

Sermons Empty of Gospel

Colleagues,

The Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis [LST-STL] offered a 10-week course this fall quarter titled: "Preaching the Gospel." Yours truly was the instructor. For 30 class hours fourteen of us wrestled with the topic, including such stuff as "how to tell when gospel is there and when it isn't." One of our mentoring texts was Jerry Burce's PROCLAIMING THE SCANDAL (reviewed exactly a year ago on Thanksgiving Day 2000 as ThTh #128). Besides that modern classic we also got hold of 4 of Jerry's sermons to see if he really practiced what he preached. Fundamental to our class-process for text study and sermon construction was the Crossings paradigm. We applied that to lectionary texts for 3 Sundays in October and November. We also read other preachers' sermons, and preached and critiqued our own, including some addressing the cataclysm of Sept. 11, 2001. Fundamental to our definition of "Gospel-preaching" was the Reformation axiom "necessitating Christ." Thus, if Christ wasn't necessary in a given sermon, for getting the hearer to the goal the preacher proposed, that sermon failed the test for preaching the Gospel. Failures abounded—even from ELCA bishop types. Some sermons never mentioned Christ at all, let alone his cross and resurrection, let alone "needing" that crucified/risen Christ to get the hearers to the sermon's goal—either the goal of "Lord, increase our faith," or the goal of increased living that faith out in the world.

The class-members' own experience (only one of them was an ordained pastor) verified the "real absence" of Gospel in huge chunks of today's preaching. So we spent some time working on this side-agenda: What to do when you're in the pew, and the preacher isn't preaching the Gospel? Even worse, when it is apparent that the preacher doesn't even KNOW that he/she is not

proclaiming the Gospel? The answers we came up with did not dispel all the gloom. A full-scale Reformation is needed, it seemed.

So what did the instructor then do? I gave a “final exam” (even though this was a non-credit course): write an e-letter to Jerry Burce, tell him your experience—in reading and discussing his book in our class and as a sermon-listener—and see what he says.

I’ve read the letters the students posted to Jerry. And now I’m going to post one of them to you and ask for your own “audience response.”

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

*November 15, 2001Hello Pastor Burce,
We wrapped up our class on preaching last night. Over the next few days, you should be receiving letters from members of the class.*

As for my background, I am a 1976 graduate of Long Island Lutheran High School and a 1980 graduate of Valparaiso University. My degree is in civil engineering and I have been working for the electric company here in St. Louis since I graduated. I have taken a number of LST classes here in St. Louis. The classes have usually been very good. It’s hard to have a bad class when there are so many interesting courses, great teachers, and hungry students. Maybe someday you will get a call to St. Louis and also consider teaching some of the LST classes.

My teacher (and one of your former teachers), Ed Schroeder, has

given us this “final exam” in our class on “Preaching the Good News.” Namely, we GET TO write you a letter. We used your book, “Proclaiming the Scandal” and a number of your sermons as material for about half of the ten-week class.

As far as I am concerned, your sermons passed the scrutiny of the class. I read your book about a year ago when Ed said some good things about it in one of his Thursday Theology emails. What I really liked about the book was that it was short. I liked the brevity because I don’t really enjoy reading too much. But to be brief and to the point, that is a gift.

My brief overview of the book is as follows: The gift that pastors must share is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The world, the church, pastor’s expectations, congregation’s expectations, conflicting priorities, and ignorance can make this gift a challenge to share. Don’t despair, there are many ways that the gospel is shared. None of the Gospel sharer’s or their ways of sharing that Gospel are perfect, but we continue on in the best way that we can. We end our church service and we start our day going in peace and serving the Lord.

Now for some questions: How does one offer constructive criticism to a pastor who does not preach anything close to making Christ necessary? It is very easy to critique the sermon (and usually the sermonizer) during coffee hour after church. Should the culprit be invited to these critique/bitch sessions? How have you offered and been offered constructive criticism? Done correctly, pastor’s jobs are probably hard enough already, but what can be done to hold pastors accountable for what they say on Sunday mornings? To various degrees, congregations have tried to hold pastors accountable for the hours outside of Sunday morning, but I’m not sure the same concern or efforts are applied to what a pastor is preaching.

Can part of the blame for sub-standard preaching be placed on the theological education system we currently have? I mentioned sub-standard, and I guess that implies that there is a standard. For now let's say that "standard" is preaching that makes Christ necessary and offers this Christ to those who need this Word. What can be done to educate pastors and congregations regarding what they might be missing? It's like they are surviving on bread and water. It will keep them alive and well, but they don't know about the banquet of wine, cheese, fruit, and meat that they are missing. Yes, they will drink water and eat bread as they go in peace and serve the Lord. I fumble about trying to serve also, but I feel fortunate to be able to grab a hunk of cheese and an occasional grape off the banquet table. Your book along with teachers we have here at LST-STL help open up that table to a doubtful, fearful, servant such as me.

*Sincerely,
Dave Endorf*