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Are We Really Preaching the Gospel?

By ELMER A. KETTNER

WITH all of our glorying in the Gospel and our striving to retain purity of doctrine, is it possible that there is too little preaching of the Gospel in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod? It's not only possible; I fear that it's highly probable. This is not a blanket accusation against every pastor in Synod. One can judge only from the sermons that one hears and reads. Nor is this written to be sensational or critical. In this respect I am perhaps "the chief of sinners"; I have sometimes bypassed the Gospel. The Scriptures remind us to "exhort one another daily while it is called Today." Heb. 3:13. We are to "examine ourselves." We should "search and try our ways." Lam. 3:40.

Let it be said at the outset that, with few exceptions, there is more preaching of the Gospel in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod than elsewhere. It should be added that there is a great deal of appreciation of the Gospel among the brethren in the ministry. It is often highly praised in our sermons. It is frequently spoken of in the abstract. We say: "The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. It is the only means whereby we may be saved. The success of the Church is due to the Gospel. It is only the Gospel which can move people to good works. The Gospel is our only hope." But praising the Gospel is not preaching the Gospel.

Most of us are preaching the Gospel somewhat and believe that we are giving it sufficient emphasis. We often make the statement: "Christ died for us," or, "by faith in Christ we have the forgiveness of sins." Surely this is pure Gospel, the very heart of the Gospel, but it is not enough.

PREACHING THE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST

To preach the Gospel clearly we must continually present Christ in His active as well as His passive obedience. When as a child of twelve years He was subject to His parents, He was so as our Substitute, not merely as an example. His obedience is counted to our credit. When you see Him going about "doing good," see yourself in Him. God counts it that way. When He overcame Satan, He did it for us. He is now in us and works through us. The scourges that He endured were mine. The crown of thorns, mine. His death, mine. Is it because we observe Lent that we fear we shall be out of season, if we refer to the details of His suffering at another time of the year?

Juxtaposition is a good word to remember in sermon preparation. Put the individual believer alongside of Christ. Then describe them as they trade places, the sinner as though he had done all that Christ did, and Jesus as though He had done all that the sinner did. Let us not merely refer to the Gospel, but dwell on it, develop it, repeat it, emphasize it, and apply it, that our hearers may catch it.

If we wish to learn this art, Luther is still our best teacher. In a sermon from the year 1525 he says: "The Law says: 'You are a sinner.' If I say, 'Yes,' I am lost; if I say, 'No,' I must have firm ground on which to stand, to refute the Law and uphold my 'No.' But how can I say it when it is true and is confirmed by Holy Scripture that I was born in sin? Where shall I find the 'No'? Truly I shall not find it in my own bosom, but in Christ. From Him I must receive it and fling it down before the Law and say: 'Behold, He can say "No" against all Law, and has the right to do so, for He is pure and free from sin, and He gives me the "No," so that, though I look on myself and must say "Yes" because I see that I am a sinner and cannot stand before the Law, and feel that there is nothing pure within me, and see God's wrath, yet I can say that Christ's righteousness is my righteousness, and henceforth I am free from sin.' This is the goal, that we should be able to say continually that we are pure and godly forevermore, as Christ Himself can say, and all this is wrought through faith."

ABSTRACT TERMINOLOGY

It is one of the deceits of the devil that, while we think we are preaching the Gospel, we are just referring to it or glossing over it. We take for granted that our hearers know it, when we ought to be explaining it to them as we would to a twelve-year-old child. We use the old, generic terms, "forgiveness," "justification," "redemption," "His blood," "sanctification," "faith," and suppose that everyone understands what we are talking about. We can say so much in a single, abstract term. But we lull our hearers to sleep, spiritually, if not physically. The only reason why they don't have the experience of Eutychus is that they're not sitting in a third-story window. Perhaps, too, the wife nudges them occasionally. We have soared off on a cloud and left our hearers, who are of the earth, earthy, to mull over their personal problems, to which the sermon seems to have no relation. Those who have been trained in our parochial schools may understand these terms. Even they, and certainly the stranger who comes seeking God, will find theological terminology dry. The terms may be Scriptural. No doubt, the members of the body of Christ ought to learn to understand them, but we cannot take it for granted that they do.

Must we stop using the term "forgiveness of sin"? Must we explain the doctrine of redemption every time we want to refer to it? That is not the point. One cannot preach to a well-indoctrinated congregation as though they were heathen who had never heard the Gospel. There are hundreds of facets to this gem which we call the Gospel. We can take them one at a time and speak about them in a concrete way. We can use the language of the people of today.

For example: "Augustus Toplady, author of the hymn 'Rock of Ages,' calculated that by the time the average man was twenty years old he had committed 630,000,000 sins in thought, word, and deed. By the time he reached fifty years of age the average man was estimated to have committed one billion five hundred million sins. Only God knows how many sins each of us commits. However, Toplady's estimate ought to give those of us who are not conscious of any sin pause to ask, 'What is sin?' If I am guilty of half that many sins, or even one tenth that number, what am I going to do about it? More important still, what will God do about it? He is a just God who cannot carelessly overlook sin.

Do you know what He has done about it? If there is one message that predominates in the Scriptures, it is this, that God laid all our sins on Jesus. Our Savior bore the punishment of sins for us. Those thoughts of envy and covetousness, those angry words spoken in the heat of argument yesterday—God has forgiven them, wiped out the record of them, if you have repented of them and laid them down at the feet of Jesus. He loves you just as though you had never done them, yes, more! He loves you as though you were His only-begotten, pure, innocent Son. Jesus said, 'Thou hast loved them, as thou hast loved Me.' With what joy you can return to your homes today knowing that before God you are as spotless as one of the holy angels!"

That is an attempt at saying what Paul says in one phrase: "We have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins." Eph. 1:7. Paul can say it in fewer words. The man who searches the Scriptures daily will understand him and rejoice. The mind that has been trained to think philosophically can think in abstract terms and make the application. But not so the average man or woman in our congregations. He is more apt to have the reaction of Tennyson's "Northern Farmer," who said:

And I always came to his church, before my Sally were dead,
 And heard him a-bumming away like a buzzard cock over my head;
 And I never knew what he meant, but I thought he had something to say,
 And I thought he said what he ought to have said, and so I came away.

BEING "PREACHED AT"

Why is there so much resentment at being "preached at"? How many people still go to church out of a sense of duty and are glad when the sermon is short! The man who recently received a gift of a book of good Gospel sermons is a case in point. He replied: "Who wants to read sermons anyway? Isn't it bad enough to have to go to church and listen to them?" He was a regular church-goer and supposedly a Christian.

There are probably several reasons for this attitude. One is that the preacher may be pushing people farther than they are willing to go. This is undoubtedly the explanation for the very prevalent objection to stewardship. Just say the word "stewardship" in this area, and most people will bristle. They get a fiery look in their eyes, and their hair begins to stand up. It is because someone tried

to push them farther than their measure of faith was ready to take them. There was not enough Gospel preaching in connection with the presentation of the stewardship obligation. Being "preached at," as I understand the expression, is being told to do or being shamed into doing more than our love for Christ moves us to do. What needs to be increased is faith and love. These grow through the preaching of the Gospel.

Another possible reason for resentment to being "preached at" is that the Gospel is turned into a new law, as though it were the eleventh commandment, the New Testament commandment. For example, I heard this recently: "What do you think a Christian is? You probably think that anyone who is not a Jew is a Christian. Well, I want to tell you that to be a Christian you've got to believe in Jesus Christ. How can you be saved if you don't believe in Jesus?" Instead of offering the Bread of Life freely to anyone who will accept it, this is demanding a price for the purchase of a chance on a meal which—so it must seem to the unconverted—may never materialize. It is a failure to grasp the nature of faith. Whether we preach a pastoral sermon to the faithful, or an evangelistic sermon aimed principally at the unconverted, we shall never weary them if we preach the Gospel as an offer of God's grace and love.

WEARY OF THE GOSPEL?

Weary them? Perish the thought! No one ever tired of hearing the Gospel except a man who was rejecting it in his heart. I shall never forget a fine, Christian woman who lamented: "Our former pastor used to preach long sermons, and we loved them. He would tell many Bible stories and explain them, and we went away feeling lifted up. Our present pastor preaches short sermons; but he's always scolding us. Everyone goes away angry." Needless to say, the brother wasn't wearying his people with the Gospel, but with the Law. Perhaps he was very conscious of his people's shortcomings and hoped to remedy them by calling attention to them. He probably didn't realize that he was defeating his own purpose.

No, people don't tire of hearing the Gospel unless they hear it from a man who is tired of preaching it. It can become an irksome chore to prepare two or three sermons a week. One can become calloused to the Gospel. One can take it for granted that every-

one in the audience knows it. Then sermon preparation becomes a painful scrabbling around for something new to say, when all the while the riches of God's grace lie untilled and the precious seed unsown. We're afraid that people are surfeited with the Gospel when they are literally hungering for it. It's only the preacher who has tired of it. He has lost his freshness. He is not telling the story, as though it were the first time, to people who are hearing it for the first time. His sermon becomes mostly application and exhortation. He forgets that his audience does not know the Bible stories as he does. Getting them out of the recesses of our minds and into our sermons will bring us back to the old paths of preaching the Gospel. Explaining words which have the Gospel hidden in them and presenting the Gospel content of the not-so-well-known incidents in the Bible will help, too.

PREPARATION FOR THE GOSPEL

To preach the Gospel effectively does not mean that we shall abandon the Law. The seed of the Gospel can germinate only in soil that has been tilled with the sharp blade of the Law. Very often the Gospel is not received because the hearer doesn't feel any need of it. Reinhold Niebuhr has said, "There is nothing more superfluous than the answer to an unasked question." Or why should a man put a bandage and healing ointment on a finger that has not been bruised? It is the broken heart that God will not despise. Sometimes God breaks men's hearts through the chastisement or the natural consequences of their sins. Then we can apply the healing Gospel immediately. This is not usually true. It is the preacher's task to break the heart with words before God breaks it with deeds. Preaching the Law is not scolding; it is calling attention to sins of which the hearers are not usually conscious.

To prepare the soil properly the plow must go deep. Too many sermons just scratch the surface. We are very conscious of the sin of absenteeism from church. In most cases this is a symptom, rather than the disease. We shall have to probe deeper to find the cause. We are aware of the sin of failure to read the Bible and failure to pray sufficiently. Many homes do not have a family altar, even though we mail out sufficient *Portals of Prayer* to cover the whole congregation. But we'll have to dig still deeper to find the causes for these omissions. Finally we'll get down to the human heart,

and we'll have to expose the hidden sins there with a surgeon's scalpel. General condemnation of sin will not convict anyone. The story of the fall of Adam and Eve, told over and over again in Missouri Synod circles, may explain the origin of sin, but it will not make many people conscience-stricken nor receptive to the Gospel. We must be more specific than that.

BEING SPECIFIC

Eugene Harrison writes in *How to Win Souls*: "I find as little good comes out of general prayer as out of general confession of sin." The statement is somewhat shocking to a Lutheran. How can one possibly enumerate all sins in the public service? Time would permit only a few, and being very specific would certainly leave out most of the people present. However, it isn't difficult to see his point. No one prays as fervently to be forgiven of sins in general as one will pray to be forgiven of a particular sin which troubles the conscience. The same is true of preaching. Few people will become brokenhearted over sins in general. Unless we uncover specific sins, name them, describe them, point to their consequences in the lives of the sinner and his fellow men and to the fact that these very sins nailed Jesus to the cross, the Holy Spirit will not convict many hearers of their sins.

We are very specific in our theology. We say, for example, that by the communication of attributes of the divine nature of Jesus to the human, the human nature also is eternal. Perhaps we can neither prove or disprove the statement. It certainly stimulates thought and makes us ponder the impenetrable mystery of the wonderful person of our Lord. Are we as specific as that in our preaching? I do not suggest that we should preach that particular doctrine. The point is that we must be as definite as that in our preaching of the Law. We cannot be satisfied to refer in general to sins of thought, word, and deed. Unless the average hearer finds something in the sermon that moves him to say, "I never thought of that as sin nor realized that I was guilty of it before," he will not be moved to repentance.

Since it is improper to refer to people by name in the sermon and difficult to say to so many, "Thou art the man!" it may be helpful to refer to them by class or by a description of their sin. We might say, "You who are housewives" (or office workers,

members of a labor union, laborers, fathers, mothers, children, etc., as the case may be). Or we may describe their sin and thus name them: "You who cut out of line in traffic, you who are chronic speeders, you who take the Lord's name in vain at the least provocation." However we may do it, we must be as specific as John the Baptist when he said: "Be content with your wages." A Lutheran woman recently said of her pastor: "Everyone whom I know has the feeling that he is preaching to them." That, I believe, represents specific preaching of the Law and good preaching of the Gospel.

THE GOSPEL IN SANCTIFICATION

Is there a danger of compartmentalizing Law and Gospel? We speak of "rightly dividing the Word of truth." We must do that so that believers will know that the curse of the Law does not apply to them. For example, the woman who said: "You quoted in your sermon, 'For every idle word that a man shall speak, he shall give account thereof in the day of Judgment.' How shall I give account of all the idle words I have spoken?" Her pastor could tell her that that sentence was Law and that she who was standing in the grace of God by faith in Jesus Christ is not under the condemnation of the law. But what about the Gospel in sanctification?

Think of this Bible verse: "It is God who worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure." Phil. 2:13. If it is God who must work sanctification in us, why do we preach as though men had to do it? Why do we not teach our people to depend more on God for it, to trust Him more, to ask Him more frequently to help them in their Christian growth? Is it because back in our minds is the fallacy that, while God justifies, the believer himself must sanctify himself? We don't teach that in our theology. Perhaps we haven't all thought it through. Or consider this verse: "Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord." Ps. 27:14. If it is God who must strengthen the heart, can we not encourage our people in the whole field of sanctification to ask for God's help, to wait for God's help, and to trust in God's help? It is to be feared that we are not doing this sufficiently. We are apt to limit the Gospel to the forgiveness of sins, even though we say in the explanation of the Third Article: "The Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel . . . sanctified me in the true faith."

WHAT SHALL WE DO?

If it is true that we are limiting the Gospel, that it has a broader application, that we use too many abstract terms which do not reach the hearts of our people, or that we take the Gospel for granted, what shall we do?

We might examine our sermons more carefully with these questions in mind: Is the Gospel clearly presented in this sermon? Do I have it, not only in my mind, but in the words? Do the sentences on sin cut sharply and deep? Am I speaking in the language of today? Am I reaching my members by dealing with their problems? Are there too many trite, outworn, over-used phrases and expressions in the sermon? Is Jesus offered as the sinner's Substitute? Does the Gospel predominate so that the worshipers will feel that "where sin abounded, there grace did much more abound"? Or is the criticism valid (voiced to me just last evening): "Our pastor has always demanded in his preaching that the Christian life be such a perfect ideal that most of us gave up trying to attain it. He seemed to have no sympathy for the sinner nor understanding of the weakness of the flesh"? Perhaps the pastor's wife could answer just these questions for him for a few weeks.

It might be well to institute or reinstate the old custom of sermon criticism at pastoral conferences. This practice may have caused hard feelings at times, but it surely does much more good than harm.

I write as a brother in the Lord, not setting myself up as an example of a good Gospel preacher nor even claiming to be the most competent judge. Surely there is much Gospel preaching in our midst. I am deeply indebted to my brethren in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and have a high respect for them as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps the situation is something like that to which St. Paul referred in his Letter to the Thesalonians: "Indeed ye do it . . . ; but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more." 1 Thess. 4:10. Let us pray in the study, pray at the altar, pray in the pulpit, that God will through us make known the riches of His grace. For we must say with Paul: "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel!"

Wollaston, Mass.