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## The Pastor and His Audience

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### **The Pastor and His Audience**

In that delightful book by Arthur Stevens Phelps entitled *Speaking in Public* we find, among the many scintillating epigrams and pungent sayings, this thought-provoking sentence: "It takes two to make a speech, the man that speaks and the man that listens." And again: "If a speaker may be 'too full for utterance,' a congregation may be too full for audience." Both of these sayings contain much food for thought, especially for the Lutheran pastor.

It should be self-evident for a man of this type, of course, that he does not think of his audience in terms of a *social group*, particularly along the lines followed by the exponents of the social gospel. To men of the latter kind their congregations are just another variety of an organization with social objectives. For that reason we find them taking the attitude toward their congregations by virtue of which they make the abatement of the smoke nuisance, the extension of the park system in a city or a town, the promotion of plans for better housing, the direction of political movements, the establishment of universal peace, and similar projects the chief interests of their respective flocks. To them a congregation, and hence also a Sunday audience, is not primarily a gathering of blood-bought souls, but a meeting of citizens professing the Christian faith, whose function is primarily the promotion of present-worldliness.

We begin with the idea that a congregation is a communion of blood-bought souls and that a church audience is a gathering of Christians who profess a belief in Jesus Christ, their Savior, or come to church for the purpose of hearing a message from the Bible pertaining to salvation or sanctification, or both. The audience, to quote Phelps once more, is the speaker's "farmland, to be cultivated so as to produce a valuable harvest. . . . An audience is like a foreign land: he that expects to visit it with pleasure or

profit must study its features before he arrives, until he is familiar with its arts and sciences, its history, its possible future, its glories, and its Hall of Shame." If a speaker, in this instance a pastor, will want to make the most of his relation to his audience, he must be aware, first of all, of the fact that his very names indicate to him what the Lord expects of him in his relation to his people; for he is to be pastor, or shepherd, in feeding the flock, minister in serving their needs, elder or bishop in taking the oversight of his congregation, teacher in making known to its members the way of salvation.

From this very truth it follows as a matter of fact that a true pastor should not only know his people as individuals (which is basic in his office), but that he must know them in the mass, he must have knowledge of assemblies or crowds as such, of their reactions to the audience relations, and other factors.

What classes of assemblies and audiences must the Lutheran pastor distinguish? To some extent even the *accidental concourse* named by Gardner in his informative book *Psychology and Preaching*. Such assemblies come about without premeditation or purpose when a number of persons find themselves near to one another by accident. They just happen to be in the same locality at the same time and, whether there be two or three or a dozen of them, they are at the beginning only disjointed particles of humanity. Speaking in terms of physics or chemistry, they are in a state of flux. Groups of this kind are usually characterized by the presence of small talk, by the exchange of opinions about the weather or neighborhood news. However, a very slight impetus may cause such a heterogeneous group to receive solidarity, to achieve mental unity. Anything that will focus the attention of all those present, or even only of the majority, upon some definite object will change the complexion of the group. If some one then, a member of the group or one who joins it at the appropriate moment, assumes the role of leadership, there will be social thinking and acting.

It is evident that a pastor will frequently have to deal with groups of this type, even if the interests of the people with whom he is dealing will not be as divergent as in the case of the average professional man in town. People drift together before meetings, before they are guided by a specific order of business, and begin to talk about the most inconsequential things, or they merely stand or sit in some kind of proximity. Such gatherings will be found before the place of meeting, on the sidewalk, in a hall or corridor, even in the meeting-room. There may be a general attitude of mind, or "mind-set," but there is as yet no mental unity. Nevertheless the pastor's contact with such people must be guided by a knowledge of assembly psychology. The very fact that he would not think of stirring up powerful emotions under such circum-

stances will guide him in his relation to groups of this kind. It may be a matter of pastoral wisdom for him to get away from the routine of small talk and always to plant some thoughts in the mind of as many members of the group as possible that will develop into fruitful ideas.

At the same time it is true that a pastor, in thinking of audiences, will ordinarily have in mind the *purposive assembly*, one whose members already have a definite attitude of mind. Under this heading Gardner distinguishes *inspirational gatherings* (using the word "inspirational" in its widest connotation) and *deliberative assemblies*. In the former case we are dealing with people who come together for the purpose of being instructed or stimulated or inspired. In most instances we are dealing with the favorable factor of unity of locality, the audience being not only within the same building, hall, or room, but preferably also seated in fairly close proximity. In a small audience, distributed loosely through a large auditorium, mental and emotional solidarity is achieved only with great difficulty. Hence one of the contributive factors in a good audience situation is the effective seating of the people in attendance, so that they present a fairly well-knit group. A second favorable factor is that of unity of purpose in being present, an element which, in the case of our congregations, may well be strengthened by the use of a definite pericopal system or serial pulpit program, which enables the members of the assembly to have some kind of "mind-set" before the meeting opens, and by preparing old and young, particularly the latter, for intelligent participation in the service by means of explanations of liturgy, hymns, symbolism of the church-building and its appointments, etc.

Gardner and others distinguish three stages of mental unity in audiences of this kind. In the first stage there is still a large degree of individuality and self-centeredness, with the critical faculty still predominant. The members of the congregation are present to be instructed, and a pastor ought to keep this fact in mind even while he endeavors to mold his hearers into a unity. To have the program or the order of service built up primarily to play on the emotions of those present, without a more or less complete and definite conviction concerning the truth presented, smacks of the machinations of the demagog. A pastor's chief interest at this stage will be to draw the minds of his audience away from every person's individual interests, to keep the thoughts of those present from drifting along idly according to the laws of association or sinking down to the level of drowsy extinction. The leader's first purpose in a meeting of this kind, specifically a church assembly or a Bible class, is to have all those present think along the lines suggested in his presentation, or, to put it scientifically, "to blend the separate

units into a psychical mass, in which each realizes that his mental reactions coincide with those of others."

Most pastors, especially those of the intellectual type, will be satisfied if they are reasonably successful in reaching the first stage of unifying their audience. In many cases they count themselves fortunate if they succeed in eliminating the distractions of whispering and giggling children (and adults), of coughing and sneezing, of banging doors, and of other undesirable interferences. But if the audience has once been fused into a thinking unit, it may be possible and desirable to have the intellectual activity of the individual to be less independent and autonomous and to add the stimulation of emotional appeal without having the individual become conscious of the limitation which is placed upon him. It is at this point that many so-called "evangelists" transgress the rights of the audience. Having been remiss in laying an adequate foundation of sound Biblical information, they nevertheless play on the emotions of their listeners, with the result that the critical faculty of the people is submerged and frequently their will paralyzed. If any audience has reached the stage when its component members are no longer able to weigh with approximate fairness the pros and cons of an issue presented to them, then the stimulation of the emotions is unfair and frequently fraught with distinct dangers to the stability of a democratic church polity. Needless to say, the Lutheran pastor will evidently not deliberately attempt to reach the stage in his directing of an audience when the individuality of the personal units disappears entirely, when nothing is left to their mental efforts but reflexive and instinctive peculiarities, when, in other words, the audience has reached the mob state. A pastor who uses the crowd suggestion to this degree will very likely endanger the effectiveness of the Gospel and possibly of his own ministry; for "the hypnotic subject nearly always refuses to obey a suggestion which runs counter to his instincts and deep moral habits." The first stage of mental unity is desirable, in fact, practically essential, and will always be found in a true deliberative assembly. The second stage is certainly permissible and frequently also desirable, and may certainly be supported by the outward influences of beautiful surroundings, appropriate (but not sentimental) music, and other agencies. The emotional tide must never run so high as to submerge the intellectual life and drown all independent ideas as in an overwhelming flood, for that would defeat the end of all true teaching.

Let us consider a few other factors which will influence an audience, which, in fact, make an audience. It has been correctly stated that an audience has its moods, that it may be alert or dull, responsive or unresponsive, eager or apathetic, devout or irrelig-

ious, serious or inclined toward levity, friendly or hostile. A characterization by Rondthaler is quoted by Phelps in the book referred to above, in which we are told: "There are noisy, boisterous churches and sedate and sleepy churches. There are churches which, like sand-heaps or jackstraws, fall apart when the benediction is pronounced; and there are churches like mountains, that are knit together into a solid fellowship. There are churches that make you involuntarily turn up your collar in midsummer and churches that warm you like a genial hearth-fire in midwinter. I have known churches that have thawed out an icicle in the pulpit and churches that have frozen out a whole procession of ministers. You go into some churches, and you wonder whether your clothes fit; and you go into other churches, and you wonder whether your heart is right. Some jolt you on the heavenward road as over a badly ballasted roadway, and some carry you happily and smoothly as in a palace-car. There are churches that make you look around, and there are churches that make you look up. There are some that feed your vanity and some that make you hunger and thirst after righteousness. Out of some you go without a single inspiration, and out of others you come with the ardent wish for a thousand tongues to tell the old, old story and for a thousand hands to help the weary and heavy-laden."

Distractions of various kinds were alluded to above. But there are related elements to be considered in this connection. The factor of material surroundings includes a cold church, cold in temperature according to the thermometer (or hot, as the case may be) and cold in temperature on account of the bare appointments or the attitude of the congregation. A morning audience may have an entirely different mental and spiritual complexion than one assembled in the evening. A dark and gloomy day may definitely affect the disposition of an audience, unless there is some sort of counteraction, as a very happy occasion or a matin service on Christmas morning.

Some writers refer to the fact that the pastor must expect emotional centers in his audience, which may definitely change its complexion and serve as helps or hindrances to success. A new hat, an unusual or striking gown, a spoiled and noisy baby, even a fluttering sparrow, may take charge of the situation and cause the audience to disintegrate into so many individual bits of delighted or disturbed humanity. For the audience is human, often painfully so. Its sympathetic listening makes a poor speaker better; its pitying attitude makes even a good preacher wince and fail. And therefore only the sympathetic speaker may expect a sympathetic audience.

But there are certain other considerations, most of them suggested by Holy Scripture, which the conscientious pastor will keep

in mind with respect to his audience. There can be no doubt, for example, that we must keep in mind the spiritual and, in a degree, also the intellectual level of the people whom we are trying to serve. The difference between rural and urban congregations is negligible under our system of indoctrination; in fact, the country congregation may frequently have the advantage in this respect. But the level of general culture must be taken into account by every pastor lest his preaching go far above the heads of his hearers. Our preaching is incongruous if not adapted to such circumstances. Luther's dicta with reference to speaking in the language of the common people, of watching their mouths and catching their ways of expressing themselves, are well worth remembering. The ridicule which he expressed with reference to the preacher who, in an institute for aged and infirm women, delivered a sermon on the value of holy marriage, was also well taken. It is necessary for a pastor constantly to visualize his audience, to keep in mind whether he has city or country conditions to cope with, whether his audience may be expected to be highly cultured or not, whether he is dealing with neophytes or well-indoctrinated people.

We have before us the example of some of the great preachers of the Bible. It is a most profitable study to analyze the sermons and discourses of our Savior from this angle. His manner of dealing with the woman of Samaria is a model of kind and tactful and yet most effective handling of a difficult situation. If we turn to the conversation with Nicodemus, we find an altogether different and yet fully as adequate a manner of dealing with an audience. The so-called Sermon on the Mount and in the same degree the Sermon in the Fields show an adaptation of presentation to a specific audience. Both situations had the disciples as the nucleus of the Lord's audience, and yet both took into account the common people who were listening in and were consequently so deeply impressed with His doctrine. The discourse on the Bread of Life in John 6 is another example of consummate art in understanding an audience situation. But the very climax of the Lord's manner of approaching and dealing with an audience is presented in the farewell discourses, John 13—17. A pastor may spend a great deal of time in studying these discourses, and not the least of his efforts will be directed to the learning of Christ's methods in applying the eternal truths of salvation to specific people in particular situations.

A splendid example of a preacher's applying his teaching to audiences in keeping with their social and economic background is afforded by John the Baptist, Luke 3, 10 ff. When some of the members of his audience addressed a question of general import to him, he gave them a rule of living which applies to all situations of this kind. When the tax-collectors presented a specific question,

he gave them the advice which they needed in their profession. When the soldiers came with a difficulty, he gave them particular directions for their own station. Nor did John the Baptist fail to appreciate the audience situation at other times. There may be some doubt as to whether he was bothered by personal doubts when he sent two of his disciples to Jesus to inquire concerning His Messianic mission; but there can be no doubt as to the effectiveness of his dealing with the men concerned in making them conscious of the prime purpose of Christ's coming. And as for John's sermon on the Lamb of God, his attitude shows an adequate appreciation of the difficulties involved in bringing men to the knowledge of the truth under such precarious circumstances.

A great preacher who had the ability to fit his message to his audience was also St. Paul, as even a superficial study of his letters will show. Although the fundamental facts of his Gospel are the same whenever he speaks and writes, it makes a big difference to him whether he is addressing the Thessalonians, with their brief term of indoctrination under his direction, or the Ephesians, who had had the benefit of his teaching for fully three years. He makes a similar distinction in writing to the Philippians, to whom he addresses the Epistle of Joy, and in writing to the Galatians, who, after his various visits in their midst, were so easily deceived to give heed to "another gospel." There is an altogether different atmosphere in the Letter to the Romans, written at a period of comparative quiet in Paul's life, to a congregation which at that time had evidently been established for many years, from that in the First Letter to the Corinthians, in which Paul has an audience before him which had addressed certain specific inquiries to him. In short, the apostle was a master also in the difficult art of evaluating an audience situation properly.

While the Lutheran pastor will keep all these factors and others in mind in his ever-recurring and sometimes apparently tedious task of preparing sermons and lesson plans, he will always remember that, in the final analysis, all his instruction will be addressed to the *individual*. The paramount question in the life of every human is or should be: What must I do to be saved? Every contact of a pastor with every audience situation must be so guided that it will show the individual soul the way of salvation.

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