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## Lutheran Preaching and Its Relation to the Audience

By RICHARD R. CAEMMERER

Persuasive public speech demands the close relation between the speaker and his audience. This fact is true also of preaching. The most common complaint against preaching is that the preacher does not adequately reach the attention and will of his hearer. The first and last need of preaching is that it bring the Word and will of God to the hearer; it must bear witness to Christ, it must teach the Word. To do that, it must not merely be true and Scriptural, but it must actually engage the hearer's interest.

The history of Lutheran preaching reveals a number of contrasting processes for achieving this goal. Lutheran preaching usually partook of the trends and ideals of speech of its period in history. A brief review of those periods and trends may prove helpful in defining the preacher's goal and ideal for his preaching today.

### I. LUTHER'S PREACHING

Luther was the outstanding preacher of his time. In the galaxy of the Reformers he is distinctly the most powerful preacher. A review of the factors entering into his relation with his audience reveals remarkable facts.

Luther believed that preaching was for the sake of the hearer. Hence he had a passion for being understood, for talking in the language of the people. In his earthiness and directness Luther reminds us of the great popular preachers

of the late Middle Ages, like Berthold or Geiler.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, this passion involved the use of the vernacular. Luther believed that the spoken word was the most powerful tool for conveying Christ to the heart and that the preached Word was more than the saying of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> Luther was a son of the people, of a family that was close to the soil and competent to think and act. When this trait was combined with the insight into the Word of God as a power, directness of expression was bound to follow.

Luther was also scholastically trained. The mediaeval university made communication basic to its training. Grammar prepared for the higher studies. Pivotal in these studies were: rhetoric, the art of expressing ideas aptly and persuasively; and dialectic, the art of operating with discussion and logic for the purpose of gaining the hearer. Whatever shortcomings Scholasticism had brought about in university training, to the very end it preserved the importance of communication and argument. The chief instructional tool was the disputation, a formal discussion of the pros and cons of definitely stated propositions. The purpose of the disputation was not merely to prove the mastery of one opponent over the other, but to open up and present all sides of a subject.<sup>3</sup> This training contributed, in Luther's preaching, to the quality of constant awareness of the hearer's thinking. Two characteristics are standard in Luther's expression in preaching: He continually applies himself to the hearer's questions, conjectures what they might be, removes prejudices and preconceptions; and he restates, through artful variation or through outright repetition, the core idea of his paragraph. The latter trait gives his preaching at times an overpowering emotional quality. So impressed was Luther with the concept of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. E. C. Dargan, *History of Preaching*, New York, 1905, Vol. 1, p. 316 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Luther's quip in a sermon on the Bethphage incident, St. L. XI: 28, 29: "Die Kirche ist ein Mundhaus, nicht ein Federhaus; denn seit Christi Zukunft ist das Evangelium muendlich gepredigt, das zuvor schriftlich in den Buechern verborgen lag. Auch so ist des Neuen Testaments und Evangelii Art, dass es muendlich mit lebendiger Stimme soll gepredigt und getrieben werden. . . ." Cf. also WA, V:379, *Op. in Ps.* (1519-1521); and R. H. Gruetzmacher, *Wort und Geist*, Leipzig, 1902. Cf. also St. L. VI:1099. Dargan, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. F. Paulsen, *Geschichte des gelehrten Unterrichts*, Leipzig, 1896, 2d ed., Vol. 1, p. 35 ff., for a sketch of the scholastic method and the disputation. Cf. Luther, St. L. XII:128; preaching should be like a conversation at table.

dialectic in the sermon that he regards the catechetical method primary for the training of the parish.<sup>4</sup>

These qualities of Luther's preaching are basic for an adequate relation between the preacher and the audience. They guarantee not merely a setting forth of doctrinal truth; but they imply that the preacher takes responsibility for reaching the hearer with the Word; and they impress the hearer with the preacher's manifest desire to be there only for the sake of the hearer.

## II. HUMANISTIC PRINCIPLES

Luther taught preaching only by example. In the Lutheran Reformation he was the doctrinal leader and the publicist. The method of equipping preachers for the task of spreading the evangelical doctrine he left to the educational experts of his time, of whom the chief was Melanchthon. They dominated the theory of speech imparted to subsequent generations. That theory was developed by German Humanism.

German Humanism was a movement in German scholastic communities of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which sought to improve upon scholastic methods. This movement has at times been regarded as an element in the Renaissance, since it operated with newly discovered manuscripts of the classics and since it counted in its membership Renaissance figures like Erasmus, Pirckhaimer, and Reuchlin. Actually, however, German Humanism had a more restricted sphere. The Humanists attacked the barbarous Latin of the schools. They demanded that philosophy be studied not through the digests and glosses of the Scholastics, but through the originals. The movement was helped by editions of these originals—Erasmus began the procession with his New Testament—and by the recovery of portions of Aristotle which had not been in use in the schools. The Humanists inquired into the reasons for the superiority of the originals over the scholastic reproductions and found it in qualities of style. The result for the German university was that grammar and rhetoric received an emphasis beside which dialectic tended to disappear. The

<sup>4</sup> *Deutsche Messe*, 1526, St. L. X: 232 ff. Luther deprecated his own dialectic technic, by comparison with scholastic or humanistic experts; cf. St. L. XXII: 648, 664, 1568. Actually his method shows artful progression of thought, constant awareness of the hearer's train of reaction, and mastery of exposition and emphasis.

old teaching method of the disputation gave way to new devices such as school plays, reading of the classics, and particularly the declamation. Academic festivities now were marked by students declaiming orations, either directly copied from the classics or composed for the occasion by professors who sought to give both the declaimers and the hearers an adequate illustration of classic style. The subject matter of the declamations revolved, since they formed a part of the teaching process, almost exclusively about concepts of classic literature — mythology, biography, psychology, and philosophy. The theory of speech in this procedure assumed that the function of the hearer was to enjoy the aptness of language of the speaker and thus to be impressed by his ideas. In the humanistic psychology the will was presumed to function simply like the mind; if a man received information, and that in pleasurable words, then he was moved for the better. Furthermore, humanistic education emphasized competition and reward. If a speaker succeeded in gaining applause for his declamation, his purposes were achieved just as well and better than if he had imparted a fact or moved to action.<sup>5</sup>

The Lutheran Reformation was tremendously handicapped by a dearth of preachers. The visitations which established the Lutheran confession in the German lands made evident that a minority of preachers were competent to speak freely and to interest their hearers effectively. Postils were prepared at once. A process of training was developed for the clergy by which they would be equipped to supplement the doctrinal content of their sermons with philosophy and science. These processes resulted in several disadvantages. The pastor was led to think of his sermon as dissociated from the hearer during the process of compilation and to think of preaching as a species of declamation, in which the hearer's one function was to listen. The hearers were trained to listen passively or, at best, to admire the preacher's effort; they were not helped to seek zestfully for concepts which would help and heal.<sup>6</sup>

The doctrinal controversies of the sixteenth and seven-

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. current volume of the *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, p. 323 ff. For Melancthon's theory of speech and teaching method cf. Karl Hartfelder, *Philip Melancthon*, Vol. vii of *Mon. Germaniae Paedagogica*, Berlin, 1889, 2d ed., Vol. 1, pp. 339, 403, 404, 444, 457.

<sup>6</sup> Dargan, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 50, 51.

teenth centuries produced a predominantly factual strain in the preaching of that period. As the difficulty and complexity of the sermons increased, the humanistic concept of the declamation became all the more useful. It is noteworthy that for practical and devotional impulses Pietism turned to agencies other than the sermon, namely, the conventicle, devotional literature, and the hymn. The Age of Rationalism and the Enlightenment only increased the distance between the pastor and the hearer. The sermon degenerated into a form preserving the amenities of the service rather than contributing to the spiritual needs of the congregation.<sup>7</sup>

The humanistic theory made some useful contributions to Lutheran preaching. It emphasized the doctrinal core and Scriptural basis of the sermon. It provided traditions of careful preparation and thorough revisions of style. Its handicaps for preaching lay in the fact that the pastor did not continue Luther's passion for the person.

### III. AMERICAN INFLUENCES

American contributions to the theory of the preacher's relation to the audience have been manifold. The established churches and the preachers trained in the early universities followed the humanistic tradition. In considerable contrast was the preaching on the frontier and in the revivalistic movement. This preaching indeed challenged the hearer's interest to personal reaction and employed emotional reinforcement.

With the growth of the American cities and the trend to formalism also in the denominations descended from dissenting communions, the accent in American preaching shifted to oratory. One component of this accent was the original humanistic concept of eloquence. Another, however, was supplied by the nineteenth century speech criterion of the stage. The rise of the drama in England, France, and Germany established the speech of the actor as the standard. The actor's relation to the hearer, however, involves a different concept. If the actor is effective in impersonating and interpreting the character which he plays, he succeeds in causing the hearer to identify himself with the speaker. In effect,

<sup>7</sup> Cf. F. Uhlhorn, *Geschichte d. deutsch-lutherischen Kirche*, Vol. 1, 311; Vol. 2, 1—109. Leipzig, 1911.

the hearer crosses the footlights onto the stage. The actor succeeds in his objective by consciously and deliberately employing every artifice of gesture, vocal quality, posture, and reflection in order to depict a personality. The pulpit did not expressly imitate the stage. Nevertheless, the audiences borrowed the criteria of voice production, gesture and posture, and inflection from those of the stage. As church buildings became larger, and as pastors of large parishes became the models of successful speech, these criteria became the more acceptable.

The elocutionary ingredient of pulpit speech made some useful contributions to preaching. It helped to draw attention to the shortcomings of an exclusively sober, flat delivery. It drew attention to the fact that people could be interested by speakers. It developed a science of the resources of speech and challenged the speaker to employ all of himself, and not merely his voice, in advancing his ideas. The handicaps, however, were also great. Just as the technique of the actor became mawkish and ineffectual when employed by an inept and insincere performer, so the rules of elocution applied to preaching caused the preacher to look for approval for his technique rather than for help for his hearer and caused the "delivery" of the message to assume major proportions in the view of the audience. Hearers began to appreciate the "eloquence" of preachers and to discuss them as great speakers. Thus a distance was set up between the preacher and the hearer — a distance between the idea residing in the speaker's words and the expectations of the hearers and the use to which they put those words.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV. CURRENT EMPHASES

In the last twenty-five years new emphases have begun to dominate American speech. The pulpit traditionally lags behind speech trends, but may be expected to accommodate itself. This is especially important in the current case. For the current emphases are of value to the intrinsic purpose of preaching. They are derived from the purpose of using speech for changing the hearer's mind. They demand that the speaker think of himself only as a tool and means, and concentrate

<sup>5</sup> Dargan, *op. cit.*, pp. 503—540, on the British pulpit.

utterly upon the hearer. In so doing they remind strongly of some of the dialectic and personal emphases in Luther's own preaching method.

The emphasis on persuasion, basic to current speech theory, is due to the fact that speech today is dominated not by the stage, but by politics, law, and the radio. Interestingly enough, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* has become a basic expression of speech theory. The Aristotelian concept of persuasion stresses the devices by which the hearer is led to change his mind and employs not merely devices of speech, but enlists the speaker's entire personality in the process. Psychological theories, beginning with the James-Lange theory of emotional response and climaxing in the organismic, or *Gestalt*, theory, have helped to describe the speaker's entire self and body as occupied in the process of influencing the hearer. The doctrine of empathy has drawn the speaker's attention to the influence which an idea must first have upon himself, mentally and emotionally, so that the hearer will be moved by that response as a whole and not simply by a stream of words. The accent in current speech training is not on declamation and oratory, but on discussion; not on gesture and elocution, but on communication and the impact of one personality upon another.<sup>9</sup>

A further element in the consideration of current preaching theory is the fact that vast elements of American society are apathetic to preaching but that these same masses are in need, as never before, of spiritual help. The ineptitude of mass education for creating appreciation of literature and art has made it necessary, furthermore, to reach the masses on the most primitive level of interest. A tiny minority can be actuated to thoughtfulness or emotion through values of literature or through any ties with the past. Regrettable as this situation may be, it is not one to which the pastor can react with mere helplessness. Rather is he confronted by the need of speaking as simply and directly as possible to his people, in terms of their prime need and of the supreme answer which the Word can give in Christ.

Interestingly enough, therefore, the stage is set for a revival of Lutheran preaching in the elemental sense of Luther's own method. Again the hearer is to be gained. As never

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<sup>9</sup> As an illustration cf. Lew Sarett and W. T. Foster, *Basic Principles of Speech*, 1936, Cambridge.



before, the Lutheran pastor will concentrate on being simply a servant of the Word — a craftsman whose goals lie not in himself, his prestige, his self-satisfaction, but altogether in the life of his hearer.

The persuasive intention and the serving attitude of the Lutheran preacher of today will produce certain qualities of voice, demeanor, personal response to his message. What those reactions are, it is the business of speech theory to describe. Here it needs only to be said that the hearer listening to effective preaching is unconscious of the method of the speech at all. The more effective the delivery and speech of the preacher is, the more completely will the hearer be aware only of the message itself — its meaning, its usefulness to him, its importance, its godliness.

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