Scripture. It is "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."[3]

The question that Beecher asked as his test of a sound theology, "What doctrines are fundamental to the formation of Christian character and to its complete development?" indicates that his interest in this subject was

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 4-5.

[2]Henry Ward Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, I (New York: J. B. Ford and Co., 1869), "Preface" iii.

[3]Ibid.

in the doctrines that could be preached[1] in line with his aim.[2] Using one of his own figures, Beecher never shot an "arrow" aimlessly, but always took careful aim that the "arrow of truth" should hit its mark--the heart of the hearer.

The Instrument of Persuasion

According to Beecher's rhetorical theory, persuasion is the instrument to be employed by the preacher in gaining his objective. This element of persuasion is like the feather on the arrow that bears and guides the missile to its mark. Without it preaching is not effective, for men are not actually moved. The principles involved in effective preaching he frequently termed "the instruments of persuasion."[3] The burden of his Yale Lectures was to direct his young auditors to these instruments and to instruct them in their effective use. These instruments will be considered as they are related to the points discussed in this and succeeding chapters.

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[1]John Wright Buckham, Progressive Religious Thought in America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919), p. 37.

[2]It is interesting to note how closely Beecher's and Allan's ideas in this matter coincide. The latter in his Warrack Lectures stated: "The main purpose of preaching is to make truth more clear and duty more urgent, to enlighten the mind, rouse the conscience, touch the heart, and persuade men and women to accept the Gospel message and live the Christian life." Arthur Allan, The Art of Preaching (London: James Clarke and Co., 1939), p. 9.

[3]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 3, 7, 29, 178, 185.

Beecher's unusual knowledge of human nature greatly contributed to the persuasiveness of his preaching. He knew how to enter into the hearts of men. Actually his psychology of the audience was quite in advance of his day. Winans[1] has noted Beecher as one who knew how to render an audience suggestible long before psychologists started talking about such matters. He has quoted from one of his lectures in which Beecher had indicated that the close seating of the congregation was an aid to persuasion.

> People often say, "Do you not think it is much more inspiring to speak to a large audience than a small one?" No, I say; I can speak just as well to twelve persons as to a thousand, provided those twelve are crowded around me and close together, so that they touch each other. But even a thousand people, with four feet space between every two of them, would be just the same as an empty room. Every lecturer will understand what I mean, who has ever seen audiences and addressed them. But crowd your audience together, and you will set them off with not half the effort.[2]

In this matter of persuasion the difference between preaching and lecturing comes to view. Although Beecher did much of both he was deeply conscious of the distinction. This distinction can be simply stated, "lecturing desires to impart knowledge; preaching to persuade men to a better life." Blair pointed to this distinction when in writing on pulpit oratory he spoke of the sermon as a "per-

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[1]J. A. Winans, Public Speaking, Principles and Practice (Ithaca, N. Y.: Sewel Publishing Co., 1915), p. 291.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 73.

suasive oration."[1]

The importance of the instrument of persuasion to preaching was further underlined when Beecher stated that the object of the sermon was not to convince but to persuade. Broadus, too, has noted this differentiation: "It is not enough to convince men of truth, nor enough to make them see how it applies to themselves, and how it might be practical for them to act it out,--but we must persuade men."[2] Beecher felt that much of the preaching of his day was missing the mark by becoming involved in pointless intellectual and theological disputations void of any emotional appeal.[3] He set out to correct this.

> The hard reasoner says, "No tears for me, don't color your preaching; I want it pure as the beams of light, and as transparent; and the calmer and more inexorably logical its propositions, and the more mathematical its proof, the better I like it." But there are in any community probably six to one who will watch for the emotional and impassioned part of the sermon saying, "That is the preaching I want; I can understand what I feel." They are fed by their hearts. They have as much right to be fed by their hearts as others have to be fed by their reason.[4]

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[1]Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (Brooklyn, 1807), Lecture XXIX.

[2]Broadus, op. cit., p. 215.

[3]A similar need which Beecher sensed in his day is needed today. A student in an adult conference last summer said: "What we need is not so much more information in our heads but more motivation in our hearts."

[4]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 54. As has been noted in the biographical section, Beecher grew up at a time when much of the preaching in America had degenerated to mere theological disputation. He felt that this tendency was the main cause in the decline in the spiritual life of the nation.

Beecher did not neglect those who are fed by their reason but his main emphasis was always on pathetic proof[1] because most people can be reached that way.

The Sermon: Means not End

What has been written of Demosthenes could be said of Beecher: "A good speech was to him a successful speech, not one which was to be admired by critics as a piece of literature."[2] The Plymouth preacher frequently commented that he was not saying something for the press but to move people. To him the sermon was never an end in itself but always the means to an end. As he early told his Yale auditors:

> Sermons are tools;[3] and the business that you have in hand is not the making of sermons, or the preaching of sermons--it is saving men. Let this come up before you so frequently that it shall never be forgotten, that none of these things should gain ascendency over this prime controlling element of your lives, that you are to save men.[4]

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[1]The term "pathetic proof" is used to describe that form of proof when the appeal is made mainly through the emotions. Aristotle discusses three forms of proof: ethical, pathetic, and logical. See Aristotle, The Rhetoric, trans. by R. C. Jebb (Cambridge University Press, 1909), Bk. I, Chap.ii, pars. 3-6.

[2]J. F. Dobson, The Greek Orators (London: Methuen and Co., 1919), p. 240.

[3]Black in his James Sprunt Lectures made the same observation in very similar language: "Preach your burden not as an interesting fact in history, but as a dynamic for life. But plainly, preach for results. A sermon is not an end in itself, or a work of art, but a tool." See James Black, op. cit., p. 56.

[4]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 38. This idea of the sermon as a tool, as a means to an end, is basic in Beecher's homiletical theory.

It is evident then, that Beecher was not interested in the salvation of sermons but of men. He did not hold his outline inviolate and if something came to him as the inspiration of the moment he would discard his prepared sermon plan for the new idea. His concern was not literary permanence but the actual moving of a certain people, at a definite time, in a particular situation.

A loosely-knit arrangement is especially adapted to persuasion. Frequently Beecher employed such an arrangement which he called "a line-of-facts or a series-of-parables" type. "A line of facts or a series of parables will be better adapted to most audiences than a regular unfolding of a train of thought from the germinal point to the fruitful end."[1] This is another instance of his contemplating the congregation before him and his considering how he can best persuade them to a better life. In the average congregation he maintained, there are only a few that enjoy or have the ability to follow the unfolding of truth step by step,[2] but the many can receive the truth "by facts placed in juxtaposition rather than in philosophical sequence." Is this not one more reason that the "common people heard him gladly"?

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[1] Ibid., p. 219.

[2] This intellectual capacity of the congregation is also noted by Holmes, Autocrat of the Breakfast Table, p. 140: "A thoroughly popular lecture ought to have nothing in it which five hundred people cannot all take in a flash, just as it is uttered. But I tell you the average intellect of five hundred persons, taken as they come, is not very high."

In examining a characteristic volume of his sermons it is interesting to note how many follow this "line-of-fact" arrangement. On Sunday morning April 3, 1870, Beecher preached on the topic "Spiritual Stumbling-Blocks."[1] His line of attack is the consideration of various "stumbling-blocks" placed in juxtaposition. He considers some five causes of spiritual stumbling. A similar approach is noted in his message, "The True Religion,"[2] on Sunday morning May 15, 1870. One would most likely expect the points of this sermon to be the various characteristics of true religion, but in typical Beecher-style its structure is based on five loosely connected facts concerning "true religion." A month later he preached a sermon, "Conflicts of the Christian Life,"[3] in which the "line-of-fact" method of organization is again followed.

There are certain advantages to this type of arrangement. It can be expanded or contracted at will. Since he is not unfolding the truth in close logical order, the speaker can give attention to winning his audience rather than saving his outline. "For what shall it profit a preacher if his sermon be perfectly constructed, if he lose the attention of his audience?"

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[1]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, IV, 90.

[2]Ibid., p. 205.

[3]Ibid., p. 322.

On Monday morning sermons preached with such an organization may not read well and in matters of literary excellence they may be entirely wanting. Beecher would be the first to grant this. But,he would protest that it is unfair to apply the tests of literary excellence or permanence to a sermon. The only relevant test here is, Did it persuade men to the Christian life? To those who contested this point, he replied: "What do you want? You do not want an argument for the sake of an argument. You do not want a sermon as perfect as a machine can be, unless it does something."[1] Beecher persistently maintained that the utilitarian test is the test of good preaching.

To leave the impression that the "line-of-fact" type of organization was the only method employed by this famous Brooklyn preacher would be unfair. This was a common type, for it was so well adapted to his theory of persuasion, but his approaches were varied as described not only in his theory expounded to the Yale divinity students but also in practice as is revealed in his many extant sermons.

Variety

Whatever criticism might be brought against Beecher's preaching it could never be said that it suffered from "Lameness, sameness, and tameness." To Professor Stewart's

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 165.

statement, "variety is the very breath of life in preaching,"[1] Beecher would have enthusiastically given consent. And he would have fully agreed with the Scottish preacher's further comment:

> It is bad to cast all your sermons in one mould, so that people know infallibly in advance what shape they will be. Principal Rainy once spoke of sermons to which congregations listened "with respectful resignation, foreseeing clearly how it was all to be, and conscious that mental consuetude had superseded mental life."[2]

In fact, Beecher has addressed himself to this same point in very similar language.

> When you have finished your sermon, not a man in your congregation should be unable to tell you, distinctly, what you have done, but when you begin a sermon, no man in the congregation ought to be able to tell you what you are going to do. All these cast-iron frames, these stereotyped plans[3] of sermons, are the devices of the Devil, and of those mischievous devils of the pulpit, formality and stupidity.[4]

Thus in outlining his theory, Beecher advised the young ministers before him to seek variety in form by varying the approach to their discourses.

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[1]Stewart, op. cit., p. 69.

[2]Ibid., p. 131.

[3]This is no illusion which Beecher is condemning here as will be noted in the following: "When I set down at my desk I go to work organizing my material. Thanks be for William Converse DeWitt, best of instructors in preaching, who compelled me in early days to grind out homiletic exercises according to an invariant outline. Almost every sermon I have ever preached has followed this recommended pattern: A. Point of Contact; B. Discussion (1) Thesis. (2) Antithesis. (3) Synthesis. C. Application." Bernard Iddings Bell, "I Write a Sermon," If I Had Only One Sermon to Prepare, ed. by J. F. Newton (New York: Harpers, 1932), pp. 141-142.

[4]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 221.

> It is this necessity of adaptation to the innumerable phases of human nature that reacts upon the sermon, and determines the form it shall take. If it were possible never have two plans alike. It may be well, today, to preach on an intellectual theme by an analytical process; but that is a reason why, on the following Sunday, an intellectual theme should be treated by a synthetic process. . . . If you have preached today to the heart through the imagination, to-morrow you are to preach to the heart through the reason; and so the sermon like the flowers of the field, is to take on innumerable forms of blossoming.[1]

Just as human nature is varied so the sermon must be varied to meet the different needs. Although Beecher believed that the many could be reached through the emotions, he did not leave those who are fed by their reason to go hungry. This varying appeal gave variety in form to his sermons. In examining five of Beecher's messages preached in the spring of 1870,[2] one is convinced that his counsel to students to seek variety was founded upon his own practice. The first is an exposition of a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, "to encourage hope in the fainthearted," and the second is a call to the duty of witnessing for Christ based on one of the Master's miracles. In the following message his approach is more an appeal to the intellect as he distinguishes between "desiring and choosing" as related to the spiritual life. The next Sunday morning his sermon takes the form of an exhortation as he warns against some of the obstacles which hinder men in

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 221.

[2]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, IV.

their spiritual growth. In his discourse for Sunday April 10, 1870, he appeals to the heart through the aesthetic as he preaches on "Beauty." This brief representation will afford an idea of the rich variety that entered into Beecher's sermon-making. Little wonder that Spurgeon, Beecher's English contemporary, once characterized him as "the most myriad-minded man since Shakespeare."[1]

Unity

From the great variety manifested in structure one might suspect Beecher's tactics void of any unity. But his concern for this "cardinal virtue of rhetoric" is frequently noted. To it, he very piquantly drew the attention of his auditors at Yale.

> I heard described the other day a style of preaching which was likened to the way they are said to build ships down in Maine. They build them down there by the mile; and when they have an order they cut off so much, round up a stern and a bow, and send it. Thus some sermons seem to have been built by the mile. There seems to be no earthly reason why the preacher should begin in one place rather than another, or why he should stop in one place rather than another.[2]

His theory at this point can be tested by the sermons themselves--some thirty volumes of them. As one examines these, it is evident that in battling for the attention of his audience Beecher never lost sight of the need for unity. He does not as Dale commented "say a great many

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[1]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 120

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 27.

things in the same sermon," but he endeavors to say the same thing "in a great many ways."[1] For example his sermon preached on Sunday evening, May 16, 1869, on the topic, "Watchfulness,"[2] is eighteen pages in length and probably took an hour to deliver but every part has to do with the topic which grew out of the text. Perhaps, there are some grounds for Broadus' remark that Beecher's "sermons are too discursive and unsymmetrical,"[3] but no one could ever say that they lacked unity. Beecher would have denied even the justification of the former remark because he maintained that the standards of literary excellence should not be applied to sermons. He was not interested in what silly admirers call "beautiful" sermons that have perfect symmetry, but in "successful" sermons that actually move people to Christ.

Beecher's Emphasis on the Application

Any discussion of the preaching strategy of this great pulpit-master would be incomplete without considering his emphasis given to the application. The long application is especially adapted to the "instrument of persuasion" which was so important in Beecher's theory and practice.

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[1]R. W. Dale, Nine Lectures on Preaching (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), p. 130.

[2]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, III, 39.

[3]Broadus, op. cit., p. 279.

With his great stress on the application in sermon construction Beecher is not in bad company, for Spurgeon said, "Where the application begins, there the sermon begins." And Daniel Webster once emphatically remarked, "When a man preaches to me, I want him to make it a personal matter, a personal matter, a personal matter."

The long application which characterized Beecher's preaching can be traced to the influence of Jonathan Edwards, America's first philosopher-theologion. In fact he has acknowledged his indebtedness.

> . . . . I could see how plainly Jonathan Edwards' sermons were so made. Those gigantic applications of his were only the stretching out of the arms of the sermon upon the hearts and lives of his audience. . . . having caught the idea, I went eagerly through Edwards to see how he took aim. I found his sermons to be either a statement and establishment of a plain principle, or an exceedingly abundant collection of Scriptural teachings around some great central truth. This was not, however, the sermon; it was only a battery thrown up. Then from these bulwarks and batteries came a fire upon the life, the hearts, the character, the conduct, of living men, just as they lived in Edwards' days, such as I think no uninspired man ever surpassed, if any ever equalled it.[1]

Turning from this analysis of Edwards' sermon-making to an examination of some of Beecher's sermons, it becomes evident just how much the "Plymouth preacher" borrowed in the art from his New England predecessor. In his sermon, "Fidelity to Conviction," which is seventeen pages in length, the first eleven pages are exposition of the pas-

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[1]Beecher, Eyes and Ears, pp. 111-112.

sage and the remaining six are given to application. This is not always the pattern of his sermons but it is the most characteristic one.

The persuasion of men to a nobler life was Beecher's object in preaching and it was in the portion of the sermon devoted to the application that this note of persuasion could be made most articulate. As Oman advised his students, Beecher was out "from beginning to end, for a verdict."[1] This note is all but lacking in contemporary preaching. The following is a typical testimony of one who expresses concern in this matter:

> The most severe criticism I have heard of our pulpit work today was given not long ago by a lady. 'It's nearly all a knotless thread,' she said. No grip, no catching-point in it. Much of it is clever; some of it--too much perhaps--is entertaining; a little of it is brilliant. But it can be all these and remain a knotless thread--a thing that slips through the mind, pleasantly it may be, like the sound of a very lovely voice, but ineffectively, leaving no trace.[2]

Beecher would have much to say to this situation. He would remind us that "beautiful" sermons are not necessarily "successful" sermons and that preaching is not for expression but for communication. Unless men are actually moved to a more vital relationship with God through Christ, preaching falls short of its mark. This same emphasis of the importance of the application

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[1]John Oman, Concerning the Ministry (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), p. 156.

[2]J. R. P. Sclater, The Public Worship of God (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1927), p. 88.

to effective preaching is made articulate by Newman in his University Preaching.

> Talent, logic, learning, words, manner, voice, action, all are required for the perfection of a preacher; but 'one thing is necessary,'--an intense perception and appreciation of the end for which he preaches, and that is, to be the minister of some definite spiritual good to those who hear him. . . . I do not mean that a preacher must aim at earnestness but that he must aim at his object, which is to do some spiritual good to his hearers and which will at once make him earnest.[1]

C. The Personal Equation

If Goethe's judgment, that

> Persuasion, friend, comes not by toil or art,
> Hard study never made the matter clearer,
> 'Tis the live fountain in the speaker's heart
> Sends forth the streams that melt the ravished hearer,

is accurate, then, it is a natural transition from the subject of persuasion to the role of the personal element in preaching. In Beecher's definition of oratory, as "truth sent home by all the resources of the living man" the importance of the personal equation in speaking is underlined. A. E. Garvie has similarly stressed the personality of the preacher. "Preaching is not merely a communication of knowledge. As it exercises the whole personality of the preacher, so it is addressed to the whole personality of the hearer as a moral and religious subject."[2] As in that classic definition of preaching by

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[1]Quoted by T. J. Potter, Sacred Eloquence, p. 213.

[2]A. E. Garvie, Preachers of the Church, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926) p. 244.

Phillips Brooks, "truth through personality,"[1] Beecher frequently noted these two elements and usually gave special emphasis to the second. In a typical statement he once said, ". . . truth alone is not sufficient, for truth is the arrow, but man is the bow that sends it home."[2]

The Ethical Proof

To persuade others to the Christian life a man must not only have training but he must have character. The preacher "must manifest truth not merely announce it."[3] This instrument of persuasion Beecher called "moral beauty." It is the same element that Aristotle in The Rhetoric termed "ethical proof."

> Ethical proof is wrought when the speech is so spoken as to make the speaker credible; for we trust good men more and sooner, as a rule, about everything, while about things which do not admit of precision, but only of guesswork, we trust them absolutely. . . . It is not true as some technical writers assume in their systems, that the moral worth of the speaker contributes nothing to his persuasiveness; nay, it might be said that almost the most authoritative of proofs is that supplied by character.[4]

It is to the persuasive nature of the speaker's character that Beecher drew attention when he said to his auditors: "Let no sneak try to be an orator."[5] On another oc-

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[1]Brooks, op. cit., p. 5.

[2]Beecher, Oratory (Philadelphia: Culbertson and Bache, 1876), p. 9.

[3]Oman, op. cit., p. 35.

[4]Aristotle, The Rhetoric, 1355a.

[5]Beecher, op. cit., p. 6.

casion he also noted that the necessity for good character in preaching is greater than in other types of public-speaking. "While physical truth and abstract philosophy need not depend on the character of the teacher, yet all social and all moral truth depend largely upon the living exemplification of them."[1]

Many have attested to the "Plymouth preacher's" noble character so it is evident that this matter of ethical proof was not just theoretical. Andrew Carnegie once said of him:

> One felt in his presence that nature had sketched with a free hand and upon broad lines a massive character. Nothing petty, nothing vindictive--a lovable, loving man, brimful and running over with charity, all-embracing.[2]

Oliver Wendell Homes has given a similar testimony in his article on "The Minister Plenipotentiary":

> He has the simple frankness of a man who feels himself to be perfectly sound, in bodily, mental and moral structure; and his self-revelation is a thousand times nobler than the assumed impersonality which is a common trick with cunning speakers who never forget their own interests. Thus it is that when ever Mr. Beecher speaks everybody feels after he has addressed them once or twice, that they know him well, almost as if they had always known him; and there is not a man in the land who has such a multitude that look upon him as if he were their brother.[3]

From these and similar testimonies there is evidence that Beecher's force of character contributed in no small meas-

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[1]Pond, op. cit., p. 135.

[2]Bok, op. cit., p. 14.

[3]Holmes, "The Minister Plenipotentiary," The Atlantic Monthly, XIII (January 1864), 9.

ure in making his preaching effective.

Delivery

It is in the actual delivery that the importance of the personal equation becomes most evident. Beecher frequently emphasized that the preacher may be considering a very important truth but if it is not actually communicated there is no preaching. As has been noted, he believed the whole personality must be brought into play if preaching is to be effective. This importance of personality in conveying truth was an emphasis of his first lecture in the Lyman Beecher Series.

> When a man is made by God he is made all over, and every part is necessary to each and to the whole. A man's whole form is a part of his public speaking. His feet speak and so do his hands. You put a man in one of these barrelled pulpits, where there is no responsibility laid upon him as to his body, and he falls into all manner of gawky attitudes, and rests himself like a country horse at a hitching-post. He sags down, and has no consciousness of his awkwardness. But bring him out on a platform, and see how much more manly he becomes. . . . The moment a man is brought face to face with other men, then does the influence of each act and react upon the other.[1]

In delivering the message Beecher wanted nothing to come in between him and the congregation not even a "barrelled pulpit." Here, too, is one reason that he so strongly favored extemporaneous preaching; he wanted no manuscript or set of notes to come in between him and his audience. He knew of the power of the personality to make preaching effective

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 11-12.

and he did not wish it to be squandered in any way. From the testimony of those who heard him it is apparent that his personality was no small factor in making his preaching effective. As one listener testified: "A large part of Beecher's influence over his hearers was due to his abounding physical health and his joyousness of nature."[1] And Brastow has attributed his effectiveness mainly to his great personality.

> It is precisely the originality and the size of his personality, its freshness, its vitality, its sympathy, its irresistible energy, that accounts for this influence. It was a battery charged with psychical and physical impulse and energy that, breaking through all barriers, found copious discharge according to its own free method.[2]

His great physical energy so apparent in his powerful personality also contributed to his forcefulness.

The Minister's Health

A Scottish contemporary, W. N. Taylor, who later became pastor of Broadway Tabernacle, New York City, commented concerning Beecher's robust health.

> His body is well developed, and his great maxim is to keep it in first-class working order, for he considers health to be a Christian duty, and rightly deems it impossible for any man to do justice to his mental faculties without at the same time attending to his physical.[3]

Good health was no small concern to the Brooklyn pastor. He

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[1]Bok, op. cit., p. 37.

[2]Lewis O. Brastow, Representative Modern Preachers (London: The Macmillan Co., 1904), p. 106.

[3]William Taylor, Scottish Review, October 1859.

devoted one entire lecture session at Yale to a consideration of the preacher's health. To Allan's statement, "Mens sana in corpore sano should be every preacher's motto," Beecher would have heartily agreed.[1] Perhaps his robust health contributed to his optimism, on which several have commented. It is most picturesquely described by Holmes.

> . . . Beecher was the same unaffected, robust, outspoken, clear-headed, sensible man, with a gift of fervid eloquence and a power of effective illustration which swayed the multitudes before him as the wind sways the leaves of the forest. He never addressed men as if they were convicts, born rebels, and would-be-devils, but as brothers, to be helped, to be led, to be raised upward into the higher atmosphere of good thoughts and good companionship. What a comfort it was, after hearing a bloodless invalid preach as 'a dying man to dying men,' to hear a sound, strong-bodied, healthy minister of the Gospel speak with virile force and ringing accents, as a living man to living men.[2]

Passion For Truth

Beecher's physical vitality contributed to his great passion for truth. This passionate enthusiasm was once described in the Atlantic Monthly, as "an inflaming, convincing, coercing power."[3] In lecturing to students on his preaching theory, he frequently mentioned the passion for truth as a prerequisite for effective preaching. He told his auditors

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[1]Allan, op. cit., p. 18.

[2]Bok, op. cit., p. 2

[3]Lyman Abbott, "Henry Ward Beecher," The Atlantic Monthly (October 1903), p. 543. There are many who have placed imagination as the foremost element in Beecher's preaching, and then have put conviction next. To be in rapport with his hearers he frequently mentioned the importance of the minister having strong feeling.

at Yale that there are "four foundation stones for a successful ministry: imagination, emotion, enthusiasm, conviction,"[1] and again in a later lecture, "there is nothing so dignified as a man in earnest."[2] In addressing British students some years later he made a similar emphasis, for he said a preacher "must have the enthusiasm of a ransomed soul persuading men to be ransomed."[3] Beecher may have first become aware of the importance of passion to effective speaking in reading Cicero in his college days. At least he knew the truth of the famous orator's remark, "it is only passion that makes the orator a king."[4] But to Beecher passion was never an end in itself but a means of persuasion to the corresponding course of action.

The Influence of Training and Discipline

Before turning to another subject, it needs to be said that Beecher's fine delivery was no accident. There may have been the touch of genius about him, but not here. His unusual speaking ability was the result of vigorous discipline from early college days. It may be one of the ironies of life, but in early childhood he had a decided speech impediment and some of the family never thought he would speak distinctly.

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 103.

[2]Ibid., I, 139.

[3]Pond, op. cit., p. 88.

[4]Cicero, De Oratore, pars. 128-132.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Beecher believed in studying the principles of rhetoric and oratory and advised his young auditors at Yale to do the same. "The same considerations that make it wise for you to pass through a liberal education, make it also wise for you to pass through a liberal drill and training in all that pertain to oratory."[1] He studied several masters of the art to learn the secret of their success. But with all his study and training in the field of rhetoric and elocution there was nothing artificial in his style.[2]

His ability to rise to the demands of any and every occasion was undoubtedly due to his training and discipline. This unusual resourcefulness was manifested in facing the hostile audiences in Britain during the Civil War. His mastery is illustrated in his attempt to get a hearing before a Glasgow audience as reported by Philip Schaff.

> A common friend, Mr. Peter Macleod of Glasgow, who induced him to delay his return and to make those powerful addresses in behalf of union and freedom in 1863, told me that he prepared himself for his Glasgow speech by a sound sleep, and could not secure a hearing from the noisy assembly till he excited their curiosity by the question, "Would you like to hear what my wife told me when I left America?" Then he broke forth in an extemporary eulogy of Scotland that took the hearers captive. "'Whatever you do, Henry,' she told me on the deck of the departing steamer, 'do not forget to visit Scotland.' And here I am, in the land of John Knox, of Walter Scott, and Robert Burns; the land where every valley is a battlefield, every brook a song,

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 129.

[2]Mention of this point is made in an article, "American Verdicts on Henry Ward Beecher," The Congregational Review (June 1887), p. 538.

and every hill a poem; the land whose memories are as bright as the stars and almost as numerous.[1]

During this tour of Britain, Beecher sometimes sparred with a hostile crowd for over an hour before getting a hearing, but there was not one occasion when he failed in producing a permanent effect upon the hearers in spite of their hostility.[2]

As has been noted in this chapter, Beecher looked upon preaching as an art. Through the investigation of his many sermons preached and his lectures given to students it is possible to discover the principles which he believed were involved in effective preaching. In this chapter there has been the consideration of his theory and practice as related to his technique in preaching.

Beecher's method of sermon planning was an integral part of his theory of extemporaneous preaching. It always contemplated the audience. This principle accounted for his eagerness to know human nature first-hand. He was a man of versatile interests and garnered sermonic materials from many sources. His preparation was mainly general; he looked upon all of life as a preparation for preaching. During much of his ministry, his formal preparation was limited to an

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[1]Quoted by Bok, op. cit., pp. 86-87.

[2]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 226. Beecher's "Liverpool Address" during this tour is considered one of the best examples of persuasion before an hostile audience and since 1863 has been included in many books on rhetoric.

hour for outlining his message just prior to speaking.

The actual creation of the message took place as he stood before the congregation. This audience collaboration determined the form of the discourse. He felt a loose organization was most advantageous to persuasion which he considered the aim of true preaching. What he called "the line-of-fact" type of arrangement was especially adapted to his method of improvisation.

To Beecher, the actual persuasion of men to the Christian life was the objective of all good preaching. A sermon without this definite aim is impotent. This stress on persuasion is basic in formulating his preaching technique. He maintained that a sermon is not for expression but communication. This emphasis is paramount as attention is now focused on the style of his preaching.

THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER

CHAPTER III THE STYLE

"Veritas pateat, veritas placeat, veritas moveat."
---St. Augustine

To make the present chapter and the preceding one mutually exclusive is not only impractical but impossible. Many of the matters discussed under "technique" are not unrelated to "style" and vice versa. Although the division has been made as logical as possible, at some points it is of necessity purely arbitrary.

In this chapter there is included a brief survey of the style of Beecher's preaching followed by a detailed analysis of his preaching according to the common rhetorical qualities of style. Also in the final pages there is included a discussion of the role of the imagination in giving a distinctive style to his preaching.

Style Influenced by Necessity of Communication

Beecher's thinking on the matter of style was influenced by his emphasis on communication. For him style was effective oral expression. He was not a writer but a speaker. In expounding his practice to the Yale divinity students he noted the difference in the requirements of style in oral and written discourse.

> Above all other men, the preacher should avoid what may be called a literary style, as distinguished from a natural one; and by a literary style, technically so-called, I understand one in which abound these two elements,--the artificial structure of sentences, and the use of word and phrases peculiar to literature alone, and not to common life.[1]

Beecher was always aware of the importance of contemplating the audience in preaching.

A recent lecturer on preaching also called the attention of his auditors to the difference between literary and rhetorical style: ". . . what you are hoping to produce is a sermon--not an essay, not a lecture, not a college exegesis, but a sermon. That is to say, when you sit down to write in your study, you must visualize a gathered congregation."[2] Since preaching by its very nature must be audience-conscious, its most effective style will always be conversational rather than literary. The unusual precision with which Beecher observed this difference will be noted in the analysis of his preaching according to the rhetorical elements of style which follows.

A. The Qualities of Style

Augustine's "Veritas pateat, veritas placeat, veritas moveat" suggests the qualities of an effective style. How similar is this analysis to Campbell's familiar classifi-

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 229.

[2]Stewart, op. cit., p. 119.

cation of the rhetorical elements of style: perspicuity, energy, and elegance, or as they are sometimes stated: Clearness, force, and beauty. For the examining of Beecher's style it will be helpful to follow this classification as an outline. First, attention will be given to Beecher's concern for the most important property of style--clearness or perspicuity.

Perspicuity

"Leave nothing merely hinted and left to the reader to make out as best he can,"[1] Beecher advised in a letter to one of his sons away at college. And in addressing his auditors at Yale he frequently admonished them to avoid obscurity of style. In his typical pungent language he said:

> I know some men, among whom, I think, was Coleridge, who justify the obscurities of their style, saying that is a good practice for me to be obliged to dig for the ideas they get. But I submit to you that working on Sunday is not proper for ordinary people in church, and obliging your parishioners to dig and delve for ideas in your sermon is making them do the very work you are paid a salary to do for them.[2]

Beecher realized that a preacher is more solemnly bound than any other person to make what he has to say perspicuous. He knew that to preach over people's heads is not the way to reach their hearts. Therefore, he counselled young min-

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[1]W. C. Beecher, S. Scoville, and Mrs. Henry Ward Beecher, Life and Letters of Henry Ward Beecher (New York: Charles L. Webster and Co., 1888), p. 644.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 156.

isters by saying:

> When you preach you think you must preach so as to touch the top heads in your congregation. Touch the bottom and you will be sure to touch the top. He that puts a jackscrew under the roof is not going to raise the whole building; but he who puts a jackscrew under the sills of the building, and raises them up, will, I think take up everything that is above them.[1]

This matter of perspicuity of style is one of the "virtues of diction" mentioned by Aristotle. With style generally, he was not a little impatient, but evidently felt that this element was so important that it warranted mention. "In regard to the style, one of its chief merits may be defined as perspicuity. This is shown by the fact that the speech, if it does not make the meaning clear, will not perform its proper function."[2] Quintilian has also emphatically stated the importance of making speech perspicuous. "We must take care, not that it shall be possible for the (hearer) to understand, but that it shall be utterly impossible for him not to understand."[3] This is very close to Beecher's conception for he always thought of perspicuity in terms of reception by the audience.

From the testimony of those who heard the "Brooklyn pulpit-master," it is evident that his theory concerning perspicuity of style was not something spun out of his

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[1] Ibid., p. 61.

[2] Aristotle, op. cit., Bk. III, Chap. 2.

[3] Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, VIII. 2, 23.

own fancy but it was based upon his practice. One of his hearers has testified:

> A great many sermons are like a glass of Missouri water, you must let it stand and settle before you drink; very often you will have to throw half away. But the sermons that Henry Ward Beecher preached were translucent, fresh, and pure as spring water.[1]

Actually, Beecher's preaching theory as expounded in his Yale Lectures was the fruit of more than thirty years of preaching experience.

Perspicuity of Language

To make a discourse intelligible Beecher's first emphasis was on perspicuity of expression. As he told his auditors:

> Every man ought to know the charm there is in using vernacular and idiomatic phrases. I have known a great many most admirable preachers who lost almost all real sympathetic hold upon their congregations because they were too literary, too periphrastic, and too scholastic in their diction. They always preferred to use large language, rather than good Anglo-Saxon English.[2]

Beecher considered Anglo-Saxon words more perspicuous to the people at large than the scholastic words of Latin origin. He preferred them for they are so suggestive through the life-long association of ideas. As he stated:

> . . . there is a subtle charm in the use of plain language that pleases people, they scarcely know why. It gives bell-notes which ring out suggestions to the popular heart. There are words that men have heard when boys at home, around the hearth and the table, words that are full

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[1]Bok, op. cit., p. 8.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 131.

of father and of mother, and full of common and domestic life. These are the words that afterward, when brought into your sermon, will produce a strong influence on your auditors, giving an element of success; words which will have an effect that your hearers themselves cannot understand. For after all, simple language is loaded down and stained through with the best testimonies of life.[1]

This emphasis on effective, association-provoking words is very similar to the advice in Spencer's essay, "The Philosophy of Style," with which Beecher was familiar.[2]

> The greater forcibleness of Saxon English or rather non-Latin English, first claims our attention. The several special reasons assignable for this may all be reduced to the general reason--economy. The most important of them is clearly association. A child's vocabulary is almost wholly Saxon. He says, 'I <u>have</u>,' not 'I <u>possess</u>'. . . . The synonyms which he learns in after years, never become so closely, so organically connected with the ideas signified, as do these original words used in childhood. . .[3]

As both Beecher and Spencer have stated, the simple words of everyday experience, learned early in life, are the ones that contribute most to clarity. Emerson has also stated his preference for what he calls "the language of the street." "Cut these words and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive; they walk and they run."[4] In his advocacy of the use of the language of everyday speech, along with such men as Spencer and Emerson, Beecher was a fore-

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[1] <u>Ibid</u>.

[2] Henry Ward Beecher, <u>Hints for Home Reading</u>, ed. by Lyman Abbott (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1880), p. 53.

[3] Herbert Spencer, <u>The Philosophy of Style</u>, ed. by F. N. Scott (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1892), p. 5.

[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, <u>The Heart of Emerson's Journals</u>, ed. by Bliss Perry (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909), p. 154.

runner of the present-day tendency to use the common words and idioms of everyday life in oral and written discourse.

Beecher's emphasis that the language should be modern was based on his theory that the pulpit must be contemporaneous. At this point he would have agreed with a present day preacher who recently said: "There is nothing that more effectively cuts communication with our hearers than a remoteness of language and archaism of style."[1] A preacher out of touch with his age, Beecher dubbed a "pulpit-antiquary" for he commented:

> The true preacher is to be eminently a man of his own time. He is to be in sympathy, not with ideas and truths alone, but with living men. To know merely what men thought a hundred years ago; to be learned only in the things that men wanted in other ages--is to be a pulpit-antiquary.[2]

How closely Beecher's thought in this matter is being paralleled by those wrestling with "the problem of communication" today is noted in the comment made by a prominent Scottish preacher in the Warrack Lectures last year.

> The requisite of preaching of the living Word in our generation--that it should be in the words of this generation and not of the one before; that it should arise out of our genuine participation in the life of the modern world.[3]

It is obvious, then, that perspicuity of expression is a

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[1]Read, op. cit., p. 71.

[2]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, I, Preface iii, iv.

[3]Read, op. cit., p. 72.

problem that every generation must meet;[1] few have been more conscious of this than was Beecher.

Perspicuity and Sentence Structure

Beecher noted that perspicuity is not only dependent on the language employed but also on the construction of the sentences. He disparaged an artificial style with its long involved sentences. In advising his Yale auditors he commented to this effect:

> I have often heard ministers in private conversation and said, 'Would to God you would do so in the pulpit!' But the moment they are in the pulpit they fall into their scholastic, artificial style, which runs through the whole ministerial life. A man will stop you in the street and discourse with you there, and be just as limber and affable in his sentences, just as curt and direct and crisp and simple in conversational vernacular as any one; and yet in the pulpit, two-thirds of what he has to say will be Latin periphrases woven together. . . . This style is false to everything but books. It may be all in sympathy with them; but no man in earnest, talking to his fellow-men with a purpose, falls into that artificial style.[2]

The literary style lacks the breath of life that Beecher believed should be in preaching and sometimes tends to obscure the thought rather than to elucidate it. As he warned his auditors:

> Above all other men, the preacher should avoid what may be called a literary style, as distinguishable from a natural one. . . . Involved sentences, crooked, circuitous and parenthetical, no matter how musically they may be balanced, are prejudicial to a facile understanding of the truth. . . Don't run around for your meaning. Long sentences may be good, but not twisting ones.[3]

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[1]A current criticism of seminary training is that it is for the generation just past.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 43.

[3]Ibid., p. 229.

The object in preaching is to move people but if their attention is lost in a jungle of "circuitous, parenthetical, or involved sentences," they never will be reached. Beecher noted that oral discourse does not necessarily demand short sentences, but it does require that the sentences be instantly intelligible. Otherwise there will be obscurity of thought and persuasion will be impeded. Always underlying Beecher's rhetorical theory is this element of persuasion. As someone has written concerning the perspicuity of his sentences: "His brief, pungent sentences often had the effect of a succession of pistol shots; but there is one of his sentences under our eye as we write, containing eighty-five words--a sentence of perfect clearness and harmony of members."[1]

Energy

Since Beecher's thinking on the matter of style was influenced by the necessity of moving an audience to action, the quality of energy was paramount in his theory and practice. It is not enough for the hearer to understand, but he must be aroused and animated. As has been noted, the "Plymouth preacher" was interested in preaching that seeks action not praise for its beauty. In order to give animation to style Beecher noted first the importance of the

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[1] J. G. Rogers, "American Verdicts on Henry Ward Beecher," Congregational Review (June 1887), p. 548.

choice of terms.

The Concreteness of Terms as Related to Energy

He knew the truth of the Apostle's injunction: "For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" That his preaching should give no "uncertain sound," Beecher gave special care to the choice of words. As he expressed it: "Sometimes a single word like a drop of ink in a tumbler of water, will change the color of a whole statement."[1] He thought of words as "seeds of action," and he preferred the concrete to the abstract term, for the former has greater power to incite action. Beecher drew the attention of his auditors to the importance of this fact when he said that ". . .which will touch men most sensibly, and arouse them most effectually, and bring them to a new life most certainly, is that which is specific."[2] The concrete or specific term always makes a clearer image than the vague general one and thus make a deeper impression. "The more general the terms are, the picture is the fainter; the more special they are, it is the brighter." This, as Beecher commented, is one of the great contrasts between the natural and artificial styles.

. . . . The truths of religion, in a simple and trans-

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[1]Beecher, Eyes and Ears, p. 403.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, III, 215.

parent style, shine as the sunlight on the fields and mountains, revealing all things in their proper forms and natural colors; but an artificial and gorgeous style, like a cathedral window, may let in some light, yet in blotches of purple and blue that spot the audience, and produce grotesqueness and unnatural effects.[1]

Farmer, in our own day, has emphasized this same need for concreteness in preaching. To him abstractness is "the greatest curse of all our preaching."[2] Oman, too, warned his students against the abstract style and advised them to use "concrete, picturesque, simple language."[3] In addressing himself to the problem of communication as it faces the Church today, Professor Torrance of Edinburgh underlines the fact that Jesus presented "His teaching in a concrete fashion and not in abstractions."[4] Beecher had observed this concrete expression of truth in the Master's teaching and made every effort to employ it in his own discourses.

The Animation of Style and the Illustration

This turning of abstract truth into concrete pictures was done many times by Beecher through the use of his favorite "instrument of persuasion"--the illustration. As he explained it to his Yale auditors:

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[1] Ibid., I, 228.

[2] Herbert Farmer, The Servant of the Word (London: Nisbet and Co., 1941), p. 99.

[3] Oman, op. cit., p. 91.

[4] T. F. Torrance, A Study in New Testament Communication, Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 3, No. 3, (Sept. 1950), 298.

> Experience has taught that not only are persons pleased by being instructed through illustration, but they are more readily instructed thus, because, substantially, the mode in which we learn a new thing is by its being likened to something we already know. They are a kind of covert analogy, or likening one thing to another, so that obscure things become plain, being represented pictorially or otherwise by things that are not obscure and that we are familiar with.[1]

Many contemporary preachers have mentioned this use of the illustration to make the abstract concrete. One of the outstanding of them has emphatically stated: "Abstract truth has to be translated into concrete terms, if it is to impinge upon the average mind. . . . Trust made concrete will find a way past many a door where abstractions knock in vain."[2]

Although Beecher's use of the illustration does not belong exclusively to the animation of style, yet it is so closely related to this making of preaching concrete that it seemed most advantageous to discuss it here. Moreover, Beecher considered the illustration as an "instrument of persuasion" which not only serves to stimulate attention but to move people to action, and thus contributes in no small measure to the energetic style of a discourse.

Beecher's Employment of the Illustration

If in Beecher's rhetorical theory "the application is the master of all," as has been mentioned, then "the illus-

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 155.

[2]Stewart, op. cit., p. 142.

tration is the servant of all," for he enumerated some eleven uses of it as he expounded his practice to the Yale students.[1] Before him, no one had made such a complete analysis of this instrument, and few have since. It is at this point that he made one of his greatest contributions to preaching theory.[2] In the handling of the illustration he was a master of the art, and his sermons are immensely enriched by its frequent use. The following quotation indicates Beecher's interest in this instrument of persuasion and his assiduous cultivation of it:

> . . . while illustrations are as natural for me as breathing, I use fifty now to one in the early years of my ministry. For the first six or eight years, perhaps, they were comparatively few and far apart. But I developed myself in that respect; and that, too, by study and practice, by hard thought, and by a great many trials, both with the pen and extemporaneously by myself, when I was walking here and there.[3]

His facility, then, in handling the illustration was not a gift but the outgrowth of disciplined study and practice. In the immediate succeeding pages attention is given to a

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[1] In his first series of Yale Lectures Beecher devoted the entire seventh lecture to this subject.

[2] Louis Brastow has commented on Beecher's influence on American preaching at this point: "From the early period and on into the first quarter of the nineteenth century, American preaching was largely doctrinal in its subject-matter, logical in form, and philosophical in spirit. It has ceased to be doctrinal and logical in the formal sense. Church doctrine no longer constitutes its subject-matter and dialectic is no longer the instrument of defence. . . . To this modification in the didactic type of American preaching Mr. Beecher, equally with Dr. Bushnell, has been powerfully tributary." See Brastow, op. cit., p. 115.

[3] Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 175.

brief survey of the ways in which Beecher employed this important instrument of persuasion.

His principal use of the illustration was to explain. As he told his auditors at Yale: "The purpose that we have in view in employing an illustration is to help the people to understand more easily the things that we are teaching them."[1] He was not like the seminary student who had three good illustrations and built a sermon around them, for Beecher never employed this instrument as an end in itself but always to throw light upon some truth or argument. As he declared: "Now an illustration is a window in an argument, and lets in light."

Aristotle described the illustration as one of the two means of proof. He has written: "All men effect their proofs by demonstration either with examples or with enthymemes, there is no third way." And to assist proof is one of the ways in which Beecher employed this instrument of rhetoric. He knew that many times people are more convinced by an apt illustration than by a philosophical argument. "An argument," Beecher commented, "may as well go forward by illustration as by abstract statement; sometimes it will go better."[2] It turns the "obscure abstract into the vivid concrete."

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[1] Ibid., p. 121.

[2] Ibid., p. 165.

In his Lecture Room Talks in 1872, Beecher mentioned a use of the illustration that is usually not noted, that of being helpful to introduce the narrative quality into a discourse.

> . . . next it seems to me we should attempt to teach our children as much as possible, as the Scripture teaches us, by narrative. You never had to persuade a child to listen to a parable. You never had to persuade a child while you read a thrilling history.[1]

Cicero is among the few that has called attention to this narrative element: "A narrative referring to various characters, and intersected by dialogue, affords much gratification."[2] Frequently in Beecher's sermons, and even in his Yale Lectures, there are illustrations animated with characters and dialogue.

Closely connected with the use just mentioned, Beecher considered the illustration as a means to stimulate the imagination. This use is not strictly definitive, but it is an element that should be in all good illustration. Here is part of Beecher's discussion of it:

> Illustrations bring into play the imaginative faculty, which is only another name for ideality. . . . You cannot help your audience in any other way so well as by keeping alive in them the sense of imagination, and making the truth palpable to them, because it is appealing to the taste, to the sense of the beautiful in imagery as well as to the sense of truth.[3]

Furthermore, Beecher considered the illustration as an excel-

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[1] Ibid., p. 155.

[2] Cicero, op. cit., ii, 180.

[3] Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 159-160.

lent means to assist the memory. To him a sermon was only half-finished when it was delivered, it must be "translated" into life, as a present-day preacher has put it. A good illustration can facilitate the remembering of the truth proclaimed until it is actually incarnated into life. This idea of the illustration the "Plymouth pulpit-master" expressed to his Yale auditors.

> Then they (illustrations) are a very great help in carrying away and remembering the things your audience have heard from you. . . . They will remember the picture; and, if they are questioned, the picture will bring back the truth to them and after they will remember both together. Whereas all except the few logically trained minds would very soon have forgotten what you had discoursed upon, if you had not thus suitably seasoned it. Your illustrations will be the salt that will preserve your teachings, and men will remember them.[1]

In discussing the matters of interest and attention James Black has suggested that a minister "should have means for resting an audience."[2] Beecher thought of the illustration as a means to do this, for it affords variety by appealing to different parts of the mind. From all evidence available he was the first to note this use of the illustration. Broadus[3] in his outstanding textbook on homiletics includes this use in his discussion and suggests that he is indebted to Beecher for it.

By the careful employment of the illustration "everybody gets something every time," Beecher suggested to the

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Black, op. cit., p. 48.

[3] Broadus, op. cit., p. 198.

students at Yale Divinity School. In discussing this important use of the illustration he further stated:

> There ought not to be a five-year-old child that shall go home without something that pleases and instructs him. . . . There always ought to be, and there is no way in which you can prepare a sermon for the delectation of the plain people, and the uncultured, and the old and the young, better than by making it attractive and instructive with illustrations. . . . You are to preach so that every man shall have his portion in due season, and that portion ought to be in every sermon, more or less. You will scarecely be able to do it in any other way than by illustration.[1]

The preacher's audience is more heterogeneous than any other, and since the "illustration is capable of appeals to the imagination, of assisting proof, of stimulating thought," it is especially valuable in reaching hearers of the different levels of society. It was probably Beecher's facility in the use of the illustration that caused Anna de Bremont to write, "He had the charm of bringing his subject within the scope of the most limited understanding."[2]

Another use that Beecher mentions that is not commonly noted is that the illustration helps people to think for themselves and tends to lead "them into the truth."

> I notice that in a prayer-meeting which has grown up under a minister who illustrates, all the members of the church illustrate too. . . . It leads men to look at truth not only in one aspect, but in all its bearings, and to make analogies and illustrations for themselves, and thus brings them into the truth. But this means you bring up your congregation to understand the truth more easily than you would by any other method.[3]

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 162.

[2]Anna de Bremont, "Henry Ward Beecher as an Actor," The Theatre, XVIII (May 1, 1887), 246.

[3]Beecher, op. cit., I, 159-160.

To get people to think is surely a task of first importance for the preacher, and if an illustration can be used not only to induce them to think but to induce them to think along right lines, then, it is invaluable as an instrument of persuasion. Hugh Blair has also noted this employment of the illustration: "Illustrations prompt us to remark and observe and thereby make us advance in useful knowledge."[1]

Ruskin once said that "all noble ornament is the expression of man's delight in God's work." And in sympathy with this Beecher has mentioned the ornamental use of the illustration. "An illustration," he declared, "is never to be a mere ornament, although being an ornament is no objection to it."[2] From the same platform some seven years later Brooks also stated that an illustration should not be deplored just because it made "truth glorious to the imagination,"[3] but warned that truth is never to be the servant of beauty but always beauty of truth. William Taylor once told of the workman who stated we must never "construct ornament, but only ornament construction."[4]

Beecher believed, too, that the illustration has util-

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[1]Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, I (Brooklyn, 1804), 241ff.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 160.

[3]Brooks, op. cit., pp. 175-176.

[4]William Taylor, The Ministry of the Word (New York: Randolph and Co., 1876), p. 185.

ity in enforcing a point by indirection.

> There are many very important themes which a minister may not desire to preach openly upon, for various reasons, especially if he wish to remain in the parish. But there are times when you can attain your object by an illustration pointed at the topic, without indicating whom you are hitting, but continuing your sermon as though you were utterly unconscious of the effect of your blow.[1]

This is not a general use, but surely it would facilitate the discussion of a subject when unusual discretion is required. Beecher evidently discovered this use of the illustration in discussing slavery at a time when direct, pointed discussion of the subject would only have resulted in antagonism.

At the close of each lecture at Yale the students had the opportunity to question Beecher concerning the subject discussed. After lecturing on the use of the illustration, Beecher was asked a question which revealed another way he employed this instrument of persuasion. When asked if it was proper to make someone laugh in Church by using an illustration, he replied (in part):

> Never turn aside from a laugh any more than you would from a cry. Go ahead on your Master's business, and do it well. And remember this, that every faculty in you was placed there by the dear Lord God for his service. Never <u>try</u> to raise a laugh for a laugh's sake, or to make men merry as a piece of sensationalism, when you are preaching on solemn things. That is allowable at a picnic, but not in a pulpit where you are preaching to men in regard to God and their own destiny. But if mirth comes up naturally, do not stifle it. . . .[2]

Cicero first mentioned employing the illustration as a

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[1]Beecher, <u>Yale Lectures</u>, I, 166.

[2]<u>Ibid</u>., I, 178.

vehicle to introduce humor into a discourse and Beecher is among the few that have mentioned this use since.

The outstanding characteristic of Beecher's sermons is their abundance of illustrations. In 1904 a compilation of illustrations was made from his many extant sermons and addresses.[1] Included in this volume of six hundred and seventy-five pages were over twenty-five hundred illustrations. His skill in the art of illustration caused an outstanding authority on preaching to name him along with such other great preachers as Chrysostom, Jeremy Taylor, Christmas Evans, Chalmers, and Spurgeon. At his death in 1887, the New York Tribune said: "Thousands have marveled at the variety and aptness of his illustrations without reflecting how vast must have been the stores of information upon which he drew."[2]

Now to a third quality of style manifest in Beecher's preaching and theory attention is given.

Elegance of Style

Beecher believed that effective preaching should have an unstudied beauty about it. In describing this quality of style he used such terms as "simplicity, grace and ease." He felt that a true energetic style would also be elegant. Thus the latter excellence is gained by seeking the former.

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[1]Henry Ward Beecher, A Treasury of Illustrations, ed. by J. R. Howard and T. J. Ellinwood (New York: Revell, 1904).

[2]New York Tribune, March 8, 1887.

To him elegance must be the natural product of imagination and passion or it leads to an artificial style that produces "grotesqueness and unnatural effects."[1] To strain for elegance when men's souls are in jeopardy was to Beecher extreme vanity. His famous English contemporary also expressed an aversion for this straining after elegance.

> A man's style may be as fascinating as that of the authoress of whom one said, 'that she could write with a crystal pen dipped in dew upon silver paper, and use for pounce the dust of a butterfly's wing'; but an audience whose souls are in instant jeopardy, what will mere elegance be but 'altogether lighter than vanity'?[2]

Seeking for elegance for elegance's sake, Beecher insisted, was not natural and led to a perversion of style. In his discussion of style Oman has mentioned four such perversions which are actually the result of straining after elegance in one way or another; they are "the spacious style, the polished style, the fine style, and the flowery style."[3] Such styles "overdressed, velvety beyond measure" have been satirized in the following lines:

> Nor highest looks have not the highest mind,
> Nor haughty words most full of highest thoughts,
> But are like bladders blown up with wind,
> Which, being pricked, do vanish into noughts.

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 228.

[2]C. H. Spurgeon, Lectures to My Students, I (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1893), 73.

[3]Oman, op. cit., pp. 84-87. Oman's treatment of the subject of style is one of the most thorough and penetrating among modern books on preaching. It considers the relation of style to speaking and to the materials of preaching.

Contrast Between the Style of Rhetoric and of Poetry

Beauty of style is desirable but Beecher knew that in preaching it must be a matter of secondary importance and never sought after for its own sake. He knew that some preachers care too much for embellishment and their whole aim is entertainment--the mere gratification of the audience. Beecher maintained that the object of preaching is not entertainment, although good preaching should never lack for interest. This distinction becomes clear in a contrast between the style of rhetoric and of poetry. As Aristotle remarks:

> The first style of rhetoric was formed on that of poetry; witness the style of Gorgias; and even at the present time the majority of ignorant people fancy that such orators speak most delightfully; this however is not the case, but the style of poetry and that of prose is distinct.[1]

In poetry beauty is the most important element of style; but in rhetoric it is subordinate to perspicuity and energy. In the former the "proper purpose" is to give pleasure, but in preaching the purpose is very different and any gratification of taste must always be subsidiary to persuasion. As Beecher repeatedly pointed out:

> No matter how methodical, philosophic, exquisite in illustration, or faultless in style, that is a poor and weak sermon that has no power to deliver men from evil and to exalt them in goodness.[2]

Although elegance is not to be the preoccupation of

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[1]Aristotle, op. cit., III, 1.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 228.

the preacher, a natural beauty of style is not to be deplored. Beecher specifically urged simplicity as a mark of great excellence. In this matter he would have concurred with what Oman once told students:

> In religion in particular, the expression of it in simple, varied, popular human speech, embodied sometimes in homely figure and story, which, though rising at times to the sublimest poetry and the most impassioned appeal, never fails to speak to the common man in his own language, is not merely something of value for teaching, but belongs to the nature of religion when rightly known.[1]

Included in his idea of simplicity of style, is what Beecher sometimes called the "ease" of style--one that is not excessively labored or in any respect artificial--but that flows freely and is natural. In such a style the meaning is instantly intelligible which Beecher emphasized was absolutely essential to effective oral discourse. He advised his auditors, "Never be grandiloquent when you want to drive home a truth."[2]

Simplicity of Style as Related to the Principle of Economy

Underlying Beecher's idea of simplicity of style is the principle of economy which is one of the main features of his whole rhetorical theory. He borrowed this idea of conserving the auditor's attention from Spencer.[3] Obscurity in

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[1]Oman, op. cit., pp. 92-93.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 229.

[3]Beecher, Hints for Home Reading, ed. by Lyman Abbott (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1880), p. 53.

style is feasible in poetry where there is opportunity to ponder the meaning, but sermons, Beecher maintained must go directly to their mark, be instantly intelligible. In a style that unfolds the thought at once there is a beauty and gracefulness of simplicity which Beecher considered highly desirable.

Beecher's Picturesque Language

Another feature of Beecher's preaching that contributed to its elegance in style was its picturesque language. A leading American preacher has said that "he who would hold the ear of the people, must either tell stories, or paint pictures."[1] Beecher did both. He so excelled in the latter that he has been quoted in books on preaching to illustrate the exact choice of words.[2]

His skill in the art of word-painting was not a matter of chance but he often read for words that he might have an adequate vocabulary to serve him as he composed in the presence of the audience. He advised his young auditors at Yale to do the same:

> It is desirable that the preacher should have a copious vocabulary, and a facility in the selection and use of words; and to this end he should read much, giving attention to the words and phrases used by the best authors, not for servile copying and memorizing, but that these elements may become assimilated with his own mind, as a part of it, ready for use when the time comes.[3]

Frequently literary workers make it a practice to stalk for

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[1]Broadus, op. cit., 160.

[2]H. L. Mencken, The American Language (New York: Knopf 1936), p. 140.

[3]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 228.

words. Emerson spoke of reading Barrow and Ben Jonson for no other purpose than to seek "vigorous phrases and quaint, peculiar words" that would, as he said, "help to rattle out the battle of my thoughts."[1] Evidently Beecher's deliberate effort to enlarge his vocabulary was not in vain, for when standing in the presence of an audience composing he was never at a loss for words. "Words," he exclaimed once, "when I am well started, I don't need to hunt for words! They come in crowds, getting in one another's way, and each one saying, 'Take me! take me!'"[2]

There are many examples of Beecher's adeptness in the art of word-painting,[3] but it will only be possible here to note a few outstanding illustrations. In his early ministry he gave a series of practical Lectures to Young Men that won him wide acclaim. In one of them entitled "The Strange Woman" he warned young men against licentiousness in unusual fluency.

> Trust the sea with thy tiny boat, trust the fickle wind, trust the changing skies of April, trust the miser's generosity, the tyrant's mercy; but, ah! simple man, trust not thyself near the artful woman, armed in her beauty, her cunning raiment, her dimpled smiles, her sighs of sorrow, her look of love, her voice of flattery; for if thou hadst the strength of ten Ulysses, unless God help thee, Calypso shall make thee fast, and hold thee in her island.[4]

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[1]Emerson, op. cit., p. 154.

[2]Rossiter W. Raymond, The Crown of Life (Boston: D. Lothrop Co., 1890), "Introduction."

[3]See Beecher's characterization of the "Shepherd's Psalm" which is the frontispiece in Weatherhead's, A Shepherd Remembers.

[4]Beecher, Lectures to Young Men, p. 117.

His facility in the selection and use of words is noted, too, in his many sermons. From one of them preached about half-way through his ministry there come to mind two very expressive sentences: "Life was to you like the flight of butterflies," and "We spend half our life wishing we were old, and the other half wishing we were young again."[1] Occasionally, especially in public orations, his style nearly approached that of poetry. His eulogy of Lincoln many times has been cited in textbooks on public speaking as an example of rhythmical prose.

> Four years ago, O Illinois, we took from your midst an untried man, and from among the people. We return him to you a mighty conqueror. Not thine any more, but the nation's; not ours but the world's. Give him place, O ye prairies! . . . . Ye winds that move over the mighty places of the West, chant requiem! Ye people, behold a martyr whose blood, as so many articulate words, pleads for fidelity, for law, for liberty.[2]

One reason that Beecher is still frequently quoted after nearly a century is that he had the faculty of compressing great truths into brief sentences. Evidently his search for telling words was not in vain. An example of one of these terse statements appeared recently in an American periodical: "Selfishness is that detestable vice which no one will forgive in others and no one is without himself." Handford calls these epigrammatic expressions

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[1]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, I, 281, "The Hidden Christ."

[2]N. D. Hillis, Lectures and Orations of Henry Ward Beecher (New York: Revel, 1913), p. 283.

"Beecherisms" and describes this capacity of the Plymouth preacher as follows:

> It was impossible to listen to him through a sermon without carrying away expressions and sentences that would cling without any effort to the memory. No thoughtful man ever went to Plymouth Church without coming away the richer by some gem of thought set in a few beautiful or burning words. No trick of rhetoric--perfectly natural. He opened his mouth and these sentences freighted with so much wisdom, and tenderness, and love, flowed forth--
>
> 'As effortless as woodland nooks
> Send violets up and paint them blue.'[1]

Beecher's unusual power over words won him the title of the "Shakespeare of the American pulpit."[2]

Following this analysis of Beecher's preaching according to the three principal qualities of style it seems appropriate now to consider the role of the imagination in giving to his preaching a distinctive style.

B. The Role of the Imagination in Beecher's Preaching

The famous Plymouth pulpit master regarded the imagination as "the most important of all the factors which go to make the preacher."[3] From the rostrum where Beecher spoke these words, Dale some seven years later described the role of the imagination in giving distinctive style to preaching. "The dif-

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[1]J. H. Handford, Henry Ward Beecher, Christian Philosopher (New York: Bedford, Clark and Co., 1887), p. 56.

[2]Arthur S. Hoyt, The Pulpit and American Life (London: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1921), p. 100.

[3]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 109.

ference between vivid and languid speaking depends very largely upon the extent to which the imagination contributes in this way to the expression of thought."[1] Broadus also gave pre-eminence to the imagination in effective preaching. "It is . . . mainly through imagination that we touch the feelings, and thereby bring truth powerfully to bear upon the will, which is the end and the very essence of eloquence."[1]

Beecher, however, not only named the imagination as the most vital element in preaching but he also defined it. He makes a distinction in its use in preaching and its more general use.

> The imagination in its relations to art and beauty is one thing; and in its relations to moral truth it is another thing, of the most substantial character. Imagination of this kind is the true germ of faith; it is the power of conceiving as definite the things which are invisible to the senses,--of giving them distinct shape. And this, not merely in your own thoughts, but with the power of presenting the things which experience cannot primarily teach to other people's minds, so that they shall be just as obvious as though seen with the bodily eye.[2]

According to Beecher's conception, then, imagination has a very close connection with faith in making the things of the Spirit real to the preacher so that he can communicate them to others. Is this not analogous with the poet's idea?

> That minister of ministers,
> Imagination, gathers up
> The undiscovered Universe. . .

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[1]Broadus, op. cit., p. 424.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 110.

This function of the imagination has already been noted in the analysis of the creative process in Beecher's preaching.[1] It is through the imagination separate experiences and ideas are fused into new concepts capable of being transmitted to others. The imaginative process is also important in the actual arrangement of the materials of a discourse. No wonder Beecher termed the imagination "the quality which of necessity must belong to the ministry."[2]

In his definition to the young ministers at Yale, Beecher implied that it is the imagination that actually breathes life into preaching, for it enables the speaker to "conceive of invisible things, and to present them as though they were visible to others." Through the imagination thought is given a definite shape, concrete expression. Such expression kindles the imagination of the hearer and affects his feelings and thus brings truth to bear upon his will which is the very essence of effective preaching. Here is the advantage in using the concrete word as Beecher perceived it, "It gives bell-notes which ring out suggestions to the popular heart."[3] As a present-day preacher has described the importance of this role of the imagination: "The churchgoer wants the preacher to see what he says; not argue, but

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[1]See this thesis, Chap. II, page 11.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 117.

[3]Ibid., 131.

to paint scenes like those in the parables."[1]

Another function of the imagination in Beecher's theory and practice was to enable the preacher sympathetically to participate in the fortunes and feelings of others that his preaching might be vital to their needs. What Lord Acton said of George Eliot could as appropriately have been spoken of Beecher, "she had the secret not only of reading the diverse hearts of men but of creeping into their skins, watching the world with their eyes, feeling the latent background of conviction, discerning theory and habit."[2] Beecher's sympathetic imagination made him so alive to the needs of his people that sometimes he sensed a particular need as he stood before them and altered his sermon plans to meet it.[3]

The importance of the role of the imagination in his preaching is attested by an outstanding theologian and Church historian who heard him.

> His imagination was as fertile as that of a poet, though he never wrote a poem or quoted poetry. His mind was a flower-garden in perpetual bloom, enlivened by running brooks and singing birds. He was always fresh and green, and rarely repeated himself. He had an inexhaustible store of apt illustrations, quick repartees, and amusing anecdotes admirably told.[4]

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[1]Andrew W. Blackwood, The Preparation of Sermons (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1948), p. 50.

[2]Quoted by James Reid, In Quest of Reality (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1924), p. 181.

[3]Mrs. Henry Ward Beecher, "Mr. Beecher as I Knew Him," Ladies' Home Journal (May, 1892), p. 4.

[4]Philip Schaff in Bok, op. cit., p. 86.

As is apparent from the study of this chapter, style was not a matter of preoccupation with Beecher. he would never have agreed with Cicero who once said, that "when one has found out what to say and in what order, there still remains by far the greatest thing, namely, how to say it.[1] To Beecher thought was the main thing, and he believed that a straining after form often led to a curbing of the creative imagination. However, he did not dismiss style as being unimportant, but only implied that in oral discourse its place is subsidiary. In fact, Beecher's consideration for style is reminiscent of that of the ancient master who said: "Let there be care about words, but solicitude about things."[2]

In essence Beecher's thesis was that style must never become an end in itself, but always be a means to effective communication. He warned his Yale auditors that a literary or artificial style is actually an hindrance to this end. "An artificial and gorgeous style. . . . produces grotesqueness and unnatural effects." The difference in the requirements of style in oral and written discourse Beecher brought into bold relief. Style for the sake of style is justifiable in poetry and other forms of literature where the purpose is literary permanence but never in preaching where the object is immediate effect upon the audience.

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[1]Cicero, op. cit., par. 16.

[2]Quintilian, op. cit., IV. 1, 3.

Beecher's purpose was not to make discourse but to accomplish his object. Therefore, to him style was effective expression. Stendhal's definition as quoted by Murry is very close to Beecher's concept: "Style is this: to add to a given thought all the circumstances fitted to produce the whole effect that the thought ought to produce."[1] The effect, of course, which Beecher always contemplated was persuasion. As he emphatically stated:

> No matter how methodical, philosophic . . . or faultless in style, that is a poor and weak sermon that has no power to deliver men from evil and exalt them in goodness.[2]

In summary, Beecher believed preaching to have a nobler work to perform than the production of literary masterpieces. As someone has put it, he was not interested in the immortality of his sermons, but in the immortality of the souls of the people to whom he preached. Of sermons more interested in literary permanence than the actual moving of men, he said, "People say, 'Those sermons are fit to be printed.' They are fit for nothing else. They are essays. They are sections of books."[3] Such sermons he called "show sermons" and warned his young auditors against them in words that seem to summarize his whole attitude

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[1]J. Middleton Murry, The Problem of Style (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), p. 79.

[2]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 43.

[3]Ibid., p. 186. Beecher's style was that of extempore preaching; it was sometimes termed a "conversational style."

toward style:

> Great sermons, young gentlemen, ninety-nine times in a hundred, are nuisances. They are like steeples without any bells in them; things stuck up high in the air, serving for ornament, attracting observation, but sheltering nobody, warming nobody, helping nobody. . . . Great sermons will come of themselves, when they are worth anything. Don't seek them. . . . I do not believe that any man ever made a great sermon who set out to do that thing.[1]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 32, 226.

THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER

CHAPTER IV THE MESSAGE

"Beecher was in touch with the most advanced thought of his era, as few preachers were, yet he never lost touch with the ordinary men busy at their task."
A. L. Drummond

Although Beecher's main contribution is to the art of preaching, it will be helpful in this chapter to examine the message of his preaching. Not only will an analysis of the main emphases of his preaching lead to a better understanding of his technique and style, but will also assist immeasurably in viewing his preaching as a whole in its true perspective. Furthermore, a brief consideration of his message will contribute to an understanding of the place of his preaching in the theological and sociological trends of American history.

The Theological Background of His Message

Although Henry Ward Beecher was born in the "orthodox uplands of Litchfield, and of a strictly Calvinistic sire,"[1] as Trent puts it, he became one of the leaders in the Calvinistic revolt that was taking place on the American religious scene in the last half of the nineteenth century. He felt

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[1]Trent, op. cit., III, 213. Actually Lyman Beecher was not a strict Calvinist; his son described his position as "alleviated Calvinism."

that much of the irrelevant preaching of his day had degenerated into mere theological harangues and was responsible for the low ebb of Church life in his generation. Thus, he determined to emancipate preaching from a dogmatic theology.

In his seminary days Beecher had become expert in theological technicalities in order to defend his father who was on trial for heresy, but witnessing the bitterness of this trial he became more and more convinced that theological controversies were futile and wicked. He later confessed concerning this earlier experience:

> By the time I got away from theological seminary, I was so sick--no tongue can tell how sick I was of the whole medley. How I hated and despised this abyss of whirling controversies, that seemed to me to be filled with all manner of evil things, with everything indeed but Christ.[1]

From that time, his ministry was characterized by a reaction against the rigid Calvinism that had dominated American religious thought since the days of Jonathan Edwards.[2]

This spirit of revolt was by no means peculiar to Beecher. Actually he was only reflecting the religious climate of his day. New forces were at work shaking the rigid Calvinistic foundations upon which the message of the New England pulpit had rested for over a century. The tide of liberalism was beginning to surge, thanks to Horace Bushnell and his famous book, Christian Nurture. Beecher, skillfully discerning the

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[1]Abbott and Halliday, op. cit., p. 490.

[2]See this thesis pp. 3-5 for an account of the influence of Edwards and the New England theology.

signs of the times, did much to popularize the revolt[1] that Bushnell and others had so recently begun. This role of Beecher's during much of his ministry has been well described by one of his biographers. "He had a singular gift for encountering major movements in his period--for crashing into them, glancing past them or riding them as a skilled swimmer rides a wave."[2] Although Beecher was not a deep or original thinker, yet for his great share in making articulate this reaction that was taking place, he has been termed one of the "liberators of American theological thought."[3]

The nature of this reaction as popularized by Beecher can be briefly characterized. Along with Bushnell, Beecher was opposed in thinking of Christian theology as an intellectually demonstrable system. He did not believe that Christian truth was something to be systematized but something to be explored and applied and actually confirmed in experience. This belief has been expressed similarly by a contemporary theologian: "No theology ought to go against the plain declaration of experience."[4] Beecher felt that no system or combination of systems was adequate to contain the truth of God. And, therefore, those systems in his day

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[1]See Thompson, op. cit., p. 53.

[2]Constance M. Rourke, Trumpets of Jubilee (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927), viii.

[3]Buckham, op. cit., p. 32.

[4]Farmer, op. cit., p. 96.

posing as perfect were actually partial. He would readily have consented to what Brooks once said of orthodoxy: "Orthodoxy is, in the Church, very much what prejudice is in the single mind. It is the premature conceit of certainty. It is the treatment of the imperfect as if it were perfect." In stating his stand against irrelevant theological controversies to British ministerial students Beecher said:

> I should like to see a report taken here of what orthodoxy is; I do not believe that there would be two of you that would agree, and it comes back to the old familiar saw: 'Orthodoxy is my doxy and heterodoxy is your doxy.'[1]

Frequently in his preaching he voiced his objections to the learning of the catechism as he had done.

> A God by definition is never a living God; and a child is incompetent to understand such a being. The catechisms which children receive very seldom add anything to their notions of God. . . . As I recollect my own childhood, when I had gone through the accumulated words which defined God, I went through nothing! . . . . And yet, I had a very vivid conception of God--formed almost wholly, however, by the transfer of family affections and knowledge to the divine name.[2]

In another Sunday message he characteristically commented: "It is not enough for a man to put on his bib and tucker and say the catechism. You have got more to do than say your catechism. You have got a testimony to make."[3] Thus, Beecher implicated that the rigid Calvinism of his day had emphasized right beliefs to the extent of eclipsing the importance of the right life.

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[1]Pond, op. cit., p. 91.

[2]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, I, 94.

[3]Ibid., I, 143.

In Beecher's revolt against creedal orthodoxy, one detects an attempt to return to a more Biblical idea of faith. Faith under the dogmatism of his day had become an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Faith in Christ was not the test of orthodoxy, but faith in certain logical propositions about Christ contained in the creed was the test. Thus faith became merely assent to a certain theological system rather than commitment of life to Christ. In his preaching Beecher called men to a personal loyalty to Christ rather than mere acquiescence to certain creedal statements.[1] He sought to make truth vital to life and a means to Christian character rather than something merely theoretical. This emphasis on life rather than on doctrine is noted in the questions that he asked candidates coming for church membership:

> Do you avouch the Lord Jehovah to be your God, Jesus Christ to be your Savior, the Holy Spirit to be your Sanctifier? Renouncing the dominion of this world over you, do you consecrate your whole soul and body to the service of God? Do you receive his Word as the rule of your life, and by his grace assisting you will you preserve in this consecration unto the end?[2]

With her brother so fervently revolting against the kind of preaching which was mainly involved with theological abstractions, it is quite evident that Harriet Beecher Stowe

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[1]See Thompson, op. cit., p. 73.

[2]Handford, op. cit., p. 237

did not have him in mind in her portraiture in The Minister's Wooing:

> . . . a learned man, guileless as a child, wrapped up in the abstractions of theology and innocent of human nature and most of all of himself--an example of absolute other-worldliness--analyzing the deepest and tenderest emotions with the coldest logic, and sternly following wherever the logic led.[1]

This characterization represents the kind of preacher who would bring to his people a message completely divorced from life and the world of men. From such irrelevant preaching which flowed "over the solemnest heads of the congregation in a cascade of orthodox platitudes,"[2] Beecher was seeking to emancipate the American pulpit.

As has been noted, Beecher's preaching marked the breakdown of rigid Calvinism and the beginning of the era of liberalism. In the history of American religious thought, Sweet has commented that Henry Ward Beecher along with the other famous members of the Beecher family, "helped to build a bridge between the theologians of the past who placed chief emphasis upon corret doctrine and left everything else to God's direct intervention, to the leaders of our day who place less emphasis upon correct doctrine, and who do not depend on God's direct intervention to bring about man's salvation."[3] Thus, in this popular reaction against Calvinism so clearly

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[1]Quoted by Hoyt, The Pulpit and American Life, p. 5.

[2]Read, op. cit., p. 62.

[3]Sweet, Makers of Christianity, p. 254. This strategic role of the Beechers in this transitional period is often noted.

reflected in the preaching of Henry Ward Beecher, foundations were being laid upon which men such as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch were to build their social emphasis in religion. As Drummond[1] has indicated, Beecher was exploring the outposts of religious thought in his generation that were to become the settled communities of the next. Beecher sensed this, for in a letter to a friend he once wrote: "Only let the common people read and believe and in the next generation I shall be orthodox enough."[2]

With this theological background against which to view the message he proclaimed, special consideration will now be given to an analysis of the various emphases of his preaching.

The Practical Emphasis of Beecher's Message

As the preceding discussion has indicated, Beecher's message was consistently more practical in emphasis than theological. He felt that much of the preaching of his day was more inclined to maintain a certain theological position than to persuade men to the Christian life. His choice of topics was governed by his "test of the good ministry."

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[1]Drummond, op. cit., p. 360.

[2]Lyman Beecher Stowe, op. cit., p. 328 . Beecher himself was not a trail-blazer but he was out on the frontiers of religious thought following the new paths that others had blazed.

> The fruit of a preacher's labor is the best justification or condemnation of his judgment in the selection of topics and material. As the sheaves are the proof of good husbandry, so are good men, after the pattern of Jesus Christ, the only proper test of a good ministry.[1]

Whatever touched man in any way so as to build him up in Christian character was a fit subject for him to preach upon.

Beecher's whole theory of preaching was based on meeting the needs of the people. He began with people and not with some theological system. Sensing some special need among the members of his congregation, he sought to bring the Gospel to bear upon this particular situation. Although Beecher invariably began with a text and usually made a brief exposition of its meaning, the major portion of his sermon was the application of the principles of the text to specific life situations with which the people before him were confronted. Thus, whatever touched man's relationships with his brothers and with God was material for preaching. On this practical emphasis of his message, Beecher commented in a sermon entitled "The Sphere of the Christian Minister."

> When ministers meddle with practical life, with ethical questions and relations, they are meddling with just what they do understand,--or ought to. If they do not understand these things, they have failed to prepare themselves for one of the most important functions to which they could address themselves. . . . A man may preach politics too much. A man may do it foolishly. So a man may administer a bank foolishly.[2]

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[1]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, I, iii

[2]Ibid., II, 186.

This view of the scope of the pulpit was revolutionary in Beecher's day, for the influence of the Puritan movement which had tended to "split life into sacred and secular, and give all the fun and laughter to the secular,"[1] still prevailed. He pointed to the unity of life and sought to break down this quasi-distinction between the secular and the religious. As he once expressed it:

> . . . . Too often men think that religion, like music, is something that belongs to a depth which is exceptional and quite outside of the ordinary routines of life. We leave religion to go to our work and duty. We forsake work and duty, at appropriate periods, to go back to religion. But a better conception of religion is, that it is the conduct of a man's disposition in work. . . . When a man stands upon the deck, and at the bench, and by the forge. . . . then, if ever, if he has a life to live of true piety, is the time; and there at the post of duty, is the place.[2]

To meet the needs of the people, Beecher believed that preaching must be concerned with every area of life. This same emphasis is noted in Brooks, for in advising ministerial students he said, the true preacher must have "a conception of our work so large that everything which a true man has any right to do or know may have some help to render it."[3]

Making the Message Relevant

Closely related to the practical emphasis of Beecher's preaching, in fact almost inseparable from it, was his concern to proclaim a message that was relevant. He gave special

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[1]Black, op. cit., p. 28.

[2]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, I, 5.

[3]Brooks, op. cit., pp. 4-5

concern to relating the "timeless to the contemporary."[1] Vital preaching must always do this, as Dr. Falkner Allison emphasized in his definition of the "perfect parson": ". . . . He must be able to help those who are trying to see the relevance of the Christian faith to this industrial and atomic age."[2] In his sermon, "Thirteen Years in the Gospel Ministry," Beecher commented on the importance of this phase of the minister's task.

> . . . . A minister, to be successful must adapt himself to the wants of the age in which he lives. The work to be done in different ages varies, not in kind, but in specialties, and God raises up men and qualifies them for the work to be done in their own age.[3]

This characteristic of Beecher's preaching becomes evident as we consider the social emphasis of his message.

The Social Emphasis of His Message

Beecher was not one of the class of ministers characterized by Goldsmith's village curate,

> Remote from towns they run their godly race.

There was no trace of the monastic in his message; it was concerned with issues along "the crowded ways of life." He believed "the pulpit has a right and duty to discuss social questions, moral questions in politics, slavery, war, peace."[4] This was at a time when such subjects were still largely taboo

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[1]This idea is used by Gerald Kennedy, His Word Through Preaching (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), p. 127.

[2]Falkner Allison, "Perfect Parson," Sunday Graphic (May 21, 1951), p. 2.

[3]Beecher, Forty-Six Sermons, I, 12.

[4]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 91.

for the pulpit. The prevailing notion was that the minister should preach nothing but the Gospel. Political questions should be carefully avoided. The common opinion was that if men were only converted in sufficient numbers, social problems would solve themselves.

However, as has already been intimated, Beecher had a different conception of the functions of the pulpit. He agreed as to the necessity of preaching for the conversion of individuals, but he believed it was equally the minister's duty to do his part in trying to remove the social evils which made right living difficult or impossible.

In the days before the Civil War Beecher spoke increasingly from the pulpit concerning the great moral issues of the time. One of the most outstanding pieces of work he ever did was a series of messages delivered during his Indianapolis pastorate warning young men concerning the vices that threatened their souls.[1] After taking up his work at Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, slavery with all of its political implications became one of the major themes of his ministry.[2] When bitterly attacked for denouncing this social evil from the pulpit, Beecher answered: (This passage is from a sermon preached on the eve of the Civil War.)

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[1]These messages were entitled Twelve Lectures to Young Men and were given in 1844.

[2]See the biographical section of this thesis for a more detailed account of Beecher's role in the Civil War, pp. 32ff.

> I hold that it is a Christian minister's duty not only to preach the Gospel of the New Testament without reservation, but to apply its truths to every question which relates to the welfare of men.[1]

No one could ever accuse Beecher of following "John the Baptist into the wilderness rather than Christ into the world."

Beecher's great interest in the world about him and his courageous dealing with the public questions of the day have no doubt had much to do with the widening of the range of the American pulpit.[2] He contributed to making the pulpit one of the strong social forces in American life. Parrington speaks of him as "the prophet of the new day,"[3] of course, the "new day" to which he is referring is the advent of the Social Gospel.

Some might accuse Beecher of what Jowett calls "emphasizing the Old Testament message of reform rather than the New Testament message of redemption."[4] Such an accusation is not without grounds, for there is evidence that in his great reforming zeal Beecher neglected the message of redemption. He did not ignore, but he came to minimize the importance of the intervention of the supernatural, and practically reduced Christianity to a matter of "Right Living." In a

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[1]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, I, 29.

[2]Thompson, op. cit., p. 75.

[3]Parrington, op. cit., III, 202.

[4]Jowett, op. cit., p. 79.

sermon in his later ministry he said: Religion is simply Right Living. In both Old and New Testaments it is called Righteousness. It begins as a seed. It develops as a growth.[1] However, the social emphasis of his earlier preaching was presented more as an implication of the message of redemption through Christ. In one of these sermons from an earlier period, he speaks of the "blazing center of Christianity. . . as Christ and Him crucified."[2] But in many of his later messages it is true that his emphasis was on the particular application of the Gospel rather than the Gospel itself. He fell into the pitfall of the "Social Gospelers" against which P. T. Forsyth pointedly warned the students at Yale as early as 1907. He said: "The order of obligation for a preacher is first to the Gospel (in its nature, not its particular applications), ... He is not first a prophet of social righteousness but an apostle of the Gospel."[3] To this same point Spurgeon commented: "To choose mere moral themes will be to use a wooden dagger; but the great truths of revelation are as sharp swords."[4] Can not the example of Beecher serve as a warning, lest those who preach today become so involved in contemporary issues that the eternal verities of the Gospel be neglected

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[1]Beecher, Evolution and Religion, I, 15.

[2]Handford, op. cit., p. 69.

[3]Forsyth, op. cit., p. 78.

[4]Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 82.

and the message of reform eclipse the message of redemption?

A Gospel of Love

The most characteristic theme of Beecher's many sermons was love. His emphasis on love was part of his reaction against the austerity of Calvinism. As an outstanding biographer has put it: "Lyman Beecher mitigated the austerity of Calvin's God; Henry Ward Beecher transformed him into a God of love and service."[1] Beecher was convinced that the old theology obscured or falsified the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and he violently condemned this misrepresentation of the Westminster Confession of Faith as "spiritual barbarism."

> The chapters of the Westminster Confession of Faith concerning decrees, election, reprobation . . . . I regard as extraordinary specimens of spiritual barbarism. The views therein given of the divine character and procedure are wholly irreconcilable with the manifestations of God in Christ Jesus. . . Much of the violence sometimes manifested in my preaching springs from indignation that I feel when the loveliness, the beauty, the glory of God in Christ is trampled under foot by such spiritual barbarism. It stands in the way of thousands. It has turned more feet into the barren ways of infidelity than any other single cause.[2]

In expounding his idea of the Divine nature Beecher in a sermon entitled "The Love of God," said:

> Love is God's nature. Not that no other feeling exists in Him; not that justice and abhorrence of evil are not coordinated with it; not that these do not take part in the Divine administration among men; but that the central

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[1]Lyman Beecher Stowe, op. cit., p. 393.

[2]Abbott and Halliday, op. cit., pp. 482-483.

and peculiarly Divine element is love, in which all other feelings live, within whose bounds they all act.[1]

Beecher felt that love, not fear, was the impulse of Christianity. As in the sermon, "The Old and the New," he said: "It is that faith which works by love that is to save the soul."[2] Not infrequently did he get around to the main thesis of his preaching. In his sermon, "Moral Affinity the True Ground of Unity," he expresses it rather uniquely. "I believe in a pope," he said. "Love is the only pope that should be allowed in this world. I believe that he ought to have supreme sway, and that all men should be obedient to that pope."[3] In concluding the first series of Yale Lectures, he gave a lecture on "Love, the Central Element of the Christian Ministry." As in his many sermons on the subject he emphasized God's love, forbearance, and mercy. Beecher felt that the only test of a man's orthodoxy was the test of love. As he once put it:

> I have never yet seen an examination . . . for admission into a church that dared to sound this note of orthodoxy, 'Do you love one another?'. . . (this) is the one note by which we are to determine whether a man is orthodox or heterodox, whether he is converted or not converted.[4]

It is quite evident that Beecher did not believe in mounting the pulpit "wi' tidings o' damnation," as Burns has ex-

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[1]Beecher, Forty-Six Sermons, I, 19.

[2]Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, I, 262.

[3]Ibid., p. 206.

[4]Pond, op. cit., p. 8.

pressed it; the message of love was always on his lips. Because of his great emphasis on this main motive of the Christian life, critics accused him of "harping on one string." He did get great variations of melody out of that one string, but he neglected other important notes of the Gospel message in doing it. The note of judgment is all but absent from his preaching. In revolting against the severity of the God of the old theology, Beecher began emphasizing an easy-going fatherly God which was also a distortion. This balance between the goodness and severity of God has always been difficult to maintain. As Gossip once suggested: "Apparently the human mind has difficulty in holding together, at one and the same time, both sides of a truth."[1]

As is reflected in Beecher's preaching at the very beginning of the new era, the tendency of liberalism is in the direction of a soft gospel that leads to a sunny optimism. There is a shift from justice to love as the most important attribute of God. As Charles Howard Hopkins has characterized it: "Divine judgment (is) tempered by a romantic optimism; the basic Christian concept of crisis (is) smoothed over by the softer idea of progress. The sympathizing Jesus gradually (replaces) the Christ of Calvary."[2]

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[1]Quoted by W. M. Macgregor, The Making of a Preacher (London: S.C.M. Press, 1945), p. 13.

[2]C. H. Hopkins, The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), p. 19.

The Changing Emphases of His Message[1]

There are changing emphases in Beecher's preaching. From examining his extant sermons which cover the major portion of his ministry, it is possible to distinguish three main periods of varying emphasis. These correspond roughly with the fast moving panorama of American history. In his early ministry his messages were predominately evangelistic. Although there are few sermons remaining from his first two pastorates, biographers have indicated that his main stress was on revivalism.[2] In coming to Brooklyn, he indicated as his primary purpose from the beginning, "to preach Christ for the awakening of men, for their conversion . . . . My desire was that this should be a revival church."[3] His appeal in these earlier years was mainly to the heart through the emotions. Later the emphasis of his messages became predominantly ethical. This period included the years of the Civil War and those just preceding it. During these years of controversy over slavery, the churches were awakened to a new awareness of their social responsibility. This change was reflected from many a pulpit, including that of Henry Ward Beecher. After the War there was another significant change in Beecher's preaching.

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[1]This change is noted briefly in the biographical section of this thesis, see p. 37.

[2]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 63.

[3]Ibid., p. 243.

During this period of reconstruction his sermons became more intellectual and philosophical. They appealed more to the mind than to the heart. This change, too, reflected the climate of the times. For in his later ministry, the influence of Darwin's Origin of Species was beginning to be felt in the United States. Although the new scientific outlook was held in contempt by a majority of the clergy, Beecher sought "to relate the thinking of religious people to the advancing world of scientific knowledge."[1] In a sermon preached on February 14, 1875, entitled "The Old Paths", he commented concerning the new scientific ideas that were blazing "new trails" of knowledge and belief.

> I am not a disciple of Darwin. . . or of Tyndall, or of Spencer; and yet, I thank God for raising them up . . . . I believe them to be men who are throwing out ore which, when it is smelted and purified, is to be precious indeed. . . . there are elements of truth in their teaching which are indispensable to the reconstruction of men's beliefs.[2]

Beecher was one of the very first preachers in the United States to interpret these new scientific developments from the pulpit.

Although this division of Beecher's preaching into three periods of different emphases may be an oversimplification of the facts, it does give some indication of the major themes of his preaching. Moreover, it reveals the unusual degree to which his preaching reflects the important trends in American

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[1] Thompson, op. cit., p. 85.

[2] Beecher, Plymouth Pulpit Sermons, III, 545-546.

Protestantism. During his lifetime there were influences at work that wrought strong intellectual and spiritual revulsions, and these are more clearly mirrored in his ministry than in that of any of his contemporaries. As Drummond has significantly commented, "Beecher was in touch with the most advanced thought of his era, as few preachers were, yet he never lost touch with the ordinary men busy at their task."[1]

Although in seeking to free the pulpit from the dogmatism of the old theology, Beecher came to neglect certain elements of the Gospel message, although in seeking to correct the inadequacies of the preaching of former generations, his own message became distorted and partial, there is evidence that his preaching never lost its evangelical emphasis. As someone has put it, "he tried to be on the right side of every moral question and on the evangelical side of every controverted doctrine."[2] And shortly before he died he said to his good friend, Rossiter W. Raymond, "When I am gone do not let it be forgotten that my one aim was the winning of the souls of men."[3] In this connection a contemporary historian has aptly suggested: "Beecher was a new phenomenon in American Protestantism--a man of God who was emancipated from the old, repressive dogmas which reduced Christianity to a soul-numbing

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[1]Drummond, op. cit., p. 360.

[2]John W. Platner, The Religious History of New England (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), p. 79.

[3]Thompson, op. cit., p. 95.

chain of demonstrated doctrines. . . emancipated, but ardent in evangelical enthusiasm for the Lordship of Christ and the conversion of souls."[1]

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[1]Drummond, loc. cit.

THE PREACHING OF HENRY WARD BEECHER

CHAPTER V ITS SIGNIFICANCE: CONCLUSIONS AND EVALUATIONS

No one family has exercised more influence on the American religious scene than the Beechers, and no member of this family has had greater influence than its illustrious son, Henry Ward. For nearly forty years he preached from the pulpit of Plymouth Church at the very heart of America's metropolis. During his unrivalled pastorate this pulpit became the "sounding board" for both the religious and political life of the young nation, and since has been called by an outstanding historian the "most famous pulpit in America."[1]

In his Donellan Lectures on the history of preaching, Brillioth[2] has noted the "brilliant oratory of Henry Ward Beecher as one of the outstanding landmarks" in American preaching. It is apparent, then, that the preaching of the famous Brooklyn preacher has been unusually influen-

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[1] Sweet, Makers of Christianity, p. 328.

[2] Yngve Brillioth, Landmarks In the History of Preaching (London: S. P. C. K., 1950), p. 34.
This cursory treatment of the history of preaching delivered as the Donellan Lectures in Trinity College, Dublin, March, 1949, is invaluable as a bird's-eye view of the development of preaching through the centuries.

tial in the annals of American Protestantism. To determine what this influence has been and to evaluate it will be the burden of these concluding pages. In proceeding, attention will be given to answering the following questions: At what points has Beecher's preaching had its greatest influence? What were the estimates of his contemporaries? To what extent have these judgments been validated or discounted with the passing of time?

Represents the Water-Shed in American Preaching

At the time of his death the New York Daily Tribune gave the following testimony to Beecher's influence on the preaching of his day: "He not only emancipated religious thought, but he even gave direction to current methods of preaching."[1] Various authorities since have also noted Beecher's influence in the changing of the trends of American preaching. Brastow has stated that Beecher stood at the cross roads between the strictly dogmatic, doctrinal preaching of the early nineteenth century and the more illustrative, expository preaching which followed.[2] This same influence has been made articulate by Brigance: "Beecher can be said to have influenced the American pulpit in that he put the emphasis on noble living rather

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[1] New York Daily Tribune, March 9, 1887.

[2] Brastow, op. cit., p. 115.

than on correct doctrines and that he influenced the presentation of the sermon in making it illustrative rather than argumentative."[1] From these and many similar judgments that appear throughout the history of the American pulpit it is evident that the illustrious preaching of the Brooklyn preacher represented the "water-shed in American preaching."

As our study has revealed, Beecher occupied a position half-way between the strong doctrinal preaching of an eighteenth-century Jonathan Edwards and the twentieth-century life-situation preaching of Harry Emerson Fosdick.[2] In other words, Beecher's preaching marked the breakdown of rigid Calvinism and the beginning of the era of liberalism. Previously sermons had been concerned with propagating a certain set of beliefs, but Beecher put the emphasis on the implications of religion in everyday living. He led what Read has characterized as a "shift of emphasis from the objective truth of the Gospel to its pragmatic value to society."[3]

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[1]William Norwood Brigance, History and Criticism of American Public Address (London: McGraw-Hill, 1943), p. 272.

[2]This judgment is also expressed by Professor Donald Macleod, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, in a letter dated January 15, 1953. He writes: "Henry Ward Beecher inaugurated a new era in American preaching when he introduced the art of illustration in order to offset the dry erudition of Edwards. And, of course, Fosdick is an example of the art of illustration at its best."

[3]Read, op. cit., p. 17.

Beecher felt that much of the irrelevant preaching of his day that exhausted itself in mere theological speculation had brought Church life to a low ebb and he set out to make truth more relevant to man in his contemporary situation. He emphasized the importance of contact between the Gospel message and his own generation. Thus in his long ministry in one of the outstanding pulpits in the country, Beecher gave great impetus to the trend to make preaching less theological and more practical. In noting this change in the current of American religious life, Abbott, an outstanding religious journalist, attributed to Beecher a major role, for he says that he has "probably done more to change directly the religious life, and indirectly the theological thought, in America than any preacher since Jonathan Edwards."[1]

At this point some pertinent questions come to mind. Did Beecher actually determine the trends that were taking place or did he merely reflect them? Was his preaching a mere barometer of the climate of the age or did it actually influence the change in religious climate that was becoming evident? In an attempt to answer these and similar questions, it becomes apparent that this is not an "either/or" proposition, but it is as Dargan has suggested a matter of reciprocal influence, "Preaching has shaped events and

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[1]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. xii.

events have affected preaching."[1] Then, it can be said of preaching as it has been said of literature, "it is, in turn, both the cause and the effect of the spirit of the age." This observation is truly incarnated in the ministry of Beecher.

Undoubtedly Beecher did "sense the tides of history and ride them to their flood,"[2] as has been said of Churchill, but there are also indications that he actually influenced the tides of religious thought and trends in preaching that were taking place in his day. In some instances he may have been largely responsible for them, and in other cases he popularized currents already started and gave to them an added momentum. This role of Beecher has been noted in a recent series of lectures, Changing Emphases in American Preaching.[3] The lecturer, in considering five outstanding preachers who have helped to determine trends in the American pulpit, gave the greatest place to Beecher and his preaching. Evidently, then, in influencing currents in religious thought and trends in the American pulpit, and also in making these and other changes articulate for more than

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[1]Edwin C. Dargan, A History of Preaching (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1905), p. 8.

[2]O. H. Brandon, "Mr. Churchill Expected to Visit United States Soon," Sunday Times (Oct. 28, 1951).

[3]Thompson, op. cit.

half a century, Beecher can be called the "bridge between the theologians of the past and the spiritual leaders of the present."[1]

Influenced Trend of Homiletical Method

The editorial that appeared in the New York Daily Tribune on the eve of Beecher's death which stated that, "He not only emancipated religious thought, but he even gave direction to current methods of preaching," has been substantiated with the passing of the years. Since this dissertation is particularly concerned with Henry Ward Beecher's art of preaching, attention will now be focused on a resume' of his influence on homiletical methods.

There are few modern treatises on homiletics that do not acknowledge his contribution here. Stewart in his "practical book of preaching," Heralds of God, makes reference to Beecher in the discussion of almost every chapter.[2] Blackwood, an outstanding American homiletician, in his popular treatise on homiletics that has recently had a British printing, makes some eleven references to the preaching and theory of the famous "Brooklyn pulpiteer."[3] However, antedating these men many years, Broadus in the first revision of his famous treatise on The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons had

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[1]Hopkins, op. cit., p. 392.

[2]References to Beecher are found on pp. 40, 62, 121, 136.

[3]Blackwood, op. cit., pp. 17, 18, 35, 37, 50, 51, 111, 181, 196, 214, 232.

acknowledged Beecher's great contribution to sermonic craftsmanship.[1] Of the great influence of Beecher's unusual ministry at this point Brastow, too, has noted:

> Modifications in . . . homiletic spirit and method are seen conspicuously in Henry Ward Beecher, and by him homiletic movements already started are much farther advance. . . . the influence which he exerted upon the preaching not only of Congregational churches, but upon all Protestant churches of the country and upon many in other lands, has not been surpassed by any man.[2]

Contribution in Yale Lectures

Beecher's influence on homiletical theory and practice has been greatest through his Yale Lectures. Perhaps if it had not been for Henry Ward Beecher, this famous lectureship would never have been established. It was founded by Henry Sage, a member of Beecher's congregation, who wished to give young men studying for the ministry the opportunity to hear his preacher's method of sermon-making. Sage may have gotten his idea for this series from Beecher's lecture given to the theological students at Princeton Seminary in 1870, for it was only some two years later that he endowed the one at Yale

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[1]Of Broadus' book, Hoyt Hudson, of Princeton University, has commented, "There are not many alive today who could move through the works of the masters so sure-footedly as does Broadus. It is a treatise undertaken by one who felt the responsibility of mastering a subject before he wrote." It has not only been widely used in Britain, but for nearly thirty years there have been translations of it in Chinese, Japanese, and Portuguese. There is a definite indication that Broadus borrowed some material on the use of the illustration from Beecher. Of course, the former acknowledges his indebtedness. See Broadus, op. cit., p. 231.

[2]Brastow, op. cit., p. 339.

in honor of Henry Ward Beecher's famous father. Since their inauguration in 1871 these lectures have continued through the eighty-two-year period (since) with the exception of four widely separated years. In fact, they are considered "the most outstanding contribution to the field of homiletics yet produced in America."[1]

Beecher, of course, delivered the first series. They were so well received that he was invited back for the second and third series.[2] In the three years he gave a total of thirty-three lectures and remains to the present time the only preacher who has spoken on more than two occasions.

Especially outstanding is his initial series. Series by other lecturers since have been more penetrating theologically, but none have ever surpassed the original lectures in their helpful, practical, suggestiveness. He made no attempt to theorize--to tell how a sermon ought to be prepared--but he told how he composed one. He spoke out of nearly fifty years experience in the ministry. In a sense his lectures are autobiographical, for they are an intimate revelation of his own craftsmanship. Of them Barrow's comment is typical: "Foremost among Beecher's works, I mention

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[1]Batsell Barrett Baxter, The Heart of the Yale Lectures (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947), p. vii.

[2]These series appear in separate volumes (1872, 1873, and 1874) and there is a one-volume edition (1892).

The Yale Lectures on Preaching which remain unsurpassed in suggestiveness and stimulating power."[1]

Their uniqueness also lies in the fact that they not only expound methods of extempore preaching, but they actually illustrate them. This was Beecher's great forte. He had gotten the reputation of practically shaking his sermons out of his coat sleeve, and some of his friends were dubious of his ability to speak in a lectureship of a great university. "Would he not make the judicious grieve?" It has been reported that the outline for his first lecture came to him while he was shaving the morning he was to inaugurate this famous series. And it is because Beecher ran true to form and spoke of the only kind of composition with which he was familiar that these lectures have any value.

What are the peculiar insights into effective preaching Beecher has learned from nearly half a century of practice revealed in these lectures?

As has been noted, Beecher looked upon preaching as an art and therefore capable of being studied. This was no new observation, but Beecher emphasized it in a way that few before or since have done. This truth is peculiarly manifest in his own ministry, for he was not a born-preacher but a made-preacher. What some have attributed to genius, his

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[1]J. H. Barrow, Life of Henry Ward Beecher, the Shakespeare of the Pulpit (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1893), p. x.

best biographers attribute to hard work. As someone has aptly said, "Even a genius has to learn all that he knows." He ardently studied such pulpit-masters of other days as Edwards, Barrow, and South, and frequently examined and re-examined the preaching of the Apostles in the New Testament. From this study in conjunction with persistent practice he gradually worked out his own philosophy of preaching.

Although Beecher looked upon preaching as an art, it was never art for art's sake. Preaching, he emphasized, must never be for mere self-expression. In this it differs from the usual forms of art, for they are an end in themselves. But preaching must never become an end, but must ever remain a means to an end. According to his theory and practice this end is persuasion--the actual moving of men to the Christian life. The techniques or tools employed by the preacher in doing this Beecher terms "instruments of persuasion," and in his discussion he actually adds to our knowledge of these.

His first contribution at this point has been noted in considering Beecher's methods of arranging sermonic materials. He frequently used what he called the "line of facts or series of parables" type of arrangement. This loose type of organization he considered advantageous in seeking to reach the masses. He reasoned that in the average con-

gregation only a few can follow the logical unfolding of a sermon step by step, while the many can be interested by this loose type of organization. There seems to be no indication that anyone has ever described this type of arrangement before although it has been utilized by several outstanding lecturers and preachers. Russell Conwell in his famous lecture, Acres of Diamonds, which he delivered more than six thousand times, used this arrangement. In his Big Blunders Talmage[1] employed the series-of-parables organization. And Spurgeon, who, too, endeavored to reach the masses, frequently used this form of sermon structure. This loose arrangement was especially adapted to Beecher's theory of persuasion, for it could be easily expanded or contracted at will.

When his critics pointed out that such a method produced unsymmetrical sermons, Beecher reminded them that literary standards were not applicable here. Sermons are tools; they have a job to do. Utility was always Beecher's first consideration in sermon-making.

A second contribution to our knowledge of the instruments of persuasion is Beecher's unusually fine treatment of the illustration. As was noted in a previous discussion,

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[1]Thomas De Witt Talmage, American Presbyterian preacher of the last half of the nineteenth century.

Aristotle spoke of the illustration as one form of proof. For him this was its only use. Cicero and Quintilian, the famous Roman rhetoricians, accepted this dictum and added nothing to it. Up to the time of Beecher's Yale Lectures such rhetoricians as Blair, Campbell, and Whatley had added clarity as one of the uses but made no particular analysis of this instrument.

Beecher was especially skillful in the "craft of sermon illustration" and when he expounded his practice to the Yale divinity students he made a great contribution to our knowledge of this instrument. His fine analysis of the different uses of the illustration is the most elaborate yet made. Although the twelve uses mentioned are not mutually exclusive, yet they do help toward discrimination. Three uses which he discusses are not to be found in any of the treatises on the subject before his time, and are evidently original suggestions of ways which this instrument can be employed. These are: the illustration provides for various hearers; it rests the audience by appealing to different parts of the mind; and the illustration is helpful in saying indirectly what may not discreetly be said directly. A typical paragraph from his discourse on the subject is the following:

> An illustration is a window in an argument, and lets in light. You may reason without an illustration; but when you are employing a process of pure reasoning and have arrived at a conclusion, if you can then by an illustration flash back light upon what you have said, you will bring into the minds of your audience a realization of your argu-

ment that they can not get in any other way.[1]

How many have used that expression, "An illustration is a window," without realizing its source!

Of Beecher's skill in the use of this instrument of persuasion Lyman Abbott, his successor at Plymouth Church, has said: "Beecher's illustrations were not ornaments attached to his discourse like fringe upon a garment; they were woven into it, a part of its web and woof, so that, in general, it was impossible to remember the illustration without remembering the truth which it illustrated."[2] Broadus, the outstanding homiletician that America has produced, classes Beecher with Chrysostom, Jeremy Taylor, Christmas Evans, Chalmers, and Spurgeon in his general and fine use of the illustration. Also in the revised edition of his well-known treatise, The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons, published in 1897, he uses materials from Beecher on the illustration.[3] In his first edition published in 1870 he noted only four uses of the illustration, but in the later edition he mentioned six uses and for the additional ones he acknowledged his indebtedness to Beecher. The wide circulation of Broadus' monumental work has done much to disseminate Beecher's influence at this point.

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[1]Quoted by E. D. Shurter, Rhetoric of Oratory (New York: Macmillan Co., 1909), p. 115.

[2]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 108.

[3]Broadus, op. cit., pp. 225-229 (1897 edition).

In most modern textbooks on rhetoric and homiletics there are many references to Beecher. For instance, Brigance's material on the illustration in The Spoken Word is almost all matched in Beecher's discussion.[1] Shurter before him had discovered this valuable source.[2] And Hoyt in his manual, The Work of Preaching, borrowed liberally from Beecher.[3] Sangster in his recent book, The Craft of Sermon Illustration, makes reference to the famous Brooklyn preacher's method of illustration.[4] In a popular modern anthology of illustrations[5] there are more from Beecher than from any other source.[6] His closest rival is Fosdick, the best exponent of the illustration in the generation just past. As has been noted in a previous discussion, there is a discernible line in American preaching running from Beecher to Fosdick. In a real sense Beecher inaugurated a new era in American preaching of which the preaching of the famous Riverside pulpiteer became its most illustrious example.

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[1]Brigance, op. cit., p. 272.

[2]Shurter, op. cit., pp. 45ff.

[3]Arthur S. Hoyt, The Work of Preaching (New York: Macmillan Co., 1940), pp. 261-265.

[4]Sangster, op. cit., p. 51.

[5] Stanley I. Stuber and Thomas Curtis Clark, Treasury of the Christian Faith (New York: Association Press, 1949), There are 113 from Beecher and 104 from Fosdick.

[6]Of such "canned" compilations of illustrations Stewart has commented: "Omnibus volumes of sermon anecdotes are the last refuge of a bankrupt intelligence." Stewart, op. cit., p. 144.

From these evidences cited, it is conclusive that Beecher's contribution to our knowledge of the illustration as an instrument of persuasion and his influence in actually changing the character of American Protestant preaching are far from negligible.

In this evaluation, so far, the points at which Beecher's preaching has had its greatest influence have been noted. In sketching this influence the significance of his preaching for Protestantism in general and for the American pulpit in particular is indicated. It will be helpful now to turn attention to specific estimates of Beecher and his preaching.

Estimates of His Worth

Bacon, the noted American historian, has described Beecher as "the great popular preacher, whose words, caught burning from his lips, rolled around the world in a perpetual stream."[1] This term "popular preacher", however, has a bad connotation, and many feel that popularity is a dubious criterion in judging a preacher's worth. They feel that it savors too much of judging success by man's standards rather than by God's. Perhaps there is a danger here, but one must not forget that it was said of the Master-preacher "the common people heard Him gladly." And there are those since who have appeled to the masses who have done an immeasurable amount of good from the Christian viewpoint.

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[1]Leonard W. Bacon, A History of American Christianity (London: James Clarke and Co., 1899), pp. 383-384.

If popularity, then, does have certain value in judging a man's worth, few have ever surpassed the famous Brooklyn preacher. Criticize his theology as being unorthodox and his sermons as being unsymmetrical, but the fact remains that he spoke to nearly three thousand people twice every Sunday for the greatest portion of his ministry which extended over half a century.

The great popularity of Beecher's ministry was no accident. As has been noted, his keen interest in people and his unusual knowledge of human nature in no small way accounted for it. His great passion was to be heard by his own generation. And there can be no doubt that in this he succeeded. While his appeal was particularly to the masses, it was never limited to them, for he moved among all manner of men. This diversity of appeal Joseph Parker particularly noted on Beecher's last tour of England.

> Looking back upon the few weeks Mr. Beecher has been with us, I have been amazed at the variety of personality and character interested in his coming and going. . . .--Amongst those who have invited him to hospitality, or heard his lectures, or attended his religious services. . . . I find names representing an almost startling diversity. One among the first to invite him. . .was the chief magistrate of this city. Then I find the name of the Right Honorable W. E. Gladstone; of Lord Iddesleigh; Prof. Bryce, the Dean of Westminster, the Dean of Canterbury, Canon Wilberforce. . . Prof. Tyndale, . . . Herbert Spencer. Who else could have touched such variety of character?[1]

Whether one can ascribe greatness to this famous Brooklyn

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[1] As reported by Pond, op. cit., p. 107.

preacher seems to be a matter of opinion, but no one can deny his great popularity and hence his tremendous influence. As Philip Schaff has expressed it: "I would hesitate to call him the greatest American preacher, but he was probably the most popular and widely known and perhaps the most influential."[1]

As we seek to estimate the significance of the preaching of this famous nineteenth century preacher, there is danger as Buckham has warned that our "estimates, however judicial, may become inevitable tributes."[2] Although some of the estimates made by Beecher's contemporaries may fall into Buckham's "inevitable tribute" class, it will be helpful to examine them as indications of the esteem with which he was regarded in his own day. Undoubtedly the outstanding of these testimones was made by Beecher's famous pulpit contemporary, Phillips Brooks. On the Sunday after Beecher died, at the close of his sermon, Brooks said: "I know that you are all thinking, as I speak, of the great soul that has passed away, of the great preacher, for he was the greatest preacher in America, and the greatest preacher means the greatest power in the land."[3] This estimate is so impressive because it was made by one of the greatest preachers, not only of Beecher's day, but of all time.

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[1]Schaff, op. cit., p. 24.
[2]Buckham, op. cit., p. vii.
[3]Allen, op. cit., p. 229.

Another outstanding estimate by a contemporary was the testimony of Professor Christlieb in the second edition of Real Encyklopädie. Writing of Beecher, he said, "He was without question the most highly gifted and versatile of modern American preachers, the Shakespeare of the pulpit of our day."[1] This judgment is of no little value. It is from an independent outside source who had won note as an historical student and critic of Christian preaching and one who had been educated in quite a different homiletic school from that in which Beecher was trained.

No doubt one of the most lavish estimates of Beecher's preaching was made by Joseph Parker, a British preacher, who enjoyed an unusual fruitful ministry as pastor of City Temple during the time that Beecher was so popular at Plymouth Church. In part he said:

> England has had her great preachers, such as Donne, the poet-preacher, of whom Bishop Lightfoot says: 'Nothing can be more direct or more real than his eager, impetuous eloquence when he speaks of God, of redemption....,' such as Jeremy Taylor, whom Coleridge calls 'the most eloquent of divines--if I said of men, Cicero would forgive me, and Demosthenes nod assent'; such as Chalmers, of whom Canning said: 'The Tartan beats us all'. . . . But Mr. Beecher stood apart from them by the very fact that whilst they purchased their pulpit eminence by great expenditure of effort he was evidently free from. . . yet the ornate pomp and classic unity of others were not to be compared with his artless simplicity. Happily this panegyric can be tested by the sermons themselves; there they stand in thirty volumes; look where you may, you will find that not

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[1]Theodore Christlieb, "History of Preaching," Real Encyklopädie, 2nd edition, XVIII, 644.

even the printer, that cruelest extinguisher of pulpit eloquence, has been able to quench their abounding vitality.[1] In evaluating this generous estimate one must take into account that Beecher and Parker were personal friends and that it is from a eulogy which generally tends to be overdrawn. However, Parker does not say anything that many others have not said, he merely emphasizes the uniqueness and individualism of Beecher's preaching.

Having considered these estimates of contemporaries from very diverse backgrounds, the question can be raised, Has the passing of the years validated these judgments? To what place in the history of preaching do more recent authorities relegate the famous Brooklyn preacher? In answer to these and all similar questions, two outstanding testimonies will be cited. Sweet, the well-known American Church historian, as recently as 1937, acclaimed Henry Ward Beecher as "the most famous of all the sons (of Lyman Beecher) and perhaps the greatest American preacher of the nineteenth century."[2] Is not this witness noteworthy inasmuch as it is removed from the scene by over half a century? A. L. Drummond, a British historian, in his well-written Story of American Protestantism, has unstintingly proclaimed: "In any country Beecher would have been a prince of the pulpit. He was in touch with the most advanced thought of his era, as few preachers

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[1]Joseph Parker, Eulogy on Henry Ward Beecher (London: James Clarke & Co., 1887), pp. 16-17.

[2]Sweet, Makers of Christianity, p. 246.

were, yet he never lost touch with the ordinary men busy at their task."[1]

Evaluation Through Comparison

In further evaluating the significance of Beecher's preaching it will be helpful to compare it with that of pulpit masters of his own day. However, in doing this, one must take into account that every true preacher--to use the homely words of Spurgeon--"sits on his own gate and whistles his own tune." Real preachers are personalities. They are born into the kingdom for a particular time. They each have their own vocation to fulfill. Nevertheless, to compare or to contrast the ways in which they answer the call of God is suggestive. To compare Beecher's preaching theory and practice with that of outstanding contemporaries will be revealing and will help one to see the uniqueness of his role in the history of the American pulpit.

His outstanding American contemporary was Phillips Brooks. Beecher in Brooklyn and Brooks in Boston were doing a similar work in a somewhat different way but both were champions of the new theology that had appeared on the American scene. The latter was a preacher, and only a preacher; the former was a preacher, but more than a preacher. Brooks concentrated, but Beecher spread himself out. For this reason Brooks may have been greater in stature as just a preacher,

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[1]Drummond, op. cit., p. 360.

but Beecher surpassed him in diversity of attainments. Beecher's sermons do not have the polish--the finished quality of Brooks' sermons, therefore, they will never be the pulpit classics of his Boston contemporary. In formulating their preaching theory in the Yale Lectures, they agreed on the importance of general preparation, "the preparing of the preacher rather than the particular message," but they differed in their consideration of the illustration. Beecher, as has been observed, made generous use of this instrument, but Brooks used it sparingly. Frequently authorities place the influence of the famous Boston preacher above that of his prominent Brooklyn contemporary, but the fact remains that the name of Phillips Brooks does not appear half so often upon the pages of rhetorical and homiletical treatises as does that of Henry Ward Beecher.

In Beecher's heyday, on the other side of the Atlantic, there was an English preacher who was enjoying a very popular ministry at Surrey Tabernacle. He was Charles Spurgeon. Although Beecher and Spurgeon were contemporaneously appealing to the masses, their message was quite different. Beecher's preaching was not based on Calvinism as was that of his English contemporary. It has been noted that Beecher's concern with the needs of his people precluded theological discussions from the Plymouth pulpit. Following one of his lectures at Yale the Brooklyn preacher was pointedly asked:

"Is it not true that Spurgeon is a follower of Calvin and is he not an eminent example of success?" He answered: "In spite of it, yes; but I do not know that the camel travels any better, or is any more useful as an animal for the hump on its back."[1] This incident incited some contention between the two famous preachers.[2] Although Spurgeon had contempt for his American contemporary's theology, or lack of theology, yet he respected him for his unique versatility and his unusual powers of imagination, for he is reported to have said that Beecher was "the most myriad-minded man since Shakespeare."[3] In comparing such "royalty of the pulpit"[4] it is infeasible to say that one was greater than the other--each was great in his own way. Although these two great pulpit masters were very different in temperament and technique, it is evident that God used their diverse gifts to His glory.

With these two brief comparisons it becomes evident, as was hinted at the outset, that the relative estimating of great preachers is elusive business. Its main value is to point up the uniqueness and individuality that goes to

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[1]Beecher, Yale Lectures, I, 102.

[2]Spurgeon retorted that the hump "is a breast of nourishment to maintain the camel's strength."

[3]Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 120.

[4]A recent book on outstanding American preachers bears the title, The Royalty of the American Pulpit, Edgar De Witt Jones (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951).

make up every real preacher. As Brooks once commented:

> There is nothing more striking about the ministry than the way in which very opposite men do equally effective work. You look at some great preacher, and you say, 'There is the type. He who is like that can preach,' and just as your snug conclusion is all made, some other voice rings out from a neighboring pulpit, and the same power of God reaches the hearts of men in a totally new way, and your neat conclusion cracks and breaks. Spurgeon preaches at his Surrey Tabernacle, and Liddon preaches at St. Paul's, and both are great preachers, and yet not two men could be more entirely unlike. It must be so.[1]

A Critical Judgment

Lest this attempt at evaluating Beecher's preaching should become the "inevitable tribute" against which Buckham warned, a critical judgment will be included at this point. Beecher made no pretense of having arrived at the perfect theory or having produced the perfect sermon. In presenting his Yale Lectures he merely expounded his own method of sermon-making hoping that he would be able to drop some helpful hints learned through years of trial and error that would prove helpful to the young would-be-preachers who were his auditors. The only justification he made for his technique and style was that it worked--it was effective in nineteenth century America. He made no claim of the perfect sermon, but he did lay claim to the effective sermon.

No one knew better than Beecher that his preaching was not without fault. He would have admitted of himself as he said of

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[1]Brooks, Yale Lectures, I, pp. 37-38.

Grant in his eulogy of that famous American: "Grant made no claim to saintship. He was a man of like passions, and with as marked limitations as other men." And as he added: "Men without faults are apt to be men without force."[1] Beecher was a man of force and he had his faults. Today we can point to weaknesses in his armor. The criticism that Forsyth brought against liberal Christian theology in his day[2] could have been spoken against much of Beecher's preaching. In seeking to escape the sterile preaching of his day that had degenerated into nothing but irrelevant theological harangues, Beecher did at times neglect the objective truth of the Gospel. Using the language of the "resurrected" British theologian, there are traces in Beecher of "too much pulpiteer and not enough preacher" and a tendency to "emulate the Greek orator[3] rather than the Hebrew prophet."[4] As an eminent historian has said, "The era of Henry Ward Beecher was the age of the orator,"[5] and Beecher was possessed of certain eccentricities which at times seemed to cause his great oratorical powers to over shadow the Christ. Against

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[1]Henry Ward Beecher, A Memorial of U. S. Grant (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1885), p. 77.

[2]Forsyth, op. cit., pp. 1-3.

[3]Beecher has sometimes been called the "American Demosthenes." See Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, p. 262.

[4]Forsyth, loc. cit.

[5]Drummond, op. cit., p. 375.

such a tendency in preachers, Professor Torrance has written, "The preacher is to proclaim Jesus Christ in such a way that the person of the preacher fades out of the picture altogether and the Person of the living Christ is in the foreground encountering men face to face."[1] No doubt, too, the Plymouth preacher was guilty of the activism that has all too frequently characterized the American religious climate. Bishop Gore once characterized this tendency as "seeking refuge from the difficulties of thought in the opportunities of action."[2]

But in spite of these weaknesses and idiosyncrasies, Beecher through his preaching influenced the American life and pulpit in a way that few preachers have equalled or surpassed. When the religious life of the nation was threatened with decadence because most of the preaching had become so irrelevant, Beecher breathed into the sermon a new breath of life by addressing himself to the needs of the people rather than in maintaining some theological position and by making the sermon illustrative rather than argumentative. Thus, his preaching marks the beginning of a new era in the American pulpit.[3]

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[1]Torrance, op. cit., p. 310.

[2]Quoted by Jowett, op. cit., p. 96.

[3]Brastow has given a similar estimate. "That he has exerted so effective an influence in modifying our preaching is due to the fact that he was so distinctively American in his qualities. It is for this reason that he has contributed more, perhaps, than any other American preacher to the production of a modern type of American preaching. Brastow, op. cit., pp. 100-101.

A Voice Not Yet Silent

His voice is not yet silent, nor will it soon be. Although he was supremely interested in being heard by his own generation, yet in many ways Beecher speaks on. His Yale Lectures,"unsurpassed in suggestiveness and stimulating power,"[1] are still eagerly studied by seminary students. Not even printer's ink has been able to eradicate the eloquence of his many sermons and lectures, and they are yet read, and frequently cited as example for rhetorical and homiletical precept. You run across references to Beecher in the most unexpected places. In a recent book on American Protestantism by a British author, the initial quotation[2] is from Henry Ward Beecher. In reading Sinclair Lewis' It Can't Happen Here one discovers a reference to Beecher "as the apostle in the fancy vest."[3] A recent homiletical journal published in America includes a funeral sermon, "The Love that Lifts Sorrow,"[4] which begins with a quote from the famous Plymouth preacher: "Tears are often the telescope by which men see far into heaven." These citations are only exemplar and could be multiplied a thousand fold, but

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[1]Barrows, op. cit., p. x.

[2]Drummond, op. cit., p. vi.

[3]Sinclair Lewis, It Can't Happen Here (New York: Doubleday Doran and Co., 1935), p. 141.

[4]Frank E. Pulley, "The Love that Lifts Sorrow," Pulpit Digest, Vol. XXXII, No. 168 (April 1952), 49.

they are sufficient evidence of the way in which the influence of Beecher and his preaching live on. Henry Ward Beecher, a giant among giants during that golden age of American preaching, is truly the voice of one "who being dead yet speaketh."

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