

# More Power for Lutheran Pulpits

RUDOLPH F. NORDEN

*Pastor Rudolph Norden, editorial assistant of Synod's Commission on College and University Work, Chicago, handles a weighty subject with the lighter touch.*

THE Lutheran minister is mindful of the high privilege accorded him to be a spokesman of Jesus Christ. His vocation is unilateral, according to the Savior's reminder, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain." As the ministerial office is a gift of Christ to those holding it, so is the minister himself a divine gift to the Christian community. St. Paul tells the Ephesians: "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers." The minister himself and those ministered to are thus instructed to regard this spiritual office with due honor and respect.

While the position of the man of God has enjoyed recognition intramurally, there were times when individuals outside the church viewed it with jaundiced eye. There were critics of the clergy, sometimes not without cause, long before Communists released waves of anti-clericalism. One cannot say that Lord Macaulay was unsympathetic to the Christian ministry as such when he satirized a deficient young parson in these terms, "While he explains what seems most clear, So clearly that it seems perplexed." In another poem the same author takes a rather pompous country clergyman to task in this genteel criticism, "Dr. Humdrum, whose eloquence flows, Like droppings of sweet poppy syrup."

A past era found the exponents of Biblical Christianity, perhaps because of unwarranted dogmatism, not particularly welcome among the intelligentsia of our land. Anti-clerical sentiments, as witness "Red" Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, coincided with the rise of science liberated from metaphysics and a pragmatist philosophy detached from theology. However, Henry C. Link, a psychologist, and others in his generation led the return to religion, while in England C. S. Lewis was a bellwether among scholars re-discovering Christian theology. All this took place before "fox-hole religion" emerged from the immediate perils of World War II. The return

to religion preceded Norman Vincent Peale, Bishop Sheen, Billy Graham, and other popular preachers. Without taking anything away from any of them, it is probably true to say that they did not so much create the religious wave as that they are riding it.

The net result is that the theologian, from parish pastor to seminary professor, enjoys a measure of respectability among people of thought. He represents the queen of the disciplines, now recognized again as self-containing. Dr. Edgar Carlson, president of Gustavus Adolphus College, bears witness to this when he writes: "There was a time when the theologian lived off the crumbs from the table of the psychologist, the philosopher, and the sociologist. But developments in Biblical theology have been so decisive that theology is recognized as having a definite field of its own."

### *The Theologian in the Pulpit: The Text*

The pastor rises to his full stature as a Christian theologian in that high moment when he enters his pulpit. This is his shining hour, his golden opportunity to proclaim the *kerygma* of Christ crucified for sinners. Not only does he reach what is most likely the largest assembly of the week; he reaches it in an atmosphere of worship and prayerful attention. This is an opportunity not to be muffed.

Church custom and tradition suggest that he begin with a text. The text is not chosen on the spur of the moment. It has been selected long before Sunday morning, to be prayed over, studied, evaluated, and readied for homiletical use. How far in advance of the Sunday service, under normal conditions, should the sermonizer begin with his survey of the text? Under the pressure of multitudinous parish duties sermon preparation is sometimes deferred until Friday. There is then not sufficient time to do justice to the creative task of developing the God-given resources of the text. With time running out, the temptation is great to rely heavily on someone else's printed sermon, or to fall back on trite phrases, theological cliches, and spiritual bromides. Matter-of-fact reiterations of theological formulae do not hold the attention—and the attendance—of people who have become discriminate as to the content of public presentations. Neither does, what Walter Lippmann calls, "the deep slumber of a decided opinion." The Christian preacher who

addresses people of thought faces the task of serving the new wine of the Gospel in new bottles. Stated in another way, his function is to confront his generation with evangelical Christianity in modern thought-forms and language. Thus hearers of many backgrounds and experiences will come to appreciate what one educated layman recently described as "the genuine relevance of vital and valid Christianity to the present situation."

An effective way of beating week-end deadlines for the Sunday sermon was once described by Dr. Louis B. Buchheimer, who was for many years in the pulpit of Redeemer Lutheran Church, St. Louis. Far from improvising from Sunday to Sunday, this skillful homiletician selected his texts and themes in advance for the coming church year. For each Sunday's sermon he set up a file. From time to time, as he came across illustrations, quotations, textual insights, parallel passages, and truths germane to these texts, he inserted this material into the respective file. This sermonizer began his preparation for any given sermon as much as a year ahead of its actual delivery. In other words, a great deal of mining preceded the final minting. This is keeping the homiletical larder well stocked, with the result that "the barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail."

Some pastors prefer to preach on the propers—the standard Epistles and Gospels, or on texts in various pericopal systems. Others gravitate toward free texts. Much can be said in favor of preaching on the pericopes, provided the treatment remains fresh and is supplemented from other portions of Holy Scripture. A routine use of the pericopes results in a pericopated, apocopated, incomplete Bible. The Christian minister, on the other hand, is committed to declare the whole counsel of God.

Free texts, if for a season the pastor elects to sermonize on them, should be chosen with care and with the purpose in mind of preaching sinners into heaven through faith in Jesus Christ. Free texts give the preacher greater leeway in adapting his message to given occasions and to situations and problems calling for Christian thought. In the end, it makes little difference what system or combinations of systems is used, if the distinctive meaning of each text is set forth and the expounded Word slanted to the needs, problems, and interests of worshippers.

### *Choosing Thought-Provoking Themes*

The reading of a meaningful and majestic text, of course, should be followed by a theme worthy of the dynamic spirit and life of the Word of God in the text. Sometimes themes announced on bulletin boards or from pulpits fall below the challenge of the text. It is obvious that God is at work in the latter, and man in the former. The incongruity between a red-blooded text, yea, one that flows with the life-giving blood of Jesus Christ, and an anemic theme is too much of an off-set. It is a letdown, somewhat reminiscent, as one has said in another context, "of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra tuning up for ten minutes and then playing 'Pepsi-Cola Hits the Spot.'"

State your theme in stimulating, challenging, attention-arresting, and thought-provoking terms, so that even he who came to sleep will become wide awake. This is not to say that cheap and shallow sensationalism should be resorted to, for that is something else again. Interest in the sermon can be aroused by stating the theme in question form, particularly in such question form as not to suggest a cut-and-dried answer. A theme like "What Do I Mean To God?" is effective because the hearer does not at once know the set answers but awaits them from the speaker.

Other sermonizers create interest in the theme by offering a contrast, as does Templeton in "Pebbles or Pearls?" and another in "Streetlamps or Stars?" A pastor speaking on the text: "We wrestle not against flesh and blood . . ." might well effect a contrast by wording his theme: "Fencing or Fighting?" Sometimes a current phrase or expression can be given a twist to make it relevant to a spiritual problem. The current phrase, "Design for Living", under the deft hand of a recent sermonizer became, "Design for Christian Living." Attention should be given to how a theme looks in print, or how it strikes the ear. An example of good phrasing is, "Peter, Reed and Rock."

### *Introduction, Door to Sermon Theme*

The introduction is not to be a little sermonette by itself. Its function is to effect a proper lead-in to the theme. This purpose may be accomplished by referring to a recent event, which then becomes an analogy. For example, a pastor preaching on Christ's

parable of the merchant seeking pearls and finding the Pearl of Great Price, might begin this way: "In 1947 a Bedouin goatherd in the rugged terrain about the Dead Sea set out to look for a lost goat. Instead he discovered something of far greater value in a cave—the Dead Sea scrolls."

Striking quotations are also appropriate for sermon introductions. If you intended to say something about the Sputnik Age, which has some Russian scientists claiming that they found no evidence of the presence of God in space, you can point out that this is not a new claim. The astronomer Le Lande said long ago, "I have searched the heavens and found no God." You can balance it off with a companion quotation from Kepler, the Christian astronomer who was thinking his thoughts after God, or Abraham Lincoln's words as inscribed on a marker in the Springfield, Illinois, cemetery where the great emancipator lies buried: "I cannot conceive how a man could look up into the heaven and say there is no God."

### *The Sermon Itself*

As for the structure of the sermon, Louis Henri Sullivan's dictum on architecture applies: "Form follows function." What is the function of the sermon? Is it not to confront modern man, burdened with his own and the world's sins, with the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ? A scholarly dissertation that fails in its function to attract twentieth century people to the foot of the first century Cross is a lost presentation, despite profundity and precise form. By the same token, a sermon sparkling with witticisms that divert rather than direct to Christ represents love's labor lost, despite its light-hearted informality.

The "old line, rose-water modernist," who by-passed Sin and the Atonement is an anachronism. Sin and Salvation must still be preached with capital S's. There can be no appreciation of the Gospel unless the Law first determines man's personal guilt and desperate circumstances when left to his own devices. Bo Giertz, Sweden's Bishop of Gothenburg, is not only in tune with present-day trends in theology but also expresses what was always the genius of prophetic and apostolic preaching when he underscores the reality of sin in these trenchant terms: "Our whole generation, which has

stood up to its neck in the putrid sewers of sin and nearly drowned itself in the consequences of ugly godlessness, ought really to have learned that sin is not an empty word." To pass over sin in favor of more engaging, but less relevant, subjects, would in the poet Auden's word, be "talking of navigation while the ship is going down."

Of course, the knowledge of sin and its consequences is not enough to make anyone a Christian. Law preaching minus the Gospel may by another route lead hearers to the same abyss of despair and sense of futility to which Eugene O'Neill's play *Long Day's Journey Into Night* leads its auditors. Despair of God's mercy, whether by legalistic, Gospel-less preaching or atheistic existentialism, is six of one and half-dozen of the other. The "empty throne of God," the "irrelevance of God," the condition described by Martin Buber as the "eclipse of God," and by Pascal as the "misery of man without God" represent the desperate philosophy of many people in our times. To offer answers to man's questions, the Christian minister leads his hearers from the knowledge of sin to the comfort of forgiveness and perfected salvation in Jesus Christ. In every sermon the way of salvation should be clearly underscored. No one who has ever sat under a Christian pulpit should be able to say on the day of final judgment, "I went to church one time but was not told of Christ, the Savior."

Whatever the structure of the sermon, its foundation is always what W. E. Gladstone was pleased to call the "impregnable rock of Holy Scripture." Preaching should mean opening the Scripture. The failure to speak God's Word encourages Biblical illiteracy and deprives the pulpit of its unique power. He who speaks for God cannot be uncertain as to the authority of his message, lest the trumpet give forth an uncertain sound and none will gather for the battle.

### *Linguistic Dress of the Sermon*

If the purpose of Christian preaching is to communicate God's revealed truths, not only the sermon structure but also its language garb will prove ancillary to it. The choice of words is important. A good sermon answers to Robert Frost's characterization of good poetry, namely in it "understanding comes to the surface and you

catch it without fishing for it." Abstract art with its symbolism is meaningful only to the initiated. Sermonic art cannot afford to leave people out in "left field." On a given Sunday morning the pastor addresses himself also to unindoctrinated and uninitiated hearers. Therefore, it is necessary to communicate through understandable language. Theological and philosophical jargon, also argot that offends and hides meaning, should be avoided.

Effective preaching includes also the courtesy which Dean Acheson, in quite another connection, called "hospitality to intelligence." Most of our hearers these days have at least a high school education, and we can pre-suppose understanding on their part. What St. Paul had to say about Christ-less wisdom in First Corinthians Chapter 1 and other places should not be wrenched out of context and made to apply to helpful science, pursuit of truth, and "to all pure arts and useful knowledge." The Lutheran Church, born in a university, is not hostile to higher education, nor does it believe that the quest of knowledge is the alternative to faith. Anti-intellectualism in our circles, if any, stems from later developments.

How can language be enriched? A seminary professor, who had occasion to read many sermon manuscripts, once expressed the opinion that ministers should read more poetry to enhance their speech. There are certainly people in the Sunday assembly who can appreciate good poetry, not only from the English classics (Shakespeare) but also from meaningful modern poetry. In fact, some of the most pertinent confessions of Christianity are in our times voiced by our poets. By way of example, it will do something for a festival sermon on the Nativity of Christ to cite Ted Hughes' line in "Hawk in the Rain", telling us that Christ's was a childbirth that "righted the stagger of the world."

The choice of words comes easier when the pastor lives in close rapport with his parishioners. Aware of their concerns, cares, needs, interests, and sympathies, he can address himself more knowingly to them. Humor has it that a pastor once preached an eloquent and incisive sermon against dancing in a veterans' hospital. The trouble was, however, that he was preaching to a congregation of amputees.

A realistic painter of the English social scene of some two centuries ago was Hogarth. In a well-known picture he depicts a poor

sinner enroute to the gallows at Tyburn Tree. Hogarth supplies him with two spiritual counselors, one a "stuffed shirt"-type clergyman riding in his coach and the other a plain parson sufficiently concerned about the spiritual welfare of the man as to ride with him in the cart. It is not the pastor who rides in the isolated splendor of a coach but the one sharing his parishioners' cart who speaks intimately and intelligently to his flock.

### *Accentuate the Positive*

The pastor prefers to cast his pulpit message in positive terms. Negative, controversial, defensive, and apologetic preaching gives people wrong impressions of the straight-forward Gospel proclaimed in Lutheranism. Fosdick, if his words may be quoted in this context, is worth hearing: "We defend religion too much. Vital religion, like good music, needs no defense but rendition. A wrangling controversy in support of religion is precisely as if the members of an orchestra should beat folks over the heads with their violins to prove that music is beautiful. Play it." The exposition of the Lutheran catechism is exemplary in this respect: It presents the truths of Christianity positively.

### *The Delivery*

Through good delivery the content of the sermon is communicated to the hearer. Speaking styles vary with individuals, inasmuch as talents are diverse in this respect. A good style for all to cultivate is natural speech in "enlarged conversation." The tone of voice is that of conversation, only the volume is "turned up" to make the voice audible to all in the sanctuary. Public address systems, with which many of our larger churches are equipped, favor use of the natural speaking voice. No shouting is necessary.

As for pulpit manners, one extreme to be avoided is the limp informality which may be proper for a lounge discussion but not for the pulpit, which has a tradition of dignity and power to uphold. "There are some preachers who preach like after dinner speakers," writes Dr. George Forell of the Chicago Lutheran Seminary in an overt criticism of too informal a preaching style. On the other hand, stiff formality is likewise to be eschewed, as Dr. C. F. W. Walther urged in one of his asides in *Proper Distinction*



*Between Law and Gospel:* "I do not want you to stand in your pulpits like lifeless statues." As for demeanor and facial expression, the Christian minister has every reason to radiate the joy of the Christian religion. Let him not be a counterpart to one of Cervantes' figures—"The Knight of the Woeful Countenance."

### *Sustained Performance*

Effective and fruitful preaching is not a one-time, one-shot performance but a sustained effort. Edward Hicks made his reputation as a painter on only one picture, namely "The Peaceable Kingdom," which shows lambs and lions lying down together and William Penn with tranquilized Indians in the background. Clement Clarke Moore became famous because of one poem, "A Visit From St. Nicholas," although he also wrote a two-volume compendium lexicon of the Hebrew language which no one remembers. A pastor, on the other hand, cannot make his reputation on the strength of one good sermon. His purpose should be to achieve and maintain a high caliber of preaching from Sunday to Sunday; also on occasions when attendances are slim.

There is no need for special gimmicks, tricks, or techniques borrowed from motivational research. To paraphrase Vance Packard, we also have a Hidden Persuader, namely the Holy Spirit. "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him, but ye know Him, for He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you." John 14:16-17.

"For He can plead for me with sighings  
That are unspeakable to lips like mine;  
He bids me pray with earnest cryings,  
Bears witness with my soul that I am Thine,  
Joint heirs with Christ, and thus may dare to say:  
O heav'nly Father, hear me when I pray."