

Symposium on Preaching

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Reaction to Pastor Philip Sievert's Essay: *"A Paradigm for 21st Century Lutheran Preachers"*

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For weeks, more than a few of my beloved Milwaukee Brewers have fanned the breeze as they fade from contention. When confronted with a tough pitch, they've swung and missed.

Pastor Sievert, with this assignment, the committee that planned the Symposium hurled a 98 mile per hour, outside corner, sinking fastball in your direction. We thank God, that, unlike the Brewers, you didn't swing and miss. In fact, in high-scoring Coors Field fashion, God blessed your efforts not only to make solid contact but to deliver at least an extra base hit. If those of us waiting on base as you stepped to the plate race home to make application of your essay, then God may have just used you to deliver a bases clearing in-the-park home run.

I will begin with three general comments of appreciation for the essay.

- Our essayist found the biblical middle ground for how to handle the challenges the current culture hands us every time we preach. He encouraged us to avoid the twin ditches of 1) failing to ask "what does this mean?" when confronted with those cultural challenges; and 2) making unbiblical compromises. One ditch robs us of saying anything intelligible; the other of saying anything meaningful.
- While offering wise suggestions to ponder, our essayist avoided telling us exactly how every pastor must preach on every text to every gathering of God's people. The day is long gone when congregational settings are so homogenous that a single sermon preached in a single style would fit any ambo. Our essayist respected our ability to wrestle with issues. He provided us a flexible paradigm, not a narrow straitjacket.
- He wrote with evident conviction and storied winsomeness that sacrificed nothing of truth, thereby modeling the very thing he was encouraging: speaking God's unchanging truth to a skeptical, secular, and storied culture.

Now here are some specific points we do well to ponder carefully.

- Pastor Sievert urged us not to over-react to a skeptical culture's rejection of authority (6-7). To hammer away on the Word's authority confuses faith and a fruit of faith. It borders on legalism. No unbeliever has ever honored the Word's authority (including our own sinful hearts). How much better, rather than defending the lion, if we turn the lion loose by a clear proclamation of the text. Lutheran preachers believe God's Word knows how to speak in its own defense.
- Pastor Sievert also made an excellent point about not getting too far ahead of our hearers.

We get to wrestle with a lesson for a whole week and wrestle with the challenges it presents. Passing by those challenges in one sentence in a sermon might not be so fair to those who are following along with us on Sunday morning. (8)

As we ponder a text for days, we can forget how challenging statements of our text were at first to our natural way of thinking. If we forget that, we fail to acknowledge those challenges and so easily give the impression to hearers that we don't inhabit their world.

- On pages 11-12 Pastor Sievert pleaded with us to examine how we preach about hell. Urging us to find another middle ground, first he asked us to ponder how much we have been impacted by an antinomian society. Have we begun to grow silent about hell, reducing it to a cameo appearance of a mere word ("hell") as if paying outdated, embarrassing obeisance to Walther?

But he also captured two warnings on the other side. First, when we do speak in depth about eternal judgment, do we pause to recognize the unique language by which our text speaks that warning? If we default to a few tired expressions, we turn the sermon's law into ordinary rather than proper! Like an overused, unsharpened arrow, dull edges struggle to pierce.

He also reminded us that preaching hell shouldn't be a guilty pleasure. "But may I suggest we do it with tears in our eyes and love in our hearts. God's will is that no one perish, that all come to the knowledge of the truth" (12). Even where Scripture thunders, we quickly go wrong in tone if not in wording if ours aren't the first knees to knock. That thunder is meant first to terrify the preacher's arrogant sinful nature that fears men but does not truly fear God.

- On page 14, the essay asks us to ponder this: "a certain amount of vulnerability in our preaching will give us credibility with those who listen. Where we decrease, Christ will increase." The pulpit isn't our personal confessional, but it also isn't a fortress for our sinful nature's desire to be on a pedestal. We dare not allow God's people to think that only beneath the pulpit's level do sinner/saints wrestle with temptation, doubt and discouragement.
- As the author discussed different organizational structures for sermons (17-22), he again kept his balance. Scripture uses both deductive and inductive patterns. Depending on the text, and our preaching setting, one path may have a distinct advantage over another. This is simply taking seriously not only "what" the Spirit says in Scripture, but also "how" he says it. Our preaching has often been strong on the former while failing to appreciate the latter.
- Balance was again key when it came to speaking about using projection technology. While our essayist issued cautions (19-20) about projecting endless words and bullet points (which quickly give sermons an overly cognitive, doctrinal-essay-like feel), he did not fail (21-22) to speak of the usefulness of carefully chosen images or video clips. To fail to consider the latter is to ignore the heart language of many in a visual, storied culture.

There were only two places where I found myself wishing for greater clarity.

- On page 8, it seemed like we were being warned never to step out from the pulpit. Yet on page 9 rationale was given for why a pastor might literally step away from any perceived barrier. That balance might have been clearer if he had not only issued a warning about why **not** to step **out** ("If you are doing it to be hip or cool, don't!") but also why **not** to stay **in**. I imagine that warning sounding something like this: "If we are staying behind pulpit/ambo because it is a convenient hiding place for our weaknesses, then by all means step out." Both sides in that debate easily argue externals while ignoring the matter's heart. Authenticity and transparency are issues of the preacher's heart rather than GPS coordinates. The secret of authentic and

transparent preaching is a preacher who has experienced his own death and resurrection in the text so that, as he serves as God's mouthpiece, his hearers might experience their own.

- The second place where greater clarity might have been helpful was the importance of speaking honestly in the pulpit about where our hearers' sinful natures may struggle with doubt. "Even if your congregation is made up of mostly mature members who don't have those questions and struggles, they may learn to answer their skeptical neighbors' questions and objections" (8). While it may be true that not every mature member wrestles with every doubt that troubles a true denizen of postmodernism, yet the sinful nature of even the most mature Christian is not beyond any such doubts. Listen to Job. Observe the struggles of John from prison. "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man" (1 Co 10:13). Addressing such doubts to mature Christians doesn't just supply ammunition for lips but armor for hearts.

Finally, I will end by sharing a concern (partly echoed in the essay) spoken to me by a retired colleague. He was concerned that some, in embracing different sermonic styles, were leaving more behind than a mere slavish devotion to deductive patterns. My colleague mentioned in particular two concerns: the loss of thematic preaching and the loss of letting expounding the text be the heart of the sermon.

This essay strongly addressed the first of those concerns. Pastor Sievert warned us about not violating the 3 AM rule (17). He pleaded with us not to preach without a clear proposition/theme, lest we risk leading our hearers in aimless wandering. We may live in an anti-propositional age, but our sermons need to be built around a clear, single textual proposition. In more deductive style we may announce that proposition from the start. In more inductive style we may postpone the formal revelation of the proposition until after it has been established from the text. But it is an abuse of the privilege of preaching to stand up without having thought ourselves through to clarity about what that proposition is. Stitching together a few stories, biblical or contemporary, may give the appearance of being relevant. However, all we may have arrived at is being confusingly vague. In fact, we may have caved in to our culture more than we know. Without intending to, we may be allowing everyone to draw their own conclusions about the text's meaning heedless of whether those conclusions are textual or biblical. Our responsibility as Confessional Lutheran preachers is far greater than throwing a few somewhat loosely organized thoughts at our hearers on Sunday morning all the while hoping something sticks.

That brings us to the other concern raised by my colleague. In the midst of changing paradigms and patterns are our sermons at their heart still a careful expounding of the text? In deductive preaching we can abuse this with a caricature of law/gospel preaching. We hunt for a word or phrase that can preach law (regardless of that word or phrase's textual and contextual purpose), hunt for a word or phrase that can preach gospel (again, regardless of its textual and contextual purpose), assemble it into two predictable parts (part one law, part two gospel), and presto: a half-baked but Lutheran sounding sermon is ready to be delivered! (Which sermon, by the way, no matter how hard we try to add some spice and seasoning, tastes an awful lot like reheated leftovers from last week's sermon!)

In inductive preaching, the same problem shows up with a logical twist. We search for a way to give them an experience of law and gospel (again, perhaps regardless of context), mix in a dash of surprise, and out pops a sermon that takes our hearers on a thrill ride. But as much as they may enjoy the ride, the experience gives them little insight into the text's meaning in its salvation history context. The inductive form of this failure-to-expound the text may be – at least at first - less predictable, but both inductive and deductive forms rob God's people of seeing how that text addresses our current situation out of the real situation of the first hearers. Instead of combatting biblical illiteracy, we compound it, since now they erroneously think they know that text.

I don't fault Pastor Sievert for not addressing at length the second element of my colleague's concern. The essayist proceeded on the assumption that we're committed to (con)textual exposition as the sermon's foundation. But as I'm sure he would agree, whenever that is not the case, any discussion about speaking to postmodern ears rests on a shaky foundation.

Thank you again, Pastor Sievert! You served us well by helping us wrestle with the task with which every generation of faithful preachers must wrestle. Since God has so ordained to speak his truth through human jars of clay to other jars of clay using the changeable outward forms of human communication, it is never loves labor lost to ponder how God can enable us to perform our task with greater humility, honesty, wisdom and clarity. You have aided us greatly in our wrestling! More eternal souls than you may ever know (until heaven), will thank God for your work!