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Long or Short Sermon Texts?

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Sakramente miteinander Einigkeit gehalten wird. . . . Danach verwerfen und verdammen wir als unrecht und dem Worte Gottes zuwider, wenn gelehrt wird, daß Menschengesetze und -sagungen in der Kirche für sich selbst als ein Gottesdienst oder Teil desselben gehalten werden sollten; wenn solche Ceremonien, Gebote und Sagungen mit Zwang als notwendig der Gemeinde Gottes wider ihre christliche Freiheit, so sie in äußerlichen Dingen hat, aufgedrungen werden, item, daß man zur Zeit der Verfolgung und öffentlichen Bekenntnisses den Feinden des heiligen Evangelii (welches zum Abbruch der Wahrheit dient) in dergleichen Mitteldingen und Ceremonien möge willfahren oder sich mit ihnen vergleichen." (Formula Concordiae, X. Trigl., 830.)

Anmerkung der Redaktion. Diese Auszüge aus Luthers Schriften, mit einigen Zitaten aus den lutherischen Bekenntnissen, werden hiermit allen Pastoren dargeboten, besonders denen, die die Werke Luthers nicht vollständig besitzen, damit sich alle auf die Grundsätze besinnen, die Luther seinerzeit dargelegt hat, und sich demgemäß in rechter Weise orientieren. Es ist besonders darauf zu achten, daß Luther sein Unterscheidet zwischen dem, was göttliche Lehre ist, und dem, was zum äußerlichen Gottesdienst gehört. Diese Punkte sind schon wiederholt in Artikeln und kürzeren Abhandlungen besprochen worden, und es mag jeder Interessierte selbst nachprüfen: "Decorum of the Pastor", *Theol. Quart.*, XXI (1917), 218 ff.; "The Symbolism of the Lutheran Cultus", XXII (1918), July; "The Influence of the Prayers in the Early Liturgies on the Doctrine of Purgatory", XXIII (1919), October; "The Sacrificial Concept in the Eucharist of the Early Church", XXIV (1920), October; "Das liturgische Erbe der Reformation", *Hom. Mag.*, Nov.-Dec., 1917; "Aphoristic Hints for Liturgists", *Hom. Mag.*, January, 1920; "Luthers reformatorische Arbeit auf dem Gebiete der Liturgie", *Lehre und Wehre*, November ff., 1917; "Principiis obsta", 1929, 327 ff.; "Some Historical Facts concerning Church Polity", *Theol. Monthly*, October, 1926; — im CONCORDIA THEOL. MONTHLY: "The Spirit of the Lutheran Chorale", I, 508 ff.; "Clerical Vestments in the Lutheran Church", I, 838 ff.; "Luther's Use of Medieval Hymns", II, 260 ff.; "Die Sakramente in ihrer Beziehung zur Gemeindeorganisation", II, 818 ff.; "The Pastor as Liturgist", III, 296 f.; "Die Spenderformel im heiligen Abendmahl", III, 745 ff.; "Elevation-Adoration of the Elements", III, 766 ff.; "Some Principles of Lutheran Liturgies", III, 940 f.; "Our Formula for Infant Baptism", IV, 120 ff.; "The Lutheran Pulpit Garment", IV, 217; "Concerning Late-comers in Church Services", IV, 300; "The Use of Extemporaneous Prayer", IV, 373; "Matins as the Chief Service", IV, 437; "Luther über Gleichförmigkeit in kirchlichen Ceremonien", IV, 454; "The Oxford Movement a Hundred Years Ago", IV, 481; "Sacramental-Sacrificial", IV, 624; "The Omission of the Hallelujah during the Lenten Season", IV, 692; "The Rubrics of the Marriage Ceremony", IV, 695.

Long or Short Sermon Texts?

Taking it for granted that the sermon should be based on a certain text, the question arises, Shall it be a long or a short text? By a long text we do not necessarily mean a text of ten to twenty or more verses. The pericope for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Rom. 13, 8—10, although containing only three verses, is not a short text. And speaking of a short text, we do not mean a brief saying

of Scripture which is torn out of its context and given a meaning different from that which it originally had, nor a few words of Scripture that are chosen merely for novelty's sake. To do that is such a reprehensible practise, unworthy of a Christian minister, that we believe the preachers for whom we are writing would not stoop to it. Nor do we wish to be understood that we would bar short texts altogether. When a preacher is preaching a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments and takes the words of the commandments themselves as his text, as, for instance, "Thou shalt not kill," he is using a short text; and there is no good reason why he should not do so. Or a preacher may take for his confessional address such a text as 1 John 1, 7: "The blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, cleanseth us from all sin." Also such texts as John 3, 16 and 1 Tim. 1, 15 are excellent texts for any sermon. But more or less regularly choosing short texts for the usual Sunday sermon, and at that very often texts *which contain very little sermon material*, we hold to be bad practise; we believe that doing so contributes much toward poor sermonizing.

To use a short sermon text is a real temptation. The short text does not demand much textual study. Compared with the preacher who spends much time and labors hard over a longer text, the short-text preacher is soon through with that part of the work. Nor has he much trouble in making an outline, especially if he preaches in accordance with the so-called topical method, which very much ignores the text. He chooses, for instance, as a text 1 Tim. 2, 8: "I will that men pray everywhere." According to the topical method of some homileticians the preacher will decide to preach on the subject of prayer. He has no real theme, merely a subject, a topic. The preacher will say this and that on prayer, as his *dogmatical knowledge* may suggest, for the text itself does not suggest very much to him. All that the preacher says may be Scriptural, but very likely will be along general lines; his sermon will be more or less shallow. If he uses good language and good illustrations, interspersing a few striking stories, he may be interesting; but will his sermon be profitable? *This kind of sermon is the easiest to make, but is also the least productive.* And at that, the preacher has likely altogether overlooked the fact that his text according to the context and the Greek word used for *men* speaks of the public prayer of the *men* in distinction from the women at public worship.

Some specious arguments are advanced in favor of short sermon texts. We are told, for instance, that people can remember a short text better than a long one; that many preachers, some of whom have made a great name for themselves, use short texts; that the very brevity of the text is somewhat of a novelty that attracts attention; that the mere reading of a long text already wearies the people and

makes them suspect that a long sermon will follow; that a long text contains too much material for development; that a short text gives the preacher more opportunity to display his cleverness in handling the Scriptures (what vanity!); etc.

We hold that the practise of preaching from short sermon texts is a bad practise, which makes for poor sermonizing. Even in those circles in which the preaching of short-text sermons is the common practise, there are men who are convinced that such practise does not make for the best preaching. They are therefore advocating what they call expository preaching, or, as one has put it, "dealing with the Scriptures in large chunks."

Why, then, should a preacher, as a rule, not preach on a short text, one verse or even a part of a verse? *For the very simple, but good reason that the short text does not offer sufficient sermon material.* All homiletical work should be based on good, sound, thorough exegesis. The short-text preacher does not base his sermon on exegesis, on a careful study of the text, but *on the dogmatical suggestions which the text offers.* The short-text preacher very often very much ignores his text, using it merely as a starting-point. Referring again to the text 1 Tim. 2, 8 or any similar text that speaks of prayer, the preacher would develop his subject somewhat along these lines: 1. Why we should pray; 2. for what we should pray; 3. how we should pray. His sermon is not in the text; all that the text suggests to the preacher is the idea of prayer. What a greater wealth of sermon material such a text as Luke 11, 5—13 gives to the preacher! In speaking of some specific phase of prayer, that of perseverance, and offering sufficient sermon material as this text does, the preacher will offer much of something and not a little of this and a little of that and not much of anything. The people will take interest in such a sermon, will be benefited by it, will have their Bible knowledge increased and their spiritual needs supplied. And they will be glad to come back for more.

Preaching from a long text requires much labor on the part of the preacher; he must thoroughly study his text, find its specific thought, develop that by means of a good outline, work his textual material into his sermon, and apply it to the needs of his hearers. In doing all this, however, he has the satisfaction that he is doing much more than merely filling in a half hour in the pulpit. The short-text preacher is feeding his flock on short rations, while God has given to His people, and intends them to have, an abundant supply.

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