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Heirs of the Reformation in the Pulpit
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Heirs of the Reformation in the Pulpit

By GRAEME M. ROSENAU

BEING an heir of the Reformation involves far more than giving oratorical impasto in the pulpit to the slogan "We have Luther as our Father" and engaging in unbridled ranting against Rome or Geneva. Without scorning necessary and proper polemics, the Lutheran preacher will at the same time be gratefully aware that in the very act of occupying his pulpit he is enjoying one of the richest blessings of his heritage.

Because the Reformation "exalted" the sermon and gave it "centrality," as Roland Bainton puts it,¹ the heir of the Reformation holds the pulpit in high regard. The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* declares: "The chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel" (XV, 42). In his *Large Catechism*, Luther says: "For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church, and outside it no one can come to the Lord Christ" (Creed, 45).²

The heir of the Reformation therefore realizes that in the pulpit he practices a divine art. It is divine because he is God's spokesman in a task to which God has called and for which God qualifies him. It is, on the other hand, an art, because it is also an endeavor on his part to present the Gospel effectively and affectively by

means of human skills and means of communication. Preaching begins, continues, and ends in God; but at the same time it is a cooperative effort between God and the preacher to the extent that His message is spoken by a man in the pulpit. It devolves upon the latter, therefore, to put forth every effort to become a worthy partner of God. He will try to master the art and techniques of Biblical study and of public address. Both are necessary. Theological understanding without aptitude in communication is like water stored in a reservoir without pipes — unavailable to others — hence practically useless. On the other hand, excellence of speech without theological understanding is at best like an early exercise in penmanship — interesting to oneself, perhaps, but scarcely valuable or enlightening to others.

In the following we shall offer some observations on the role of the heir of the Reformation in the framework of the three great principles of the Reformation. We shall touch on the *sola gratia* and the *sola fide* only briefly not because they are less important but because in the *sola Scriptura* there are implications of particular significance for the expounder and preacher of the written Word.

SOLA GRATIA

Sola gratia both describes and burdens the heir of the Reformation in the pulpit.

"By grace alone" teaches him the very necessary lesson of seeing himself as did no less a preacher than the apostle Paul,

¹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: a Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), p. 348.

² *The Book of Concord*. Trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fisher, and Arthur C. Piepkorn (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).

who said: "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10). The preacher, in every respect like the pewman, was born hostile toward God. He didn't overcome this enmity by himself; the grace of God conquered it in him. He didn't volunteer for the pulpit, even if he did. He was called out of darkness by the grace of God, which alone also qualifies him to fill the pulpit of Christ's people helpfully and well.

But *sola gratia* is also a burden to the heir of the Reformation in the pulpit, just as the Word of God was a burden to the prophets. What he has experienced, the preacher is impelled to share with others. For necessity is laid on him. Woe to him if he does not preach the Gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16). He must strive to lead people from the terrors of conscience and the condemnation of the Law to Jesus Christ, in whom God's saving grace is theirs.

SOLA FIDE

Sola fide also both describes and burdens the heir of the Reformation in the pulpit.

It describes his work because preaching is itself an act of faith. Without faith in Jesus as his Savior and Lord, he is a charlatan and an impostor who merely mouths the doctrine of Christ from His people's pulpit.

But the preacher who lives by faith in the Son of God is thereby under the burden of the obligation and the privilege of speaking to others the Word of Life. He will labor with consuming zeal to bring to his hearers the comfort of being saved by faith alone and to urge them to manifest the fruits of faith in godly living.³

³ Cf. Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., "Luther Expounds the Gospels," *CTM*, XXVIII (January 1957), 14—28.

SOLA SCRIPTURA

Finally, *sola Scriptura* describes and burdens the heir of the Reformation in the pulpit.

He draws his message of grace and salvation through faith from the Holy Scriptures alone. He leads his flock to the living waters that flow in this Book of Life. He urges them to "search the Scriptures daily" to see whether the things he speaks are so. He encourages them to go for nurture and guidance to the Word of God, where alone is light for those groping in darkness, water for the thirsty, bread for the hungry.

But the principle of *sola Scriptura* also imposes on the heir of the Reformation in the pulpit the burden of proper preparation and presentation of his Biblically oriented message. And since the discharge of this obligation remains a life-long challenge, it may be wholesome and profitable to review some of the principles and techniques that are involved in this task.

1. Interpretation

For the heir of the Reformation, Scripture must interpret itself. Other studies may be useful and enlightening; they may alert him to Biblical emphases previously unnoticed. But they dare not become a substitute or be allowed to sit in judgment on Scripture. God's Word alone is to be the lamp to his feet and light to his path.

If the preacher is true to his heritage, he will be above all, therefore, an interpreter of Scripture—an exegete. To hear the Word of Scripture on its own terms is his first task; to let others hear it is his function in the pulpit.

What a trite observation! But it bears repetition because this Reformation principle so often receives mere lip service.

To put it to practice requires much labor and no little skill. In arriving at the meaning of a text, the exegete must work his way through the three barriers that surround it. Martin Franzmann describes these as the circle of language, the circle of history, and the circle of theology or Scriptural revelation.⁴ To use a similar comparison, we can say that the interpreter is much like a person seeking to dig out a nut encased in three shells.

Such searching penetration of Scripture is a *sine qua non* for the heir of the Reformation if from the pulpit he would bring the rich blessing of the three *solas* in their dynamic potential to his hearers. Facing the *tentatio* of pulpit and parish with steady *oratio* for the guidance of the Spirit, he busies himself with the language and words of Scripture to find, through this Spirit-guided *meditatio*, the meaning of his text for himself and Christ's flock. He knows that the training he received at the seminary to equip him for this task was merely the beginning, a directive and indication of a course of study from which he never graduates. Fully aware that the goal of perfection always remains beyond his reach, he finds delving ever more deeply into the Scriptures a constant imperative and satisfying challenge.

The heir of the Reformation will therefore be grateful for every suggestion of procedure or technique which can aid him in his preparation for the pulpit. In his very helpful book, *Preaching for the Church*, Richard R. Caemmerer suggests these five steps in working through the

barriers of the text: 1. study the text in its historical and contextual setting; 2. study the vernacular translation of the text; 3. study the text in its original language; 4. amplify the basic concepts of the text through the study of parallel passages, marginal references, concordances, lexicons, etc., and by exploring its doctrinal suggestions via the Confessions and other systematic writings; 5. state the central thought of the text.⁵

Frederick W. Danker gives essentially the same directives, which he formulates as:

THE TWELVE EXEGETICAL COMMANDMENTS

1. Thou shalt *translate* thy text accurately into the tongue of thy father; yea, faithful to the original and idiomatic shall it be.
2. Thou shalt *compare* diligently with one or more versions and make careful note of thy divergences, but thou shalt not yet consult the commentaries lest thou frustrate the growth of thine own brain cells.
3. Thou shalt note the *context*, both that which goeth before and that which followeth after.
4. Thou shalt determine the natural *units* of thy text.
5. Thou shalt *dissect* thoroughly the words and phrases and sentences of thy text; yea, let grammars and lexicons be thy kinsmen and parallel passages the apple of thine eye. Thou shalt not despise the Septuagint, nor yet separate the critical apparatus from thine affections.
6. Thou shalt in no wise be puffed up with thy findings without *questioning* thy text further.

⁴ Martin H. Franzmann, *Essays in Hermeneutics*; reprinted from *CTM*, August, September, and October, 1948 (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Print Shop, 1956).

⁵ Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959).

7. Thou shalt not divorce thy text from its *context*.
8. Thou shalt *enumerate* thy theological discoveries.
9. Thou shalt articulate the *central thought* of thy text; yea, its chief purpose thou shalt express clearly.
10. Thou shalt discover the *relevancy* of thy text, for through it the Spirit speaketh to the sons of thine own aeon.
11. Thou shalt in no wise leave thy text until thou hast established thine interpretations by taking counsel with those who know more than thou knowest; yea, the *commentators* thou shalt not despise after thou hast exhausted thine own resources.
12. Thou shalt remain humble and know that thou knowest not all that thou mightest know concerning thy text.⁶

It should particularly be noted that in both of these sets of directives the study of the text in the original languages is mentioned as a self-evident requirement. Since theology, according to Bengel's quotation of Luther, "is nothing else than grammar occupied with the words of the Holy Spirit," the exegete must try to come as close to the meaning of the Spirit's words as knowledge of the original and the best textual scholarship will permit. The preacher who has spent years in learning Greek and Hebrew during his college and seminary years and then lets his linguistic knowledge and skills vanish by disuse, is not a grateful heir of the Reformation. If no other reason, gratitude for his heritage should move him to repent of such poor stewardship of time and to make amends by reviving and improving his use of the languages. He may never

⁶ Mimeographed class notes.

be an expert linguist; but if the Lord has given him even one share of ability, let him invest it with thanks.

The preacher who is handicapped by a lack of a knowledge of Greek or Hebrew nevertheless will find Nestle's Greek text useful because of its invaluable marginalia. The English introduction or Frederick W. Danker's book, *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study*,⁷ will provide adequate instruction for their use. He will, of course, be able to proceed to the second of the "Exegetical Commandments" and compare various translations with each other. Copying one version triple spaced and writing divergent renderings from other translations above this basic text will be time well spent. Major problems and suggested answers will immediately become apparent and can be pursued further via concordances, lexicons, grammars, and the like.

Regarding one's theological discoveries from a given textual study (Commandment Eight), it will prove helpful if such topics are explored further by turning to the index of the *Book of Concord*, Pieper's *Dogmatics*, or some other systematic work. The doctrines thus made one's own exegetically and systematically will, of course, influence future exegetical and homiletical work, as they certainly did in Luther's case.⁸

2. Communication

Having finished the exegetical study, the heir of the Reformation prepares for the communication of God's Word from the pulpit.

⁷ Concordia Publishing House, 1960.

⁸ Martin E. Marty, "Preaching on the Holy Spirit: a Study of Luther's Sermons on the Evangelical Pericopes," *CTM*, XXVI (June 1955), 423—41.

Richard R. Caemmerer suggests the following five steps for completing the work: plan to persuade the people by establishing the goal for the hearer, the sin-malady and its symptoms, which prevent the hearer from reaching the goal, and the application of Gospel power that will cure the malady and enable him to reach the goal; organize the material to persuade the hearer by establishing an outline; construct the working brief, or much-expanded outline; write the first draft (for as the author notes on pp. 100, 101: "Writing tends to shorten . . . the sermon, because its chaff gets winnowed out over the typewriter rather than by the wind that blows from the pulpit"); and finally rework the draft.

The careful establishment of goal, malady, and means is a most important step. For if the pastor knows on the basis of his text where God wants his hearers to go spiritually, why they aren't there, and what application of Gospel power will get them there, he can proceed to prepare a helpful and blessed sermon. And the goal, as the writer states, is either faith or faith's life. The message in preaching "is always: Jesus Christ died for your sins so that you might believe in Him as Redeemer or follow Him as Lord."⁹

Throughout his sermon preparation the heir of the Reformation will therefore keep the hearers in mind and seek ways and means of really communicating the message of the text and thus meeting their needs. In this connection the observation by Vernon Boriack is apropos:

Simply using the same old words over and over again, even when accompanied with violent headshakes and facial contortions,

will not convey relevant truth although these words are Biblical words. The communication of saving truth urgently requires words, phrases, and thought forms which are alive, relevant, loaded.¹⁰

These considerations lead right back to sound exegesis as the foundation work for communicative preaching. The preacher who doesn't understand his text because he has let himself be diverted from lexicon, concordance, grammar, and parallel passages because of various "administrivia", may substitute some doctrine hazily called to mind by the passage for effective Biblical teaching. Because he has not bothered fully to understand the doctrine, he presents it from the pulpit merely in trite terminology that may be orthodox but does not communicate. Such a performance is not preaching by Scripture alone. It is not even preaching by the confessions, nor yet by Walther, Pieper, or any set of doctrinal formulations. It is, in fact, not preaching! It does not make the preacher an heir of the Reformation in the pulpit. Such preaching, in fact, reverts to the pre-Reformation era, since it pays only lazy lip service to the heritage of *sola Scriptura*.

Adequate preparation of the sermon will take more than a few hours on Saturday. The heir of the Reformation will give it the firstfruits of the whole week's time. But by dint of sustained hard work and with the Spirit's blessing, he will speak as Luther did "with the authority he had learned from his master, and not like the scribes and the scholastics."¹¹

¹⁰ Vernon Boriack, "Techniques in Modern Preaching Toward Communicating the Gospel," *CTM*, XXV (December 1954), 893, 894.

¹¹ Spitz, p. 26.

⁹ Richard R. Caemmerer, "Preaching in Lent," *CTM*, XXXI (January 1960), 38-44.

Finally, if a pulpit is a place from which to preach, then the heir of the Reformation must be prepared to be in the pulpit far oftener than the weekly or biweekly occasions when the congregation convenes for public worship. Jesus was "in the pulpit" at night with Nicodemus in an unknown place, in the homes of Pharisees and tax collectors and close friends; He was "in the pulpit" on the mountaintops as well as in the synagogues. St. Paul was "in the pulpit" in many a synagog, but also at the riverside place of prayer, in prisons, in the Athenian marketplace and on the Areopagus, on the steps in Jerusalem, and in the law court of Felix.

These examples alert the heir of the Reformation to the fact that he, too, is "in the pulpit" not only in public services, but also at members' homes, at the corner store when he meets and talks with people, and in a thousand other daily settings. His hours of study prepare him for these encounters, as well as for the periods of formal worship. In a very real sense, the world and every place in it is his pulpit, presenting him with the opportunity to live under and urge upon others the magnificent blessings summarized by *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura*.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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