

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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The Edifying Word: The Word of Hope

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The Binding Nature of Synodical Resolutions  
for a Pastor or Professor  
of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod

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CAN PREACHING START A CHAIN  
REACTION?

The parish sermon is under attack from a number of quarters as a useful ingredient of worship and means of communication. Habits of attention are changing. Pastors do not have the time to prepare messages. Traditional forms of worship need to be replaced. People don't like to be talked at. The language of religion and the speech of every-day don't mix. The parish and therefore the parish pulpit are outworn institutions.

More serious are questions about parish preaching which have little to do with changing culture. They have surfaced in recent years in studies like Reuel Howe's *Partners in Preaching* (New York: Seabury, 1967). They take their rise in the Great Commission (Mark 16:15) or the practice of the early church (1 Cor. 14:26) and the injunctions of Eph. 5:19-20 and Heb. 10:23-25; and they are echoed by Martin Luther in his Torgau sermon of 1544 (*Luther's Works*, American Edition, 51, 343). If the Gospel is really the greatest good news, these arguments run, can listeners keep from telling it? What is the curious screen between pulpit and pew that renders the audience powerless to speak? And if the people don't speak, have they been thinking? Up to 50 years ago a high proportion of the congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod had *Christenlehre*, which brought the pastor down from pulpit and chancel to walk among the people and engage in questions and answers. Are there contemporary parallels?

To undertake a serious study of these questions, I circulated a questionnaire among a number of preaching colleagues. The sampling is not random and probably has no statistical validity, but it is most illuminating. The responses have come from younger and older parish pastors, campus

pastors, men known to be open to innovation, and men with no such propensity.

The first group of questions concerned methods of helping the listener "to feel struck by my preaching." The majority of respondents expressed themselves positively to the "pretty standard" expedients that have been described in books on preaching and homiletical magazines for the past decade or two. Supplementary comments pointed out the process of helping listeners realize their ministry to each other. One reaction from a pastor in a large parish was particularly important. He stressed that "one of the chief factors in meaningful preaching is the pastoral relationship between the preacher and the listener. . . . A man who is a real pastor to his people will probably accomplish many of the same things, by the very nature of his day-to-day ministry, as the man who sets up various programs of listener feedback."

Several questions inquired concerning the methods by which the parish service encouraged participation of the audience. A majority of the respondents indicated that laymen read lessons. While unexpectedly few noted possibilities for interruption of the sermon by conversation in the regular morning services, a number of pastors indicated experiments in evening services, and many more commented on the parallel to this in Bible classes.

The third set of questions concerned devices for follow-up on or feedback from the sermon. The involvement of the children's confirmation class in such a process is quite frequent. Bible classes are a useful medium, but not a high proportion of pastors are involved in them. A few pastors are experimenting with structured groups, as in the Howe method, which gather to discuss the sermon.

A final set of questions concerned modes of stimulating interest in the sermon before it is preached. A majority of respondents referred to bulletin and newspaper publicity. Many invite suggestions for topics for their sermons. Over half indicated that they converse with individuals or groups about future sermons. In a few exciting instances pastors appear to be eliciting and testing the relevance of their sermons in advance of their preparation.

Many pastors are genuinely concerned about the handicaps of parish preaching: the multifarious audience, the hesitancy to manipulate an audience and not simply persuade or evangelize, the sluggish refusal of the most habitual churchgoer to permit himself to be addressed meaningfully.

The big question still remains: How can a group of worshiping Christians keep the Gospel coming to one another? Their pastor's word, from the pulpit or anywhere else, is one way. But it should not simply replace their own words to one another, reinforced at the strategic points of personal relationships and life crises. What makes words of worship stale or logically "odd" is not that the times are changing, but that the words are not being invested by those who speak them with their own demonstrations of faith, thanksgiving, adoration and praise, love and sacrifice, responsibility and concern. To keep the church at that richer utterance is the chain reaction of the Gospel.

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#### A REVIEW OF PREACHING AND WORSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY GERMANY

In *Verkündigung und Forschung* (Vol. 15 [1970], No. 1, *Beibest zu Evangelische Theologie* [Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag]), the editor, Goetz Harbsmeier, publishes a review article with the title "The Experimental Service of Worship — Liturgy of Revolution?" He pays chief attention to an article by Karl Ferdinand Müller (*Jahrbuch für*

*Liturgik und Hymnologie* 1968, published in May 1969) concerning experimental orders of worship, and supplements the study with the report of Dorothee Sölle and Fulbert Steffensky on the "political vespers in Cologne" (*Politisches Nachtgebet in Köln*), published in Stuttgart, Berlin, and Mainz in 1969.

Harbsmeier suggests that these works put into question the liturgical revival of the postwar era. The new services are really not "orders of worship," but new happenings for each occasion without continuity with the past. The new forms are in revolt against any liturgical tradition, just as the new worshiping groups that employ them are in revolt against any effort to fulfill the Sunday ritual of the established church.

The new worship forsakes remembrance of the past and is directed to action, Christendom arising from the dead. Harbsmeier feels that worship should be given a chance to show whether it is able to reconstruct the elementary meaning of New Testament worship as it rejects accretions of form. He discerns little influence of liberal theological reconstruction that marked liturgics in the postwar era. Rather he asserts a revolutionary operation is under way, in which prayer becomes the central activity of worship, the proclamation of the Word of God in Christ is deemphasized, love is defined as the changing of the contemporary order, and all authority is rejected. Jesus Christ is set forth as a revolutionary. But Harbsmeier feels that these worshiping action groups should be given the opportunity to achieve an interpretation of worship for a time of change and to experience the sharing of the Spirit and the power of the traditionally oriented groups.

Also highly contemporary are the articles in *Gottesdienst und Öffentlichkeit*, edited by Peter Cornehl and Hans-Eckehard Bahr (Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1970), an anniversary tribute (*Festschrift*) for Hans-Rudolf

Müller-Schwefe. The concept of *Öffentlichkeit* — in the sense of “publicness” — dominates the inquiries of these essays. This concept is beyond the experience of the American denominational church, which always has as its primary target its own worshiping community. A sermon by Otfried Halver on Luke 18:1-5, in which the preacher plays the role of a preacher delivering his last sermon in disgust and judgment over his congregation, opens the volume. Halver preached it as a result of a questionnaire that he had circulated among his people, testing their attitudes toward public concerns. A series of reactions from listeners is appended.

Gert Otto lists “theses to the problems of the sermon in today’s world.” He considers the meaning of church and congregation; the validity of monologic speech; congruence of the didactic, communicative, and public functions; orientation of the sermon to theology rather than to individual texts; the importance of the “occasional” (*kasual*) quality for every sermon.

An interesting historical review by Walter Magass traces the relation of the worshiping congregation to its surrounding public through the epochs of European history from the apostolic age to the present. The church lives in tension between the availability of mass communications and the widespread rejection of the church by the masses that use the mass media.

Jürgen Roloff publishes a splendid exegetical article on the Eucharist as communion, which will for many readers be the contribution of lasting value.

Peter Cornehl describes contemporary problems in devising a liturgy which takes account of the world surrounding the worshiping community. He also provides a historical study, indicates the public relevance of the sermon of the Reformation, describes the difficulty of achieving full “public” relevance in contemporary worship, and analyzes the *Kölner Politisches Nachtgebet*, appreciat-

ing its ecumenical character but disparaging its caricature of Christ.

Hans-Eckehard Bahr employs the American catchwords of “hot” and “cold” in examining the possibility of worship via television. He believes that the televising of services of a church or studio audience is not useful, and feels that the preferable medium should involve the viewer in his own situations.

Sigurd Martin Däcke analyzes the public quality of theology, preaching, and religious instruction. He also rejects the broadcasting of sermons qua sermons and recommends “information as proclamation — and not proclamation as information” (p. 230). He stresses the importance of viewing information and communication as two aspects of the Word that are not to be separated. German radio in general appears to be conscious of a more exclusively agnostic audience than America’s.

The last issue of *Hörer-Echo (Lutherische Stunde)*, Bremen, Jan. 1970, about to change its title to *Verkündigung*, edited by Hans-Luther Poetsch, brings two useful essays on radio preaching. Joachim Heubach discusses bread-and-butter problems of the broadcaster: use of the text, clear proclamation in the indicative, avoidance of professional jargon, process from the easy to the difficult, objective manner of speech without loss of natural liveliness. Poetsch contributes to the discussion of *Öffentlichkeit*. “The Gospel is there for everybody and not just for one group (people, race, class, etc.)” Poetsch argues further that the task and objective of the Gospel is not the Christianization of social, political, or ethical factors of the public world, but conversion (p. 15). Poetsch gives an analysis of the religious broadcasts of his time. He puts in a word for the intentions of his own church group to present the Gospel as a spiritual power freed from institutionalization. He too stresses the importance of personal witness.

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