

Reality versus theories of preaching



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Based on the method of naturalistic observation with its own set of flaws, mainly the problem of subjectivity, Richard Lischer's *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church* is a case study of preaching to a group of semi-literate people in southern Illinois. With a PhD in theology from a prestigious university, Lischer finds himself out of place at the Cana Lutheran Church in New Cana. He knows far too much for the majority of people of New Cana to understand. Yet, it is his first assignment as a minister.

He must spend three years in New Cana before he can write about his experiences in *Open Secrets* – a true story of preaching, as compared to theories of religion alone. After having studied all possible theories of Christian faith from the masters, Lischer must face the people that he has studied long and hard to minister to. Yet, the people of New Cana are completely unlike the masters of theology. Among them are a wife batterer whom Lischer eventually gets arrested and a thirteen year old girl suffering from cerebral palsy.

The preacher must learn how to celebrate ordinary people's lives among the people of rural America. He must counsel families on the verge of breaking, baptize babies on the verge of death, and also celebrate new marriages in New Cana. What is more, he must learn from the ordinary people what they have learned about Christianity, in particular, their methods of prayer, healing, service, etc. Although the preacher is rather grumpy at first, he has learned from the masters that compassion is one of the keys to healthy Christian living.

Besides, persistence pays off. Lischer does not leave New Cana before his assignment has been completed. He must learn to respect those that know less than he does. After all, the Christ was similarly sent to people that knew less than he did. Hence, Lischer must learn the realities of preaching after having studied long and hard from those that preached best. Indeed, the new minister of the Cana Lutheran Church was well prepared to deal with the challenges of reality.

Loving one's neighbor' was the most essential theory to apply in the situation that Lischer found himself in. Masters had spoken to him through books. Had he turned his back on the people of New Cana, Lischer would not have been able to practice what he had desired to preach, that is, the Gospel. As mentioned previously, the chief problem with Lischer's case study of preaching – that is, Open Secrets – is that his analysis is based on his personal thoughts and feelings alone.

Apart from this weakness, Open Secrets is fundamentally flawed because the preacher appears to be boasting about his education and upper class upbringing when he looks down upon those that know less than he does and the places he must visit for their sake. He describes a dingy eatery in addition to a hog-killing that he had to visit for the sake of the poor people of New Cana. Although Lischer managed to get his work done, the fact that he described such places with reference to the people of New Cana most definitely makes him a boaster in the minds of the people of New Cana in the very least.

Similarly, Lischer appears to mock those that cannot seem to understand all that he has studied about religion. His memoir may be considered humorous for this reason. Then again, it is not part of a church minister's job to look down upon the people he or she ministers to and the places that they occupy day after day. The strength of the book lies in the fact that Lischer is honest in his opinions. Other books authored by him, for example, *Theories of Preaching*, easily illustrate that he has, indeed, studied Christianity in great depth.

Dr. William Hendriksen has written the *New Testament Commentary – Philippians*, where he states that all people who belong to the church must be “striving side by side for the gospel-truth... mainly in spreading God's glorious redemptive truth which centers in Jesus Christ....” Even though Lischer believes in this fact of Christianity, the reader is still left to wonder about the thoughts of the people of New Cana after they have read *Open Secrets*. Would they stop trusting pastors because of Lischer's boasting? Would they fear approaching pastors because the latter might end up writing books that mock the common folks?

Would they also fear confession at church? Lischer should have thought such questions through before mocking New Cana as he did. The author of *Open Secrets* trusts in the values of compassion and neighborly love nevertheless, which is why his assignment at New Cana ended with a banquet after three years. The minister thought that he had been successful by the end of the third year. But, this was only possible because he did not give up on Christian values of love and compassion even as he felt deeply

uncomfortable about ministering to New Cana. For new ministers of church, this lesson is sufficient.

Lischer's background was completely different from that of the people of New Cana, but it did not really matter when it came to performing the job of a pastor. After all, the Gospel is for everybody, regardless of race, creed or class. The only characteristic of Lischer that other pastors should work to avoid is boasting. After all, there is a reason why some people must be teachers or ministers while others must be students or followers. If everybody holding a PhD degree were to start mocking his or her students, the entire process of education would be marred.

Church ministers need to remember, therefore, that they are taught to know more than those they approach to teach and help. Instead of boasting, ministers like Lischer should perform their assignments with humility. This would allow congregations to trust their ministers to boot. If the congregation realizes that the pastor is looking down upon the common folks because the latter know less than he or she does, the pastor would not only be distrusted but also looked down upon for his or her beliefs.

Likewise, if every teacher were to look down upon his or her students, the latter would not respect their educator and end up mocking the education that he or she imparts. To practice what one preaches is essential to the job of a pastor, after all. Failing to do so is hypocrisy. The readers of Open Secrets in New Cana probably do not appreciate Lischer anymore. Perhaps they would never trust another pastor with a background similar to his.