

# Preach the Word

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## Joy and Confidence from the Basics - Part 2

By Mark Paustian

If there were such a thing as “Paustian’s Famous Home-Cooked Chili,” I imagine creating each new batch by some combination of habit, instinct, and muscle memory. A handful of this. A dash of that. But the messier and more ill-defined the process, the more I need to lift a ladle of the stuff to my mouth before serving it up for my friends. “Hmm. It’s missing something. But what?”

What is my process, you wonder? If you watched me cooking up the next sermon, what would you see? I’m afraid I can only describe it in broad strokes as others have before me: I study myself full. I think myself empty. I write myself clear.

But the more ill-defined my procedure, the more important is that final tasting of the homiletical chili. Having written a sermon for my friends, these are the questions I ask as I preach to myself: “What have I missed? Is some element under-developed? Is something too overpowering? Is some quality lacking?”

With your indulgence, I’d like to plow some of the old ground from the last issue before pressing further down on my list of ingredients.

### Is my sermon truly textual?

If every sermon text is like a town in England having a “Main Street” that is the inspired writer’s flow of thought, then we want to walk this street often in our preparation so as to know it intimately.

*A thousand windows each have a clear view of Main Street.*

I suppose when we think about the old cliché about the “thousand sermons in every text” we can extend the analogy to a thousand windows that each have a clear view of that Main Street. It is not as though we can ever speak the last decisive word about Psalm 23 or close down all the meanings at the Pool of Siloam. The waters are too deep.

But there’s an important caution here. We need to ask ourselves what the Spirit of God is intending to say and do in the lives of people by means of a given portion of his Word. What is the *telos*—the purpose—that throbs like a beating heart within our chosen Scripture? We answer this question on the basis of a robust study of our text which we undertake with every tool at our disposal.

*A “thousand sermons” does not mean “anything goes.”*

The point is that the “thousand sermons” bit does not mean “anything goes.” Simply put, when it comes to what we have casually taken to be the point of our text, we can be wrong.

We brought our own agenda or our minds missed a crucial element of context. On the basis of something that immediately caught our eye in the lesson, our thoughts ran ahead to a favorite story or clever insight...and the sermon starts to write itself. But we may have missed entirely the driving thought of Isaiah or John or Paul that caused them to write as they did. (I’ve often found that a good commentary can call me back.)

To multiply our analogies, we’ve been taught to “marry our text” in just the sort of intimate familiarity and steady commitment we’ve been describing. Personally, I’ve come to prefer the “arranged marriage” of preaching on a text that has been assigned to me or that I’ve chosen from the lectionary in a systematic way. I’ve come to appreciate that early period of warming up to a portion of Scripture I would never have chosen. I meet it as an awkward stranger. It resists me at first, then begins to release its secrets. An affection stirs. We become close. And I will need no reminder to keep in constant contact with my text as I write.

One more? I appreciate Kierkegaard’s “epidemiological approach” to the Bible. This is a call to catch the mood of the Scriptures like

a contagion, like a disease, and to not be content with an exposition that gets the words right but that remains on the outside of the prodigal's shame, the Father's longing, or the joy of the Coming Home. I ask not only, "What does this Word teach?" but also, "What does it do to me?" for an engagement with the text that is not an intellectual one alone.

John 10 furnished our example of the tension in the room that you could cut with a knife as our Lord thundered—yes thundered—"I am the Good Shepherd!"

## Does my text stand behind some touchstone of Lutheran theology?

This issue isn't mentioned on my original list of criteria, and so it's possible that in my early years in the pulpit I left this too much to chance. My practice now is to always check the index to Pieper's *Dogmatics* to determine whether my text has served as a doctrinal *sedes*.

For example, I recently preached on Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares. It struck me how relevant the Donatist Controversy still is to both the flawed pastor and the watching flock and to any of us who have our radar tuned for hypocrisy, that is, if we are each still to thrill to our baptism or come eagerly to the Table.

"Master, should we pull up the weeds?"

"No. You'll only get it wrong."

In connection with John 10, we could reflect in our sermon about the person of Jesus or of the *perichoresis* of the Trinity in all of eternity, both of which inform and beautifully complicate that stunning moment: "The reason the Father loves me is that I lay down my life..."



Speaking of which, a recent study by Pew Research shows that 78% of evangelical Christians side with Arias in the Arian Controversy naming Jesus as the first of God's creative acts. Millions of people are poorly served. Even having the Nicene Creed as a regular part of liturgical worship would rescue them—"light from light, true God from God."

*78% of evangelical Christians side with Arias in the Arian Controversy.*

My point is that the lectionary provides people with a regular catechesis in the great doctrines of Scripture such as keep the soul alive to God. We do not want to emulate the doctrinal indifference of modern Christendom. Just imagine, for example, if you were 58 years old (like me) and it were 45 years since you last heard a serious treatment of the person of Jesus.

Imagine no longer being sharp on the truth that what happened to Jesus happened to God himself or the fact that Jesus, our true brother, is the very one who rules all things for the sake of his Church. What does Christian living become then?

*The lectionary provides people with a regular catechesis in the great doctrines of Scripture.*

I expect we would live under the common illusion in Christendom. We would think that the true heart and core of Christianity is our living for God, instead of what it really is, namely, that God, in Christ, lives for us.

## Does the law in my hands disturb?

Good things happen to me when I take up residence in that textual town and walk its Main Street, not that they are easy. I am implicated, unmasked, revealed. Always. It no longer comes as a surprise. Like you, I have learned in the Spirit's school to be suspicious of myself and to remain alert to the plank in my own eyes.

If the Scripture on which I will preach is nothing but a gush of Good News, there is likely to be something in the immediate context that confronts me with my fallenness. We may have to walk the side streets of our little textual "town" or even take a quick stroll in the countryside that is the wider context of the book.

Our example in John 10 was brutal. We were compelled to ask ourselves whether we are the "hired hands who care nothing for the sheep," and we withered before a Savior who calls things as they are.

As far as just how harsh we will be, we will take our cues from the divinely inspired words in which we have immersed ourselves. It is, of course, no fun being the prophet, so to speak, the one who sees the maladies in our midst, all those impulses and qualities that have no place in family of God. There are a range of ways

*We may draw people into that surgical light in which no sinner looks good.*

in which we may confront these things so as to make the Good News of Jesus, in a word, necessary.

We may hold up the mirror of God's holy will or draw people into that surgical light in which no sinner looks good. Or we may take some seemingly trivial human foible or some common observation about the way we are or the things we do, and ask over and over, "But why?" so as to expose the ugliness at the root.

Ask that question often enough and what begins, for example, with the mundane fact that we lie or pretend may take us in the end to the way we worship at the altar of other people's opinions. There the cruel deity howls, "You need me! Don't you know what I can do to you!" There lies the bleeding idolatry, the blasphemy, the inward curve of soul, the thing fit for crucifixion.

The law is always present in our minds. That means that sometimes, as our text guides us, it is enough to peel back the bandage and expose the wound that is the sinner's predicament, the problem of which we are in no way the solution, and to gently draw into conscious awareness that this need that is always with us—whatever it may seem to be—is our need for Jesus.

"Have you examined yourself and found yourself wanting? The Scriptures call you a sinner—have you proved it already today? Does unworthiness overwhelm you and put you on your knees? It is a good place to be. Let me tell you why...."

However we choose to apply the law, we do it in compassion over the common pain and familiar shame of the sinner. We know something about that, do we not? All struggles overlap. It is a kindness that we help people over and over to walk right up to Sinai, touch it, and die.

Good Lord, what a relief!

*I am implicated, unmasked, revealed.*

## Did I gain a fresh hearing for the gospel?

If each sermon text is a town in England with its own Main Street, you will recall that there is also a "Road to Oxford" leading out from that little town. There is a natural, unforced path to our true subject, Christ crucified and raised for the world. We hope to find a road that we pray the Spirit would approve. To our robust understanding of the human condition and of the Word of God we have taken up in our private study, we add a robust understanding of Jesus and what he means in this moment. Right here. Right now.



Again we take our cues from the Word of God as we strive to gain a fresh hearing for this gospel, and to have it once again be heard above the nagging of a terrified conscience or the complaints of offended reason. A whole menu of ways to communicate the grace of God is already on extravagant display across the pages of our Bibles, its stories, poems, and images. There is a full repertoire for us to gain across a lifetime of scriptural study that is already there in the mouths of the biblical characters and still hot off the pens of the ancient writers.

Understandably, the "Road to Oxford" may be more difficult to spot when we preach on the Old Testament. Finding it has well been described as an instinct.

In the book of Ruth, for example, the character of Boaz is saying, "There is a Redeemer who shares your own flesh and blood, who takes your disaster and makes it his own. *I am not him. I only point to him.*" "There is an affection, a bond, and an enjoyment of Another," so says the marriage of Ruth and Boaz and every Christian marriage, "*But I am not it. I only point to it.*" The ancestral land of Israel says, "There is a place for you that will not be taken from you, and a name that will not be cut off. *I am not it. I only point to it.*" There is a *true and better* Obed, the baby redeemer whose name means "Servant" and who, just by being born, revived the hopes of his whole human family.

There is more being said in that book than, "Be like Boaz. Be like Ruth." There are Old Testament texts that, to borrow from Martin Luther, are true "John the Baptists" pointing beyond themselves.

Further, Christian eyes read the Old Testament as Luther did, always tuned in to the struggle between faith and unbelief including as they battle within a single heart. Witness the war on every page between the striving and calculations of men and the redeeming grace of God. There is a true Israel within Israel that waited in hope for Messiah to come, as does the true heart within my heart.



As to proclaiming Christ on the basis of the New Testament, our text might be a little “Oxford” itself, leaving no doubt what expression of the gospel will animate our sermon or what feature of the gospel we will wear on our faces.

What grace that among us there is no talk of “theories of the atonement!” We absolutely do *not* choose among supposedly competing ideas about this God on a cross. Is he our sacrifice of atonement? Is he the Second Adam in whom we hide ourselves in faith? Is this *Christus Victor* whose whole heart goes out to us poor victims of sin, death, and devil? Yes, yes, and yes. And more still than this.

When the devil stirred in the hearts of the “hired hands” to do their worst, death claimed a victim that did not deserve to die. So it was that sin, death, and devil fell right into his hands, our Noble Substitute, our Champion, our Real Life, and our So Much More.

## Is my sermon coherent?

Prof. John Jeske taught my generation of preachers to ask, “What does the Spirit mean to accomplish in the hearts and lives of my listeners on the basis of this text?” We must have clarity about the “What?” and “So What?” and “Now What?” of our text. Ideally, we get these down in words so as to guide the process of writing and inform the hard decisions about what to leave in and what to take out. This will have no one who heard our sermon wondering, “Why did he tell me all that?” And with God’s help and to his glory, we’ll leave no listener behind.



I strive to express in one unambiguous sentence the burden of my message. Let no one walk away unable to answer the question, “What was that all about?” Our example from a text in John 10: *The Father prizes the act of the Son laying down his life, only to take it up again, and he prizes all those who prize it with him, by grace, through faith.*

I am learning to thank God that writing doesn’t come easily to me. And this piece is as hard as it gets. But there’s a sermon in there. I can taste it. There’s a coherent message already taking shape, one I can write in the stream of this single grand idea.

My introduction involves the moments in life we prize or fail to. My exposition will observe how the “hired hands” missed the joy of the moment when a blind man received his sight. As a law application I could tease out the ugly reasons why according to Jesus’ own diagnosis. This prepares the moment lit up by the words of Jesus when I will give my coherent center (above) room to breathe and spread its wings. I’ll conclude with an echo of my introduction about the moments we prize, and ask: “Why not this one? Why not now, when Christ is again revealed to that ‘true heart within your heart?’”

## I study myself full. I think myself empty. I write myself clear.

Yes, it takes time. We have two more matters to take up in the next issue: how to illustrate and how to apply the Word of God. For now, an encouragement.

There are sounds of birth pains coming from your private study. As August Pieper wrote long ago, for there to be a new Springtime of the Spirit among us, it must begin with a Pentecost in the “pastor’s little prayer cell.”

*It puts a man on his knees before his Audience of One*

It is as high a privilege as can be thought of: to inhabit the Scriptures, to breathe deep the atmosphere of a particular text, to gather up its colors, to climb the steep hill of understanding, and to capture in writing the mind of Christ for the sake of people who arouse all your compassion. It puts a man on his knees before his Audience of One.

It is a good place to be.