

Concordia Publishing House has allowed the rights to this publication to revert to the author. This entire booklet is being posted on *Proclaim Grace!* with the kind permission of the author, the Rev. Lowell Erdahl.

# Better Preaching

## Evaluating the Sermon

Lowell Erdahl

THE PREACHER'S  
WORKSHOP SERIES

BV  
4211.2  
.E69  
1977  
c.3



THE  
PREACHER'S  
WORKSHOP  
SERIES

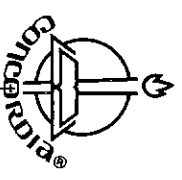
Book 9

# Better Preaching

Evaluating the Sermon

Lowell Erdahl

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY  
311 10th St.  
P.O. Box 77, WARREN'S CIRCLE  
MADISON, WISCONSIN 53092



Publishing House  
St. Louis

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE  
1505 WEST WASHINGTON STREET  
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI 63103

## Contents

Preface	4
1. Renewal Through Self-evaluation	6
2. Renewal Through Spouse Evaluation	16
3. Renewal Through Congregational Evaluation	26
4. Renewal Through Pastoral-Professional Evaluation	38
5. When the Well Runs Dry	42

BV  
4211.2  
.E69  
1977  
C.3  
280S1

Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri  
Copyright © 1977 Concordia Publishing House  
Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Erdahl, Lowell O  
Better preaching.

(The Preacher's workshop series; 9)

I. Preaching. I. Title. II. Series.  
BV4211.2.E69 251 77-21826  
ISBN 0-570-07408-8

# 16.50 / 9

Pub.

4-3-78

## Preface

This book is one in a series of nine that deal with preaching. That word "preaching" immediately elicits some negative reactions from most people. "Don't preach to me" is part of our vocabulary. Yet the preacher is called on to preach (we hope without being "preachy") every Sunday, week after week. The written sermons for one year that come from his desk would easily fill a 300-page volume, and he, as well as his "regular readers," expect that each page will be as informative as tomorrow's newspaper and as interesting as this evening's TV special. This expectation of excellence is growing among a laity that is increasingly well informed. It is no wonder that many preachers feel inadequate about their preaching and panic when "the well runs dry." And it seems to run dry more quickly and more often as the years pass.

This is why this series is addressed primarily to the veteran preacher, although the beginning preacher will find much in each book that will help him also. Each author is an expert in his field and has been given the assignment of opening up his study door to the reader so that he can look over his shoulder and gain a new appreciation for preaching and sharpen the tools that he uses in his own "workshop." Appreciation for the pulpit as the place where God meets people through the vehicle of human language permeates each book in this series. Each author is committed to the power of the Gospel, a power that gives and sustains the new life that Jesus Christ purchased and the Holy Spirit offers. It is the goal of The Preacher's Workshop Series to get at the basics of that kind of preaching.

This series is designed so the reader can accomplish this goal if he simply reads and applies the offered insights. These books are also intended to encourage the preacher to enter into dialogs and workshops with his peers so that this series will provide the basis for continued growth in saying the Good News to the world that needs it so much.

So we open the door to you, preacher of Good Tidings. Welcome to the workshop!

### The Preacher's Workshop Series

- Book 1 — The Mighty Word: Power and Purpose of Preaching
- Book 2 — Letting the Word Come Alive: Choosing and Studying the Text
- Book 3 — The Real Word for the Real World: Applying the Word to the Needs of People
- Book 4 — The Lively Skeleton: Thematic Approaches and Outlines
- Book 5 — The Creative Task: Writing the Sermon
- Book 6 — The Sermon as Part of the Liturgy
- Book 7 — Power from the Pulpit: Delivering the Good News
- Book 8 — A Sermon Is More than Words
- Book 9 — Better Preaching: Evaluating the Sermon

Richard Kapfer, Series Editor

## Renewal Through Self-evaluation

### Self-examination vs. Self-preoccupation

Self-examination is a blessing; self-preoccupation is a curse. There is a fine line between the two, and most of us are more acquainted with the latter than the former. We often worry about what others think of us and, depending upon signs of their reactions, shift between self-adulation and self-pity. This is especially true in relation to our preaching. Many of us are desperately sensitive and defensive and can be easily elated or crushed by compliments or criticisms related to our sermons.

If we are to endure and profit from the evaluation of others, we need to first subject ourselves to a serious and genuine experience of self-examination. After having personally faced our strengths and weaknesses, we can be more open to the evaluation of others.

Such self-evaluation is not self-preoccupation, nor is it self-depreciation or self-exaltation. William Temple is reported to have said, "Humility is not thinking less of ourselves than of other people. It is not thinking of ourselves one way or the other at all." There is much truth in that statement. The opposite of pride is not self-depreciation but self-forgetfulness. In our preaching, as in all of life, it is perhaps best that we forget ourselves about 99 percent of the time. We find our lives when we lose them in self-forgetful trust of God and self-giving concern for people. But granting that, total self-forgetfulness would be a denial of proper stewardship of self. There are times to look in the mirror to discover the condition of our appearance. Then having either accepted or corrected our appearance, we are free to forget about how we look and to be attentive to other things.

So also with regard to our preaching. Periodic self-examination helps to free us from perpetual self-preoccupation. The self-confidence and self-correction that come from honest self-examination enable us to live without endless worry about our preaching and also free us to be open and honest in inviting and accepting the commendation and correction of others.

### The Sermon as Living Event

As we move into self-examination of our preaching, it is important to remember that a sermon is not the notes or manuscript we take with us into the pulpit, but is rather the total living event that happens when we preach. We can, for example, learn much by reading the written record of Luther's

sermons, but only those who actually heard him preach experienced the living reality of his preaching.

All preachers are themselves a vital part of their own preaching, and self-evaluation of our preaching is therefore more than careful analysis of the content of our words. It also involves a searching look at ourselves as preachers and as persons. There is truth in the saying, "When we open our mouths to speak, we let people look into our hearts and minds." As we examine ourselves as preachers, we must therefore look not only at the words of our mouths, but also at the thoughts and attitudes of our minds and hearts.

### Something Wrong on the Inside?

To lead into this personal aspect of self-examination, we recall a story told about Abraham Lincoln. It is reported that on an occasion during his presidency, Lincoln collided with a young man at the hallway corner in a Washington office building. Both were knocked down and as they were picking themselves up, the young man, who failed to recognize the President, cursed at him for not watching where he was going. Lincoln replied, "My young friend, there is something wrong with you on the inside." When there is something drastically wrong with our preaching, the chances are that it is not only what we want of homiletical technique, but there is also something wrong with us on the inside. To begin our examination of our inner condition, we need to honestly ask ourselves such questions as these:

1. Am I personally living in trust of the grace of God?
2. Do I really understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ?
3. Do I honestly care for the people to whom I preach?
4. Am I lazy and slipshod in my work?
5. Am I a coward who is afraid to tell it like it is?
6. Am I only a second-hander, professionally repeating what I have been taught to say?
7. Do I feel so worthless and inadequate that I don't begin to give myself a chance?
8. Am I really an arrogant snob who considers both God and the congregation lucky to have me as their pastor?
9. Am I a pastoral phony going through the motions to earn my pay?

Doctor Alvin Rogness, former president of Luther Theological Seminary, told of the difficulty of writing a recommendation for an extremely well qualified candidate for the ministry who was an excellent student and had a deep understanding of theological issues. He could write a great paper and preach a great sermon. He was personable and friendly. There was just one "little" thing missing; he seemed to lack in integrity. There were evidences that he lacked genuineness and could not always be trusted. Could that ever be true of any of us?

## The Perils of Professionalism

There has been much stress in recent years on upgrading the ministry as a profession. We are urged to think of ourselves as professionals and to master the essential skills of our trade. There is a sense in which this emphasis is needed. Incompetence is not a virtue, and we need to do all we can to be as skilled as possible in fulfilling the responsibilities of our ministry. Much of this volume will be related to the development of specific aspects of the art of preaching. But having recognized its importance, we go on to stress that there is great danger in thinking of ourselves chiefly as professional practitioners of the vocation of ministry.

It is easy to be sarcastic in deriding the "professional parrots" in the pulpit who do little more than repeat the popular phrases or slightly reword another's thought to avoid charges of plagiarism. Some can cynically be labeled "mechanical performers" or "broken records," while still others are among the "loafers" who are so expert at preaching that they can get by with nothing more than opening their mouths and listening to themselves talk.

But such cynicism can be both cruel and unmerited. I doubt that there are many conscious hypocrites in the ministry. We do not set out to become professional parrots or mechanical performers, but we are weak and sinful, and the internal and external pressures of personal and professional life push us into unconscious compromises with our own integrity. Storms of doubt, discouragement, and despair may be raging within us while expectations of strength, clarity, and perpetual faith, hope, and love are being pushed upon us. What are we to do? We could be honest and seek out at least one friend or counselor with whom we could share it all, but often we do not; we pretend that all is well. We have learned our lines, and since "the play must go on" and there is nothing else we are trained to do, we enter the stage and say our lines with the professionalism of a trained actor.

Perhaps we even fool ourselves and are unaware of the contradiction within us, but more likely we sense something is wrong. If we are deeply sensitive to our condition, we may be plunged into one of those dreadful, dark nights of the soul when everything we have trusted seems to be giving way and all that gave meaning seems empty and meaningless. The catalyst for such a crisis may be a major event such as a tragic death, a seemingly irresistible temptation, a glimpse at the sorry state of our own mind and soul, or perhaps more likely it is some little thing, one more detail that calls for the attention something in us refuses to give. Pulled this way and that by the diverse demands of personal and parish life until we feel like the legendary character who mounted his horse and rode off in all directions, something finally gives way and we feel that we can no longer go on.

## Breakdown vs. Breakthrough

Although such experiences of collapse may be described as breakdowns,

they may sometimes be breakthroughs into more honest dealing with ourselves and others. If we are propped up by the support of a pious professionalism or a pastoral pride, we may need to break down. That may be our hope. In retrospect, sincere self-examination may reveal such a breakdown to be a breakthrough into new self-awareness and into new dimensions of life in grace.

We are often plagued by the wrong fears. We are afraid to be human, afraid to reveal our weaknesses and our ignorance, afraid to let others know what is in the depths of our hearts. Perhaps above all, we are afraid of losing control, afraid that the fragile structures of our personal, professional defenses will collapse and leave us with nothing behind which to hide. But the real danger is that our defenses will not collapse and that we will be able to hide our whole life long. The true danger is not in revealing our humanity, but in being perpetual pretenders who lack elemental and essential genuineness.

## Strength in Weakness

Most of us have preached more than once on the promise that came to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness" and have sought to explain what he meant by "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9, 10). But for all that we are exceedingly reluctant to acknowledge that same weakness and to really live by that grace. We can, however, take comfort that we are not alone in experiencing this difficulty. In his sermon "On the Sum of the Christian Life," Luther confessed his difficulty in living in total daily dependence on the grace of God.

Let anybody try this and he will see and experience how exceedingly hard and bitter a thing it is for a man, who all his life has been mired in his work righteousness, to pull himself out of it and with all his heart rise up through faith in this one Mediator. I myself have now been preaching and cultivating it through reading and writing for almost twenty years and still I feel the old clinging dirt of wanting to deal so with God that I may contribute something, so that he will have to give me his grace in exchange for my holiness. And still I cannot get it into my head that I should surrender myself completely to sheer grace; yet this is what I should and must do. (*Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 51, edited and translated by John W. Doberstein; General Editor, Helmut Lehmann, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1959, pp. 284—285)

If Luther had this problem, we need not be totally surprised that we too have it. If Luther could face this difficulty in himself and acknowledge it to his hearers, we can take the courage to honestly and openly do the same. Should we ourselves decide to make a similar confession to our congregation, it would be hoped that it would be a true sharing of the depths of our hearts and not just an experience of self-exhibitionism which

proudly says in effect: "See how spiritual I am; I am just like Luther."

If we are to be heard as genuine proclaimers of the Word of truth, we may need to be honest in confessing our sins and doubts as well as our faith. This does not mean a self-righteous or self-deprecating catalog of specific details, but an honest expression of the fact that we share the same temptations and defeats as do our people. When we do so, we often discover as did Paul Tournier that "We help people more by sharing our defeats than our victories." As we think along these lines, we remember that another Paul has helped each one of us by confiding his despair and weakness. (See 2 Cor. 1:8-10; 12:5-10.) Can we be as honest?

Another Paul, Paul Scherer, liked to remind his students that there is something wrong with the preacher who speaks as if the pulpit were "four feet above contradiction." That's true enough, and it applies equally to those who speak and live as if they were four feet above lust, greed, doubt, discouragement, hatred, or anything else that is part of the common life we share.

Tournier maintains that it is not correct to divide people into the strong and weak, because as a matter of fact we are all weak. Some of us may wish to argue with another Tournier assertion that "we are all equally proud," but there is probably more truth in it than we care to admit. It may even be true that we are as conceitedly self-centered in our self-righteousness as are others whom we readily condemned for their self-indulgence. Pride comes in different packages, but the contents remain essentially the same.

### **By Grace Alone**

Grace alone enables us to face and confess the contradictions within ourselves. We stand at the same level as all our people and are equally under God's judgment and mercy. We preach to ourselves as we preach to others. With our people we turn from ourselves to trust the promises of welcome and strength in Christ which invite us to rest in God's love and power. In that grace our trying to be someone we are not begins to be replaced with a trusting that lets God use us as we are and transform us toward what He would have us be.

Someone has said, "The best day in my life was when I resigned from being Chairman of the Board of the Universe." As we live by grace, that kind of resignation is part of each day's adventure. In that grace we begin to realize that we are not called to proclaim ourselves or our faith, but God's presence in holy love revealed in Jesus Christ. Held in grace, the awareness dawns that, as Fosdick liked to say, "We need not be great in ourselves to stand for something great." We see ourselves then not so much as persuaders but as proclaimers. We are witnesses to Christ, not just lawyers for Christ. Weak and limited as we are, we can without pride or pretense point to Jesus Christ.

### **All Things New**

In the grace of God we discover that it is even possible for a preacher to be saved—to be saved even from being a phony professional performer. Each new day of grace can be an adventure into the abandonment of self-forgetful trust and self-giving concern for others—never perfectly, but completely enough to lure us on through all the doubts, defeats, and discouragements that rise again and again to rob us of joy. But these too are grist in God's mill, for our hope is in a gracious presence beyond our feelings of either failure or fulfillment.

On an Easter morning, for example, when we wonder if we believe anything at all, we bring ourselves with our people under the witness of Scripture. We preach to ourselves as we declare: "Here are promises which speak to us in our doubt and disbelief." Through such proclamation we allow ourselves to be lifted and renewed by a message which holds promise of rebirth for people and preacher alike.

The story is told of a discouraged pastor who went to Doctor Alvin Rogness and anxiously confessed, "I don't think I believe in God anymore," to which Dr. Rogness reportedly replied, "I don't think God is too worried about that." Although such a retort may seem flip and irresponsible, it is really a vivid witness to the gracious presence of God, who promises in Christ that nothing "in all creation" can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:38-39).

In this grace we are not only new people, we are new preachers with a new congregation. Our people are not just enemies to be conquered, nor are they only problems to be solved. They are fellow pilgrims with us in the joyful and agonizing venture of living. They are people with potential born of the grace of God. He loves them more than they love themselves, and He invites us to love them too.

Now our preaching is not just something we have to do to earn our pay, but it is an opportunity to share gifts we are receiving ourselves. Our Scripture texts are not just materials to lecture about, but messages intended to bless and transform our lives. When captured by the sense that both the Scripture and our sermons can actually be means of grace and that we, motley as we are, can be used as bearers of God's Good News, pious pulpit pretense begins to give way to honest no-nonsense proclamation.

### **Specific Self-examination of Our Sermonizing**

Having tried to deal specifically with some personal dimensions of our lives which relate to our preaching, we now turn to specific means by which we can evaluate and improve our preparation and delivery of sermons. Here again a number of checklist questions are in order:

1. Do I discipline myself to take sufficient time for sermon preparation?

2. Do I begin preparation early enough to provide a gestation period for sermon development?
  3. Do I prepare *for* the sermon by careful study of the text, using all the tools available to me?
  4. Do I prepare to preach *from* the text and not just to lecture *about* the text?
  5. Do I prepare *for* the sermon by reading widely and deeply in Scripture and other literature?
  6. Having prepared *for* the sermon, do I then devote adequate time to preparation *of* the sermon?
  7. Does preparation *of* the sermon involve a careful ordering of thought from the introduction through the development and the conclusion?
  8. Do I prepare myself to speak and not just to read or recite?
  9. Do I prepare in such a way that my mind can be on my thoughts, and not just on my words at the moment I share them?
  10. Does my preaching express the clear "yes" of the Gospel, "no" of the Law, and "go" of the Great Commission?
  11. Is there enough in my sermons to enable my listeners to say, "I want to hear this because it seems important to me"?
  12. Do I deal with issues of life specifically and concretely rather than generally and abstractly?
  13. Do I use adequate illustrations to make it possible for my hearers to "see" what I am talking about?
  14. Does the central message of my preaching invite people to look away from themselves to the mercy, power, and will of God revealed in Jesus Christ?
  15. Have I settled down with some bad preaching habits which need specific, and possibly professional, correction?
- As we seriously ponder such questions, we may discover, for example, that we go too quickly from preparation *for* the sermon to writing out the sermon, without having adequately completed preparation *of* the sermon. After a period of intense study and wrestling with the text, we may sit down at the typewriter and essentially ad-lib a manuscript which flows from our fingers with nothing more than a stream-of-consciousness, free-association plan of development. We then declare the sermon completed and, when Sunday morning comes, pick up our manuscript and read it to the congregation. While this "method" may seem to work well, it is corrupted by two of the most pernicious sins to affect the process of preaching. One of these is flagrant neglect of sufficient time and effort to carefully order the thought of the sermon into a clear, progressive plan of development. The other is the use of a process which prepares the preacher to read rather than to speak. Detailed development of an appropriate process of preparation is covered in another book in The Preacher's Workshop Series.

Review of our own sermons may reveal problems more in the area of

content than in preparation or delivery. Self-examination may show that we have, for example, become so wary of proclaiming cheap grace that we are now proclaiming conditional grace. When our sermons are sprinkled with phrases such as "If you repent" or "If you believe, then God will forgive," we are declaring conditional grace. Repentance and faith are not conditions we meet in order to get God to be gracious toward us. God does not love us because we repent and have faith; we can repent and have faith because God loves us. We proclaim the Gospel of God's grace in Christ in order to create the responses of repentance and faith, but we need beware lest we give the impression that God is gracious toward us because of, or on account of, our repentance or faith or anything else we may achieve or do.

### **The Good—Enemy of the Better and the Best**

In this regard as in all other areas of life, the good may be the chief enemy of both the better and the best. Just because we are getting by and even getting compliments on our preaching does not mean that we can settle down in complacency and self-satisfaction. As there are none so hopeless that they can't improve, so also there are none so perfect that they can't be much better.

Professor Gerhard Frost of the Luther Theological Seminary has said that when we have preached our best sermon, we still need to pray, "God be merciful to me a sinner." That's true enough, but beyond asking for forgiveness, we also need to seek the grace and guidance to repent of our sins and to improve our ways. The Gospel means that we need not stay as we are but can be changed to become more nearly the persons God wills us to be. As we preach for this change in the lives of the people who hear our sermons, we also need to be open to change our preaching.

### **To See Ourselves as Others See Us**

Robert Burns spoke of the gift of seeing ourselves as others see us. Much of the following chapters is related to openness to others so that we can hear how they see and hear us. But thanks to the technical developments of the 20th century we are able, via audiotape and videotape, in effect to sit in the pew and hear and see ourselves preaching. It is often especially helpful to listen to tapes of sermons preached some weeks, or even months, previously. We hear these more objectively than the one just preached and are less defensive about ourselves.

This is not to say that we should never listen to a sermon on Sunday afternoon, but rushing to do so after every sermon may be more evidence of self-preoccupation than of serious concern for objective self-evaluation. Perhaps my experience is unique, but I can recall that during my early years as a preacher I would often preach the morning sermon over in my head for the rest of the day, wondering why I had or hadn't said this or that. There may be some educational value in such immediate reflection, but



I think that it is more a sign of fleshly anxiety than constructive self-criticism and that it is best to forget the sermon for a while, take a nap, and think of other things. Having planted the seed, we entrust it to the soil and to God, who gives the growth. Perhaps by Tuesday we might be sufficiently detached to hear Sunday's sermon somewhat more objectively, but even then, not as objectively as one preached a month earlier.

Whenever we listen, here are a few questions to ask ourselves:

1. Am I speaking naturally, or am I slipping into a preacher tone or pulpit manner?
2. What is the impact of my rate and inflection. Is it so fast that it's hard to keep up? So slow that it gets dreary and drowsy? Am I mentally and vocally responding to my own content?
3. What is the central impact of the message? Is it Law or Gospel? Moral exhortation? Scolding? Gracious proclamation?
4. Is the development clear enough to be followed and remembered through a single hearing?
5. Are there vital sections of the sermon which illustrate one or two things I should try to do more often?
6. Are there one or two specific distractions which can be avoided the next time I preach?

Arranging to see ourselves on videotape may be difficult, but it is usually worth the trouble. Most seminaries and colleges have facilities for such taping and some offer refresher courses for pastors which include the recording and seeing of sermons. One danger here is that the "performance" in front of the camera may be quite different from the proclamation in the home pulpit. Another danger is that while viewing the sermon, we may be so distracted by some detail of our appearance, such as our balding heads or minor mannerisms, that we miss the central impact of our preaching. It is often necessary to see and hear ourselves several times before we really begin to experience our preaching as do our regular listeners.

When taping a sermon in classroom or studio for specific self-evaluation, it is well to follow the sermon with a question-and-answer session during which we are asked to defend certain aspects of the sermon or comment on them. This post-sermon session should also be recorded in order to enable us to see and hear if there is any difference between the way we speak while preaching and during direct conversation. When taping a Sunday sermon for purposes of evaluation, it is well, for the same reason, to also record the announcements. If a marked difference is revealed, we may have developed an unnatural pulpit manner which needs correction.

It is to be hoped, however, that hearing and seeing ourselves will not be a totally negative experience, but will be a source of affirmation and encouragement. To hear and see the Gospel clearly proclaimed in our own words can send us back to the task of preaching with renewed gratitude and confidence.

### The Courage of Imperfection

Even as we seek to use every gift God has given us and to prepare and preach to the best of our ability, we also need a measure of what someone has called "the courage of imperfection." This is especially true of those who live under the tyranny of impossible ideals. Such ideals can so depress and immobilize us that we are incapable of doing anything at all. Just as the sloppy and careless may need to post and heed the slogan "Anything worth doing is worth doing well," so the paralyzed perfectionist may need to post another which reads "Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly." There are days in the parish when the best we can do is to muddle through, and when those days come, we can still trust God to use us in spite of everything. It may even be that one of those sermons hurriedly prepared between funerals, weddings, and crisis-counseling sessions may be more meaningful than others developed over hours of more leisurely study. Without minimizing the importance of all the careful preparation we can muster, there is truth in Professor Lowell Satre's suggestion to his students at Luther Theological Seminary, "When you are well prepared, you preach; when you are not well prepared you preach anyway."

We are, at any rate, not the final judges of our preaching. Our most meaningful sermon may be one we had the most trouble preparing and the least satisfaction in proclaiming. Paul Scherer told of a visit from a person who reported that a sermon Scherer preached 10 years earlier had been the turning point of his life. Scherer went to the file and found the preaching notes for that sermon. Across the back he had written: "This sermon is lousy, never use it again."

THE SEMINARY LIBRARY

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY  
MEQUON, WISCONSIN

## Renewal Through Spouse Evaluation

### It's Inevitable

The subject of spouse evaluation arouses intense feelings among both preachers and spouses. Some believe that the best counsel to be given in this regard is to urge spouses of preachers to refrain from any comments on their spouse's preaching. Others, including myself, consider such counsel to be both unrealistic and unwise. Whatever any of us think about it, spouse evaluation is an inescapable reality. In one way or another, by speech or silence, action or attitude, positive or negative evaluation will be expressed by the spouse and experienced by the preacher.

It is, therefore, not a question of whether we will have spouse evaluation, but rather a question of the kind of evaluation we will have. Will it be helpful or hurtful, constructive or destructive? Will it be for the improvement or detriment of preaching? Will it strengthen or weaken the total ministry? Will it enhance or distress the marriage?

The alternative to constructive spouse evaluation is not no evaluation, but a kind of evaluation which is either useless or destructive. Some may protest against this assertion, saying: "My wife told me years ago that since she is not a preacher, she felt unqualified to comment on my sermons; and we agreed that it would be okay if she never said anything about my preaching." She's never made a comment since, and we have gotten along just fine." If this is true, the wife has likely been silently supportive of her husband's person and preaching. Most wives, however, would not be able to keep silent that long; nor would their husbands desire them to do so. This "I will never comment on your preaching" arrangement strikes me as comparable to the preacher's telling his wife, "Since I am not a cook, I feel unqualified to comment on your cooking and will, therefore, never say anything about it." If he devours every meal with gusto and obvious delight, no comment may be needed, but isn't there something unrealistic and unnecessary in this arrangement?

It is obvious to all of us that one does not need to be a chef to comment on cooking. We react to food as eaters, and even if we have never boiled water, we are the only persons in the world who can tell what a meal means to us. So also with preaching. We react to the sermon as hearers, and no one else can tell what any sermon means to us. As one need not be a cook to react to food, one need not be a preacher to react to preaching.

No sensible husband would consistently enjoy his wife's tasty meals and never share a word of appreciation; nor would he keep solemn silence for

years while she continued to serve everything so salty or half-cooked he could hardly eat it. Likewise with preaching, let's not play games of make-believe. Our spouses are served the food of our preaching and have reactions of appreciation and suggestions for improvement which are best shared with honesty and kindness.

### A Word of Warning

Having stressed the inevitability of spouse reaction and urged a quest for the most constructive means of sharing it, a word of preliminary caution is certainly in order. As there is something wrong with the husband who never says a word about his wife's cooking, there is equally something the matter with him if he is on a solo crusade to "help" his wife become the best cook in the world and to do so brags or complains about every meal. Again, likewise with preaching. To urge constructive spouse evaluation of preaching is not to place a special burden on the preacher's wife. She is neither divinely nor humanly ordained to be her husband's chief critic, nor does she have the authority to pronounce the last word of praise or judgment on his preaching. In what follows, we will attempt to illustrate both constructive and destructive spouse evaluation and will seek to set it properly in perspective within the wider context of the total ministry and marriage. It is hoped that these comments and the discussion they may provoke between preachers and spouses will not only result in better preaching but also greater fulfillment in both ministry and marriage.

### Examples of Spouse Responses

To make our consideration as concrete and practical as possible, we begin with some examples of spouse responses to preaching. As you read these, pause a moment to sense your reactions to each.

1. "That was a great sermon."
  2. "Didn't you preach almost the same sermon last Sunday?"
  3. "I guess I didn't listen very carefully."
  4. "What was the point of the long illustration?"
  5. "The section illustrating our similarities to the situation of the text was really excellent."
  6. "Why don't you talk to us in the sermon as you do during the announcements?"
  7. "You're a great one to talk about love! Why don't you practice what you preach?"
  8. "That sermon was stupid!"
  9. After hearing a guest preacher: "I wish you would preach like that."
  10. "Please make a point of looking at those of us in the front pews."
- As you tried to sense your own thoughts and feeling responses to such comments, they likely included reactions such as these:
1. Encouragement and eagerness to preach again.

2. Discouragement and a sense of defeat.
3. Appreciation and affection toward your spouse.
4. Anger and resentment toward your spouse.
5. Confusion and bewilderment concerning how to improve.

As we think of these examples of spouse evaluation and preacher response, it is immediately obvious that such comments not only affect the pastor's attitude and action concerning preaching and help shape his self-concept as a person and pastor, but they also affect his attitude toward and relationship with his wife. Specific changes possibly caused by spouse evaluation include the following:

1. Better preaching.
2. Worse preaching.
3. Better self-concept and pastoral concept.
4. Worse self-concept and pastoral concept.
5. Better marital relationship.
6. Worse marital relationship.
7. Increased openness to positive change in all areas.
8. Increased resistance to change in all areas.

With awareness that we are dealing with something that has great potential for good and for ill, we will now attempt to identify some of the specific characteristics of helpful spouse evaluation.

### Characteristics of Helpful Evaluation

To serve the improvement of preaching, preachers, and marriage, spouse evaluation is at best true, personal, kind, and specific. In the sense used here, true comments not only express the honest opinion of the critic but also accurately reflect the true need of the preacher. A wife may, for example, honestly believe that her preacher husband should never say a word about any controversial subject, and she may protest loudly every time he does so. Or she may express honest appreciation for his frequently sarcastic references to the congregation. While reflecting her sincere convictions, these suggestions may not be true to her husband's need, which may be to receive encouragement to deal with controversial issues in both a pastoral and prophetic manner and to be told that his sarcastic humor is beginning to alienate half the congregation.

It is, therefore, important that all spouse criticism be recognized as personal in the sense of being one person's opinions. It may not reflect the opinion of others and may, in fact, be the wrong advice, complaining when it should praise and praising when it should complain. This is, of course, true of other critics as well as spouses, but because husbands and wives are so intimately involved with each other, it is sometimes especially difficult for a spouse to see the preaching-pastoral situation from an objective point of view. This is frequently the case when the pastor is involved in controversy with persons in the congregation. When caught up in the heat

of battle, a loving wife may urge behavior which either arouses further hostility or is in effect an abdication of proper prophetic leadership.

Even when appropriate to the preacher's need and presented as one person's opinion, spouse evaluation may be given in such an unkind manner that it only creates stubborn resistance to change and creates discouragement toward the ministry and disunity in the marriage. It may be true, for example, that her husband speaks so slowly that his sermons drag and become dull, but to be told during dinner every Sunday, "Your sermon was so dull I could hardly listen," may be neither helpful nor kind. It may, in fact, be another shot in a matrimonial warfare which has little to do with preaching at all. On the other hand, a wife can be so appreciative of her loving husband that he can do no wrong. This wife's kind and honest perpetual praise of every sermon during Sunday dinner may be great for his ego and stimulating for the marriage, but it may give an incorrect impression of certain aspects of his preaching.

It is probably true that all sermon comments reflect at least as much of the reactor's general attitude toward the preacher as they do the specifics of a particular sermon. That is, if people like the preacher, they will express appreciation for his preaching; if they dislike the preacher, they will complain about his sermons as about everything else. If this is true in general, it is especially relevant for spouse evaluation. The intensity of marital affection, or hostility, must be recognized by both partners as extremely significant factors coloring comments made on preaching. When the preacher is deeply aware of this fact, he is somewhat protected against the temptation to pride born of adulation and temptations to despair which come from angry jibes at his sermons—which may be more related to his failure to take out the garbage or clean the garage than anything in his preaching.

Another characteristic of helpful comment is that it is specific enough to be useful. Specificity is especially significant when the comment is negative. A positive word of general appreciation such as "I really liked your sermon today" doesn't tell a thing about why it was appreciated. It may have been said in gratitude for brevity, but it may be heard as appreciation for profundity. But nonetheless, such a general comment does provide encouragement which may tend toward more of whatever prompted the praise.

General negative comments on the other hand are usually of little help. If it is not followed by anything more specific, a comment such as "I didn't like your sermon today" does nothing but discourage, and it may possibly enrage the preacher. What is he supposed to do with such a reaction? The healthy and helpful thing to do is, of course, to follow it with a "Please tell me what you didn't like about it," which could lead to an objective discussion of specifics. But when given by a frustrated wife who has been waiting with dinner while her pastor husband is being detained by a troubled

parishioner after church, it may prompt something other than objective reflection on preaching.

It would have been far better for the comment to be specific in the first place, stating exactly what was disliked. More specific statements such as "I didn't get the point of your first illustration" or "I don't agree with your interpretation of that text" or "I got lost and couldn't see where you were going" are much easier to handle and lead to more productive discussion.

### Hints Toward Helpfulness

Having recommended that the best spouse evaluations are those that are true, personal, kind, and specific, we will now attempt to make all this more specific and concrete by sharing one preacher's suggestions to his loving spouse. They are presented in the hope of enabling both pastors and spouses to share more constructive communication concerning preaching:

*"Please don't kick me when I am down."*

Preaching is both exhilarating and exhausting. Even when worship and proclamation have been uplifting experiences for the preacher, the Sunday morning schedule leaves most of us feeling fatigued. When things don't seem to have gone well and we have already received a little negative flak and a lot of stony silence, Sunday noon can be a time when we feel let down. To be greeted at dinner with some additional flak or more stony silence may be more than we can handle with good grace. If there is anything positive to be said about the sermon, this may be a good time for a loving spouse to say it. Few sermons are so totally without meaning that it is impossible to say anything positive.

If there were glaring defects in the sermon, an autopsy may be in order, but Sunday dinner may be neither the time nor the place for it. Instead of doing a dinner-time postmortem on the sermon, it is usually much wiser for the wife to postpone sharing her most negative reactions until about Tuesday and then to present them not as complaints about last Sunday's sermon, but as positive suggestions to keep in mind while preparing for next week. Following this procedure will likely do much to promote better preaching as well as more harmonious home life.

*"Please share your experience of my preaching without attacking me or my sermons."*

In commenting on preaching, as in all marital communication, it is usually much better to confess our own feelings than to attack each other. As it is better for the eater to tell the cook, "The carrots are too salty for me," than to say, "You are a poor cook" or "This is a crummy meal," so also it is better for the hearer to say, "I was confused during part of the sermon," than to say, "You are a poor preacher" or "That was a crummy sermon." When attacked, we often become hostile and defensive. We dig in

and fight back. Having invested a great deal of ourselves in a sermon, any attack on it is also felt as an attack on ourselves, and we seek to protect and defend it as if it were one of our children.

We can easily argue with anyone's comment that "Your sermon was confusing," but we must accept the fact when someone says, "I was confused." We may, of course, blame this confusion on the hearer rather than ourselves, but when it comes as confession rather than attack, we are more likely to be open to the possibility that our lack of clarity was at least a contributing factor. Attack promotes warfare; confession promotes confession in return and opens the way to deeper communication and more positive change.

*"Please encourage my strengths rather than only complaining about my weaknesses."*

A member of one of the Dale Carnegie speech courses once asked the instructor, "Why do you give such positive reinforcement and so little negative criticism?" The instructor replied, "Our experience with thousands of people has taught us that complaining about faults doesn't do much good. The speakers become depressed and make little progress. But when we affirm the person's strengths and say, for example, 'You really spoke to us during that illustration,' we discover that the person is not only encouraged, but goes on to do more of the same."

As we think along these lines, we ask ourselves, "Who has helped me the most, my negative critics or my most positive encouragers?" A review of memory prompted by that question will likely include recollection of occasions when we have been grateful for honest confrontation with our faults and failures. But when this is so, is it not always in the context of positive encouragement which has challenged us to believe that we could do better?

To urge this kind of accentuation of the positive is not to recommend a lapse into Pollyanna sweetness, but to put the evaluation in the context of our potential rather than just our problems. Negative harping about the unchangeable past can be like beating a dead horse. Presenting positive recommendations toward future possibilities and more meaningful proclamation can renew confidence and provide guidance that gives new life to preaching.

*"Please be as specific as possible."*

As noted earlier, general positive comments are of some help, but general negative remarks are often worse than useless. It is possible that such comments will make us angry enough to seek further clarification and correction, but it is far better that this clarification be given in the first place. Even with positive comments it is more helpful to hear, "I appreciated your explanation of justification by grace" than "I liked your

sermon." And on the negative side, it is essential that the evaluation go beyond "That was a lousy sermon" to "I don't agree that each of us is as sinful as an active alcoholic," or whatever it was that prompted the "lousy" label.

*"Please accept my limitations."*

As the preacher needs to come to terms with his own impossible ideals, the spouse needs to do likewise. At best, we will do a lot of pedestrian preaching. Every sermon will not set the world on fire. This does not mean that these sermons are useless. The analogy to cooking is again appropriate. Most of our family meals would not win blue ribbons at the county fair, but they are good solid everyday food which is both tasty and nourishing. So also most of our sermons are of the everyday meal variety which provide solid food for our lives.

For a wife to expect some sort of homiletical masterpiece from her husband each week is to expect too much, and to lay such expectations on him and reflect this in comments of disappointment and disapproval is to be unfair to the human being she married. It is always dangerous to make a god of another person, and certainly so in marriage. Such idolatry is destined for disillusionment. Proper positive expectations are one thing, idolatrous idealism quite another. There may be a fine line between the two, but we need beware lest we live on the wrong side of it.

It is especially important that wives accept limitations which their preaching partners are incapable of changing. Unless she wants him to wear a wig, there is no sense in complaining about the appearance of her husband's bald head. If after years of the best corrective therapy he still has a strident voice, there is little use in constantly talking about it. All harmonious human relationships involve the acceptance of personal characteristics which we wish were different. With regard to preaching, as with everything else, we do well to live by the Serenity Prayer which has become so significant for groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and Emotions Anonymous. Quoting the original wording of Reinhold Niebuhr: "Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the one from the other."

*"Please care enough to kindly confront me with things that need to be and can be changed."*

To keep silent during Sunday dinner concerning faults of the morning sermon may be an act of kindness and wisdom. To be silent for years while aware of distracting homiletical habits and distorted theological thinking is an action born of cowardice or contempt. There may be some things which our best friends may not tell us, but not if they can be changed.

In the best of marriages it is often difficult to discuss certain subjects and especially to make suggestions recommending change. Even the most

positive suggestions imply criticism and are not always welcome. "Why didn't you do this" may be heard as "You are wrong in what you are doing" or as "You are too dumb to know what to do." After having made gentle suggestions to her preacher husband and having them ignored or greeted with outright hostility, a wife may give up and keep peace by saying nothing. Then during an argument over something else when they are angrily dumping a load of accumulated resentments on each other, it will finally come out: "The way you talk in the pulpit makes you sound like a pompous pope! You preached that way 10 years ago, and you still do it!" If he is rational enough to ask, "Why didn't you say so sooner?" she may reply, "I tried, but you never listened!" That may be true. If we preachers want constructive criticism from our wives or from anyone else, we need to respect them enough to really listen to it.

When there are terrible problems in preaching or in any other area which are obvious to a preacher's wife and to everyone else in the parish except the preacher, but which no one knows how to correct, it may be necessary to make arrangements for a more professional evaluation. If I am so sick that I haven't sense to call a doctor, I certainly hope my wife will make an appointment and get me there. So also if I am so out of touch with the hurtful realities of my preaching, I hope she, with the possible help of a kindly parishioner or pastoral friend, will do something to help me face and correct the situation.

*"Please be understanding and merciful toward my defenses."*

Having stressed that all suggestions imply criticism and that criticism of the sermon is also criticism of the preacher, we preachers should not be surprised that we are defensive of our preaching. Even as we plead for understanding and mercy, we also need to ask for courage to be more open in receiving the negative reactions. Most of us have little trouble receiving appreciation for our preaching. As we welcome the positive, we pray for courage to accept the negative as well.

Open communication in marriage involves sharing both the better and the worse. Couples who operate on the rule that they are permitted to share only positive thoughts and feelings with each other may get along fairly well for a while, but they will sooner or later discover the superficiality of their relationship. In-depth involvement includes the honest sharing of likes and dislikes, and preachers need to repent of excessive defensiveness, which makes it difficult for others to do more than share their compliments.

*"Please remember others may react differently."*

As we become acquainted with other human beings, we are constantly amazed at how much we are alike and also at how widely we differ. We are all sinners in need of grace; we are all weak and lonely and afraid. We all need love and reassurance that someone cares. We all yearn to be loved and

to give ourselves in love to others. But we are also very different and also see the world from vastly different perspectives. One person lives in dread of communism taking over the world, and another is convinced that corrupt capitalism will so pollute and exploit the earth that it will be impossible for human life to exist on this planet. In relation to preaching, some will praise the preacher who supports every sermonic assertion with a specific Biblical quotation, while others will label this "proof texting" and consider the preacher superficial in his use of Scripture. Although we share a common humanity, our specific attitudes and opinions are so different that it is impossible for one person to speak for us all.

It is, therefore, essential that spouse evaluation be corrected or confirmed by the more general congregational and pastoral-professional evaluation discussed in the following chapters. When there are specific points of disagreement between husband and wife over some aspect of proclamation, it is wise to seek the opinions of others, not to prove who is right, but to discover what is right.

*"Please let God and other people transform my life."*

Having stressed the place of spouse evaluation, we again underscore the fact that it is a limited place. When husbands and wives care for each other and live together as good friends as well as lovers, they will do what they can to support and encourage each other. When her slip is showing, he will care enough to say so. When he has a distracting pulpit mannerism, she will kindly call it to his attention. When there are occasions for appreciation, they will be shared with openness and gratitude. But all this does not imply that either has the job of transforming the other. Marriages which begin on the assumption "I will change him/her after we are married" are notoriously unsuccessful. So too, both preacher and spouse need to understand that the improvement of preaching is not a special vocation to which one is ordained by marrying a preacher.

Many a spouse in Al-anon, the organization for wives and husbands of alcoholics, has confessed that it was a great day when she realized "My husband is not my little boy and it's not my job to keep him sober. That is up to God and AA." Similarly in the parsonage it is sometimes a great day when a wife can say, "I have decided to be his wife and will no longer try to find my fulfillment through being an alter ego pastor." Liberated from the responsibilities of having to provide the total care and feeding of the preacher, she is now free to be constructively supportive and corrective, not as a part-time critic, but as a loving friend.

### The Other Side

Having shared this list of "hints for helpfulness" from the preacher to the spouse, we could go on to a similar list from the spouse to the preacher. Many of these have been implied in what has been said thus far: "Please

listen to what I am saying," "Please don't be so defensive," "Please don't expect me to be your sole critic and source of support," "Please let me be human too," and the like. Others could be singled out for special consideration such as the following:

*"Please don't take my comments for more than what they are."*

After having remarked that she didn't understand an illustration or agree with a specific point, many a wife has discovered her husband to be depressed over having failed as a preacher. But she didn't say that. She only said she missed one little point. His reaction is like that of a cook who feels a meal to be a total failure because someone says that the carrots are a little salty. The fact is the meal may be great and most people even prefer the carrots that way. As applied to preaching, this means that we need to take each comment for what it is. One compliment doesn't make us the greatest preachers in the world, nor does one complaint mean that we are total failures.

*"Don't worry so much about your preaching."*

Some preachers distress their wives by rushing home every Sunday to ask, "How did I do?" These wives wish that once in awhile their husbands would just preach the sermon and forget it, without being so anxiously preoccupied about what others might be thinking. Such anxiety reflects insecurity and may call for more support than most wives can give. It is also a sign that the preacher sees himself as a performer to be rated by his audience rather than a proclaimer sharing the Word of truth. We need to care more for our message and our people than for our performance. When we do so, we give ourselves a chance to be the proclaimers we are called to be, and we also begin to be freed from the excessive self-occupation which prompts us to ask our wives for a weekly evaluation. Having planted the seed, we can forget it and trust God to make it grow.

# 3

## Renewal Through Congregational Evaluation

### An Introductory Note to the Reader

In order to make the content of this chapter as personal as possible, it is presented in the form of two letters, one from some listeners to their pastor and the other from a pastor to his listeners. It is hoped that this format will encourage both lay and pastoral initiative toward greater partnership in preaching. I do not recommend that either clergy or laity copy these letters and send them to each other, but rather that each might be a bit more assertive in seeking to share homiletical responsibilities. I hope, for example, that there will be at least one suggestion in the pastor's letter to his hearers which will stimulate every clergy reader to attempt to do it. Some steps, such as placing feedback cards in the pew racks, can be taken on his own initiative, while others require the enlistment of a group of volunteers. No parish will want to try everything suggested, but some might wish to experiment with several approaches.

There are dangers in moving toward partnership in preaching, and some of these are discussed in the pastor's letter. But there is also a great potential, not only for improvement of preaching, but also for deepening relationships between clergy and laity and for enrichment of congregational life and pastoral ministry. The steps suggested seek to open the way for gift-giving and gift-receiving, so that clergy and laity will be mutually strengthened and encouraged by one another.

Many of the "Hints Toward Helpfulness" and "The Other Side" included at the end of Chapter Two (see pp. 19-24) apply equally to congregational evaluation, and while most are not referred to again, it is hoped that they will be kept in mind and appropriately shared with the congregation.

### Steps Toward Partnership in Preaching

*Part One*—"Please Let us Help You with Your Preaching": An open letter from some listeners to their preacher.

Dear Pastor,

We are some of your sermon listeners who offer ourselves to help you with your preaching. We are grateful for all that we have received from your sermons, and we want to encourage and assist you in this vital aspect

of our shared ministry. We sense a responsibility for preaching, not only in the sense that it is our job to listen attentively, but also that we have some things to share with you which we believe will help you preach to us.

We can't tell you everything you need to know. We are no substitute for your seminary training nor for your own independent study and reflection. We don't want you to sell your soul to please us. You are ultimately responsible under God for all of your sermons, and we would have it no other way.

But granting that, we can tell you some things which others are unable to tell. Only we can tell you if your messages are getting across to us. Only we can tell you how much we appreciate the new life that has come to us through your sermons. Only we can tell you of specific distractions which sometimes keep us from receiving the full impact of your preaching.

Give us a chance to share some reactions and suggestions. We think that you will usually be pleasantly surprised. Most of us will be kind and appreciative. You may even have to nudge us a bit to bring out some of the negative reactions which we are reluctant to share.

Many of us are eager to enter into this kind of partnership in the preaching process, but it is very difficult for us to initiate it. You will have to take the lead to get us started. We wait for your invitation and guidance. Please let us know of ways in which you think we might be able to help you preach to us.

Sincerely,

Some of your concerned listeners

*Part Two*—"Please Help Me Preach to You": An open letter from a preacher to his listeners.

Dear Listeners,

Thank you for inviting me to seek ways to enter into partnership with you in the process of preaching. Many of you have already been extremely helpful to me by personally sharing your reactions and requests. It is a pleasure to attempt to spell out some specific ways through which I believe you can further help me preach to you.

In addition to the essential support of your prayers and your presence, there are two ways by which you can be especially helpful. One is through giving "feedback" reactions to the sermons you have experienced. The other is by sharing what we might call "feed-in" or "feed-forward" insights and suggestions to help in the planning of sermons to be preached. Although feedback and feed-forward are bound up together and may often occur in the same session or even the same sentence, I will make some separate suggestions for facilitating each.

### Feedback

We preachers are much like golfers driving golf balls in the dark. We

may swing hard and feel that we are driving well, but we have no way of knowing if we are hitting the green. The only way for us to know if our preaching is reaching or missing you is for you to let us know.

Please help me preach to you by sharing your feedback reactions. Here are some ways of doing it:

### 1. *Written feedback*

Sermon feedback sheets can be placed in the pews or in Sunday bulletins, and the congregation can be invited to write its reactions during or following the sermon. These sheets can be returned with the offering or handed to an usher after the service. Some may wish to take them home to fill out in more detail and then mail them back to the church.

There should be no place on the sheets for reactors to sign their names. To promote honesty, total anonymity should be encouraged.

While recognizing that it would be disruptive to make a "big deal" over such written feedback every Sunday morning, I believe it would be well to encourage anyone who wishes to do so to react to any or every sermon. One way to give this encouragement would be to have a number of reaction cards or a pad of feedback sheets in the pew rack every Sunday morning. A single sentence in the bulletin reminding worshippers that they are invited to share their sermon reactions and suggestions by filling out and turning in the feedback form in the pew rack would be sufficient invitation on most Sundays. Even if there are no written returns on some Sundays, this invitation will not be wasted. Letting the hearers know that they are free to share their suggestions can be a significant step toward partnership in preaching. On occasion, especially at the beginning, it might be well to invite everyone to share some reactions and to give them five minutes after the sermon to write them out.

Here are some samples of the kind of forms we might use. Note that while the stress here is on "feedback," "feed-in" is also encouraged. (See the next four pages.)

### *Sample One*

This form invites both positive and negative reactions, as well as suggestions, and is intended for use on a half page (8½" x 5½") bulletin insert.

#### **Partnership in Preaching**

You are invited to be a partner in the preaching process.

Please share your sermon reactions and suggestions on this form. Return on offering plate, hand to usher, or mail to church. You need not sign your name.

What did you appreciate?

What detracted?

Suggestions

Please use reverse side for more reactions and suggestions and to list questions, concerns, texts, or topics you would like considered in future sermons. Thank you for your help.



*Sample Two*

This is an adaptation of a form used in seminary preaching workshops and includes a detailed checklist which may help bring specific aspects of the preaching experience into conscious awareness. Some congregations have used it to help seminary interns with their preaching. It is suggested for use on a full 8½" x 11" sheet.

**Partnership in Preaching**

You are invited to be a partner in the preaching process. Please share your sermon reactions and suggestions on this form. The checklist on the right may help you to be specific in your remarks. Please hand to an usher after the service or mail to the church. You need not sign your name. What did you appreciate?

On Content

Did the preacher:

- (1) Preach the Gospel?
- (2) Preach the Law?
- (3) Preach the text?

On Clarity

Did the preacher:

- (1) Order his ideas clearly?
- (2) Develop one theme?
- (3) Have clear purpose?
- (4) Have clear introduction and conclusion?
- (5) Make clear connections between
  - a. Theme and main points?
  - b. Sections of the sermon?
- (6) Use clear language?

What detracted?

On Relevance

Did the preacher:

- (1) Speak to you personally?
- (2) Do vital business with you?
- (3) Relate to social issues?

On Delivery

Did the preacher:

- (1) Speak naturally?
- (2) Have a manner and attitude consistent with the message?
- (3) Have variety in rate, inflection, and intensity?

What suggestions do you have for improvement?

Please use reverse side for additional comments and suggestions and to list questions, concerns, texts, or topics you would like considered in future sermons.

Thank you for your help.

*Sample Three*

This brief form can be printed on small cards (3" x 5" or preferably 4" x 6") and kept stocked in the pew racks to provide the opportunity for feedback, and feed-in every Sunday.

Sermon Reactions?

Preaching Suggestions?

To keep our preaching from being a "one way street," we invite you to write your reactions (both positive and negative) to today's sermon, together with your suggestions, on this card. Please place it in the offering basket. You need not sign your name. Thank you.

Please use reverse side if needed.

#### Sample Four

This form uses three questions suggested by Reuel Howe in his book *Partners in Preaching*. It can be used with the congregation at large and can be easily adapted for use with confirmation students who are asked to report their sermon responses.

#### Please Help Your Preacher

To let your preacher know what his sermons mean to you, please share your responses on this card and return it with the offering. You need not sign your name. Thank you.

1. What did this sermon say to you?

2. What difference, if any, do you think the message will make in your life?

3. What did the preacher do to help or hinder communication?

Please use reverse side if needed.

Over a period of time the congregation could experiment with each of these forms as well as with others developed by both the preacher and the congregation. The most important thing is not the mechanics but the clarity and sincerity of the encouragement which invites reaction and suggestions. Few will likely respond unless they are clear on what we are requesting and are convinced that we really mean business and are not just playing games with them.

#### 2. Group Feedback

In addition to inviting written feedback, we can get some people together to discuss their reactions and suggestions.

#### *We Can Talk About Preaching Together*

One pastor begins this process by inviting about eight people to come to his home for an evening of talk about preaching. They begin with discussion of preaching in general. The group members are invited to share memories of some of their previous, as well as more recent, experiences with sermons which they have found meaningful or dull. They are then asked to sum up some of the characteristics of the kind of preaching they appreciate the most. This pastor reports that most people talk freely about these matters and that an hour or two is easily filled with memories and recommendations concerning preaching in general. At the close, the group is invited to meet again, and the pastor suggests, "Next time I'd like you to get more specific in sharing your reactions and suggestions concerning my preaching." Each person is given some questions, such as those we have suggested in the sample forms for written feedback, to keep in mind while listening to the next sermons. They are urged to jot down items they would like to talk about, and a time, at least a week or sometimes up to a month later, is set for the next meeting at which these specific matters will be discussed.

He reports that most people are more open about sharing positive than negative comments, which helps provide a good deal of encouragement for the preacher. The negatives do, however, have a way of coming out usually by way of statements such as "I really appreciate this or that *but* sometimes I have trouble . . ." One layman told this preacher, "You are really alive and enthusiastic when you preach, but when you keep going at such a rapid pace, it's easy after a while to sit back and let it go over my head." This comment contained both appreciation and a vital bit of negative feedback which the preacher needed to hear so that he could take steps to stay with his listeners or to keep them with him.

These groups meet at least twice and usually three or four times, after which a new group is invited to begin the process anew. After having survived a couple of such groups, the preacher gained enough courage to invite some people to participate whom he had considered to be especially

critical of him and his preaching. The resulting sharing not only provided some helpful insights regarding his preaching but also helped to deepen his understanding of and respect for these people as well as theirs for him.

We can also talk about preaching in less formal settings, such as during home visits and when something related to preaching comes up in a congregational group meeting. To facilitate such discussion, we should be courageous enough to ask for specific elaboration of both positive and negative reactions. When during a home visit someone says, "I really appreciated your sermon," I should go beyond saying, "Thank you," to ask "Was there something specific you found meaningful?" Or if during a circle meeting someone says, "I liked" or "I didn't like the pastor's sermon," I should respond by saying, "I hope that you will feel free to discuss the specifics among yourselves and that at least one of you will be kind and courageous enough to come and visit with me about it. I need to know both what you find helpful and distracting."

#### *We Can Use a Tape Recorder*

Other congregations are following Reuel Howe's suggestion in *Partners in Preaching*. He suggested that some of the congregation meet around a tape recorder to discuss the sermon immediately after worship without the preacher present. Groups of six to eight enter into give-and-take which may be centered in some of the questions we have suggested. Then later in the week the preacher can listen to the tape and take the comments into consideration as he plans his next sermons.

Whether in face-to-face discussion or with use of the tape recorder, there may be some merit in postponing the confrontation, especially with negative aspects, until a couple of days after the sermon is preached. Immediately after the service we preachers are often so emotionally involved with it all, and sometimes so depressed by our own sense of failure, that we may be unable to handle negative feedback objectively. This is not to suggest that all negative comments are to be postponed. I've personally been grateful for comments made following the first service which resulted in clarifications included when the sermon was preached again at the second service.

#### *We Can Have Written Group Reaction*

A variation of the tape-recorder method is to have a "secretary" in the sermon discussion group record the main reactions and suggestions, which are then turned over to the preacher. In addition to the "secretary's report" individual group members can of course turn in their individual comments. This procedure maintains anonymity and may encourage more immediate frankness, and it also is less time-consuming for the preacher who may find himself too busy to take an hour to hear the tape.

#### *We Can Discuss the Sermon in the Adult and High School Forums and Church School Classes*

One of the adult forums which meets after worship could be a sermon discussion group. This group will possibly be more concerned with discussing the content of the text and the sermon than in providing feedback for the preacher, but one of the members could be asked to take note of comments which would be of special interest to the preacher. Other adults, Senior, and Junior High groups could occasionally be asked to discuss the total experience of the sermon and to report back to the preacher either orally or in writing.

Younger church school children can be asked to share what they heard in the sermon. They may have difficulty articulating their reactions, but it is not difficult to discover if anything in the sermon captured their attention.

#### *Feed-In*

As we have noted, feed-in is involved in the feedback process. The most helpful feedback is a form of feed-in, in that it provides suggestions which help shape future preaching. At the same time, there are some specific ways through which you may help to provide direct feed-in to improve the preaching.

#### *Combined Feedback—Feed-In Groups*

In one congregation, for example, several parishioners are invited to an evening session which combines feedback with feed-in. The first part of the meeting is devoted to sharing reactions to last Sunday's sermon. Then the attention shifts to specific consideration of the text and theme for the coming Sunday. Group members have been asked to read the text in advance and to bring questions or concerns which the passage raises for them. This helps the preacher to take hold of the text at the place where it directly speaks to his people.

#### *Feed-In Groups*

Other congregations have groups which center more exclusively on in-depth study and discussion of the text or topic of the next Sunday's sermon. The helpfulness of such groups seems directly related to the attitude of the preacher. If he sees himself as the sole expert on interpretation of Scripture and the final authority on all controversial issues, the group has little reason to exist beyond informing the preacher of his people's ignorance. But when open to this kind of partnership in the preaching process, many preachers have been moved to express surprise and appreciation for lay insights into the meaning of Scripture and for their profound wrestling with vital issues.

*Congregation-Wide Preparation for the Sermon*

Some congregations announce the text of the coming Sunday's sermon a week in advance and ask each person to include it as part of his or her weekly Bible reading. Another distributes a suggested program of Scripture readings for a month at a time with portions selected to include the text and context to be considered in each Sunday's sermon. Some congregations use Sunday school materials which consider a single Biblical theme in all classes, which can also be expressed in the morning sermon. When such practices are followed, the congregation "feeds-in" its prior understanding to greatly enrich the experience of preaching.

*Types of Specific Feed-In*

One preacher expressed public gratitude for a group within the congregation which he had asked to share illustrations which might be helpful in his preaching. He warned them in advance that he would likely use only a small portion of the items they turned in but that he would be grateful for them all.

Another pastor periodically asks several of the groups within the congregation to share concerns related to their most vital issues of living. In addition to the group sharing, he invites them to share their present concerns in private or anonymously in writing. When such invitations from the preacher are matched with an attitude of openness, they do much to promote an atmosphere conducive to partnership in preaching.

*Pitfalls and Possibilities of Feedback and Feed-In*

Without retracting a word from the stress already placed on the importance of developing partnership in the preaching process, we should add a closing word of warning. All good things, including procedures for feedback and feed-in, can be misunderstood and misused.

The purpose of feedback and feed-in is to deepen understanding and foster partnership in preaching; it is not to reduce the preacher's responsibility to think and study on his own. We preachers need beware lest we sell our souls to our listeners and preach for praise and approval.

We have been given a message to proclaim. We are called of God to witness to his Word in Jesus Christ our Lord. We stand with our people under the judgment and mercy of God and are ultimately accountable to Him. Those who hear us are not the final judge and jury of our lives nor of our preaching. We need to learn all we can from our hearers to know where they are living, what they are hearing in our sermons, and what they can teach us, which is often a great deal. But when the views of our people tempt us to compromise our convictions, we need to pray for courage to say with Peter and the apostles, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Paul reminded the Corinthians that they did not belong to Paul or

Apollos or Cephas (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). In this passage he reminds us all that as Christians we belong to Christ, and in Him all things are ours, including Paul and Apollos and Cephas. Related to feedback and feed-in, this tells us preachers that while our supreme allegiance is to Jesus Christ, all of you who join in helping with our preaching can be God's gift to us. We don't belong to you, nor to any group or party in the sense of being possessed or controlled by it. We belong to Christ. We yield our lives and our lips to His controlling love. But in Christ you belong to us as a gift from Christ. We receive and regard you as His gift and seek to learn all we can from you. As His gift, you can help to make our preaching a more effective means of grace to you and to others.

Sincerely,  
Your grateful preacher

## Renewal Through Pastoral— Professional Evaluation

In addition to receiving constructive comments from marriage partners and congregational members, what are the possibilities for receiving help from fellow pastors and professionals, especially in homiletics, theology, and speech? Because our situations differ, there can be no universal answer to this question. But none of us is so isolated that he is totally beyond this kind of support and corrective guidance.

### Difficulties Abound

My impression is that relatively little is being done along these lines, and we may as well be frank and acknowledge that several difficulties stand in the way of our doing more. Except for some radio sermons, most of us rarely hear anyone else preach, nor do other pastors hear us. The thought of being evaluated by a fellow pastor or homiletical professor may also stir considerable anxiety within us. We are afraid of being discovered to be less competent than we assume ourselves to be. Nor do we completely trust each other; we doubt that certain pastors or professors, who are not in our situation, could provide much help. We also wonder if hearing one sermon really gives an accurate example of how we usually preach.

In spite of such difficulties, some pastors are involved in pastoral-professional evaluation, and a review of some examples of what is being done may suggest one or two ways which are relevant to each of our circumstances. We begin with possibilities for pastoral feedback in common parish situations.

### Possibilities for Pastoral—Professional Feedback In Solo Pastorates

To receive this kind of evaluation a pastor who serves alone must (1) invite a pastor or professor to hear him in his own church, (2) send someone tapes of several sermons for evaluation, or (3) attend a preaching workshop during which he preaches before fellow pastors and perhaps a professional critic. When there are special problems, all three of these may be in order. But even when our preaching appears to be going well, an occasional checkup using one of these means can provide encouragement and helpful suggestions.

Of the methods suggested, the preaching workshop is probably the most

easily arranged and most often the most productive. If the preacher remembers that each of his critical hearers is a human being in need of the Gospel, the workshop sermon need not be a totally academic presentation. It is also helpful to have each of the hearers preach and be evaluated, so that no one is beyond criticism. Since the purpose of such a workshop is not to select the best preacher or the most clever critic, but to encourage and help each of the participants, all comments should seek to combine honesty with kindness. There is no virtue in tearing a preacher apart and leaving him to pick up the pieces. The workshop is a place for healing, not an autopsy. The use of forms such as those suggested earlier helps to focus evaluation and guide discussion.

Several seminaries and colleges offer continuing education opportunities for pastors which include this type of preaching workshop. If possible, select facilities which enable videotaping of the sermons so that the preacher may see and hear what his critics are talking about. The presence and comment of a competent homiletician, theologian, or teacher of speech usually serves to keep the group centered on its task and often adds significant insights and suggestions.

When the facilities of a seminary or college are not available, there is no reason why a group of pastors cannot set up a workshop of their own. The local public schools may have videotape equipment which could be used. Someone will need to be the initiator and expeditor of the workshop, but no one needs to be the leader or self-appointed expert.

### In Multiple Staff Ministries

In addition to all the possibilities available to solo pastors, there are additional opportunities open to those who serve together. Pastors who supervise vicars or interns are expected to give constructive criticism of their preaching and can receive help by inviting the same in return. This sharing sounds simple, but is often difficult to carry out constructively. Both the pastor and intern may be threatened by each other, and each may be so fearful of what the other will say that neither offers nor requests feedback from the other. An evaluation form sent from the seminary to both supervisor and student for use by themselves as well as by the congregation often serves as a catalyst for sermon discussion.

A wise supervisor remembers that students need encouragement and not just criticism, and that it is usually more productive to single out one or two specific suggestions for improvement rather than lambaste the vicar with a dozen things to be done differently next time. Such an attack may immobilize the student or make him so hostile that he will react with defensive stubbornness and do the opposite of what is suggested.

When the supervisor invites feedback from the vicar, it may be well for him to confess his personal anxiety in doing so. After being out of the seminary a few years, we wonder if our understandings and interpretations

are in accord with the latest theological insights. But more than that, we have developed habits which may be deeply resistant to change. For a young preacher to be told after his third sermon that he has a couple of bad habits that need correcting is distressing enough, but it is nothing compared to the threat to an older pastor who is now accused of having done things wrongly for 30 years.

Congregations with assistant, associate, or copastoral arrangements provide similar possibilities for mutual helpfulness. If the comments are to go beyond "That was a good sermon," someone will need courage to ask for more detail or to offer some kind suggestions. This does not mean that one pastor is to launch a campaign to correct the other. Here too, it is usually best the recommendations be directed toward specific and limited goals for improvement and that the emphasis be placed on the encouragement of strengths and not just the condemnation of weaknesses.

As with spouse evaluation, it is not necessary that a complete critique be given of every sermon. When we are not preaching, our main job is not to be a critic, but to listen and apply the message to ourselves. When a sermon has spoken meaningfully to us, we should have the honesty to say thank you and to be as specific as possible in indicating what we appreciated. Likewise, if something was offensive to us, we should directly single out the specific point rather than condemning the whole sermon or deriding the preacher. Beyond such weekly comments, an occasional discussion, sharing general reactions and supportive as well as suggestive comments concerning each other's preaching, should suffice.

#### **Possibilities for Pastoral—Professional Feed-Forward**

In addition to receiving feedback on past sermons, there are also possibilities for receiving feed-forward for future proclamation. One group of pastors, for example, meets from 10:00 to 12:00 a.m. each Tuesday to discuss the lectionary texts from which they will be preaching the following Sunday. Having participated in such a group, I can testify to both its positive potential and some of its problems. When each of the pastors has done some homework in advance, the discussion can be extremely insightful. One pastor will tell of a fresh glimpse into the meaning of the text received from the study of a Greek word. Another relates the text to a contemporary situation in a way the others had not thought of before. Still another shares an illustration which illuminates the text. But when no one does any significant preparation, the meetings can degenerate into a pooling of ignorance or an interesting but often insignificant bull session. If only one or two participants regularly do all the work, the rest of the group may parasitically use the group experience as a substitute for their own personal study and preparation. Discipline, shared participation, and some measure of rigor in sticking to business are essential if such meetings are to be helpful to everyone involved.

In multiple-staff parishes it is possible to share in the study and discussion of the preaching text, but there are several reasons why it is often best not to do so. All pastors need freedom to develop their own sermons, and suggestions from colleagues may apply pressure that undermines personal responsibility and creativity. When working with a vicar or an assistant, a supervisor or senior pastor is often well advised to restrict pre-sermon comments to those which are specifically requested. None of us can really do our own work when someone else is telling us what to do. It is, therefore, often preferable that staff study of Scripture focus on passages other than the preaching texts.

When there is true mutuality, a couple of neighboring pastors who trust and respect each other can also share study and reflection on the texts. But here, too, participants in such sharing need to be careful lest one's influence infringe on the integrity of the other. Learning from each other is one thing, becoming a parasitic pastoral plagiarist is quite another. Nothing we do together should be allowed to interfere with our own integrity in preparation.

## When the Well Runs Dry

Much of what has been said thus far is suggestive of means by which we can be continually receiving so that we continue to have something to give. The process of self, spouse, congregational, and pastoral-professional evaluation maintains contact with persons whose insights and encouragements keep us on the growing edge.

By way of summary, we underscore three factors which seem essential for longtime preaching ministry. One is study and reflection in solitude, the second is in-depth dealings with people, and the third is time for rest and recreation.

The first two may seem to contradict each other and in actual practice certainly compete for the pastor's limited time, but they belong together. The preacher who isolates himself in the study or whose attitudes or actions toward people prevent the development of in-depth relationships lives out of touch with the persons to whom he is to minister. Phillips Brooks and Harry Emerson Fosdick believed that they could not preach without deep personal relationships with people; and what was true for them is likely also true for us. On the other hand, the preacher who is so involved with people that he has no time for solitary pondering of Scripture and reflection upon the thought of others, lives out of touch with the eternal springs which provide the living water needed to quench his own thirst and that of his parish.

### Beware This Temptation

One of the most dangerous temptations of a busy parish ministry is that we can become so involved in the details and activities of congregational life that we have little time for either significant solitude or in-depth relationships. We may spend a lot of time with people without really meeting each other as persons. We often interact as roles: one is pastor, another board chairman, or president of the church women. Much may be accomplished in these meetings, but they do little to feed our souls or to provide the kind of understanding of life necessary for preaching. Or, on the other hand, we may spend considerable time in the study, but it's often time under pressure without the solitude needed for serious reflection. Letters and bulletins must be written. Confirmation tests have to be corrected and new lessons prepared. A sermon for the funeral tomorrow and another for next Sunday must be hurriedly thrown together. And so it goes, week after

week, with little occasion for quietly pondering the Scripture or leisurely reading a good book.

How can a busy parish pastor maintain times for solitude and still keep in touch with people? Some of the standard solutions, such as the frequently espoused idea that every morning be reserved for quiet study and every afternoon for scheduled visitation and counseling, may be out of touch with the realities of life in many parishes, but we should certainly do all we can to secure some time each week for being alone and some for really being with people.

If we are open to people and care enough to visit the sick and listen to the troubled, the times of in-depth sharing will probably take care of themselves. Even so, we do well to visit open meetings of groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Emotions Anonymous, where people share some of what is in their deepest hearts. Nor is the ancient, though often currently despised, practice of pastoral visitation in the homes to be lightly set aside. A routine visit to welcome a new family or to consult with the parents of a confirmation student often turns into an occasion for in-depth sharing.

### Time for Solitude

The time for reflective solitude is usually more difficult to secure. There are many interruptions which break into the silent time, and no caring pastor will seek isolation to avoid them all. Henri Nouwen reminds us of a priest who confessed that he was always terribly upset that interruptions kept disturbing his work until he realized that these interruptions were his work. There is truth in that, but it is not the whole truth. To be open to drop everything to meet an immediate crisis is part of every pastor's calling, but study and reflective meditation are also vital aspects of the work to which we are called. Each of us must arrange our lives in accord with the realities of our parishes in order to secure a significant time for such solitude. Some of us who awaken alert in the early morning have an hour or two of delightful solitude before the rest of the family begins to stir; and when we can get a brief nap around noon, we receive a new lease on life for the rest of the day. Others seem most wide awake at midnight and study best after the rest of the family has gone to bed. Still others stay out of the office and have a hideaway in a corner of the church or neighborhood library, where they can be reached in case of an emergency but are not necessarily disturbed by minor concerns which can be handled later. In following any such procedures, the total needs, not only of the pastor and the parish but also of his marriage and family, need to be taken into account.

### The Daily Office

A daily pattern of devotional reading without haste or concern for its immediate usefulness is especially helpful. Much of what we read in this

way will affect our preaching, but that is a blessed by-product, not the specific intention. Study of sermon texts will lead us to preach to ourselves as we preach to others, but this study is not enough. We also need to let the Scripture speak to us without thinking of how we will use it in preaching to others. Nor are a few moments of family devotions sufficient. We need time to reflect and ponder on our own. My own present practice, which is frequently interrupted, but which can be renewed after each day of failure, is to read selections each day from the Old Testament, one of the gospels, the rest of the New Testament, and the Apocrypha using *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.

Each of us has his favorite devotional authors who have a way of speaking to his condition. As I think of those to whom I am especially grateful, books like E. Stanley Jones' *The Way*, Luther's *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, Rosenius' *A Faithful Guide to Peace with God*, Oswald Chamber's *My Upmost for His Highest*, Fosdick's *The Meaning of Prayer*, Paul Tournier's *Guilt and Grace*, J. N. Kildahl's *The Holy Spirit and Our Faith*, Helmut Thielicke's *The Trouble with the Church*, and even Carl Sandburg's volumes on Abraham Lincoln come to mind.

My wife and I are in a reading group which stimulates us to read a book a month, most of which would never be read were we not "required" to do so. In reflection upon our experience in this group, I must confess that the most meaningful to me have been time-tested classics such as Dostoevski's *The Idiot*; Tolstoi's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*; and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. There are, no doubt, many great things being written today, but we may not have time to read through everything that is temporarily popular to find them. Wise stewardship of time may lead us to concentrate on works of recognized significance and a few others which are of compelling current interest.

### Examples of How Insights from Reading Help to "Prime the Pump"

There are many ways in which such general reading helps to "prime the pump" for preaching. As I think back over my own experience, many examples come to mind.

Years ago in one of E. Stanley Jones' devotional books I ran across a reference to a passage of Scripture in which the critics of Christ were described as unwittingly proclaiming the Gospel. This triggered a special sensitivity in subsequent reading of the New Testament to attacks against Christ such as "This man receives sinners," "He saved others, He cannot save Himself," "He trusts in God, let God deliver Him," which eventually became the basis for a Lenten-Easter series of sermons. (See the author's *Unwitting Witnesses*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1975.)

Insights gleaned from reading often combine with those gained from in-depth contact with persons to help us preach more meaningfully to the

concrete situations of life. One of the points made by Paul Tournier in *Guilt and Grace* is that God's forgiveness in Christ removes the condemnation but not the feelings of guilt. When we are forgiven, we are assured of God's love, but we still continue to feel regret for the wrong we have done. Shortly after reading this book, I counseled with a person who said, "I feel terrible for having been unfaithful to my husband. I have asked God to forgive me, but I still feel awful about it, so I must not be forgiven." Having heard her confession, I could agree that she should feel guilty and have regret for the way she had deceived her husband, but I could also assure her that those feelings did not cancel God's promises of love and mercy in Jesus Christ. She was not condemned. Her sins were real, but they were not too great for God to forgive. While she would continue to regret her wrong, she could rejoice that neither her sin or her feelings about it could separate her from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The insights from the book and the counseling session gave new appreciation for texts which call us to "reassure our hearts before Him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts" (1 John 3:19-20) and lead us to a more specific proclamation of the relation between God's forgiveness and our feelings.

J. W. Stevenson tells of a father who was "on the edge of breaking down" as he confronted his daughter's waywardness.

That was his hope. He had to break down. The woman in adultery was once more before the Pharisee . . . this is the confusion we are in, that we can scarcely judge evil without increasing the evil in ourselves . . .

I was afraid for this man, as he began to lose grip on himself—until I saw that it was his grip on himself which held him back from God and from what God wanted him to be.

I was on the instant ready to comfort him and bring him back to himself—until I saw that this was exactly where he must not be brought back. The evil was not in the crumbling of his life but in the shoring of it up . . .

Our fears are for the wrong things—fear that our defenses will fall down, when it is our defenses which put us in peril; fear that we may have to be changed, when our wretchedness comes from going on as we are. J. W. Stevenson, *God in My Unbelief*, New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1960, pp. 54—55

As I read these words, insights related to life and for preaching seemed to leap off the page. Texts in which Jesus warned us against judging one another and in which He spoke against the self-righteous who look down on others were vivid illustrations of the fact that "we can scarcely judge evil without increasing the evil in ourselves." The prodigal son coming to himself and the alcoholic taking the first step of the AA program were living examples of our need to break down. How often is it true for all of us that "It is our defenses which put us in peril" and that we fear "for the wrong things . . . that we may have to be changed, when our wretchedness comes



from going on as we are." Think of all this means for our preaching for conviction of sin. We are not just to scold, but to expose the defenses which lock us into pagan and destructive patterns of life. And as we preach on these things, we see the sin and defensiveness not only in others but also in ourselves. We too need to break down and to repent of the evil in our judgmental self-righteousness and to be open to the healing spirit of Christ.

The impact of a literary work on our preaching is often less specific, but no less significant, than that of the examples already cited. A reading of James Agee's novel, *A Death in the Family*, for example, not only gives us profound insights into the experiences of an alcoholic struggling through a time of crisis, a child terrified by the shadows of the night, persons waiting for word of the results of a serious accident, and a total family's disruption by death, but also helps us feel the emotional impact of it all. There are sections which might be quoted in a sermon, but even if the book is never referred to directly, it seems sure to deepen our sensitivity to the realities of life and death in ways which enable us to preach and pastor with greater empathy.

The significance for preaching of what we read in Scripture or elsewhere cannot be measured in terms of its immediate usefulness in a sermon but must be seen in light of its total impact upon our understanding and sensitivity. The most practical book may, therefore, be one which is never quoted from the pulpit, but which helps the preacher see himself and his people with greater clarity and compassion.

#### **Pastoral Intercession**

Solitude provides occasion not only for personal study and reflection but also for prayerful remembrance of the people to whom we are called to minister. In this regard I am personally indebted to Dr. Charles Whiston, who suggests that we image a cosmic Christ inviting us to come to Him. In His mercy this Christ welcomes us with open arms of love; but then having done so, He turns us around and has us stand before Him with His hands on our shoulders. "Now," He says, "look with Me to see the people for whom I care. See with Me those whom I also love as I love you."

Within the context of this image and invitation of Christ, Whiston follows a practice of intercessory prayer which looks to people with the concern and compassion of Christ. He recommends, for example, that we use the membership list or congregational picture directory as a guide for intercession. As we review the names or pictures, people come to mind. In some cases, their remembrance will move us to a specific petition—"Lord, help Bill to find his way"—but most often the intercessions will be wordless prayers of concern which simply, but significantly, call the person to mind in the presence of Christ. (For further understanding of Whiston's principles and practices of intercessory prayer, see his *Pray: A Study of Distinctively Christian Praying*, pp. 68-80.)

The skeptics may wonder what such intercession does for those for whom we pray. We can only trust that God, who in Christ invites us to pray and promises to hear our prayers, is able to use our thoughts as well as our deeds in the working of His will. But whatever uncertainty there may be concerning the influence of such prayer on others, there can be no doubt of its effects upon ourselves. It puts our whole ministry, including our preaching, in the perspective of the caring compassion of Christ. We see ourselves as sent by Him and see those to whom we are sent as persons we are to love even as He loves us.

#### **Times to Get Away from It All**

If we are to keep the creative juices flowing, reflective, prayerful solitude and in-depth sharing need to be supplemented by a third type of activity which is an essentially playful getting away from it all. A pastoral conference which mixes work and play may be such an occasion, but so also is an evening at the movies, a dinner out with close friends, or a Sunday night and Monday at a motel with a swimming pool.

Some consider it sinful for us to enjoy life in a suffering world. There is truth in Dr. Rogness' saying "It's difficult and perhaps immoral for us to enjoy the concert when the hall is in flames or to enjoy the fishing or the sunset when the ship is sinking." There are crisis times when all we can do is to fight the fires and man the pumps, but as Dr. Rogness went on to point out, "What if we are to be fighting fires and manning pumps all our life-long?" We simply cannot spend every hour against the flames or at the pumps. We have to draw back, to get away, to rest, and to be renewed so that we can return to fight the fire and man the pumps another day.

Jesus went apart from the pressures of the crowds to be refreshed in a lonely place. When we get so busy that we haven't time to do what Jesus did, we are likely too busy for either our own good or the good of others with whom we live and work.

#### **Cared for and Caring**

Beyond all this, there is nothing as renewing as awareness that there are some who care for us and others who need our care. In one sense, the most important people in the world for us are those who love us. In another sense, the most important people are those who need our love. As we give ourselves a chance to be loved by God and people and then give ourselves away in self-forgetful caring for others, we discover a meaning and joy in life which seems to come in no other way. Losing our lives, we find them. In Christ we receive new life to live and new life to give. To live that life is the joy of being in Christ. To give that life is the joy of being a preacher of the Gospel.

"What do I do when I run out of sermon ideas? How can I be more creative in my preaching?"  
You'll find answers to these questions—and more—in THE PREACHER'S WORKSHOP SERIES! It includes:

Book 1—*The Mighty Word*—Faces honestly the low esteem in which much of society holds preaching, then triumphantly reaffirms the power and purpose of preaching and proclaiming God's Holy Word. By Alton Wedel, preacher, lecturer, author of *A Cross to Glory*, *Chin Up*, and numerous professional articles.

Book 2—*Letting the Word Come Alive*—Examines methods of textual study, textual problems, pericopal systems and the use of translations. By W. A. Poovey, formerly professor of preaching at Wartburg Seminary, and author of 16 sermon and devotional books.

Book 3—*The Real Word for the Real World*—Explores the culture that surrounds parishioners—mass media, literature, music, etc. Includes discussion questions. By Donald Deffner, former professor of religious education, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.

Book 4—*The Lively Skeleton*—Demonstrates how to construct a coherent sermon outline by going through the steps necessary to get a sermon from thought stages to words on paper. By Gerhard Aho, professor of homiletics, Concordia Seminary, Ft. Wayne, Ind.

Book 5—*The Creative Task*—Offers practical suggestions for cultivating creativity in a sermon. Includes guidelines and possible fresh approaches. By Gerald Knoche, Lutheran campus pastor, University of Wisconsin.

Book 6—*The Sermon as Part of the Liturgy*—Focuses on suggestions that help make the sermon a unified part of the complete worship service. By Paul Bosch, author, editor, and specialist in liturgy and worship.

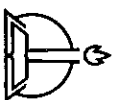
Book 7—*Power from the Pulpit*—Includes recent insights in communications skills, and helps preachers apply these techniques to their sermons. By Paul Harms, associate professor of homiletics, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Columbus, Ohio.

Book 8—*A Sermon Is More than Words*—Explores the use of audiovisual materials and explains how preachers can fit these materials to the needs of their parishes. By Eldon Weisheit, former television script writer, magazine editor, and author of six books of object lessons for children, including "To the Kid in the Pew."

Book 9—*Better Preaching*—Features specific suggestions for personal, pastoral, and homiletical renewal through evaluation. By Lowell Erdahl, author of *Preaching for the People*, and pastor of University Lutheran Church of Hope, Minneapolis, Minn.

THE PREACHER'S WORKSHOP SERIES—a complete refresher course for the experienced preacher!

from



CONCORDIA®