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Dear Mike. . .

Andre Resner

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Abilene Christian University Abilene, Texas

November 1, 1995

Dear Mike,

Thanks for your letter. I appreciate these little dialogues we have by mail for a number of reasons. First, it helps my teaching of students who are going into ministry situations much like you are in. I hope you do not mind, but many of the situations you describe become case studies in my ministry classes. Of course, “the names are changed to protect the innocent,” but real life ministry cases are, more often than not, stranger than fiction! Second, I hope they are helpful for you. You tell me they are—at least most of the time—and I trust that you will tell me when they are not. Let us let our relationship be characterized by honesty and not just professional decorum. Third, I really like receiving letters in this age of e-mail. There are some things that cannot be improved upon by technology, and I think the “personal epistle” is one. I am not convinced Paul would have completely abandoned the letter genre and personal messengers just because he now had electronic mail, just as I am not convinced that Jesus would have abandoned the parable genre just because he now knew that people want the “point” or a quick and easily digestible “sound-bite” more than they want a “story.”

Well, enough rambling. Let me address the matter about which you wrote. I sympathize with you as a preacher who is facing the liturgical renewal in Protestant worship. The pendulum seems to be swinging with great force and swiftness in both Protestant worship (from sermon-focused assemblies) and in Roman Catholic worship (from supper-focused assemblies). The swing is good in both realms because more balance is essential to accomplish all that we are called to in worship. But that does not mean it will always be easy for the preacher who must now relegate himself to a “supporting actor’s role,” when he has always been used to “top-billing.” (Take my metaphor from Hollywood with a grain of salt, picturing me with tongue placed firmly in cheek;

and remember that as a preaching professor the pressure is now on to be “Professor of Preaching and Worship,” not just preaching).

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You are now having to see your sermon as part of a greater whole, rather than the culmination of all other parts. How can you do this? Well, I have been helped in this transition by a very good conversation partner, Charles Rice in his book **The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy** (Augsburg Fortress, 1991). Rice himself has lived what he is writing about. Namely, how does one relate preaching to the Lord’s Supper in the entirety of the Sunday morning worship experience, i.e., liturgy. As you know, I like that word, liturgy. I like it because it means the “work of the people in worship.” It reminds us that worship is the “work” (not work as an earning of salvation, but a response to our salvation) of all the people gathered for worship, not just a few who stand up front. Rice writes, “liturgy is never passive.” That is one reason why preaching cannot carry the whole of worship because it depends too much on one individual in speaking, as well as in evoking the hearing of those present. Even when this act of preaching is bolstered by a theology of the Word which places ultimate dependence on God and the Spirit—which I am compelled by—a marginalization of the other aspects of worship, because of sermon-dominance, borders on making the preacher the focus, not God. And, how do you spell “idolatry”?

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Rice started out as an Oklahoma Baptist and now functions as a New Jersey Episcopal priest. Yet, he teaches preaching at Drew University. Thus you can see how his own ecclesial history and practice mirror his concerns in this book: How is preaching related to the rest of worship, the Lord’s table in particular? He suggests that part of the answer lies in re-envisioning preaching’s goal. He says that the

aim of the sermon is to bring people to the eucharist (another word I like, since it means “thanksgiving,” and reminds me of the most important thanksgiving meal we Christians eat together). Furthermore, the Lord’s Supper sets certain limits for the sermon. Listen to Rice explain:

The person who preaches with the table in view may not preach on just anything or without regard for style appropriate to this setting. The sacramental context, both Baptism and Holy Communion, judges preaching, sets limits to it, calls to account mere sermonizing and pulpitering, the inordinate preaching of the law and indiscriminate use of the pulpit for promotion or for calling attention to cultural observances. Where our preaching presupposes Baptism and proclaims what the Eucharist sets forth, we are less likely to forget who we are [as preachers] and why we are preaching (19).

Not only that, but the sermon finds its conclusion in the Lord’s Supper. “Does not the sermon find its conclusion as members of the community gather around the table in the *anamnesis* [living, ongoing memory and participation] of Jesus, to lift up their hearts in praise and thanks to God?”

You say that such a view would suggest ordering worship differently, so that the Lord’s Supper follows the sermon. Yes, it does suggest that, if not urge it strongly. That may cause problems for some who “have never done it that way.” Or some who, like the preacher, often want the service to culminate in the sermon. Or, often—I do not know if I am stepping on your toes here—preachers want to get everything else out of the way in as time-efficient manner as possible so they know how much time they have—as much as possible!—for their sermon. Rice tries to, literally, turn the “Table” on the preacher. He wants the preacher to reevaluate his place amidst all the facets of the worship experience. He suggests that “the bigger the occasion (i.e., Christmas or Easter), the smaller the sermon” (50). He wants to “put the preacher in his or her proper place, as a companion to the liturgy.” The breaking of the bread, which is Christ’s body, and the drinking of the cup, which is Christ’s blood, remind the preacher that “people do not come to church to listen to the preacher, not ultimately,” but to commune with God. When Garrison Keillor was asked about preaching in church he responded, “When a minister stands in front of people [at church] he is interrupting what the people have come to church for. . . . We go [to church] to look

at the mysteries, and all the substitutes for communion with God are not worth anyone’s time” (51). The change in the order of worship that Rice suggests would not be simply to shake things up—“change for change’s sake”—it would be for deep theological reasons. The change would be an attempt to take the “magic” or “dead memory” out of a silent communion service, and it would be an attempt to take the spotlight (celebrity speaker syndrome) off the human preacher. Moreover, by linking them explicitly both have a greater possibility of serving Christ and being faithful stewards of God’s mysteries.

Get Rice’s book and we will discuss it more in depth together. You know I never suggest reading material for you that is “extra.” I know you do not have time to just read. That is why I suggest books only when I think they will genuinely be good “conversation partners” for your ministry. This is one, especially in light of all the worship renewal talk.

I must mention one last thing from Rice, however, for you to mull over until CBD makes its delivery. Rice says that viewing the sermon more liturgically will answer one of our age-old questions about how long the sermon ought to be. He says that it ought to be no longer and no shorter than the time that it takes for the congregation to take the Lord’s Supper together. Think of the implications of that! If you have no Lord’s Supper, no sermon! If you have been trying to shorten the Lord’s Supper to make it less “obtrusive” to the assembly time, you are actually shortening your sermon time! Rice would make preachers who want to preach long figure out ways to lengthen the communion time meaningfully. That might not be so bad.

Greet your wife and kids for me. I remember fondly your hospitality when I was in town and look forward to returning it if you visit Abilene. God be gracious to you as you seek him and his guidance in your ministry. You are a great encouragement to me as I try to help prepare men and women for ministry. I am glad to be able to point to you as a minister committed to the Kingdom of God and its expression within our heritage of Churches of Christ. Remember Jesus Christ. And pray that I may be useful to Christ here.

Shalom,

André Resner, Jr.

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