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The Theme of the Sermon

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Luther wollte den Irrtum gründlich widerlegen. Man wird den ganzen Abendmahlsstreit am besten verstehen, wenn man diese Schrift genau studiert. Der Schluß der Schrift ist ein kurzes, aber umfassendes Bekenntnis Luthers von den Hauptstücken der christlichen Lehre, das mit Recht des öfteren zitiert wird. Im Anschluß an das Apostolikum führt Luther kurz aus, was er glaubt, worauf er leben und sterben will. (St. Louiser Ausgabe XX, 894—1105.)

1528. „Bericht an einen guten Freund von beider Gestalt des Sacraments, auf des Bischofs zu Meissen Mandat.“ — Seine Absicht, diese Schrift zu verfassen, gab Luther schon am 26. April kund, und sie scheint etwa Ende Juni ausgegangen zu sein. Sie erschien in Wittenberg bei Joseph Klug, der sie im nächsten Jahr auch wieder auflegte. Luthers Angriff auf die römische Irreligion, sonderlich im ersten Teil dieser Abhandlung, ist sehr scharf und satirisch, wie wenn er schreibt: „Zum andern, so habe ich bisher mit meinem Schreiben schon allzubiel und starke Lutherische gemacht, daß ich wohl muß aufhören; es möchten sonst die Papisten allzugar lutherisch werden.“ „Weil denn der Papisten Art ist, mit eitel Lügen um[z]ugehen, und alle ihr Spiel eitel falsche Heuchelei und Trügerei ist, so will ich sie hinfort ihrem Abgott lassen, nachdem sie doch nichts anderes wollen, daß sie Lügen und trügen, bis sie müde werden.“ Der zweite Teil der Schrift ist ein Bedenken, „was man von den Ceremonien insgemein und insonderheit von Mitteldingen halten soll“, und der dritte Teil handelt „Von der eincn Gestalt des Sacraments“. (St. Louiser Ausgabe XIX, 1344—1395.)

U n m e r t u g. Die Tätigkeit Luthers während dieses Jahres auf dem Gebiet der Bibelübersetzung und der Schriftauslegung war nicht gering, denn er hat nicht nur eine Auslegung der Zehn Gebote auf den Markt gebracht, sondern auch Vorlesungen über den ersten Brief an Timotheum beendet sowie die Niederschrift der Propheten (besonders Jesajas) und eine neue Übersetzung des Pfalters besorgt.

(Fortsetzung folgt.)

P. E. R e c h m a n n.

The Theme of the Sermon.

The theme of the sermon is a proposition, or a statement, expressed in a few words. Yet Phelps, in his book of well-nigh six hundred pages, *The Theory of Preaching*, devotes eighty-two pages (pp. 282—364) to a discussion of the proposition, or the theme, of the sermon: its definition, necessity, substance, and form. Why? Because of the importance of the sermon theme. The theme is the sermon *in nuce*; the sermon is the theme unfolded, or developed.

The essence of a good theme is its *specificness*; a good theme must have an individuality all its own. Therefore the sermonizer must not only find the *main* thought of his sermon text, that is, the thought which pervades the *entire* text and which is not merely a secondary thought of some part of the text, but he must also find what his sermon text says *specifically* about its main thought, thereby distinguishing itself from other texts which treat the same subject-matter. Judging from this viewpoint, many sermon themes, also those of printed sermons and printed outlines, are homiletically defective; they are more or less colorless statements prefixed to the sermon — subjects, but not themes.

How does the sermonizer arrive at the theme? *By a thorough study and understanding of the sermon text.* A lack of a thorough study and understanding of the text is the reason why many ser-

monizers fail to find the real theme of their text and of their sermon and why many sermons are poor in content. It ought to go without saying that we leave out of consideration the preacher who does not do his own sermon work, but instead *copies verbatim* the ready-made material of other men, either entirely or to a large part, and then recites it, or even reads it, to his congregation. Such dishonesty is unworthy of a minister of the Gospel. In his brochure *Sieben Geheimnisse der Predigtkunst*, Alexander Loewentraut tells us that the preacher who does his own mining and minting has discovered one of the secrets of successful sermonizing. Loewentraut says: "Ein viertes Geheimnis fuer eine wirksame Predigtkunst ist naemlich das Konzept der Predigt, und zwar das eigene, das heisst, die eigene Ausarbeitung desselben. . . . Wie viele Prediger mag es wohl geben, deren Predigten eigene Arbeiten sind, selbst gewonnen und durchdacht, eigenhaendig und vollstaendig niedergeschrieben? . . . Leider greifen viele infolge mangelhafter homiletischer Vorbildung fruehzeitig, zumal durch die Naehc des naechsten Predigttermins gezwungen, zu fremden Predigten, oder sie lassen, durch den scheinbar guten Rat, nach Mustern zu arbeiten, bewegen, allmaehlich nach und verlassen sich immer mehr auf eine zuweilen nur notduerftige Durcharbeitung oder mehr oder weniger genaue Aneignung fremder Predigten, ja ganzer Predigtjahrgaenge, eine Arbeit, die obendrein zu meist in den letzten Tagen oder gar am letzten Tage der Woche, oft noch nach andern Arbeiten, erledigt wird. . . . Dass man unter solchen Umstaenden keine wirksame Predigt am Sonntage erwarten darf, liegt auf der Hand. . . . Im Interesse seiner Predigtarbeit gute fremde Predigten zu lesen, ueberhaupt Predigtlectuere zu treiben, ist nichts weniger als verboten; vielmehr gilt auch hier die Mahnung des Apostels: 'Pruefet alles und das Gute behaltet!' 1 Thess. 5, 21. Gute fremde Predigten sind zu studieren! Nur sind die gedruckten Predigten, wenigstens die meisten, nicht dazu verfasst und herausgegeben worden, gleichsam geistige Hypotheken fuer geistesarme Geistliche zu werden; sie sollen vielmehr zur Erbauung ihrer Leser dienen. Es ist daher ein schmaehlicher Missbrauch, den man mit gedruckten Predigten treibt, wenn man sie zu Surrogaten eigener Predigtgedanken erniedrigt." In these days of *Vielgeschaeftigkeit* and many distractions it needs to be said with special emphasis that the making of a good sermon outline and the writing of a good sermon requires that sufficient time and labor be given to the task; that is the price that must be paid. "*Von der Stirne heiss rinnen muss der Schweiss, soll das Werk den Meister loben; doch der Segen kommt von oben.*"

Let me in a practical way demonstrate how the theme is to be found. Let us take 1 Tim. 2, 1—7 as our text. After praying for divine enlightenment and the Lord's blessing upon his entire effort

the sermonizer should carefully read the text in the vernacular. But Scripture should not be studied in a piecemeal fashion, and therefore also the context, the immediate and, if need be, the remote context, should be read. The original Greek text should be carefully studied. At this time the sermonizer should make no real effort to find the parts and the theme of his text; these should rather press themselves in upon him as the result of his meditation on the text. As the sermonizer works through the text, he will find that in the very first two verses there is an exhortation to *prayer*, in fact, to prayer "for all men," "for kings and for all that are in authority" being especially mentioned. The reason why we should pray for our rulers, whatever the form of government may be, is given in the words "that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." With the word *οὐν* the apostle links up his exhortation to prayer with the thought expressed in v. 18 of the previous chapter. The purpose of the charge committed to Timothy is the salvation of all men, and therefore, in public worship and otherwise, prayer should be made for all; "for," as the apostle says, "this is good and acceptable in the sight of God, our Savior, who will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth," vv. 3. 4. That the *γαρ* is missing in v. 3 in some manuscripts does not change the sense. The *γαρ* in v. 5 at once indicates that the thought which follows is linked with the preceding one, to wit, that prayer should be made for the salvation of all men; for there is only one God, who earnestly desires the salvation of all His created human beings and offers His grace to them through the one Mediator, Christ Jesus, "who gave Himself a ransom for all," v. 6, which fact is to be testified *καιροῖς ἰδοις*, in due time, each generation receiving the testimony in its own time, Paul himself, v. 7, having been called as a preacher and an apostle and a teacher of the Gentiles for that purpose. In vv. 2b—7 the *reasons* for *intercessory* prayer are given, and at the same time the content of such a prayer is indicated.

That it is a correct exegesis of the text to say that *throughout* the apostle has the subject of *prayer* in mind is clearly learned from v. 8, where the apostle still speaks of prayer, saying: "I will therefore that *men* pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting." In this verse the apostle shows that in *public* worship, *men* (here the word *ἀνὴρ* is used, not *ἀνθρώπος*, as in vv. 1. 4. 5), not women, v. 9 ff., should offer the prayers. We here also have an instance which shows how necessary it is that the preacher should be able to read and understand the original Greek text. In the English translation the word "men" in the expressions that "prayers be made for all men," that God "will have all men to be saved," and that "men pray everywhere" on the face appears to have the same meaning; yet the Greek, as we have seen, uses different words to bring out the

different and the real meaning. Luther's translation emphasizes this difference, for he uses the words *Menschen* in vv. 1. 4. 5 and *Maenner* in v. 8. In the American Revised Version the distinction is made by prefixing the article "the" to men in v. 8, which article the King James Version omits.

At this juncture of the study of the text, or even while verse for verse is being studied, the parallel passages or Scripture references should be looked up and the most pertinent ones later inserted in the outline and used in the sermon.

My purpose has not been to give a thorough exposition of the text or a complete sermon study, but merely to point out the guiding lines, showing the sermonizer how to arrive at the parts of his sermon and at the theme. Retracing his steps after a careful study of the text, the sermonizer will find that the text contains such important thoughts as these: God would have us lead a quiet and peaceable life in this world; God will have all men to be saved; Christ Jesus is the only Mediator between God and men; Christ gave Himself a ransom for all. These are important facts; but none of them can be made the theme of the sermon, for none of them expresses the unit-thought of the *entire seven verses of the sermon text*; they are secondary to the *main thought of the text*, which is an *exhortation to prayer*. But while prayer is the main thought, covering all the verses of the text, we must for the formulation of the theme look for some *distinctive* statement in this text in reference to prayer, something *which distinguishes this text from other texts that also speak of prayer*; for instance, John 16, 23 speaks of *prayer in the name of Jesus*; Matt. 21, 22, of the *prayer of faith*; Matt. 6, 5—8, of *prayer offered up in true sincerity*; Luke 11, 5—13, of *persistent prayer*; Matt. 6, 9—13, of the *model prayer*; Jas. 5, 14 of *prayer for the sick*; Matt. 9, 38, of *prayer for workers in the Lord's vineyard*; Jer. 29, 7, of *prayer for one's city and country*; 1 John 5, 14, 15, of *prayer according to the will of God*; Matt. 4, 10, of *prayer to the true God*; etc. What does the text 1 Tim. 2, 1—7 say of *prayer in distinction from these other texts?* It is an exhortation to *intercessory* prayer. The word "intercessory," however, not being readily understood by all in a mixed church audience, had better not be used in the theme. Besides, v. 1 tells us that *prayer in its various forms of content* (supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks) should be made *for all men*. Again, we find that the text contains not only an exhortation to prayer for all men, but says *why* such prayer should be made. The theme may therefore be formulated to read as follows: *Why God Asks Us to Pray for All Men*. 1) He does so for our own sake, vv. 1. 2, (cf. Jer. 29, 7); 2) He does so for the sake of others, vv. 3—7 (God desires the salvation of all men). In the introduction to the sermon it may be said that every Christian prays and that he

quite self-evidently in his prayers speaks of his *own* needs and of his *own* blessings, but (this is the transitional thought) that God also asks Christians to *pray for others*, for all men.

In the text just treated the specific thought which gives to the text its peculiar physiognomy and to the theme its color is quite apparent. It is not always so apparent in all texts; the preacher must diligently search for it. It may be just one word or one phrase that needs to be added to show up the peculiar physiognomy of a certain text; but that word or phrase must be found. Two more examples shall be given. 2 Cor. 1, 3—7 speaks of *comfort in trials and tribulations*. Comfort is the *main* thought; but many texts in the Bible speak to us of comfort. The *specific* thought in the text is given by the words of v. 4: "who comforteth us in all our tribulations *that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.*" The refrain to this distinctive thought of the text is found in vv. 6 and 7: "It is for *your* consolation and salvation," "so shall *ye* be also of the consolation." A theme like this would be suitable for the above text: *God Would Have Us Comfort Others in Their Troubles by the Comfort wherewith We Ourselves are Comforted of God.* This theme being somewhat long, we might shorten it by saying: *By the Comfort wherewith We are Comforted of God We Should Comfort Others.* Such a theme has color; it is not general, it is specific. — 1 John 4, 7—12 speaks of *love*. That is its *main* thought; but that is too general. The text tells us that we are to *love one another*; but there are other texts that also tell us that. This particular text gives us the *reasons* why we must love one another. Therefore a theme like this would be specific: *Why Must We Love One Another?* Now the preacher knows exactly what he is to preach, and the hearer knows exactly what he is to learn.

In the *parables* the *tertium comparationis* determines the theme, and of course the treatment, of the entire text. The New Testament *miracle texts* teach that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, that, believing, we might have life through His name, John 20, 31. The sermonizer must find the *specific* truth which the miracle teaches in connection with this fact.

The theme in its specific character *restricts the thought*, but *greatly increases the sermon material*. Those preachers who are satisfied to treat a general subject are following the path of least resistance. But they will soon have nothing more to say on that subject; their sermons will be general and vague and will soon grow stale both to themselves and to their hearers. The specificness of the theme, which is found by digging down into the text, gives color to the sermon; it gives to sermons that *variety* which is necessary to hold the interest and the attention of a congregation before which

a preacher is called upon to preach Sunday after Sunday, month after month, and year after year; it makes sermonizing a real pleasure to the preacher and the hearing of sermons a real joy to his congregation; above all, the congregation will derive much spiritual benefit from such sermons, increasing in spiritual knowledge and in godliness, and such preaching will redound to the greater glory of God and the greater glory of Him "who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."

The treatment given to 1 Tim. 2, 1—7, the text which we used as an example, is that of the *analytic* sermon method. Suffice it to say that, when the *synthetic* method is used, the sermonizer must also first work analytically; the *main* thought of the text must be in his synthetic theme, the theme must be specific to the text, the sermon must be textual. A *synthetic* treatment of 2-Cor. 1, 3—7 (referred to before) would suggest this theme: *The Spiritual Harm We Christians Do to Others when We Murmur under the Trials and Afflictions of This Life*. 1) We set a bad example to others; 2) We do not and cannot comfort others as indeed we ought to do. While these thoughts are not expressed in the text in so many words, they are implied; we have found them *by way of deduction*; the truths they express are contained in the text and can be proved from the text. (See article on "Sermon Methods," CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, Vol. II, p. 364 ff.)

The theme should be a statement. A statement, however, need not be expressed in a complete grammatical sentence. Such a theme as *The Prayer of Faith, Prayer in the Name of Jesus*, is the statement of a fact. The theme may be in the form of a declarative sentence, an interrogation, an exclamation, or a mere phrase. The theme should always be clearly stated; words not readily understood or ambiguous should not be used. The theme should not be too long; just enough words should be used to bring out clearly the meaning. Since the theme is a very important part of the sermon, — its unit-thought, *der rote Faden, der sich durch das Ganze hindurchzieht*, — the theme should not only be announced, but the announcement should be made with such an approach (by a cautionary preface and a significant pause) and in such a manner (speaking slowly, distinctly, loudly) that every person in the audience will get the theme. When the preacher has finished preaching, the hearer ought to be able to give a definite, clear-cut answer to the question, What did the preacher say? A preacher will do well to put this question to his class of catechumens on Monday. If the majority of the children can give no answer to this question or only a very incomplete one or even give an incorrect answer, the preacher should not scold the children for their inattention, but rather blame himself, go home and go down on his knees and ask God to forgive him and promise that with the Lord's help he will do better next Sunday.

Have I thoroughly studied my text, and do I understand it? Have I found its most important thoughts, and have I coordinated them? Does my theme cover these thoughts, and is it specific to this particular text? Do my divisions, or parts, divide the theme? What is my *fundamentum dividendi*? Do the subdivisions offer sufficient material for development? How about the logical arrangement? Have I added the text references and the parallel passages? What about the applications? Have I a good introduction, one that really leads up to the theme? How about the conclusion? What will be the *final total impression* which — not I, but — the sermon will make upon the hearers? These are questions which the sermonizer should ask himself after he has finished his outline and before he writes his sermon.

God has given us the themes for our sermons in the Bible, His Word. We should diligently search for them. How could we preachers otherwise say with Paul: "I take you to record this day that I am pure from the blood of all men; for I have not shunned to declare unto you *all the counsel of God*"? Acts 20, 26. 27.

JOHN H. C. FRITZ.

Dispositionen über die altkirchliche Epistelreihe.

Jubilate.

1 Petr. 2, 11—20.

Church publicity wird gegenwärtig stark unter uns betont. Und mit Recht. Die Kirche Christi darf ihr Licht nicht unter einen Scheffel setzen. Sie muß alle ihr zu Gebote stehenden Mittel gebrauchen, das Evangelium an den Mann zu bringen, z. B. Hausbesuche, Traktate, kirchliche Zeitschriften und Bücher, Tagespresse, Radio usw.

Die beste Reklame für das Evangelium ist und bleibt aber der gottselige Wandel der Christen. Wo dieser fehlt, werden alle andern Mittel wenig nützen. Das wird jedoch oft vergessen. Darum heute:

Daß der christliche Wandel von der allergrößten Bedeutung für die Ausbreitung des Evangeliums ist.

1. Weil die Schmähungen der Welt dadurch als Verleumdungen gebrandmarkt werden;
2. weil unserm Zeugnis dadurch Nachdruck verliehen wird.

1.

a. Die Welt verhöhnt und verurteilt die Christen als Übeltäter, B. 12, als sonderbares, eingebildetes, hoffärtiges, seine Mitmenschen hassendes Volk, das aus Loren und Heuchlern zusammengesetzt sei und nur Zwietracht in der Welt anrichte. So war es zu Petri Zeit; so ist es heute noch. (Weisspiele.)