

Sermons Empty of Gospel: Part 2

Colleagues,

Here are some responses to Dave Endorf's letter of last week (ThTh 181) about sermons with no gospel in them. Dave's letter, you may remember, was addressed to Jerry Burce, author of PROCLAIMING THE SCANDAL. We used Jerry's book in our course on preaching this fall at the Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis. On this St. Nicholas Day,

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. First Jerry Burce's own response: Dear Dave,

Thank you so much for taking the time to write. You ask the large question, "What do we do about sub-standard preaching?" My unhappy answer is, "I don't know yet." The problem is complicated. In the ELCA it starts with the fact that the standard you've been taught—and you spell it out so well: offering up the necessary Christ—has not been taught to all preachers. Too many of us operate with other standards. Too few were trained to insist with Paul on "knowing nothing among you except Christ and him crucified." Meanwhile that crucial discussion about what the Gospel really is, and isn't, has been more or less off the table from the ELCA's beginning. Those who cobbled it together chose to presume that we were all in agreement

about this. In my very small opinion they presumed badly. As a result some cracks are beginning to show in the ELCA. I suspect they're about to widen. But I digress...

At a local level, the problem for astute listeners like yourself is that preachers, like everyone else, are the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. We hate critique. We tend to be especially thin-skinned about our preaching. We also tend to be more successful than just about anyone else I know at dodging serious, thoughtful evaluation of the work we do. (The astute listener I'm married to has complained to me about this for years.) Not that we aren't being evaluated—of course we are. Constantly. It's just that most of what passes back and forth between folks around the coffee pot or in the parking lot never reaches our ears; and the little that does get back to us usually arrives months later than it should have. Lots of us, of course, are far too content with this. Lots of you—the listeners, I mean—are instinctively aware of how thin our skins are, so you go out of your way to avoid scraping them. Among ourselves we may (or may not) work together on textual studies and sermon ideas; but I have yet to find a group of pastoral colleagues that is willing to put last week's sermon on the table for the others to gnaw on. Hence bad preachers stay bad, while decent preachers find little help at all in getting better. And folks who are stuck with poor preaching Sunday after Sunday remain precisely that—stuck, I mean.

I witnessed a version of this misery, by the way, when I visited some near and dear ones this past summer. Their names are not Fred and Dorothy, but that's what I'll call them. They are now retired from a career as overseas missionaries, and live somewhere in Wisconsin. They are steadfast members of the LCMS congregation that Fred was

confirmed in, way back in the late '30's. The current pastor of that congregation is a wretched preacher. He simply hasn't got a clue. (That's first-hand testimony, by the way. On occasional visits over the years I've heard him try.) Fred is a first-rate theologian and a very good preacher who in his career taught good preachers by the score. Dorothy is a first-rate hearer of sermons who, like you, knows what standard to use in telling a good sermon from a bad one. Both of them sit there Sunday after Sunday and suffer. Then they grizzle, gently and sparingly, over the lunch table. They are much too loyal to go find another preacher in another church. But the structures for helping their current lousy preacher to get better are non-existent, and the dynamics at work in old Adam's thin skin are such they dare not approach the fellow themselves for fear that he will bleed, and not only bleed, but hemorrhage, and not only hemorrhage, but bloody up the congregation. So they opt for peace—and weekly suffering. I suspect you can sympathize with their dilemma.

In the ELCA context, I wonder what would happen if able listeners like yourself would band together and start clamoring at the conference level for pastors to get their preaching act together. I wouldn't recommend this at the congregational level—it would get too instantly personal with your own pastor. Nor would I recommend starting at the synodical level. it would be too easy for somebody to keep you away from the microphone. But at the conference level—what if lay delegates were to sponsor and pass a resolution calling on all conference pastors to submit at least one sermon every quarter to a sermon review board comprising two or three of the conference's best preachers, two or three lay folks who know how to tell the difference, as Lutherans, between good and bad sermons,

and maybe a bishop's assistant as well?

I also wonder what would happen if a newly elected bishop, making up his or her mind to serve strenuously and faithfully for a single term only, would make the calibre of preaching in the synod a top priority? He might then begin dropping in unannounced at church services to hear what was going on, and if necessary would rebuke it and would also insist that preachers who didn't measure up should sign up immediately for remedial classes, said classes to be offered by the bishop himself? This would presume, of course, that the bishop herself know how to preach.

Should you ever be moved to try these or other approaches to the problem, I'd be very glad indeed to hear of it. Thank you for your kind words. God bless and keep you in the courage and joy of the Gospel.

Faithfully yours,
Jerry Burce

II. From Timothy Hoyer
Dear Dave Endorf,
Two external problems beset us. One is "the agnostic assumption" (defined by Burce as "no single way of describing reality's unseen dimension."). The second is pastors not proclaiming the good news of Christ. Perhaps the second problem is a result of the first, for it is easier to speak on what is good and right (morality) than it is to proclaim that what is good and right is Christ.

The internal problem is our lack of faith in the goodness of who Jesus is and what he has done for us by his death and resurrection. Our shame is brought on by the agnostic assumption and by our neighbors' asserting that what we

say of Christ is only one of many opinions of God. Worse, they aver that God, if there be one, merciful and good, will surely save them, connection to Christ or lack thereof notwithstanding (Burce, p. 19). We are made faithless and silent, and retreat to feeling good by morals. And preachers speak only of morals, which is but law.

The eternal problem, not strongly enough stated by Burce, is that not only are we alienated from God, not only is the agnostic assumption a sign of our alienation (No one can clearly know God. It's all opinion.), but that God has fierce horror against us, not just over our arrogance to presume God is an opinion (Burce p. 70, #5). (Burce, p. 71, #6, reads, "What then is the spiritual agnosticism of North America if not a present manifestation of the wrath of God?" However, that is to reduce the problem back to the external, to the agnostic assumption.) When our neighbor says that if there is a God, merciful and good, that neighbor has not seen the wrath of God and has not heard what the law says about them. We make the law weak when we limit the law to comparing ourselves to others or to doing the best we can or thinking we are not the best but good enough. Weakened law hides God's condemnation of those not perfect in faith, not just in deeds. It is lack of faith, being against God, not knowing God, not trusting God, not honoring God, our very opinionating of God that is our damnation. It is this emphasis on lack of faith that preachers lack in their sermons. To not go this deep, to not go to God's holding us accountable for our loyalty to God, is what makes pastors' sermons empty.

The eternal solution is the cross of Jesus. There the wrath of God is blasted upon Jesus. Jesus was seen as another opinionator about who God is. His opinion

challenged the opinion of the Jewish perception of God—which is also in many forms, all other ways of legalism, which includes “doing the best we can.” Burce states it this way, “When Jesus forgives us, he takes our sin into and upon himself. . . . Jesus the Christ, now identified with us, is himself driven by God into the pitch-black pits of anguished confusion and horrible not-knowing with respect to the Things of God. . . . That God raises Christ from the dead is therefore the promise that we too will be brought out of the pits into which God himself has driven us.” (p.72, #11) I think that God does not drive us only to the external problem of the agnostic assumption (not knowing with respect to the Things of God) but God ends our life and forbids that we [be] saved.

But God has raised Jesus from the dead. (We have witnesses.) God has declared that Jesus is a new way to trust God and to know God. It is the new way God deals with us. Jesus is God’s new offer of a relationship with God.

The internal solution is the offer of Christ to us, the goodness of which overwhelms us to trust that Jesus is God’s good way of treating less-than-law-perfect humans. Of all the opinions about God this is the best offer. “There is no news fresher or better than this” (Burce, p. 71, # 7). Here pastors actually get to give Jesus to their hearers. They can do more than say that Jesus makes us right with God. They can go to the hearer and say to her, “Jesus makes you right with God.” Right in the midst of the sermon the pastor can walk down the aisle to the hearers and declare, “You are good because of Christ.”

The external solution does not get rid of the agnostic assumption that is all around us. It does get rid of it in

the hearer who is told by the pastor, "You are right with God." Of course, the hearer can say it to other hearers at church or at home or with a close neighbor friend.

One way to get a pastor to talk about the message in a sermon is to give them a copy of the Crossing's Outline as in "Sabbatheology" whatever number it is, and ask the pastor, "I read this as a way to do sermons. What do you think of it? Read it over. Then I want to make an appointment to come and talk with you about it. I'm available on these days at these times. When would it be good for you?"

Have the Crossings outline as an adult Bible class topic.

Peace,
Timothy Hoyer

- III. From a California Deaconess Having read Jerry Burce's book when you suggested it a year ago, I really appreciated the plan of your class. More people ought to read that book. The letter you printed hits every nail on the head concerning the lack of Christ and the Resurrection, and therefore, Gospel, in too many sermons. Your erudite and straightforward student states it in ways that I wish I would have stated the same things when some of us survivors (of weekly bread and water) discussed the same issues awhile back...without the pastor. I'm really looking forward to reading the comments from others.
- IV. From Martha Neustadt As far as who holds pastors accountable for what they say, I don't know. I know that I have been church-hopping for over a year in hopes of finding a pastor who preaches the gospel combined with a congregation and staff that acknowledge I do exist even though I am neither a high school student nor a wife and

mother (you'd be surprised how many places the first question I am asked – if they talk to me at all – is, “are you married?”, followed by a disappointing, “ohhh...” – heaven forbid a single 26 year old woman is in a church – and it's not even the Missouri Synod!). So, maybe the short answer to “what do people do” is “leave”. Of course, that gets you into the question of “do people really want to hear the gospel,” which would not be so apparent when you look at the churches which are preaching politics, at best, and are nonetheless filled to capacity every week. People seem to want to believe “I am saved, but he is not, because he is _____” fill in the blank with liberal, homosexual, poor, rich, whatever. Or maybe they don't want to be saved at all – the ones who are in church to preach an all-accepting way of life are just as non-gospel oriented, even though there results may be a little more fruitful for society.

Boy, I still don't have an answer for you yet, do I? I suppose when I finally get enough theology in me, I will go and talk to the pastors, tell them their gospels are not, and see what they have to say. I think I know what it will be though – that the majority people don't want to hear that over and over again. People want to hear about morals and politics and how to live their lives and that they are good people, not that we are sinners and need Jesus. Pastors don't want to see their congregations be unhappy, so they give them what they want – usually in the name of the “great commissioning” (battle cry of the 21st century mega-church). Maybe I can recommend the pastors here can all get on your list serve? If they learn half as much as I have over the past year, it will certainly be a start ☐

Of course, if I think about it too much, I think that I

have been ruined for the churches here. The influences on my theological studies have been so great – you, my dad, my Christian History prof at school, the great staff of Purdue's Christian Campus House – have all ruined me. I wish I was in St. Louis to take some of the LST classes. Teaching those may be your best path to seeing the gospel preached everywhere. It just may take a long time.

V. Another VoiceThTh 181 asked about responding to “Gospel-less preaching.” You could probably call it “un-Crossed preaching.” Thanks for asking.

I have been struggling with this for some time now. I attend a fine Lutheran Church in which the weekly proclamation is “Try Harder to believe in Jesus, Try Harder to trust, Try Harder to be good, etc”. And for a bonus, there are children's sermonettes which are notoriously legalistic, as they seem to be in most churches.

After bitching and moaning to various friends (But not to the preacher. Woops!), I began to repent by seeing this theology as the subliminal message of my Lutheran upbringing, and the kingpin of my religious old self. Try harder! Much harder!

Then I started worshipping 75% of the time at two other churches – one Catholic and one Episcopal (still avoiding confrontation). On Reformation Sunday this year . . . I realized that our Lutheran preacher didn't have a clue to what he was doing. And I am sure he thinks of himself as “preaching the Gospel.” So I am looking forward to some of the workable approaches that others may offer in response to your request for comments.