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Reflections on the Status of Our Preaching

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und vertreten, sollen nach Gottes Willen jederzeit bereit sein zur Verantwortung jedermann, der Grund fordert der Hoffnung, die in ihnen ist, aber auch dazu, mit allen zusammenzuarbeiten, die wirklich mit ihnen in Glaubenseinigkeit stehen.

Alle diejenigen (Kirchengemeinschaften und einzelne), die in irgend-einem Punkte von der Wahrheit des Wortes Gottes (von irgend-einer klar geoffenbarten Lehre) abweichen, können nicht als Glaubens-brüder angesehen werden. Solange sie noch der Belehrung zugänglich sind und ihre falsche Stellung nicht öffentlich lehren und verbreiten, haben wir Geduld anzuwenden; aber dies Dulden darf nie auf Ver-leugnen der Wahrheit hinauslaufen.

Wenn die abweichende Stellung trotz gegenteiliger Ermahnung behauptet wird, dürfen wir mit solchen, die sich dessen schuldig machen, in keiner Weise auf kirchlichem Gebiet zusammenarbeiten (Altar- und Kanzelgemeinschaft) noch irgendwelche gottesdienstliche Gemeinschaft mit ihnen pflegen.

P. E. K r e t z m a n n.

Reflections on the Status of Our Preaching.

2.

The Alarming Symptoms, Regarded by Some as Evidences of a Decline.

Among the eighty brethren who replied to the questionnaire submitted in the last issue of this journal sixty-five went on record as being deeply concerned about the preaching that is being done in our Synod at the present time. They claim to have observed certain definite symptoms which must be regarded either as positive evidences of decline or as a handwriting on the wall warning us that a decline is bound to come unless we give more attention to the preparation and the delivery of our sermons. The following paragraphs present a number of the most interesting statements received on this point.

In Regard to the Attitude of the Preacher.

One of our most experienced men writes:—

“I regard as a symptom of decline the lack of real interest in the question of personal fitness, self-examination, comparison with others. This lack, I am inclined to think, is due largely to a certain self-satisfaction. . . . Another symptom I find is a lack of real professional interest in ministerial conferences and in the greater work and possibilities of the Church. This lack entails a lack of adjusting contacts, so much needed by so many of our men. Another lack that I think I discern is a lack of professional ambition. By ambition I mean nothing else than what Walther meant by it when he said: ‘*Die Bescheidenheit im Ziel ist eine suendliche Bescheidenheit.*’”

But even more alarming, according to not a few, is the change of attitude on the part of many of our ministers with regard to their preaching. A brother in the Northwest writes:—

"I fear many of our pastors no longer regard preaching as their most important work and consequently do not prepare their sermons carefully enough. . . . Some spend too much time visiting, gadding, lecturing, raising chickens, reading the papers, baseball news, etc."

Another says:—

"There may be something to the 'changed attitude with regard to preaching on the part of our ministers.' Subconsciously the view may seek to gain ground that the theologian of former days has out-lived his usefulness and that the 'go-getter' must replace him. Now the 'go-getter' has so many places to go (and they appear so very important to him) that he will not find sufficient time to get down to the unromantic task of writing a sermon."

But if it is really true that some of our pastors have changed their attitude toward their preaching, the blame, we are told, should not be placed upon them alone, but also upon their congregations. Apparently many congregations are very unreasonable in the demands which they make upon their pastors in the interest of other church activities and consequently render it impossible for them to do their best in the pulpit. Here is an expression on this point from one of our metropolitan pastors:—

"The complaint which practically all pastors, especially pastors in larger congregations, make is this, that with the stress of other work, different confirmation classes for children, for adults, visiting of sick, and mission-work, the round of meetings in the evening, Bible class and educational work in the different societies, they do not find the time for sermon work and study which they would like to have. *Zersplitterung der Kraefte* is the greatest weakness of the modern ministry. It is not that the pastor places undue emphasis upon the other activities in the congregation, but because he must give some time and thought to all these manifold duties of the ministry of today, his time for sermon work and study is too limited. There the real danger of a future decline lies."

Another brother says:—

"Do our ministers in general still regard preaching as their most important work? My answer: Yes, the ministers do. But some may have failed to impress upon their congregations the fact that preaching is the most important work."

Still another offers the practical suggestion:—

"Our congregations, too, should be made anxious to have real preachers in their pulpits. They should be taught that this is the chief work of each congregation and that they ought to give their pastor every available help in money and service to relieve his purse and other demands that he might devote himself and consecrate himself to his pulpit work."

*In Regard to the Contents of the Sermon.**a. Doctrinal Preaching.*

The question was asked: "Have you noticed any decided trend away from doctrinal preaching?" In the answers given to this question some differences of opinion are evident. Several of our correspondents assert that they have noticed *a decided trend away from doctrinal preaching*. A younger brother, who has much opportunity to hear others preach, says: —

"I have not heard a doctrinal sermon from our younger men in ten years. Recently I heard two sermons of a series of four on 'The Last Things.' There was not a word of the doctrine. The sermons were excellent moralizing."

And one of our leaders writes: —

"Leider ist auch das Interesse an der Lehre gesunken. Das zeigt sich daran, dass nicht einmal das MONTHLY von allen Pastoren gehalten wird, dass das Studium der grossartigen lutherischen Literatur zuruecktritt und den sektiererischen Erzeugnissen Platz macht."

A member of a District mission board replies: —

"You wish to know whether a decided trend away from doctrinal preaching has been noticed. I think I have. This trend probably is caused not so much by the unpopularity of doctrinal preaching as by the lack of preparation. At least I think that, if a person is unprepared, it is easier to exhort or to have recourse to inspirational or devotional preaching than to delve into the doctrine. Then again, a closer approach to the unchurched American may have brought some of us to think that we would frighten him away with too much doctrine."

Corroborating these expressions is the report of one of our District Presidents. He writes: —

"During the past two weeks I was privileged to attend two of our conferences. At each the usual sermons were heard at the services, and during the conferences sermons were read and criticism offered. This presented a fine opportunity for a discussion of our pulpit products. To a man the older pastors deplored the decline of expository and doctrinal preaching. Emotional and inspirational preaching is usurping a place in our midst to which it is not entitled."

Virtually the same opinion is voiced in the following communication from one of our larger conferences: —

"We believe that there is a decided trend away from doctrinal preaching. Just as greater indifference prevails to-day with regard to thoroughness in indoctrination while preparing children and adults for confirmation, so ever so many are not aware of the urgent necessity of indoctrinating their people by good doctrinal sermons. Goodly numbers of our pastors are of the opinion that doctrinal sermons are too dry and stale and will not prove to be a real drawing card. Some there are who imagine that doctrinal preaching means a mere matter of fact presentation of some certain Biblical doctrine, which cannot be made sufficiently interesting. They forget that by the proper method doctrinal preaching can be used as a genuine foundation for

true exhortation and admonition, in other words, that by interspersing proper applications doctrinal sermons become very interesting and decidedly profitable. It is our opinion that too many of our pastors have resorted to what one might term 'inspirational' preaching. We realize that inspirational preaching is necessary, but there must first of all be a good doctrinal foundation upon which to build. Again, we feel that too many of our ministers are apt to drift into mere admonition. Admonition is urgently necessary, especially in our day and time, but we cannot get away from the fact that there must be, first of all, the proper foundation, which can be laid only by thorough indoctrination."

On the other hand, the majority of the letters received indicate that *some sort of doctrinal preaching still seems to be the rule among us, but that it rather generally suffers from serious defects* and consequently is not as effective as it might be. "Doctrinal preaching is still carried on extensively in our midst," we are told by an active pastor in one of our large cities. And another writes:—

"I have not noticed any trend away from doctrinal preaching. I believe thorough doctrinal preaching is still the rule. As a matter of fact, there seems to be an inability to get away from the intensively doctrinal presentation, even on public occasions, when the audience consists primarily of outsiders. . . . I do not believe that there is any danger in our circles at the present time of getting away from doctrinal preaching. Perhaps here and there the doctrinal presentation receives a little overemphasis."

But that *much of our doctrinal preaching is far from what it should be*, that it is too often shallow, stereotyped, and mechanical and completely ignores the present needs of our people, seems to be evident to the majority of our correspondents. The essence of their criticism is given in the following excerpts:—

"I would not say that there is a decided trend away from, but a weakening in, doctrinal preaching; a lack of boldness in the position: I believe, therefore I have spoken; also a deficiency of Scripture-proof for doctrines treated in sermons. In this the fathers were always strong."

"It may be that many, if not most, of our preachers continue to preach doctrinal sermons. But their doctrine is so thin and watery, they are so careful never to touch on a controverted article, so cautious in hedging about with weakening conditions every statement which a he-man might make, that it is seldom a joy to listen to one of their 'doctrinal' sermons."

"As to the causes of a decline in preaching I would name a considerable uncertainty as to the niceties of distinction in doctrine and a lack of pleasure and patience in the careful presentation of them. It is in consequence thereof, I think, that we meet with a very persistent avoidance of real doctrinal preaching."

"There is still a good deal of doctrinal preaching, but much of our doctrinal preaching tends to be superficial. It moves on the same plane as the elementary catechetical instruction lesson, the same phrases, the same proof-texts, the same Bible History examples, occur and reoccur. There is no fault in this as far as it goes, but after all,

the pastor should strive to give to his adult congregation a more substantial food and dig deeper into the mysteries of God's Word. I think this is one reason why people sometimes grow tired of such doctrinal preaching. Often there is also an utter lack of practical application. All doctrines of course have a practical value. The pastor doesn't always seem to realize this self-evident fact."

"I would say that the most alarming tendency in our preaching that I have noticed is a wandering away, seemingly unconsciously, from the proper division of Law and Gospel, due probably to a largely indiscriminate use of Reformed sermon literature."

"Legalism seems to be coming more into prominence instead of real Gospel-preaching. The Gospel is used as Law and there is mixing of the two."

"Sermons on Christian virtues or on sins of the time frequently contain no comfort for the stricken in conscience nor show the right and only motive for righteous living."

"Due to the desire to clothe the Gospel of Christ in an appealing modern dress the clear and unmistakable Lutheran confessional tone is sacrificed. Many sermons heard in our circles would be acceptable to Reformed churches."

"There seems to be, according to my conviction, the greatest danger for our Synod in the inclination of not a few to become infected with Reformed pietism. . . . There is the inclination of stressing Christian service one-sidedly, so that it begins to endanger the service which Christ has performed for us. Even expressions which we know from the old Pietists may be heard or read occasionally. One finds that within the Church the distinction is made between awakened and unawakened Christians. . . . There is also the inclination of the Pietists to compel Bible-texts to prove things which they really do not prove. Also the danger of substituting proof by conclusions for proof by direct Scripture-texts."

"The most alarming thing that I have noticed in sermons is the influence of Calvinism. . . . Not that it is to be found so much in preaching that which is false in a direct way, but rather in omitting that which should be brought out. For example, preaching sanctification without preceding justification, ignoring objective justification, not recognizing the fact that the Holy Spirit works only through the means of grace, and the like."

"I fear that there is a considerable amount of stale, uninteresting, dry, dogmatic preaching being done. There is some lazy preaching going on which may be thoroughly orthodox; but couched in technical theological terminology, it has not been brought to the people in language which the untrained can understand. . . . If there is a decline, if the effectiveness of our preaching is endangered, I believe this can be charged to a more or less mechanical recitation of Catechism truths, lacking the divine, throbbing, renewing power of the Spirit. No fire."

b. *Expository Preaching.*

In reply to the question, "Is expository preaching still considered the ideal method for a Lutheran pulpit?" the majority registered opinions agreeing with that of the brother who writes:—

"Expository preaching is suffering the same fate as doctrinal preaching: it is going into discard; it takes much preparation; it is suspected of being 'dry,' and the preachers to-day stress brevity too much."

Theoretically, it is conceded, we still believe in expository preaching, taking that term in its most comprehensive meaning. We still contend that a good sermon must grow out of the text and that it must bring the message which God Himself has placed into that text. But in actual practise, many allege, the expository character of our preaching is rather generally beginning to suffer. This is ascribed to the facts that relatively few among us engage regularly in thorough and systematic exegetical studies, that many sermons are composed in a rush, and that the effervescent inspirational harangue has already achieved a wide-spread popularity even among us. The results are obvious. The finer features of the text, its individual coloring, and the interesting details which invest a discourse with life and charm are frequently passed by unnoticed. Thus the man in the pew is consistently deprived of some of the choicest blessings held in store for him by the Word. Accordingly, one writer explains:—

“There is a lack of the old-time thoroughness in treating the text and the clear presentation of what that particular text says—flitting over or around the text to come to some kind of practical application.”

Another brother offers the following:—

“I believe that we often come too soon to the application of the text. We fail to lay down a sufficient expository basis. While writing the above, I looked over a few sermon volumes of past and present days, and I found sufficient proof for this assertion.”

An older pastor says:—

“Eine wirkliche Lehrpredigt wird auch immer eine ‘expository’ Predigt sein. Wie waere das anders moeglich? Moralisieren kann man sehr wohl ohne Text; politisieren kann man ditto, und zur frommen Salbaderei braucht man erst recht keinen Text. ‘Expository preaching’ fordert Studium und Meditation. Zu beiden haben viele in unserer vielgeschaeftigen Zeit keine Zeit, keine Lust und keinen Apparat. Man sehe sich in manchen Studierstuben nur die Bibliothek an.”

A District President declares: “Our sermons do not show enough Scripturalness or, rather, our living in the Scriptures.” This point is elaborated by another brother in the following words:—

“My chief criticism may be summed up in this: Many of our ministers are not preaching any more the Bible, but they are preaching Missouri Synod literature. . . . I mean to say that most of them do not get the material for their sermons from the Bible directly, but rather from the literature which has been published in our Synod. Now, since the early writers of our Synod were orthodox, I think that most of our sermons are orthodox. If visitors were to go from church to church for the purpose of scrutinizing very carefully the contents of the sermons over a period of time, I doubt whether they would find any heterodoxy. I can preach Schmidt and Walther and Pieper and Hartenberger all my life, and you will never be able to tell me that I have preached one word of false doctrine; it was all

strictly Biblical. And yet my preaching has declined most woefully: I have not preached the Bible, but Schmidt, and Stoeckhardt, and Pieper, and Hartenberger."

c. *Shallowness and Lack of Variety.*

These two faults were not even alluded to in the questionnaire; nevertheless, most of the brethren went on record as believing that they are becoming all too common in our pulpits and that this constitutes one of our most imminent dangers. A few quotations from their letters must suffice.

"According to intelligence tests made during the World War our population has an average mentality of about twelve years. No doubt some preachers, realizing these conditions, decide, perhaps semiconsciously, that it doesn't pay to worry over producing thoughtful, thought-provoking sermons when the listeners are satisfied with platitudes and generalities. For this the laymen are at least partly to blame. In past days our fathers read the Book of Concord and often discussed religious questions. Such a layman nowadays is a *rara avis* indeed."

"Far too many preachers seem to be satisfied if they provide a flow of beautiful-sounding words, even though these are void of meaning. . . . Our laymen are to some extent to blame for these things also. They would rather have a preacher who holds forth in high-sounding phrases and empty words than one who proclaims the truth of God's Word with no uncertain sound."

"Risking the danger of being misunderstood, I venture to voice the impression that much of our preaching is entirely too stereotyped. Many of our men are afraid to be original. They pattern after certain homiletical models and become accustomed to use other men's outlines to such a degree that some of them become incapable of delivering a sermon which may be called distinctively their own."

Similar criticisms are registered in some of the expressions on doctrinal preaching quoted on pp. 920 f.

In view of the tendencies and methods mentioned in the foregoing quotations one of our old pastors exclaims:—

"I despise this slap-dash, lick-and-promise method of work. As I read the *Predigtstudien* in our one-time *Homiletic Magazine*, I am impressed with the amount of work done by way of preparation for a single sermon; the thorough exegetical study of the text which precedes any attempt to formulate a theme and parts. I have seen manuscript sermons of some of our older men. The rewriting, correcting, reworking, and polishing they did is astounding."

d. *The Lack of Personal Testimony.*

Discussing this point, one of our District Presidents says:—

"There is also a lack of personal testimony. . . . Preachers are to be witnesses, *μαρτυρες*, of Christ. St. Paul calls preaching, 1 Cor. 1, 7, *τὸ μαρτύριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ*. And look at his own personal testimony regarding his own experiences, Rom. 7, concerning the sinfulness of his own heart, 1 Tim. 1, 15, 16; 2 Tim. 1, 12; Gal. 1, 15, 16, and many other places. Are not our sermons lacking in this? I know this can

be overdone and is overdone by many sectarian preachers; but let us examine ourselves whether we do justice to Christ's words 'to be His witnesses.' Dr. Zorn said that many sermons in our midst were nothing but cold and dry essays on some Christian doctrine."

That others agree with this brother is evident from the following statements:—

"Preaching with some seems too much a matter of routine, a job to be gotten over with, their heart not really in it. . . . Too seldom does one find that the preacher is really aglow with enthusiasm for his text and burning with eagerness to set it before his people."

"Not rarely the sermon takes more the form of a more or less interesting 'talk' or of a 'platform speech' than that of a solemn message from the pulpit."

"There has been a tendency to deliver essays instead of sermons, essays that were way beyond the grasp of the hearers, instead of heart-to-heart talks that everybody can understand."

"Much of our preaching is cold, lifeless, merely repetition of formula, without the life that should characterize a sermon dipped out of one's own heart. If doctrine means nothing to the preacher, how can it mean anything to the hearer? Too often the preacher seems to be preaching 'because he has to say something' instead of 'because he has something to say.'"

In Regard to Homiletical Form and Language.

On this point there is a surprising unanimity among our correspondents. The following paragraphs from their letters seem to reflect a rather general opinion.

"A person notices ever again slovenliness in preparation; poorly digested and hastily thrown-together material is used; too much use of stereotyped material; following well-grooved lines of thought; an absence of fresh illustration; points are not clearly conceived and not clearly brought out; not the definite practical application of just that text to that particular audience at that particular time; . . . the lack of that extra half hour which would have made the sermon good, but they quit working too soon; in general, an absence of personal, intensive individual work and creative effort."

"The want of a proper logical arrangement of the sermon or failure to properly divide and subdivide the theme and to 'stick to the point.'"

"The English which one hears from many of our pulpits is often of low grade and sometimes full of inexcusable crudities and mistakes."

"In the whole collection of sermons written by men of our Synod in recent years, there is hardly a sermon the writer of which has a distinct literary style. This, I need not say to you, was by no means always the case. One has no difficulty when reading the older numbers of the *Magazine* or our other publications in immediately recognizing Walther or Stoekhardt or Pieper. I am not aware that this can be said to-day. . . . I am not at all sure that our accepted method of sermon building is conducive to the development of a good style. The preparation of what we call *eine ausfuhrliche Disposition* carries with it the temptation to be overmuch mechanical. Walther could do it without detriment to the beauty of his diction. I cannot. Besides, tastes change."

In Regard to the Delivery of the Sermon.

Not a few of the brethren declare that they have noticed two dangerous tendencies in this respect. In the first place, careless extemporizing; and in the second place, reading the sermon from the manuscript. A large conference declares:—

“Too many of our younger men are resorting to extemporaneous preaching too early in life. The result is that their preaching deteriorates into ever-recurring extemporaneous generalities.”

“Since I have been in the — District, I have been surprised to notice that almost all our pastors preaching at conferences had their manuscript before them and in some cases paged it. . . . Imagine these young missionaries, trying to build up new stations or congregations, preaching in homes, district schools, rented chapels, and reading to their hearers, putting their manuscripts as a barrier between themselves and their hearers instead of giving them an appealing Gospel-sermon straight from the heart! . . . Small wonder that some of our missionaries are not drawing or holding many hearers.”

“This pulpit use of material not original is further fostered by the growing tendency of reading the sermon, *i. e.*, displacing the Bible with a loose-leaf book which has the full text of the sermon. Though the adept reader may only throw furtive glances at the manuscript, he is in danger thereby of not himself fully assimilating the message and of not ‘delivering’ it.”

This concludes the *résumé* of the opinions on the alarming symptoms which the majority of the brethren whom I consulted claim to have observed in our preaching. Whether we agree or disagree with them, it certainly must be admitted that their strictures furnish us with ample food for thought.

E. J. FRIEDRICH.

Die Hauptschriften Luthers in chronologischer Reihenfolge.

Mit Anmerkungen.

(S c h l u ß.)

1539. „Von den Konziliis und Kirchen.“ — An dieser Schrift, die zu den gelehrtesten und am sorgfältigsten ausgearbeiteten Schriften Luthers gehört, arbeitete er schon im Jahre 1538. Am 19. Februar 1539 hatte er etwa ein Siebtel des Manuscripts vollendet. Am 2. März war schon der erste Teil der Schrift im Druck, während Luther noch am letzten Siebtel arbeitete. Am 14. März war die Schrift handschriftlich vollendet, und schon am 1. April konnten die ersten Bogen versandt werden. Am 7. Mai war Justus Jonas schon damit beschäftigt, das Buch ins Lateinische zu übertragen. Es ist eine gewaltige Streitschrift, die auf Grund eingehender historischer Forschungen die falschen Behauptungen der römischen Sekte widerlegt. Er behandelt in extenso besonders das sogenannte Apostelkonzil und die ersten vier ökumenischen Konzilien und geht dabei immer wieder auf die Lehrfragen ein, die auf diesen Konzilien behandelt wurden. Besonders wertvoll ist der dritte Teil der Schrift, „Von der Kirche“, worin Luther den Unterschied zwischen der Kirche im eigentlichen Sinne und im uneigentlichen Sinne darlegt und dann über die äußerliche Gemeinschaft oder die Gemeinde redet, wobei er auch die christliche Schule erwähnt („Die Schule muß das Nächste sein bei der Kirche“). (St. Louiser Ausgabe XVI, 2144—2303.)