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In What Way Does Christ Speak Through the Ministry*

BY PRAELAT ISSLER

THESIS 1

Christ speaks through the office which He has established in the Church because He has committed to it the Word in which, despite the sinfulness of the office bearer, the Spirit of God is actively present. Christ's charge is here the basic factor.

OUR question does not simply ask in what way Christ speaks through the minister's sermon, but in what way Christ speaks through the ministry. Hence our first thesis treats of this office (*diakonia*), the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*. It is neither possible nor necessary to adduce a *locus classicus* for the institution of this office: we have such only for the Apostolic office. But Gospels and Epistles alike reveal the same factual situation—the "office" is there! Word and Sacrament require it and, as it were, create it as their own instrument.

The one office (Eph. 4:11; cf. 1 Cor. 12:28) branches out into a fivefold office: Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. But even in its various branches it is one office, one *diakonia*, which in all its functions is related to the Word and, even in the specific office of the Word, is not detached from its other functions.

* This is one of the essays presented at the 1951 Bad Boll Free Conference. The topic of the six-day conference was: "The Living Word of Christ and the Response of the Congregation." (Cp. this journal, July, 1951, p. 515.) Two essays of the series have already been published, "The Speaking Christ in His Royal Office" (March, 1952) and "The Lutheran Doctrine of the Autopistia of Holy Scripture." (April, 1952.) Prof. Victor Bartling has translated the essay appearing in this issue. The Rev. Mr. Issler is a prelate in the *Evangelische Landeskirche in Württemberg*.

As to the mode of the call into this office we find no prescriptive direction in the New Testament. At one time the call comes through election by the congregation; at another time it comes through appointment by an Apostle or his proxy, such as Titus; still another time the choice is made by the casting of lots. The office is not conferred by human authorities. *Rite vocatus* is he upon whom the office is conferred in the divine service of the congregation. However, the congregation in this case acts not as a human organization, but as an organism controlled by the Spirit of Christ and representing the one Holy Christian Church. Or, we should rather say, the Lord Himself, who according to His promise is present with the congregation, is the One who confers this office. In the same way it is not the Apostle as an individual who confers the office by the laying on of hands, but He who has called the Apostle acts through him. So, then, Christ Himself speaks through the ministerial office and its incumbents—*ubi et quando visum est deo* (Aug. Conf., V).

Why has this office been established? The first answer to this question must always be: God is not a God of disorder but of peace (1 Cor. 14:33). God wills that Word and Sacrament be administered in orderly fashion. Therefore the Lord, the Personal Word, through the Word and for the Word, creates the office that testifies of Him.

To be sure, the office exists not only for the sake of order. It has a dignity of its own as a concrete reminder of the claim which God's Word makes not only upon the congregation, but upon every man, including the office bearer himself. (2 Cor. 4:1-2: "Therefore, seeing we have this ministry, we . . . by manifestation of the truth *commend ourselves to every man's conscience* in the sight of God.") Happily our people as a whole have not lost the sense of the special character of this office. The minister occupies a distinct position. He has his commission from God. His office, therefore, represents God's claim upon every soul; it shows one generation after the other the "vertical line" of the Church. And so not only for the sake of order has this office been established, but also for the sake of love.

Now, then, to this office the Word has been entrusted which is proclaimed from the chancel (*kanzel*) by the "chancellor," as

the message of the King. In this Word the Holy Spirit is operative. As the Trojan horse bore the armed men of the Greeks, so this Word is the bearer of the Spirit of God, who at Christ's command does battle for the souls of men with the weapons of light.

All this is highly significant for us preachers. In the first place, it calls for *deep humility* on our part. What a privilege, what mercy beyond compare, that we sinful mortals should be invested with an office of such lofty dignity! Such undeserved honor must keep us down on our knees in sincere repentance. Surely we "sinful keepers of the Holy Grail" must be free from all clerical pride. In the second place, the origin of our office must afford us happy *assurance* regarding our vocation. Such assurance is not given me through my appointment by some church board or through my election by the large majority vote of my congregation. That by itself does not make me *rite vocatus*. But that I through prayer have been made inwardly free and, at the same time, inwardly bound to have this office committed to me in the presence of God and the assembled congregation—that imparts assurance. My charge is not my own. I am the ambassador of Christ, though but His "soot-stained instrument" (Luther). And thus I stand in the long line of all God's called witnesses, from Moses down to the Prophets and Apostles, from the pre-Reformation witnesses down to the Reformers themselves and all the confessors and witnesses who have been called into this office down to this present day. Only in this sense do we lay claim to Apostolic Succession.

Finally, we note once more that the office so derived represents *Christ's claim upon all men*. His Word speaks in admonition and aid to every sphere of life and lays claim upon all men for God. While cognizant of the problem posed by the multiplicity of religions and denominations and the problem clothed in the familiar slogan: "Religion is a private matter," we must recognize that if it is true what Paul says in describing our office as speaking "to every man's conscience in the sight of God," we are not merely the pastors, preachers, and administrators in the service of one particular confessional body. No man can escape the authoritative voice of the Word by severing his connection with the Church. While practical conditions may hinder us from exercising

such universal authority, yet we are not really servants merely of a denomination; we are holders of the office which by the manifestation of the truth addresses every man's conscience in the sight of God.

THESIS 2

This office obligates its bearer as one under the constraint of God to yield himself every day of his life to the regenerating power of the Crucified and, himself a bearer, to stand in line with the members of his congregation in the solidarity of guilt, suffering, and obedience.

Christ speaks through the ministerial office in spite of the sinfulness of the incumbent. Therein lies comfort for the hearer when the sin and the weakness of the preacher give offense to those without; and therein, too, lies comfort for the preacher himself. But such comfort, he must know, is purely a gift of God's wondrous grace, and it does not absolve him from guilt if his life presents an obstacle to God's working. God is not obliged to work this wonder; He can let the failures of the preacher become a curb to the working of His grace.

Article VIII of the Augsburg Confession states that the Sacraments and the Word are effective though they be administered by evil men (*per malos*). Who are these *mali*? Not the heretics; for, of course, God can save a man through a heretic. Heretics, however, are not meant in this connection. On the one hand, those are meant who through immoral living, unrighteousness, lovelessness, and wantonness give the lie to the Word they proclaim, whose life clashes with their preaching. On the other hand, also the *imperiti* are here meant, men who know the article concerning justification and zealously contend for its truth but have themselves not experienced what it means to accept without any qualifications both the divine judgment and pardon. Also such men in their way give the lie to the Word which they proclaim. And yet the Word also from their lips is effective "when and where it pleaseth God."

True as it is that the Word is a weapon wielded ultimately by the Lord Himself and not by the preacher, that "soot-stained instrument" of the Lord; and true as it is that God can and often does perform the miracle of separating the Word in its effective

power from the personal qualities of the preacher: yet it is also true, from the human point of view, that the Word cannot be separated from the preacher. From the human point of view we must say that the condition for an effective ministry is that the preacher of the Word exposes himself fully to the judging and saving, the killing and vivifying power of the Word. Humanly speaking, a smug "I-have-already-attained" attitude on the part of the preacher means death to his message. Scintillating showmen as pulpiteers are soon forgotten, while those who bear the marks of Christ are a blessing long after they have passed away.

Our first two theses stand in tension to one another. The preacher must say to himself: I must pray and live as though effective preaching depended alone upon my sanctified life; but I must preach as one who knows that all depends alone on God's promise and not upon my sins or virtues, my perplexities or certainties.

If the preacher yields himself daily to the regenerating power of the Crucified, it will be impossible for him to exalt himself above his congregation members. With all his heart he will join them in a solidarity of guilt, suffering, and obedience. This does not exclude that on occasion he will confront his people as God's ambassador with God's inexorable command to repent and thus, as it were, set himself apart from them as God's mouthpiece. The Church requires the gift of such stern repentance preaching; but it must be a gift and not posing or presumption on the part of the preacher. In general, however, pastors must be "We men," who say "We sinners," in contrast to the sectarians who parade as "You men" with their: "You sinners!" We are neither Apostles nor Prophets, but *ministri*, servants.

THESIS 3

Christ can speak to men apart from the ministerial office, through such as are not "rite vocati." But genuine proclamation and genuine hearing always leads to membership in the visible communion of the Church.

God is free in His Word and can, if He wills, dispense with the ministerial office of the Word. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings He can bring perfect praise (Matt. 21:16). He can

employ a pompous blusterer, who falsely lays claim to divine sending, for effective service in the Word (Phil. 1:18). God can use the strangest of instruments in the most out-of-the-way places. He will, indeed, one day call the self-called to account for their vanity, for abusing the Gospel for selfish ends, for dividing the body of Christ in order to gain an obsequious following for themselves. God can speedily cast them away, but He can also suffer them long. But in every case He can *use* them, and Christ can speak through them.

The test whether Christ uses and speaks through them can usually be quickly made. If such preaching produces only a general feeling of religiosity or a few moral resolves or only some vague spiritual stirrings; or if such preaching actually results in Pharisaic separatism, whether in a worship in isolation or in some conventicle of the "elect," with no willingness to kneel together humbly with the fellowship of repentant souls in the congregation and with no willingness to serve in the midst of this larger fellowship, the Word applies: "By their fruits ye shall know them."

Sovereign detachment like that of the imprisoned Paul, who could rejoice: "If only Christ be preached" (Phil. 1:18), cannot be maintained over against actual deception. The schismatic is a deceiver. Also he is a deceiver leading souls astray who, as is witnessed in our larger cities, lightly scatters the precious pearls of grace in the market place. The earnest note of repentance is seldom heard in such street preaching. The name of Christ may be spoken in almost every sentence, and yet Christ Himself refuses to speak.

THESIS 4

If the voice of Christ in preaching is not to die away without effect, the body of bearers must become a congregation, and each bearer as a member must abide in active confession and in loving service to the brethren.

There have been and still are vast audiences under pulpits, and yet they cannot in every case be spoken of as congregations. The true congregation manifests itself as the body of Christ in the manifoldness of service rendered by its members toward one another and toward the world. But many in those large audiences shy away from this organism. They only wish to give their itching

ears a treat by listening to a preacher palatable to their tastes. It is almost worse when an assembled congregation regards itself but as a Sunday assemblage, a mere audience, while the individual hearer fails to recognize his responsibility for service to Christ in home, community, and calling. The need for such service may be supplied in part through various functionaries on the church staff. Such church workers can sometimes not be dispensed with in view of the modern economic situation. The ideal, however, must be that every member conducts himself as a servant to his fellow members and to the world at large.

In this connection two dangers must be pointed out. One is that a congregation may insensibly become a purely sociological unit. A special social group, a particular type of community, bands together, and a distinct community spirit (*spiritus loci*) puts its stamp upon the group. The community interest may easily relegate the Gospel to the margin, and the local spirit rather than the Gospel becomes the tie that binds; social custom usurps the place of service for Christ's sake. One means to counteract such development is for the local congregation to assume an active share in the joint work of affiliated congregations in the larger church communion. (Incidentally let us state here that also the liberty of transfer from one congregation to another must be safeguarded; the individual congregation is a home and not a cage with bars.)

A second danger is that the activities of various circles in the congregation may become an end unto themselves. The Sunday worship, instead of being the crown of the congregational life, becomes a mere duty, a concession to the preacher or to tradition. From force of habit, without clear motives, people still participate; but their real concern and interest is their special circle, whose activity, it must be said, gradually becomes mechanical and runs its course like a machine requiring no spiritual direction.

Over against these two dangers we have the reminder in our Augsburg Confession that the Church is not merely a *congregation* of men, but at the same time, however rude its human appearance, a manifestation of the *ecclesia*, even the *una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura*. The true Church has two sides: in her worship service, with the Word of God reaching out into the lives of men, she

is an image of the heavenly congregation with its eternal song of praise; on the other side, she is *congregatio*, and the Christian life itself of its members, regulated by the Word, is truly a divine worship. This applies as well to the individual Christian's private life as to the corporate life of the congregation. In this life the Word, even without a spoken word, everywhere shines through. "The light shineth in the darkness," shines silently but effectively. And unless the Word thus shines through the multiplicity of Christian services, including the daily duties resting upon parents in the home and the daily labors of Christian workers about their tasks, the Word preached on Sunday loses its effect, seems unreal, and fails to run its destined course. We preachers, too, must learn this lesson and learn to step down to many a humdrum, unpretentious, and apparently secular service. And our congregations must learn this lesson. Many a parishioner is loyal to his parish church. However, such loyalty becomes meaningful only in work-day actions and attitudes.

THESIS 5

Christ's speaking through the ministerial office does not mean that we can discard the words of the Word ("Entwoertlichung der Offenbarung"). On the contrary, it obligates us to search in an ever new effort for the exact meaning of Scripture and how this meaning may best be put into present-day language for the present-day situation.

Since the Lord Himself speaks through the "soot-stained instrument" of the preacher, it might be supposed that the preacher could be careless about the letter of the text. And since the Revealer Himself speaks through the preacher, may he not be relieved of the exacting task of close study of the Word? One thing is true in this theory of fanatical "enthusiasts," this, that the Word is not an independent factor *beside* Christ. Christ Himself is *the* Word. We have access to Him, the Word, through the Scriptures, which testify of Him. Scripture is word of the Word, in a sense, a secondary Word. In the same way the Scriptural sermon is word of the Word, with the aid of the Inscripturated Word drawing from the fullness of Him who is the Personal Word.

Just for this reason there is no dispensation from conscientious textual study. The preacher must ask: What does Scripture mean

in this passage? What is the thought here put into words? What special instruction is here given? What precept of the divine will is indicated? Then follows the very serious task of endeavoring to see how this discovered meaning may be stated in all its depth and force in the language of our own day and for the present moment of history. This is a serious problem. It cannot be lightly solved by clever artifices. But the Church must tackle the problem seriously. No Church has yet found the solution.

Formerly men spoke of "the parallel of the present" ("*Gegenwartsparallele*"). The term is inadequate. We are not to draw a second, parallel, line but are to drive the line of the text itself into the hearts of men and into the situation of today in order to rouse, convict, exhort, comfort, and direct, our contemporaries. But we lack the language that really touches the sensory nerve of modern man. Language, we said, not diction. What we mean may be illustrated with Luther. The question which, unconscious and unformulated, for more than two centuries during the disintegration of the Medieval Church disturbed men's souls, Luther formulated in his epochal question: "How may I be assured of a gracious God?" He found the answer in the Gospel. The future belongs to the Church which, like Luther, finds the expression for the needs of human souls today and finds the right word to give answer to this need.

We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by the fancied needs of our hearers. To be sure, there are means to beguile and fascinate modern man. Some will be taken in by the rattling apparatus of traditional terms and formulas: sin, grace, repentance, regeneration — under this old roof they feel secure. The question, however, is whether the substance is really present or only the verbal husks. Others want the preacher to play on their emotions, and they call that "edification," "devotion," and they fancy that they are thus experiencing the numinous presence of deity, are being invaded by the heavenly Spirit. Still others clamor for exact calendars fixing precisely the dates of the eschatological events. Now, all these are but fancied needs of modern men. A preacher who sets out to meet them may command a measure of ephemeral acclaim. And yet these are not the real needs, but rather pseudoprojections of what they really need. Lutheranism

has often been chided for its allegedly one-sided soteriological emphasis. In the face of all criticism we must insist that the fundamental problem whose solution man in truth does need, the question which underlies all other questions, is the old Luther question: "How may I be assured of a gracious God" That question is not alive in modern consciousness. And yet it is the hidden fountain of all restlessness in the depth of men's souls. As the question rises to the surface, it changes its hue and loses itself in altogether different questions: "How can I forget myself? How can I get rid of fear? How shall I find security? Where is something really new? Where is the doctor, the political or religious leader, the *Fuehrer*, who will bring me the help I need?"

We know that Christ has the power to unmask these questions as caricatures of the question that embodies man's true need; we know that He can bring into clear light that one great question as to the way toward peace with God and that He is able to give daily anew the answer that satisfies. We know, too, that this all is veiled in Scripture and is waiting there to begin with joy its saving assault upon the human heart. But we have no prescription for this other than ceaseless study of the Word and unwearied prayer for the right word for the Word.

THESIS 6

In clear correspondence to the divine-human Person of the Word Incarnate, and even more to the human form He has taken in Holy Scripture and to the IN, CUM, and SUB of the Sacrament, Christ through the fully human word of the sermon nevertheless speaks "His" Word. Here we have both the promise and the limitation of our office.

Christ *speaks* through the ministerial office, He speaks through the sermon. Hence it is an action of Christ which differs from His action in the Mass as conceived by the Catholic. Through the fixed holy words of the liturgy of the Mass the Catholic is transferred, as it were, into a holy place: Christ in the act of transubstantiation Himself strides through the church. Over against His holy presence the faithful are passive. In the sermon, however, Christ the Word reaches out actively to the congregation and its members through the individuality of the preacher, a very

limited and sinful man. Thus the sermon in both origin and language can be no holy act removed from the world. With the basic intention to let the Lord Himself speak, the preacher gets to work at his sermon. Various factors conspire to bring to life the finished product: an inquiring mind searching for knowledge; problems of homiletical method and of pastoral concern; psychological aims; religious experience as colored by the limited and one-sided personality of the preacher; Scripture interpretation which must always fall short of the ideal through want of perfect historical and theological insight; doctrinal exposition; value judgments, and so on. The preacher will hardly entertain the thought that in the sentences he has put together he has been word for word the instrument and voice of Christ. Here, too, the *in*, *cum*, and *sub* have their place. In principle, we must say that the sermon at the outset can be regarded as purely human speech (and often it remains that when it pleases the Lord on occasion to withhold His promise) — human speech, bearing throughout the traces of fallen man and his debilitated reasoning powers. But it is also true that the Lord at His own hour is pleased to use this sermon as His own address to individuals, few or many, and the sermon becomes the voice of God exhorting and uplifting man.

Do you ask how this supernatural event takes place? We only muddle matters by trying to trace the inscrutable! At times the preacher will recognize a sentence in his sermon as given to him by God just as it stands. Again at times the voice of God will accompany the spoken word somewhat like an induction current, and it is Christ who speaks and not the preacher. Indeed, it happens that while the preacher speaks, Christ can say something to the hearer's heart which was remote from the preacher's line of thought. The preacher then, perhaps, feels put out about such unexpected echoes to his sermon and says: "My dear man, you evidently didn't catch the drift of my argument," or: "I am sorry to say, you took up a chance remark as the main point and even then misunderstood it." Sometimes the hearers really hear amiss and foolishly, but also at times it is the case that though they failed to get the preacher's meaning, they well understood the meaning which Christ intended *for them*.

The preacher does well to remain content with his humble role

as "the soot-stained instrument" of Christ, leaving the mystery of Christ's speaking wholly to Him. The preacher in all humility will take up the charge laid upon him in the assurance that just in such obedient submission — *credo quia absurdum!*—the sermon will be the product not merely of the preacher's will and sweat, but will be primarily and decisively God's own performance.

THESIS 7

The strictly personal nature of the Word as address and exhortation does not exclude, but rather includes the speaking of Christ when veiled in the physical signs of bread and wine in the Sacrament or in the apparently impersonal and objective presentation of the saving truths in the liturgy, veiled also in the wordless service of love or in the witness of wordless suffering (cf. Theses 4 and 6).

We do not intend to speak here in a theoretical way about the relation between the sermon and the liturgy. However, we do want to express our conviction that in every service, however impoverished it may be in respect to liturgy, both sermon and liturgy should in some fashion be present; together they constitute the service. . . .*

In the liturgy the congregation on earth participates in the perpetual worship of praise which, as described in Revelation, the heavenly assembly offers to the Lord. In the liturgy, furthermore, the worshiping local congregation rejoices in its fellowship with the whole Christian Church on earth and with this Church traverses ever anew the full orb of God's plan of salvation.

The proclamation of the Word may, indeed, be unaccompanied by liturgy, although in our judgment it would be better otherwise. Still less ought there be liturgy without the sermon (we speak here of the main service without Communion). The congregation on earth cannot live exclusively in the heavenly hymn of praise of which the liturgy is a weak image. It stands in constant need of instruction, edification, comfort, exhortation, reproof, and training in righteousness. Without this the liturgy

* Here follows a rather lengthy passage in which the lecturer points out that the objective nature of the liturgy serves as a counterbalance to the more subjective nature of the sermon from both the preacher's and the hearers' standpoint.

easily becomes a specious spiritual luxury or may be regarded as a meritorious performance.

And yet liturgy, too, is Christ's own proclamation. In unmistakable accents He knocks upon the door of the heart in the Confession and Absolution, speaking as the holy and merciful Lord. In the Creed, Christ, the dynamic Agent of the entire plan of our salvation (*Heilsgeschichte*), demands of the hearer or pray-er his personal "Yes" to this historical movement from Creation to the final consummation. Also when the liturgy at some point deeply stirs a worshiper and lifts up his soul in adoration—yes, just then—liturgy becomes a mighty proclamation. To be sure, the decisive thing is that Christ confronts me personally. But as He confronts me, He brings along with Himself all that He means for me, all that He is and has done for me, as this is reflected in the prayed summary of the history of salvation in the Credo and in other parts of the liturgy. Often men help us more by what they are than by what they say, however much they may speak to our hearts. So, too, the present Lord can work mightily upon our hearts through the simple presentation of the realities of His Being and work in the liturgical parts of the service.

Similar reflections have their place also with regard to the Sacrament and the "wordless" Word of Christian service and Christian suffering.

THESIS 8

a. The "purpose" of the sermon is to bring the hearer through repentance and forgiveness back into fellowship with God, who seeks the lost, to renew their lives through union with the living Lord, to make them members of the body of Christ, and to call them to serve the new realities of the Kingdom of God amidst the old realities of the present world.

b. In the case of "occasional" sermons, and such as are designed to meet some special cause, there is danger that they may block the way to the "speaking Christ" if the special purpose is not deeply rooted in Christ's salvation.

May one speak about the "purpose" of the sermon? Properly not. If it is true that Christ Himself speaks in the proclamation, we must leave to Him the purpose of His speaking. We speak

of "purpose" in connection with preaching only in a secondary sense. Naturally the preacher must pursue purposeful designs as he addresses his own flock with its individual character. The hearer, too, comes to the service with thoughts of purpose. He brings along his religious, emotional, and intellectual needs; he brings his cares and his longing for life. At times he may receive an immediate answer to meet his needs. Generally it will be otherwise: Christ confronts the hearer in His Word and perhaps calls him away altogether from every egocentric thought and seeks to bring him down on his knees before God, who judges and mercifully acquits. Thus Christ aims at that transformation in which alone man can experience fellowship with God. But that "one thing needful" includes all other things: a new status as member of the Church of God, an influx of heavenly blessings, a whole new world that opens up before him—the world of the Kingdom of God; and there comes to him the clear call to serve the new realities of this Kingdom amid the old realities of this present world. And all this will have its mighty reactions upon his soul as a sort of psychotherapy. The rusted and disordered apparatus is cleansed, adjusted, and set into motion. And having thus been brought again into orderly relation with his God, the "man in Christ" is set free for joyous and unselfish service to his fellow men.

Now, this "serving the new realities of the Kingdom of God amid the old realities of the present world" means an obligation for the preacher. It requires of him as the shepherd of his flock to direct his people to specific goals, to call them to specific tasks, some of them old and constant, others occasioned by new needs (such as the problem of the DP's, the problem of sectarian propaganda, etc.). Here some warnings are in order. Never let the sermon have the nature of an ethical or sociological treatise. The sermon must tap the hidden springs in the heart of the Gospel and show how its rivulets flow with healing waters into every sphere of life. At all times the sermon must retain its kerygmatic character and proclaim God's saving act in Christ. A too direct appeal for special action, while, like propaganda, it may have its momentary effect (and sometimes that may be called for), pursued at length, has a corroding effect.

All this applies likewise to special sermons for various forms of Christian action, such as inner mission, foreign mission, and different types of relief work. The pastor must indeed seek to expand the horizon of his congregation and quicken their sense of responsibility and stimulate sacrificial giving and living. But here, too, in his preaching, he must always work out from the center. Under his pulpit sit troubled or erring or satiated souls (and who has never belonged to that class?) — are these to leave the church with empty hands on "special days"?

The subject of the so-called "political sermon" would require a separate lecture. However, a few words on this subject may be permitted. "Political sermons" must not be rejected in principle. As our generation has experienced, every true sermon under a totalitarian regime becomes political, whether this be its design or not. For whenever *Christ* speaks, idols are unmasked. Times do come when Christians must say: "We must obey God rather than man." But as preachers we must not be on the lookout for occasions to come to grips with the political powers. We must not pounce upon the events of the hour in political life and interpret them offhand. That is not evangelical preaching. The political sermon may become a God-given duty of the Church and as such a divine testing which the Church can undergo only with fear and trembling. But the Church should not deliberately provoke the test. If we expound God's Word fully in our sermons, even when our words have no explicit political reference, Christ will through our sermon address the total man in his total life, including his political life.

THESIS 9

When Christ speaks through the sermon, He addresses every man. There is no theoretical distinction between the "congregational" sermon and the "evangelistic" sermon. Also the difference between "religious" and "irreligious" men is inconsequential here.

God's Word speaks to all. This does not imply that the preacher may now preach at hit or miss and everywhere. The "all-the-world-my-parish" preachers are a peril to the Church. There will, no doubt, always be "guest preaching." When we serve in the capacity of guest preachers on official visitations,

on visits to our brethren, or in the course of evangelistic work, we must be on our guard lest on such occasions our sermons resemble romantic air castles, instead of entering the everyday life of men. Or let us put it this way: Let us be on our guard lest our sermon be like a cloudburst, which suddenly floods the soil and as suddenly flows off, leaving the soil hard, instead of a fruitful rain that penetrates the ground and brings nourishment.

We may also err by excess on the other side. The preacher who always thinks only of *his own* flock and its special needs and its ability of comprehension, asking constantly: "How shall I make myself understood by this people? What special sins and special cares must I single out today?" is apt to assume a schoolmaster attitude toward his people and look down upon them with contempt, while he as a true pastor ought to join hands with his people as subject along with them to the same Word. The preacher who regards his people as the object of *his own* personal working may become a barrier between his people and the speaking Christ. We must not look upon our congregations as blunt and blockish. Perhaps they cannot follow abstruse theological deductions. But if there be any life with God, any earnest seeking after God, the simplest soul will not be surpassed in his ability to grasp the Gospel truth by the most cultured savant.

In this thesis we have differentiated between "religious" and "irreligious" men. We do not mean with this latter term the man who is without religion, but the practical man who has no great problems and, therefore, is no particularly interesting subject for the psychologist of religion, the man without religious *a priori*—in contrast to the "religious" man who knows the whole scale of religious experiences, all the shocks and thrills, who also knows and dotes on the appropriate terminology. He cannot live without constant introspection, he must relate all his actions and sufferings to God in the most personal way, and he constantly searches for the meaning and interrelation of his experiences. It would seem as though the preacher would find his task easy with such a "religious" man. Not so, however. This introspective individual, bent wholly upon himself, will often be found to be a man who actually withdraws himself from God as much as an extrovert whose concern is action, the palpable and visible, and who looks

quite irreligious. An extrovert, however, may in reality be living a life of repentance, faith, and obedience. Christ speaks to the total man. It is His business to determine the point of attack in the individual case; that is not the task of our psychologists.

We see danger, too, in the demands we often hear for "evangelistic" as opposed to "congregational" preaching. We see in this a false antithesis. Indeed, "as every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another." But all the while it is *Christ* who must speak. It is hard to conceive of the great preachers of our Church having deliberately determined: "Today I am going to preach to arouse my people; next Sunday I shall speak to edify them."

THESIS 10

Christ remains sovereign Lord also over His Word. He may use the preacher as His mouthpiece, but He may also withdraw Himself from him. Likewise the hearer may say "No" even to a sermon replete with divine authority. (See both facts stated in Is. 6:9 ff.) The mystery of the "ubi et quando visum est deo" does not mean that the preacher and the congregation need not inquire after the reasons for ineffectual preaching, nor does it exempt them from earnest prayer (Eph. 6:18f. and 1 Sam. 3:10b).

This thesis is meant as a call to prayer. Preachers should plead with Christian people for their intercession, as Luther so often closed his letters with three words: "Pray for us." It is not so that nothing has happened in that sermon which God did not use for the working of faith. It need not always be that dreadful and final judgment expressed in Isaiah 6: "Harden the heart of this people, till the cities become desolate without inhabitants. . . ." To state it simply: through the sermon the ground is made either harder or more receptive for God. Neither the preacher nor the hearers leave church in the same spiritual state as when they entered. Therefore Paul writes, Eph. 6:18f.: "Pray always . . . for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador." And let the congregation, to which also the pastor in the pulpit belongs, be mindful not only of intercession, but also to follow the example of Samuel in his prayer: "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth!"