

Pulpit and Pew: As Seen from the Pulpit

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Have you ever wondered what goes on in the mind of the minister as he is in the pulpit, or even while he is preaching?

For one thing he has made a lot of preparation. Our professors in the seminary often told us that in preparing a sermon we must let the text speak to us. We should not approach a text with some preconceived notion and try to fit the text into what we want it to say. The text must speak, and we must listen. This involves a study of the original language, either the Hebrew or the Greek, exegesis of the text, meditation and prayer. One must be in the state of mind that he can say: "Speak Lord, for thy servant heareth." To use a rather homely figure, making a sermon is much like making homemade bread. The dough must be prepared and kneaded. The yeast must have time to work through the dough. Then the bread must be kneaded again, and possibly again, until it is finally ready for the oven. In making a sermon, the text must become alive in one's soul. It must create zeal and enthusiasm. Only then is the minister ready to write out the sermon. This cannot be done at the last minute on Saturday. This involves the entire week of preparation, taking the text along to the sick and the shut-ins, to the catechism classes and society meetings. By Sunday the minister must be bursting with eagerness to preach. He needs an hour or so to enter once more fully into his sermon and to be spiritually ready to meet the congregation. He needs the quiet opportunity to pray. Only then can he climb the pulpit and with strong conviction say: "Thus saith the Lord!"

What helps the minister in his preparation is a few quiet moments with the consistory and the prayer of one of the office bearers. This should indeed be a quiet time of preparation, also for the office bearers. What is also a great help is the fact that the congregation prays for him that utterance may be given to him. that he may open his mouth with boldness, to make known the mystery of the gospel. Eph. 6:19. It stirs the depths of his soul to join the congregation in singing: "With joy and gladness in my soul I hear the call to prayer!" And, "O pray that Zion may be blessed and have abundant peace, for all that love Thee in their hearts shall prosper and increase. What is also important is the receptivity of the audience, the quiet atmosphere, the zealous singing of the Psalters, the eager waiting for the sermon as expressed in the congregational prayer.

One congregation seems to be more receptive to the preaching than another, even as one individual is much more receptive than another. A minister soon recognizes those who slump down in their seats, take a relaxing position and doze or sleep through the sermon. He also soon spots those whose faces have a far-away look and knows that their minds are occupied elsewhere. Some faces can even express complete boredom. It is best that the preacher put those out of his mind.

There is a close contact between an attentive audience and a zealous minister. Sometimes the atmosphere can become so electrified, that the preacher feels that his audience is hanging onto each word he utters. A receptive audience is an inspiration to the bearer of God's Word.

That can even be true of individuals. Children can be taught to listen. I prefer this to allowing them to draw pictures or fuss with a plaything. Some children have learned to be so attentive that, not only the minister, but also those sitting around them are impressed by their attitude. In fact, I know of children who at an early age can follow the minister as he proceeds from one point of his sermon to the next. I grant you that this takes some effort on the part of the parents, but it is not impossible. Making sermon reports are undoubtedly helpful in teaching a child to

listen, but the child must also learn to take part in the service spiritually, as himself involved in the Word. I recall an incident where a rhetorical question was asked, “Is that true?”, and a small child responded in all seriousness with a loud “No-o-o”.

One intensely interested person in the audience can be an inspiration to the minister. An elderly man comes to mind who always sat close to the front. He could not resist showing a smile of perfect contentment as he drank in the message. At times he was so impressed that he would turn around to his son on one side of the church, or to his son-in-law on the other side with a nod of the head, as if he wanted to say, “Now, did you get that?”

I well recall an elderly mother in Israel, whose face almost radiated with joy as she sat and worshipped among the saints. During the sermon her eyes never left the minister. She sat in rapt attention throughout the sermon. In fact, at times she would move forward, as if she could not drink in the message fast enough, so that she often sat at the very edge of her seat. You can well realize that a minister can readily forget the rest of his audience and preach to one such eager soul.

Preparation for the Sunday service is of utmost importance. You and I both realize that if a person is out late on Saturday night, sleeps as long as possible on Sunday morning, dresses amid a great turmoil, and then rushes off to church to arrive just as the consistory enters the auditorium, that person is hardly prepared for worship. One young man that I heard about had arrived in church just as the service started. Afterward he boasted that he had stayed in bed until twenty-five minutes before church time, had dressed, had gotten into his car, and had still made it on time. He wondered whether maybe he could still cut another five minutes off from his time of preparation. Even an unhappy atmosphere in the home on Sunday morning, or an indifferent attitude toward the minister, or a lack of desire to go to church can deprive one of a blessing before the service has even begun.

One time I was in a farm home where the chores were finished at an early hour, breakfast was served and enjoyed with still ample time to go to church. As soon as all the family was dressed the father called us all into the living room. There we had a half hour of devotions. The father reminded the family of the Lord’s Day that would take up their attention that morning, read a passage of Scripture that suited the occasion, and led in prayer. Would that we could have more of that!

Not merely for our spiritual edification do we go to church, but a church service is something very special, the like of which cannot be found anywhere upon the whole earth. A church service is a worship service. There God’s people meet with their God!

To Thee, O Lord, I lift my eyes, O Thou enthroned above the skies; As servants watch their master’s hand, or maidens by their mistress stand, So to the Lord our eyes we raise, Until His mercy He displays. To Thee, O Lord, I lift my eyes, O Thou enthroned above the skies!
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God speaks through the benedictions, through the Scriptures and through the preaching. He speaks even powerfully as He applies His Word by His Spirit through the faith of the saints. His people respond with the doxology, both at the beginning and end of the service, but also in song and prayer. This response is also evident whenever the Apostolic Creed is read or recited. Our blessing does not depend on the preacher, who is but the channel through whom Christ speaks, but our blessing depends on Christ, Who alone can speak to us the words of eternal life!

May we appreciate our worship services while we still have them. In many places God’s people meet in very small groups, often in homes, listening to a tape or to a sermon that is read to them. This already is a foreboding that the day is not far off when the church doors will be nailed

shut, when songs arising from the communion of saints will no longer be heard, when our worship will be in secret; who knows under what circumstances?

Originally Published in:

Vol 45 No 7 August September 1986