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A Critique of Contemporary Lutheran Preaching

By ERDMAN W. FRENK

PREACHING, i. e., the public proclamation of the Word of God, is the chief function of the Christian ministry. It is duty number one on a pastor's functional docket. It is his first and foremost responsibility. It was this in the early Church. It became this again through the Reformation. It must be this in the Church of our day. At the top of any list cataloguing the duties of a pastor in the order of their importance, preaching must stand first. If there is one field in which the pastor will seek to excel, it is in preaching.

This is true particularly in the Lutheran Church, whose glory is that she is a Word-centric Church. This means that the Word is not considered only a divine deposit, something given by God to man, but as the channel by which God leads man to a knowledge of sin and salvation. With this insight and background Lutherans look upon preaching as the primary function of the ministry.

Last year Dr. Murray H. Leiffer, a prominent Methodist layman, issued his daring book on *The Layman Looks at the Minister*. In it he actually takes a minister apart. Seeking and sampling the opinion of literally thousands of Methodist men and women with regard to their ministers, he tells the ministers many uncomfortable things about themselves, including a few things about their preaching. The perusal of this heavily statistical yet extremely illuminating book will make you a better Lutheran pastor and preacher. And before a layman of our own Church takes us apart publicly, even

as privately they *are* constantly doing, we suggest that we look critically at our own preaching. It is the purpose of this study to present an honest critique and appraisal of the preaching in the circles of the Synodical Conference during recent years. To do so, we must detach ourselves from our own preaching as far as possible and evaluate it, as it were, from without.

On the whole, our preaching, we think, is good, easily comparable with that of other church bodies. It is Biblical, it is eminently orthodox, it is evangelical though not necessarily evangelistic, it is textual, it is expository on the whole. Our contemporary Lutheran preaching is positive. It is authoritarian. Certainly it is doctrinal as probably in no other church body. It is traditional in the sense that our type of preaching seems to have been considered the best and preferred type of preaching down through the centuries, as Frost states in his *The World's Greatest Sermons*. Our sermons are timely, at least to a degree. They emphasize sin and grace, justification and sanctification, the former sometimes at the expense of the latter. They are pericopal; which, we think, has its virtues. Our preaching is confessional. It extols Christ and the open wounds of Christ. It is eschatological, at least on one or two Sundays of the year. On the whole, we should not hesitate to call our preaching good. It is so recognized by men outside our circles, who, while they do maintain that our preaching is too heavy with theology and dogmatics, nevertheless concede that our preaching is good. We may fall short on other pastoral ministrations, but when it comes to preaching, it is here that our pastors do seek to excel.

Yet despite the many good things which can honestly be said about our preaching, there are other things about it which are not so good. There is, we believe, a mutuality of feeling on the part of both clergy and laity in this matter. Our congregations are not wholly satisfied with our preaching, for valid or invalid reasons. And our pastors, too, we are sure, have turned a questioning eye upon their own preaching when they noticed the dull and dim effect of their sermons upon their congregations. Who at times has not felt constrained to cry with Peter: "Lord, we have toiled all the night and taken nothing?" Only our nights are prolonged into days and years. Who of us, feeling the vehement east wind

of our preaching, has not better understood Jonah when, sitting under the gourd, he could lament: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live." Who of us has not found boundless comfort in the assurance of our Lord that His Word would not return unto Him void, but would in its own mysterious way accomplish His purpose, especially when our own eyes for months and possibly years have anxiously roamed over our congregations and failed to see even distantly the purposes of God and the prayers of man realized?

There must be a reason for the ineffectiveness of much of our preaching. While some of it can be traced to the complexity of our congregations or the physical circumstances of our parish, much can be traced directly to us who do the preaching. We have selected six areas in which we may look at ourselves and our preaching in a critical and self-analytical way and trace, if possible, our weaknesses to their root sources, with the thought that we might thus arrive at some understanding which will make for more effective preaching.

I. THE SIMPLICITY OF PREACHING

Much of our preaching, I fear, is perfume wasted on the desert air because our preaching is too hard, heavy, difficult, abstruse, incomprehensible, in content, arrangement, and delivery — although of the latter I would speak later. There is beauty in simplicity. Complexity in anything mars or voids its beauty. There is no simpler religion in the world than Christianity, despite its divine origin. The simple Christ, the simple Word, the simple Cross, the simple Resurrection — much of the beauty in all of this lies in its simplicity. And God's plan of salvation in having Another die for us that we might live is extremely simple. Therefore Jesus said that what God kept from the wise and learned, He had revealed to the simple — this simple plan of salvation in the blood of Christ. In fact the Apostle states that this very simplicity is offensive to the pride of self-righteous man and moves him to reject it. He wants a salvation which is not so simple but more demanding, less blood of another, and more of his own blood. This simplicity of Christianity is characterized further by the simple manner in which Christianity is brought to us, viz., through the

means of grace. St. Paul calls the means of grace "earthen vessels," again pointing to the simplicity of matters.*

God's design in all this seems apparent. Christianity is for all. The simple message of sin and grace is intended for all classes and ages of men. Therefore the Lord has given us this simple and universal message in correspondingly simple and universal language. Will anyone question that the revelation of the Old Testament in simple Hebrew and the New Testament in the Koine, or popular Greek, was another move on the part of our Lord to "popularize" His message? Look at the preaching reflected in the New Testament and prevalent in the Epi-Christian Church: its marked characteristic is its simplicity! Paul went out of his way to preach the simple Gospel in simple language, whether he was speaking in the market-place, the synagogs, or in the private chambers of the governor or kings. The same is true of the other Apostles. And down through the ages of the Christian Church, simplicity in thought, simplicity in language, simplicity in presentation, these have invariably been one of the secrets of pulpit dynamics.

It is at this point, I fear, that many of us fall short, and the pity is that we are smitten with an almost fatal blindness in recognizing it. We may see it and hear it in others and be entirely oblivious of the fact that we, too, are burdened by the same affliction. Let us be frank about it. We may in our own way feel that we must be weighty, deep, profound in some of our pulpit utterances. Or we may be enamored of the style of another, of the rich, fruitful flow of his thought and language, and in our attempt to raise our style and standard to his we become ambiguous to ourselves and others. Or we may be inclined to be theologians first, pastors and preachers second, plumbing the depth of theological wisdom in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin during the week, and on Sunday moving in language and thought so foreign, so difficult, so incomprehensible that the world of the pew gets little or nothing out of the profound dissertation of the pulpit. Or we may follow the line of least

* Dr. Paul Scherer follows this line of thought in his contribution to the Yale Lectures on Preaching, a book which easily ranks with the best of the 65 volumes in this series and is the only Lutheran contribution. If the reader can afford but one or two books in this series, then let him by all means purchase Scherer's *But We Have This Treasure* and possibly *The Heart of the Yale Lectures* by Batsell Barrett Baxter.

resistance and in the pulpit use a professional language with its jingo and jargon which is perfectly clear to us preachers, a few pastors' wives, and the sprinkling of emeriti in the congregation, but is impenetrable and incomprehensible to the rank and file of the hungry souls of our congregation. We speak from experience. We have been guilty of all of these things and more. In appraising some of the sermons recently heard we are reminded of the new-type wrapping paper and deep-freeze containers. They are advertised as airtight and lightproof, enabling you to take out pretty much what you put in without shrinkage. Thus we fear it is with many of our sermons—doctrinally solid, homiletically correct, exegetically profound, but airtight and lightproof, enabling us—and us preachers only—to take out of them pretty much what we put into them. This, we concede, is an overstatement, but the point is clear.

Language is simply a vehicle of thought, the nexus between one mind and another. Certainly we can convey thought from mind to mind through other means than words; but for the preacher it is mostly through words. The effectiveness of 90 per cent of the preaching of a pastor is dependent upon his ability to use words which are known and understood by his hearers. If these words are not understood, they form a block, an obstacle, an impediment, to the thought stream which immediately interrupts the flow of the sermon in the mind of the listener, although the preacher may continue with his words. If the preacher uses a number of words which mean nothing to his hearers, or uses them with undue frequency, the listener pays him tribute by staring blankly at him with his eyes wide open but with his mind turning to the more comprehensible realities in life. We cannot emphasize this sufficiently, a preacher holds or loses his audience largely by the words he utters and the type of language he employs.

Now let us look at some of the language we do use. For years in the Eucharistic prayer we thanked God for this "salutary" gift. Words like "redemption, justification, sanctification, consecration" flow like butter from our lips. Incidentally, our difficulty with many of these words lies not only in the inability of our listeners to grasp them, but in the inability of preachers to explain them and put concrete meaning into them. In our dilemmas we advise

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calling upon God for "succor." We have just eulogized the dead and then politely refer to them as "vile bodies." We remind young parents and sponsors that children are "conceived in sin," we sign the infants in token that they have been redeemed by Christ the Crucified, then we address Christ in prayer as One who "did sanctify and ordain Jordan and all waters for a saving flood." In our marriage rite, first form, we summarize our introductory readings from Scripture with the words: "Thus God has sanctified marriage, etc.; for Christ, having atoned for our sin, hath hallowed even the crosses of those who believe in Him." Now, please note, we are not questioning the orthodoxy or truthfulness of these words and forms. Neither do we feel that they are entirely out of place in the various rituals and collects where we play with suggestions of awe and overtones. What we do object to is the fact that these terms so easily find their way into the vocabulary of the pulpit, where they convey little or no meaning to our listeners. Terms of this type, we maintain, are not understood or are misunderstood by the laity at large and, when used by the preacher, have but one effect upon his congregation, and that is to destroy the rapport and mutual interest which must exist between the two if the sermon is to be understood and carried into life.

But if the use of theological terms often works as a bane upon our preaching, even more so the tendency of the preacher to use abstract terms. Theology as a science is largely in the metaphysical class. It should not be, but it is. Not only does it deal with matters transcending sense comprehension, but in its endeavor to accommodate revelation to the concrete thinking of man it meets with constant difficulty. We recognize the eternal God only in the form of the historic Christ, anthropomorphically as theologians put it, and His entire revelation of Himself and His plan of salvation is given to us anthropopathetically. No, we are not saying that these terms are out of place in our pulpits, but what we do maintain is that, in view of our very professional training and ministrations, we are inclined to use an abundance of abstract terms in our preaching and hence perplex, if indeed not paralyze, the thinking of our hearers. Some months ago a prominent Roman Catholic layman wrote a book on the subject *How to Make Us Want Your Sermon*. We recommend it to you. A reviewer describes it as "Sacred

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Eloquence from the Point of View of the Sinner." He writes strictly from the listener's point of view, and among many other things he pleads with his reverend father, when in the pulpit, to use concrete terms, taken from everyday life, which suggest color, action, and drama, rather than employ abstract metaphysical terms which are easy for the preacher but hard for the listener.

Then I would point to a third factor making for heavy and involved pulpit language on the part of many of our pastors, and that is our Teutonic-Germanic background. The professional German knows little or nothing of simple, short, staccato language. His words involve the whole of man's breath and usually half of the next. He can use terms with a Greek and Latin derivation which are simply staggering to the American mind. Some of us who were brought up on the German *Gymnasial-Seminar* diet have no difficulty with this. Our boot training has conditioned us to it. We can use sentences with four dozen words, eight commas, four semicolons followed by a dash with the explanation in brief, and then follows another long paragraph. But that is not the language the pew understands. It revels in "koine" English. It wants short, concrete sentences with words that do not demand a knowledge of Greek or Latin to be understood. It wants nouns, and more nouns, active verbs, and a sparing use of adjectives, especially if they are colorless. It wants terms that have color and blood and that can easily be remembered. It doesn't want sermons with language which would seem to indicate that the sermons are for Sunday only. It wants preaching that is couched in terms that are simple, clear, concrete, interesting, using, if at all possible, words with which the listener thinks. In brief, it wants its preaching in language it can easily understand.

Simplicity in language and style is not an easy task for the preacher. And the older, the more read and scholarly he becomes, the more difficult. Men who are being trained for radio preaching are told by the experts that, when addressing the multitudes, whether visible or invisible, they should remember the advice of Cromwell to his soldiers: Always aim low—in language about the fifth-grade level. Another whimsically remarks that, while the Bereans sought and compared diligently, bringing their Bibles to

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worship, modern churchgoers must come with their dictionaries! Extreme, of course, but to the point.

But how acquire this simplicity of language? We venture a few brief, bold suggestions:

1. Reread every sermon you write, not for the purpose of determining its orthodoxy, but its simplicity. Cull and void every term which a child of the congregation cannot understand. Replace or paraphrase it. This had been the practice and discipline of one of our top radio preachers for years.

2. Take advantage of every occasion to preach sermons to children. They are always a homiletical therapeutic. You will have no difficulty in holding the attention of adults if you can capture and hold the attention of children.

3. Learn to live and think close to your parishioners. Pastoral counseling and regular home visitation are tremendous factors in determining concrete and effective preaching.

4. Read carefully the sermon reports of the catechumens, and note the language in which they regive your thoughts or their struggle with words they failed to understand or completely misunderstood. You will find this excellent chastening for your ego.

5. Prepare your sermon and write your sermon as close to the place where you will preach it as is possible with a mental picture of the congregation you will probably face on Sunday ever before you.

6. If you preach the same sermon in the early and a later service and you lose the attention of your hearers at any point in the sermon in the early service, better recheck your sermon manuscript in the interim between the two services. If you don't, in all probability your failure will be greater in the second service than it was in the first.

7. Assuming that no preacher will destroy a sermon manuscript into which he has poured his lifeblood, let him never file away that manuscript without a careful review and appraisal of the sermon as preached, deleting what proved to be poor and adding those thoughts which the inspiration of the hour and the congregation brought to him. This is a discipline which he will never regret.

8. Have an occasional recording made of your sermon. Several years ago in our vanity we consented to have a series of sermons published under the title *Preached on Sunday—Written on Monday*. We prepared these sermons with a fair degree of diligence, preached them as best we could, had them recorded while being preached, then transcribed, and then submitted for editing before publication. Your suspicion is correct. We wanted to include as much of the light and life in the sermons as the spontaneity of the congregation would provide. However, an honest reading of the transcribed manuscript completely disillusioned us. When we read the sermons from the listeners' point of view, then heard them replayed to us, it taught us more about our own preaching than a dozen of Dr. Broadus' good books on homiletics could have done.

9. Do not hesitate to question the "missus" on the merits and demerits of your preaching. After all, they are our best and most honest critics and share with us to an amazing degree the joys and sorrows of the pulpit.

Before we leave this point of simplicity, we would like to say just one word on the simplicity or organization of the sermon.

We are of the opinion that the structure of the sermon should be as simple as possible, with theme and parts clearly conceived and frankly announced to the congregation. This procedure will give the proper mental support to the preacher as he prepares and preaches the sermon, and to the congregation as it follows him. Where theme and parts, at least the parts, are deliberately suppressed, as is frequently done in our day in the interest of sustained interest, as the experts put it, we suspect that what you encounter is more tension and suspense than interest. To us such sermons are like the two-faced modern Studebaker, you don't know whether they are coming or going, or like the ill-fated and short-lived Tucker, we mistake the luggage for the engine compartment, and there we are in between. On the other hand, when the layman in his own wisdom or vanity boasts that when the preacher announces his theme and parts, he, the layman, knows in advance what he is going to say, this may be far more of a compliment to the preacher than the boast of the layman would seem to indicate. Now, understand, we do not mean that the preacher must announce his theme

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in the same way in every sermon, nor that he must have the same number of parts. But what we do say is this, that the preacher had best learn to think in terms of theme and parts as he prepares his sermon and, we believe, had best announce these parts to his congregation would he enjoy an easy following.

II. THE LENGTH OF THE SERMON

We have the manuscript of a funeral sermon preached seventy years ago by a prominent patriarch which took us close to an hour to read, and not because of its cacography. Sermons consuming forty to fifty minutes are still preached in our day, not on anniversaries and other festive days only, but as regular Sunday morning offerings. Our German congregations on the whole hear by far longer sermons than do the English. Yet the length of our sermons, I fear, lies at the root of some of the distaste and aversion which our parishioners feel for our sermons. In many instances they are mercilessly long, too long to do anyone much good, and in this we include every sermon beyond twenty-five minutes. We shall list a number of reasons which in our opinion are the cause of the undue length of sermons.

1. The first is, that the sermon was not properly written. Some preachers never learn that in the interest of brevity and balance the body of the sermon must be written first and the introduction second, the conclusion third or not at all. They start with the introduction and usually crowd into it things which, if they are pertinent at all, belong into the body of the sermon. And long introductions are like foot racers who take too long a run before they try to make the first hurdle only to find themselves winded before they come to it. Question it not, long introductions are tiring, if indeed not exasperating especially in this time-conscious day and age and are wholly out of place when they do not directly introduce the hearer to the body of the sermon. Let the preacher learn to think and write the body of the sermon first, and then the introduction, and he will find an amazing compactness and balance making for brevity and directness. Much of this also applies to the conclusion. The finest conclusions are simply a restatement and review of the introduction, the introduction in reverse in other words, assuming that the introductions actually introduce the listener to the

body of the sermon. Many of the conclusions we have heard and in part have made are downright abominable. They tax the patience of an impatient congregation in the extreme; they arouse the suspicion that somehow or other the preacher is gathering up the odds and ends which escaped him in the course of his sermon; they actually leave the impression that the sermon was not what it should have been and the extras are now being thrown in as an appeasement, and the only thing they really conclude is not the sermon or the subject of the sermon, but the effort of physical preaching. Like Topsy, they are on the ice float and just can't get off. A lengthy conclusion is always a *testimonium paupertatis*.

The conclusion is the most natural but at the same time the most difficult part of the sermon. Conclusions should be brief, preferably in staccato language, always relating the truths of the sermon to the life of the congregation and if possible ending on a high eschatological note. We have learned from personal experience in recent years, when our eyes were glued on the radio clock and the charge of \$.92 a minute was constantly dancing before us, that a formal conclusion in many instances is wholly unnecessary. If the sermon has served its purpose and the white glow of the congregation is apparent, the heart visibly warmed, and the wills all raring to assert themselves, then just conclude. Let the close be abrupt under conditions and, the more daringly and dramatically abrupt, the better. A few words under those conditions say amazingly much. Alexander Maclaren, still considered one of the greatest preachers of all times, never worried much about his conclusions. He remarked dryly that the conclusions to his sermons lay in the subsequent life of his listeners and that when some people spoke of his sermons as finished, which they were to some, they had actually only begun with others. He was one of those who believed that the clock should not determine the length of a sermon and accordingly at times before thousands of listeners spoke only twelve minutes, at times an hour and twelve minutes, as the Spirit moved him, or as he put it, "he would have to leave off spinning because his wool was done." "Is the sermon over?" asked a belated worshiper as he entered the church. "No," said the elder, "it has only been preached." Carefully prepared sermons will make for short sermons and eliminate the danger and agony of long-windedness.

Of course, it is far more difficult to prepare short than long sermons. Classic in this respect is the reply of Woodrow Wilson, who, when invited to deliver an address, replied: "If I am to speak tomorrow, it will be a two-hour address; if you give me a month, I shall cut it to an hour; but if you give me plenty of time to prepare, I shall be happy to deliver a twenty-minute address."

2. The second factor making for long sermons is the failure to rehearse the sermon vocally before it is preached, and preferably in the very auditorium in which it will be preached. We have had some very regrettable experience with radio preaching in this respect, sermons which were perfectly clocked for ten minutes in the study, and read in a normal tone in the study for a ten-minute broadcast, yet which almost brought apoplexy to the announcer when he saw the hand of the clock climb to thirteen minutes and the preacher, feeling the tension, vocally gallop like a race horse in the final lap. With few exceptions most men speak much more slowly in the pulpit, especially in the pulpit of a large church, than in a cramped study. In addition there is the stimulation which the sound of our own voice brings to our current of thoughts and preaching. Some of the most profound men of God have learned not only to pray but to read their Bible on their knees and to read aloud. Martin Luther read his Bible aloud even in his private devotions. Let preachers preach their sermons aloud, if possible in the very auditorium in which they will hold forth, then will they not only preach richer sermons in thought and contents, but the actual length of the sermon can actually be predetermined.

Most preachers have their own distinctive way of sermon preparation. We, too, have our own. Most of our Sunday morning sermons, especially those that are broadcast, are preached on the average of at least four times in church before they are delivered on Sunday. On Monday they are chicken in the rough, just the text and a more or less spontaneous vocal tussle with the bones. On Tuesday our mind has gotten away from the bones and can see vaguely the skeleton and structure of the sermon-to-be, chicken in the basket. By 11:00 on Thursday morning the sermon has been carefully thought out, sketched, and written so far as time permits, and this is immediately followed by a vocal rehearsal of the sermon, with a careful timing of the sermon and an immediate recheck of the

manuscript for deletions and additions. We try it again on Friday, and then joyfully await the hour to deliver the sermon.

Would you enrich your sermon in content and compress it into a reasonable length, then acquire the commendable habit of rehearsing your sermon aloud, even though you may have been in the ministry for a quarter of a century.

3. A third factor contributing to the abnormal length of a sermon is a failure to have a clear-cut conception of the direction and purpose of the sermon. A repeated vocal rehearsal of the sermon will contribute radically and vitally to a clear conception of the aim and purpose of the sermon. We know an elder who can out-talk any layman anywhere. When the issue in a meeting is clear, his remarks are sober, sane, passingly brief, and to the point. But if a matter or resolution is introduced which is not clear to him, he will speak for thirty minutes on practically nothing, until he suddenly sees things in the proper focus, and then, in an act of amazing mental and moral gymnastics, he practically reverses himself, comes down to earth, and concludes quite speedily. We suspect that much of this takes place in our regular preaching, when the sermon has not been carefully prepared and the mental outline or print of it is rather hazy. Referring to it, Whately, an Episcopal homelitician, remarks: "Many a wandering discourse one hears in these days, in which the preacher aims at nothing and—hits it. Like the dove of Noah, he flies to and fro and knows not where to light." Another somewhat uncharitably said of the preacher: "One could not detect whether the preacher was coming or going. It seemed much like emptying the contents of one empty bottle into another empty bottle." Let there be a clean, clear conception of the purpose of the sermon and much will be purged from the introduction, body, and conclusion which will be there if the terminals and objectives are hazy.

4. A fourth reason I would submit for the tendency to be long-winded in preaching is the inability of some men to resist the tempting inspirations or irritations which most listening congregations present. There is, of course, danger in sticking too closely to the letter of the manuscript, becoming little more than a recitalist, completely losing the warmth and color of spontaneity, which, we

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think, are indispensable to effective preaching. But there is also the danger to go off on a tangent and to be guided for the greater part of the sermon by the sudden awareness of the needs of the congregation. This may be extolled by many as a virtue. But it is more a weakness than is commonly realized. Preachers who give way to this danger may preach interesting but long sermons. Let the preacher learn to anticipate the needs of his congregation as he prepares his sermon in his study, cover these needs as best he can in his preparation, stick to it in his preaching, and thus guard against long preaching.

5. We submit as a fifth reason for lengthy sermons the false and erroneous conception that our congregations must be made acquainted with all of the intricacies and profundities of theological reasoning through sermons. A sermon on *Gratia Infusa* and *Gratia Applicativa*, even at a pastoral conference, gives us the creeps, not to speak of what it does to the average Sunday morning congregation. Like St. Paul, we will declare the whole counsel of God. This does not mean that we must exhibit our ability in theological reasoning, but that we state and restate as simply as possible those things which the congregation must know in the interest of its salvation. The older we get, the more we are impressed with the ingenious system which some brethren have developed of building all of their preaching around about two dozen major thoughts or themes which are basic. Strange as it may seem, these brethren seem to develop indoctrinated and spiritually minded congregations. On the other hand, preachers who regive at great length the profundities of the scholarly treatises studied during the week will ordinarily find themselves preaching in a church with a growing echo and dust-covered pews. And frequently the preacher, not fully understanding the theological profundities and usually feeling his way through them, is inclined to dogmatize at length, with the emphasis on the length.

Scientific research and measurement have determined the fact that the eye and the ear can and will follow a sermon lasting from 18 to 20 minutes. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. But ordinarily sermons beyond twenty minutes are largely wasted breath unless unusual conditions obtain. The time of sustained interest is even less in radio preaching, where the ear only is used.

For this reason most religious radio programs are booked on the fifteen-minute basis.

Speaking of the length of the sermon, Martin Luther says: "Some plague the people with too long sermons; for the faculty of listening is a tender thing and soon becomes weary and satisfied. It is best not to preach long sermons and to speak simply, like a child." Let us follow his well-known maxim: "Tritt frisch auf, tu's Maul auf, hoer bald auf." May God in His mercy keep us from the fatal folly of preaching our pews empty through inordinately long sermons.

III. LIFE-RELATED PREACHING

We turn now to a third major consideration in our critique of contemporary Lutheran preaching, and that is the failure of much of our preaching to be related to the life of our listeners. Atkinson in his *How to Make Us Want Your Sermons* states: "Clergymen often seem to take their audiences for granted. They deliver sermons that are not what the people need, but what they, the pastors, would like to say. Their line of reasoning is something like this: (1) Here is a gathering of sinners; (2) To such groups it is my duty to preach sermons; and (3) I will preach a sermon. The '*ex opere operato*' complex is carried over from the sacraments to the sermon. Pastors, please study us and our needs in advance, and then preach your sermons." We believe that this indictment is not without foundation. Too many of our sermons are theological, metaphysical, philosophical, stratospheric, and impractical. They carry a distinct *post-mortem* emphasis and mean little or nothing for the life that is here and now.

If *oratio, meditatio, et tentatio faciunt theologum*, then they also make the preacher, and, so far as the preacher is concerned, the *tentatio* is not the least of the three. The preacher, to preach effectively, must know life, life in its utter reality, in some respects more of life than any of his parishioners. Unless his sermons attach themselves with design to the conscience, the heart, and the will of man, they will do little or no good. Good sermons are practical sermons, and practical sermons somehow flow out of life and go right back into life. Certainly the application of the sermon is a part of the problem we are here discussing, but only a part of it. To be a living, thrilling, throbbing sermon, it must reflect a definite

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acquaintance with life from beginning to end. "One cannot listen to a sermon very long," writes a book reviewer in the *Christian Century Pulpit*, "without detecting whether the sermon is born and bred in the cloister of the preacher's study or in the heart of his congregation. Pastors who are chained to their desks invariably preach sermons of a metaphysical character, while pastors who live for their people and with them are bound to preach life-related sermons." And George F. Pentecost writes: "If the truth were known, many sermons are prepared and preached with more regard for the sermon than the souls of the hearers."

This is a danger which confronts especially the Lutheran preacher. Our doctrine of the Word may easily lead us to assume in view of the Holy Spirit's operation through the Word that it is entirely unnecessary to relate the preached Word to life. Our preaching accordingly is exegetical, expositional. We frown somehow upon thematic or topical preaching inasmuch as it seems to come too close to life and leave too little room for the Word to function as a means of grace. Yet experience proves that preaching that does not die with the moment of delivery, but moves on in ever-widening circles in the lives of men, is preaching that reflects a good understanding of the profound moral and spiritual needs of men and is designed to supply these needs.

In this as in many other things men have gone to extremes. Sermons that appear to be all application, all sanctification, are not unknown to our circles, neither the type of preaching known as "life situation" preaching, where a particular need or problem in life inspires a sermon and completely monopolizes the sermon. An occasional sermon of this type may be welcome and beneficial to the congregation, but as a steady diet we question its value. "The preacher must catch the spirit of the age. However, his business is not only to catch, but to correct the spirit of the age. True preaching will touch life at every point."

The question naturally arises, how to make sermons more concrete, living, realistic, related to actual life. The answer is found in the person of the preacher and his own relatedness to the life round about him. If he is a cloistered clergyman, who seldom emerges from his shell, he will quite naturally preach transcendental ser-

mons. But if he lives in his parish, in the hearts and homes of his people, touching their lives at their worst and at their best, his sermons will breathe a spirit of life-relatedness, which is immediately felt and discerned by his hearers.

We venture a few suggestions:

1. Do not underrate the homiletical value of parish visitation. Not books, nor sermons, nor church attendance will give firsthand information relative to the needs of the parish, but a regular visitation of the homes of the parish. We do not know whether the home-going pastor will necessarily have a better churchgoing congregation, but we do know that this home visitation will go a long way in keeping the feet of the preacher on the ground in his sermons.

2. Welcome every opportunity to counsel members of the congregation. Whether it be pre-marital counseling, parental counseling, problem counseling, youth or child counseling, jump at the opportunity and make the most of it. Certainly it is time-consuming, but educationally as broadening and deepening as anything one can find anywhere. Its homiletical value to the preacher cannot be weighed in rubies.

3. Read avidly the biographies of good and great preachers. It is impossible to read biographies of great preachers without becoming a better preacher oneself. We are thinking of books like *Six Kings of the American Pulpit*, by Macartney, or *American Preachers of Today*, by Edgar De Witt Jones, or *River of Years*, by Joseph Fort Newton, or *I was Made a Preacher*, by Bishop Ivan Holt, or *The Romance of the Ministry*, by Raymond Calkins, which is essentially an autobiography, or *Set Apart for the Gospel*, by Clarence Stoughton, which carries a distinctly Lutheran ring, or *Nine Great Preachers*, by Currier, or *Princes of the Christian Pulpit and Pastorate*, by Howard, two volumes, in which he treats both British and American preachers of note. Sermons will be more life-related when we note how others related them to life.

4. Do not underrate the value of some of the pastoral romances which in recent years have appeared on the market. Smile if you will, but *One Foot in Heaven*, by Hartzell Spence, has given more than one practical turn to our sermons, in addition to teaching

us pastoral tactology. *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, by LeGrand Cannon, read and reread with the greatest delight, has frequently influenced our pulpit. *Papa Was a Preacher*, by Alyene Porter, is more than a humorous story of life in a Methodist manse. It has nuggets of homiletical thought. *I Married a Minister* makes excellent reading not only for the pastors' wives, but for the preacher seeking homiletical stimulation. *Forty Years a Country Preacher* is an excellent antidote for one who may be tempted to drift into social preaching. *Pastoral Adventure*, by Reese, will serve to remove any inferiority complex which the Lutheran preacher may have when comparing his position in life with that of the Episcopal rector. And the Lutheran preacher who has not read *Clerical Errors*, by Louis Tucker, should be in sackcloth and ashes until such a time that he has laughed himself through the last chapter and learned that life has been very much the same for all preachers.

Learn to preach life-related sermons, and you will preach sermons that live in the conscience and life of the listeners. The proclamation of the eternal truths of God's Word means little or nothing unless these truths can be attached to the conscience of the individual and be made to bear upon his very life. The unknown must be attached to the known, the new fitted into the old, and then we shall have what our generation likes to speak of as "carrying something home with you," or "carrying over into life." All of Paul's preaching was life-related. So brutally and brazenly life-related was the preaching of John the Baptist that it cost him his head. If ever a prophet was a realist, it was our Lord. It must be thus with every preacher today. Failure in this accounts for some of our ineffective preaching today.

IV. DELIVERY OF THE SERMON

One of the truly touching tragedies of our day is to see conscientious preachers burning the midnight oil in the careful preparation and writing of the sermon, then treading the winepress until the wee hours of the morning studying and mentally rehearsing their sermon, and . . . doing practically nothing about the vocal delivery of their sermons. Who of us has not listened to sermons excellent in content and arrangement but completely lost to the congregation because of a faulty delivery? And who has not extended his envy to

preachers who, though thin in thought and shallow in theology, yet because of a remarkable delivery, satisfy and move their congregations? Many of our preachers make tremendous efforts in preparing their sermon but fall down because they do practically nothing about its delivery. As a result one hears the following typical complaint: "Many sermons are never delivered at all. The minister gets his words out; he gets the sermon off his mind and out of his system, but he does not lodge it in the minds and hearts of the people, to whom it is addressed. Essentially he keeps the sermon to himself because he does not know how to deliver it. He doesn't know how to preach."

It is in the spirit of "take heed" that we venture the following suggestions:

1. Take time to study the anatomy and operation of your own voice. It will pay you a thousand times over. Unfortunately most of the books on this subject which we have consulted down through the years have proved too difficult or dull for us, but there are some within the intellectual and financial reach of most of us. Our random suggestions are a study of *The Creative Delivery of Sermons*, by Kirkpatrick. *The Psychology of Persuasive Speech*, by Oliver, which gives valued physiological directions. *The Voice Governor*, by an Eastern Episcopalian rector named Harper. *The Preacher's Voice*, by Craig and Sokolowsky, possibly the best of all. *How Shall I Say It?* by Stover, a U. L. C. A. pastor of Philadelphia.

2. Do not underestimate the value of safeguarding and promoting the health of your voice. This will mean a daily gargle, better, twice or three times a day, perhaps a massage with cold water or a penetrating ointment at the beginning of the day, guarding the voice against a cold or chill, wearing a collar and tie which do not choke or suppress, and exercising the diaphragm and lungs daily in support of the speaking voice, in short, doing everything possible to keep that voice healthy, pliable, strong. The voice is the preacher's greatest and most indispensable tool. The care he gives to the voice determines whether the voice will be an asset or a liability. A poor voice has been the underlying cause for the premature retirement of many a preacher from the ministry. Failure to take care of the voice may mean an early pension. Our sugges-

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tion, then, is to let no day go by without your exercising and strengthening your voice through a series of vocal calisthenics. *Nulla dies sine vocalysis.*

3. Discover the pitch and the level on which you can speak effectively. Usually a tenor envies a bass, and a bass envies a tenor, both failing to recognize that each has a range and pitch all his own. Just how much training can change the natural pitch of a voice, we do not know, but there is no voice that cannot be made resonant and pliable through exercise and training. And the ring of the voice reveals emotion, convictions, or the lack of convictions more so than probably anything else.

We have always been amused and amazed by the suave directions given especially to young preachers relative to the tone of delivery. We quote: "Speak in the conversational, matter-of-fact tone. Avoid shouting. You may fire an audience with a loud voice, but if you want to persuade them, drop your voice and talk to them as a father talks to his child. Speak slowly and deliberately. Seneca writes of Cicero that he always spoke deliberately from the heart. Write simply as you talk, and so talk to your people. The memorized sermon will spark off quite naturally. Don't be in a hurry. Like every other vocal artist, make every sound and syllable count."

There is a good measure of wisdom and practical advice in all of this, but also the definite danger that the preacher becomes little more than a mechanical channel for the operation of the Holy Spirit and the transference of revealed truth. He is just a relay station. Just a recitalist. His tone of voice soon reveals it. No righteous ring, no real warmth, no revelation of personal convictions, no give-and-take thrill of spontaneous reasoning, no rapport, no feeling of togetherness in a common cause. Just a calm word-for-word peeling off of the prepared sermon manuscript. And this, I believe, is characteristic of much of our preaching. It neither reveals life nor excites life. "He left me cold and frigid," complains a listener. While another added: "With his dry and unemotional preaching he could not convert a titmouse."

If John the Baptist had followed the rule of conversational matter-of-fact preaching, he would have been pretty much of a failure. And Augustine must have been wretched in his pulpit,

for, like many of us, he was very nervous and at times fell all over himself. Martin Luther with his high tenor voice, his comparatively rapid pace, and his language of the common man, what a fizzle he must have been! Walter A. Maier, with his rapid-fire, rasping voice, employed anything but a conversational tone.

Yet preaching is something more than a mere restatement of revealed truth. It is, first of all, a public proclamation of these truths made in the name of another. It is furthermore the proclamation of truths which have passed through the distillation of a preacher's personal experience. He preaches the meaning of Christ to man only after he has personally experienced what Christ means to him. His preaching is always and only in the light of personal testimony and experience. It is true what Paul says: "We preach not ourselves," yet it is amazingly true that we *do* preach ourselves, and unless we do it, our preaching remains poor and ineffectual. In other words, if personal convictions, based on personal experience, do not guide us in all of our preaching, our preaching will be lacking in warmth and fire. Now, if the pulpit is not on fire, the pews in all probability will not ignite. And if the sermon and the tone of delivery reveal no personal convictions, do not look for a harvest in the pew. And this, I add, is not written with a thought of underrating the power of the Holy Spirit. Said a Chinese convert in a conversation with a missionary while discussing the merits of a new pastor for the parish: "We want men with hot hearts to tell us of the love of Christ."

In the light of the preceding, then, it is evident that the depth of the convictions and the reality of the religious experience of the individual will largely determine the tone and the ring of the voice. He will shout on Easter if the Easter hope and comfort are truly in his soul. He will never drop but ever raise his voice in righteous wrath when proclaiming God's judgment upon the transgressions of man. There will be times, to be sure, when his voice will assume the slow, rhythmic pace of the funeral march. Factual comfort is quietly spoken. There will be other times when his voice will assume the rush of many waters. After all, all of our convictions and emotions are expressed in certain tones, and they are never quite the same in every person. God spare our con-

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gregations from the same, dead, lifeless, conversational, monotonous tone in every sermon. Recitatives are usually bad enough in the average oratorio, even when sung by artists and maestros. Conversational, monotonous "recitatives" in the pulpit are a positive abomination in a Christian church and bring no glory to the living Christ. Let the preacher never hesitate to preach with abandon.

Preacher, watch your voice. Give it the best of your culture and care. Without it you are practically helpless in your ministry. And learn to speak in tones which are inspired by, and leave no doubt with regard to, the profundity and reality of your religious convictions and are designed to awaken and deepen religious convictions in others.

V. ILLUSTRATIONS

One cannot compare Lutheran sermons with non-Lutheran sermons without noting immediately that while Calvinistic preaching on the whole is rich in illustrations and analogies, our Lutheran preaching is not. Certainly we are making excellent headway in this direction, as a comparison of a 1950 *Concordia Pulpit* with a 1940 *Concordia Pulpit* will sufficiently indicate, or some of the sermons in the 1950 *Concordia Pulpit* with other sermons in the same volume will prove. Our preachers are beginning to use illustrations, good illustrations, and use them aptly and effectively. Yet we still have much to learn in this area.

To our day and generation religio-theological reasoning is difficult. This, we feel, also applies to the members of our Lutheran churches for whom we have provided Christian day schools and of whom we frequently boast that they are well "indoctrinated." Yet ask the average congregation to follow a preacher in, let us say, fifteen minutes of straight theological reasoning (dogmatic sermons in other words) and see what paled and palsied appearance the congregation will assume after about five minutes. It is indescribably dry to them, and after a bit, distasteful and dead. We marvel at times at the long, deep, dogmatic sermons which our forefathers could preach to their congregations, and apparently with profit and delight. What they had which we lack is difficult for us to determine, unless it be charged against the general levity and secularism

of our age. Certainly in mind, culture, and education we are not one whit behind those generations.

Suffice it to say that our congregations need mental helps and props in following us in our twenty-two minute sermons. Such interest helps are stories, illustrations, pointed comparisons, parables. In the overtones of illustrations we can often teach more than we can through the straight word.

Jesus was a master in parables or pointed illustrations. He saw profound spiritual truths symbolized and illuminated by occurrences in everyday life and did not hesitate to call attention to the point of comparison or contrast. Our Lutheran congregations today in their utter simplicity are strangely like the multitudes that faced Jesus. And they have need of sermons with barbed parables and pointed illustrations.

Many of our forefathers (in fact some of the *patres* today) were deadly set against the use of illustrations. In our own seminary mimeographed text on homiletics, as late as 1920, we find a caution against the use of illustrations. They reflect a Calvinistic way of preaching, the author argues, essentially deny the clarity of the Word, invade the sphere of the Holy Spirit, and should be used sparingly or not at all. The only proper illustrations are those taken from the Bible. Such advice is no longer given — nor heeded, as is evidenced by the publication of the 1936 volume of the *Concordia Pulpit* series. This volume on illustrations is a homiletical gold mine. It has given us inspiration for at least five years of solid preaching and is good for many more. And this despite the fact that our own index system of illustrative materials is quite thorough and we have a better-than-average library of reference books on homiletics. May we also call attention to the fact that no series of our six-penny devotional booklets sold so readily and was used so eagerly as that which in every meditation featured a story or illustration and then quoted Scripture in support of the point of the story. No, it is true, we are preaching sermons with more and better illustrations, and whether Calvinistic in origin or just American, illustrations are here to stay.

Illustrations are windows for the soul, both of the preacher and the listener. The glass in these windows is a two-way glass, per-

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mitting thought traffic in both directions. Where they are lacking, as they frequently do in our preaching, truth suffers. Experience conclusively proves that where illustrations are aptly used, truth sinks in and registers. Where they are absent, the truths frequently die on the lips of the preacher. Illustrations are like pictures to the eye which rivet attention and help to fasten the truth in memory.

Perhaps we should add that we are aware of the dangers and temptations in the improper use of illustrations—the temptation of the preacher to identify himself with the experiences of others and to take credit for something which is not his own; the danger of betraying the secrets of the confessional; using illustrations which do not illustrate the point at issue; following the lazy preacher's path and converting a series of stories into a sermon rather than laboring painstakingly with the revelation of God's Word. Yet despite these and many other dangers we are firmly convinced that for better and more effective preaching we must acquire the art of using more and better illustrations in our sermons.

But where get them? That, after all, is the question. Certainly the easiest and least profitable way to acquire illustrations is to purchase them by the book loads on the market, all ready made and carefully indexed. Now, if you simply must lead a dull life, lack imagination, and cannot acquire the *habitus* to see great truths reflected and revealed in the ways of man, then by all means purchase a good book on illustrations.

We offer a few suggestions in the art of acquiring more and better illustrations for your preaching:

1. Carefully read and comb your Bible for illustrations and comparisons. The authority of the Word will carry over to the authority of these illustrations. Oh, for the gift of illuminating the truths of the Scriptures with other Scriptures! Some men have it. All of the great pulpit masters have it. Most of us can acquire it if we properly pursue it. Bible illustrations are the best illustrations, more cogent and convincing, less tempting, and more readily understood than any others.

2. Record and compile illustrations based on your own experience. Our card index of illustrations from our own pastoral life is invaluable. They have flesh and blood, can be repeated, and awaken a natural warmth in the lips of the preacher and the ears

of the listener. Next to Biblical illustrations always give first place to your own, even though they may not be quite as phenomenal, miraculous, and breath-taking as some of those of the books.

3. Listen carefully to the pastoral experiences of others. Our people have an amazing interest in the tales of preachers, especially if these tales throw new light upon old truths. Next to our own pastoral experiences we can quote none with greater effect than those of some brother of the cloth. At times we wonder why some older brother with a little more time has not felt inspired to gather these stories and weave them into a pastoral anthology literally jam-packed with glowing tales for sermon illustrations.

4. Use published illustrations from the pastorates and ministries of others, especially if they have been pastors with an evangelical bent. Clarence Macartney's book on illustrations gleaned from his own sermons is unexcelled in this class.

5. Operate a file (or combine it with your own card index system of illustrations) of all of the striking illustrations which you may happen upon in your reading, irrespective what that reading may be. We cannot at this time recall the name of the great psychological light who was buried with pen and pad in his hand because of his insistence throughout his professional life that thinking is best done with pencil and pad. I believe that most of us preachers would be more thorough and effective preachers if we did more of our thinking and reading with a pencil and pad. The occasional day, when we review, classify, and file our perforated memo slip, always proves a most profitable day for us.

6. Purchase with thought and discretion a book on illustrations and anecdotes, preferably Volume 1936 of the *Concordia Pulpit*. Pastors who have not read *The Art of Illustrating Sermons*, by Bryan, should do so. If nothing else is read in the summary statements of Batsell Barrett Baxter in his *The Heart of the Yale Lectures*, then certainly the chapter on "Illustrations" should be read.

To summarize: Illustrating sermons is difficult work, more so for the younger preachers than for the older, who have a lifetime of experience behind them. But it is an art which must be mastered if the preacher would hold and move his audience. The preacher rises and falls with his sermons. Concern for good illustrations will enable him to preach better sermons.

VI. ESCHATOLOGICAL URGENCY

Our religion is both "diesseits" and "jenseits," *ante mortem* and *post mortem*. Yet traditionally our emphasis has primarily been on the "jenseits," the *post mortem*. The preaching of the New Testament is distinctly eschatological. It is always directed toward those things which lie in the foreseeable future, at the end of time — the returning Lord, resurrection, judgment, eternal salvation or damnation. So our Lord, so Paul, so Peter, and so John. And that preaching was urgent. The tension and pressure of imminence was always within it. *Now* is the time of grace. *Today* is the day of salvation. The ax is at the root. Today harden not your hearts. Be ye ready also, for ye know not the hour when the Son of Man shall come in His glory. What immediacy, what tension, what urgency and imminence! Maranatha. It is a matter of today or never.

Richard Baxter could write:

I preached as never sure to preach again
And as a dying man to dying men.

And Summerfield, just before his death, exclaimed: "Oh! If only I might be raised again! How I could preach! I could preach as I never preached before! I have taken a look into eternity!"

An examination of our current preaching reveals the absence of this urgent, eschatological ring. Whether we preachers have not taken our look into eternity, or whether we have become so enamored of the *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *sola Scriptura* that we have largely forgotten about the other end of the rainbow, we do not know. But this urgency, we fear, is neither in our own convictions nor in the sermons we preach, except possibly at the close of the church year or at the bedside and the casket side. And because it is absent, our sermons are falling flat. We hit little or nothing because the note of urgency is lacking. And next Sunday another sermon will be preached, and we shall have another opportunity, so why worry very much about this one?

It would seem to us that one of the most compelling needs we preachers face is a recapture of the urgent preaching of the early Church in view of the imminent return of our Lord. With John the Baptist every appeal was a matter of life and death. All of the preaching of Jesus and Paul was colored by the sure things which

lay immediately ahead. Peter in his Epistles literally throbs with urgent eschatology. And you will never understand John in his Revelation unless you keep in mind the background of persecution and the imminent relief which the returning Lord would bring to him over against that situation.

Yes, Baxter is right, we must preach every sermon as if this were the last opportunity for us and our congregation, knowing full well that both we in the pulpit and they in the pew are common fellow travelers on the pathway to the grave, the resurrection, the judgment, and, pray God, the throne of grace above.

Homileticians tell us that it is always advisable to conclude the sermon on a high eschatological note, pointing to the hands of love above, to heaven, to eternal life. There is wisdom in this. But what is greater wisdom, it would seem to us, is to inject this note into the body of the sermon, have the sermon completely colored and saturated by it, and then with this urgency press it upon the heart and conscience of the congregation.

With this we conclude our Critique of Contemporary Lutheran Preaching. If what we have said or suggested will so move the preacher that he return to his preaching with the firm resolve to perfect himself in this greatest of all arts—publicly proclaiming God's saving love to men—then our efforts surely will not have been in vain. "For we have this treasure." Let us share it with men as best we can.

Joliet, Ill.

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