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"Give Attendance to Reading"

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"Give attendance to reading," St. Paul exhorted Timothy. This exhortation has sometimes been applied to contemporary ministers as follows: Let them keep up their private studies, their reading of the Bible and of the many other materials which enrich their mind and ministry. That is a useful and necessary exhortation. The original intention of 1 Tim. 4:13, however, is simpler. St. Paul tells Timothy that he is to minister faithfully and vigorously to his congregation till St. Paul himself will come. This ministry means bringing the Word of God to people. That he is to do through three routes: reading the Scriptures to them, exhorting them concerning Scriptural facts, and teaching them the significance of these Scriptural facts for themselves.¹ This exhortation of St. Paul to Timothy has important applications for the ministry of worship in general and the ministry of preaching in particular. These applications deserve to be re-emphasized. An unbelieving or liberal attitude toward the Scriptures has weakened the centrality of the Bible in the service and the sermon. But worse: also among ministers and people who defer to the authority of the Scriptures, this centrality can give way to other elements, such as the form of worship, the customs and habits of worship, the eloquence and finesse of the preacher. Hence we propose to reassert Paul's exhortation: "Give attendance to reading."

I

From the synagog the early Christians were familiar with the customs of reading in public worship from the sacred Scriptures. So our Lord Himself did at Nazareth, Luke 4:16-20. So St. Paul did at Antioch in Pisidia, Acts 13:15.

The Early Church continued this procedure. Some selections from the Epistles and Gospels were added. These selections were at first simply extracts read consecutively.²

Already the New Testament books indicate that the reading of the selections was followed by a discussion, which may have been at first participated in somewhat freely and unsystematically. In other instances, and generally at a later time, the leader of the service gave the comments and exhortations which stemmed from the reading.³

This procedure at once focuses our attention upon a significance to reading of the Scriptures, and preaching, in the service of the church, which is very easily forgotten. That is, that the church service is an activity in which one Christian contributes to the edifying of each other one there present, Eph. 5:18-21; Col. 3:16. This significance of the reading of the Scriptures in the service is one for every age. Whatever else be said or done in the service of worship in which Christians edify one another, the Scriptures themselves are the point of origin, the "one source and norm." They are, in the words of the ancient church, the *Archai*.⁴

However, the Scriptures come to us not merely that they be read or that their words be repeated. The Scriptures come before us so that the message which they bear be thrust forth over people, and people thereby be helped and changed (2 Tim. 3:14-17). That means that every reading of Scripture must actually supply the message of Scripture. This is not wholly possible within the framework of many of the traditional lections. They have been extracted from larger units so that sometimes the context and total significance are lost. This is apt to be the case with lections from the Old Testament. Christians are accustomed to understanding God's will and grace for them in terms of His promises completed in Christ Jesus. That understanding is not always directly signaled in the words of Old Testament readings. From the beginning the Christian Church has had a sound sense about Old Testament lections, particularly the Psalms, and sings the Gloria Patri after them, as though to provide and underscore the Trinitarian interpretation of the lection or canticle. To the lections at the minor services, moreover, it has appended the antiphon: "But Thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us. — Thanks be to Thee, O Lord!" The Epistle has

been traditionally followed by a Gradual which underscored the total Gospel significance of the lection in terms of the day. The Gospel selection, whether it happened to discuss soteriological or ethical materials, preceded the response "Praise be to Thee, O Christ!" These liturgical tokens were designed to refresh a complete insight into the significance of the extract from Scripture used with them. For the Christian needs ever to remember that he is a man in Christ and that God's promises and God's Spirit are his to have and use because of the redeeming work of Christ.

Several implications confront us for the liturgy as we propose to read the Scriptures in every service. The one is that the language must be intelligible. The version must be in the language of the people. There is something strange about the reluctance with which English-speaking people have kept their liturgical version in phase with the speech of the people. Our German forebears did better with the freedom with which they adjusted the German Bible generation by generation to the practiced understanding of their hearers.

A second implication is that the lection must be read as though it is to be understood. Whether the reading is to be "sepia," with inflections that have been abridged and stylized for the sake of liturgical "objectivity," or whether the reading should be normal and interpreted, has been regarded a question of taste. If, however, we assume that through the reading the Christians of the congregation are admonishing one another, it seems rather self-evident that they should hear them inflected and interpreted the way any speech should be if people are to understand it.

A third implication lies in the subject matter of the lesson. If indeed it can be called a "lesson," we may presume that it has a specific purpose. That purpose must be made clear. Already before it is read, hearers should be helped to know what the purpose of the reading is going to be. Worshiping Christians must be led to want to admonish one another with the content of a given lesson. The church year affords convenient defining of the lessons that are to be imparted in each service. Alert ministers who actually accept responsibility for the worship of their hearers will find means of briefing their congregations in advance concerning the purposes and the messages of the respective lessons. It is a valid psycholog-

ical principle that people do not pay attention to messages which they do not want to hear. It would be a dismaying discovery to find how many worshipers—and could we say also pastors?—expect no specific lesson from a lection which is being read in the church service. That situation violates the first principle of Christian worship.

How shall the lesson, the purpose of the lection, be made clear to the hearers? A number of alternatives present themselves. Parish bulletins can give advance information. Bible classes can spend a few minutes on the function of the liturgical selections for the day. The sermon will be the most useful means, since it will be correlated with the lessons of the day and will rely upon the corroboration of their message for its own purpose. However, the sermon in our current practice follows upon the lessons, and it is best that worshipers are alerted to their meaning before the sermon. Some ministers give brief explanations, and sometimes running commentaries, upon details of the lections as they read them. Liturgically this may be disturbing and certainly demands finesse and economy if used at all. Yet the question remains whether the church should not at least from time to time revert to the practice of Louis Harms, who discoursed at some length upon the lection for the day, prior to the sermon itself, which was on another text.⁵

II

The Scriptures are the center of the church's service. That focus has its implications not only for the liturgy in general, but also for the sermon in particular. We said above that in the Apostolic Church the sermon was an extension of the conversation of Christians and their leaders concerning the lections of the service. That was a sensible procedure, for it safeguarded several emphases simultaneously: the lessons of Scripture were actually thought through, they were applied to the needs and interests of the group, they were explained and understood. Those emphases are essential for the common worship of Christians today and should reflect themselves in the sermon for the day.

The sermon should actually discuss the subject of the lection or lections for the day. That is most simply done when the text of the sermon is a lection. That was the practice traditional in

the Lutheran Church over many centuries. It has its advantages: there is no danger that the lection will not be understood, the central purpose and idea of the day becomes familiar over the years. This procedure also has disadvantages: sources and applications of the teaching of Scripture become unduly limited. Worshipers begin to think of the Scriptures, particularly where they do not attend Bible classes or practice personal Bible reading, as a list of a hundred lections.

In average practice, of course, pastors employ texts other than standard lections or do so in a majority of instances. Here, if the focus of "Scripture in the service" should be maintained, it becomes even more important to relate the subject matter of the sermon and its text to that of the lection. Lutheran communions share with a few others the schedule of the church year and of a sequence of themes for entire services. The Synodical Conference, particularly through its specialist Pastor Frederic H. K. Soll, has amplified the host of alternative pericopic selections which the nineteenth-century German provincial Lutheran churches had developed in extension of the standard pericopes.⁶ All are useful for maintaining unity between the propers for the day and especially the lections, and the sermon. The pastor who wishes to safeguard that unity will employ also other devices to that end, such as a careful selection of hymns.

More must be said, however, concerning the technique by which the reading of Scripture maintains its central and unifying influence in the service. It is possible for a man to choose the text for his sermon from a pericopic selection for the day and then vitiate the unity of the service by side-stepping the central lesson of his text or by departing from a substantial Christian theology altogether. The Protestant preachers who so frequently served as models to our Church in its first years of English preaching did not for the most part follow the liturgical year. Many of them were, furthermore, impelled by principles of the pulpit which are at variance with a concept of the church at worship. One such principle is the "prophetic"—that the minister harangues the audience, and it listens to him. This disrupts the structure of worship, in which each Christian through his pastor addresses each brother present. Another faulty principle of preaching is the moralizing one, that

the minister is on hand to stimulate his parish to various modes of organizational behavior. A subsidiary of this principle is the preaching that is chiefly church-administrative — the pastor summoning his people to participate in churchgoing, Christian giving, communing, or other activities by which the demands of the organization are met. Again these principles disrupt the mutual supply of faith and exhortation to Christian living which the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Sacrament of the Altar are to make possible in Christian worship.

When a minister thinks of his sermon as the counterpart of discussion by his people of the lections for the day, a number of specifications will suggest themselves. As he prepares his message, the lections for the day, and the theology surrounding those lections, must be before him. However, the language in which he states his message, and the method by which he brings his message to the hearer, will be given by his understanding of the people — what they need, and how they talk to one another.⁷ A Swiss pastor states that he has been preparing his sermons by meeting with a group of his people on Thursday or Friday evenings. They first discuss the preceding Sunday's sermon, then discuss the text for the next Sunday, verse by verse, and point out applications and concerns of the congregation with the text.⁸ In actual practice the minister frequently does this with one of his church groups, or with a shut-in, or in a catechetical discussion.

The manner of such preaching is going to reveal the pastor's thought for his people. In it he will show not merely that he speaks *to* people, but that he is speaking *on behalf of* people. His style will be conversational, in that it anticipates questions that would be asked, objections that might be leveled. The pastor will not ask questions for the sake of padding his material, but exclusively for signaling his concern for questions and problems that people actually have.

This emphasis in preaching, that it is on behalf of the people as they reflect upon the message of the Scriptures, will do notable things to preaching style and language. Jesus Christ our Lord is Himself the model there, in His level of language to the common people, who "heard him gladly," or St. Paul, as he writes to the Philippians, "his joy and his crown." It was about utterances in

public worship that St. Paul said: "In the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue" (1 Cor. 14:19). The pastor will not imitate deficiencies or perversions of the language of his people, but certainly he will not, as their spokesman, mouth words which they do not employ or understand.

It is quite possible that preaching is in a state of transition. People become progressively less and less able to concentrate upon the spoken word. If preaching is to continue, it must truly serve the purpose of growth in grace. If preaching is changing, what direction shall it take? This consideration would suggest that the course of preaching in the future should be dictated by its course in the Apostolic Age. Let preaching, like the hymns and prayers, be recognizable as the admonition of the people to one another. Let the pastor truly be the minister of the people, each man's servant for edifying each other one. And let all be done with the Holy Scriptures as the point of origin, the power of preaching simply the power of the Scriptures themselves, the significance of the worship this, that men have come together so that God might speak to them from His Word.

St. Louis, Mo.

NOTES

1. *Expositor's Greek New Testament*, IV, p. 126, N. J. D. White, New York
2. Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 273. Philadelphia, 1947.
3. Cf. M. Reu, *Homiletics*, Chicago, 1925, pp. 2-3. He quotes 1 Cor. 14:1 ff.; 12:27 ff.; James 3:1 ff.; Heb. 10:25 ff. He and White, *loc. cit.*, quote Justin Martyr, First Apology, Section 67, on the practice of exhortation following upon the reading. Reu derives the word "homily" from this conversational communication of the congregation, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
4. Saint Ignatius to the Philadelphians, VIII, 1; *Apostolic Fathers*, I, Lake tr., Putnams, 1912, p. 247.
5. E. g. McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopaedia*, IV, p. 83.
6. Cf. P. Nesper, *Biblical Texts*, Wartburg, 1952, for fourteen series.
7. Cf. Arthur John Gossip, "The Whole Counsel of God," *Interpretation*, July, 1947, p. 332; reprinted in *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, pp. 355 to 368, 1948, XIX.
8. *Evangelische Welt*, February 1, 1952, p. 61, Bethel/Bielefeld.