

results of this research were presented at the St. Michael Conference at Zion in Detroit this year. We learned from them that there was a much greater consensus among dioceses of Western Christendom than previously thought regarding the lectionary for the church year. These men, with whom I spoke the next day, also indicated to me that they found no authority for the Michaelmas skip anywhere among the historic sources, a consensus of which instead simply count the Sundays after Trinity in order until the last, when finally, a skip to Trinity 27 is made. In addition, the editors of *Gottesdienst* share a desire that it's helpful to move toward uniformity in such matters, and inasmuch as a great number of our churches have never included the skip, we thought it would be prudent for us at this time to discontinue it as well. The calendar provided in this issue does not make the Michaelmas skip, though readers who wish to continue using it will find an asterisk where it would take place; of course, they will need to find their own information for some of the Sundays. In addition, we are recommending that the Festival of the Reformation be observed on its day, October 31, though the option of observing it on the last Sunday of October, an American custom, is also indicated with an asterisk. ✂

Commentary on the War: Toward Gaining Ground in the Ministry

Hearing a Sermon

David H. Petersen



In 2006 I wrote a column for this journal entitled “How to Listen to a Sermon.” I have changed my mind on some of those ideas. I think that column gave in to some exaggeration and lacked nuance.¹ While I still understand that preaching can be performative speech, I think I made too much of that idea, while downplaying its didactic role.

I also think that I was too fond of the use of Walther's *Law and Gospel* as a homiletical textbook. I know this is the long practice of the LCMS seminaries, but I think Walther's book is misunderstood when it is used as a homiletics textbook. I think Walther, a dying man who lost his wife in the midst of those lectures, was describing how to give pastoral care to individuals rather than teaching us how to write or preach sermons. He was dealing with eschatology in the most intimate and personal way. He wanted his students to be ministers of the Gospel. He claimed in the very beginning, in his first sentence, that

he was not giving a systematic treatment of the doctrine of Law and Gospel. He was only trying to warn of the dangers of mingling Law and Gospel.² Perhaps we haven't taken him at his word on that score. Much of what he writes can and should be applied to preaching, but in the end what he proposes explicitly can't actually be done in a sermon,³ and no one really tries to.

The Gospel forgives sins when it is proclaimed in sermons. Sermons can operate in a performative way that is similar to the Absolution. But I do not think that is their sole purpose or even their main purpose. The Book of Concord and the Bible both use the word “teaching” to describe sermons. The idea of Bible classes does not exist in either the Bible or the Book of Concord. In the decades following the Reformation, catechism instruction seems to have been done through sermons, not through classroom lectures. The pulpit is where the Church teaches.

We have made far too much, in my opinion, of the differences between proclamation and teaching. These words have nuance, to be sure, but they are synonyms. Whatever it is that we call it, I want to consider here how it is that we listen to sermons with reverence.

Normally, to hear a sermon properly, reverently, a Christian must prepare himself. Reverence can occur spontaneously, but it usually doesn't. The liturgy itself is built toward the purpose of not merely delivering the Gospel in the moment but of preparing us for what is coming next, whether that be a return to home for lunch, a return to one's work, or the final judgment. The service begins with a cleansing of the heart and mind through Confession and Absolution. It then proceeds with prayers, Bible readings, and the Creed. Each portion builds on what preceded. The hymns also aid the Christian by teaching and helping him to reflect upon and apply the texts for the day. Those elements of the Divine Service should all be attended to with care. They should not be plowed through by rote. They demand the taking of pains. Perhaps no other preparation for the sermon is so important or fruitful as those first twenty or so minutes. He who does well there is well prepared to hear the Word of God explicated and applied. That task is easier said than done, of course, for the flesh is weak; but it should be said, and it should be striven for. The liturgy delivers the Gospel to us as justification, but it also gives the Gospel to us as sanctification, teaching and preparing us to hear God's Word and to apply it to our lives.

Preparation before the service is also beneficial. In particular, Christians do well to pray on Saturday night for the preacher, the sermon, and the hearers. It is also helpful if the readings for Sunday have been read in the week or day before the service. What is particularly nice about this preparation is that it runs parallel to the preacher's own preparation, syncing, in a sense, preacher and hearer.

Contrary to what I wrote in 2006, I do not think that listening to a sermon is radically different from listening to any important speech or instructions or from a close reading of a significant text. The same skills and discipline apply and are needed. The hearer ought to set his will in the last moments of the Hymn of the Day to focus and pay attention to the sermon, as though Jesus Himself were standing before him and preaching, and perhaps pray a silent prayer. He should attend the sermon with utmost serious eagerness and attention.

To be sure, for a Christian sermon to be considered Christian it must be about and proclaim the person and work of Jesus Christ, by which salvation is offered to all who believe. All Lutheran sermons must also be marked by a proper distinction between Law and Gospel. At the same time, texts should be explicated, corollary doctrines—not merely justification or the Gospel in the narrow sense—should be taught, corrections to popular misunderstandings and rebukes for errors or moral laxities should be issued, and specific consolations should be given. Writ large, all Christian sermons are about Jesus Christ and His atoning work for us. Hearers must listen for this. At the same time, one sermon should be distinct from another. Sermons ought to have different topics and main points. The sermon should have a discernible point related directly to the sermon text. It should not be so generic that it could be preached on any Biblical text.

Thus, besides listening carefully for truth, the first task of the hearer is to consciously notice what the sermon's main point is. The hearer's first idea of this might have to be nuanced or modified as the sermon proceeds, but the hearer wants to follow the sermon's argument or plot. He wants to know what the preacher is talking about. Most of the time, the hearer should expect that the sermon's main point will be obvious, at least in a general way, if not absolutely explicitly, in the first few minutes of the sermon. There are Sundays where the main point is the Gospel itself in the narrow sense, but normally, when that is the main point, it will still be nuanced and colored by the sermon text. A sermon on John 3:16 ought to be shaped differently than a sermon on Ephesians 2:8–10.

The hearer's goal is to learn and retain the sermon. Thus, it is useful to rehearse the thesis silently to oneself during the sermon. Start thinking about how to repeat and apply it even while the preacher is talking. Reverent listening is attentive and takes the sermon seriously. This requires effort. Failure to do this is a sin against the Third Commandment.

The sermon must be judged, and part of that judgment is to determine if Law and Gospel have been properly distinguished, made clear and rightly applied, and whether or not the Gospel predominates. That judgment takes place constantly, but I fear that sometimes we have made this our only judgment. We have asked if the ser-

mon was doctrinally pure, and if it was, we then proclaimed that all was well. We listened for spiritual truths in an almost abstract way, apart from the texts. That has made for lazy preaching. Sermons should be distinct from witnessing to an unbeliever or co-worker. Sermons are not for conversion, but for edification. Yes, the old man is drowned in the sermon and a new man arises, but that is not the first drowning. The man who has faith needs renewal through the Word of God, or perhaps an awakening or stirring, but not a conversion. The sermon takes place in Jerusalem, not Athens.

Saying failure to learn and retain the sermon's content is a sin may sound harsh, but this is Luther's teaching in the Large Catechism. The commandment is not only violated by those who abstain from worship altogether but can also be broken by those who are present. Sin is committed by those who "listen to God's Word as they would to any other entertainment, who only from force of habit go to hear the sermon and leave again with as little knowledge at the end of the year as at the beginning."⁴ Luther expects an increase in knowledge over time based on preaching. If a person claims to be a Christian but can show no growth in this regard, then he has sinned against the Word of God as grievously as if he had not come to Church at all. Coming to Church for Holy Communion and going through the motions is not enough. True, there may be seasons in a Christian's life when that is all that he can do, and reverence can occur spontaneously, but that is not the full life of a Christian or the purpose of the means of Grace that God has given. Simply coming to Church for the Gospel in the liturgy and Sacraments without regard for the sermon is tantamount to abusing the means of preaching in much the way that some abuse the Holy Communion by only receiving it once a month or so. Luther rails against us and our lazy attitude toward preaching when he says: "we permit ourselves to be preached to and admonished, but we listen without serious concern."⁵ He likens a lack of learning and retaining from preaching as an abuse equal to the blasphemous neglect of God's Word when it was thought that grace could be bought or earned. He goes on:

Remember, then, that you must be concerned not only about hearing the Word, but also about *learning* it and *retaining* it. Do not think that it is up to your discretion or that it is an unimportant matter. It is the commandment of God, who will *require* of you an accounting of how you have *heard*, *learned*, and *honored* his Word. In the same way those conceited spirits should also be punished who, after they have heard a sermon or two, become sick and tired of it and feel that they know it all and need no more instructors.⁶

Those who listen to Christian preaching without learning and retaining it or who think they have nothing to learn from Christian preaching place their souls in peril by violating the Third Commandment. We need to be called to repentance for this. We have treated Christ Himself with contempt and failed to love His gifts. Our preachers haven't always preached in such a way as to aid retention and learning, nor have they emphasized to their hearers that this is the goal. We should humble ourselves to receive the grace that He offers in preaching and the Sacraments that we might learn to love that which He gives and to be strengthened by it.

Besides the main point, the hearer should try to follow the preacher's argument. As much as possible, the hearer seeks to understand how the preacher supports his point. He wants, above all, to identify what section of Scripture is being explicated, that is, what text the preacher is preaching on. Ideally, the hearer will come back to this text after the sermon and find new light in it from the sermon. The hearer should also try to pay attention to what passages or Biblical narratives the preacher uses to support his point and how it applies to him and his vocation. It is unlikely that the preacher will be able to make all of the application to the individual obvious. This is partly why reverent listening is important. Most of the time, the hearer has to do much, if not most, of the application himself. Thus, it is useful that these things be consciously noted and rehearsed that they might be repeated later.

What is learned in the sermon is meant to be repeated by the hearers. Ideally, the hearer seeks to talk about the sermon with his family or fellow parishioners. If the hearer is a father or mother, then he should quiz and instruct the children on the sermon, filling in the gaps that the children missed or further applying it for them. The children, likewise, should learn to talk about the sermon and to demonstrate to their parents how attentively they are listening and what they have learned. Those who are single and live alone should likewise seek opportunities to speak about the sermon, perhaps with fellow parishioners or on the phone with loved ones who weren't present.

The burden for this responsibility does not fall on the hearers alone. If God requires that hearers learn and retain sermons, then preachers must preach in such a way that their sermons can be learned and retained. Whether there is a manuscript or not, whether sermons are poetic or conversational, whether they are to school children or to the seminary faculty, sermons should have a main point. This might be formally stated as a thesis statement in the first minute or two of the sermon, or it might be built up over the course of the sermon, or it might be repeated at the end of every section; but sermons are, in the end, communication, and they must seek to communicate. They are not merely a spiritual ex-

perience. They are spiritual and they can be emotional, but they are never separate from the intellect. Thus, they should not be ramblings about all sorts of Christians ideas and topics or simply convey a handful of spiritual truths. They should explicate the Bible for a purpose and goal. This proclamation is, at its heart, as educational as it is performative.

As the spiritual fathers of their parishes, pastors need to teach close listening to and discussion of the sermon. They need to carefully craft sermons that are capable of this sort of scrutiny and careful consideration. They need to become better communicators. To this end, they need feedback. More than ten years ago, T. David Gordon issued a rallying cry for some sort of post-sermon survey that would enable preachers to evaluate their effectiveness.⁷ He knows it is hard for the clergy to bear. He says it must be done anyway. I agree.

I recognize that some clergy labor in hostile environments. Some opinions are more valuable than others. Surveys could be used against faithful preachers simply because someone doesn't like the pastor, hates true doctrine, or just wants to be entertained in Church. I think some of the risk can be mediated but not completely removed. I think it is worth the risk anyway and that it could actually provide opportunities in hostile environments for catechesis.

So here is how I have started doing this at Redeemer. I crafted a survey that I think helps reduce the risk of antagonists using the survey against me. It does not ask the hearers for a theological evaluation. It does not ask what was the Law and what was the Gospel in the sermon. It does not ask if the sermon was orthodox, if it correctly interpreted the Bible, if they liked the hymns, or what they think would have made the sermon better. It does not ask whether or not they thought the sermon was good. It only asks three questions. It is meant to help me recognize if I am getting through or not, whether or not my point was clear. It can be answered in as few as one or two sentences. Survey takers are told not to use more than five or six sentences, but they sometimes do use more. Here are the questions:

- (1) What was the main point or thesis of the sermon?
- (2) Were you able to discern how that thesis was proven or demonstrated? If so, can you briefly note it?
- (3) Was there anything in the sermon, such as an illustration, application, or turn of phrase, that was particularly distracting or helpful?

I do not ask theological questions because my people tend to know the right answers to give and will give them, and I do not expect that a survey will be needed to elicit a response if I commit heresy. If there is no blatant doctrinal problem, people tend to be nice, and if I ask about Law and Gospel, they can find it or make it up.

They aren't likely to tell me that I was rambling or incoherent or that my illustration was confusing. But with this survey, in my estimation, if at least 50% of them have no idea what my main point was, I have a clue that I failed. Whereas, if most of them did understand it, at least I know that I communicated.

Besides giving me feedback after the fact, it also helps me prepare and helps them listen. They know the questions in advance. They know that they will be sending them to me via email on either Sunday or Monday. This makes them pay closer attention to the sermon because they want to get the answers right. The survey helps to hold them accountable and helps them to focus. I also know that it is coming, that they are listening, and I don't want to fail. That helps me to work harder at being clear.

Right now, I am only having my elders take the survey. That is part of how I have tried to control the risk, also. Both the elders and I have loved it. I want to expand it, but I don't want to read two hundred e-mails about my Sunday sermon, no matter how short or encouraging they are. So, I am thinking of doing something alphabetic, asking for volunteers whose last names start with certain letters to do it for a month. Then we would move on to another set of letters. I might also list the survey questions in the bulletin for the survey takers. I am thinking that would give everyone a little guide for listening carefully.

There are, no doubt, other ways to do this, and I welcome feedback and suggestions from readers. So also, if you have ideas for the survey or other ways to encourage and teach careful listening of the sermon, I'd welcome that as well. In the end, though, I believe that the Large Catechism's admonition needs to be taken to heart and prayed on by both preachers and hearers and that we could all do better at listening to sermons.

Notes

¹ Consider, for example, this statement: "Sermons can have didactic elements or effect, but those are secondary to the sermon's purpose and goal," even though it was said earlier that "Learning to hear a sermon is learning to hear and apply the Word of God" (11). Worst of all is the final paragraph where I claim that "to hear and benefit from a sermon all one needs is faith" (12) even though I earlier stated that the language of the sermon has to be comprehended for there to be benefit (11). *Gottesdienst*, Advent/Christmas/Epiphany 2006–07.

² C.F.W. Walther, *Law and Gospel* (CPH, 2010), 11.

³ For example, Walther says that the Law only must be preached to secure sinners and "not one drop of the Gospel. As long as people are at ease in their sins, as long as they are unwilling to quit some particular sin—in this case you must preach only the Law, which curses and condemns them. However, the moment they are frightened about their condition, administer the Gospel to them promptly, for from that mo-

ment on they can no longer be classified as secure sinners" (22). More examples of these sorts of statements can easily be found throughout the lectures. This might be done in one-on-one pastoral care, but it cannot be done in a sermon preached to a congregation. If there were a way for a preacher to identify this reality in one of his hearers during a sermon, which seems almost impossible to me, there would be other hearers who aren't there yet or who were there sooner. If the preacher moved to the Gospel for the sake of the hearer who just came to this conviction, he would do an injustice to those who were yet secure and also damage to those who were ready earlier. If the preacher stayed in the Law for the sake of those still secure in their sins, he would do those ready great harm. Thus, what Walther says has to be applied to sermons but can't be a method for sermons. Sermons are not as direct as what Walther describes, but individual pastoral care is.

⁴ LC III 96 (KW).

⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁶ Ibid., 98–99, emphasis added.

⁷ T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* (2009).

Aurora Borealis

En Route to a Christology Worth the Name

John R. Stephenson



From my teenage years already, I was drawn to the dogmatics locus of Christology, and once my undergraduate studies began, vindicating and upholding the Chalcedonian Definition became a chief aim of my theological existence. But the Oxford faculty of divinity in the 1970s had become a much different environment from what it had been when the venerable Dr. Pusey walked the cloisters of Christ Church. Maurice Wiles (1923–2005), then Regius Professor of Divinity, was famous for a journal article "In Defence of Arius," and around the middle of the decade in question became one of six scholars who issued a symposium volume entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Oddly, the Archbishop of Canterbury at that time, with whom I came to be on friendly terms during his retirement, appointed Wiles to be chairman of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England. Small wonder that the mother church of the Anglican communion has ended up where it now is. Happily, despite his lofty position, Wiles was one of the most boring lecturers imaginable, and I don't recall his having many disciples.

But the same could not be said for the last ordained head of the college to which I "went up" in the fall of