

#775 The Preacher's Audience: Some Give and Take

Colleagues,

I've got to call him something, so I'll pick Fred, Fred after the late great Danker whose feistiness he shares. [Five weeks ago](#) we published a set of theses that Robert C. Schultz had penned in response to a couple of pieces that appeared last November. Two days later Fred, a lay theologian, sent along some thoughts he had scribbled out while reading. They were interleaved with Bob's text. We shot them off to Bob, who got back us the next day or so with the following:

"Thank you for sending [Fred]'s reflections. It seems to me that they are quite appropriate responses to what I posted. In that respect, the theses are having a desired effect. I say that without agreeing with everything that he says, but I think that what he calls stream-of-consciousness is really what thinking is all about. If [Fred]'s responses are at times more open about his feelings than is common in Crossings circles, that is also a contribution."

In light of that, what could we do except send Fred's thoughts along so you could read them too? Here they are to chew on and enjoy, bubbling up in italics between the lines of Bob's prose and at the end, a passionate coda of sorts. If they should get you scribbling in turn, we hope you'll make like Fred and hit the send button too.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

1. In reflecting on the comments made by [Burce on November 24](#) and by [Schroeder on November 8](#), I have formulated some theses for discussion of the role of pastoral diagnosis in sermon preparation.

2. The Crossings method is a useful method for the study of a text.

3. The Crossings method may not be as useful in the preparation of a sermon.

Therefore a different approach/method is needed.

4. The distinction between the study of a text and the preparation of a sermon is an important distinction.

5. The Crossings method focuses on identifying the person in the text who has the problem.

And on a bit more than that too!

6. The sermon is focused on the need of those who will hear the sermon.

I.e., the Problem those people have? Need = Problem?

7. Those present in the congregation have come to worship God. The sermon is a helpful element of worship but is not essential in such a way that worship cannot occur if there is no sermon.

People have come to worship God? That's a given? Hardly. They are here to feel good about themselves. To get some religio-jollies. To demonstrate how righteous they are. To confess. To beg forgiveness. To meet someone's expectations; even if only their own. To sing because they feel good about singing. Lots of reasons. Not mostly to do with "worship." Question: Without death and

resurrection—Preached Word—is it even possible to “worship God”?

8. The preacher focuses on the need(s) of those who will hear the sermon rather than on the need of one individual—which requires pastoral care.

I.e., “Preacher is to focus on common need, not individual problem... a skill which requires discernment.”

9. In determining the need which the sermon will address, the preacher seeks to identify a common need of the people who will gather for worship—as part of their worship they will hear and reflect on the sermon.

The songs are sung. The scriptures are heard. The prayers are prayed. The sins are confessed, the penitent is absolved. The sermon is “reflected upon”?? “Oh, Pastor did a nice job today...wasn’t that nice. Who brought the donuts?” Crossings teaches us, if nothing else, that the preached word is living and powerful. It brings us to death and raises us in Christ. It throws away our religious crutches and leaves us bravely looking out at the world, seen rightly for once, from the safe arms of Jesus-God himself. Reflect that!

10. The worship of some members may be more enriched by other elements of the service, for example, by meeting their need to worship in a group, by the administration of the sacraments, or by reinforcing their identity as members of this group of worshippers.

If the Preached Word is not happening, pampering your “need” to worship in a group, to have identity there...it’s just idolatry! Likewise the sacraments. They are Preached Word Enacted, and if the Preached Word is not happening

in and through the sacraments, are the sacraments really even Sacraments or just the Lutheran flag-waving over grape juice and bread cubes?

11. For diagnostic purposes, the common need of members of a group gathered for worship can be compared to an epidemic in which there is a common problem even though the symptoms of each individual may differ.

I.e., "We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have failed to do. We have not loved you with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves...etc." Robert, it's called Sin. A nice easy three-letter word. Use a capital letter so we all know you're not talking about sins.

12. Diagnostic skill is measured by the accurate identification of the epidemic as the cause of the symptoms.

A "Pastor" could exist who doesn't realize that Sin is the problem?

13. Therapeutic skill is measured by the treatment of the underlying illness of the epidemic.

I.e., to be useful, a pastor needs to tackle the Sin problem and not just the "I'm so depressed, selfish, anxious, and apathetic!" problem. Fair enough.

14. Conversion of symptoms of one kind into symptoms of another kind may be helpful but is management rather than therapy. For example, converting unbelief, shame, or guilt into some other spiritual problem may be helpful but does not resolve the underlying problem.

What is he talking about? How could pushing the tumors

out into the bloodstream be a good idea? Helpful? Helpful in feeling good about ourselves so we can get back to "worshiping" God again?

15. In the organization of the congregations that we individually serve as pastors, the pastor begins his preparation for the sermon with the task of identifying these symptoms in the people who will hear the sermon and diagnosing them as having a common source.

So job #1 for the man or woman who will hold forth the Preached Word is to notice that our problems come from Sin? This is too good!

16. This common source of these symptoms, that is, the epidemic, is described as law in the Lutheran Confessions.

And the problem is not Sin. It's law, Lutheranly understood. The Lex is the reason we have not loved God with our whole heart, nor our neighbors as ourselves. Ok, fair enough. I could make some hay here.

17. The symptoms of the experience of the law presented by members of the congregation are manifold.

The Lex operates and that's why we're taking it on the nose, one and all.

18. The New Testament uses a rich variety of images in describing these varied symptoms of people's actual experience of the work of the law.

The New Testament has lots of images (parables?) for how the Lex attacks people. Knocking out their religious crutches might not be one of them.

19. The Book of Concord similarly refers to a variety of images and their accompanying symptoms without ranking them.

Ditto the Lutheranly writings.

20. The symptoms of the work of the law that are described in the text and/or that may predominate in the preacher's personal experience may (or may not) coincide with the symptoms experienced by the persons described in the text (or by the preacher).

Eh? The Symptoms of Lex described in the text may or may not coincide with the Symptoms (of Lex?) experienced by the persons described in the text? Do I read aright? Is he trying to say that sometimes what the text alludes to (or what Sabbatheology Gurus write about) has nothing to do with what the pastor or the people need to hear?

21. The problem to be addressed in the sermon is the problem experienced by a significant number (not necessarily all) of the people who will hear the sermon.

I.e., so preach toward a problem that most people have or at least have heard about, and forget about the Preached Word. "I'm doing pretty well. Why in the world would I need the Preached Word to disrupt my prosperous little parsonage?"

Pushback Theses

- The Lex is part of the fabric of this world.
- It deceives and seduces, accuses and lies. It declares, if only you were such and such, this and that, you'd be okay.
- The world has swallowed these lies hook, line, and sinker. From the youngest iteration of Old Adam and Old Eve to the

largest hegemonic powers of this planet, we believe our okay-ness depends upon our righteousness, religiousness, performance, achievement, attainment, commitment...the list is long and ridiculous. We love it and ride the roller coaster of success, pride, failure, guilt, fear, despair, and denial.

- But, you won't believe it, the Lex is a lie!
- Your okay-ness is already accomplished because Jesus Christ has bought you with his life. (To borrow one of admittedly many images for this.)
- Trusting His promise, words like forgiveness and freedom and service start to resonate joyfully.
- In terms of preaching: There's no substitute for Gospel on soil tilled by the Law.
- The preacher must delight like a butterfly and sting like the Hammer of Thor-i.e., bash Old Adam's unregenerate house to unrecognizable pieces. The bruised reed she must not break; the filthy tombs she must not whitewash. Discernment? Of course. Lazarus! Come forth!
- The preacher must beware to NEVER promote religion for the sake of filling the pews or coffers. Church is not a social club because you're too righteous to go to the bar and meet someone. The Divine Service is not to fulfill psychological needs. Go see a shrink. Get a life.
- Preachers: proclaim Jesus Christ or hang up the stole.