

AN EVALUATION OF
MODERN EVANGELICAL PREACHING

A SYMPOSIUM ON PREACHING
WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

22 SEPTEMBER 2014

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The dutiful WELS pastor makes an “It’s All About Jesus,” home visit. To make life easier for his pastor, the patriarch of the family has gathered his grown children and their spouses to be present for the visit. At the end of the visit, the WELS pastor asks, “Is there anything else on your mind you’d like to discuss?” The late twenty-something son pipes up. He explains how he recently visited a community church at the bidding of his friend. He identified the false doctrine in the preacher’s sermon. Still, he had to ask, “Why don’t you preach that way? Why don’t you use visuals in your sermon? You do know the younger generation learns visually, don’t you?”

The WELS pastor recoils in horror, yet tries to maintain a cool composure. Is this young man insinuating that a WELS pastor ought to be more like the Evangelicals? So he tries to answer his questions. “We don’t use that method because we don’t want what they teach to be confused with what we teach.” The young man’s comment was about style while the pastor’s response was about content. Instantly the WELS pastor knows he needs to try again. “We believe the word is enough. The word doesn’t need to be supplemented with gimmicks.” Strike two. A means of communication, different from the preached word, does not make it a gimmick. Luther regarded the latest bit of technology, called a printing press, a wonderful tool—not a gimmick—for getting the gospel out by all possible means. Finally, the WELS pastor reaches for the ultimate response. He says, “That’s not how we were trained to do it at the Seminary.” In other words, “Don’t talk to me, talk to the people who trained me.” If the main concern is to preach the good news, then “how best to do that” will always be a top priority for a preacher of the word.

Instead of trying to find the best way to rebut the insinuation and react in a defensive way, a better approach would be to use the questions asked about evangelical preachers and the way they do it as a launching point for finding out what they do and how they do it. There’s always something to be learned, either a new approach to preaching or how not to preach. My personal challenge is to get beyond my own biases in an attempt to take an honest and fair look at the landscape of modern evangelical preaching.

Most of the people in this room were taught how to preach at this institution by a variety of gifted professors, using the well thought out tool known as *Preach the Gospel*. The book is a very practical, direct, “how to” book on preaching. It emphasizes a style of sermonizing known as the classical, deductive style. Nowhere in this book is the claim made that this style is the

only style. But, since it is a time honored, proven style, it is the toehold, the starting place for aspiring preachers. In the handbook issued by our Seminary to pastors who are supervising vicars, the following encouragement is given: “We ask, however, that the majority of sermons the vicar preaches—and certainly the sermons he preaches during the first half of the vicar year—be in a deductive style.”¹ Bryan Chapell, the author of *Christ-Centered Preaching*, would agree with the approach of starting somewhere: “I have simply found it more helpful to lay a foundation on which students can build rather than point them to the vast homiletics horizon with the encouragement to preach as the Spirit moves.”²

Perhaps there are a few unintended consequences, as a result of stressing—at least initially—one preaching style. The preacher may regard this style as the only one synodically approved, and whatever someone else might offer in the way of homiletical insight at best is naive, at worst heresy. The preacher may regard one style as the best and only style, though there is no Old or New Testament “one style.” In addition, WELS people may have become trained to listen for one style. “Where did you get your ears?” as a church body.³ Maybe we get our ears from listening to one dominant style. As listeners we expect a well thought out theme and parts and a deductive approach. But does stressing one style make no demands on our hearers to work at listening and drawing conclusions from the text? Is it a disservice to any form or style to elevate it to THE form or style?⁴ Is the goal of the preacher to simply have the listener regurgitate theme and parts, or is the goal to touch the intellect, emotions and will?

It might be helpful to return to *Preach the Gospel* to find out what our seminal tool for preaching falls back on. Yes, the book, though not footnoted or containing a bibliography, quotes the Bible, Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. But it also gleans practical guidance for preaching from different sources, some Lutheran, some not Lutheran. On page 108 it even goes as far as listing five books as recommended reading, and some of those authors would be considered Evangelicals. This stands as an admission that not everything good about preaching comes solely from Lutheran circles. There have been devoted preachers in the past who fall into the Evangelical camp, who have sought to present Christ to their people in the form of a well

¹ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Vicar Handbook, 4.

² Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 142-143.

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abiding Press, 1985), 34.

⁴ Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), xvi.

thought out sermon. For people whose activity of “preaching” is so closely bound up with who we are, namely “preachers,” it is a given that we will be interested in our craft, interested about hearing preaching in our circles and other circles, interested in learning what others have done, giving thanks for the good while marking the bad. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, an institution established to train preachers, though starting with the tried and true methodology for preaching, has never sought to confine creativity in the area of preaching. And this fact brings us then, to the purpose of this paper, to examine modern Evangelical preaching, to see if there is anything to be learned.

I. An Evaluation of Modern Evangelical Preaching on the Basis of Its Roots

We will start with a look at a couple of the most famous American preachers, Dwight Moody and Billy Graham. Before we do, we will need to define the word “evangelical.” Our definition is “gospel stressing.” That definition doesn’t mean that the law is ignored, but when law and gospel are preached, the gospel is predominant. America’s modern dominant understanding would be “those who are part of the Community Church or Evangelical movement.” However, that definition, used in an effort to define modern evangelical preaching, will not always be helpful, since there are many different types of Evangelicals. If someone asks you to define modern Lutheran preaching, you would be careful to first of all distinguish what kind of a Lutheran you are before expounding on Lutheran preaching. In the same way, Evangelicals in the homiletical department at an institution like Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, are careful to talk about their circle of evangelicalism and the wider circle of evangelicalism. Evangelicals in the days of Moody were Presbyterians and Methodists. Today, we likely wouldn’t lump Presbyterians and Methodists in with the Evangelicals. Definitions change. Those who would call themselves Evangelical Christians fall into many different categories or circles. A local evangelical pastor informed me that Evangelicals come in many forms. Some are charismatic, some fundamentalist, some conservative and some liberal.⁵ Some consider “stressing the gospel” a mandate to exclude preaching the law as a mirror.

⁵ Rick Wager, personal interview by author, Palatine, IL, 13 August 2014, campus pastor, The Chapel.

Dwight L. Moody

Let's begin with a brief history of a famous preacher in America, Dwight L. Moody. Prior to Moody, preachers like Charles and John Wesley, who sailed to America on October 14, 1735, and George Whitefield (1714 – 1770), who made seven voyages to America, made an impact on America resulting in what was called the “Great Awakening.” Evangelicals will sometimes refer to another notable preacher of the time, Jonathan Edwards, who preached the famous “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” sermon. This sermon epitomizes first use of the law preaching, providing a detailed description of the torments of hell and mankind's natural depravity. In that sermon he describes sinners being held over the pit of hell by God, “much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire.”⁶ Modern Evangelicals would distance themselves from such preaching.

Moody was born in Northfield, Mass., and at the young age of 17 moved to Boston in search of work. On September 18, 1856, Moody arrived in Chicago, again in search of work. Though possessing only a fourth grade education, he made a living as a shoe salesman. However, Moody was a devout Christian. He became connected with a group called the English Brethren who focused a lot on the second coming of Christ and what needed to be done prior to that coming.⁷ Moody also focused on the work of the Holy Spirit and the need for spiritual rebirth. Initially Moody's efforts to win the lost were dismal. So he was encouraged to try to reach the lost kids of Chicago, which he did with astounding success, gathering 1,500 children into his Sunday school. Even President Lincoln became interested in his work. The thing to remember about Moody was his businessman approach to church work. Moody was a salesman. The Chicago Times wrote about him that, “He knows how to talk to customers, whether they are looking for dry goods or religion.”⁸ Moody made a business out of saving souls and went about it in a businesslike manner.⁹

Moody's revivals began not in the United States but in Liverpool, England, in June of 1873. His partner was a man named Ira Sankey, a gifted musician. It is said of Sankey that “he

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2005), 178.

⁷ Thomas W. Horton “The Assemblies of God” *WLS Essay File*, 19 September 1994: 1.

⁸ Bruce J. Evensen, *God's Man For The Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 144.

⁹ Evensen, 177.

sang... with the conviction that souls were saved between one note and the next.”¹⁰ Moody and Sankey ushered in the “Second Evangelical Awakening.” Though initially their efforts in England were disappointing, as Moody and Sankey travelled from one revival meeting to the next, aided by the YMCA, soon large crowds turned out to hear them. A revival meeting would begin and end with the performance of and singing of Gospel hymns. In the middle of the revival Moody would deliver his sermon. Moody’s goal was not to start a church but to evangelize and then plug the new believers into a local evangelical congregation. In the process, not wanting anything to stand in the way of evangelism, Moody sought to break down denominational barriers and bring denominations together.¹¹ Moody and his people worked hard to get as many religious leaders on board as possible and provided them with seats of prominence at his revivals. Moody also made use of the press, which was often favorably disposed toward him and would even reprint his sermons in the newspapers. Posters and placards would be pasted all over a town prior to Moody’s arrival and revival. Moody reasoned that if Luther made use of the printing press, he would make use of every available means to promote his revivals.¹²

In the past, with awakenings or revivals, it was said that if the Spirit moved, then he moved as the Spirit saw fit. Moody didn’t wait for the Spirit to move. He took matters into his own hands. He highly publicized his revivals, sometimes insisting that a venue be built from scratch before he’d come to town, as was the case with his revival in Chicago. Though his revival meetings didn’t contain an altar call, Moody did provide an “inquiry room” where attendees could ask questions or maybe be asked, “What is standing in your way of becoming a Christian?”¹³ Moody preached that his “inquiry room” was a reasonable thing. He compared it to the need of a schoolboy who was having problems with algebra. The schoolboy would get some help from someone who knew algebra. In the same way, Moody encouraged his listeners to seek personal help from those more schooled in Christianity.¹⁴

¹⁰ Kurt J. Eggert “Gospel Hymns and Lutheran Worship” *WLS Essay File*, 22 June 1993: 1.

¹¹ Evensen, 22.

¹² Evensen, 161.

¹³ Evensen, 176.

¹⁴ Ralph Turnbull, ed., *The Best of D. L. Moody: Twenty-three Sermons by the Great Evangelist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1981), 49.

Moody's Style and Content

Concerning Moody's style of preaching, let's just say he "preached." When addressing a large crowd of close to ten thousand, and all you have is a sounding board above your head to amplify your voice, you have to "preach," not whisper. You have to be amazed that a human's voice could withstand the strain of preaching day after day at a revival that lasted sometimes close to ten weeks. Moody appealed to the masses because he spoke in a style that touched on common life experiences. Unfortunately we do not have any live recordings of Moody actually preaching. Moody did not consider himself a pastor, but an evangelist. His revivals had the purpose of reaching the lost in a wicked and godless age. Moody loved the sense of the dramatic, and did all he could to build in a city a sense of excitement for his revivals. "I prefer sensation to stagnation every time—a seaman doesn't fear a storm as much as fog."¹⁵ The revivals were adorned with prayer. "If our sermons are going to reach the hearts and consciences of the people, we must be much in prayer to God, that there may be power in the word."¹⁶ Moody pointed to Luther as one of his examples of a man of prayer. "Luther and his companions were men of such mighty pleading with God that they broke the spell of the ages and laid nations subdued at the foot of the Cross."¹⁷ Moody stressed the certainty of heaven.¹⁸ Moody employed his power of persuasiveness in preaching to make becoming a Christian look attractive.¹⁹ In general, despite his Pentecostal leanings, Moody brought the good news of salvation to people in large urban areas in England and in the United States. In downtown Chicago stands today the Moody Bible Institute and a few blocks north is the enormous Moody Church. Although he never served as pastor at the church that bears his name, he did raise money to build it.

When you sit down with the top ten Moody sermons you begin to realize that the man with a fourth grade education had a tremendous grasp of the Bible. He preached an entire sermon on the subject matter of "The Precious Blood" which details what the blood of Christ does: it redeems, blots out sin, etc. When Moody comes to the part about the precious blood justifying the sinner, he refers to Martin Luther shaking all of Europe with that truth. In his

¹⁵ Evensen, 182.

¹⁶ Turnbull, 54.

¹⁷ Turnbull, 57.

¹⁸ Evensen, 117-118.

¹⁹ Evensen, 181.

sermon entitled, “Take Ye Away the Stone,” Moody compared his “out of the line” approach to Christianity to Martin Luther’s approach, “who had to break through the regular order of things in his day before he brought about the mighty Reformation.”²⁰ Dwight was obviously familiar with Luther and Lutheran theology. Moody’s preaching was Christocentric, for the most part. “Our failure now is that preachers ignore the cross and veil Christ with shapeless sermons and superfine language. They don’t just present Him to the people plainly, and that is why I believe that the Spirit of God doesn’t work with power in our churches.”²¹ Moody was a very humble man, attempting to keep the focus on Christ and crediting any resultant good coming from his revivals to Christ. “Suppose we preach anything but Jesus Christ: would this crowd be here this morning? Could they have been held together for eleven weeks?”²² Dwight preached salvation by grace through faith. “We work because we are saved; we do not work to be saved. We work from the cross; but not toward it.”²³ I don’t believe you could characterize Moody as a decision theologian. Although his brain worked like a salesman, he concluded not with an altar call but with the prayer, “May God help each of us to receive him as our Redeemer.”²⁴ Moody’s style was down to earth. He’d make a point from the Bible and drive it home with an illustration. Sometimes he preached on subjects like atonement or redemption. Other times he would preach texts. Moody’s sermons are worth the effort to read if for no other reason than to encounter the illustrations he uses to bring the Scriptural truths home to the hearer. Moody certainly was no proponent of the prosperity theology. “Many men want a religion in which there is no cross, but they cannot enter heaven that way... We do not step clear out of Egypt on to the throne of God. There is a wilderness journey, and there are enemies in the land.”²⁵ Power for godly living was attributed to God.

Moody had little use for the sacraments, declaring he had nothing against baptism but that he wanted instead the baptism by the Spirit. Even as he preached on John 3:3 in his sermon entitled “The Gateway to the Kingdom,” Moody conveniently left out the “water” part which

²⁰ Turnbull, 44.

²¹ Turnbull, 76.

²² Turnbull, 27.

²³ Turnbull, 94.

²⁴ Turnbull, 29

²⁵ Turnbull, 36.

follows two verses later. Yet at the same time he attributed new birth not to a new resolution but to the working of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ The “new creation” must be a work of God.²⁷

In general, I believe Lutheran preachers would benefit by learning about Moody and reading his sermons. His illustrations to drive home truths about salvation are masterful and usually come from everyday life experiences. His success was attributed by those who knew him personally to the fact that he was sincere and single-minded in his desire to reach the lost, without becoming arrogant. Whether people came to hear him because of the excitement generated around his meetings or because they knew deep down they couldn’t fix their problem with God, they came to places like the Bronx, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia and New York by the millions. Moody goes down as one of the greatest American evangelists ever. As a rule, after a revival local churches saw gains in membership.²⁸ The last thing to remember about Moody was that he definitely preached the law in the first use, showing people their sin.

Billy Graham

After Moody there were many Evangelical evangelists. Of note would be William Ashley “Billy” (Sonntag) Sunday (1862 – 1935), who made the decision on the part of the listener a central feature of his revivals. The ex-baseball player made his sales pitch for Christ and expected his listeners to make the purchase with their decision. Billy died in Chicago. At Logan Square in Chicago you will find the Billy Sunday Cocktail Bar, named after the outspoken prohibitionist.

The next big-time evangelist for Christ was Billy Graham. Graham was born on November 7, 1918 and grew up on a dairy farm outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. Graham was raised a Presbyterian.²⁹ At a young age of sixteen, Billy Graham attended a revival meeting where he heard a preacher named Mordecai Fowler Ham. It was said that Mordecai had a preaching style much like Moody.³⁰ It was at this point in time when Billy became enthralled with revival preaching. Eventually Billy was re-baptized as a Southern Baptist. After high

²⁶ Turnbull, 92.

²⁷ Turnbull, 94.

²⁸ Evensen, 89.

²⁹ Deborah Hart Strober and Gerald S. Strober, *Billy Graham: An Oral and Narrative Biography* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 15.

³⁰ Strober, 16-17.

school, Billy spent a year at the Florida Bible Institute in Tampa, FL. In June of 1940, at the graduation service, the valedictorian declared that God has chosen men like Luther, Wesley and Moody in the past, but the time was ripe now for another man to take up the calling to be the next great evangelist.³¹ Eventually Billy made his way to Wheaton Bible College in Wheaton, Illinois, where he entered as a second semester freshman in 1940. Though granted many honorary degrees, Billy never attended or graduated from a seminary. He barely was able to finish obtaining his Bachelor's degree from Wheaton because he was much in demand as a gifted preacher. Ironically, Billy Graham served only one year as the pastor of Western Springs Baptist Church. The life of being a pastor wasn't for him, though he felt he better understood what pastors must deal with because of his one year as a pastor. The qualification for Billy's replacement at Western Springs was simple: "We want someone who will be here instead of flying all over the country for speaking engagements." Billy felt his calling was to be an evangelist, not a pastor.

You can visit the Billy Graham Center on the campus of Wheaton College today. It displays information about the work of evangelists in America. It also doubles as an evangelism presentation, complete with the card they'd like you to fill out before leaving. The option, "I have questions and would welcome your help in finding answers," sounds like Moody's Inquiry Room. Other boxes ask if you've asked Jesus to forgive your sins and come into your heart and life, or, if you are already a believer, if you have renewed your dedication to God and want materials to become more effective in your life of faith. The card also asks if you attend or prefer a church. It makes a person wonder: if you filled out the card indicating you preferred a strict Lutheran church, would you be referred to the local WELS church?

You can find many interesting parallels between Moody and Graham. As with Moody, it is said that what drew people to Graham was his maturity in Christ and total commitment to Christ.³² Billy Graham preached to more people in his lifetime than any other preacher ever to have walked the face of the earth.³³ Many would claim more people came to faith because of Billy Graham than anyone else. Graham began his crusades in America, but following in the footsteps of Moody he also went to England. It was estimated that two million Brits attended the

³¹ Strober, 20.

³² Strober, 31.

³³ Strober, 15.

crusade in London, with 36,000 answering the altar call. As with Moody, the media was very kind to Graham, and he used the media like a master. Some would say the media made Billy Graham.³⁴ Now the media included TV and radio.

Many in this room perhaps remember the crusades and the impact it made on your community when Billy Graham came to town. The Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay file has many essays dedicated to identifying Graham's false teachings, such as *Decision Theology in the Light of Scripture* by Daniel Drews, to name just one. Billy was also known as the pastor to the Presidents and served as officiant for several of their funerals. Billy was a prolific writer and published many books. The funding organization for his efforts is called the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA). The BGEA funded "Decision" magazine and "the Hour of Decision" radio program. "Christianity Today" was also born of Graham's efforts. When the BGEA was established, Billy got some friends together to lay out some guiding principles for future efforts. Four points were laid down called the Modesto Manifesto: 1) financial solvency, 2) an avoidance of sexual impropriety, 3) a refusal to criticize local pastors, and 4) a warning against exaggerating the number of converts.³⁵ A couple of years ago Billy's beloved wife Ruth died. Since Billy has been out of the public eye for many years, his fame among Americans has diminished. Though many do not know much about Billy Graham today, when Billy passes, which will happen sooner rather than later since he's 96 years old, his work and crusades will be brought back to light, probably sparking a renewed interest in his work.

Graham's Style and Content

You can watch Billy Graham on your local Christian broadcasting cable channel and find his sermons on YouTube. A consummate showman, Graham is often described as a salesman and his sermons as sales pitches. His preaching consisted of describing the goods in plain terms, letting you see them and then decide for yourself if you wanted to make the purchase.³⁶ Some said that asking people to accept Christ as personal Savior in 1950 was very unusual, but Billy Sunday had been doing this for decades already.³⁷ Billy just took it to a new level. Some have said that his sermons are all the same when you listen to them, or at the very least, all end the

³⁴ Strober, 71.

³⁵ Strober, 46.

³⁶ Strober, 69.

³⁷ Strober, 45.

same. “They may have a slightly different text, and a slightly different introduction, but essentially they’re all the same. He never went empty at the invitation.”³⁸ Some would even describe his preaching as “not great, rambling and dull,” but that his success was due to keeping a sharp focus on the gospel and on evangelism.”³⁹

Billy was a hardcore decision theologian, which would make him Arminian. C.F.W. Walther identifies Billy’s approach as an improper division of law and gospel in Thesis 13: “The Word of God is not rightly divided when one makes an appeal to believe in a manner as if a person could make himself believe or at least help toward that end, instead of preaching faith into a person’s heart by laying the gospel promises before him.”⁴⁰ Dr. L. Nelson Bell (Billy’s father-in-law) expanded his son-in-law’s appreciation for the status of the Christian faith within mainline denominations, thereby saving him from the narrowness of which his contemporaries at Wheaton supposedly fell prey.⁴¹ So Billy would invite a wide variety of local church leaders, even Catholics, to sit with him on the stage at his crusades. Moody, on the other hand, was anti-Catholic. Graham actually became friends with Pope John Paul II. He figured that if those present were for his message, he wouldn’t raise issues that would divide.⁴² Due to the inclusive nature of his approach, Billy’s evangelism became known as “the new evangelicalism.”⁴³ Billy was staunchly anti-Communist, anti-old fundamentalism and anti-discrimination in his preaching. Though not close friends, Graham had a friendly relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Graham often said, “There is no color line at the foot of the cross.”⁴⁴

Due to his advanced age, his crusading days are done. What do you discover as you listen to a Billy Graham sermon on TV or YouTube? You discover that unlike Moody, who insisted that if something was worth saying, it shouldn’t be read, Billy Graham did quite a bit of reading from the pulpit. By the way, some of Moody’s preaching notes are on display at the Billy Graham Institute in Wheaton, Illinois. Billy’s rapid style and Southern accent were

³⁸ Strober, 135.

³⁹ Strober, 146.

⁴⁰ C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), 260.

⁴¹ Strober, 28.

⁴² Strober, 140.

⁴³ Strober, 23.

⁴⁴ Strober, 73.

pleasing to the ear. To his credit, he preached clear law, calling sinners to repentance, labeling all as sinful from birth. In a sermon on sin, Billy clearly identified the underlying cause of all the problems in the world as sin, and the problems themselves only symptoms.⁴⁵ Billy preached first use of the law. Most often his sermons were textual, although within the text he would launch into a laundry list to prove a point.⁴⁶ This might be called the “catalog, additive, ladder or diamond facet” form of sermon construction.⁴⁷ Billy often clearly preached Christ. In a sermon on the two natures of Christ Graham clearly identified Jesus as true God and true man.⁴⁸ Billy wasn’t afraid to say again and again, “The Bible says...” And to his credit, Billy urged the people who attended his crusades to find a local church, even a Lutheran church, and to attend that church regularly.⁴⁹

Unfortunately a lot of bad was also included in Graham’s messages. He would often inject doubt by asking if his listeners were really Christians. He did this by asking questions like, “Are you filled with the Holy Spirit? Are you really alive?”⁵⁰ Billy’s preaching was saturated with, dripping with decision theology. It is in this area where Billy revealed his salesman-like skills, insisting like a car salesman that the deal had to be sealed NOW. One of his worst sermons was, “How to Live the Christian Life.” In that sermon Billy found the need for a decision under every rock, even when it came time for the bride to choose to say “I do” to the groom. And Billy wanted the decision to be public. So at the end of every sermon he’d issue his altar call, insisting on a public commitment to Christ as the choir sang, “Just as I Am.” Conversion for Billy was an act of intellect, emotion, and primarily will. Billy was also big into issuing challenges to motivate. And finally, the proof that Jesus lived and was alive was to be found in the fact that Jesus changed Billy’s life, or in the large number of people gathered for a

⁴⁵ YouTube “What’s Wrong with the World” *Billy Graham sermon Charlotte, 1958*, available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXcsIIP3bdg>.

⁴⁶ YouTube “The Holy Spirit and You” *Billy Graham sermon Sacramento, 1983*, available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AJ8FtKN9EE>.

⁴⁷ Chapell, 155.

⁴⁸ YouTube “Who is Jesus?” *Billy Graham sermon Chicago*, available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIqRH1XBw5M>.

⁴⁹ YouTube “How to Live the Christian Life” *Billy Graham sermon New York 1957*, available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvG_vN9fPvU.

⁵⁰ YouTube “The Holy Spirit in You”.

crusade, or in the hundreds that came forward for the altar call.⁵¹ Billy said he trusted in Jesus because of what Jesus did for him by changing his life.⁵²

Summary

A study of evangelical preaching in America reveals a wide variety of preaching. The preaching of Jonathan Edwards might be described as puritanical and heavy on the first use of the law. Men like Moody and Graham had the goal of evangelizing the people in this country, especially those living in large urban areas. To do this they needed to get around denominational churches but tried not to demonize them. Moody and Graham bear the moniker “salesmen” and were known for making their sales pitch for Christ. Both men used the media in a masterful way. Finally, most of the evangelical preachers up to the modern era faithfully used the law as a mirror to show people their sin.

II. An Evaluation of Modern Evangelical Preaching on the Basis of Its Homiletical Training

You might think that with giants like Moody and Graham setting the pace for preaching, the modern evangelical preacher would sit around all day reading Moody’s sermons and watching and listening to Graham preach. However, when asked about the role Moody and Graham play in homiletical training today, Dr. Greg Scharf from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS) in Deerfield wrote, “Moody and Graham, though highly respected in our circles are, in a sense, ancient history.”⁵³ If that is so, how does a person get a handle on “modern evangelical preaching” today? I suppose there are two ways. One way would be to listen to evangelical preaching on TV. You can also visit your local mega church and evaluate the preaching. The problem with that approach is that there is little continuity in the realm of what is called “evangelical.”

Part of the reason for this is because a community church doesn’t have a consistent set of credentials required for a person to be a pastor in their midst. In general, a local evangelical

⁵¹ YouTube “A Warning Against Idolatry *Billy Graham sermon Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1979*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79EEEEVPkGlg>.

⁵² YouTube “What’s Wrong with the World”.

⁵³ Dr. Greg Scharf, interview by author, e-mail correspondence, Deerfield, IL, 11 July 2014

pastor told me, an evangelical church will require a Master's degree of some kind before hiring someone to be their pastor.⁵⁴ On the other hand, if the drummer in the praise band is a nice guy, he may be appointed pastor, though he hasn't had any homiletical or theological training. The next in line on the board of elders may be appointed pastor with the idea that he will begin pursuing some kind of theological degree. And then there are those youth pastors who often deliver messages and receive the title "pastor" because they are cool and get along with young people.

A local evangelical pastor, who is a friendly acquaintance, is described in the following way on his church's web site: "His specialties include talking, sitting, sleeping, and laughing. His favorite things: Jelly Belly jelly beans, grilling out (he has many award-winning dishes), riding his motorcycle, watching movies (often times alone--he is that creepy) and his family."⁵⁵ Such a description may be provided to de-emphasize scholarly credentials due to an anti-clerical bias and to emphasize "authenticity." Yet the message that person delivers on any given Sunday is considered to be "modern evangelical preaching." Moody, Graham and Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, fit this mold. None attended a seminary. Hybels studied one year at Trinity as an undergraduate student. He then ventured out on his own, first as a youth pastor in Park Ridge, Illinois. Ultimately he started his own church. So in an evangelical's mind, if the Spirit moves someone to be a preacher and that person can find or start a congregation, to hinder that would quench the Spirit. Or if the gifts needed to be a preacher are so obvious, training seems to be superfluous.

The second way of looking at modern evangelical preaching would be to look at the kind of instruction offered by those training evangelical preachers today. Evangelical preachers come from a variety of different institutions, but in general Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL, and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, MA are the most recognized.⁵⁶ To get started we will briefly consider the works of Craddock, Lowry, Chapell and Stanley. According to Dr. Scharf from TEDS, "Craddock and Lowry are read and appreciated but would not be assigned as basic texts since they do not do much with an evangelical theology of preaching." Chapell's *Christ Centered Preaching* is listed as one of three primary books used by the homiletical department at

⁵⁴ Rick Wager

⁵⁵ <http://www.nfclz.com/#/about-us/staff>

⁵⁶ Rick Wager

Trinity, and the work by Andy Stanley and Lane Jones is listed as “the standard” for evangelical preachers today.⁵⁷ Since several of these manuals are part of the curriculum used at our Seminary, let’s briefly look at their contributions.

Fred Craddock—*Preaching*

The first work under consideration is Fred Craddock’s *Preaching* published in 1985. Let it be said right at the outset that any work of Craddock is worth reading since he’s an excellent writer. The instruction manual Craddock offers on preaching is not as direct as *Preach the Gospel*. He offers a more eclectic approach to homiletical instruction, laying out different options and describing the pros and cons of each approach. In my mind, *Preaching* would be a fine work to pick up and read after having ten years or so of homiletical experience under your belt. This would be the book to challenge the notion there is only one correct style for homiletics. Craddock offers some wonderful insights Lutherans would laud. He declares the marks of the church to be the means of grace.⁵⁸ He suggests a liturgical context for preaching⁵⁹ and calls a liturgical context vital for the health of preaching.⁶⁰ Craddock insists that lectionary preaching offers a more balanced diet to the hearer.⁶¹ Unlike his other evangelical counterparts, Fred isn’t so much interested in re-baptism, but wants a re-appropriation of baptism instead.⁶² Craddock echoes *Preach the Gospel* in his insistence on a thematic approach to a text.⁶³ He may call it the “unity” of a sermon or the “governing idea,” but he’s right on target when he writes, “To aim at nothing is to miss everything.”⁶⁴ Finally, Fred lays out the ultimate purpose of a sermon: “All of this has one end in view: that the hearer be moved to respond with attitudinal or behavioral change.”⁶⁵ With this statement, Craddock identifies the evangelical’s goal for a sermon—to affect change. Lutheran preachers would beg to differ, identifying the primary purpose of a sermon is to engender faith in Christ, trusting that such faith will express itself in

⁵⁷ Rick Wager

⁵⁸ Craddock, *Preaching*, 29.

⁵⁹ Craddock, *Preaching*, 32.

⁶⁰ Craddock, *Preaching*, 42.

⁶¹ Craddock, *Preaching*, 101.

⁶² Craddock, *Preaching*, 126.

⁶³ Craddock, *Preaching*, 145.

⁶⁴ Craddock, *Preaching*, 155-156.

⁶⁵ Craddock, *Preaching*, 166.

ways which please God and serve neighbor. Missing from this work is a strong emphasis on preaching the first use of the law.

Fred Craddock—*As One Without Authority*

Sixteen years later, in 2001, Craddock followed up *Preaching* with *As One Without Authority*. This would be the work to read if you wanted to learn about “inductive” preaching. Again, Craddock makes many wonderful points a Lutheran preacher would agree with. He rails against the social gospel movement, the insistence on deeds not words, the idea that “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day.”⁶⁶ Craddock lays out a compelling case for inductive preaching, a preaching style that seeks to recreate a congregation’s inductive process in reaching a conclusion.⁶⁷ “Inductive preaching seeks to persuade.”⁶⁸ “Preaching deductively,” Craddock argues, “is like starting a joke with the punch line.”⁶⁹ As in the case of *Preach the Gospel*, Craddock insists that the sermon’s goal is to appeal to the mind, emotion and will. However, he has his own take on this:

While all these facets (mind, emotion, will) of human capacity are involved in inductive preaching, they are involved in the more natural and normal way—that is, together. This psychological pattern is supposedly based on the natural process that salesmen understand to be the ordinary way customers come to the point of making a purchase. But the salesman-customer analogy is totally inadequate to carry the full dimensions of the preaching event. In addition, this trinitarian formula probably fits very few people. Observations and experience indicate many rather normal people place emotion earlier on the agenda, with intellect limping along later, giving reason for the course already taken.⁷⁰

The salesman analogy should sound familiar. It’s how Moody and Graham approached preaching. It’s the way Hybels views his preaching as well. James Twitchell, in his book *Shopping for God*, reports that outside Bill Hybels’ office hangs a poster that says: “What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider [of] value?”⁷¹ As I read *As One Without Authority*, the most glaring warning issued by the author for the Evangelical

⁶⁶ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 6.

⁶⁷ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 99.

⁶⁸ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 79.

⁶⁹ Lowry, 57.

⁷⁰ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 116-117

⁷¹ “Willow Creek Repents?” *Christianity Today* 18 October 2007; available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/parse/2007/october/willow-creek-repents.html>; Internet; 8 July 2014.

preacher is the pitfall of a “utilitarian” use of Scripture.⁷² In other words, the only value Scripture has is as a tool for effecting what is desired, namely life transformation.

Eugene Lowry—*The Homiletical Plot*

Eugene Lowry’s book “The Homiletical Plot,” came out the same year as Craddock’s *As One without Authority*. Lowry must have had knowledge of, or an advanced copy of *As One Without Authority*, since he quotes from it in his book. Craddock wrote the forward for Lowry’s book. In his book Lowry attempts to compare the sermon to a good movie. A good movie begins with a problem, a discrepancy, or a felt discrepancy.⁷³ The resolution of one central issue or problem is needed.⁷⁴ The author offers the steps he feels are needed to create a plot twist in the sermon: upsetting the equilibrium, creating tension, analyzing the discrepancy, disclosing the clue to resolution, anticipating the consequences. The introduction to a sermon, therefore, has the purpose of creating a scenario which begs for closure. Lowry should be commended for clearly identifying the gospel as the only way to solve the malady. Lowry urges the use of the principal of reversal, of taking the listener in one direction only to reverse that direction, the way Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount with his, “You have heard that it was said...but I tell you” (Mt 5:21,22). Lowry points out that much of what is considered modern evangelical preaching is legalistic and human effort centered. Such preaching “urges us toward greater effort to find ourselves and to do God’s will. Good advice, perhaps, but hardly the good news!”⁷⁵ “The critical matter left for explication has to do with the future now made new by the gospel.”⁷⁶ In the area of sanctification, Lowry is right on when he states, “The ‘climax’ of the sermon coincidental with the ‘asking’ of human response constitutes a form of work righteousness, no matter how much the preacher tries to avoid it.... Freedom is a consequence of the grace of God.”⁷⁷ Lowry has no use for decision theology. “Human freedom is therefore not a reservoir of capacity the preacher seeks to shape into a ‘decision for Christ’ by means of the sermon.”⁷⁸ “The

⁷² Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 60.

⁷³ Lowry, 24.

⁷⁴ Lowry, 32.

⁷⁵ Lowry, 65.

⁷⁶ Lowry, 80.

⁷⁷ Lowry, 83.

⁷⁸ Lowry, 83.

gospel is not a push from the backside of our lives into goodness but a release from inevitability of doing evil.”⁷⁹ Lowry bears the flag for gospel motivation.

After doing a brief overview of the literary efforts of Evangelicals like Craddock and Lowry, the discerning reader finds much to rejoice in. They seem to have a sense that preaching has gone stale and seek to offer alternatives intended to challenge both the preacher and hearer more in line with the way people hear today. Both seem to have detected the legalism found in evangelical homiletical circles. They both notice how the word of God is often used primarily in a utilitarian way to achieve the desired goal of transformation in the life of the believer. Both seem to have a clear understanding of what the gospel is and how it should be used, even, as in Lowry’s case, in the area of Gospel motivation. Neither of the two men are flawless in their theology. Nonetheless, if read with a discerning heart by those who have worked hard at mastering deductive preaching, both Craddock and Lowry have much to offer. Lowry especially senses that if the first use of the law is stripped from evangelical preaching, the gospel loses its power and application suffers.

Bryan Chapell—*Christ Centered Preaching*

Let’s continue our brief survey of evangelical homiletical textbooks by touching on *Christ-Centered Preaching* by Bryan Chapell. Dr. Greg Scharf from TEDS writes: “The texts in order of popularity in our circles are by Haddon Robinson (*Biblical Preaching*), Bryan Chapell (*Christ-Centered Preaching*), and John Stott (*Between Two Worlds*).” He also recommends as a resource the Evangelical Homiletics Society (www.ehomiletics.com), which will host a preaching conference entitled, “Hermeneutics for Homiletics,” held at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, October 9-11, 2014. The Chapell book is the textbook for Middler homiletics at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) and has been used at WLS for the past eight years. Just from the title of the book you can get an idea of the direction of the author. The forward clearly states,

By exploring how this gospel of redemption pervades all of Scripture, this book also establishes theological principles for redeeming the expository sermon from the well-intended but ill-conceived legalism that characterizes too much evangelical preaching. Christ-centered preaching replaces futile harangues for human striving with exhortations

⁷⁹ Lowry, 86.

to obey God as a loving response to the redeeming work of Jesus Christ and in thankful dependence on the divine enablement of his Spirit.⁸⁰

Christ-Centered Preaching, more than the other works in the area of homiletics mentioned above, comes closest to an instruction manual for prospective preachers. It also serves as a wonderful tool for evaluating evangelical preaching, since the author offers warning after warning about homiletical abuses found in evangelical churches. For example, he seems to have TV / mega church preachers in mind when he laments the lack of expository preaching in favor of illustrations and applications. Those applications are specific and concrete, but are often dominated by personal opinion, legalism or error, and offer the listener milk, not meat, resulting in the production of baby Christians.⁸¹ The resultant church ends up being an inch deep when it comes to Bible knowledge due to the lack of expository preaching, which gets scrapped in favor of legalistic exhortation.

Though Chapell incorrectly identifies the means of grace as being “prayer, study and fellowship,”⁸² you can tell this author’s heart beats with the gospel of Jesus Christ and that he earnestly wants to correct the abuses that exist in evangelical preaching. He insists that preachers must utilize something he calls the “Fallen Condition Focus.”⁸³ He encourages expository preaching using the historical grammatical way of interpreting the Bible.⁸⁴ Although he doesn’t emphasize justification the way a Lutheran would, he does emphasize the redemptive context, urging the preacher to always ask, “How does this text disclose the meaning or the need of redemption?”⁸⁵ Chapell wants grace focused preaching⁸⁶ and insists that “expository preaching is Christ-centered preaching.”⁸⁷

His greatest contribution has to do with the area of gospel motivation in preaching. He lays down powerful warnings against preaching Pharisaism⁸⁸ and an anthropocentric faith.⁸⁹

⁸⁰ Chapell, 20.

⁸¹ Chapell, 169.

⁸² Chapell, 222.

⁸³ Chapell, 48.

⁸⁴ Chapell, 131

⁸⁵ Chapell, 80.

⁸⁶ Chapell, 39.

⁸⁷ Chapell, 280.

⁸⁸ Chapell, 232.

⁸⁹ Chapell, 287.

“Make sure that you motivate believers primarily by grace, not by guilt or greed.”⁹⁰ Chapell insists that the power for change will not come from bootstrap theology but will always come from God.⁹¹ Preaching the believer to change on the basis of his/her own power is like yelling at a drowning person to “Swim! Swim!”⁹² “In Christ-centered preaching, the rules of Christian obedience do not change; the reasons [for godly living] do.”⁹³

I do believe a word of caution needs to be offered here. It’s easy to read something with Lutheran eyes. After reading Chapell’s section on the “Fallen Condition Focus,”⁹⁴ I assumed he was writing about first use of the law preaching. However, when he describes the Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) as “the messiness and pain of human existence, human concern, incompleteness, lack of wholeness, brokenness, a human problem or burden,” it doesn’t sound as if he’s willing to declare the Fallen Condition “damnation.” He gives this away when he writes, “Ultimately, a sermon is about how a text says we are to respond biblically to the FCF as it is experienced in our lives—identifying the gracious means that God provides for us to deal with the human brokenness that deprives us of the full experience and expression of his glory.”⁹⁵ Are Evangelicals preaching worldly sorrow instead of Godly sorrow? I will address that question later.

Andy Stanley and Lane Jones—*Communicating for a Change* (a play on words)

This book, published in 2006, came recommended as the “standard” for modern evangelical preachers.⁹⁶ Andy Stanley and Lane Jones are part of North Point Ministries out of Atlanta, Georgia. Their work would be a good one to examine for those who have spent time writing and delivering sermons. They too encourage preachers to “take some risks...to move out of your comfort zone as a communicator.”⁹⁷ The authors ask, “Are you willing to abandon a style, an approach, a system that was designed in another era for a culture that no longer

⁹⁰ Chapell, 219.

⁹¹ Chapell, 289.

⁹² Chapell, 221.

⁹³ Chapell, 312.

⁹⁴ Chapell, 48-52.

⁹⁵ Chapell, 51.

⁹⁶ Rick Wager

⁹⁷ Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating for a Change* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2006), 13.

exists?''⁹⁸ The authors insist that the stories of the Bible stay the same. David always ends up killing Goliath. What is needed is a fresh presentation.⁹⁹

The first part of the book uses the illustration of a truck driver needing to know where he is going. Like a truck driver, a preacher needs to 1) determine your goal, 2) pick a point, 3) create a map, 4) internalize the message, 5) engage your audience, 6) find your voice and 7) start all over. The most interesting part of the book is the ME-WE-GOD-YOU-WE concept for outlining a sermon. The ME part is where the preacher identifies something troubling him / her. The WE part transitions to the idea that both preacher and hearer struggle with the same issues. The GOD part lays out what the Bible teaches. The YOU part would be the application. And the WE part lays out a vision of what the world or the congregation would look like if we all acted in a certain way.¹⁰⁰ Stanley and Jones emphasize that a preacher should pare down a message so that it makes only ONE point, since people won't be able to walk away remembering more than one thing.¹⁰¹ The authors suggest taking a text, and instead of trying to teach four things from it, teach one and save the other three for a sermon series on that same text.

Stanley and Jones are the clearest when it comes to communicating the primary goal of evangelical preaching.

I want to see their lives changed to reflect the love of Christ.¹⁰² ... At the end of the day, I want the people in my congregation to trust God with every arena of their lives: family, finances, career, relationships, everything. That kind of trust is developed when we act on what we know. Acts of obedience allow our faith to intersect with God's faithfulness. It is at that intersection that we see God work. And when we see him work our faith gets bigger.¹⁰³

These statements reveals why Evangelicals put such a strong emphasis on the changed life. Faith, in their view, comes primarily from seeing God work, not from hearing the message. Faith doesn't come from seeing God fulfill a specific Bible promise but from witnessing that doing things God's way makes for a better and fuller life.

⁹⁸ Stanley and Jones, 89.

⁹⁹ Stanley and Jones, 148.

¹⁰⁰ Stanley and Jones, 120-121.

¹⁰¹ Stanley and Jones, 105.

¹⁰² Stanley and Jones, 84.

¹⁰³ Stanley and Jones, 97-98.

III. An Evaluation of Modern Evangelical Preaching on the Basis of Its Modern Manifestation

A Disclaimer

Though the evangelical umbrella encompasses many camps, it doesn't encompass everyone. Stanley, Hybels and Warren are Evangelicals. A rising star among evangelical preachers is Chris Brown at North Coast Church (www.northcoastchurch.com). Joel Osteen, however, is not under the umbrella. According to Evangelicals, Joel Osteen is a prosperity preacher. Some even go as far as calling his church a cult while at the same time admiring the massive organization he has built. They claim he doesn't preach the full counsel of God.¹⁰⁴ You might describe his message as the gospel according to Hananiah, a gospel of peace and safety and good things, a gospel intended to create a euphoric state (Jeremiah 28). Osteen loves to promise things that sound good but that have no Biblical basis. You can't judge modern evangelical preaching on the basis of what comes from Osteen.

The Authority of Scripture

Evangelicals will claim they abide by the authority of Scripture. Yet when a local evangelical preacher was talking about homosexuality, he indicated that HE tells his people it's a sin but that he wasn't going to insist on that view for everyone.¹⁰⁵ The statement of belief on a local evangelical church's website reveals an "essential, non-essential" viewpoint of Scripture. "In essential beliefs—we have unity (Eph 4:4–6), in nonessential beliefs—we have liberty (Ro 14:1,2,12,22), in all our beliefs—we show charity (1 Co 13:2)."¹⁰⁶ WELS Lutherans and Evangelicals may agree we have a "high regard for Scripture," but we don't necessarily view Scripture in the same authoritative way.

Format

Evangelical preachers will normally preach 30-40 minutes. The Evangelicals essentially combine Bible class and the sermon into that one event sometimes called the "sermon, talk, teaching or message."¹⁰⁷ During the week the congregation is invited to meet in homes for small

¹⁰⁴ Rick Wager

¹⁰⁵ Rick Wager

¹⁰⁶ www.nfclz.com/#/about-us/what-we-believe

¹⁰⁷ Stanley and Jones, 13.

group study. Most evangelical churches do not offer church and Bible class as two separate events on a Sunday morning. Lutherans attempt to keep Bible class and the sermon as two separate, unique things. In Bible class, Lutherans use all the latest teaching tools available to us. The sermon, however, has been kept sacrosanct as the 20 minute oration. I always thought that the primary draw for Evangelicals on Sunday morning was the band, the entertainment in the form of Christian Contemporary Music. Yet they are willing to sit through 40 minutes of “message,” even when that message isn’t live but a video recording. Why? I’ll save my thoughts on this until the end of the paper.

Video / Media

Most evangelical preachers make use of video. Andy Stanley encourages the use of any and every kind of visuals, including props. “Use visuals every chance you get. Visuals are engaging. Even bad ones.”¹⁰⁸ A local evangelical pastor told me he uses PowerPoint slides during his sermon, but he doesn’t project the text or proof passages on the screen because he wants his people to look up the text and passages in their Bibles or electronic readers.¹⁰⁹

I’m guessing the use of anything but the written or spoken word in a service likely relates to the above mentioned concept of format. If evangelicals view the teaching or message as the one shot during the week they have to reach their people with the word, they will use everything at their disposal. On the other hand, if the sermon is viewed as one presentation and Bible class as another, the slides and video will be saved for Bible class. The most effective use of video I’ve seen is when a clip is used as an introduction to a sermon. For example, a brief video shows a father shucking corn on the front porch. He looks up when he hears a truck drive up the driveway. His long lost son emerges from the truck, walks to his father and the two embrace. Thus you have a nice introduction for your series on the Prodigal Son.¹¹⁰ At the same time even Evangelicals are acutely aware that there is a definite entertainment ethic and overload in their circles, that the use of video can become the primary focus or replace the preeminent position of the word of God in the service.

¹⁰⁸ Stanley and Jones, 161.

¹⁰⁹ Rick Wager

¹¹⁰ www.chapel.org/messages/vantage-point/the-father1

Types of Preaching

The type of preaching you find in an evangelical church will reflect either the pastor's or the congregation's emphasis. If the emphasis is to reach the lost, to have a seeker type service, the preaching in such a church will likely be more topical. Billy Hybels and Willow Creek Community Church of South Barrington would follow this model. The idea behind this approach is to lure people to church, covering some topic that is of interest to them, and then, once they are present, to tell them about Jesus. From my personal experience, the "tell them about Jesus" part takes a back seat to the topic that brought them in, such as finances or marriage. Andy Stanley would say that he injects the topics of sexual purity and finances into just about every sermon series they do, not because they draw interest but because those are the issues that consume the time and attention of the average man and woman.¹¹¹

The other type of preaching found among Evangelicals is expository preaching. In evangelical circles John MacArthur would be the leading authority on expository preaching. John MacArthur's ministry is called "Grace to You" (www.gty.org). Expository preaching for Evangelicals would be "book by book" or a else series covering larger sections of the Bible at one time. Expository preaching would be designed more for the flock that is used to coming to church. A recent example of expository preaching I ran across was a three part series entitled "Vantage Point." The preacher, a man by the name of Scott Chapman, took Timothy Keller's book, *Prodigal God*, and broke it down into a three part series: 1) the Father, 2) the Son, 3) the Brother. The preaching of the parable was verse by verse, containing much exposition and little application (www.chapel.org/messages/vantage-point/the-brother). I got the distinct impression from evangelical preachers in my area that those who engage in expository preaching are considered to be more theologically conservative than those who preach topically. John MacArthur, the primary proponent of expository preaching among Evangelicals, has 61 points which he boils down into 15 points concerning the negative effects of the "superficial brand of preaching that is so rife in modern evangelicalism."¹¹² He is no fan of "seeker-sensitive" preaching.

Evangelicals seem to be aware that there are pitfalls or extremes to be avoided when taking either a topical or expository approach:

¹¹¹ Stanley and Jones, 97.

¹¹² John MacArthur, *Preaching—How to Preach Biblically* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005), xiv-xviii.

Communicators either skip along the surface of a few verses without really explaining or engaging the text. Or they go down so deep and stay there so long everybody in the audience is gasping for air. The first extreme leaves the audience biblically illiterate. The second extreme reinforces the audience's assumption that they could never understand the Bible on their own.¹¹³

Transformation / Life Change

As noted earlier, the stated goal of evangelical preaching is a changed life. Graham pointed to his changed life as proof that God was real. Andy Stanley stated that the primary goal of preaching is to change lives. "God is Real," the slogan for a local church chain, insinuates that the proof that God is real is found in changed lives. Evangelicals give credit to God the Holy Spirit for this change, changing a person from the inside out. The image of Christ, they would say, is put on more and more by the grace of God, but they go way too far in this area. Evangelicals today preach themselves into the camp of the Pietists.

Evangelical preaching—primarily the content of evangelical preaching—will ultimately need to be evaluated on the basis of the proper or improper use of law and gospel. To this end, in his *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* C.F.W. Walther addresses the error of the Evangelicals seeking proof of conversion or proof of God's existence from piety. In Thesis 16, Walther states, "The Word of God is not rightly divided when the preacher tries to make people believe that they are truly converted as soon as they have become rid of certain vices and engage in certain works of piety and virtuous practices."¹¹⁴ The evaluation of evangelical preaching, as we will continue to see, primarily has to do with the correct division of law and gospel. However, when the Lutheran preacher gives the impression that things are now right with God because the live-in has now tied the knot, he does the same thing, failing to address the primary issue of sin before God.

Dumb or Damned, Part One—Moralizing

The oft leveled complaint about evangelical preaching is that it is moralizing, a preaching of Pharisaism. When the goal of getting at the transformed life becomes the primary goal, without any thought to motivation, then Jesus is either assumed or skipped in preaching. Walther addresses the mistake of using the law to motivate in Thesis 5: "The first manner of confounding of the Law and Gospel is one of the most clearly recognized—and the grossest...

¹¹³ Stanley and Jones, 126.

¹¹⁴ Walther, 299.

Christ is represented as a new Moses, or Lawgiver, and the Gospel turned into a doctrine of meritorious works.”¹¹⁵ Evangelical preaching can then be evaluated not on the basis of what is present but on the basis of what is missing. Authors like Chapell are acutely aware of this problem and believe the answer is in Christ-centered preaching, a putting of Christ back into the center of things. It sounds good, especially to Lutheran ears. However, another question needs to be asked: “What kind of Christ is being preached? Is the Christ being preached the Savior from damnation, or is he the one who can help fix the mess you made on earth?” If so, then the Christ sought after would be the earthly king Christ, the one who can / should deliver us from those nasty problems, like those mean Romans. This kind of Christ was the Christ who was sought after by the disciples right up until Jesus’ feet left the ground in his ascension into heaven (Ac 1:6).

To get at some answers, the evangelical preacher’s view of the law will need to be examined. In general, an evangelical preacher would state that the law was not given to make us look good but so that we can live life to the best and the fullest. The law was not given to restrict but to make life more full. God’s grace fulfills the law. The Bible in their view is not a law book but a love letter. Evangelicals view all law in terms of the Book of Proverbs, as an instruction book for Godly living. It was described to me in this way. If a mechanic recommends 10w30 oil for your car, and you instead put olive oil in your engine, you are not very smart since you didn’t listen and now your engine is ruined. To use the law in the first sense, to show the sinner his / her sin, would be oppressive to the evangelical preacher. They know Romans 3:20, but they would rather attempt to use the law as something put in charge to lead us to Christ (Gal 3:23-25).

To evangelical preachers, preaching the law as a mirror would be oppressive. So what about thundering preachers of damnation like Edwards, Moody, Sunday and Graham? Evangelicals would state that their purpose was to evangelize, and yet isn’t that the claimed purpose of the seeker service? Evangelicals complain Osteen is not evangelical because he doesn’t proclaim the full counsel of God, but at the same time they are unwilling to proclaim the law as a mirror. Evangelical preaching has evolved away from using the law as a mirror to using it primarily as a guide. Law preaching in evangelical churches has turned into an attempt to discover felt and shared needs. A laundry list of woes will be articulated to prove how stupid we

¹¹⁵ Walther, 69.

were for not using 10w30. This creates an air of self-pity and a desire for sympathy. “How dumb we have been for not following God’s rules. Look at how messed up things are because of it. Thank goodness God has something to say about this.”¹¹⁶ This sounds to me much like worldly sorrow but not godly sorrow (2 Co 7:10).

Dumb or Damned, Part Two--Come on! Jesus really wants this!

When it comes to evaluating evangelical preaching, I no longer ask the question, “Is Christ mentioned in this message?” I ask, “What kind of Christ is mentioned, if he’s mentioned?” Bill Hybels described a very different Christ for me as he attempted to get me to sign up to be re-baptized when I visited his church in August of 2009. He clearly stated that my infant baptism didn’t count, that Willow had a rule I had to be at least 13 to get baptized, that I had to sign up on the website for this baptism. The reason he gave to be baptized was not so that my sins could be washed away, but because Jesus wanted this for me. So, come on, be baptized. When the law isn’t used as a mirror, Jesus no longer is Savior from damnation. Instead he’s now the fixer of problems and the one who wants things for us, and since he wants certain things for us, we ought to want them for ourselves as well. Jesus has now become one who shames his people into action.

Dumb or Damned, Part Three—First Use of the Law, Gospel, Third Use of the Law

If the law is not preached as described in Romans 3:20, to make us conscious of sin, then there is no need to hear about Christ as Savior from sin. The need for a Savior is then replaced with the need for someone to prove his worth by fixing problems and giving me life to the full. In evaluating modern evangelical preaching, a determination has to be made about the kind of Christ being preached. That determination will become clear if the law is not used to preach the sinner to hell. To summarize, evangelical preaching is backward. It consists of: Moralizing alone, or moralizing attempting to use the gospel to motivate. However, if the gospel is something other than the good news of salvation, it is no gospel at all.

A thorough search of evangelical preaching manuals will fail to uncover any discussion of the proper distinction and use of law and gospel in preaching. Chapell’s “Fallen Condition Focus” comes close, but doesn’t hit the nail on the head. Evangelists like Moody and Graham did a better job when they described the woes of life as mere symptoms of the underlying cause

¹¹⁶ Stanley and Jones, 126.

of sin that damns. Yet *Preach the Gospel* covers the importance of clear law-gospel preaching in great detail:

It is a rarity to hear sermons in our circles without any gospel from greeting to vatum. But it happens. Such sermons apparently intend to produce a change of attitude and behavior. They are nothing but legalistic moralizing. They attempt to produce sanctification without the motivation of justification. They employ law to do what only the gospel can do. Confusion of law and gospel may creep into our preaching in less obvious ways. It happens when we present the gospel and then follow it up with an encouragement to sanctification which treats the new life as something a Christian ought now to be able to produce instead of as something God produces in and through his people.¹¹⁷

The authors of a book published in 1978 describe accurately the pitfall modern evangelical preachers have fallen into. But they also give the reminder that Lutheran preachers can make the same law / gospel mistakes. Evangelicals may have something to offer in the way of style, but if the confusion of law / gospel exists, then the only thing to learn from the content will be a lesson in “how not to do it.”

IV. Final Points for the Preacher to Ponder

A Sermon Meant to Evangelize

Moody and Graham were not pastors. They were self-proclaimed evangelists. They preached on simple gospel themes such as atonement, the person of Jesus, and salvation by grace through faith. They travelled from place to place doing this. In a certain sense this matched the activity of the New Testament evangelists like Philip the Evangelist (Ac 21:8). The job description for an evangelist was to share the good news by preaching it or writing it. In Lutheran circles we recognize the gift of evangelism, that “God gave some to be evangelists” (Eph 4:11), that some congregations have trained evangelists, but we don’t have men who function as evangelists as did Moody and Graham.

It caused me to pause and think that maybe, every once and a while, a sermon should be written with the effort to evangelize, or to “share the good news with the congregation” as if the

¹¹⁷ Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, *Preach the Gospel: A Textbook for Homiletics* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982), 9.

congregation were hearing it for the first time. The crowds that attended revivals and crusades came because they wanted their problem with God to be addressed.

Some Sunday mornings the minister should take the congregation by the hand and with them step off the dimensions of their inheritance as children of God. Some of them have been ‘preached at’ for years but have never been given a peek into the treasury, much less to run their fingers through the unsearchable riches of Christ.¹¹⁸

The Role of Personality in Preaching

“You feel his compassion, his honesty.” Evette Cager made that comment about Joel Osteen after Joel and his wife Victoria hosted a rally at Cellular One Field, Chicago, IL, in August of 2011.¹¹⁹ The same comments were made about Moody and Graham. It was said that the reason they were successful was because of their personal, obvious commitment to the cause of God and evangelism. The one major addition the Chapell book makes when it comes to preaching has to do with “personality of the preacher,” a subject that does not receive any attention in *Preach the Gospel*. Chapell identifies the personality of the preacher as one of the main reasons a person will listen.

The apostle Paul taught of the inherent efficacy of the Word, but he also related his personal resolve to put no stumbling block to the gospel in anyone’s path (2 Co 6:3). Aristotle’s classic rhetorical distinctions, though not inspired, can help us understand the basic components of every message we preach so that we do not needlessly cause others to stumble over what or how we speak. In classical rhetoric, three elements compose every persuasive message:

logos: the verbal content of the message, including its craft and logic;

pathos: the emotive features of a message, including the passion, fervor and feeling that a speaker conveys and the listener’s experience;

ethos: the perceived character of the speaker, determined most significantly by the concern expressed for the listener’s welfare. Aristotle’s belief (confirmed in countless modern studies) was that ethos is the most powerful component of persuasion.¹²⁰

Joel Osteen seems to understand this concept. That must be why he and his wife are always telling me they love me. Is that such a bad thing? I believe Jesus told his congregation the same thing (Jn 13:34). I believe that Jesus also showed them the full extent of his love (Jn 13:1).

¹¹⁸ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 72.

¹¹⁹ Ariel Cheung, “Joel Osteen brings message of hope to Chicago” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 7 August 2011; available from <http://www.suntimes.com/news/metro/6924204-417/joel-osteen-brings-message-of-hope-to-chicago.html#.U9evfPldVng>; Internet; 8 August 2014.

¹²⁰ Chapell, 34.

The idea that the personality of the preacher has a role to play in the effectiveness of our preaching may make a WELS preacher feel uncomfortable. The ministry is not about the man but about the message. How many WELS pastors have their picture on the website of their church and feel a bit squeamish about that? To their credit, men like Hybels have been very aware of the pitfalls of being the center of attention and the temptations involved. They are aware that a hyper-focus on personality can result in a personality driven church, or, as we would likely call it, a cult of personality.

On the other hand, if there is no conviction exuded on the part of the preacher, it can speak an opposite message of what is being spoken. John Shaw, an early American pastor, illustrated this viewpoint in an ordination sermon.

It's true as one observes, God can work by what means he will; by a scandalous, domineering, self-seeking preacher, but it is not his usual way. Foxes and wolves are not nature's instrument to generate sheep. Whoever knew much good done to souls by any pastors but such as preached and lived in the power of love, working by a clear, convincing light, and both managed by a holy, lively seriousness? You must bring fire to kindle fire.¹²¹

WELS preachers pray our personalities don't get in the way. On the other hand, can the example of your personal conviction be a part of convincing your hearers that what you say from God's word is true? How can the person in the pew be convinced that patience is a Christian virtue if the pastor is losing his patience at every turn? Surely, the preacher can provide a better example of grace than the grace that is needed to cover his own conduct when it is regularly inconsistent with his preaching.

Learning through Exposure

When you learn about men like Moody and Graham and discover where they got their homiletical training from, you realize it didn't come from a book or a seminary. It primarily came from observing and listening to the great preachers of their day. Joel Osteen learned his craft by watching his father, the founder of Lakewood Community Church in Houston, TX. Andy Stanley learned how to preach from his father Charles.

It may be helpful to pause and remember that for the majority of the history of the Christian Church on earth, preachers did not learn their craft the way the men in this room learned it—in a classroom. Jesus had disciples follow him around and listen to him so they

¹²¹ Chapell, 34.

could learn what to say and how to say it. Yes, they had their vicar experience, when they were sent out two by two. But they learned by listening to and observing a great preacher. Saul learned how to preach by being a disciple of Gamaliel. Timothy and Titus learned how to do it by emulating Paul.

Can the preachers in this room learn a new thing or two by watching the example of others? We do that and rejoice in the presence of good preaching when we get together for conferences or at a gathering like this one. Yet how often do you sit down and watch a Billy Graham sermon on YouTube unless you have to for an assignment? You can learn a lot, both good and bad. The instruction you will receive by observation will more often have to do with style than content. Andy Stanley would add to this advice the encouragement to watch yourself preach. He believes that great self-improvement and tweaking is possible if the preacher would spend time watching himself preach.¹²²

Format Change

The format of the Evangelicals intrigued me. If the people are willing to listen for forty minutes, could Lutherans double the length of our sermons without doing injustice to our word / sacrament balance? Might it be possible to shorten the service on a non-communion Sunday to make room for a longer presentation? Most of the men in this room could easily double the length of their sermons. It's keeping the sermon to twenty minutes that is the problem.

Initially I thought this might be an “evangelical style / Lutheran substance” experiment to try. However, Evangelicals take this approach not only because they combine sermon and Bible class into one but also because they provide Christian education for kids during the service. In their view, the kids haven't reached the age of accountability yet. So the evangelical service is for adults. Lutherans want families to worship together. We want children in our worship services. We also want a thorough instruction in God's word for our young. A forty minute presentation, especially for young kids who then are expected to attend Sunday School, might be too much.

Something Worth Trying?

If a modern Evangelical has developed an effective means of communicating like the ME-YOU-GOD-YOU-WE format, is it possible to take that format and then use it while still

¹²² Stanley and Jones, 179.

making a proper distinction between law and gospel? I think it is. However, the identification of a problem in the ME part and the generalization of that problem as a shared problem would then need to be taken to the next level. The real problem is not that we have ruined our lives but that our relationship with God has been ruined and that as a result hell, not heaven, is our proper home. Another issue to watch out for would be the “me” centered approach to preaching. If you look at the ME-YOU-GOD-YOU-WE format, you see that God only gets 20% of the time on the agenda. A careful scrutiny would have to be made -- perhaps by circuits in study -- to see if a work like Stanley’s *Communicating for a Change* can be made to serve Lutheran substance.

Conclusion

Certain truths are common about preachers. We want to improve our craft. So we are here for this symposium. But are you really here for the essays? Yes and no. I’m here mostly for the worship service. More specifically, I’m here to listen to good preaching. Isn’t that the highlight of a symposium, a worship conference, a district convention or conference, a synod convention or a pastor’s conference? By the way, I believe three out of the five sermons preached at the most recent National Worship Conference hosted at Carthage College were preached in an inductive style, and those three sermons were preached by younger preachers. We love good preaching. But our definition of good preaching has been molded in a different way than the definition our listener might adhere to, especially our young listeners. He / she may say, “I don’t know what it was, but there was something good about that message in the evangelical church.”

OK. I won’t dismiss that opinion out of hand. Maybe there’s something to be learned. Through careful examination we know it wasn’t the content. Instead it was the style. If style and method of delivery are changing, then our love for souls entrusted to our care will cause us to learn about those methods, utilize what is good, and leave the rest. Our goal will be to have them love preaching as much as we do, because in preaching Christ as Savior is proclaimed. The goal is to preach the Gospel. However, that goal has an audience—people. People and the way people communicate are constantly changing. And so I owe it to that young man who touted the methods of the evangelical preacher to, at the very least, become more informed about what is going on in the preaching world today.

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