

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 63: Number 1

January 1999

Table of Contents

G. Waldemar Degner (1925-1998)	3
Letter to a Preacher	
Donald L. Deffner	5
A Case of Identity: Reflections on the Church's Preaching in The Modern World	
Charles Hughes	19
The Problem and Power of Preaching: Romans 1:16	
Loren Kramer	29
Learning from Pieper: On Being Lutheran in This Time and Place	
Gilbert Milaender	37
Theological Observer	50
Germany and Australia: Ordination of Women?	
Why We Need a Critical Edition of Walther	

Book Reviews 57

Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers. By Christopher A. Hall William C. Weinrich

Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission. By Abraham Friesen J. Preston Byrd Jr.

Henry Melchior Muhlenberg: The Roots of 250 Years of Organized Lutheranism in North America. Edited by John W. Kleiner Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus. By Mary Ann Donovan William C. Weinrich

Union and Confession. By Herman Sasse Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

Martin Luther: Learning for Life. By Marilyn J. Harran Douglas Punke

Church History an Essential Guide. By Justo L. Gonzalez Grant Knepper

The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation. By James C. Russell. Karl Fabrizio

Where Earth Meets Heaven: a Commentary on Revelation. By John G. Strelan Charles A. Gieschen

Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity. By Charles P. Arand. Martin Noland

Books Received 78

Letter to a Preacher

Donald L. Deffner

Dear Pastor:

I am a teacher at the graduate level. I have a Master's degree in Guidance and Counseling. I have also had extensive training in composition and communication skills. And in teaching classes in the church I have always sought to follow Jesus' methods of communication.

I have been a member of the Lutheran Church all my life. I have spent many hours sitting in the pew listening to dull, uninteresting, and uninspiring sermons. May I share my concerns with you and make some suggestions?

Now in all fairness I admit that I am not familiar with your schedule. I know crises arise and sometimes pastors are at the hospital most of Saturday night into Sunday morning.

Others see their first priorities as counseling and calling. Indeed, one survey I read put sermon preparation sixth on the list.

But please hear me out. I go to church with expectancy and hope for a message that will get me through the week.

Here is why I often go home not only unfed but angry.

The Rehasher

I am not a theological butterfly but I do visit various Lutheran churches. At this one church the preacher was seven minutes into the sermon. But so far he had no illustrations, no inductive questions pulling me into the message, and no proclamation of God's law/judgment. It was a dead re-hash of one of the lessons for the day. There was no fresh language, just a simplistic, catechism-like serving up of religious goulash. No sharp, fresh applications of the text were made to my contemporary life here in my cultural setting. A number of people were dozing.

The Rev. Dr. Donald Deffner was Full-time Visiting Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary at the time of his death in November, 1997.

I will never forget the fifteen year old black girl seated six rows in front of me. Now I paint no stereotype. From friends of mine I later learned about her home situation. She has an absentee father, but a deeply committed Christian mother. She has no siblings. She has had sex frequently since she was thirteen years old. She has sampled drugs. Failing in school, she sees her future as a blank ghetto wall. Her head was on the back of the pew. She was asleep. Like her, I took nothing home from that sermon, either. The droning preacher that day could be called Mr. Completely.

The Jokesmith

Oh, this preacher is "interesting." The style is sort of "tee-hee." Light. Humorous innuendos. Easy to listen to, because I was not asked to change anything in my life. The preacher made only general references to "sin." But then broadside attempts at humor really began to distance me from the speaker.

The pulpiter floated on into a soliloquous style for a while (with which we were supposed to identify). But the ending was abortive. There was no real *summa* at all to what was said. I remember nothing of the message.

The Remote Scholar

Another church. Again, there was no law/judgment on my sinful life except by vague implication. There was not a shred of personal application to me, the hearer. It was a classically generic "sermon"—but really not a sermon at all but an "exegetical talk." No more than that.

The Strident Growler

I have heard this pastor really cares for people and has an exemplary Christian family. But he is something else in the pulpit. His voice is strident, his paragraphs convoluted.

Ten minutes into his message he had done no more than rehash the text. There were no contemporary applications of the text to my life, no specific law/judgment proclamation, no

illustrations, and few questions directed at me. Fifteen minutes into the sermon there was still not one reference to my life in this city. At eighteen minutes he started pounding law into me. Repent! Then he drifted into two to three minutes of generic gospel. The sermon was twenty-one minutes long. The gospel did *not* predominate.

I took *nothing* home with me.

Dedicated But Dull

When I listened to this person preach, I could sense the individual's dedication and genuine fervor for the gospel. But the message, though pure law/gospel, was not a "sermon" as I understand it. The preacher did not start with me and my life, and then go on to the spiritual truth to be learned ("from the known to the unknown"). Jesus' principles of communication (as outlined below) were completely ignored. No theme was stated. The preacher rambled and did not apply the message *to me personally*.

I was never indicted by God's law/judgment, nor was the gospel applied to me personally with respect to the forgiveness of my sins. The whole message was generic. The judgment of God on my sin was brought in briefly near the end of the sermon with a tense, grating style. But I went home unmoved.

As I reflect on the character of this preacher, there is not a deceitful bone in the preacher's body. The individual is certainly dedicated, but dull.

A Sea of Sweeping Generalizations

And now to *your* sermon last Sunday. As I listened to you my self-centered life this past week was not really probed at all. The word study and general discussion about Christ really being the Son of God neatly sidestepped my need to confront my specific sins. There were no illustrations in which I saw myself, and no questions that really indicted me. I went home fairly undisturbed and satisfied with myself.

By the way, I have been rather lonely the last several weeks. Not a one of you preachers addressed that “universal” in the human condition.

Interminability

One more point here. Some preachers cannot stop talking. Or, they try to make up for what they failed to say in the sermon in a rambling *ex corde* prayer afterwards.

I counted five conclusions to one preacher’s message. That man’s delivery epitomized that of the speeches of President Harding: “They are an army of pompous phrases marching across the landscape in search of an idea.”

When you conclude, I wish you would *conclude*.

Sameness

Now if you hear a certain sameness in all the above, *that is precisely the point!* Often I am tempted not to go to church at all on Sunday morning, I am so tired of mediocrity. I am inclined to stay home. When I do not go to church, though, I feel like it really has not been Sunday, and there is a big gaping hole in my life.

So I try going back to church again.

My Plea

I am a professional. I work hard at my craft all week long. When I go to church, I want to take something edifying home with me. I know you are overworked and incredible demands are made upon you. As I see you, you are a caring, loving person. You are the kind of person I would want at my deathbed.

But I wish you would put your preaching higher on your list of priorities. I am inclined to drive ten miles beyond your parish to hear another preacher, because that person always feeds me. It is not that that person is “interesting” or tells stories. But that individual speaks to my world with fresh material, in contemporary terms, and follows Jesus’ principles of

communication: questions addressed to me personally, story-illustrations with a telling twist to them (in which I see myself), and creative language with word pictures that really grab me.

By the way, I would rather have that kind of sermon even *read* to me, than hear a preacher without a manuscript—where the individual just “winged it” and fell into the two traps of shallowness and repetition.

Why Are Some Preachers Dull?

I have often puzzled over this question.

1. Some may say that they preach the way they were *taught* to preach. In other words, they never knew any better.

I find that hard to believe. Are they not able to recognize a dull sermon when they hear one?—and want to do something about their own preaching? Also, some *were* trained by good homileticians. But they have either forgotten or ignored what they learned.

2. Some preachers think that the sheer stating of Biblical truths is “preaching.” They simply repeat the whole story and the Holy Spirit does the rest and people will apply it to themselves.

But “Telling is not Teaching!” And just stating Bible truths—pure as they may be—is not “preaching.” I want the clear gospel every Sunday. “*Christ died for my sins and rose again.*” Let the gospel always predominate in your preaching. But proclaim it to me *afresh*, with rich contemporaneity applied to *my life today*.

I am quite aware of the fact that the pastor is to “preach the text.” The sermonizer is not there to titillate, just to “tell stories” or make the sermon “interesting” for the people. But the preacher *is* to speak the law and gospel to the *real* world I live in. As Luther said: “If you preach the gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues that deal specifically with your time—you are not preaching the gospel at all.”

3. Why are some preachers dull? A preacher may counter, "But people say they *like* my sermons!"

I respond to that by suggesting:

- Many people lie. (A noted Lutheran sociologist, J. Russell Hale, makes this point about polls, also.)
 - They love you even though you are boring. You are a nice person. They will never forget the tender care you showed a member of their family.
 - Many persons would rather hear innocuity than be called to account for their sin with clear law application.
4. Some pastors are just plain lazy. "I just get up and throw out a few thoughts. . ."
5. Some pastors have never really had to *listen* to their own sermons with a trained homiletician evaluating the message.

So may I suggest the following.

State a Clear Problem/Resolution Theme

A man came into church late, near the end of the sermon. He whispered to his wife, "What's he talking about?"

"I don't know," his wife responded. "He hasn't said yet."

My point: stick to one clear idea, with the problem/resolution theme stated within a minute of your beginning. Then I will know where you're going – and if you went there!

That is not dull! It gives me a focus, a "line of direction." You have not "given me the answer" already with an obviously predictable outcome. Rather, I will see if you *have* the resolution properly mapped out, and whether you present it cogently, and applied to *my* life in *my* contemporary setting.

Inductive Questions

So many dull sermons I have heard were not really sermons at all but discussions, lectures, comments *about* a topic. It was deductive, a laying out of certain principles or biblical truths.

But it was not applied to me with piercing questions that called for a dialogical response in my own mind. For example:

Christ's words "Abide in me" warn against spiritual vagrancy, against intermittent consecration, against a spasmodic religious life. There are some people who visit Christ, and others who abide in him. To the one class religion is a temporary expedient; to the other it is a permanent principle. "Not good if detached" is as true of church members as it is of a railroad ticket.

Or:

There is a Persian bird known as the juftak. It has only one wing. On the wingless side the male bird has a hook and the female bird a ring. Neither can fly alone, but when fastened together they can fly. How like the human race is the juftak. And how like the church. What would your church be like if only men and boys belonged, or only women and girls.

Or:

Now let's go back and see what happened in the Garden of Eden again. God had created a man and woman as . . .

"Oh, no!" I say. "Not another re-run of the Garden of Eden! Ho hum!"

In contrast to the above, note this preacher's use of incisive questions which really grabbed me personally:

Have you ever felt like running?—running away from it all . . . running to escape some of the pressures in your life . . . running to try to find some *meaning* and *purpose* in your life!

That leads to my theme today: *although we at times are tempted to run away from our responsibilities— or even from God— he calls us to run to him and the refuge of his protective wings.*

Now that preacher really had my attention right away, because that is how I often feel. Here is another:

Who is *really* in charge of your life – you, or God?

Do you doubt or believe? Do you trust Christ is here with you each day, or are you depending on your own planning and abilities?

Do you shift with the wind – blown about by others who influence or intimidate you?

“That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:8).

Indeed, we need to turn, to change. God calls us to be truly *contrite* for our sin, to *repent*.

Or:

A terrified young woman sits fidgeting on the edge of a chair, facing her doctor. She looks like a frightened bird about to take flight. Her body is tense and she turns her head quickly from side to side, blinking her eyes, as she glances nervously around the room.

“What are you afraid of?” asks the doctor.

“I don’t know,” she replies. Then, very softly, “Yes, I do know . . . I’m afraid I’m going to die. . .”

“You probably won’t die for a long time,” says the doctor. “But you are having an anxiety attack.”

The woman looks at him incredulously. For the first time, her head is still, her eyes steady and unblinking. “Anxiety? Is that all?”

“It is enough,” says the doctor. “In your case, *more* than enough.”

Have you ever felt like that woman?

The preacher that day had me in the palm of his hand. Yes! I *have* felt like that woman! Or take this one:

A man is driving home from work. He remembers the haggard, pained look on his wife’s face as he left the house in the morning.

"I honestly do not know what we will eat tonight," she said. "There is no food in the house."

Shamed, he drove to work. "And no money in my wallet, either," he thought bitterly.

Then, in the afternoon, it came. The pink slip. He was fired. And his final check wouldn't be in hand until Friday.

Not till Friday! "No food in the house!" What will I tell my kids? How can I face them?

You promised me, God! Where are you now, God!?

Have you ever felt like that man?

Well, many of us *have* felt like that man. And *often!* And a telling inductive question like that involved me *dialogically* in the preacher's message.

He's describing *me*. I am involved in this text!

Illustrations with an O. Henry Ending

O. Henry, of course, was a famous short story writer with a rich style whose tales also involved a fascinating twist at the end of the story.

I wish preachers used illustrations that were more than just boring analogies. Many illustrations I hear fall flat because they make a theological comparison of some sort, but the analogy is lifeless and dull. Maybe the preacher has made a trip to Palestine (for which the parish will have to pay *two* times!). Or the preacher has seen some famous paintings in museums, and describes them in florid but interminable detail.

"There is this picture in the Louvre. . ." intones the preacher. "And so it is in the Christian life. . ." So what? Tell me a *story!* That is what Jesus did!

The point is, the preacher should strive to select illustrations with a *denouement* — strong punch line, like the "hook" at the end of a well-told tale. Such a resolution clarifies the outcome or point of the story which, of course, must fit the text and never eclipse it. For example:

A man was going to a masquerade ball in a devil's costume. It was a thundering, rainy, stormy night, and the man was driving along a country road. The car went off the road into the ditch. He could not get the car started again, so he got out and made his way across a cornfield to a small country church.

Well, the people were inside the church having their evening prayer meeting, singing hymns and praying. And just as this man got to the front door of the church and opened it—dressed in this devil's costume, mind you—there was a bolt of lightning, a clap of thunder. All the people looked around in amazement and saw the devil standing there, and they went out of the doors and windows as quickly as they could—except for one little old lady standing in the center aisle.

With her cane in hand, and shaking from head to toe, she said: "Mr. Devil, I do not know what you want here, but I have only one thing to say. I have been a member of this church for 40 years, but I have really been on your side all the time!"

Or:

Some years ago a foreign exchange student at the University of Michigan flunked his exams. He was afraid to go home to his family—he would "lose face." And so he hid in the bell tower of the local Methodist church.

Well, there were some strange goings-on in that building for a while. The spaghetti disappeared from the refrigerator after the ladies' aid meeting. There were some creakings, groanings, and rustlings in the building. And no one could figure out what was going on, until someone discovered that there had been a "man hiding in the church."

Are you the man or the woman *hiding in the church*?

But even a good story can be *badly* told. The first version of the following illustration was soundly emasculated by some copy editor who had no imagination.

The need for cooperation in the church is the theme in the story of a little girl lost in a cornfield on a freezing winter day. Rescuers searched for hours, but to no avail. Finally, one person suggested that the group hold hands and traverse the field systematically. They found the child.

Now note how another preacher made the same incident "come alive."

Out on a farm, a father had always told his little girl, "Now, never stay outside when it gets dark, especially in winter when it gets cold so fast."

Well, one day the little girl had been playing in the corn field and got lost. She did not know which way to go to get back to her house, because the corn was a lot taller than she was, and so she just kept stumbling around in a circle.

Now it had gotten quite dark, and a very cold wind came up. Soon it was nearly freezing, and the girl did not have a warm coat on.

The farmer missed his girl and started searching for her. But he could not find her. Then he got desperate, so he phoned all his neighbors and asked them to help him find her. But they did not have any success, either. By this time, it was extremely cold, way below freezing, and they all were afraid for the girl's life.

So one man said, "Why don't we start at one end of the corn field, and all hold hands, so we don't miss any spot where she might be, and slowly cross the whole field together?"

And so they did. And they finally found the little girl—freezing and on the verge of death. Her father, with great joy, cried out: "Thank God we were holding hands!"

That is what we need to do in the church. Let's keep "holding our hands together" in prayer and mutual cooperation, so that we do not wander off on our own—and get lost.

Note the simple—but not simplistic—language used. That preacher was also sensitive to the presence of children listening to the message.

Rich Imageries

Would you tune *in* or tune *out* to the following:

Many of us have never stopped to think of how important water is in our daily lives. It takes care of our physical needs and can also be used for recreation when we go swimming or boating. But it also has a spiritual connotation. For when you were baptized. . .

Or:

Now you must realize that children learn a great deal by watching their parents. Students learn much by watching their teachers. Now if you have been really listening to me, you see, we teach each other by the kind of examples we portray. And so, as Christians. . .

Those are actual statements I have heard in sermons and some devotional books. But I get a feeling of condescension, of being talked down to like a little kid.

The preacher is stating the obvious, with no imagination, and no creativity. There is no depth of thought going beyond that which is plainly evident.

I must add that you can raise your voice, pound your Bible, get very emotional, or even cry—and wipe the tears from your eyes, but I am still not impressed unless you have some fresh content in your sermon.

“But I am just not a creative writer,” you may say.

I challenge that. Study great literature, great writing. Get out your Roget’s *Thesaurus* or click the mouse on that button on your computer and work on richer imageries in your speech. There may be more creativity and imagination within you than you realize.

Remember the man who was in prison for 20 years until one day he tried the door and found it . . . *unlocked*.

Denouement

By the way, I heard a sprightly old lady tell you after church, "Wonderful sermon, pastor!" And you quipped, "Well, we'll see!"

Will I be in church next Sunday to hear you preach? "Well, we'll see!"

Now I do not want to end on a negative note. I have some rethinking to do myself. This is a joint task between both of us, preacher and hearer.

It's not just a matter of communication. The Means of Grace are involved here. It is *God's Word* being proclaimed. And I need to focus more on what God has to tell me through you.

I should concentrate less on what I think I need, and more on Christ and what He knows I need to hear. I will work on that.

So . . . "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

May God bless your preaching ministry.

I will see you next Sunday.

Sincerely . . .

For Discussion

Responses to "Letter to a Preacher"

- This person really turns me off! The parishioner's mind is on *self* (as an individual) and not on *Christ*. The person should focus on what *God* wants to tell us, rather than on what we think *we* need – me! me! me!
- "I am not being fed," the person moans. Yeah, I hear that a lot. But you are fed in different ways – the sermon being only one way.
- "My *particular* needs," the person says? I have hundreds of people sitting out there in the pews on Sunday morning. I cannot meet all their needs. Plus the fact that many of them came to church for the wrong reason. They want a show. They want to be entertained.
- "You did not preach to my *loneliness*," the critic says. Well, it has not been in the lectionary this year.
- This person is a pain! I hear the complainer saying, "You had better be good or I will leave!" The individual does not understand that you go to church to praise God, not to make yourself feel good. This person just wants warm fuzzies.
- Frankly, this critic's expectations sound more like those of a professional speech expert than an average parishioner. I cannot match up to all that, nor did I receive the training for it.
- Okay! I will admit it. My gift is not preaching. I am limited in my ability to communicate well in the pulpit. But I love my people. And I love counseling and calling. And my people seem to really appreciate that. "Such as I have I give thee."
- This critic does not motivate me to change. In the business world we have a phrase: "Win-Win." You do not force a person into a situation where one wins, and one loses. It is better that *both* win. So you need to be *positive*, not negative, to motivate people.