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## What Makes for Effective Preaching?

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## What Makes for Effective Preaching?

The question to be discussed is not, Is the Word of God effective? The Word of God has divine power in itself, which we can neither take away nor to which we can add. However, the sorry thing that we can do is to hinder the Holy Spirit from exerting His divine power through the Word. From this viewpoint the question under discussion will be considered. Therefore, the shrewd Scotch woman who was asked to give her view concerning the power of the pulpit was not wrong when she said, "That depends on wha's in it."

In discussing the question concerning the effectiveness of preaching, consideration must be given to the *preacher's attitude* towards his sermon work, the *contents* of the sermon, the *sermon structure*, and the *delivery*.

### I

A man's *attitude* toward his work makes all the difference in the world in reference to the results which he will achieve. Any workman who desires to serve God and his fellow-men will be interested in his work, faithful in his service, do even hard labor cheerfully, and, as time goes on, seek to perfect himself. Some one has said, "If only a cobbler I be, the best of all cobblers I'll be." Preaching is not an easy task. Any preacher who gives little time and attention to his sermon work, is not, and cannot be, an effective preacher.

The minister of the Gospel, who is to instruct others to perform the duties of their calling faithfully, "not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God," doing their work "heartily, as to the Lord and not unto men," "serving the Lord Christ," Col. 3:22-24, and who is to be an example which others should follow, Phil. 3:17, should above all men take the right attitude toward his work. What that attitude should be Paul expresses in these words written to the Christians at Thessalonica, saying, "We were bold in our God to speak unto you the Gospel of God with much contention. For our exhortation was not of deceit nor of uncleanness nor in guile; but as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the Gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts. For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloak of covetousness; God is witness; nor of men sought we glory, neither of you nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children; so being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you not the Gospel of God only but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us,"

1 Thess. 2:2-8. Faithfulness to God, "which trieth our hearts," and love to the souls, "which God purchased with His own blood," Acts 20:28, and which should therefore be "dear unto us"—these are the motives which should determine the preacher's attitude toward his sermon work. These motives will prompt the preacher to be faithful in his sermon work, invoking God's blessing for divine enlightenment and for such a presentation of His Word that the hearers will be edified, Eph. 4:12. Such an attitude on the part of the preacher will make for effective preaching.

## II

If a sermon is to be effective, it must have the *right contents*. Modernistic preaching which fails to present the very fundamentals of the Christian religion cannot be effective preaching. Such preaching, if done by a man of erudition, may delight those who can appreciate its literary and linguistic value; and by presenting ethical precepts it may encourage civil righteousness; but it cannot be effective as far as the sinner's salvation and a Christian life are concerned. When we speak of preaching, we have in mind the Christian preacher; the preacher who preaches the Word of God, which alone is "able to make man wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus," 2 Tim. 3:15.

However, a preacher may preach the Word of God—all that he says may be taken from the Bible and be strictly orthodox; nevertheless, his preaching may not be effective in serving the real purpose of preaching. The preaching of the Law of God will bring a man to a knowledge of his sins, Rom. 3:20, but only the preaching of the Gospel will turn sinners, in true repentance and faith, to their Savior for forgiveness and everlasting life, 1 Cor. 1:21-24; 2:2. By the preaching of the Law, Christians are told what God's will is in reference to the life which they should lead, Ps. 103:17, 18, being the children of God, 1 John 3:10, and the "salt of the earth" and "the light of the world," Matt. 5:13-16. But the Law cannot persuade them to do what is right and pleasing to the Lord; that alone the Gospel can do, Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 8:8, 9. A preacher will, for instance, not preach effectively on Christian giving if he tries to pry open the purses of his church-members by the demands of the Law, instead of, by means of the Gospel, filling their hearts with the love of Christ, so that, like the Macedonians, they will first give their own selves to the Lord and thereupon also cheerfully give Him their money, 2 Cor. 8:1-9. To try to accomplish with the crowbar of the Law what only the sunshine of the Gospel can do, does not make for effective preaching. He who would preach effectively must know *when* and *how* to preach Law and Gospel, so that each remains in its own sphere and is applied as

the needs of the hearers demand. (See "Law and Gospel" and "The Third Use of the Law" in the Formula of Concord; also Walther's *Gesetz und Evangelium*, done into English by W.H. T. Dau.)

Especially does it need to be emphasized that preaching, in order to be *Christian* and *effective*, must be *Gospel*-preaching. Every doctrine of the Bible is so closely linked up with the name of Jesus that without this it loses its significance and its value for man; be it the doctrine of God (who has revealed Himself through Christ), of sin (from which Christ has redeemed us), of grace (given in Christ), of faith (which is in Christ), of the Word or Baptism or the Lord's Supper (which are means of the grace procured by Christ), of predestination (unto God's adoption of children by Jesus Christ unto Himself), of creation (the ultimate purpose of which is the glory of God which sinful creatures can give Him only through Christ), of divine providence (which is assured to those who through Christ seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness), of the angels (who are ministering spirits sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation through Christ), of Satan and his evil spirits (from whose power man has been redeemed by Christ), of the Holy Spirit (by whom sinners through the means of grace are brought to, and kept with, Christ), of the Church (which is the communion of believers in Christ), of death and hell (from the horrors of which Christ has brought us redemption), of the resurrection unto eternal life (which is assured us in Christ), of the final Judgment (which those need not fear who are justified by faith in Christ). And as far as good works, or the Christian life, are concerned, the love of Christ is the only effective motive power.

It seems strange that any Christian minister should say that in some sermons he finds it difficult to preach Christ or, which means the same, the Gospel. Even if the text itself has no trace of any Gospel, as when sermons are preached on the Ten Commandments or allied texts, the Christian preacher dare not close his sermon without giving the comfort of the Gospel to those who have been made conscious of their sinfulness and have been terrified by the curse of the Law. The Law is not to be preached for its own sake; the ultimate purpose of all preaching is the salvation of the sinner (justification and sanctification) and the glory of God. If preaching is not Gospel-preaching, the world does not need it. It is because of the lack of Gospel-preaching that the Church in our country is in a deplorable condition. The Lutheran Church, if it remains true to its heritage and its Confessions, is a Gospel Church. Gospel-preaching is effective preaching. While to those

who reject it it is the "savor of death unto death," "in them that are saved it is the savor of life unto life," 2 Cor. 2:14-16.

Since the preacher is also a sinful human being, living in the same sinful world as his hearers and having the same spiritual needs which they have, his own needs will in a large measure direct him in determining the contents of his sermons. The attention which a preacher gives to the salvation of his own soul and to his own spiritual life will to a large extent influence him in his spiritual ministrations not only in his *Privatseelsorge* but also in his pulpit work.

### III

Effective preaching calls for a *good sermon structure*. The material for this structure is supplied by the Word of God. Out of this material the preacher is to build his sermon.

I am taking it for granted that the preacher uses a text, a selected portion of Scripture. If the preacher does not intend to preach his text, why use a text at all? The very reading of the text is a promise given to the congregation that the preacher will preach that text. If this is not the intention, why then read a text? The text should, therefore, not be a mere pretext, but *contain sufficient sermon material*, so that the preacher will be kept from uttering only mere platitudes, truths well known to the hearers; otherwise his sermons may have breadth but no depth. The text should be chosen in accordance with the needs of the hearers, as these are determined by what agitates their mind and heart at a particular time and what must be told them under certain circumstances. By way of example: for the last Thanksgiving Day sermon a preacher, taking the path of least resistance, chose Col. 3:15, "Be ye thankful," as his text. This text simply states the fact that we should be thankful; it says nothing about *why* and *how* we should be thankful. The text does not furnish sufficient sermon material; the preacher himself had to supply it. He may or may not have done so. He likely spoke in general terms about material and spiritual blessings; perhaps he said nothing or little about how we should show our thankfulness, neither gave special attention to what was agitating the minds of his hearers at a time when they were living in a world of great distress. The preacher would have done better to choose a text which covers all that, as: "Blessed be Thou, Lord God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever. Thine, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty; for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is Thine; Thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and Thou art exalted as Head above all. Both riches and honor come of Thee, and Thou reignest over all; and in Thine hand is power and might; and in Thine hand it is to make

great and to give strength unto all. Now, therefore, our God, we thank Thee and praise Thy glorious name," 1 Chron. 29:10-13. In accordance with this text and existing conditions the preacher could have used the following theme, *In Spite of the Great Distress in the World We Can and Should Cheerfully Observe Our Thanksgiving Day*, showing *why* we can and should do so, and *how* we can and should do so.

1. *Why?* (a) Because in spite of heavy taxation, high cost of living, uncertain economic future, it is *God* who gives us our *material* blessings, vv. 11, 12. He who has all things plentifully and who has told us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," will not forsake us. Even the world war, though we should become involved to a greater extent than we are now, should not make us lose courage, for *God still reigns*, v. 12; and, after all, His plans, not those made by man, will be carried out, and His plans are made in the interest of His Church. (b) Because God is the Giver of all our *spiritual* blessings. "The Lord God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever," vv. 10, 13, is also our God and Father in Jesus Christ. — Application: What the text tells us about God, who is even our God, must fill us with cheerfulness, courage, and a spirit of thanksgiving.

2. *How?* (a) By acknowledging the greatness and power and glory, etc., of God, vv. 10-13; (b) by thanking and praising Him, v. 13; (c) by giving evidence of our thankfulness. That the words of v. 13 were not empty words can be seen from the context, vv. 1-9, 14-17. — Application: Let our thanks be expressed not only with our lips but also in cheerful and liberal contributions for the support of the church, for the poor, for other good causes, and in deeds of love shown to our neighbor. Reading the text again would make a good effective conclusion.

A very brief introduction leading up to the theme with a *striking opening sentence*, a theme that is not general but specific for its particular text and thus colorful, a presentation of the subject matter in logical progression of thought expressed in clear and simple language, the use of illustrations (picturesque words, similes, metaphors, pertinent short story), good applications (especially of doctrinal subjects), and a sermon kept within the time limit of about thirty minutes — all this makes for effective preaching.

The structure of the sermon (outline and sermon manuscript) should be the preacher's own. Much preaching is not very effective because it lacks *originality*. He who makes a study of the history of preaching will find that there always have been sermon-thieves, preachers either too lazy to make their own sermons or not able to do so. There are those who excuse this evil practice. They say, it is better to deliver a good sermon of some other preacher

than a poor one of your own. But it is a practice that cannot be approved. Some one has said that of all thieves the pulpit thief is the worst; and some one else said that a sermon-thief rarely reforms.

In this article our concern is not the dishonesty of plagiarism, but the fact that it does not make for effective preaching. In her book *English Preachers and Preaching* Caroline F. Richardson relates the following incident: "When Adam Eyre and his fellow-parishioners were trying to make their vicar leave and promising him £40 if he would do so, they drew up a certificate against him, the third article of which reads: 'that during all the time of his being here, which is near 3 years, hee hath preached, though some-tymes twice a day, yet either altogether or, for the most part, other men's works; and one thing 4 or 5 tymes, or oftener, repeated on so many several dayes, without any progresse at all, only tyreing the tyme with tautologies and vaine iteracions. . . .'" It is evident from this complaint that the preacher's congregation during the three years of his ministry was not much edified with his preaching. Preaching "altogether, or for the most part, other men's works" does not satisfy.

Be it understood that there can be no objection to using other men's thoughts and any facts which are gotten from books or from other sources. I have been surprised to find few books in some minister's studies; and I fail to see how they can do efficient work with such few tools at hand. Every minister ought to have a good working library and — use it. It is the mere taking over, "altogether or for the most part, other men's works" as so much *ready-made material* that is objectionable. In the printed instructions given to our students for the writing of sermons, it is said, among other things, that they should do their *own mining and minting*. The preacher who does not dig into his text, make his own outline, study the needs of his congregation, write his own sermon, will never be a very successful preacher. If he is not sufficiently interested to study his text, think it through, try to present it well, and apply it to the needs of his people, how can he expect that his congregation will be interested in his preaching and be edified thereby? Such a preacher may "hold down his job," his congregation may not ask him to leave and may not offer him a sum of money if he will do so, yet he will fall under the condemnation of that layman who a number of years ago wrote a letter to a member of our faculty in reference to poor preaching. Among other things he said: "No doubt our pastors have a great deal of work to do already, much more than they ought to have. Especially is this the case in large cities like ours. There are visits to the sick, meetings of the men's club, young men's club, junior club, missionary work,

canvass of the unchurched, ladies' aid, girls' club, hospital work, athletic associations, clerical committees, etc. It is important work, most of it, and everybody seems to be heartily in favor of it.

*"But, after all, the sermon's the thing.* The paint on your automobile may be dazzling, the upholstery luxurious, there may be head-lights and tail-lights and spot-lights galore, balloon tires, and four-wheel brakes; but if the car won't run, it doesn't get you anywhere. The business of an automobile is to run, and the business of a church is to preach.

"In each sermon the pastor ought to give the impression that he has done some work, some reading, some writing, some thinking, for this particular sermon. We must feel that he has chosen a subject which needs to be explained to his congregation; that he has himself mastered it, not merely years ago, when it first came to his attention, but that he has gone over it again for this discourse; that he has worked it over in his mind until he is thoroughly familiar with it. Then that he has thought about the best way of presenting it to his hearers; for even a subject most familiar to the speaker may demand great skill for the proper presentation to an audience. One of my teachers used to insist that the chief problem for a teacher and, we may add, for a preacher is to keep one lesson 'from testifying to another,' that is to say, from imitating it.

"But besides giving the impression that he has worked for each particular sermon, a pastor ought also to show evidence of having done some general reading and thinking since he left school. I would like to know that my spiritual adviser was taking an intelligent interest in religious matters, that he was really qualified to speak about problems of belief and conduct and not merely repeating like a parrot the topics in which he was drilled at school. Has he read any worth-while books in the last five years? Has there been any advance in his religious knowledge, any conscious strengthening of his faith, or has he stood still? Is he growing warmer, or is he growing colder?

"Of course, this growth presupposes that there be something to grow on, a good education and preparation for the ministry. The governing bodies of our Synod have the solemn duty to see to it that the candidates for the ministry are properly qualified.

"We might here raise the question whether our educational system is in the best possible shape. Is it thorough enough? Is it efficient? Does it encourage initiative and originality? Does it create a desire to grow through hard work, or does it condone lazy habits of thought?" \*

In answer to the question, *What is the real secret of effective*

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preaching? Alexander Loewentraut has written his *Sieben Geheimnisse der Predigtkunst*. Among these he mentions *die eigene Ausarbeitung des Konzepts der Predigt*, the preacher's own, original sermon manuscript. He says: "*Wirksam ist eine entlehnte Predigt nicht*," a borrowed sermon is not effective. He adds: "One need not be a professional homiletician in order to detect at once whether a preacher has decked out his sermon with his own or with borrowed plumes. In the latter case, good and important thoughts are usually spoken quickly and without expression; it all makes the impression of something that has merely been committed to memory." That does not make for effective preaching.

#### IV

Many a good sermon has been spoiled by a poor *delivery*. It is difficult to understand some preachers; they speak in too low a tone of voice (a very common fault); they do not pronounce their words distinctly; they drop syllables; they utter the last words of a sentence in a muttering way; they speak too rapidly; they do not emphasize properly or not at all; they do not speak naturally in a conversational way but recite what they have committed to memory; they show no animation in gestures, facial expressions, and bodily movements. It was not very complimentary when an actor said: "We actors speak fiction as if it were truth; while you preachers speak truth as if it were fiction." Such preaching cannot be very effective; it does not put the message across.

A speaker, be he a preacher or a platform orator, must so speak that his audience cannot fail easily to hear every word and to understand the thoughts which his words should convey to the hearer. The very least that can be expected of a speaker is that he speak *loudly*, so that he can be *heard* by all; *distinctly*, so that he can be *understood* by all, speaking neither too rapidly nor too slowly; and *in a lively manner*, so that he makes the impression that *he is interested* in that in which he is trying to arouse interest in others.

Speaking well must be learned, even as other things must be learned that are to be done well. Mere eloquence is not enough. When Aeschines had delivered an oration, his audience would say, "How well he speaks!" But when Demosthenes had delivered his Philippics, his hearers cried out, "Let us march against Philip of Macedon!" Demosthenes moved his hearers not to mere admiration but to *action*; that was effective speaking. When Peter preached his great Pentecostal sermon, his hearers were moved to ask, "What shall we do?" "And the same day there were added unto the Church about three thousand souls." That was effective preaching.

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