

# 15th Century Preachers And Preaching

By Steve Williams

My, how times have changed! Yes, and my, how times have not changed. Human nature remains the same, so it is interesting to read of history repeating itself so often. Schaff's *History of the Christian Church* (VI, pp. 659ff) tells many interesting details about preachers (and priests) and preaching in Western Europe. A study of the 15th century reveals why the Reformation was needed so badly. Morals and religious life had reached a terrible low. Materialism and immorality among clergymen was the rule instead of the exception. But some of the comparisons with church life today are interesting, and many are humorous.

One problem was the inadequate training of most priests, a situation which was made worse by selection of men for the ministry who had little or no interest in religion. In a family of several sons, the least talented one would be directed into the ministry. Geiler of Strassburg complained, as people set apart the chicken that has the pox and the pig that was affected with disease for their offerings, so they devoted the least likely of their offspring to the holy office.

Today I hear complaints from those directing preacher training in our colleges that the best students are going for business degrees and big bucks. Not only the number of men training to preach, but also the quality of the men, is declining. This is sad if it is an accurate appraisal. Today we need positive encouragement so that some of our most talented and spiritual young men will become preachers. This must start in the home and then in the local churches. There are problems associated with being a preacher, especially those who are older and are not wanted in our youth-oriented society, but you are allowed to work for and with the greatest people in the world and to help them go to heaven.

During the 15th century, preaching only started to become a renewed custom in most churches in Western Europe. Some people would attend mass and leave before preaching. This angered some preachers who pronounced the early-leavers as worthy of excommunication. This sounds like today. Some people come and take communion and leave! Another parallel with the 15th century, especially in Germany, was in sermon books. Outline books and sermon digests, as we would call them, became very popular as preaching became more common in the churches. A collection of sermons by John Nider went through 17 editions. His sermons invariably had a three-fold division. This reminds me of jokes about a sermon having three points and a poem. Also, during this period preachers limited their discourses by the use of hour-glasses, a custom which was later transplanted to New England. How many jokes have you heard about preachers today, and the people watching the clock?

As preaching became more common and more sought after in the churches, there were criticisms about much of it being full of air but having little content. Erasmus condemned ignorance among preachers: "All their preaching is mere stage-playing, and their delivery the very transports of ridicule and drollery. Good Lord! how mimical are these gestures! What heights and falls in their voice! What toning, what bawling, what singing, what squeaking, what grimaces, making of mouths, apes' faces, and distorting of their countenance; and this art of oratory as a choice mystery, they convey down by tradition to one another." Erasmus urged more teaching and instruction in sermons. Thankfully it was some great preaching and a renewed study of the Bible during this period that led to the changes of the Reformation movement.

But, how times have changed! And, how times have not changed!