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Defects of Preaching

The Lutheran Church has had, and still has, many good preachers, from Luther down to the present time. As far as the scholarship of the preacher and the homiletical structure and delivery of the sermon are concerned, the preachers of our Lutheran Church compare favorably with those of other denominations. They excel others in the Biblical content of the sermons. That our Lutheran Church has great preachers is, strange to say, little known and recognized outside of our own circles. This is, I think, largely due to our former isolation because of the language used and to the reluctance of our preachers to get into the limelight. In former years we shunned newspaper publicity. In this respect we have been too timid; *for the Gospel's sake* we could and should have been somewhat bolder. The Lord Himself tells us not to put our light under a bushel but to let it shine, Matt. 5:15, 16. "O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength," Is. 40:9.

At the present time there is no little complaint about poor preaching, and whether we like it or not, we must admit that much poor preaching is heard from Lutheran pulpits also: sermons that are shallow in reference to their Biblical content, sermons that do not supply the needs of the people, sermons poorly constructed, sermons not well delivered. When people sit through a sermon Sunday after Sunday, they ought to be strengthened in their faith, warned against sin, especially the sins of their time, encouraged to lead a Christian life, comforted in their troubles, advanced in Christian knowledge. But some sermons do not supply these very needs. There is too much of a filling in a half hour, more or less, in the pulpit with a talk that is not unorthodox but that does not grip the hearts of the hearers. I well know

that the low level of Christianity, spiritual ignorance, indifference, and worldliness, which are found with so many of our people, are not due to poor preaching only; much of all this is due to a lack of *Privatseelsorge* and a lack of church discipline. A *noli-me-tangere* sort of Christianity has become the fashion of the day; and we cannot say that we have remained altogether untouched by it.

I

What, then, are the defects of preaching? I mention first the *evil practice of preaching on short texts*. A text is too short when it does not offer sufficient sermon material. The sermon preached from such a short text is based on a topic rather than on the exegesis of the text. As a result the sermon lacks specificness, covers too much ground, deals in generalities, is shallow. If the preacher is a good speaker, uses good language, adds a few stories, he may be interesting, but his audience gets little of real value. These sermons are the easiest to make, but they are the least effective. They are not in the true sense of the word edifying, they do not build up a congregation by deepening spiritual knowledge and by enriching spiritual life. Homileticians in other than our own circles who teach the topical sermon method themselves condemn it. Says Knott: "*Lack of originality is the outstanding weakness of topical sermons. The way to overcome this danger is to narrow the field and give to the theme depth rather than breadth. What is on the surface nearly every one knows; what is below they do not. 'Faith' as a subject, may thus be limited to 'Faith as an Essential to Progress' or 'Triumphs of Faith,' which demands a more intensive development than is required by 'Faith' without any limitation.*" "This is the easiest kind of sermon to prepare and is, generally speaking, the least effective because of the danger from lack of originality. It makes less use of the text than any kind and, when the subject covers a large field, makes less demand on the preacher." (Pp. 124, 125.) Broadus, who calls the topical sermons *subject sermons*, says: "It is usually better that the subject should be not general but specific. . . . Too often the text is only a starting-point, with which the sermon afterwards maintains not only no formal but no vital connection. Sometimes indeed it is made simply a motto, a practice of extremely doubtful propriety. . . . But, as a rule, it is greatly better that the subject should be precisely that which the text most naturally presents and which most thoroughly exhausts its meaning." (P. 309.) Phelps says: "For the first twelve centuries of the Christian era the restriction of the text to an isolated verse, or fragment of a verse, of the Bible was unknown. The topical sermon therefore was an innovation. Originally the Christian sermon

was an exposition, and only that." (P. 47.) We may very well heed the words of Dr. Reu of the American Lutheran Church, who says: "Short texts ought never to become the rule. For it is the function of the sermon to bring its hearers to a more thorough knowledge of the Bible, so that their ability to read and understand it for themselves may be constantly increased. Many English preachers have driven the choice of brief texts to an evil extreme, and not a few of the 'modern' preachers of Germany are doing the same. Even American Lutheran preachers are aping this practice. Now, it would be absurd to demand that no short texts should ever be chosen. . . . But it dare not become the rule to choose such brief texts if our congregations are really to be made acquainted with the Bible and trained to read and study it for themselves. Preaching on the great verses of Scripture, provided that they really are this, is a most valuable aid in impressing indelibly upon the memory the fundamental Scripture truths in quintessential form. But to confine oneself to such passages or to give them the preference would be to reduce the congregation's spiritual fare to very scant rations and is not in keeping with the reverence due to Holy Scripture, which has not been given to us in the form of a book of maxims but as a many-sided organic whole, comprising history, poetry, prophecy, and doctrine, and which has a right to be treated as such in the pulpit. It was not by chance that in the ancient Church the development was from the longer portions of the *lectio continua*, covering often several chapters, to the selection, not of separate verses but of whole sections, which became gradually the basis of the sermon; although separate verses were occasionally preached on." (Pp. 314, 315.)

II

The second defect of preaching is *lack of careful preparation*. We are now taking it for granted that the preacher has selected a text that has sufficient sermon material, a text taken from one of the many pericopic systems or a text of his own choice. What should he do with this text? He ought thoroughly to study and well understand it. He ought first to read it in the vernacular and answer the question, What does this text say? We expect that even the ordinary Christian reader, to whom God has given the Bible, should be able to answer this question. But the preacher, being a *teacher*, must have a deeper insight into the text than the ordinary reader. He should read the text in the original in order to get the finer shades of the meaning of words and thus be better able to explain the thoughts of the text, or, in some instances, even be prevented from giving a wrong or incomplete

interpretation of certain terms. The meaning of the word "charity," for instance, in its present usage, has been much narrowed down from its meaning in the original and even from its meaning when first used in the King James Version, 1 Cor. 13. The preacher should read also the context, both the immediate and the remote context. In many instances this is of utmost importance for an understanding of the text. Parallel passages should be consulted, especially such as present the same thought material, but also such as give us a better understanding of the use of certain words.

After a careful meditation on his sermon text the preacher is ready to make the outline. To do so, he must find the *specific* thought of his text, the divisions which are to be treated for the unfolding of this thought, the applications to be made, the introduction, and the illustrative material to be used. After having done such *original* work, the preacher should consult commentaries and sermon helps and, if necessary, make changes in his outline. Consulting commentaries and sermon helps at once or even before the outline is made will keep him from doing *his own original thinking*, prevent a fuller understanding of the text, lessen his interest in the subject-matter, fail to suggest the application to be made to *his* hearers, cramp his style, and even adversely influence the delivery of the sermon.

Further meditation and the *careful writing* of the sermon complete the work of good sermon construction. Perhaps in a later article I shall treat the subject "Writing and Memorizing the Sermon." Suffice it now to say that no preacher should *altogether* dispense with the writing of the sermon, especially not the beginner, and that memorizing should not begin when the Amen has been written, but as soon as the preacher reads his text for the first time.

The insistent demand on the part of many of our preachers for *ready-made* sermon material, *extensive* outlines, and even *entire* sermons is evidence sufficient for the fact that many would spare themselves the *laborious* task of original meditation and homiletical construction as outlined in the preceding paragraphs. Instead of beginning the preparation of next Sunday's sermon early in the week, many postpone it to the end of the week. They must be in their pulpit on Sunday morning, but now the time is too short thoroughly to study the text, carefully to prepare an outline, to give due attention to the needs of the people, and to spend much time in writing the sermon. As a result the Sunday sermon will abound in pious phraseology, be shallow, and be more or less unprofitable; or a sermon prepared by some one else will be used, perhaps *in toto*, but will neither supply the needs of the hearers nor be delivered with much animation. Whatever

explanation there may be for such poor sermonizing, the fact remains that the guilty preacher is neglecting the most important work of his ministerial office, the work of preaching. He is not only not attracting people to his church but is also losing some of his hearers, while the faithful ones who attend are not being spiritually well fed. A great spiritual awakening and an increased interest and activity in the work of the church will not take place where there is such poor preaching.

III

A third defect of preaching is a *lack of doctrinal preaching*. There may be various reasons for this. Neglecting to study the Bible and failing to review his Seminary course in dogmatics and not reading what is offered him in this respect in books and periodicals, the preacher hesitates to say much about doctrine beyond what he must teach on the basis of the Catechism to his catechumens. In fact, he lacks the ability to do so. Or he is not conscious of the great need and the great importance of doctrinal sermons. Or he thinks that doctrinal preaching is dry preaching, in which the people will not take much interest. Or he dreads the labor which the preparation of doctrinal sermons requires and therefore follows the path of least resistance by preaching sermons along ethical lines. I believe that this is the real reason why many sermons are poor in doctrinal content. Jesus taught doctrine. Paul and the apostles taught doctrine. Luther taught doctrine. There would have been no Reformation without it. Our Saxon fathers taught doctrine. It is by the teaching of doctrine that to our Synod the purity of the Word of God has been preserved and that we have grown spiritually strong. Paul writes to Timothy and to all Christian preachers: "I charge thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the Word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth and shall be turned unto fables," 2 Tim. 4:1-4.

Walther has well said: "Let a sermon be never so rich in exhortation, rebuke, and comfort, if it is devoid of doctrine, it is a lean and empty sermon, the exhortation, rebuke, and comfort of which float in the air. It is almost beyond belief how many preachers sin in this respect. Hardly has the preacher touched his text and the doctrine to be taught, when he starts exhorting or reproving or comforting. His sermon consists of scarcely any-

thing but questions and exclamation, blessings and woes, admonitions to self-examination and a belaboring of the emotions and the conscience, until the feeling and conscience of the hearer are so continuously harassed that he cannot possibly find an opportunity for quiet reflection. So far from actually reaching the heart and kindling life, such sermons are more likely to preach people to death, to destroy any hunger they may have for the Bread of Life, and systematically to produce disgust with, and loathing for, God's Word. It cannot but repel every hearer to be admonished or reprov'd again and again without being shown the reason why, just as it must repel him to be comforted in soft and savorless fashion. It is of course much easier to shake this sort of thing out of one's sleeve and thus give the sermon the appearance of vivacity and effectiveness than lucidly and thoroughly to present a doctrine. This is probably the main reason why so few preachers preach doctrinal sermons and why so many choose subjects that are already well known to their hearers and that readily lend themselves to a purely practical treatment. But another reason undoubtedly is that many preachers themselves have no thorough knowledge of the revealed doctrines and hence are unable properly to present them to others. Still another reason is found in the foolish notion that the extended treatment of doctrine is dry, leaves the hearers cold, and does not minister to the awakening of conscience, to conversion, and to a living, active Christianity of the heart. This is an utter mistake. These very eternal thoughts of God's heart, revealed in the Scriptures for our salvation, these divine truths, counsels, and mysteries of faith, hidden from the foundation of the world but now revealed in the writings of the prophets and the apostles, — these are the divine seed which must be planted in the hearers' hearts if there are to spring up in them the fruits of true repentance, unfeigned faith, and a sincere, active love. Actual growth in Christianity is not possible in a congregation without sermons that are rich in doctrine. The preacher who neglects this is not true to his calling, even though by zealous exhortation, earnest reproof, or consolation which he thinks to be particularly evangelical he appears to be consuming himself in faithful care for the souls committed to him." (Fritz, *Pastoral Theology*, pp. 71, 72.)

Doctrinal preaching is not uninteresting, or dry, if the doctrine is well presented. Doctrinal preaching is, if done right, most interesting and most profitable; the people hear it gladly and are thankful for it. The preacher must beware of setting forth the doctrine in dogmatic fashion, as is done in the classroom of the theological seminary, perhaps even using some technical terms which the people do not understand. The preacher should preach

the doctrines of the Bible in the popular way in which the Bible presents them. And he should not fail to mention the *practical use* of the doctrine, how it is to be *applied* by our Christians. The truths of Scripture must not be treated apart from life. Much preaching of the doctrine of sin is ineffective because the preacher does not preach sin as it is found in the actual life of his hearers, who therefore do not recognize the features of sin in themselves. On the other hand, much exhortation to good works is ineffective because it is detached from the doctrine of justification, which puts into the Christian's heart the only motive for good works, to wit, the love of God. So Paul, 2 Cor. 8:9 and Rom. 12:1, 2. We sometimes wonder why our preaching does not produce better results. It is because it is not of the right kind. Walther speaks of such preaching, saying: "Of much preaching it can be said that it neither contains any false doctrine nor indeed has failed to observe any one of the necessary requirements, and yet, in spite of it all, it lacks one of the chief characteristics of good preaching: it fails to grip the heart and conscience of the hearer. Such sermons are perhaps quite logically arranged, but their entire make-up is not in accordance with Biblico-psychological laws (*nicht biblisch-psychologisch angelegt und geordnet*). Such sermons shoot their arrows over the heads of their hearers, or if they at all take hold of the hearer, they do not hold him, but, like a broken net, let the fish that have been caught escape again; such sermons arouse the hearer in a way and bring forth a certain feeling of satisfaction and some pleasant sentiments, yes, they may even cause wholesome doubts to arise in the mind of a hearer and may persuade him to admire the preacher, but they do not persuade the hearer to form any definite resolutions. To produce such requires heavenly wisdom and a kind of preaching that cannot be learned from any course in homiletics but must be learned as a result of one's own personal experience and of sincere, earnest prayer imploring the blessings of the Spirit of God." (*Op. cit.*, pp. 101, 102.)

IV

A fourth defect of preaching is that it is not *zeitgemaess*. Sermons are preached in these stirring times that could just as well have been preached at any other time. The preacher, judging him by his sermon, does not at all know what is going on in this world. In these days of spiritual indifferentism, unbelief, and atheism; in an age when the sins of the heathen world, such as pleasure-madness, money-madness, and sex-madness, are the outstanding sins in our so-called Christian country and when worldliness is making great inroads into our churches; in a world in which Communism and kindred movements are not only

displacing good government but are threatening to give to us the totalitarian state, which will deprive us of our cherished political heritages, such as religious liberty, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press; in a world in which people, for no good reason at all, are slaughtering one another on the battle-fields,—at such a time we need preachers who take cognizance of these things and lift up their voice against sin and for the comfort of troubled and anxious souls. The history of mankind has been essentially the same down through the ages, and therefore the Bible supplies an abundance of texts, both in the Old and in the New Testament, for all situations and conditions among men. It is the essential sameness of man that makes the Bible an up-to-date book.

In order that his sermons will be *zeitgemaess*, the preacher must carefully study the time in which he and his people live, especially as far as his own people are touched thereby. To know the needs of his people, the preacher must also know the environment in which his people move about, the papers and books they read, the company they keep, their occupation, their cultural standard, their pleasures and amusements, their financial situation, their home-life and mode of living, their blessings and sorrows, etc. Much of this he can learn when he makes his pastoral visits to the homes of his members. Unless sermons are *zeitgemaess*, actually supplying the needs of the hearers, sermons do not serve the real purpose of preaching.

V

A fifth defect of preaching is a *poor delivery*. The preacher who cannot be *easily* understood has a poor delivery. So has the preacher who preaches in the same tone of voice and in the same tempo at a wedding as he does at a funeral or who shows no more animation on some festive occasion than at an ordinary Sunday service.

We do not need great orators in our pulpits, but we do need good speakers. Two requisites are absolutely essential for good speaking: it must be loud and distinct. No one can speak properly with his mouth closed, and yet even some public speakers often put forth little mouth and lip action. Sufficient tone projection by sounding the vowels with an open mouth will produce the necessary loudness, and a careful sounding of the consonants produces good articulation. But a speaker may speak loudly and distinctly and yet fall far short of being a good speaker. One of the worst faults of a public speaker is speaking in a monotonous tone of voice. To overcome this, the speaker must give due attention to *changes* in volume, emphasis, pitch, rate, tone-color, action, and facial expression; that will put *variety* into his delivery. There is no reason in the world why I should speak essentially

differently when in the pulpit from the way I speak to one of my parishioners or to a visitor in my study or anywhere or at any time in my conversing with people. The *conversational* manner of speaking makes for good and effective delivery. When I was a student at the Seminary, one of my classmates, whose father was a preacher, told me that his father had given him this good advice: Speak in the pulpit as you do when speaking to your catechumen class.

The secret of good delivery is to be filled with, and deeply interested in, one's subject-matter. Without this there can be no good delivery.

It goes without saying that reading from a manuscript is not speaking or preaching but *reading*. And reading from an invisible manuscript, that is, the mere *recitation* of what has been memorized, is almost as bad. The speaker who is the master of his subject will have his mind not on his manuscript, but on his subject and on his audience.

The conversational manner of speaking calls also for action of the body: movement, facial expression, gestures. This does not mean that the preacher in the pulpit or the speaker on the public platform should assume the role of the actor on the stage. The actor impersonates others, the preacher or speaker must be himself and preserve his own original individuality. He should be natural.

If preachers whose method of sermonizing and whose manner of speaking is faulty will receive what has been written as constructive criticism, they will have gotten what the writer intended. Preaching is of such paramount importance that the Church cannot be satisfied with anything that falls short of being good preaching: sermons which apply the great truths of the Word of God to the needs of men, sermons well constructed and well delivered. By such preaching the work of the Holy Spirit will not be hindered but will be a divine power in the hearts and the lives of men for their temporal and eternal well-being and to the glory of God.

JOHN H. C. FRITZ

Mofis Lied am Roten Meer

Eine exegetische Studie über 2 Mos. 15, 1—19

II

In knappen Sätzen hatte Moses 2. 1—10 die herrlichen Taten geschildert, derentwegen er dem Herrn singen wollte: „Roß und Wagen hat er ins Meer gestürzt. Das Meer bedeckte sie, und sanken unter wie Blei im tiefen Wasser.“ überwältigt von dem einzigartigen