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## Reflections on the Status of Our Preaching

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The conventional views of heaven and hell as states of bliss and of torment are "utterly repellent" (p. 93).

I have carefully reread Lewis's *Great Christian Teachings* and have failed to find in its pages one sentence or a line that maintains any element of supernatural religion except the existence of a God (who is not a Trinity, however) and of the possibility of the persistence of the soul after death. It is a faith that will be readily subscribed to by the Ethical Society, by the *Monistenbund*, and by the rationalism of the streets. The fundamental doctrines of Christianity are denied implicitly and explicitly. The book is antichristian, destructive of faith in the Bible and in its teachings.

Methodist and Baptist publishers, not to mention Scribner's and the Macmillans, have for the past twenty years placed their facilities at the command of Modernists. As a result we have to-day a grown-up generation in the Protestant churches which from the days of its youth has no acquaintance with the doctrines of Christianity. This unbelieving generation is now in control of the Sunday-schools and other teaching agencies of the sectarian bodies. More and more it becomes a problem how to deal with this situation in our mission-work. When is a "prospect" to be regarded as a Christian who holds membership in another communion and, as such, not to be looked upon as missionary material? Until fifteen or twenty years ago we would say that adult persons who professed membership in the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches were members of a Christian body and could be presumed to have received and accepted Christian instruction. But the unquieting thought forces itself upon us—if proselytizing means to steal the sheep of some other shepherd, how about our attitude toward sheep whose shepherd we know to be a wolf?

THEO. GRAEBNER.

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## Reflections on the Status of Our Preaching.

### A Symposium of Eighty Opinions.

Christian preaching never continues very long on the same plane. On the contrary, it is subject to a continual alternation of revival and decline, and that not merely with reference to its literary and homiletical qualities, but above all in the substance, the power, and the effectiveness of its message. There is nothing extraordinary about this; for "human progress of every kind is usually not steady and continuous, but rather goes by waves, like the rising tide. Declension and revival, forward and backward, up and down, these are the common Christian phenomena, individual, local, general. Even the most superficial study reveals the connection, at once causal and

resultant, between movements of the kind described\* and preaching. Decline of life and activity in the Church is commonly accompanied by a lifeless, formal, unfruitful preaching, and this partly as a cause and partly as an effect. On the other hand, the great revivals of Christian history can most usually be traced to the work of the pulpit, and in their progress they have rendered possible a high order of preaching." (E. C. Dargan, *History of Preaching*, I, 12 f.)

Accordingly, the life and spiritual complexion of a period are commonly revealed with striking accuracy in its pulpit productions. This truth is emphasized by Prof. J. M. Hoppin, who says: "There can be imagined no standard which marks so delicately and truly as preaching does the character of a period. . . . The preacher can rarely go far in advance of, or remain far behind, the intellectual and moral appreciation of the people to whom he preaches; and while therefore the fundamental truths and principles of preaching remain the same, the style of preaching, both in its spirit and form, becomes a sure, though ever-changing, index of the varied phases of the religious life of great Christian epochs." (*Homiletics*, p. 13.)

Even a casual survey of the history of the Church discloses the interesting fact that every great spiritual revival was either directly inaugurated or at least accompanied by fervent and forceful preaching. The first rays of the dawning day invariably proceeded from the pulpits of the great preachers, who, towering head and shoulders above their fellows, delivered messages which aroused the masses from their lethargy, brought them to repentance and faith, and inspired them to a more consecrated and active Christianity. "All great revivals," says Dr. John Ker, "all true advances in the Church, have come from the simple, earnest preaching of the Gospel. Let us never be allured from this or scoffed out of it. It has shown itself, age after age, the power of God to build up the Church, to convince the gainsaying, and to gather men within the fold of Christ." (*Lectures on the History of Preaching*, p. 12.)

But just as strong Scriptural preaching has always ushered in a better day for the Church, so poor preaching has without exception been the harbinger, yes, even one of the most potent causes, of spiritual degeneration and decay. The low tides and great spiritual depressions in the life of the Church have always been preceded and accompanied by weak, mechanical, and shallow utterances from the pulpit. This need not surprise us; for regular preaching is after all the chief source of instruction and edification in the Church, and where this is seriously at fault, the membership will gradually be deprived of the blessings stored up for them in the Word, and the

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\* Movements in the life and progress of nations, in customs and morals, in the arts and science, and in human culture generally.

Church itself will definitely, though perhaps imperceptibly at first, enter upon a period of decline.

The whole matter is well summed up by Dr. John Brown in the following words: "The preacher's message and the Church's spiritual condition have risen or fallen together. When life is gone out of the preacher, it is not long before it is gone out of the Church also. On the other hand, when there has been a revived message of life on the preacher's lip, there comes, as a consequence, a revived condition in the Church itself. The connection between these two has been close, uniform, and constant." (*Puritan Preaching in England*, p. 7.)

It is comparatively easy for us to dissect and analyze the preaching of past generations, to find in their sermons the records of their spiritual lives, and to trace the forces that either brought about a spiritual revival or were responsible for the resultant deterioration. The preacher of the present day will therefore find much food for thought and many wholesome lessons, both of inspiration and warning, in the sermons of past ages, especially if he studies them against the background of the period in which they were preached. It is undoubtedly true that our own preaching would be far better and that many pitfalls into which others have fallen would be avoided if we should make use of the rich and dearly bought experiences of our predecessors in the pulpit as they have been preserved for us in their homiletical productions.

But how much more valuable would it be for us if we could arrive at a correct estimate of the preaching of our own Church in the present generation! How many dangerous tendencies might we not discover in our own preaching! How many weaknesses might not become apparent! If we could really see ourselves as others see us and especially as the student of the history of preaching will see us later on, should we not be placed in a position and filled with the desire to improve our preaching, to thwart the dangerous tendencies that have crept in, to forestall all evil developments, and to insure, in a measure at least, the spiritual prosperity and the power and success of the oncoming generation of preachers?

Unfortunately, however, we cannot usurp the functions of history. We are living too close to the present scene and are too intimately identified with the good and the evil therein to be competent to pass a satisfactory verdict upon the work that is being done in our pulpits. And yet we ought to take stock of ourselves. It would be a great mistake to continue to take for granted that all is well and to rest upon the laurels earned by our fathers. We owe it to ourselves, to the people to whom we are preaching, and especially to the rising generation of preachers in our Church to enter into judgment with ourselves and fearlessly and honestly to take an inventory

of the contents, the quality, and the effectiveness of our preaching. Whenever the Church as a whole and especially the preachers themselves were interested in preaching, watched over it zealously, and put forth honest efforts for its continual improvement, preaching flourished and produced results; but whenever the pulpit lived in smug self-complacency and the pew was satisfied to let well enough alone, the inevitable decline came. It is self-evident therefore that we who as preachers of the Word continually admonish others to examine themselves should take stock of ourselves, and that above all with regard to the most important work the Lord has assigned to us, the preaching of the Gospel. We should ask ourselves: What is the present status of preaching in our Synod? What position will be assigned to our preaching by the Christian historians of future ages? What position is being assigned to it even now by the Head of the Church?

Prompted by considerations such as these, the writer several months ago addressed a letter to one hundred pastors of our Synod, asking them to express themselves frankly on the status of our preaching, to point out its virtues and its weaknesses, to note any dangerous tendencies which they may have observed, and to state how, in their opinion, our preaching might be improved. The men addressed live in practically every section of our country, occupy different positions in the Church, are of various ages, and represent divers shades of opinion. They were chosen in such a way as to afford as nearly as possible a cross-section of the opinion of our clergy on the important matter under consideration. Eighty of these men replied, some with very long and detailed letters. It is evident from these letters that almost every writer approached his task with considerable misgivings. Letter after letter begins with a confession that the writer does not consider himself competent to answer the questions submitted, but that he will try to answer them for the good of the cause. Frequent mention is made of the fact that the average minister gets to hear very few sermons and that even these rare instances are confined to a small circle. Another difficulty pointed out by quite a few is well stated by a brother in the following words:—

“The difficulty of getting a fair and adequate answer to the ‘Questions on the Status of Preaching in the Missouri Synod’ lies in the danger of giving the answers on the basis of voluntary or involuntary self-examination and, more than this, in the danger of permitting a consideration of one or two greatly praised or much-blamed pulpiteers to mold the answer to the question. It is quite difficult to form an opinion which may justly be said to reflect the general condition of pulpit work among us.”

Nevertheless many of the brethren made a very thorough study of the situation in their vicinity, some of the District Presidents even going so far as to make detailed tabulations on the basis of their findings.

In order to guide his correspondents in their discussion of the matter under consideration, the writer submitted the following questions to them:—

1. What is your impression— are we maintaining the traditional high standards of the Lutheran Church in our preaching, or have we entered upon a period of decline?

2. What symptoms of decline have you noticed?

3. Do our ministers in general still regard preaching as their most important work?

4. Have you noticed any decided trend away from doctrinal preaching?

5. Is expository preaching still considered the ideal method for a Lutheran pulpit? (The term "expository" is here used in its widest connotation.)

6. Have you observed any alarming tendencies in our preaching that are not mentioned on this sheet?

7. If there is a decline in our preaching, to what causes must it be attributed? a) Training at preparatory schools and seminaries? b) Change of attitude with regard to preaching on the part of our ministers? c) Undue emphasis placed upon activities in other departments of the congregation's work? d) Extracongregational activities? e) Lack of studiousness and conscientious sermon-preparation? f) Worldliness among the clergy?

8. Does bilingual work affect the quality of our preaching? If so, in what respect?

9. Do homiletical helps, such as detailed sermon outlines, tend to improve or to aggravate the situation?

10. What can be done to improve preaching throughout our Synod?

Since a considerable number of brethren have inquired concerning the yield of this survey, the following compilation of excerpts is being passed on to the readers of this journal,—not indeed for the purpose of announcing any positive conclusions,—for this is utterly impossible at the present time,—but in order that the prayerful attention of our pastors and conferences may be directed to the important questions treated in this discussion. The available materials will be arranged under the following heads: 1. Are we maintaining the traditional high standards of the Lutheran Church in our preaching, or have we entered upon a period of decline? 2. The alarming symptoms, regarded by some as evidences of a decline. 3. The alleged causes of the present situation. 4. Suggestions for the improvement of our preaching.

### 1.

#### Are We Maintaining the Traditional High Standards of the Lutheran Church in Our Preaching, or Have We Entered upon a Period of Decline?

The answers to this question may be grouped under three heads: those who declare that there has been no decline whatever in our preaching, those who are very positive in their assertion that we

have definitely entered upon a period of decline, and those who are not ready to go so far as to say that there has been a decline, but who declare very frankly that our preaching is not what it should be, especially in view of the age in which we are living, and who report that they have noticed certain ominous tendencies which will eventually lead to a decline unless they are speedily checked. Among the eighty men who responded to the questionnaire eleven gave the first answer, thirty the second, and thirty-five the third. Four declined to commit themselves.

The eleven who registered the opinion that, *on the whole, all is well with our preaching*, not only believe that we are maintaining the high standards of preaching which have become traditional in the Lutheran Church, but also claim to see evidences of progress, at least in some respects. The following quotations from their letters give expression to this opinion.

A prominent minister in one of our large Lutheran centers writes:—

“I do not believe that we have entered upon a period of decline, although our type of preaching is different from that of twenty-five or thirty years ago. . . . I am certain the men make a real effort to hold the attention of the people by presenting their subject-matter in the best possible manner.”

Another brother, one of our leaders in the larger work of the Church, expresses himself thus:—

“I believe our preaching of to-day is more directly fitted to the needs of our people than were many of the sermons of the fathers. The doctrinal content of the sermons of the fathers was truly Lutheran, — often directly taken from Luther's postils! — but the applications were in many cases far from being *zeitgemaess*. . . . I am also of the opinion that our younger preachers do more popular preaching in the sense that their hearers find it easier to assimilate what they hear than was the case with many hearers in the days of the fathers. The food which the fathers set before their hearers was good, solid, and nourishing, but in many cases it was beyond the power of their hearers to digest and assimilate. I hold that, upon the whole, the preaching of to-day is quite *gemeindegemaess*, not vulgar and yet popular; not too much diluted and yet easily digested; not overspiced and yet palatable. . . . I am of the opinion that Christian doctrine is brought nearer to the hearers' hearts to-day among us, that the sermons are more palpitating with life and apparent concern and sympathy than they were some decades ago. . . . I also hold that the delivery of our younger men compares very favorably with that of the older men in our Synod.”

The last point, by the way, has been mentioned by quite a few of the writers, even by such as hold the opinion that our preaching has deteriorated. Among the latter is the president of one of our preparatory schools, who voices his opinion in the following words:—

“In respect to form and delivery we have maintained the traditional standards of the past. Our English may not be quite so

good as was the German of our fathers. That is because we are now in the transitional period. We are no longer masters of the German and have not yet attained to perfection in English. . . . In delivery, however, I think we are, as a whole, superior. Rarely, if ever, does one hear to-day that old monotonous singsong, the *Kanzelton*, that was so common in former years."

These few quotations present a fair summary of the opinions expressed by those who contend that there has been no decline in our preaching. At the other extreme we find the thirty who are very positive in their assertion that *there has been a very decided decline in our preaching*. Among these are some of the best-informed and keenest observers in our Synod. One of these men, a young man of excellent scholarship and wide experience, says:—

"My impression is that we have definitely entered upon a period of decline in our preaching, and unless I am sadly mistaken, the decline began about fifteen or twenty years ago."

Another brother, living several thousand miles from the one just quoted, says:—

"My impression is that, generally speaking, there was better preaching a generation ago than to-day. With the ministers of the first generations the sermon was the living issue; they were almost constantly occupied in their minds with a sermon; they came to grips with it early in the week; they made it the topic of conversation on their visits with brethren in office; they discussed the sermon in conference; they continually sought for improvement in preaching; they put their best efforts into their sermon. With the present generation that is not the case in like degree. The minds of the brethren to-day are overburdened, preoccupied, with so many other things, that often the sermon does not receive due attention, and—pardon the expression—in a belated afterthought comes in for worried and hurried preparation. When the sermon does not receive the prime attention of the preacher, a decline in preaching is inevitable. . . . Yes, sad to say, in our Synod preaching has suffered a decline."

The same attitude is taken by one of our District Presidents. He says:—

"To me it seems self-evident that there is, and must be, a decline also in our preaching, since we are living in the last evil times of the world, when, according to Scripture, earthly-mindedness will increase more and more. We ministers are children of our times, influenced far more by the trend and tendencies of our days than we realize, as a rule."

Another quotation to the same effect is taken from the letter of one of our most experienced older pastors. He says:—

"Es laesst sich nicht leugnen, dass die Predigt nicht mehr die Stellung in unserer Synode einnimmt wie zu den Zeiten unserer Vaeter. Fruher wurde ganz allgemein viel Fleiss verwandt auf die Sonntagspredigt, auch seitens vielbeschaeftigter Stadtpastoren. Jetzt wird schon ziemlich viel extemporiert oder nach einer Disposition gepredigt. Stadtpastoren machen sich kein Gewissen daraus, Sonnabend bis spaet in die Nacht hinein sozial taetig zu sein. Ihre Predigten riechen dann Sonntags nicht nach der Lampe."



Another expresses the same opinion in the following words:—

“I have no doubt that preaching in the Missouri Synod does not to-day generally maintain the high standard of method, contents, form, and language that prevailed a generation ago.”

Still another says:—

“I am firmly convinced that the standard of preaching in our Church is at the present time decidedly low. I have reference not to the doctrinal content, but to the form and to the failure to adapt our preaching to the needs of the day. I hope I shall not be misunderstood. I well realize that the preaching in our Church must always remain distinctively Lutheran and that there must be no aping of the preaching methods of the Reformed denominations. There has been, however, a failure, as far as I can see, to adapt our pulpit work to the changed character of our mission-work.”

A pastor in one of our large cities gives his opinion with great frankness. He says:—

“In general I would say that, if the sermons I have heard are typical of our preaching, then we need not be surprised that intelligent men and women leave our churches, and our congregations consist in so many instances of ‘habit Lutherans.’ . . . A few were rambling discourses that struck me as an insult to the hearers. Others were marvelous exhibitions of shouting, with neither head nor tail. But the majority were quite proper homiletical efforts, in fact, too proper. . . . What the preacher had to say never seemed to come to grips with the realities that confronted his hearers.”

This is in agreement with the opinion voiced by a man who, owing to his position, has had opportunity to hear quite a few of our preachers. He writes:—

“In general, I am often disgusted with, and discouraged at, sermons I hear; they are so shallow, so full of repetitions, so ineffective, when one considers what they might and ought to accomplish.”

We now proceed to hear the opinions of *those who occupy the middle ground*. These brethren point to the fact that good preachers have always been the exception and that it would be unfair to judge the sermons of the present generation by a comparison with the exceptional productions of the more gifted men among the fathers. They are not willing to concede that in general there has been any noticeable retrogression in our preaching; but at the same time they declare that certain evil tendencies are becoming apparent which will most certainly lead to a decline of our pulpit unless they are curbed by a joint and summary action. This group, the largest of the three, finds an able spokesman in one of our District Presidents. He says:—

“I think your question number one needs a little scrutiny. It implies that in the past we have maintained traditional high standards, etc. Is that the case? I am not saying that it is not the case, but I will give you my recollection of some of the preachers who served larger congregations when I was a student and later on.

[Here follow interesting characterizations of a number of prominent ministers in larger Lutheran centers twenty-five years ago.] Such a brief review seems to indicate to me that we have not always maintained high standards of preaching and that also many of our fathers were lacking in this respect, although most of them worked in one language only and did not have a thousand and one trivial things to distract them that burden the poor minister nowadays. So my answer to your question one would be that we have not entered upon a period of decline, but that, to my mind, we have throughout not upheld the high standards of the Lutheran Church, and for some reason or other our failing in this respect is now becoming more apparent."

Another writes in a similar strain: —

"I am aware that, when thinking of the traditional standards of the past, we are apt to think of the high standards set by such men as Walther, Stoeckhardt, Pieper, and others like them. But their preaching was not representative of the preaching of their generation. These men stood head and shoulders above the average of their time."

The opinions of this group are well summarized in the following statement by a brother in the Middle West: —

"While convinced that our preaching is still very much above the level found in sectarian circles, I do believe that there is a great deal of poor preaching and that earnest efforts should be made to remedy this condition."

Quotations such as these might be multiplied; but this is hardly necessary, especially since the particulars of the criticisms registered by these brethren will be presented in another part of this symposium.

E. J. FRIEDRICH.

## Die Hauptschriften Luthers in Chronologischer Reihenfolge.

Mit Anmerkungen.

(Vortsetzung.)

1534. „Ein Brief D. M. L. von seinem Buch der Winkelmeßen.“ — Diese kurze Schrift (von nur 29 Paragraphen) verfaßte Luther in den Tagen nach dem 10. März, und sie erschien in demselben Jahr in zwei Ausgaben bei Hans Luft in Wittenberg sowie in einer Ausgabe bei Kunegund Hergotin in Nürnberg. Luther verteidigt sich in dem offenen Briefe gegen das Gerücht, als hätte er es — oder würde es mit der Zeit halten — mit den Schwärmern oder Sacramentsfeinden. Er weist auf der einen Seite hin auf seine Bücher gegen die Schwärmer, andererseits auf diejenigen gegen die Papisten. In Paragraph 5 findet sich die klare Stelle, die zeigt, daß die Papisten, „wo sie Christi Ordnung halten“, noch ein halbes Sacrament haben, „ob es wohl allein in einer Gestalt geschieht, dennoch der rechte, wahre Leib Christi sei und empfangen werde“. Der Hauptgedanke der Schrift liegt in dem Satze: „Hieraus könnt ihr wohl merken, daß ich nicht wider das Sacrament, sondern wider die Messe streite und wollte gern das Sacrament von der Messe also scheiden, daß die Messe zugrunde ginge und das Sacrament allein und ohne Messe erhalten würde bei seinen Ehren und bei der Ordnung unsers lieben Herrn Jesu Christi.“ (St. Louiser Ausgabe XIX, 1286 bis 1299.)

Anmerkung. Unter den Auslegungen dieses Jahres sind besonders zu nennen die des 101. Psalms, die in den ersten Monaten wiederholt erwähnt