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A PLEA TO PREACHERS

FROM FRIENDS OF CHILDREN

BY LYNN E.
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Martin Luther (Early 16th Century)

The Text for Our Lesson:

“Cursed are all preachers that in church aim at high and hard things. . .”

“When I preach, I sink myself deep down. I regard neither doctors or magistrates (of whom there are more than forty in this congregation), but I have an eye to the great number of young people and children. . . . I preach to those, directing myself to them that have most need of my preaching. Will not the rest hear what I have to say? If not, the door stands open to them, they may leave” (*Table Talk*, 427).

Luther believed that “to preach plain and simply is a great art,” and he warned that “sprinkling out Hebrew, Greek and Latin” in public sermons “savors merely of shows” (427). He recommended, instead, that preachers speak “as we use to do at home” (412). He recognized that, on occasion, “when you preach in the presence of intelligent and learned men, you are at liberty to exhibit your knowledge and skill” (Preface, Luther’s Catechism). But for Luther, the difference between teaching and preaching was not as crucial as the recognition of the composition of your audience. When the educated and sophisticated are your sole audience, have at it with all your erudition. When there are children present, preach so that the children can understand, and give the sophisticated an opportunity to receive the gospel as little children—or not.

For a preacher, “them’s hard sayings,” as my kinfolk used to say. These words are especially difficult for those of us who have invested years of our lives trying to master the language and level of discourse Luther discourages in public preaching. But is not Luther’s concern eminently consistent with the divine genius of the gospel? It certainly turns many of our present assumptions upside down—another state of affairs eminently consistent with the genius of the gospel. It is also perfectly consistent with the serious exercise of Christian fellowship (see 1 Corinthians 8).

Twenty years ago I would have smiled indulgently at Luther’s charming but eccentric suggestion. I am now old enough to feel an intense urgency to take the suggestion seriously.

The love of God, the beauty of Jesus, the sweetness of grace, the simplicity of faith, the urgency of repentance, the basics of virtue can all be told in language and with illustrations (e.g., Luke 15) that more children can understand. In the process, more adults may better understand. They may relate more fully to each other and to God, and enjoy closer fellowship with their children as well as with their more unsophisticated brothers and sisters.

No leading figure in Christian history, after Jesus himself, has done more to encourage respect for children and to promote their serious religious education than Martin Luther. Whether he succeeded or not, Luther intended all of his public sermons to be “children’s sermons” for “children’s church.” Our preaching tradition has been rationalistic, doctrinal, adult, intellectual, and sometimes intelligent. “Children’s sermons” are, for us, a separate genre.

Whether we smile at him indulgently, or smile uncomfortably, let us as preachers at least consider thoughtfully what Luther so passionately recommended.