

EVALUATION OF SERMONS IN CONSISTORY

1. IMPORTANCE OF THE SERMON

Matthew 28:19, 1 Peter 1:23-2:3

Lord's Day 31, Q&A 84 and Lord's Day 35, Q&A 98

2. THE CONSISTORY AND THE PREACHING

John 10:3,4, Titus 1:5-16

Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons (p. 625)

Article 22 CO – The Office of Elder (p. 652), Article 74 CO – No Lording it Over Others

Handshake (Shaking Elder)

3. REGULAR SERMON DISCUSSION IN CONSISTORY

Proverbs 27:17

4. SUGGESTED APPROACH TO SERMON DISCUSSION IN CONSISTORY

INDIVIDUAL SERMON DISCUSSION

An outline for discussion of a specific sermon in the consistory

1. Message of the sermon

- What was the message the sermon conveyed?
- What did this sermon want to accomplish with the hearers?

2. Explanation of the Bible passage

- Does the message come out of the text?
- Is the sermon well-structured?
- Does the sermon make the Bible passage more understandable?
- Does the sermon leave one with issues/questions which should have been dealt with?

3. Reaching the listeners

- Does this sermon help the congregation in its service of God here?
- For which members of the congregation could this sermon be applicable?
- Are there members who would not be reached by this sermon? If so, how and why?

4. Setup of the sermon.

- Does the setup fit the message the sermon wants to convey?
- Were the listeners taken along as the sermon unfolded? If you got lost along the way, where and why?
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5. Other discussion points

6. Evaluation of discussion

- What insights does the discussion offer for future preaching of the Word?

GENERAL SERMON DISCUSSION

Sermon discussion is dialogue about the preaching of Word by the consistory. Preaching is the main part of a minister's responsibility (Eph.4:11, 1Tim.5:17, 2Tim.4:1,2). It is therefore given as his first task in CO Art.16, in letters of call, and in the Form for Ordination of Ministers (BoP p.607). Ministers have been trained at seminary to bring the Word. It is a task of the elders, however, according to the Form for Ordination, Art.22 Church Order, to assist the minister of the Word with good counsel and advice and to supervise their doctrine and conduct. That includes assisting the minister with his task to bring the Word to the congregation as effectively as possible. Sermon discussion should, therefore, be an item on the consistory agenda on a regular basis. How often? I believe that a number of set times are best, say after each Lord's Supper celebration, to use a marker. A minister regularly needs to hear from the elders concerning the sermons, otherwise he may be losing touch with the congregation without realizing it. Or without realizing it he may be falling into preaching practices which distract from the goal of bringing the Word (e.g., too much repetition or too much emphasis on obedience on the one hand, or God's promise of grace on the other).

The emphasis is on discussion. It is not intended to be a sermon criticism session. The purpose is to ensure the congregation is being fed with the gospel. Elders and minister share in that task (CO Art.74), working together for equipping the saints for ministry and for edifying the body of Christ (Eph.4:12). The more that shared aim is kept in mind, the less the inclination for the minister to become defensive and the elders to vent about the minister's inadequacies.

Regular sermon discussion with the aim above is edifying for both minister and elders. The minister can feel less lonely in his task. He's able to discern from the discussion how well the preaching is reaching the hearts of the people and whether the gospel is really touching issues that matter to them. He can also communicate with the elders about the struggles and joys of his sermon-making. On the other hand, the discussion is also beneficial for elders because it helps them understand the work of their minister. They also have the task to watch over the souls of the congregation. They have to reflect on what they hear at the home visits and in their pastoral care and among the people in general, and their opinion is important for the spiritual well-being of the people entrusted to their care. In sermon discussion the elders have a regular opportunity to pass their thoughts about that, so the minister can grow in his task and the congregation can receive the spiritual food needed so they can continue and grow in in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Below are some points for sermon discussions. These are not intended to be exhaustive, they provide "hangers" for broader discussions in the consistory. They can possibly be discussed two at a time. If elders have these and they are scheduled, they can be reflected on beforehand.

1. The main thing is not whether the latest exegetical and technical discoveries have been worked into the sermon, but whether the sermons bring a clear message for the congregation out of the texts. It can be beneficial in that regard to consider whether the structure of the sermons (themes and points) truly reflect the message. Connected with that is also the presentation and delivery of the sermon by the minister. Does the presentation encourage the hearers to take the message of the sermon to heart? Is there passion?
2. The minister shouldn't preach over the heads of the hearers with difficult terms and concepts. What is preached should be "digestible" to the bulk of the people in the pews. Is the preaching geared to the hearers, the congregation in its circumstances? Is the youth is also reached, is the language used also understandable at their level?
3. Careful tuning in the real-life situations of the hearers is an important matter in the pastoral care which should come from the pulpit. Do the people in the pew receive what they need for their daily life in their Lord? Is there sometimes also attention for different groups of people in the congregation who deal with special circumstances in life – i.e. the seniors, chronically sick, handicapped, singles, childless couples, etc.?
4. The congregation doesn't expect a minister to give his judgment about all sorts of issues from the pulpit. However, there needs to be application in the sermons, and it shouldn't only be left up to the members of the congregation to apply it all themselves. How is the application in the preaching? Are

the real life experiences of the hearers explained out of the Word? Is there real direction for living given from the Bible?

5. Is the preaching Biblical, and is Christ being proclaimed? To use more difficult terms: are the sermons Theocentric and Christological? It should be apparent to the congregation that God Himself communicates to them via the Word.

6. Is there evidence of study and reflection on the Word? Is there real delving into the treasures of the gospel? In the preaching, after all, the people have to hear how good it is to walk with the God of the covenant. Is there a line of thought in the sermons which people are easily able to follow?

7. Are wrong ideas and doctrines clearly pointed out and refuted? Is the congregation sufficiently warned about the temptations they face in real life in this world, and are they also instructed how to and equipped to fight against them?

8. Are contemporary events in the world we live in such as disasters, wars, poverty brought into the picture? Preaching should not be "timeless" but current. Are issues in our own country such as materialism, contemporary attitudes toward roles of men and women, abortion, euthanasia, etc., etc. touched on in the preaching?

9. Is there a balanced text choice from the whole Bible? Is attention paid to the events of salvation (advent, Christmas, suffering and death of Christ, etc.)? Is there attention for the sacraments when they take place? In connection with this, does the minister proclaim the whole counsel of God, or is choice of text too one-sided somewhere?

10. Is the preaching covenantal, is the whole congregation spoken to as God's people? Are the people called to faith and repentance? Are both sin and grace, promise and obligation preached? Is there comfort and warning? Is the kingdom of heaven opened and also closed for the hearers (LD31)?

11. Is the need for love for one another, not just in words but especially in deeds, emphasized in the preaching? Does the preaching support also the work of the deacons, which is to bring to deeds the love for one another displayed at the table of the Lord? Is there a regular call to show mercy to all?

12. Does the scriptural basis of the confession come out in the catechism preaching? Also, is the Reformed doctrine explained clearly in the catechism preaching? Are the hearers able to relate the doctrine we confess to their everyday lives?

13. A basic question which sometimes needs reflection and discussion: Is there evidence that the congregation is being edified by the preaching, and does the gospel bear fruit in the lives of the members? Elders have the task to look for this in the home visits. Is there evidence of spiritual growth with the people in your wards over time, also those who struggle in this respect?

14. Another aspect of the preaching involves the minister's resources and time constraints for sermon preparation. Some questions that could be asked in this regard are: Is the minister in danger of becoming too involved with pastoral situations or in committees or projects or is he able to keep the bringing of the Word his main priority? Is there good division of labour in the consistory so the minister, though involved in pastoral work, is able to take time for study and reflection on the Word? Does he have sufficient means for purchasing good books and equipment to dig into the Word?

15. Finally, it is also beneficial to pay attention to other aspects of the worship service.

a. The liturgy. Are the text, Scripture readings, and songs appropriate for the worship and the bringing of the Word? How is the law introduced and read on Sundays?

b. The public prayers. Is God glorified and thanked in prayer? Are the prayers too routine? Are the general needs of the congregation as well as specific matters (childless couples, seniors, singles, handicapped, financially needy, etc.) sufficiently brought to the Lord in prayer? Is enough attention paid to the needs of the world in which we live? Are the general church matters (mission, theological college, Christian schools, broader assemblies, etc.) brought before the Lord in prayer?

c. Is there satisfaction with the manner in which baptism is administered?

d. Is the congregation edified by the manner in which the Lord's Supper is celebrated?