



More than Good Theology

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“SERMONS IN LUTHERAN CHURCHES DON’T SPEAK TO MY CHILDREN. THEY’RE GO-Sing elsewhere.” A life-long Lutheran with four adult-aged children said this to me recently. Only one of his children belongs to a Lutheran congregation. The rest have left, and the preaching they heard was the major factor in their leaving. What’s going on here? Is it a coincidence in just a few congregations? Is it uniquely Lutheran? Or is it a more widespread problem?

I don’t know the answer to those questions, but I take them very seriously. What are we preachers trying to do in the pulpit? Are we doing it well?

I. A UNIQUE AND DIFFICULT TASK

Preaching is not easy, but it never has been. Sermons are unique forms of oral communication, different from any other kind of speech. No form of speech is so multipurposed, has such high expectations and so many expectations as Christian preaching.

Traditionally, we devote most of our attention to the theological issues surrounding preaching—and those issues are as vitally important now as ever. How-

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“Sermons are boring,” say parishioners. Overcoming boredom requires more than good theology—though that is essential. It requires rhetorical skill, heartfelt passion, and personal integrity.

ever, I visit many churches and listen to a lot of preaching, from many denominations, and I know from being in the pews that there is far, far more to good preaching than good theology.

Several years ago I led a workshop entitled “Why Are People Bored with Good Preaching?” The session was scheduled for a classroom, but the turnout was so great that we had to move to the auditorium. Had I struck a sensitive nerve? How many persons came because they were preaching what they thought were good sermons, but the preaching didn’t seem to be very effective?

There is a desperate pathos here. The Bible tells us that “faith comes through what is heard” (Rom 10:17). Congregations want good preaching. Pastors want to preach well. Given all that, why isn’t today’s preaching more effective?

II. THEOLOGY AND RHETORIC

Good preaching is a combination of good theology and good rhetoric. Skimp on either side and the sermon won’t work. “Rhetoric” is the art of oral communication and skill of public speaking. In our seminaries we have historically devoted vastly more attention to theological topics than rhetorical matters. I recall in my own homiletics classes we spent most of our discussion time analyzing the law/gospel presentation in the sermon. It didn’t make much difference what the text actually said, as long as we got the law/gospel dynamic reasonably well balanced. I look back on my sermons from that time and am appalled how contrived they were—theologically correct, but overly analytical, wooden, and barely related to the text itself. I have no doubt they were also badly delivered; at least we paid hardly any attention to delivery. In a word, had these ghastly pieces been preached to a Sunday congregation they would have been judged—you guessed it—boring. The listeners would have been correct in their judgment.

III. LISTENING TO OUR PEOPLE

In a section titled “Thou Shalt Not Bore,” O. C. Edwards, Jr., writes,

When you come right down to it, the idea that the most exciting message the world has ever heard can be presented in a way that makes it sound old hat and dull is mind boggling.¹

The most frequent comment I hear from laypeople, particularly young persons, is that sermons are boring. Did Søren Kierkegaard see 155 years into the future when he wrote in *Either-Or*, “Boredom is the root of all evil”? It seems to be at least near to the root of preaching problems today!

Why is this? I have a uneasy suspicion that we homiletic teachers are not the right persons to teach preaching. We’re in the business ourselves, and we think like preachers, not like people in the pews. Pastors also, with their theological and exegetical training and ways of thinking, tend to deal with texts quite differently than

¹O. C. Edwards, Jr., *Elements of Homiletic* (New York: Pueblo, 1982) 102.

the listener in the pew. We preach what we hope are good sermons, but our perspective is so different from our listeners' perspectives that the sermon misfires. To get beyond myself and to help young preachers, I listen a lot to laypersons talk about preaching. These are, after all, the people we preach to, and they are our real teachers.

I spent a month in a congregation that numbered among its members several retired pastors and a couple religion professors. The pastor was a thoughtful, reflective preacher who spent much time in sermon preparation. His theological insights were invariably right on target. The pastors and professors thought his sermons were excellent. Yet the young persons I knew in the congregation invariably made comments like: "I didn't know what he was talking about." "I couldn't follow the sermon." "It didn't have anything to do with me."

With this in mind, what other factors about preaching must we attend to? Trained as we are to do sound exegesis, make sense theologically, and connect the biblical message with the lives of our people, what more do we need to do to preach effectively?

IV. NON-VERBAL FACTORS

"If they're redeemed, why don't they *look* redeemed?" commented that most unhappy young man Friedrich Nietzsche. He was the son of a Lutheran pastor, so he must have listened to many of his father's sermons. Was there something about that preaching that was a factor in the agonized and tortured spirit of young Friedrich, leading to the disillusionment and finally cynicism he expressed about the Christian faith? Given the German system of theological education, we can probably assume that Pastor Nietzsche's theology was in order. Were his sermons delivered with joy, verve, and energy? Were the listeners' hearts uplifted with the glorious good news of Jesus? Why did Friedrich miss all that? Why didn't Friedrich see redemption in the eyes, faces, and lives of the people around him? We'll never know, but Friedrich's comment should haunt us preachers.

Modern communication theory tells us that messages are conveyed as much by non-verbal factors as by the actual words spoken. We all know this, but we preachers don't accept this conclusion gladly. At the heart of our theology of preaching is the belief that the word proclaimed carries its own power, not dependent upon our preaching or public speaking skill. It is God's Spirit that produces the effect of the spoken word, not the personality of the preacher. I believe this too, but preaching is more complex than this simple assertion. There is an incarnational aspect of preaching that ties the words spoken to the speaker. The effect of preaching is the Spirit's work, but the preacher makes a difference.

Thomas Long, a Princeton professor, writes that we think of preachers as heralds (announcing good news), pastors (dealing pastorally with people's concerns), and storytellers (relating the biblical story to our life stories). To these he adds

“witness.” A witness bears testimony, but the words must be credible to the listener. The person of the witness is tied to the testimony given.

The testimony is not merely one of words but rather demands a total engagement of speech and action....The court has access to the truth only through the witness. It seeks the truth, but it must look for it in the testimony of the witness. The very life of the witness, then, is bound up into the testimony.²

This is not a new idea, but an echo of one of the first American textbooks on preaching. In his famous 1877 Yale lectures, Phillips Brooks coined the term “truth through personality” as a definition of preaching.

Lutherans and many other Christians tend to become very nervous with this sort of talk, as if the effect of the sermon would depend on the preacher’s craft rather than the message itself. It is the word and the Spirit that changes the hearts of the listeners. Yet a witness must give testimony as faithfully and effectively as possible, and we must attend to the broad complexity of the task of preaching. No one suggests that we assume some kind of saccharine-sweet mien in the pulpit, but it does mean that we ask ourselves if our voice, the expression on our face, and the energy of our delivery are consistent with the testimony of our words.

After a few months in my first parish, my wife asked me why I seemed to dislike preaching. I told her that I looked forward to preaching. I didn’t think more of her comment until I saw myself on video preaching, and I was appalled how serious I looked, downright glum. I was happy to be a Christian, but nobody would have known it watching me preach. I could have preached on the joy of being Christian, but I certainly didn’t *look* redeemed or joyful.

Speech teachers know that when we’re nervous we looked strained. It was quite natural that I looked grim, because I was nervous, but the congregation didn’t know that. They simply saw somebody who didn’t look as if he enjoyed preaching or even liked being in church at all. It was a sobering lesson.

V. USE OF VOICE

We all know that, in speaking, change attracts attention. When you listen to an unchanging, even voice your mind wanders. Elementary school teachers know that. Every day they speak to the age group with the shortest attention span of all. Listen to their voices! Loud and soft, fast and slow, loads of expression in their tone and on their faces. No wonder teachers of young children make good preachers. They know how to use their voices.

When you change your voice, the listeners’ attention perks up. Some people attract attention by speaking more loudly. Former seminary professor George Aus grabbed our attention by lowering his voice to a dramatic whisper, and we all leaned forward to catch what he was saying. Speeding up adds energy; slowing

²Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 42-43.

down adds emphasis. God gave us a magnificent instrument in our little voice boxes, and good preachers use it.

VI. FACIAL EXPRESSION

“Bring your personality into the pulpit with you,” is advice I tell a lot of students. When we’re nervous we tend to go flat. People who are animated and expressive in conversation often appear wooden and colorless in the pulpit.

One student recently viewed a videotape of his sermon and wrote, “A curious thing for me was to notice how tired and sad I looked....On a normal day I’m very animated....I missed a spark.” This comes from a young man who has plenty of spark in his personality and in his normal conversation! What happened in the pulpit? It was a case of nerves, a strained look on his face as he concentrated on getting the words right. He probably would not have believed he looked “tired and sad” had he not actually seen a video. After all, he didn’t feel that way, so how would he know how he actually appeared to the listeners unless he could see for himself? All preachers should videotape themselves from time to time.

VII. PASSION

Most of the above suggestions are fundamental guidelines for effective public speaking, the same counsel one receives at a noontime Toastmasters Club. I believe many of our preachers can benefit from such simple advice, but ultimately public speaking skill is a presupposition or basis for good preaching, not the thing itself. An effective preacher must be a good public speaker, but preaching is vastly more than that. Fred Craddock, the dean of homiletics professors in the United States, observed, “One can enjoy the wide reputation of being a good speaker and yet face the sad fact that hardly anyone has been altered thereby.”³

The best public speaker I ever had in a preaching class was a theater major with a finely trained voice and delivery style. He did all the rhetorical devices superbly well. But it was a performance. He was acting the role of a preacher, but I think others in the class also sensed that he hadn’t lived anything of what he spoke. I wrote on his manuscript, “Put your HEART in this sermon,” which wasn’t exactly accurate, but I couldn’t think of anything better on the spot.

The next speaker was a middle-aged woman, who had already told me before class that she was very nervous. Following the slick performance of the first speaker only made her more tense. She delivered her sermon in a strained voice and was clearly flustered when she stumbled a few times. Yet when she spoke of how Jesus comforted and healed the people he encountered, there was an unmistakable ring of truth to what she said. She had lived it. She didn’t shout or wave her hands, but there was a quiet intensity and passion to her sermon which swept us all up in the message.

³Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978) 53.

As I said at the beginning of this article, preaching is an enormously complex undertaking. Public speaking skill is essential, though often neglected, but preaching is way more than that. Good theology is essential, and sometimes missing, but preaching is more than that. In the end, preaching is the power and joy of the gospel funneled through us earthen vessels standing in the pulpit.

The place of preaching has declined, it is true. But this is a day of new and unparalleled opportunities. They can be seized as those who know the Word seek to confront the weak and conflicting ideologies of our age by the eternally valid and dynamic Word of God.⁴

People listen to sermons burdened with two questions uppermost in their minds: “Is it really true?” and “How does this work in my life?” The most crucially important 15-20 minutes of the week are when we can stand before them and speak of the wondrous good news of what God has done for them. That task deserves the very best we can do. ⊕

⁴James Montgomery Boice, “The Great Need for Great Preaching,” in *Heralds to a New Age*, ed. Don M. Aycock (Elgin, IL: Brethren, 1985) 7.