Anton Rubenstein, the nineteenth century piano virtuoso, on tour in New York, was asked if he would like to go to church. He replied, “Yes, if you can take me to a preacher who will tempt me to do the impossible.”

The plight of so much preaching in our day is not that a new and better way has been found for the Good News to be declared, but that we preachers too often give the impression that a sermon is expected to be dull, or moralistic, or safe. The excitement has departed and our name is Ichabod. We would do well to read—or re-read—Dorothy Sayres’ Creed or Chaos? where she says that no mystery writer would dare to treat his theme the way preachers treat theirs . . . “the people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused Him of being a bore; they thought Him too dynamic to be safe.”

I said that preaching is often too moralistic . . good advice instead of good news. Our sermons are full of “oughts,” “musts,” “shoulds.” Don’t we know, if there’s any red blood in us, what converts and renews and claims us and others is not commandments but visions . . . being “tempted to do the impossible” because Christ insists that we are possible?

The preacher is an artist. Passion and hard work produce the images he hopes to communicate. The passion comes to large degree from Holy Spirit, though I would think that some of it comes from having worked hard and faithfully on the sermon until it begins to grab one’s stomach muscles and make the pulse beat faster. I don’t think a sermon is ready until the passion is aroused: but neither do I think that it will move until one has worked hours and even months on the theme. Brooding is essential; and that means note-books, wide reading, contemplation—yes, and prayer.

Nor must we forget that people come to church, more so now than in many a year, not out of custom or duty or from fear, but because they want God. They want to find ways to touch the Center, to be claimed by the One who can make life whole (holy?), to get life put together (saved?) by a vision of the Eternal. The sermon is not isolated, therefore, from the rest of the Service (“work”); but the words of the hymns, the nuances in the prayers, even the way announcements are given, will create an atmosphere where God may be heard—or even when He is hidden, one will leave with a desire to know Him.

* * * *

Dr. Atwood is Lecturer in Homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary. He has been pastor of Presbyterian Churches in Schenectady, NY, Englewood, NJ, Grosse Pointe Farms, MI, and Swarthmore, PA. A graduate of Rutgers (Phi Beta Kappa) and New Brunswick Seminary, he did graduate work abroad in Edinburgh, Cambridge, and Tubingen. He was a Presbyterian delegate to the World Council of Churches’ Assemblies in Oxford, Amsterdam, and Uppsala, and is on the Board of Trustees of the American Church in Paris where he has preached on several occasions.