Articles by W. E. Sangster

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Preaching with Authority (Nov 1960)

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If it is a pitiful thing to see a man in the pulpit half apologizing for his gospel, it is worse by far to see a man appropriating the authority that belongs to him as a representative and attaching it to his own unimportant opinions. Something quite offensive obtrudes in his manner then. “I’m telling you,” he seems to say, and the “I” looms uncommonly large. He seems to thrust himself forward in a way that creates revulsion in the mind of many people, and his hearers adopt a mental attitude of opposition. “I don’t care if he is right,” they feel. “I won’t take it from him.”

The distinction between the herald proclaiming his King’s message and the braggart proclaiming his own message cannot really be confused. The man knows the difference in himself and the hearers know the difference also. In the one case there is no self-assertion: the man is clearly humble and not a little bewildered that God should use him as a mouthpiece. His authority is clearly derived. He speaks out with awful boldness, but somehow he does not fill the picture. It is easy to forget him altogether and find yourself dealing with God alone.

In the other case, it seems all self-assertion. Pomposity clothes the preacher. He is aware of his gifts, and “I can do this” is the overtone of so much that he says. The people turn from him, not because they resent the authority of God’s messenger, but because they resent the assumption of authority by the messenger himself.

From the shoals of timidity and diffidence on the one hand, and the rocks of egotism on the other, the preacher will carefully keep away, most especially when his message in preaching calls for the authoritative method. He is plainly teaching with the highest warrant. This is the word of God through His Book. This is the word of God through His Church. The preacher is laying it down in no uncertain way, but he is only the herald. “Take no notice of me,” his whole manner clearly says, “but, as you value your soul, take heed to my words, for this is the message of the Great King.” …

So he bends himself to the task: exposes the weak excuses of sin in the minds of his hearers, yet does it with such tenderness that he never antagonizes them but seems to say all the time, “I have been guilty of such folly myself.” So he goes on until his voice seems their own voice… They stir into soliloquy. “No longer is the preacher speaking outside me or against me. It is my best self he is pleading and all the accusations are in my conscience now. My heart is capitulating almost before my mind. I want to be convinced. Preacher, I’m on your side! Bid me come. The voice of God is in your voice. Bid me come and not all the powers of hell shall hold me back.”