A Plea To Preachers from Friends of Children

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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 differ-
ence 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,
pread 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 recom-
mended.