

# EMERSON'S CRITIQUE OF PREACHING REVISITED

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In 1985, *Restoration Quarterly* published an intriguing article by Frank Novak entitled "Divine Provocateur: Ralph Waldo Emerson's American Preacher."<sup>1</sup> Novak's look at Emerson's view of preaching primarily examined the lecture presented at Harvard Divinity School and later published as an essay with the title "An Address." Novak reminded readers of Emerson's scathing assessment of preaching in 1838 and how fashionable that same perspective is today among not only our critics but also our friends. Preaching always seems to be falling on hard times. Each new generation finds preaching both anemic and unnecessary. A recent doctor of ministry graduate advocated to me in private conversation the elimination of the thirty-minute diatribe that is called preaching. He could not see its contribution to the worship of God or the building up of the body. "If anything," he said, "put it last so that people can leave and not miss the Cowboys' kick-off." The following article intends to broaden Novak's evaluation of Emerson's writings and adding a supplement to his critical inquiry. "An Address" was not the only place preaching received Emerson's sharp tongue. An examination of the other essays of Emerson will not only support Novak's findings but extend them.

"Without the consent of the faculty, the Senior Class of Harvard Divinity College invited Ralph Waldo Emerson to speak . . . on Sunday Evening, July 15,

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<sup>1</sup> Frank G. Novak Jr., "Divine Provocateur: Ralph Waldo Emerson's American Preacher," *ResQ* 28 (1985): 87-96. Novak asserts (87) that other essays detract from the power of Emerson's critique in the Divinity School Address. However, Novak himself, although sparingly, draws on the other essays when they advance his argument. Likewise, Novak argues that an examination of Emerson's theology or transcendental philosophy should be excluded from consideration because such reasoning "may cause one to overlook the primary purpose of the essay." On the contrary, function cannot be separated from content. Emerson's attack is not on the grounds of communication theory or the nature of preaching alone as an abstract art, but integrated in his understanding of theology, ecclesiology, cosmology, and anthropology. Thankfully, Novak in practice disregards his own recommendation.

1838.”<sup>2</sup> As *The American Scholar* had been an attack on America’s cultural and intellectual life, so too is “An Address” an attack on contemporary religion. The address indicts primarily the traditions, preaching, and theology of the Unitarian Church through the lens of transcendental philosophy and an emergent pragmatic rhetoric. The Unitarian Church was both Emerson’s own church and the prevailing faith at Harvard;<sup>3</sup> as such, Emerson did not anticipate the ire he would engender.<sup>4</sup> George Woodbury states, “Condemnation was the more unqualified because attention was naturally given at first rather to what he denied than to what he affirmed; what he denied, all men understood, but what he affirmed, few if any, clearly made out.”<sup>5</sup>

Since Emerson’s sermon emerges from the same historical context as the Restoration Movement, I will summarize that background.<sup>6</sup> The Protestant Movement rejected Catholic Scholasticism of the sixteenth century. Alternative approaches soon divided Protestantism into various sects. One approach often advocated by Protestants falls under the classification of primitivism. Primitivism displayed itself among Protestant groups in three recognizable forms: (1) Lutherans emphasized a restoration of faith and grace. (2) Anabaptists emphasized a restoration of moral and ethical purity. (3) Puritans emphasized a restoration of the forms and structures of the primitive church. All these groups elevated the Bible as the sole source of God’s revelation. Emerson’s perspectives do not parallel the Restoration fathers in these respects.

Protestant methods of biblical interpretation come under the rubric of “mystic” or “dogmatic.” The mystic method professes to see more in natural and revealed phenomena than is cognizable by common sense. Dogmatic methods are

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>3</sup> David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1982), 135, comments on the recent division in the Unitarian church with Calvinists that made some remarks by Emerson especially caustic. “An Address” cannot be removed from Emerson’s own context of leaving the Unitarian Church. Robinson states, “The force and directness of his attack on the church in the address were due at least partly to his own need to justify his decision” (134).

<sup>4</sup> Elton D. Trueblood, “The Influence of Emerson’s Divinity School Address,” *HTR* 32 (1939): 43, notes that it was the written discourse that aroused so much attention. When the “rhetorical phrases” are “reduced to sober prose,” then the critics were given “venient clues to the author’s loose thinking” (47). Trueblood recounts Ware’s criticisms. Kenneth Walter Cameron, “Henry Ware’s Divinity School Address: A Reply to Emerson’s,” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 13 (1972): 82–91, republished Ware’s sermon in its entirety. See also the article by J. W. Alexander, Alexander Dod, and Charles Hodge, “An Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday, 15th July, 1838. By Ralph Waldo Emerson,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 11 (1839): 97.

<sup>5</sup> George Edward Woodbury, “Emerson’s ‘Divinity School Address,’” in *Critics on Emerson* (ed. Thomas J. Roundtree; Coral Gables, FL: Univ. of Miami Press, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Tim Sensing, “Baconian Influences on Preaching,” *Stone Campbell Journal* 4 (Fall 2001): 163–85.

similar to the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages with its fondness for the subtleties of Aristotelian logic and metaphysics. Although many American Protestants opted to follow a Baconian model for interpretation as filtered by Common Sense Realism (Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart), this inductive method soon incorporated many of the same dogmatic methods it had attempted to counter.<sup>7</sup> With a firm conviction that every individual possesses the faculties (common sense) to understand the Bible, Protestants affirmed the rights of the individual to study Scripture and determine God's will. Theodore Bozeman notes how other Protestants used deduction during this same period as Emerson:

Deductive reasoning must assume the truth of the premises with which it begins; it is merely a drawing out of implications already contained in those premises. If deduction must begin with generalizations already formed, it cannot at the same time be a device for their formation. Induction, beginning with particular facts, refers then to general principles, or laws; these principles then become the premises for the additional procedure of deductive analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Emerson asserted the right and ability of individuals to pursue truth on their own. Emerson, however, opted for a mystical approach to interpreting Scriptures. He advocated intuition as a means for the individual to know divine truth. Intuition linked with nature will attest to transcendent realities that are common to all. Consequently, Emerson attacked the dogmatism of the Protestants with the same arguments the Protestants used to attack Scholasticism.

Mary Edrich maintains Emerson's theology was not far removed from that of others in the Unitarian Church. She suggests that it may have been conservative compared to other less controversial figures.<sup>9</sup> Yet Emerson agitated the status quo because he presented his views in "the very fortress of Unitarian conservatism."<sup>10</sup> Emerson had just left the pulpit in Concord one year earlier. His dissatisfaction as a minister had been "essentially professional, or vocational,"

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1977) 67.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Worden Edrich, "The Rhetoric of Apostasy," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 8 (1967): 547-49. Joel Myerson, ed., *Studies in the American Renaissance* (Charlottesville, VA: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1985) does see Emerson evolving in his theology. He notes (7) that Emerson slowly moved away from revelation as an external proof and located revelation in the individual's direct experience with God. However, Wesley T. Mott, "The Strains of Eloquence," *Emerson and His Sermons* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1989): 182, claims Emerson did not change fundamentally throughout his career, for Emerson's continuity of thought is demonstrable in his journals. He notes that Emerson lived in a society that was in transition. Mott calls it "a classic of Romantic belatedness" when he quotes Emerson's essay "The Preacher": "[We] are born too late for the old and too early for the new faith."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

not "intellectual."<sup>11</sup> The content of "An Address" agreed with what Emerson had preached two years earlier in Lexington and Concord.<sup>12</sup>

Edrich describes Emerson's tone as a major contributor to the provocation of "An Address." She depicts the discourse as an apologia for his theology that he considered the best of the Hebrew-Christian tradition. Much of the criticism, Edrich concludes, was directed at Emerson's use of language. She uses the words "infelicitous" and "vagueness" to describe Emerson's "untactful" language.<sup>13</sup> "What should be noted," according to Edrich, "is that major invectives directed against the address in Emerson's day all stressed the speaker's 'irresponsible' use of language."<sup>14</sup> Edrich defends Emerson as using language that would not restrict the audience but encourage exploration of meanings. She lists<sup>15</sup> several examples of Emerson's style that produced angry responses, namely, overstatement that caused listeners to miss conservative implications, definitions of particulars that interpreters failed to maintain when Emerson related the particulars to a whole concept, the use of non sequiturs caused by the omission of a linking statement, and vagueness used to suggest meaning rather than be dogmatic.<sup>16</sup> Emerson realized the possibility of being misunderstood when he stated, "To be great is to be misunderstood" ("Self-Reliance," 183).<sup>17</sup>

As Roberta Ray asserts, Emerson's rhetoric cannot be separated from his philosophy. She states, "The primary role of the orator is not to 'convert men to one's own faith,' but rather to persuade men of their own innate worth."<sup>18</sup> Therefore, understanding Emerson's views of preaching requires a good knowledge of his transcendental perspectives. Primarily, Emerson understands "the highest faculty of the soul" to be reason, which perceives truth and reality.<sup>19</sup> Each soul connects to God (the Over-Soul). Ray concludes that the central function of rhetoric for Emerson is to act upon reason (the divine spark within each individual) so that the divine essence is perceived.<sup>20</sup> Rhetoric promotes the individual to seek after truth. In Emerson's system, divine truth cannot be explained. Truth is elusive and not static; therefore, truth cannot be reduced to dogmas, facts, or a system of logics.<sup>21</sup> Truth lies within the individual soul

<sup>11</sup> Robinson, *Apostle*, 77. See also Conrad Wright, "Emerson, Brazillai Frost, and the Divinity School Address," *HTR* 49 (1956): 18-43.

<sup>12</sup> Mott, "The Strains of Eloquence," 177.

<sup>13</sup> Edrich, "Rhetoric of Apostasy," 551.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 550.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 556.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 558.

<sup>17</sup> All references from Emerson's essays are from Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays* (ed. Larzer Ziff; New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

<sup>18</sup> Roberta K. Ray, "The Role of the Orator in the Philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson," *Speech Monographs* 41 (1974): 216.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

connecting with the Over-Soul ("The Over-Soul," 213). Revelation is a "conversation" and an "influx of the Divine mind into our mind. . . . In these communications the power to see is not separated from the will to do, but insight proceeds from obedience, and obedience proceeds from a joyful perception" ("The Over-Soul," 214). Therefore we can read God's mind directly (*The American Scholar*, 89). The audience shares a common mind, a oneness, and a unity with the speaker, for as souls together are linked to the Over-Soul, they are linked to one another ("The Over-Soul," 206, 212). Therefore, the orator will speak from the soul to affect all souls who are one with the Over-Soul.<sup>22</sup> Thus, as Emerson concludes in *The American Scholar*, "a nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men" (105).

In "Self-Reliance" (175–76) Emerson describes the inner truth common to all as "genius." In "An Address" Emerson uses the term "religious sentiment" (110) to define the divinity all share. He wants these young preachers to perceive their own inner connection with the divine. He states, "Yet, as this sentiment is the essence of all religion, let me guide your eye to the precise objects of the sentiment, by an enumeration of some of those classes of facts in which this element is conspicuous" (109). Through "intuition" every soul can recognize "Supreme Wisdom." Therefore, Emerson claims, when one touches the divine, true worship is possible, and the unfathomable and transcendent God can be glimpsed. The potential for the preacher to let others see these truths avails itself every Sunday, for "the doors of the temple stand open, night and day" inviting souls to touch the divine and know from within "primary faith" (112). Yet Emerson sees the faith of America in jeopardy (121). He mourns that it now seems "wicked to go to church" (122). He states, "I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more" (118).<sup>23</sup> In "Self-Reliance" he reiterates, "I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching" (192).

Emerson describes preaching as "empty" and "irrelevant." He blames the preacher for the fact that many in the flock do not practice Christianity. Because the soul of the hearer is not addressed, religion has become "petrified," "wasting," "famine," "decay," and "almost the death of faith" ("An Address," 117). The failure to connect faith and practice, Emerson claims, is due to the inept performance in the pulpit. His critique of preaching is described as

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>23</sup> Wright, "Emerson," chronicles that much of Emerson's dissatisfaction with Harvard's training of young ministers could be traced to the results of such training as demonstrated by the preaching of Brazillai Frost, the preacher who followed Emerson in Concord. Wright suggests that many of Emerson's complaints about Frost that were recorded in his journal were incorporated into the "Address." Robinson, *Apostle*, 41, includes Emerson's own dissatisfaction with his personal experiences as a minister and as a major contributor to his remarks at Harvard.

“uncertain,” inarticulate,” and not “man thinking.” Preachers are not addressing the problems of human experience but rather speaking to that which is sanctified by precedent and temporal concerns. Preachers are only following traditional orthodoxy. He states, “tradition characterizes the preaching of this country; that it comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul; that it aims at what is usual, and not what is necessary and eternal” (121). Therefore, any “compliance” to religion that lays waste to faith “would be criminal” (117).

Emerson’s critique of the “formalists” coincides with the critique of Scholasticism prevalent in his day. Ray notes how dogma will prevent the soul from “awakening.”<sup>24</sup> The search for truth will be locked forever unless the bonds of tradition are broken and souls are free to think again. Emerson begins “Nature” with a plea for each individual to establish a primary connection with knowledge and not rely upon the works of others from the past (35). Otherwise the individual will be in a “degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking” (“American Scholar,” 85).

Emerson describes the error of following tradition in “Self-Reliance”:

As men’s prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect. They say with those foolish Israelites, “Let not God speak to us, lest we die. Speak thou, speak any man with us, and we will obey.” Everywhere I am hindered of meeting God in my brother, because he has shut his own temple doors and recites fables merely of his brother’s, or his brother’s brother’s God. Every new mind is a new classification. If it prove a mind of uncommon activity and power, a Locke, a Lavoisier, a Hutton, a Bentham, a Fourier, it imposes its classification on other men, and lo! a new system. In proportion to the depth of the thought, and so to the number of objects it touches and brings within reach of the pupil, is his complacency. But chiefly is this apparent in creeds and churches, which are also classifications of some powerful mind acting on the elemental thought of duty and man’s relation to the Highest. Such is Calvinism, Quakerism, Swedenborgism. The pupil takes the same delight in subordinating every thing to the new terminology as a girl who has just learned botany in seeing a new earth and new seasons thereby. It will happen for a time that the pupil will find his intellectual power has grown by the study of his master’s mind. But in all unbalanced minds the classification is idolized, passes for the end and for a speedily exhaustible means, so that the walls of the system blend to their eye in the remote horizon with the walls of the universe; the luminaries of heaven seem to them hung on the arch their master built. They cannot imagine how you aliens have any right to see,—how you can see; “It must be somehow that you stole the light from us.” (“Self-Reliance,” 196)

Emerson notes the ease with which one can detect the over-reliance upon tradition when he states,

If I know your sect I anticipate your argument. I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic the expediency of one of the institutions of his church. Do I not know

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<sup>24</sup> Ray, “The Role of the Orator,” 224.

beforehand that not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word? . . . This conformity makes them not false in a few particulars. Their every truth is not quite true. ("Self Reliance," 181)

Emerson claims Jesus as a collaborating witness ("An Address," 114). Although Jesus respected Moses, he would not allow Moses to be taught. Therefore, the preacher "who aims to speak as books enable, as synods use, as the fashion guides, and as interest commands, babbles. Let him hush" (117).

In "The American Scholar" (93–94) Emerson, anticipating pragmatism, connects "thinking" and "action." He states, "The mind now thinks, now acts, and each fit reproduces the other. . . . This is a total act. Thinking is a partial act." Yet when Emerson describes a "formalist" preacher, he sees a divorce between thought and action. There was not "a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all." He had not learned "the capital secret of his profession," which is, "to convert life into truth" ("An Address," 118–19). Because of preaching's irrelevance and empty formalism, the preacher's office is ineffectual and demeaning. Therefore, "preaching lacks the credibility and authority to promote mission efforts, to uphold the 'godly' life, or to confront and condemn evil."<sup>25</sup>

Emerson recognizes exceptions.<sup>26</sup> These are not found in any group of preachers but in those moments when preachers rise above tradition and connect their soul to the infinite. Emerson ("An Address," 121) continues,

But, with whatever exception, it is still true that tradition characterizes the preaching of this country; that it comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul; that it aims at what is usual, and not at what is necessary and eternal; that thus historical Christianity destroys the power of preaching, by withdrawing it from the exploration of the moral nature of man; where the sublime is, where are the resources of astonishment and power.

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<sup>25</sup> Novak, "Divine Provocateur," 91. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), describes Emerson as an early forerunner of the founders of pragmatism. Emerson's claim that belief (thinking, conception, idea) is only complete when acted upon confirms West's conclusion. Similarly, Emerson's understanding of the soul, intellect, and human perception of the soul could be easily translated into Peirce's triadic semiotics of object, sign, and interpretant or Peirce's categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Emerson's critique of preachers is in the failure to function as a "symbol" of the Over-Soul (object) to the interpretants (listeners). Only in thirdness can the mind glimpse the Over-Soul that would "fix" belief causing people to act. My interest in Emerson connects to my pursuit of a pragmatic homiletic grounded in the philosophy of C. S. Peirce, ("A Pragmatic Homiletic: Philosophical Backgrounds," unpublished paper, Christian Scholars Conference, Rochester College, June 23, 2007). Emerson's critique calls for a new formulation of preaching that not only affirms the witness and passion of preachers and their personal relationships with God but also calls believers to communal transformation.

<sup>26</sup> Many preachers who fall within the sweep of Emerson's criticisms are still classified "good men" who are worthy of respect ("An Address," 120–21).

Another exception is found when the worshipper refuses to be “defrauded and disconsolate” and rejects “thoughtless clamor” (“An Address,” 118–19). Good hearers can listen to “vain words” and comfort themselves (119). The “good ear . . . draws supplies to virtue out of very indifferent nutriment” (119). Emerson praises the worth of the individual by paying tribute to the audience as able to find gems of truth even in the midst of foolish chatter.

Emerson notes two errors that preaching perpetuates: (1) The defect of historical Christianity that “corrupts all attempts to communicate religion” and perverts the character and teachings of Jesus (“An Address,” 114); therefore, (2) God is not seen in the present (e.g., miracles), and revelation is limited to the past (116). Emerson recognizes (114) Jesus’ unique understanding of the worth of the individual. Jesus saw his divinity and connection with God as no one had seen before. But preaching has diminished the power of the life and teachings of Jesus. Preaching’s false view of Jesus pushes religion to accept a narrow interpretation only. The distortion of Jesus’ teachings occurred as early as the second generation of preachers, who reduced the universal truth of the incarnation within every individual to a unique truth limited to Jesus alone (113). Christian preachers through the centuries have advocated the subordination of the divine in the individual and have insisted upon the acceptance of their “vulgar” interpretations of Christ’s teachings (115). Preachers’ attempts to keep Christianity in the ancient times has led to a lack of “primary faith” in the hearts of the church today. Emerson contends that religion “has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus” (113) rather than embracing the spirit and truth of his life and soul. Religion mouths the words of Jesus, yet ignores his message. Thus Emerson’s classic presses, “The idioms of [Jesus’] language and the figures of his rhetoric have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes” (113).

In “The Over-Soul” Emerson describes the good teachers as those who “speak *from within*, or from experience, as parties and possessors of the fact” while others “speak *from without*, as spectators merely, or perhaps as acquainted with the fact on the evidence of third persons” (218). Therefore, the voice of the preacher that stirs the soul to see divinity within is “throttled” and made “uncertain and inarticulate” when the sermon does not enable the worshippers to perceive “from within” themselves (“An Address,” 116).

Emerson, however, does not dismiss preaching altogether. Preachers who have passion rooted in their thinking, experience, and actions hold the highest office in the world (“An Address,” 117). Robinson summarizes Emerson’s views of preaching from his introductory sermon at Concord. There Emerson describes preaching as “the mightiest engine which God has put into the hands of man to move man.”<sup>27</sup> Emerson says God inspires the preacher’s soul to speak to other souls so they can hear the voice of God. “It is like the breath of the Almighty

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<sup>27</sup> Robinson, *Apostle*, 41–42.

moving on the deep." Robinson concludes that Emerson never lost this understanding of the preaching office.

Emerson's attack at Harvard is not about the "blessed words," but about the "errors in its administration" ("An Address," 113). Emerson does not want to start a new revolution; he only wants to "let the breath of new life be breathed by you [the preacher] through the forms already existing" (126). Preaching, he states, offers the power and potential to restore meaningful faith, "to rekindle the smouldering, nigh quenched fire on the altar" (126). Emerson sees preaching as making "the immortal sentences" of the Scriptures relevant to the lives in the congregation again. Preaching, he believes, needs to ignite the divine spark within each soul.

Emerson sees "the remedy is already declared in the ground of our complaint of the Church. . . . In the soul then let the redemption be sought" ("An Address," 122). Later he says, "The remedy to their deformity is first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul" (126). Therefore, he encourages preachers to trust their primary "knowledge of God" and "sentiment." If preachers teach a "secondary knowledge," a "chasm . . . yawns" and the congregation becomes convinced that there is "nothing in them divine" (123). Furthermore, Emerson discourages using others as role models no matter how great they are; this will limit preachers from reaching their full potential (123). He states, "Thank God for these good men, but say, 'I also am a man.' Imitation cannot go above its model" (123).

Individuals must seek deep down into their soul to discover divine truth. Emerson states, "the capital secret of the profession," in fact, is "to convert life into truth." "The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought" ("An Address," 119). He states, "Preaching is the expression of the moral sentiment in application to the duties of life. . . . The test of true faith, certainly, should be its power to charm and command the soul, . . . so commanding that we find pleasure and honor in obeying" (117–18). Therefore, Emerson encourages the young preachers at Harvard to see "yourself [as] a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity" (123–24). He exhorts these preachers to respond: What hinders you to "speak the very truth, as your life and conscience teach it, and cheer the waiting, fainting hearts of men with new hope and new revelation?" (126–27).

Emerson counters the idea of preaching as "instruction" and uses the word "provocation" instead ("An Address," 112). The preacher opens the doors so that individuals can have "primary faith" and not a warmed-over faith of someone else. The sermon, therefore, stirs the soul of the listener to bring about an awakening in the individual soul (112). Emerson applauds the "divine bards" who "admonish me that the gleams which flash across my mind are not mine, but God's; that they had the like, and were not disobedient to the heavenly vision. So I love them. Noble provocations go out from them, inviting me to resist evil; to subdue the world; and to Be" (115). These preachers inspire Emerson to find for himself the divine, "that which shows God in me, fortifies me" (115).

Ray categorizes Emerson's rhetoric under four classifications: (1) orator as artist, (2) orator as poet, (3) orator as analogist, and (4) orator as provocateur.<sup>28</sup> Since all have a soul, all have the same access to truth. Yet, Ray notes, many are hindered, asleep, and unable to perceive beauty by reason. Therefore, the provocateur's role is to "rouse them to action."<sup>29</sup> Ray describes Emerson as becoming "agitated to agitate." "The communicator can serve as a midwife helping others to give birth to their own thoughts."<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, the preacher agitates the minds of the audience in order to turn on the light and bring about a discernment enabling the audience to affirm the presence of God. Emerson asserts, "It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake" ("An Address," 123). Animating the dormant soul within the audience unlocks truth, and what was once unconscious becomes conscious, for all "have sublime thoughts" (124). The preacher persuades the congregation to listen, see, feel, and live by the truth found in the inner soul, so that when the sermon is preached, they can affirm the truth with the "amen." The affirmation of truth is not an affirmation of dogma, but of the truth that is common to all souls connected to the Over-Soul. Ray cautions, "The audience is not an animal to be manipulated, but gods to be freed from their chains. Provoke men to break the chains and live free to walk the world of Ideas."<sup>31</sup> The preacher thus persuades the listeners to follow their own inner convictions.

Jesus' preaching "astonished" his hearers. He taught "as one having authority" (Matt 7:29). Many of his statements proved provocative and revolutionary. The responses to sermons recorded in Acts are also emphatic and dramatic, "cutting to the heart" (Acts 2:37). These relevant messages possessed power and demanded response—either positive or negative. In that spirit, Emerson prods these seminary students to preach with passion that arouses action.

Mott summarizes Emerson's preaching:

The minister mediated between human nature that was socially decadent yet, potentially, individually divine. His rhetorical dilemma as prophet was to find a voice, a stance, that would engage a diverse, sophisticated audience, stir their feelings, engender a lively sense of moral righteousness, and establish a climate of communal dedication to a high purpose.<sup>32</sup>

Was Emerson a successful provocateur? If the heat generated by "An Address" is an indication, then, yes; however, Emerson did not want to engage

<sup>28</sup> Ray, "The Role of the Orator," 221–23.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>32</sup> Mott, "The Strains of Eloquence," 125. The term "communal" again anticipates C. S. Peirce's pragmatism and counters the individualism of the day.

in polemics.<sup>33</sup> Emerson wanted to arouse the soul. W. W. Wasson narrates an example of Emerson's success as a provocateur by quoting from James A. Garfield's journal when Garfield was still a student at Williams College in Massachusetts. "He is the most startling original thinker I ever heard. The bolt which he hurls against error, like Goethe's cannonball, goes 'fearful and straight shattering that it may reach and shatter what it reaches.' I could not sleep that night after hearing his thunderstorm of eloquent thoughts. It made me feel so small and insignificant to hear him."<sup>34</sup> Emerson aroused Garfield's soul.

Emerson perception of preaching differed from the Protestants of his day. For him, preaching stirs the heart to discover God's revelation of Christian truths and divine life within one's soul so that each person can possess a rich, fulfilling relationship with God. Preaching is always in danger of being domesticated. Before a preacher can proclaim a vision for society that is responsive to God, the truth concerning the discrepancies between this vision and people's present lives must be named. If Emerson's "An Address" can serve as an example of provocation, then the provocateur will pursue two functions, one that "criticizes" and the other that "affirms." Criticizing involves pointing out where the present order is unfaithful and worthy of rejection. Affirming calls for a renewal of heart to the eternal truths that connect present day realities to eternity. Such provocation might be named "prophetic" preaching.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>34</sup> W. W. Wasson, *James A. Garfield: His Religion and Education* (Nashville: Tennessee Book, 1952) 41.

<sup>35</sup> See Tim Sensing, "A Call to Prophetic Preaching," *ResQ* 41.3 (1999): 139–54, for a definition of prophetic preaching that parallels yet nuances "preaching as provocation."



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