

A Reaction to Pastor Andrew Bauer's Essay:
"An Evaluation of Modern Evangelical Preaching"

Say, Pastor, you know who Charles Stanley is, don't you? Well, did you know his son Andy just started up a church on North Point Parkway? Oh, you do? Isn't it incredible what they're doing over there? That has to be 10 million dollars' worth of new construction. Their parking lots are so huge, Pastor, they actually have to shuttle people to the entrance. Sunday mornings so many people come, they have three traffic cops waving cars in and out of the place. I hear there are half a dozen musicians on the payroll fulltime. And they've got Andy Stanley. From everything I hear, the guy is an amazing preacher!!

It's almost twenty years later, but I can still hear church members using a double exclamation point when they gushed about Andy Stanley and his new church. Here we were, a little mission outpost in a suburb of the ATL, trying to grow our way out of a tiny WEF unit, adding maybe ten communicants a year. Meanwhile an Evangelical preacher explodes onto the scene *à la* John the Baptist. Instantly he's drawing crowds of thousands to his sparkling, sprawling facilities -- and all this just three miles down the road.

What our essayist heard is what I and many of us have had to respond to: "Why don't *you* preach that way, Pastor?" Afterwards I would even ask myself: Would it be *wrong* to imitate preaching that's different from what the seminary taught me yet attractive to so many of today's churchgoers?

Pastor Bauer reminded me of what I dare not imitate. Whether it's the renowned preacher from North Point Ministries or the pastor of the new community church on the edge of town, the Evangelical struggles to make a proper distinction between law and gospel. "To use the law in the first sense, to show the sinner his / her sin, would be oppressive to the Evangelical preacher" (p 27). Proclaiming the law "primarily as guide" (p 26), he urges his listener to place his attitudes and behaviors in line with God's ways, with Jesus "either assumed or skipped" (p 25). An error of which only the Evangelical preacher is capable? Hardly. "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" (p 25). Three times our essayist cited Walther's *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, implying that every preacher does well to stay familiar with those lectures he first read in college. I'll suggest he does even better when he includes Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philipians, Colossians, indeed, all of St. Paul's epistles in his devotional routine.

As my brother pointed out, I must also be fully aware regarding "what is missing" (p 27) from the preaching of the Evangelicals. With rare exception, the unconditional gospel proclaimed *in the Word* is missing. Likewise, indeed with no exception, the gospel given *in the sacraments* is missing. Sadly, the Evangelical preacher has been trained to deny that these are means of God's saving grace in Christ. "Moody had little use for the sacraments," the essayist announced, "declaring he had nothing against baptism but that he wanted instead the baptism by the Spirit" (p 7). Perhaps Craddock "wants a re-appropriation of baptism" (p 16), yet I've discovered that he regards it merely as "the outward sign of our commitment to God's inclusive and forgiving love."¹ Much as one might admire the communication skills of Evangelical preachers, this error cannot be rectified with the occasional wave in the direction of the font or altar. We who are called to administer the sacraments are called also to preach them boldly, vividly, and frequently. The sacraments, after all, are pure gospel.²

¹ Fred Craddock, *Speaking of Dying* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 92.

² Pastor Jonathan Micheel, in his 2003 WLS Symposium essay *The Church Offers Holy Communion*: "How often do we speak of the Sacrament in our preaching? ... The text will make it clear what to highlight. That said, though, I offer this encouragement (and if anyone wants to accuse me of talking out of both sides of my mouth, let him go ahead): Refer to the Sacrament frequently in preaching! Why? The Sacrament is the gospel ... pure gospel." What Pastor Micheel urged regarding the Lord's Supper can certainly also be said regarding Holy Baptism.

So if I must be on my guard against their misuse of law and gospel and their disregard for the sacraments, what practices of the Evangelicals might I still consider? Pastor Bauer mentioned that both Dwight Moody and Billy Graham “bear the moniker ‘salesmen’ and were known for making their sales pitch for Christ” (p 14). That the Savior’s spokesmen would attempt to sell their listeners on making a decision to accept him as Lord is nothing less than blasphemous. Still, I wonder whether I might grow as a preacher if I too viewed my preaching as an attempt to “sell” my listeners on the gifts Jesus’ gives so freely. Would that make me more willing to portray attention-getting images with my words or even on a screen? Would I spend more time planning (outlining) my sales pitch so that my listeners could follow my line of argument and hear not one but several reasons to appropriate the Lord’s blessings? Would I be more demanding of myself, knowing that I “lose the sale” when I distract my audience with excessive verbiage or stock phrases? Would I consider occasionally breaking out of the patterns I learned at the seminary so as to sharpen my sermon’s line of thought? Would I be more focused? Would I recognize the urgency? It seems to me that the Book of Acts is a series of sermons interspersed with a remarkable narrative. In it Luke tells us that the apostles “preached” and “encouraged” (εὐαγγελίζω, κηρύσσω, παρακαλέω). Yet he also observes rather frequently (Acts 13:43; 17:4; 18:4,13; 19:8,26; 26:28; 28:23-24) that they would try to “persuade” or “convince” (πείθω) their hearers. Without denying the vital role of the Holy Spirit, is that really any different than trying to “sell” one’s listeners on the truths of eternal life?

Our essayist gave us a glimpse of five homiletics textbooks authored by Evangelicals. I’m grateful for the reminder that non-Lutherans do think about preaching and do have worthwhile observations for me to consider. For instance, Pastor Bauer cited Bryan Chapell and his contention that *ethos*, “the perceived character of the speaker, . . . is the most powerful component of persuasion” (p 29). Would you and I ever say that? Probably not. We would contend that the Holy Spirit alone can turn the heart and will of the hearer. Still, why should “the idea that the personality of the preacher has a role to play in the effectiveness of our preaching . . . make a WELS preacher feel uncomfortable” (p 30)? Why would the fact that I have a personality only prompt me to “pray (that it) doesn’t get in the way”? I was pleased that our essayist challenged that notion. “On the other hand,” he asked, “can the example of your personal conviction be a part of convincing your hearers that what you say from God’s word is true?” (p 30) Of course it can. I’ll add that our listeners do indeed care that the man who preaches God’s Word week after week is compassionate, gentle, humble, loving, living a life of repentance, and fully devoted to his Lord and to his people. Let’s be willing to acknowledge that personality, or, better, Christian character, have a tremendous impact on whether others will tune in to our preaching.

It’s late in the day. Generous hors d’oeuvres and cold beverages are just minutes away, and who am I to keep you away from them. Still, can I share one more reaction to our essay? Pastor Bauer asked us, “Can the preachers in this room learn a new thing or two by watching the example of others?” (p 32) My own answer: Absolutely they can. But learning “a new thing or two” comes not just from watching Evangelicals like Billy Graham or Andy Stanley on YouTube or even from watching recordings of your own preaching. Sitting in this room are hundreds of men who for years and years have been devoted to preaching the good news that glorious God for the sake of his Son calls sinners to himself and pours out grace after grace upon them. As pastors called to shepherd a flock of Jesus’ sheep, they hone their preaching skills week after week -- agonizing over how best to communicate the text, digging deeply into the Scriptures, praying for guidance, occasionally trying out new “formats” -- all to the glory of God and the joy and edification of Christ’s holy people. Most of these men around you have a church website, and many allow their congregation to post their recorded sermons. So when you find a brother who confesses the faith as you do and preaches in a way you appreciate, what’s keeping you from devoting an occasional twenty minutes to watching his sermons? I’ll dare to say that such an exercise has a two-fold blessing. You will be nourished by the Spirit through the Word, which always accomplishes what the Lord desires. Plus, as our essayist put it, you will be “learning through exposure.”

Thank you, Pastor Bauer, for a thought-provoking essay.

Paul E. Zell
September 22, 2014