

PREACH

the Word

Vol. 1, No. 2

October 1997

A Voice from the Past



While sorting through some old files recently, I came across a fascinating article from the pen of Prof. August Pieper. (One of the neat things about being forgetful and not very well organized is that one is forever making interesting discoveries). The article is titled: "Warum hat unser Predigen nicht mehr Erfolg?" ("Why isn't our preaching more successful")? At the risk of trivializing an 18-page article, may I share a few excerpts from the article's introduction? Somehow problems in the church as Pieper saw them in 1915 seem remarkably similar to what we see 80 years later, as does the only solution to these problems.

"You don't have to be either a pietist or a pessimist to recognize that the spiritual life of our Christians is at low ebb. The fire of 'the firstlove' no longer burns brightly in our church. Joy in Christ and in his magnificent rescue has dwindled, along with a lively realization of our sinful corruption and true sorrow over that . . . More than we realize, our people have been infected by, and are controlled by, the spirit of this unbelieving world. Our people have little understanding of what it means to be Lutheran.

"Why is this, and what can we do to counteract this decline and breathe new life into the church? It won't help to answer: 'The times are evil, Satan is busy, and the flesh of Christians is weak.' Throughout history, it's always been that way.

"We need to learn all over again that God's act of deliverance comes only through the Word, and that his deliverance is adequate to meet the need. We have begun to doubt the power of the Word. We preach it Sunday after Sunday, but the spiritual deterioration of our people continues, right before our eyes. The law of God is a divine fire, a hammer that smashes rock. The gospel of Jesus Christ is spirit and life. Just as surely as it creates spiritual life, so surely can it sustain and renew that life . . . Spiritual deterioration is inevitably the result when law and gospel are not proclaimed in a clear and living way . . .

"We pastors are not completely responsible for the congregation's spiritual back-sliding, but we're primarily responsible. The proverb 'As the shepherd, so the flock,' isn't always true, but it usually is. Let each public servant of the Word lay his hand on his heart and ask: 'Lord, to what extent have I contributed to the spiritual deterioration of my people?'

Continued on page 3

CONTENTS

A Voice from the Past.....1

*Distinguishing
Two Kinds
of Basic
Scriptural Truth*2

Worth Quoting?.....2

*Worth a Ponder
or Two*.....3

*Why are You
Preaching this
Sermon?*4

Preach the Word is published
bimonthly by the
WELS Commission on Worship
2929 N Mayfair Rd
Milwaukee WI 53222-4398
414/256-3265
FAX, 414/256-3899
<bryerlach@aol.com>

John C. Jeske, editor
Wayne A. Laitinen, managing editor

PREACH
the Word

Distinguishing Two Kinds of Basic Scriptural Truth

Hermeneutics is basic to homiletics. Bad hermeneutics makes for bad homiletics. One of the first jobs the preacher faces each week when he begins his text study is to determine whether his sermon text offers a truth for appropriation or a truth for application (or possibly both). These are the two kinds of basic truth the Scripture offers, and they're as different from each other as day from night. Before drawing up a sermon outline, therefore, before writing a single sentence of his sermon, the pastor simply must identify which of the two kinds of Scriptural truth the sermon will offer his hearers.

Just in case some years have passed since you heard this technical terminology in a homiletics classroom, let's define terms:

truth for appropriation:

something God has done for us; a timeless, universal truth which the hearer is invited to appropriate, to make his own (e.g., election, atonement, conversion);

truth for application: something God asks me to do; a truth that calls for a particular response God wants to see in us (e.g., love for God and for people, more diligent use of prayer, responsible use of our spiritual gifts).

As you begin your text study each week, you simply dare not overlook

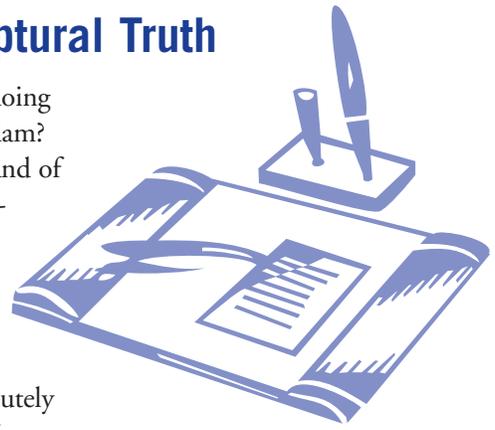
the question: "What is God doing here?" Is he killing my old Adam? Is he assuring me of his love and of my pardon? Or, is he instructing me about the new life he looks for in me? Is he promising to help me do his will?

In Lutheran preaching, "absolutely always homiletical appropriation outranks homiletical application. Absolutely always homiletical application rests on homiletical appropriation" (Lenski, *The Sermon*)

What if you forget?

Since this distinction between the two kinds of scriptural truth is so basic for Lutheran preaching, permit two examples of what happens when the preacher forgets to make the distinction.

Example #1: Hymn 104, v. 1 ("Go to Dark Gethsemane"). The hymn takes us to the garden where Jesus suffered on the night before he died. We see the Savior's bitter conflict. We keep watch with him in his grief. What kind of truth has the hymnwriter (James Montgomery) thus far presented? Truths for appropriation! In Gethsemane Christ did what he did, said what he said, suffered agony of body and soul—in my place, as my Substitute, so that I won't have to go through the agony he did.



But now look at the conclusion Montgomery drew in the final line of that first stanza: "Learn of Jesus Christ to pray." The hymnwriter actually wants us to believe that Christ endured the horror of Gethsemane—to teach us how to pray! According to that hymn, the Gethsemane narrative offers a truth for application.

That's what moralizing is: taking a truth for appropriation and twisting it into a truth for application. That may be characteristic of much of Protestant preaching today, but it has never characterized Lutheran preaching. Bad hermeneutics makes for bad homiletics.

Example #2: Some time ago a Lutheran preacher was preaching on Christ's miraculous feeding of the 5,000. Toward the end of his sermon he said: "I am not concerned so much about whether Jesus fed, or did not feed, the

Continued on page 3

2
two



"I cannot offer you a watertight technique for awakening a sense of sin in your hearers. I can only say that, in my experience, if one begins from the sin that has been one's chief problem during the last week, one is often surprised at the way this shaft goes home."

(C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*)

“The **purpose of the law**

is to make us *feel guilty*, to *humiliate us*,
to *kill us*, to *lead us to hell*,
to *take everything from us*.

The **purpose of the gospel**

is to *declare us not guilty*
and to *make us possessors of all things*.

Between the two of them, they manage to
kill us to life.”



(Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God*)

Preaching truth—Continued from page 2

multitude 2,000 years ago as I am in the great spiritual truth, which alone is relevant for our time, that we ought to be Christlike in stilling the pangs of the hungry.”

All right. You’re preaching on John 6:1-15, and you’re doing your text study. First question you ask yourself is: “What kind of truth does this miracle text offer me to present to my hearers?” The author of this pericope helps you answer that question. “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31). Accordingly, every one of Christ’s miracles is a revelation from heaven that Jesus is the Savior for sinners in their time of need. That’s a truth for appropriation.

But doesn’t the preacher quoted earlier have a valid point? Doesn’t the Scripture teach us “Share your food with the hungry?” Of course it does, and if we’re preaching on Isaiah 58:7 or Matthew 25:35 or James 2:14-17, we’ll call upon our hearers to “still the pangs of the hungry.” But that’s not the message of John 6, and to draw a truth for application from that miracle text is moralizing. May God fill you with a hatred for that!

Pieper—Continued from page 1

“Is our preaching what it should be? The simple fact that our sermons are doctrinally correct is no guarantee that they’re proper. Scriptural truth is not abstract knowledge; it’s truth which saves and sanctifies. When doctrine is taught merely as doctrine, it’s no more than ballast. The Scripture does not present any doctrine merely for intellectual stimulation, but only and always for the purpose of saving sinners. The Scripture does not contain theoretical, philosophical truth. Scriptural truth is practical truth, truth as it applies to people. Finally all spiritual decline is traceable to this, that law and gospel are not being preached in a way that is clear, living, and life-giving. Only he who daily trembles under the curse of God’s law can preach it properly. And only he who day after day lives from the forgiveness offered unconditionally in the gospel can witness to it properly. Purely intellectual comprehension and purely professional proclamation will mean the death of pure and genuine preaching of God’s truth . . .

“The law of God is incapable of producing the true, spiritual obedience God wants to see in his people. Only the law of the Spirit, who has made us alive in Christ, can set us free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2). It’s essential, then, if our preaching is to create spiritual life and foster good works, that we understand and proclaim the gospel and its proper function. That, however, is more easily said than done. To understand the content of the gospel message is not difficult. To grasp the spirit of God’s grace and to apply it to our hearers, however, is the most difficult assignment we’ll ever have . . .”

Why are You Preaching this Sermon?

Have you ever had the painful experience of listening to a sermon and having to ask yourself: "What is that man trying to tell me?" Often the reason why a sermon flounders is that the preacher hasn't identified its specific purpose. "Why are you preaching this sermon?" is a question you must answer each week. And it's not enough to answer: "So my hearers understand the Bible better." Or: "I want to give people a challenge."

No matter how brilliant a sermon is, without a specific purpose it's not worth preaching. There is hardly anything quite as dull as Bible doctrine taught for its own sake. Truth divorced from heart and life is not truth in its biblical sense, but something else, and something less. No one is better for knowing that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The devil knows that, and so did King Ahab and Judas Iscariot. No one is better simply for knowing that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son to die for their redemption. In hell there are billions of people who know that. Jesus had a specific purpose in mind for Nicodemus when he spoke those well-known words of John 3:16. That purpose was to create faith in Nicodemus' heart.

"Every sermon text has a telic note. Your own thorough study of the text has as its primary purpose to discover that telic note. You ask yourself, 'What does the Holy Spirit intend to accomplish

through this word of God in the hearts and lives of his people on this occasion?" (Gerlach and Balge, *Preach the Gospel*)

"There are few deficiencies in preaching quite so disastrous in their effect as the all-too-frequently occurring failure to determine the purpose of the sermon text." (Jay Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*)

The term "telic note" is another one of those technical terms so dear to the heart of homiletics professors, but often unfamiliar to those who haven't been around a homiletics classroom for a while. The telic note of a text spells out the specific goal (Greek: *telos*) the Holy Spirit wants to reach through those particular words of the Bible in their particular context. No biblical writer took up his pen just to jot down "a few appropriate remarks" on a religious subject.

As the preacher studies his sermon text, he must continually ask himself: "What specific spiritual goal did the Spirit have in mind by having the writer write these words?" Sometimes the inspired writer identified that purpose explicitly (John 20:31; 1 Timothy 3:14f); sometimes he didn't. Maybe his purpose was a faith goal; maybe it was a life goal.

The telic note of the sermon text must determine the use the preacher makes of it. Before writing your sermon, force yourself to complete the sentence:

"The purpose of this sermon is to [insert a verb] my hearers to [insert the specific goal] . . ."

Here are some examples:

For a sermon on Isaiah 49:15:

"The purpose of this sermon is to reassure my hearers that they are important to God."

For a sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18:

"The purpose of this sermon is to empower my hearers to look forward with joy to the resurrection."

For a sermon on John 6:1-15:

"The purpose of this sermon is to show my hearers that Jesus is the Bread of life."

For a sermon on Ephesians 6:4:

"The purpose of this sermon is to persuade my hearers to follow God's blueprint in training their children."

Determining the telic note may very well be the hardest and most time-consuming element of your sermon study, but it's likely to be the most fruitful.

May the Spirit touch your heart, your hand, and your tongue!

