

Sermonic Aim and Lutheran Evangelism

A Case Study in Historical Homiletics

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The "Confession of Faith" and the "Statement of Purpose" which ground the life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America contain neither the words "evangelism" or "preaching," although both documents are permeated with references to these activities.¹ With the highly visible emphasis on evangelism today, how is such an effort to be homiletically construed? What determines the sermonic structures and materials of an avowedly "evangelical" church as it declares Jesus Christ to non-Christians and unaffiliated seekers, as well as to Lutherans themselves?

Against the historical backdrop of Lutheran preaching in America, answers may be found for these questions, and we discover why "evangelism preaching," which characterizes other branches of American Protestantism, is so lacking among Lutherans.

For what or for whom is the sermon intended? The aim of much Lutheran

preaching is actually at cross purposes with the contemporary directives for evangelism and outreach. What has produced the current predicament, and what solutions are available?

The history of American Lutheran homiletics shows it to be quite isolated from efforts in other denominations which contributed to the religious development of the nation. This occurred because of chronological and linguistic realities.

While Lutherans became part of the New World as early as the seventeenth century, the majority of Lutherans did not arrive until the later nineteenth-century immigrations, and Lutheran pulpits had little influence on the general Protestant population.

¹"A Handbook and Directory for Congregational Leaders" (Minneapolis: ELCA Distribution Service, 1988), 2-3.

Lutheran preaching also remained segregated from American religious life because of linguistic configurations. Even into this century, much preaching was in German or in one of the Scandinavian languages. G. H. Gerberding expresses his frustration with the implications of Lutheran language usage. "It had not dawned on Lutheran theologians that America's official, governmental, school, newspaper, and commercial language was English, all English."²

A rhetorical analysis of Lutheran sermons demonstrates that, in addition to these corollary factors, the dominant aim of proclamation contributed directly to the general inability of Lutheran pulpits to offer "evangelism preaching."

The background for the issue is embedded in the homiletical beliefs of the early Reformers scattered throughout the *Book of Concord*. Based on Luther's radical insight into the power of the Incarnate Word, these doctrinal interpretations clearly articulate a singular sermonic aim: proclamation of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Did this sermonic intention carry over into Lutheran preaching in America? Lutheran sources from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicate an obvious preoccupation with sermonic aim as pastors sought to proclaim "the pure Word of God." Those efforts reveal both the integration and diffusion of traditional Lutheran homiletical values through the processes of Americanization.³

Concerns about sermonic aim were prompted in part by an apologetic effort to define Lutheran proclamation *against* forms of evangelism preaching exhibited by Dwight Moody and of social gospel preaching by Henry Ward Beecher. That such well-known personalities were able to "pack the pews" did not escape the attention of

Lutherans and contributed to remarks like this one: "It is to the credit of our Church that it does not seek to popularize its pulpits by catering to what the world wants...."⁴

Some Lutherans exhibited a more adventuresome attitude towards neighboring Protestant forms of evangelism preaching, and their curiosity led to suggestions for homiletical contextualization which would benefit Lutheran preaching.

The most specific discussions of sermonic aim, often self-critically applied, revolved around the distinction between "preaching Christ crucified" by "moving the heart," and preaching doctrinally which attempted to address the will and intellect. (This latter form presupposed an already changed heart.) While proclamation should ideally impact all three "faculties," Lutheran sermons were overwhelmingly doctrinal, or head sermons, by the turn of this century.

As a consequence, Lutheran proclamation experienced a distinct shift toward what had been traditionally considered a secondary goal of preaching: sanctification. The move was noted among Lutherans, and H. Douglas Spaeth offered a troubled reflection on the change in an article he entitled, "Do We in Our Pulpit Ministrations Emphasize Sufficiently the Doctrine of Justification by Faith?"⁵

²George Henry Gerberding, *Reminiscent Reflections of a Youthful Octogenarian* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1928), 69.

³Susan Karen Hedahl, "The Pure Word of God": *The Americanization of Lutheran Homiletical Invention Theory, 1893-1922* (Ph. D. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 1988).

⁴E. G. Lund, "Pulpit Popularity, Part I," *Lutheran Church Review* 26 (1907): 791.

⁵H. Douglas Spaeth, "Do We in Our Pulpit Ministrations Emphasize Sufficiently the Doctrine of Justification by Faith?" *Lutheran Church Review* 20 (1901):529-43.

This direction in sermonic aim can be most clearly observed through an analysis of a select sampling of homiletical works produced in English by American Lutherans between 1893 and 1922. These dates are significant because they mark the beginning and conclusion of a period which produced a corpus of homiletical concerns related to sermonic aim.

The first Lutheran homiletics manual in America, written in English and founded on eclectic rhetorical principles, was by Professor Jacob Fry of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. *Rules and Notes in Homiletics* appeared in 1893 as a modest 57-page booklet; it was expanded in later editions to over 200 pages.

Fry offers this definition of sermonic aim, grounding it—as did other writers of his time—in the selection of one form of biblical proclamation to the exclusion of others such as “keryctics,” “martyretics,” and “halieutics.”⁶

The term Homiletics is derived from the Greek *homileo*, signifying both to assemble and converse together.... From this is derived the word Homily which was the earliest form of public discourse in christian congregations.⁷

A later edition of Fry’s book provides an even more decided emphasis on preaching for edification as well as a lament for those who fall outside the purview of Lutheran preaching.

The proclamation of the gospel and the testimony... are intended for the outside world; for those who have not heard of Christ or those who have rejected or been indifferent to his gospel. But few of these hear our sermons, and therefore the preacher’s aim is chiefly to feed the flock of Christ and to build them up in their holy faith.⁸

Another homiletics professor of the same era, J. W. Richard of the Lutheran



Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, published his lecture notes for his students in 1893. He defines both sermonic aim and doctrinal preaching this way:

Doctrinal sermons should not ordinarily be controversial. The pulpit is not the place for gladiatorial combat, but for teaching and edifying. Its chief function is to build up and establish the body of Christ.⁹

E. G. Lund, professor of homiletics at Augsburg Seminary (later the United Seminary), reminds his students of the balance between preaching justification and sanctification:

⁶In a later edition of his work, Fry defined these respectively as “the public proclamation of the gospel,” “to bear witness or testimony,” and “the art of persuading or alluring.” See *Elementary Homiletics*, Third Edition (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1920), 13-15.

⁷Jacob Fry, *Rules and Notes in Homiletics* (Reading: Henry Bieber, 1893), 1.

⁸*Elementary Homiletics*, 16.

⁹James W. Richard, *Lectures on Homiletics*, Second edition (Gettysburg: Alvin A. King, 1893), 40. Privately printed and bound.

A saint is justified, that is demonstrated to be just or righteous by holiness, and we would so preach faith and works as to bring them into this connection and relation.¹⁰

With the publication of Johann Michael Reu's massive *Homiletics* in 1922, there is a complete description of preaching for edification. Like his other homiletical colleagues, Reu defines sermonic aim on the basis of his New Testament exegesis of preaching categories. Reu concludes the book's introduction this way:

We fully acknowledge that not only the missionary sermon to the heathen, but the evangelistic sermon to the masses who have become estranged from the Church or were never in connection with it... fall under the generic concept of the sermon. But we just as emphatically insist that we have to treat here [throughout the book] only of the sermon as a part of Christian worship, and that this sermon presupposes a Christian congregation, a congregation of believers.¹¹

The establishment of sermonic aim as preaching-to-the-converted was rarely criticized or even considered problematic. Only a few voices suggested that such an approach might not be feasible for the future of Lutheranism. However, John C. Seegers (Fry's successor at Philadelphia) reviewed Reu's 1922 work and challenged Reu's notion of sermonic aim:

Does the composition of the ordinary American congregation warrant the pastor in viewing his sermon as a message being addressed to "a congregation already called and gathered"? Can he presuppose a Christian congregation?¹²

There was only one liturgical opportunity for evangelism preaching, and that was established by worship schedules. Often pastors preached at Sunday morning and

evening services. Different worshipers attended these services, and Charles Jacobs summarized the importance of the difference for sermonic aim: "Edification, rather than conversion, should be the purpose of the morning sermon."¹³ Evening was the time to reach out to the unchurched.

Lutherans at the turn of the century were highly sensitive to the American religious context in which they found themselves. Doctrinal preaching, or preaching for holy living and sanctification, was in general disfavor and found itself in competition with "social gospel" preaching, which did not differentiate between Lutherans and non-Lutherans, Christians and non-Christians.

Some sources even described Lutheran doctrinal preaching as contrary to the democratic nature of American society in general and a negative force for the parishioner to contend with, especially for those haunted by more repressive uses of the pulpit through former European church-state preaching.

Lewis O. Brastow, a Congregationalist and Professor of Practical Theology at Yale, provided an analysis of "The Doctrinal Type" of proclamation in his 1914 survey of American preaching.¹⁴ His discussion shows that Lutherans were out of step with the more liberal notions of Protestant ser-

¹⁰E. G. Lund, *Homiletical and Pastoral Theology*. Class notes transcribed by Henrik L. Berg (Minneapolis: Augsburg Seminary, circa 1892), 12.

¹¹Johann Michael Reu, *Homiletics* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1922), 14.

¹²John C. Seegers, book review in *Lutheran Church Review* 42 (1923):95.

¹³Charles M. Jacobs, "The Evening Sermon," *LCR* 34 (1915):56.

¹⁴Lewis O. Brastow, *The Work of the Preacher* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1914).

monizing. Brastow asserted that preaching sanctification alone ruptures the bonds of the universal church by drawing distinctions too sharply between the "insiders" and the "outsiders." The result could only be a deterministic rather than a grace-filled form of proclamation.

Because of the early twentieth-century emphasis on sanctification, produced in part by the crucible of the Americanization process, Lutherans often found themselves at odds with their Reformation ideals. It was, and is, a conflict which is still experienced in American Lutheran pulpits today whenever "preaching" and "evangelism" are spoken of simultaneously.

Given this American homiletical legacy, what changes must be instituted to ensure a sermonic aim which promotes a wide-ranging form of evangelism?

First, there is a need to focus preaching again on proclaiming the crucified Lord Jesus Christ. (It is scandalous, some may claim, to even intimate that this is not "bred in the bone" of all Lutheran seminarians.)

Second, rather than relinquishing an emphasis on holy living provided for by preaching for edification, it is important to preach a spirituality bound to root ethical/catechetical accents. This is particularly crucial in some areas where preaching to new or non-Christians demands a focus on the central features of the Lutheran faith life: the Bible, the liturgical life, the catechism.

Third, a wider homiletical inclusivity is imperative in order to integrate historical and contemporary elements of Lutheran homiletics. This will include not only doctrinal preaching, which Brastow termed the "masculine side of Christianity,"¹⁵ but a proclamation which admits to the mystical, the emotive, the experiential, the eschatological. A developing linguistic pluralism, particularly in the coastal areas of the United

States, needs to produce a widening of sermonic horizons as well.

It is important for the church to acknowledge that we are confronted with issues of inclusivity which were not part of the consciousness of original formulations of Reformation sermonic aims.

Finally, what *are* non-Lutheran Christians about in their own forms of evangelism preaching? It is essential to ask the question with a sense of historical pride and a willingness to learn. Seminary curricula, contextual education settings, and continuing education courses provide excellent resources for work in comparative homiletics.

A greater understanding of our homiletical legacy, especially in regard to sermonic aim, will not necessarily "pack 'em in" any more than it ever has. Still, the combination of human pulpiteering and the restless exuberance of the energetic Word have led to surprising outcomes on occasion. By making evangelism a central sermonic aim, we may discover a neglected part of "doing ministry with a global awareness."¹⁷

¹⁵Brastow, *The Work of the Preacher*, 194.

¹⁷"A Handbook and Directory for Congregational Leaders," 2.



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