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E. J. Friedrich

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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The Pastor and His Sermon

Preaching with Power

In the course of the last fifteen or twenty years much was said and done to discredit the pulpit as an instrument of power in the building of the kingdom of God. Even within the sanctuary itself strident voices proclaimed with prophetic finality that the pulpit had lost its power and that the day of preaching had passed forever. Systematic efforts were put forth in many quarters to supplant the preacher by religious technicians in the fields of worship, education, social service, and organization; and men quite generally staked their hopes for a virile and world-conquering Church upon agencies and methods designed specifically to meet the challenge of the new age.

But what has happened? One by one these much-heralded panaceas have been thrown into the discard; yet the pulpit continues to occupy its rightful place: the very center of the Church's worship and work. Nothing has been found to take its place. On the contrary, the experiences of the various denominations have again demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that "the foolishness of preaching" is, and will ever remain, the most effective means of touching the hearts and molding the lives of men and thus extending the borders of the Kingdom. As a result there is at present a surprising revival of interest in preaching on every side; and in almost every Protestant communion both clergy and laity are looking to the regular pulpit of the Church for instruction, guidance, comfort, and inspiration in the turbulent days that lie ahead. Thus Dr. H. A. Prichard, a rector in the Episcopal Church, which in its tradition has never been guilty of over-estimating the value of preaching, makes the bold assertion: "Preaching, I believe, is the future stronghold of the Church. . . . The Church of the future will be, first and foremost, a preaching

Church; and it is time we recognized the fact and trained ourselves and the generation of preachers that is coming to take the fullest advantage of the implied challenge." 1) And in his Yale Lectures Dr. P. T. Forsyth ventures the unequivocal declaration: "With its preaching Christianity stands or falls." 2) Accordingly, our Lutheran Confessions are thoroughly up to date when they say: "Nothing is more effective in keeping the people with the Church than good preaching." 3)

At the same time it cannot be denied that a large portion of the Church's membership and here and there even entire congregations have grown weary of the preaching they hear. The vacant pews in many churches, the listless worshipers, and the resultant decay of spiritual life bear eloquent testimony to this fact; and the bitter complaints of discouraged preachers lend a melancholy emphasis to it. Nothing can be plainer than that the American pulpit of the present day in all too many instances lacks power—the power to attract and hold men and, above all, to regenerate and save them. The following indictment of contemporary preaching is therefore on the whole just and to the point: "Protestantism has trusted too largely to the quantity of its preaching. It has commonly deluged its devotees with sermons, played spendthrift with formal religious discourses to the great detriment of their quality and the great boredom of many of their hearers. We need not be surprised therefore at the present revulsion against preaching. We have richly deserved it. We have preached too much and not well enough." 4) *The Literary Digest* summarizes the whole matter in the blunt statement: "Pulpit power is one of the most pressing needs of the clergyman of today."

But does this apply to the clergy of the Lutheran Church? To a great extent it does. True, there is still much strong, noble preaching among us, for which we thank God and take courage; and even the average pulpit in our Church is far from being effete. Owing to its Scriptural foundation and evangelical character our preaching possesses qualities and powers which have long since vanished from the majority of American pulpits. And owing to the efficacy of the Word it does bring results. But are we preachers measuring up as messengers of the Word? Do we preach as well as we might? Far from it. At times even the best among

1) *The Minister, the Method, and the Message*, pp. X. 4.

NOTE.—Most of the quotations in this article have been taken from modern non-Lutheran sources in order to prove that among the most successful preachers of other denominations many have returned to the time-honored homiletic principles taught at our seminaries.

2) *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 1.

3) *Apology*, 24.

4) S. McComb, *Preaching in Theory and Practise*, p. XI.

us are indolent; at times we are painstaking, but coldly professional; at times we fall victim to "a sort of sacred torpidity"; at times there is only artificial fervor; and at times—let us admit it—we miss the mark entirely in spite of all diligence, sincerity, and zeal. In short, much of our preaching is without that power which one might reasonably expect to find in a Christian pulpit.

And yet it need not be. Every true ambassador of God has the privilege of preaching with power, no matter how modest his endowments and how disheartening his handicaps may be. But, mark well, such power must be sought after with earnestness and cultivated day by day in the light of God's countenance; for it is not a permanent endowment bestowed upon the preacher at his ordination nor a mysterious something put on with the pulpit gown.

But what can we do to invest our humble preaching of the Word with greater power?

To begin with, we ought to remember that pulpit power is not a superficial matter. It does not consist in a radiant personality, or in a saintly unctiousness, or in a voice that can soothe and move to tears and call to battle at will, or in the music of words, or in depth and energy of thought, or in the glow of fervid eloquence. It cannot be worked up. On the contrary, "it belongs to those preachers who, having a great message worthy to move the souls of men, are themselves so moved that they forget themselves in the message and cry from their hearts, *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam!*"⁵⁾

Accordingly the power of a Christian preacher resides first and foremost in his message. It is the content of the sermon that really counts. Strange as it may seem, this fact, which has always been axiomatic among Bible Christians, is flatly denied by famous pulpit orators and professors of preaching in our day. These disciples of liberal theology assert with characteristic authoritativeness that "pulpit power does not have to do with the content of the message" and that "the preacher is always more important than his sermon." Now, it is true of course that the personality of the preacher is of tremendous importance for his work in the pulpit; but even at that, the truth which he preaches is of far greater importance. In the last analysis, it is the only thing that is absolutely essential. If a man, speaking as the ambassador of God, proclaims "the truth of God" in his sermons, if he can truthfully say to his Master: "I have not hid Thy righteousness within my heart; I have declared Thy faithfulness and Thy salvation; I have not concealed Thy loving-kindness and Thy salvation from the great congrega-

5) T. G. Soares, *University of Chicago Sermons*, VII.

tion," Ps. 40, 10, then his preaching will invariably bear fruit; it will be "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth," Rom. 1, 16. Hence the preacher who yearns for greater pulpit power should look first of all to his message.

If our message is to be clothed with power from on high, it must be *drawn directly from the sacred Word* given by inspiration of God Himself. Neither private speculations nor the conjectures of contemporary philosophers, neither the results of scientific research nor discussions of burning problems in sociology, economics, and statecraft, dare intrude upon the hallowed precincts of the pulpit. Only God's truth has a rightful place here. Hence the preacher's watchword must ever be: "Thus saith the Lord." In his sermons he must reveal God to his people as God has revealed Himself in Holy Writ. He must teach the whole plan of salvation. He must inculcate the ethical principles which God has established as the guide-lines for all Christian living. In short, he must do everything in his power to ground his congregation firmly in the great doctrines of the Bible, in the Law and in the Gospel. This must always remain the first great objective of all our preaching; for "no matter how rich our sermons may be in exhortation, reproof, and consolation, if they contain no doctrine, they are barren and without substance."⁶ It is the proclamation of divine truth, and nothing else, that makes the preacher's message vibrant with regenerating and sanctifying power.

A renewed emphasis upon this fundamental homiletic principle is much in order at the present time. There is an ever-increasing number of Lutheran preachers, apparently sincere in their work, who have come to the conclusion that the careful and systematic presentation of doctrine has no appeal for the twentieth-century mind. Such preaching, they tell us, is too abstract, too dogmatic, too dry. There must be a different approach, more directly to the heart. Accordingly they are turning to lighter and shallower forms of preaching, to a more emotional and inspirational type. But it must be evident to every one who understands the modern mind that they are making a tragic mistake. Lurid descriptions of present-day conditions, high-powered exhortations, clamorous appeals, and effervescent eloquence make no lasting impression upon the man of today. He must be reached primarily through the intellect and not merely by way of the emotions. His demand is for facts, especially also in the sermons he goes to hear. Says Dr. W. L. Stidger of the Boston University School of Theology: "By a wide reading of sermons, by hearing the great preachers of our time, and by observing the types of sermons which please people, I have learned

6) C. F. W. Walther, *Pastoraltheologie*, p. 81.

that people want facts in a sermon. A man need not be particularly eloquent if he has facts. Time and again I have noted that men with new information, men with facts, will hold the attention of an audience, while a much more eloquent speaker without facts finds a restless and resisting audience." 7) And Dr. August Schowalter, one of the most discriminating preachers of modern Germany, puts the matter thus: "To find the proper approach to the man of today is the task of present-day preaching. . . . The man of today does not submit forthwith to external authority; he must be conquered within. But custom and tradition do not bind him within, frequently not even without; his philosophy of life is self-willed and chaotic. True, he does not shut himself up against those forces which seek to influence his emotions and his soul-life; but such influences achieve no permanent results, neither do they equip him for his defense against the attacks of unbelief and his own doubts. In view of these facts our preaching to the modern man must, more than ever before, be an intellectual presentation of the great truths of the Christian faith and must be designed to satisfy, as far as this is possible, the craving for actual knowledge. The preaching of our age must again be an indoctrination of the people in the Christian faith, as it was at the time of the Reformation." 8) And Bishop Adna Wright Leonard of the Methodist Episcopal Church corroborates this with the following declaration: "The demand of this day is for doctrinal preaching. To some this statement may seem to be a misstatement. Nevertheless—I say it advisedly after many years of effort to ascertain the mind of the laity—the demand is for doctrinal preaching." 9)

Doctrinal preaching has always been the most distinctive and potent element in the preaching of the Lutheran Church. At its best, Lutheran preaching has been highly intellectual, and even the rank and file of our pulpits have hitherto given due prominence to the great doctrines of the Bible. It would be a great tragedy indeed if we, in these critical times, would forsake the old paths and recklessly place our feet in the ways which have already led many others to disaster.

But if we would attain to fulness of power in preaching, we dare not rest satisfied with preaching *about* the Scriptures; on the contrary, *we must preach the Scriptures themselves*. As stated before, we have the solemn duty to instruct our congregations in the great doctrines of the Bible; but if we are wise and faithful, we shall do this on the basis of the Bible itself and not upon the authority of a text-book on Christian doctrine or of predigested

7) *Preaching Out of the Overflow*, p. 45.

8) *Vom Reiche Gottes*, Foreword.

9) *Ancient Fires on Modern Altars*, p. 67.

sermon helps. Our sermons should not only be thoroughly seasoned with Scripture, as Jerome demands, but should literally grow out of the sacred text and in turn lead our congregations back into it; for the Scriptures, and only the Scriptures, are the inspired Word of God, the repository and vehicle of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures, and only the Scriptures, are the inexhaustible reservoir of that mysterious power by virtue of which our preaching becomes effective upon the hearts of men. After all, St. Paul charged Timothy to "preach the Word," 2 Tim. 4, 2; and Jesus Himself said: "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life," John 6, 63.

At this point many hard-working preachers make a fatal mistake, which robs their pulpit utterances of much of the power which they might otherwise have. They speak to their people as if the average churchgoer really knew and used the Bible. Hence many of their sermons go wide of the mark. Luther used better judgment. In the monastery he had followed the sermon method in vogue among the scholastics, a method which operated more with logical distinctions than expositions of Scripture; but when he began to preach at Wittenberg to the common people, who had no Bibles, he adopted an expository method, in which the explanation of the text, the clear statement of doctrine and the practical application of text and doctrine to the needs of the people, were the most prominent features. Let us follow Luther's example. Rightly does Forsyth say: "Bible preaching means that we adjust our preaching to the people's disuse of the Bible."

Of course, such preaching cannot be shaken out of the sleeve. On the contrary, it requires *regular and painstaking study* of the Bible and unlimited patience with the individual sermon text. But it will soon become a benediction to both preacher and people. Unfortunately many of us preachers "know the Bible only in the way of business, as a sermon quarry. But the true ministry must live on it. We must speak to the Church not from experience alone, but still more from the Word. We must speak from within the silent sanctuary of Scripture. We do not always realize how eager people are to hear preaching which makes the Bible wonderful by speaking from its very interior, as men do who live in it and wonder themselves."¹⁰ If we did realize it, we would make our sermons more Scriptural in the fullest sense of the term; for in the present generation this is the royal road to true pulpit power.

Since, however, the sermon is not to be a monolog, but a purposeful religious address to living men and women, it must also

10) *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 38.

be *tempered to their specific needs*. In other words, it must focus the beneficent light of Scripture upon the perplexing problems of faith and life with which they are wrestling and thus provide them with divine guidance, exhortation, comfort, and help, 2 Tim. 3, 16; Rom. 15, 4. This of course presupposes that the preacher, as the shepherd of the flock, knows and understands his people, and that not merely *en masse*, as a congregation, but also individually, as separate personalities, with heartaches and crosses, temptations and fears, that belong to them alone. But even this is not enough. Well did Luther say that the preacher must watch over his congregation "with a real mother heart"; for to be influenced for good, the people must be loved much. Deep and abiding sympathy with our people in all their conflicts and sorrows and an earnest solicitude for their spiritual welfare must pervade all our pulpit discourses as well as our private ministrations. "No minister can profit his people to a great extent unless he can throw his whole soul into his subject when he preaches and identify himself with all the interests and circumstances of his flock. If he announces divine vengeance against the ungodly and warns the sinner of his danger, let him imitate his great Master when He beheld Jerusalem and wept over it. His heart should swell with agony and his eyes become a fountain of tears in behalf of sinners."¹¹⁾ Brethren, do our sermons really measure up in this respect? Are we not perhaps confronted at this point with one of the chief causes of our ineffectiveness as preachers? As one thinks back over his own preaching, he is reminded of the sermon of which Emerson said that he could not tell from it "whether the preacher had ever lived, loved, sinned, or suffered, had ever known the tug of temptation or the torment of dismay, had ever heard the laugh of a child or looked into an open grave."¹²⁾

It is evident therefore that our preaching, in order to wield the desired power over our congregations, must not only be Scriptural (*schriftgemaess*) and personal to the hearer (*gemeindgemaess*), but also timely (*zeitgemaess*). That is, it must take into account the age in which we live and apply the truths of Holy Scripture to its peculiar conditions and problems. A sermon which falls short in this respect is an anachronism and will almost invariably leave the hearers cold. This has been emphasized so much in recent years, however, that many preachers have, consciously or unconsciously, gone to the other extreme. While endeavoring to gage their preaching to the demands of the hour, they have lost sight of those timeless truths which, transcending all human thought, tower aloft in isolated and immutable grandeur,

11) *American Pulpit*, III, 99.

12) J. F. Newton, *The New Preaching*, p. 40.

like snow-capped mountain peaks unaffected by the change of the seasons below. As a result their preaching has become shallow, trivial, and ineffective. May God graciously preserve the preachers of the Lutheran Church from this modern pitfall! We dare not dip the messages we bring to God's people out of the shallow pools of passing events, but must draw them from the deep fountains of everlasting truth. While fixed upon the present, our preaching must be anchored firmly in both eternities. In a certain sense it must be timeless, *ewigkeitsgemaess*; for in the utter timelessness of Christian truth lies its real grandeur, its tremendous appeal and captivating power.

All preaching that rests upon this foundation will be strong, noble, elevating, powerful. Positive in its approach to the great questions of time and eternity, it will speak with conviction and the note of authority. It will in truth be a preaching of the Word of God.

And if the preacher himself is a man of faith, one whom the love of God has fully immersed in the *baptisma sanguinis, fluminis, flaminis*, the message will also be brought to the congregation in a manner befitting its high and holy character. There will be no need of working up oratorical power by artificial methods, nor will there be any danger of prostituting the pulpit with "that light and frothy sort of eloquence which consists only in a jingling multiplicity of words." Carried away with the importance and glory of his message, the preacher speaks with flaming heart "as a dying man to dying men." He preaches with "blood earnestness" as for eternity. He declares what he himself believes and loves. And all the while he depends upon God for the success of his message.

Thus every sermon which is a sermon in truth is twice-born, once in the study and once in the pulpit; but both times out of the Word of God, the faith of the preacher, and fervent prayer. As a result the divine afflatus rests upon the preacher, and the preacher's message goes forth endowed with the power of God.

E. J. FRIEDRICH

Kleine Gesellschaftstudien

2. Das Buch Gesellschafts

Im ersten Artikel dieser kleinen Gesellschaftstudien sind die eigenartige, kraftvolle Persönlichkeit des Propheten, seine Zeit und seine Aufgabe etwas eingehender geschildert worden. Wir fassen nun einen weiteren Punkt näher ins Auge, nämlich seine Darstellungsweise in seinem großen Buche.

Der kraftvollen Persönlichkeit des Propheten entspricht die Rede,