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How will Radio-Preaching Affect the Regular Pulpit of Our Church?

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Rome. It reached over sea and land; the Pope, a thousand miles and more away, had but to whisper, and every tiny hamlet in England heard with trembling." (*A. T. Sheppard.*)—Five years John Lackland held out; I believe that was a record; then he yielded; 1213 he surrendered England to the Pope, to receive it back as a fief against the promise of an annual tribute of 1,000 marks.

Always, monotonously, the story is repeated. Brave words are spoken; a great show of resistance is made. Unhurriedly Rome goes into action; Rome is never in a hurry; what it does not get this year, it will get next year or the next decade or the next century. Under steady, relentless pressure, sooner or later the breaking point is reached, and Rome is victorious.

Then came Dr. Eck's challenge of Carlstadt and his attack on Luther. For the Leipzig Debate Luther studied the evidence, or lack of evidence, for the primacy of the Pope. The result was laid down in Luther's *Appeal to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* and in his letter on *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Clearly and convincingly he proved that the sacramental system is a popish structure, the interdict "the devil's own invention," man's salvation not bound to the priest's activity; each one must be saved by his own acceptance, through faith, of Christ's merits. People heard and read and believed; and there fell the fear of the clergy, and therewith the power of the Papacy, of the interdict, etc.

Why did not the Pope lay the interdict on Saxony? He was too wise. Fifty years earlier it would have been successful; now it would have been a public laughing-stock. True, at Worms practically all Germany stood behind Luther. Cajetan advised making an end of Luther and his work; Carl von Miltitz knew Germany better; Belloc calls him a "diplomatic June-bug"; Catholics never tire in telling us that he drank too much; but he had his sober moments, and in such a moment he said: Not with 25,000 Swiss soldiers would he dare to take Luther through Germany to Rome. And yet—if Luther had not shattered the universal belief in Sacramentalism and Sacerdotalism, nothing in the world could have saved him from the fate of John Huss and his work from the fate of Wyclif's reform in England.

THEO. HOYER.

How will Radio-Preaching Affect the Regular Pulpit of Our Church?

Fundamentally Christian preaching is not subject to change. Its basis is the same from generation to generation: the inspired, immutable Word of God; its message dare never be anything but the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Any preaching that does not strictly adhere to these essential principles will invariably result in dechristianizing, or paganizing, the sermon.

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And yet, as far as outward forms and presentation of the message are concerned, the preaching of the Church has always been subject to change. Sometimes the change was gradual, almost imperceptible; at other times it was swift, abrupt, and revolutionary. Sometimes the changes were for the better, while at other times they were for the worse, and very decidedly so. It has happened that the entire complexion of Christian preaching in a given country was changed within a single generation, without, however, sacrificing its Scriptural character in the least. In such cases the message remained the same, the unchangeable Gospel, but the emphasis of that message, especially in its practical applications, and also the homiletical form experienced a thoroughgoing change, an adjustment to prevailing conditions. This was obviously due to the fact that the men who molded the preaching of their age lived in intimate and intelligent relation to their own times and endeavored to fashion their sermons in such a way as to achieve the greatest possible success when preaching to their parishioners. Viewed from this angle, there has been a continuous change in the Church's preaching from the days of Jesus down to the present century. And this change was not only legitimate and salutary, but altogether necessary. It must continue to-day if our preaching is not to become stereotyped, obsolete, and ineffective.

At this point it is interesting to note that the history of preaching plainly indicates that the alert preacher, who is intent upon accommodating his message to the problems of the day and the requirements of the particular group to which he is ministering, is influenced in his preaching not so much by the theory of homiletics taught in the classroom as by the example of successful men in the pulpit. Nothing is easier than to trace the influence of great preachers upon the preaching of their own and succeeding generations. Often one man serves as a pattern and inspiration for thousands of other preachers of the Gospel. They adopt his sermons as models. They regard his delivery as exemplary. Realizing that the man in question achieved success largely by virtue of the methods he employed, they make an honest attempt to follow the same methods, hoping thereby to attain to at least some measure of success.

Bearing all this in mind, we proceed to answer the question at the head of this article: *How will Radio-preaching Affect the Regular Pulpit of Our Church?* Mark well, we are not asking whether radio-preaching will affect the regular pulpit of our Church; for in the light of the history of preaching it is beyond dispute that it will. Hence the only question that can come into consideration is what these effects will be. We dare never lose sight of the fact that radio-preaching is not a short-lived innovation, a mere fad, but one of the most important developments in the history of Christian preaching since the days of the Reformation. It occupies a prominent and permanent place in the program of the modern Church. No invention

since the invention of the printing-press has done as much, or can do as much, as the radio is doing to speed the fulfilment of the Savior's prophecy: "This Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come," Matt. 24, 14. The possibilities of the radio sermon are so vast that even the most vivid imagination cannot forecast the extent to which they may yet be developed. All this, together with the fact that thousands, even millions of persons, living in widely separated areas, can simultaneously listen to the same radio sermon, whereas other sermons are delivered to small groups gathered within the walls of their own churches,—all this gives the radio sermon a more conspicuous position in the Church's program than is occupied by any other type of religious address.

It is evident therefore that the radio sermon of the present day is destined to have a far-reaching influence upon our Lutheran pulpit. Our men are broadcasting from local stations and over nation-wide chains. Naturally they are making systematic efforts to perfect their technique as radio preachers. In addition, our people, who regularly hear the radio sermons delivered by able preachers of our own Church and of other denominations, are gradually forming their opinions as to what constitutes a good sermon by what they hear over the air, never taking into consideration of course that the radio sermon is in a class by itself and can never, because of its peculiar limitations, take the place of the regular sermon in public worship. Finally, many ambitious preachers, especially among the younger clergy, choose one or more eminent radio preachers as their patterns and try to learn from them how to make and deliver a good, soul-stirring sermon to their own people. In the face of these facts no one can deny that our preaching is eventually going to be affected by the radio.

Would it not, in view of this plain fact, be wise to take time by the forelock and to make an effort to determine at least in a general way what the reactions of radio-preaching upon our pulpits may be? Why always wait till things have happened and then begin to trace the relation of cause and effect? In regard to the preaching of the Church we do that very efficiently in our historical studies; but one cannot escape the thought that it would have been far better if the effects of certain conditions had been more accurately forecast and the remedy applied forthwith before the cause had matured into the effect. In this way much good could have been preserved for on-coming generations, and many bitter experiences would have been prevented. Applying this thought to the matter before us, we may record it as our opinion that it is high time that the preachers of our Church give the question which is under discussion in this article their serious attention.

In order to direct the attention of our pastors to this question and to stimulate a friendly exchange of opinions with regard to it in

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conferences and otherwise, the present writer is submitting the following thoughts, which have come to him while pondering over the matter. They may furnish the incentive for a more thoroughgoing investigation.

1.

There can be no doubt about it that in certain respects the reactions of radio-preaching upon the regular pulpit of our Church will be wholesome and that they will result in some very definite improvements.

The first thing that comes to mind in this connection is the well-directed tendency of good Christian radio-preaching to bring the sermon more definitely and intimately in relation to the problems of modern man. In general, there has always been much stereotyped, dry, and mechanical preaching, a spiritless and purposeless rehearsal of great Bible truths which had found their way into the mind of the preacher, but never succeeded in gripping his heart. Such preaching has been the bane of the Church. And it has been with us too long. But it cannot survive if the preacher goes on the air; for the radio sermon must face things as they really are. It must come to grips with the burning issues of life. If it fails to do this, it will end in a fiasco. More than one radio preacher has discovered this to his own mortification; and the lesson which his experiences have taught him will be of inestimable value to every preacher of the Gospel in his own pulpit work; for every sermon should be timely and practical.

Another lesson which the radio sermon is teaching us is that we must present our message in such a way as to attract and hold the interest of the average American and to make a lasting impression upon him. In other words, radio-preaching is leading us to a proper evaluation and understanding of true audience psychology, especially in regard to the American mind. In the past too much of our preaching was designed solely for persons who had been reared in our own Church. To them it was intelligible, but to others it very frequently was not. No doubt this is one of the reasons why certain strata and groups in American life have always remained untouched, at least unaffected, by our missionary efforts. But doesn't it seem as though our radio broadcasts, in which we step before the American people as witness-bearers, ought gradually to improve our technique in this respect?

A third benefit which is apt to accrue to our pulpit from its contacts with the radio is compactness of structure and style. How many sermons of the past were long-winded, rambling dissertations, interesting perhaps, but verbose and loosely organized. But radio time is limited, and it costs money. As a result the sermon delivered by an experienced radio preacher is comparatively short, compact, and well articulated. Every word is weighed in the balance, and there is a determined effort to say as much as possible within the allotted time,

and to say it as clearly and as effectively as possible. This requires clarification and compression of thought, skilful organization, and succinct expression. All three are valuable assets to the man in the pulpit.

Closely allied with the foregoing is the encouragement which the radio sermon gives the preacher in regard to the cultivation of literary excellence. Grammatical errors, Germanisms, barbarisms, slovenly style, and threadbare diction are tabu in radio-broadcasting. There is a persistent striving for correctness, beauty, and effectiveness. Hence many radio addresses, also on religious programs, are literary gems. As a result, churchgoing people are raising their demands in regard to the literary standards of their preachers. In order to please them, a sermon must not only be doctrinally correct, practical, and helpful, but also attractive and enjoyable from a literary point of view. These demands are in perfect harmony with the best traditions of the Christian pulpit. Read the powerful oratorical productions of the prophets, the beautiful discourses of Jesus, the eloquent presentations of Paul, and the great sermons of the Church's messengers down through the centuries, and you will find that the Christian pulpit has always cultivated the beautiful. Many of the masterpieces of literature are the creations of Christian preachers. Our own preaching at present leaves much to be desired in this respect; and if the radio really succeeds in raising the literary standards of our pulpits, it will achieve something for which many teachers of composition and homiletics have hitherto labored in vain.

Another lesson that is forced upon us by the radio is the stern truth that a preacher should never plagiarize. Now, it is a well-known fact that some preachers of the Gospel are confirmed plagiarists. They will in their indignation punish a pupil who hands in another pupil's work as his own; but at the same time they will Sunday after Sunday, without blinking an eye, preach sermons written by other men. Now, it is true that no man must be condemned for making judicious use of other men's sermons. On the contrary, every one of us should study the sermons of successful preachers with a view to improving his own preaching. We may freely appropriate their thoughts, yes, even many of their telling expressions. But to take a sermon just as it is and to deliver it verbatim or nearly verbatim is nothing less than plagiarism and, except in cases of extreme emergency, can never be condoned. This important, though oft-forgotten, principle is brought home to us with unusual force by the radio; for it would certainly require a great deal of hardihood for a man to read a plagiarized sermon over the air.

Finally the radio ought to encourage and help us to improve our delivery. Some of us have never been properly trained in this respect, and others, without realizing it, have in the course of years become rather slovenly. There are faulty pronunciations, foreign

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accents, sloppy enunciations, there is faulty voice production and either a total lack of vocal expression or some peculiar artificial modulations, which mar the address and either weary or amuse the hearer. All these faults—and many others—are exposed and magnified by the radio; for in radio-broadcasting everything depends upon how one regulates his voice. Accordingly, the radio can well assist us in improving our delivery; but it will succeed in doing this only if we choose as our patterns men who speak correctly and if we ourselves study the fundamental principles of vocal expression with diligence and perseverance and then prepare with the utmost care for every radio engagement. That the radio often does spoil a good delivery, however, will be pointed out in the next section of this paper.

2.

While it is true that the broadcasting of good Christian sermons will in many respects react favorably upon our regular congregational preaching, every reflective observer will admit that certain characteristic features and tendencies are discernible in radio-preaching which, if they were to be transplanted to our regular pulpits, would constitute a grave menace to the future preaching of our Church. This, of course, is not the fault of the men who proclaim the Gospel of salvation by means of the radio, but rather the result of the natural limitations of radio-broadcasting itself.

Strange as it may seem, the radio preacher finds his first and greatest handicap in that very audience which opens up to him almost unlimited opportunities as an ambassador of Christ. It is an unseen and unknown audience. Nobody, least of all the preacher himself, knows who belongs to it. There may be millions, but there may also be only a few. And who can tell what the spiritual status and the personal problems of the individuals may be who are listening in? As a result the radio preacher must speak in terms that are suited to all. He is compelled to address himself to every one in general and to *no* one in particular. This naturally affects the contents of his sermons, especially their practical applications, and deprives his address of one of the most cherished elements of pastoral preaching, the specific and intimate application of the truth of the text to the needs of the people. It would be a pity if we in our preaching were to abandon the specific pastoral application of Law and Gospel, so characteristic of Lutheran preaching, for the vague and stereotyped applications in vogue over the radio. And yet there seems to be a tendency in this direction even now.

Another handicap that harasses the radio preacher is his consciousness of the fact that his hearers may, whenever they desire, tune him out. In other words, he knows that a radio audience will listen only to what it likes to hear. The moment the discourse becomes unpleasant, the dial is turned and the preacher silenced. It is but

natural that under these conditions the preacher will put forth every effort to make his sermon as interesting and captivating as possible. And there is nothing reprehensible in this; on the contrary, such efforts are always commendable. But at the same time the danger exists that this may result in the toning down of certain disagreeable truths or in a cheap sensationalism which is utterly unworthy of the dignity of the Christian pulpit. Unfortunately there are several preachers of other denominations on the air at the present time who have fallen victim to these temptations, and their bad example is a constant menace to the high cause of Christian preaching.

Closely allied with the foregoing is the alarming tendency observable in radio-preaching generally to neglect expository and doctrinal sermons. It is true, in a measure the Scriptures are explained and the doctrines of the Church referred to. Without this there could be no preaching of the Gospel. Yet the fact remains that the carefully developed doctrinal sermon, which has always been one of the elements of power in Lutheran preaching, and the thorough-going expository sermon, by which the hearer is led into the very text of the Scriptures themselves, is being relegated to a subordinate position in the average radio calendar and at times is even eliminated from it altogether. Many are of the opinion that sermons of this type are not practical and soul-stirring enough for a radio audience. But this is a mistake. There is nothing more practical, helpful, and interesting, even for people of our own day, than truly expository and doctrinal sermons, provided they are skilfully developed and directly and sympathetically focused upon contemporary problems and conditions. For more reasons than one of course the radio preacher cannot follow precisely the homiletical methods employed by his brother in the pulpit; nor does he have the time to give much attention to the niceties of systematic doctrinal presentation or the minute details of the text. As a result it is an easy thing for him to drift into a method of sermonizing which concentrates upon practical discussions of current topics and fervent appeals and exhortations, without first laying a satisfactory foundation for these necessary features of his discourse by the explanation of the text and clear doctrinal statements. And it will be just as easy for the rest of us to drift in the same direction in our preaching, especially since there are not a few persons in the average congregation who are not in sympathy with the traditional Lutheran sermon. Let us take heed lest we, perhaps unwittingly, yield to their demands.

Finally there is a possibility that radio-preaching may have an unwholesome effect upon the delivery of our preachers, although, as was pointed out above, the very opposite should really be the case. In order to justify this statement, nothing more is necessary than to remind the reader of the following three facts: 1) The radio sermon

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must be read; but reading a sermon from a manuscript when standing face to face with a congregation is not a method of delivery to be recommended to the rank and file of our preachers. 2) Because the radio sermon must be read, the preacher is in constant danger of losing his natural voice modulations, which alone can give expression to thought and feeling, and substituting either a dreary monotone or — and this is by far worse — an unnatural, artificial pattern of modulation, such as the “holy tone,” by which his thought is obscured and his feeling made to appear as a mere affectation. 3) In order to hold the attention of his hearers and to make his speech effective, the radio preacher must speak more rapidly than the man on the platform and in the pulpit; moreover, he must also avoid all longer pauses. This is made necessary by the fact that he is not seen by his audience. He cannot make use of pantomime, but is compelled to convey his personality to his audience by means of his voice alone. It has been definitely established by scientific research that, whereas a speaker normally gets the best results by uttering 100 to 125 words a minute, the radio speaker, in order to be at his best, must speak at the rate of 150 to 175 words a minute. Bearing these facts in mind, one may readily understand how it is possible for a preacher to spoil his delivery by a careless use of the radio or an injudicious transfer of radio tactics to his regular pulpit work.

In the preceding paragraphs a few of the most probable reactions of radio-preaching upon our Lutheran pulpit have been listed without any attempt on the part of the writer to exhaust the subject. It is evident that some of these reactions should with all diligence be fostered and accelerated, while others must be vigorously opposed and eventually rendered ineffective if the work of our pulpits is not to suffer. May God give us grace to meet this twentieth-century problem of preaching with wisdom and fortitude!

St. Louis, Mo.

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