

THE PULPIT

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The church building is here in all its glory. We recognize it, patronize it, and even refer to it in our less thoughtful moments as "the church." And generally speaking we accept it without a quiver of conscience, even though (as indicated in a preceding article) we may "wonder" about it from time to time. But if an examination of the church building itself is intriguing, it becomes more so once we move inside the stained glass doors and begin to notice the various pieces of "church furniture." Most everything about a church building--the walls, the ceiling, the lights, the hot and cold "conditioning" units, even the infamous "Willie the Water Cooler" and his offspring in the bathroom--is designed to take care of the physical man; but this is not our concern right now.

In addition to the normal provisions it makes for the needs of the human body, the church building also contains fixtures provided in consideration of the spiritual interests of Christians who gather there. Therefore inside the church building we see items of a religious nature and significance. Most of these items present no problems. Bibles, hymn books, study material, etc. are pretty well taken for granted. The Lord's table sits up front with "In Memory of Me" written on it, but the table itself causes no alarm. Neither does the baptistry, unless it springs a leak. By far the most interesting fixture inside a church building, certainly the one that attracts the most attention and costs the most money to use, is the pulpit, the subject of this brief article.

In studying any religious topic the two books to be consulted first are the dictionary and the Bible. My dictionary says that a pulpit is:

"An elevated place or enclosed stage, in a church, in which the clergyman stands while preaching."

A "stage" in a "church" where a "clergyman" stands while "preaching." Boy! Isn't that chocked full of modern ecclesiastical goodies? But don't blame Mr. Webster. He does not invent definitions. He only reports them.

The word "pulpit" also occurs in the Bible (KJV), but only one time and that in the Old Testament (OT). After the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem the returned captives gathered as one man in a street of the city and asked Ezra to bring before

them the book of the law of Moses, at which time "Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose..." (Neb. 8:4). A highly elevated place of some sort was needed on that occasion, so they built one. Actually it seems to have been more like "a tower of wood" (as the margin of my Bible says) rather than a "pulpit" in the modern sense. For Ezra is said to have "opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people" (vs. 5). A careful search of the New Testament (NT) reveals no mention of a "pulpit." This should be no surprise, since the church building itself is not mentioned there, we should not expect to find reference to any of its furnishings.

The church "pulpit" as a mere place for a person to stand while teaching the Scriptures is no more objectionable than a fiat floor. It may in fact make good sense to raise that place where the teacher stands, so he can see and better communicate with the audience and the audience can better hear and understand him. Also, having a pulpit stand to put books and notes on, and to "hunker over" or on while talking, is nice for the teacher. But, and we may as well face up to it, in the contemporary Church scene the "pulpit" is much more than this, both as a fixture and as a word. The following remarks about it will not be taken, I trust, as an objection to the fixture itself. The problem is not with the inanimate platform, but with what it means to so many people, what it represents, and what it contributes to the further corruption of the Christian faith.

Let us notice. The pulpit has been defined as "a place where preaching is done." This is all right. Surely preachers have to be SOME place when they preach the word. The bad part is that the pulpit has become the EXCLUSIVE place of preaching. It has been built for that one purpose, and this purpose has been so abundantly fulfilled that preaching is hardly done anywhere else. Now under NT circumstances, back when they had no expedient church building with a built in "preaching place," preaching was done everywhere, in all kinds of places. It is said of the apostles: "Daily in the temple, and from house to house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ" (Acts 5:42). It is said later of all the Jerusalem disciples that "they which were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). Those were the days when the word of God really got out into the world where it was intended to go. The seed of the kingdom was literally broadcast, or "cast in all directions." **Nowadays we have "local" preachers, so called because their preaching work is mostly located in or limited to one town. In reality it is usually more "local" than that. Usually it is "located" in that special spot built for that special work--the pulpit. No use to deny it. HERE, in the pulpit, in where the bulk of the preaching is done today. No wonder the harvest is small. The seed never gets out of the barn.**

Now I realize that most of us "preaching brethren" do not enjoy the fact that the pulpit has an almost complete monopoly on preaching. But facts are facts. Realize, in the

first place, that it is practically impossible to "earn your letter" as a preacher outside a pulpit. Why? Because a pulpit is where "preaching" is done. If you instruct in the way of righteousness outside of a pulpit, you are only "teaching." Speak the same words standing in a pulpit and you are "preaching." **So, the Christian who wishes to preach will somehow have to manage to get into a pulpit. Also, any preacher who wishes to continue preaching must guard his pulpit, and never relinquish it until he has found another one. And the poor preacher who has his pulpit taken away from him understands all too well that he is "out of a PLACE to preach."** Unless he finds a vacant pulpit soon he may grow frantic "looking for a place to preach." Translated into English this means, of course, "a PAID place to preach." Actually "a PAID place to preach" ought to be added to the dictionary as one of the secondary definitions of "pulpit." For certainly in today's world this is what it is. **As a matter of fact, preaching inside a pulpit, whether regularly or on a fill-in basis is about the only act of Christian service universally recognized as a marketable commodity.** Yes, occasionally some generous brother will do it "for free," without any charge to the congregation. In such cases, however, all parties involved understand that he has "donated" a service that should have been, and ordinarily would have been, paid for. In any case, whether the fellow who stands up there is paid or not, the church "pulpit" remains THE place of preaching.

The original idea of having a suitable place to talk from was not bad, but like so many other ideas somewhere along the way it got turned around. In the beginning the pulpit was designed to accommodate preaching; now preaching is designed to accommodate the pulpit. Today, you see, not only is the method of teaching dictated by the pulpit, but even the number of preachers needed is calculated by the number of "pulpits open."

As useful as a pulpit might be as an aid in addressing an assembly, from a spiritual standpoint it may not be as beneficial as we think. Personally I can see where it has certain side effects in the assembly of the saints that are not necessarily conducive to right thinking and conduct. For one thing, the pulpit strongly encourages showmanship on the part of its occupant. Remember, part of the definition of a pulpit is "a stage." We know what a "stage" is. It's a platform where something is "staged" for public viewing. In keeping with this concept, is it not a fact that the notion that a preacher should be a "good showman" is common among today's churchgoers? Don't most preachers, either purposely or subconsciously, tend to drift in the direction of showmanship from time to time? After all, it is important to one's reputation as a preacher to be known as a **"Power in the Pulpit."**

Paul said: "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." Evidently it must be easy for a person to preach himself instead of Christ. It seems to me that the modern pulpit makes this even easier to do.

Being a place for public oratory, the pulpit practically demands that those who enter its precincts "hold forth" a sermon-speech in the style, manner and technique suitable for a public show. This is what is expected-"a stem-winder." For this reason the pulpit exercises strange and strong powers over men. Its transforming power is amazing at times. A man of mild manner and soft voice steps into the pulpit and suddenly, instantly, almost miraculously, he becomes a dramatic, shouting, hand-waving creature with a totally different personality. Now he is a "preacher" doing what a preacher is supposed to do. The applause of the people (in the form of "after-church" compliments, usually made during the hand shaking ritual at the back door) makes it mighty tempting for preachers to work harder at "winding stems" than teaching the truth.

But that is not all. While the pulpit encourages preachers to be good showman, it likewise encourages everyone else to be spectators. At the heart of the average church program, the typical pulpit sermon is a presentation to be "received with thanksgiving," and silence. By tradition folks sitting on the benches are trained to sit passively while the preacher "pours it on." To answer back is just not cricket.

Furthermore, being what it is and being used as it is used in the modern system; **the pulpit is tailor-made for other abuses.** It may be used as (1) a political tool by competing factions within the church structure, (2) to pressure the Elders into certain decisions or (3) to pressure the congregation into desired directions. It may be used as (4) a whipping post, at which the preacher flogs the weak and defective disciples week after week. It may be used as (5) a sanctuary, a protected place of immunity, from which the preacher either attacks or strikes back at his personal enemies. It may be used as (6) a platform for stand-up comics, political activists and professional fundraisers.

The above are only abuses of an otherwise fine fixture, and are not mentioned here to suggest that all "Pulpit Ministers" are guilty of such bad Sunday manners. It just so happens that the modern pulpit is highly vulnerable to this kind of abuse. One is tempted to ask whether the good that comes from using a pulpit is worth the risks involved. Certainly there is reason to ask why the "pulpit sermon" should be the standardized method of teaching the Scriptures to a community of believers. Would it be possible to keep a group of disciples instructed in the ways of righteousness without one? It just might be; and without many of the temptations and hazards so readily provided by the beckoning pulpit.

The primary problem with the pulpit, however, is not its abuse or misuse as a church auditorium fixture, but rather has to do with the "Pulpit" as an idea, in what it represents to the modern mind. Another of the several dictionary definition of a pulpit is "Preachers as a class," or, "the preaching profession." You can easily see how this

word has come to be a figurative expression denoting those whose "profession" is preaching. As pointed out earlier, being made for each other, preaching and the pulpit have been united in marriage, joined together as one idea. Therefore the Pulpit speaks of the Preacher. Specifically it refers to the Preacher-Pastor-Priest system of the denominational world.

In the contemporary Church world "Pulpit" is a word symbol used with, or in contrast to, its partner word "Pew." It is well understood in the nomenclature of Babylon that "the Pew" refers to laymen, and "the Pulpit" refers to clergymen. Moreover, anyone familiar with the situation knows that the distinction between clergy and laity is a very important, official distinction within these sophisticated church systems. The "step" up from the Pew to the Pulpit is much more than a matter of working up a Bible lesson and presenting it on Sunday. It is more or less a legal step that can be taken only by the guiding hand of denominational Authority. Only a person who follows the necessary procedures for "**entering the Ministry**" can take this important step upward. Once taken, however, he becomes not just a person but a Parson, a "person" of the Pulpit, a man of the Cloth, a bona fide PREACHER! Organize him just right and he may be tax deductible!

We, of the "undenominational" Church of Christ, have traditionally abhorred and repudiated this "clergy system" of the sectarians. "We do not believe in a special Clergy," we say to one and all. And true enough, the distinction between the Pulpit (the preaching class) and the Pew (nonpreaching class) is not quite as rigid and official among us as among the assorted denominations. But I am afraid, dear ones, that despite all our disclaimers to the contrary, the distinction is there! It exists. Recognizably so. It exists to a degree that is discernible even to ourselves. We admit it when "we" use the word Pulpit in its symbolic sense just like "they" use it. When we say "the Pulpit is vacant in such and such a place," what do we mean? Although the said pulpit is filled every single time the church convenes, either with a lay-brother or a "fill-in Preacher," it is nevertheless considered "vacant" until filled with a Regular Preacher, a "full time man," a professional Sunday Speaker otherwise known as the Minister. When this professional person is hired, then, and only then, do we say "the Pulpit in such and such a place is filled." Even among us, you see the Pulpit stands for the Preacher. We SAY we do not believe in the "special priesthood" of the preaching class. But look again, and be HONEST.

A church building today without a pulpit in it would be considered inadequately furnished. WHY? Simply because an institutional Church without a professional Preacher (with a capital P) would be considered inadequately staffed. The Preacher is just as vital a "fixture" in the "spiritual" Church as the pulpit is in the physical church. Our little steps in not allowing "our" Preachers to be given a flattering title like "Reverend" is good, but does not change the situation any. The truth is, our "local

minister" (with a capital M) answers in most every respect to the position, held by the Baptist Pastor, the Episcopal Rector and the Catholic Priest; not in exact title and exact powers, but in the basic work he does, the image he portrays to the public and the function he performs with reference to the local Church Organization. Hence the Preacher of the Church of Christ Church plays a role identical to that of his counterpart in the Sectarian Church.

Do you need more evidence of the above? If so, then read what is being said and implied by brethren today. Operators of Church-related organizations and businesses regularly send out mail to congregations addressed to "The Elders or Preacher." This is nothing more than a public acknowledgement of the fact that they understand that in every Church there is one SPECIAL person known as the Preacher, and that in some respect he is up on par with Elders. At least they feel that information fed to him is just as good as information fed to Elders. In fact, some letters sent to the Church simply begin, "Dear Preacher." By experience these solicitors seem to know who REALLY runs the show. Yet we have the audacity still to argue that WE don't have an elevated Clergy. How much evidence do we need?

Believe it or not, literature purporting to describe the scriptural organization of the "true church" has been put out by our brethren actually listing "the Evangelist" (one of the modern synonyms for the local Preacher) as one of the "THREE PERMANENT OFFICERS of the Church." Whether biblical or not, at least this is honest. For as ecclesiastical matters now stand, in the Church-with-a-preacher pattern, the local Preacher IS indeed a Church "Officer" if anyone is. The fact that he is HIRED into his office rather than "ordained" into it is interesting, but not important as to the effectiveness of his official role. Now we can talk about the Elders and Deacons all we want to, and perhaps give them honorable mention; but honesty must compel us to admit that The Preacher, above anyone else connected to the local institutional Church, qualifies as a genuine Church-man. If you do not believe this, just ask the townsfolk. They may not know who the Elders or Deacons are, but they know who the Preacher is. He is the highest profile functionary (officer) the institutional Church has. What I am saying sadly is this. The Pulpit is an accurate symbol NOT just of the Clergy of a Denominational Church, but of "Ministers" of the Church of Christ. This is why "we" can speak of the Pulpit and the Pew in connection with our system and be as correct, and as well understood, as anyone else. THIS OUGHT NOT TO BE! It means we have followed the pattern set by the religious world about us more than we have followed the NT.

A few years ago a man named Pierre Berton wrote a little book called "The Comfortable Pew." Someone should write one about the Pulpit. But for the benefit of all those preachers who, like one I know, "wonder" from time to time about this wonderful fixture, perhaps the title should be "The Uncomfortable Pulpit."

