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Preaching and Liturgical Life

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# Preaching and Liturgical Life

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## I. PREACHING AS AN ACT OF WORSHIP

Preaching is an event, a living, pulsating action of God, as real today as it was yesterday, as vital for contemporary man as it was for first-century man. Preaching is always an eschatological event, part of the on-going action of God through His Son so that wherever that Word is proclaimed, God is calling and gathering His people, bringing them together into the oneness of Christ's body, the church, leading men to response, fitting them for service in His world.

The very act of preaching, therefore, is an act of worshiping God. It is a unique activity of the church, witnessing both to God's redemptive acts as an event of the past and as a present saving act glorifying Christ and rescuing people.

The understanding of sermons as event relates to the contemporary emphasis on the relation of the sermon to the liturgy. This relationship was rediscovered in the Reformation but soon lost again. The preaching of the Word is set within the liturgical action of the church, where public witness is made to God's presence and power. Ernest B. Koenker speaks of the liturgical action in Word and sacrament that leads to the experience of joy. He writes:

Worship and Word, Bible and liturgy, belong together in the Christian community. Worship dare never be rote performance, and the Word must not be subordinated to the Sacrament in the service. Together, worship, Word, and Sacrament embody the living Christ, whom we en-

counter in the service; when and where this occurs, tired, harassed people experience the joy, the renewal, the edification, that comes only from the life of God.<sup>1</sup>

The preaching of the Word belongs to the congregation and is part of the total response of the people to God before the world. "The purpose of the liturgical sermon," Fred Lindemann writes, "is to renew in the individuals the consciousness that they are members of the Ecclesia."<sup>2</sup> Where the sermon is never more than a moralistic lecture, it cannot be God's Word to people, whereby the church nurtures and strengthens itself through the proclamation of God's deeds.

This false conception of Christianity is encouraged when the preacher constantly appeals to the will, exhorts to do this and not to do that. If his words fall on good soil, he produces moral individuals, but he does not edify the Ecclesia. The liturgical sermon presents a redemptive act of God. It aims at faithful acceptance. It anticipates the response of the faithful, the declaration of faith and trust by eating the Body and drinking the Blood. Within the context of the Liturgy, the sermon will not be moralistic, for it will recall to the consciousness of the faithful a redemptive act of God and look forward to the response of the congregation, the declaration of acceptance in faith and of confident trust in and reliance on the redemp-

<sup>1</sup> Ernest B. Koenker, *Worship in Word and Sacrament* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), pp. 7—8.

<sup>2</sup> Fred Lindemann, *The Sermon and The Propers* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), IV, 4.

tive act emphasized and the central redemptive act of Christ's death.<sup>3</sup>

And so, it is liturgical preaching centering on God's redemptive acts that presents itself as an event rather than an idea or a lecture. It is preaching as part of the total act of worship that is recognized as God's Word. The Word that proceeds forth from the mouth of God, that Word by which men live, can never be reduced to the level of moral advice or ethical admonition. The Word that comes from God, that centers in the redemption of Christ, gives life. It is a Word spoken to a living body of people but also a Word spoken by people who are alive.

This lost insight is a weakness in prevailing approaches to worship and in the common attitudes toward the place and purpose of the sermon within the worshiping community. Luther believed that the congregation was preaching the Word every bit as much as its called spokesmen.

For when I preach, when we come together as a congregation, this is not my word or doing; but is done for the sake of all of you and for the sake of the whole church. It is only that it is necessary that there be one who speaks and is the spokesman by the commission and consent of others, who, by reason of the fact that they listen to the preaching, all accept and confess the Word and thus also teach others. Thus, when a child is baptized, this is done not only by the pastor, but also the sponsors, who are witnesses, indeed, the whole church. For baptism, just like the Word and Christ Himself, is the common possession of all Christians. So also they all pray and sing and give thanks together; here there is nothing that one possesses or does for himself alone; but

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

what each one has also belongs to the other.<sup>4</sup>

The people of God, by participating in the act of proclamation, witness to what has happened to them: how Christ has delivered them and reconciled them to God. They also witness to what is still happening to them and among them: that "in the church, God richly and daily forgives all sins." And finally, they will witness to what will happen in the Parousia: that the living Christ will bring His own to "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

Preaching in the church and by the church is never the occasion for saying what pleases the people or popularizes the preacher. Preaching is, rather, always the telling of the Word. As Wingren reminds us, "preaching is the deed by which both the preacher and the congregation affirm the fact which calls the church into being, that Christ is Lord."<sup>5</sup> The task of the preacher is to be a proclaimer of the church and to the church of what God has done and is still doing among men through Christ the Lord. Langdon Gilkey, of the University of Chicago Divinity School, offers an exciting description of the preacher's task:

Now this reveals to us the truly awesome task of the minister as preacher, teacher, and pastor. It is his vocation and commission to mediate this living Word to his congregation; to lead it through his preaching and counsel to become aware of this claim of our Lord — to discover

<sup>4</sup> *Luther's Works* (American Edition), Vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 343.

<sup>5</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word*, trans. Victor C. Pogue (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), Preface.

God's judgment, mercy, and love, which come to us through the apostolic witness in Scripture. This is an awesome task, and every good minister realizes that he cannot possibly fulfill it merely through his own powers; that no amount of anecdotes, clever titles, or brilliance of oratory can communicate the important thing: the judgment and love of God. All they can communicate is his own ego, and that will not feed his congregation. Only by a deep understanding of his commission to be a servant of the Word and of the Scripture — by fidelity to this task, whether it leads to popularity or unpopularity (and often the former is more dangerous) and by a continual listening in his personal life for the claim the Lord Jesus makes upon him and his congregation through the Scripture — can he perform this task. And it is an essential task: for if the Word is not heard in the church — if, as is so often the case, only the prejudices and ideologies of the world, or the thoughts, however noble, of the minister are heard there — then this tie with Christ, the Head of the church, is broken and the church slips back into the world to become nothing more than the world. For in Protestantism the central mediation of the holy in the life of the church comes through the Word, the message of Jesus Christ in lordly claim, in judgment, and in grace. If, as we have seen, this message is not heard, believed and enacted, then the main element of holiness in the Protestant church is gone, and it reflects merely the views and ideals of its surrounding society. It voices only the thoughts that all American middle-class white groups have; it has conformed to the world and has lost its Lord.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Langdon Gilkey, *How the Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Itself* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 80.

We reiterate, the world does not need the stimulation of an idea but the knowledge of an event; it doesn't need to be talked to or at, but included in the message of life and health. The world needs the Word of God, proclaimed, celebrated, enacted, made real and visible and concrete in the lives of the people. The world needs the church with its communal acts of worship in Word and sacrament. Thus it is the responsibility of the church and all those whom it commissions to deliver the Word to hold before men a new, dynamic revelation of God. God is both revealed and responded to in the act of worship. Christ is present as Lord and acknowledged as Lord whenever people gather under the Word and feed on it.

By such preaching that partakes of the act of worship and makes contemporary the reality of God's mysterious love in Jesus Christ, the church is celebrating in the midst of the world and the presence of God. Martin Luther makes a good deal of the fact that the church, in its preaching no less than any other act of worship, is a remembering community. He believed that the Word of God was more than a mere deed in history. The remembering and reciting of that deed within the redemptive community of the church was also the Word of God. This Word of God in the church usually took the form of the oral Word, the Word of preaching. When the church gathered for worship it focused its activity on the hearing of the Word of God. Jaroslav Pelikan stresses this accent of Luther:

The Word spoken in Christ was identical with the Word of God now being spoken in the church. By means of this Word of God the church became and remained a

community of redemption; in Luther's doctrine of the church this meant both a community of those who were redeemed and a community which communicated redemption. The redemptive deed of God in Christ thus became an act of redemption now, as the Word of God in the church made that deed contemporary.<sup>7</sup>

Martin H. Scharlemann, in reference to the record of God's deeds in the history of Israel, writes:

The new Israel, the church, has this same story in Word and Sacrament. We have it in greater detail and in more profound dimensions; for, as we know it, it speaks to us clearly of the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, and the session of our Lord at God's right hand. These are extensions of the prophetic Word under the old covenant; and as we assemble to hear these mighty acts recorded in Scripture, proclaimed and enacted, we show ourselves to be the church of God, the place of His gracious presence. We are the people of the end time, in whom and among whom the Lord of heaven and earth has chosen to dwell as His last great act of self-disclosure before His return in power.<sup>8</sup>

All the messages and sayings of Jesus developed into a carefully constructed unity within the worship of the early church. And the preaching of the primitive church concerned itself with proclaiming the living presence of Christ. The Word about the Lord was also the Word of the Lord, for He was present in the preaching. We cite Hahn:

<sup>7</sup> Jaroslav J. Pelikan, *Luther's Works: Companion Volume* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 63.

<sup>8</sup> Martin H. Scharlemann, "The Congregation: Place of God's Presence," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXV (November 1964), 613.

The significance of this recital of the events of the Passion and of Easter in early Christian worship is the same as what we saw to be the significance of the Lord's Supper, namely that it bears witness to the fact that the Crucified and Risen Lord is present. In the sermon He is 'set forth crucified' before the congregation (Gal. 3:1). Some manuscripts add crucified 'as though He were in the midst of you,' which is what we find in Luther's version. Preaching makes His cross and resurrection the real center of the congregation. The account of a meeting for worship in the early Church which we find in Acts 4:24 ff. gives an impressive picture of this sense of the immediate presence and activity of the crucified and Exalted Lord.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most thrilling statement about preaching as a means of celebrating the presence of God among men comes from the pen of Episcopal layman William Stringfellow.

Preaching is the faithful, historically responsive, enthusiastic utterance of the Word of God in order that the Word of God may be heralded, heard, and enjoyed by those who are witnesses to the preaching. Preaching is the celebration of the Word of God within the Church for the sake of the world, and preaching, therefore, always bespeaks the modesty of the Church, or of a particular congregation of the Church, as the representatives of the world before God. Preaching never boasts of the Church, preaching never commends the Church to men, preaching never argues or tries to prove or convince or persuade anybody. Preaching only flaunts and displays the content, grandeur, simplicity, integrity, and power of the

<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm Hahn, *Worship and Congregation*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 22.

Word of God in the world as it is evidenced in the Bible and in the world's contemporary life. Preaching is integral to the world of the Church called worship — the remembrance, recital, enactment, obedience to, exposure of the Word of God, the thanksgiving and anticipation for the Word and the unhesitant reckless excitement in the presence of the Word of God in history.<sup>10</sup>

These words of Stringfellow, in addition to being an exciting description of what preaching should be as an act of worship of the church, are helpful in yet another way by pointing out that preaching and the celebration of God's presence among men is not an isolated happening in the church but the public enactment of God's Word in the midst of the world. Preaching is not directed, therefore, at church people but is a stance toward the world, not in opposition but in invitation, not in contempt but in compassion. And so the action of the church's worship and preaching is directed away from itself, from introversion and self-preoccupation, to the secular world, to a proclaiming of the Word in words and deeds.

This brings us to a full turn with respect to preaching within the worshiping community. We began with the thought that preaching was a vital part of the church's total act of worship. As such, it proclaims that Word which calls the church into being. The church's acceptance of the Word of Life also becomes the church's witness of its own life. Thus, the Word is not only to the congregation, but it is also of the congregation. The preacher's task, in this function, is to proclaim nothing more than

<sup>10</sup> William Stringfellow, *A Private and Public Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), p. 48.

God's deeds for men. Wherever this occurs, the presence of Christ is celebrated. Remembering its Lord, the church discovers its true identity. It becomes a living community that looks back on its foundation in the Lord's death and resurrection and looks forward to its consummation in the return of its Lord. But that Word is proclaimed not on behalf of the church but on behalf of the world. In preaching, Christ reveals Himself as the Lord of and for all men.

## II. PREACHING AS A SACRAMENT

Stringfellow maintains that "the preaching of the word in the congregation . . . obviously and essentially partakes of the nature of a sacrament."<sup>11</sup>

The preaching of the Word of God has not been universally designated as a sacrament in the historic church. But even if we normally operate with the definition of a sacrament that appears in *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, widely used in The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod,<sup>12</sup> the term *sacrament* need not be completely restricted to Holy Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. Article 13 of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession concedes the term *sacrament* to the "ministry of the Word," which it understands as "the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the

<sup>11</sup> William Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience* (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1964), p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> "By a Sacrament we mean a sacred act — A. Instituted by God Himself; B. In which there are certain visible means connected with His Word; and C. By which God offers, gives, and seals unto us the forgiveness of sins which Christ has earned for us." (*A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943], p. 169).

sacraments to the people.”<sup>13</sup> Again, although Article 4 of Part Three of the Smalcald Articles does not operate with the term *sacrament* but uses the category of *Gospel*, what it says is profoundly pertinent to our present discussion:

We shall now return to the Gospel, which offers resources and help {*Rat und Hulff*} against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in His grace: First, through the *spoken Word*, in which *the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world* (which is the peculiar office of the Gospel); second, through Baptism; third, through the Holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers, Matt. 18[:20]: “Where two are gathered together, and so on.”

In the light of this we are prepared to describe preaching as a sacrament, a sacred act instituted by God in which there are certain means (in this case audible rather than visible means) and by which God offers to us the forgiveness of sins.

It is possible to imagine that Martin Luther, if he had been minded to do so, might conceivably have written something like this:

#### THE SEVENTH CHIEF PART THE SACRAMENT OF PREACHING

*In the plain form in which the head of the family shall teach it to his household*

<sup>13</sup> Apology 13, 9, 11: *Sacerdotes . . . vocantur ad docendum evangelium et sacramenta porrigenda populo. . . . Si autem ordo de ministerio verbi intelligatur, non gravatim vocaverimus ordinem sacramentum.* (Priests . . . are called to the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments to the people. . . . But if holy orders is understood of the ministry of the Word, we should without reluctance call holy orders a sacrament.)

*What is the Sacrament of Preaching?*

*Answer:* Instituted by Christ Himself, it is the true life and forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the form of spoken words, given to us Christians to hear and to share. Preaching is not merely words, but it is words used according to God’s command and connected with God’s Word.

*What is this Word of God?*

*Answer:* As recorded in Luke 24:46-47, our Lord Christ said: “It is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

*What gifts or benefits does Preaching bestow?*

*Answer:* It effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare.

*What is this Word and promise of God?*

*Answer:* As recorded in John 5:24, our Lord Christ said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life; he does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.”

*How can words produce such great effects?*

*Answer:* It is not the words that produce these effects but the Word of God connected with the words and our faith that relies on the Word of God connected with the words. For without the Word of God the words are merely words and no Preaching. But when connected with the Word of God it is a Preaching, that is, a gracious

reconciling word, as St. Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 5:19. Furthermore, when connected with the Word of God, words become a Preaching, living word, as St. Paul also declares, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you believers." (1 Thess. 2:13)

Defining preaching as a sacrament in this sense, as a means by which the *kerygma* of God becomes a present reality among the people of God, we avoid the pitfall of making preaching a kind of automatic means of grace. Reformed and Lutheran theologians are inclined to minimize the importance of the sacraments for fear of making them a kind of magical ceremony. We must concur that there is no meaning and value in preaching simply because words are spoken, just as there is no magical value in water being poured or bread and wine distributed. All the same, preaching, when it is the proclamation of God's Word, the announcing of His great deeds for men in His Son, is a sharing in a speaking/listening situation of what also happens in Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Word of God is reenacted, invoked, announced, celebrated in the midst of the congregation as a sacrament.

In Christian sacramental thought, the motif of the "visible Word" has become a classical formula to describe the sacraments as God's Word. The Lutheran reformers attempted to restore the proper coordination of the preached Word and the sacraments. Luther's emphasis, as we have already seen, was centered in his accent on the oral Word of preaching. But

here we discover that he elevates preaching to the level of a sacrament alongside the other forms of the Word of God. Pelikan describes Luther's position as follows:

Far from minimizing the importance of the written Word in the Bible, this accent on the oral Word made possible a view of the Bible that assigned it a high place in the life and teaching of the church. In the same way the stress on the Word as proclamation did not cause Luther to relegate the Sacrament to a secondary place in the church, for the Sacrament "proclaimed the Lord's death." It may be, in fact, that Luther made the proclamation of the Word a Sacrament alongside the other Sacraments. To put it another way, not only was the Lord's Supper the visible Word of God, but the proclamation of the Word of God was the audible Sacrament. Thus Luther discovered that Word and Sacrament, far from being antithetical, were actually co-ordinate. For if the Word of God was first the deed of God and then proclamation of that deed, it followed that the media which "proclaimed the Lord's death" — whether those media were audible, legible, or visible — belonged side by side.<sup>14</sup>

God wills to reach His people through words, ordinary, everyday, common words. He doesn't use special words, religious words, high-sounding words, affected words, just the plain speech of plain men.

It is not the kind of words that the preacher uses that makes God present; it is simply that God makes His saving presence a reality through words. It is His will that we use words in connection with His Word, and when this is done, we have a kind of sacrament. God has established a ministry that has the task of bringing the

<sup>14</sup> Pelikan, pp. 220—21.



Gospel to man. This is called the ministry of preaching. The words of the preacher become a direct spreading of God's Word. The sacramental quality of preaching can be seen in the fact that through words God mediates His forgiveness, life, and salvation to sinners.

This thought is expressed graphically by Presbyterian Thomas Keir, who like Article 13 of the Apology understands not only the words of preaching as a sacrament but the preacher as well. In the administration of the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, little is made of the fact that such acts are administered by men. They must be called, we say; but they do not really have to believe, we say, in order to establish the validity of those sacred acts. God acts all the same. But the personality of the preacher<sup>15</sup> seems to receive more attention when it comes to preaching. This is no doubt the way it should be since the preaching is the words of a preacher, since the Word is communicated through his personality as well as his words. Keir writes:

Preaching is a sacramental action and the preacher in orders a sacramental person. Preaching has been described as a 'manifestation of the Incarnate Word, from the written Word, by the spoken word,' but it is even more than this. It is the occasion of encounter. It is a man speaking in such a way and under such a direction

<sup>15</sup> It was Phillips Brooks who first articulated the idea that preaching the Word of God is communication through personality.

that the God who is eternal may be heard to utter his solving and saving Word in the situation that is contemporary (and this 'Word' is not to be understood as an intellectual symbol but as a personal action). . . . It is primarily and characteristically this—a personal action and that action God's. . . . Whatever else preaching was, it was a going into action; and the prophets believed unquestioningly that it was God's action in the midst of men.<sup>16</sup>

Preaching, in addition to being an event within the worship of a Christian congregation, is likewise a sacrament, a means through which the redeeming activity of God is communicated to man. God's purpose among men is the mediation of His life and forgiveness through His Word, a saving act that reaches men through the audible, visible, and legible forms of the Word. We have sought to show that the oral proclamation of the Word stands among the other forms as a sacrament of the church. God has ordained the office of the ministry primarily that His Word would be spoken, that the redemption of Christ might become a contemporary reality in the midst of men through the words of the preacher. In this connection we have seen simple words become vehicles for communicating God's grace, that the personal encounter of preacher and people is a personal action of God Himself.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas H. Keir, *The Word in Worship: Preaching and Its Setting in Common Worship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 121—22.

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