

# Preach the Word

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**Welcome a new writer:** *Caleb serves as pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Fallbrook, CA. He was a member of the Executive Committee of the WELS Hymnal Project and chairman of the project's Technology Subcommittee. He has been a frequent guest panelist on The White Horse Inn, a nationally syndicated radio program and podcast on theology and culture. He is a fellow of the International Academy of Apologetics, Evangelism, and Human Rights in Strasbourg, France and a member of the WELS Institute for Lutheran Apologetics.*

## Free Text Series or Lectionary Preaching?

# *The essential element that makes preaching worth anyone's attention*

By Caleb Bassett

A common sentiment among my fellow preachers suggests that the lectionary-based approach to preaching has become unsuitable for contemporary ministry. The thinking is that an occasional, topical approach—typically called series preaching<sup>1</sup>—is better than following the liturgical church year with its one- or three-year cycle of pericopes used in common across an entire community of churches. This opinion appears to be particularly pronounced in missions to the unchurched and in parish settings self-consciously characterized as visionary or innovative.

This is the first part of a three-part essay in which I will enter this simmering debate. I will analyze and comment on three subtle but significant criticisms of lectionary preaching. I intend to offer meaningful resistance to what strikes me as a largely unexamined assumption: that series preaching is the way of the future because it somehow offers unique advantages for ministering to the kind of people shaped by contemporary American culture. I will work to carve out some much-needed common ground even as I make the case that lectionary preaching remains the best preaching paradigm for Lutherans in our time and place.

Perhaps I will be able to convince some of my fellow preachers to return to the shared heritage, common good, and creative strength of lectionary preaching. But if not, then the series preacher might at least rely less on unwarranted assumptions to justify the practice and become more sensitive to the realistic pitfalls in series preaching.

## Effort isn't the issue

Last year I participated in a conference discussion on how best to contextualize worship to today's culture. The conversation inevitably turned to contextually relevant preaching. A clear sentiment emerged: lectionary preaching was said to be the *easy* way to preach because the lectionary has already been planned for you. The topical series, in contrast, was said to be the *hard* way to preach because a good series requires a significant amount of advance planning. The resulting benefit of all this *hardness* was said to be a corresponding increase in homiletical relevance. In other words, "The topical series is hard to do because relevance is hard to come by." By the end of the discussion the matter was even cast in moral terms. One pastor called the lectionary not just the *easy* option, but the *lazy* option!

No doubt he was overstating the case. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the lectionary has acquired a reputation as little more than a time-saving table of texts instead of an atlas showing the way to the kind of seriously relevant preaching that ministers of the gospel are called to deliver. Many preachers are setting lectionary preaching aside on the grounds that it is simply too weak of a tool to till the fields where they have been called to gather a harvest.

I will wholeheartedly agree that series preaching takes more effort to do well than most lectionary preachers probably realize. I once had to plan and preach a brief, occasional series and I found the

*Persistent misuse of a preaching paradigm does not prove the paradigm is faulty.*

process to be quite unpleasant. Maybe the difficulty arose from working against the grain of so much training and so many years of practice. Regardless, my point is that, yes, it does take serious effort to do series preaching well. I hope any preacher who preaches serially always gives the job the full beans it requires.

I will also agree that many preachers have used or continue to use the lectionary lazily. The point is well taken that the specific value of the lectionary is not that you can arbitrarily (and at the last minute) grab a text from a table of pericopes and preach as if every sermon is isolated from what has preceded it and what will follow it. But at the risk of offering what amounts to a playground retort—“I’m not lazy, you’re lazy!”—what is the lectionary preacher to make of the many websites trafficking in ready-to-preach series kits? A clever programmer could probably code a bot to compare the social media feed of every WELS congregation to what’s trending on the most popular sources of series kits and find no small number of matches.

Both lectionary preaching and series preaching have well-known and well-worn ways of taking shortcuts, the habitual use of which should be unwelcome in a virtuous professional culture. Persistent misuse of a preaching paradigm does not prove the paradigm is faulty, rather it bears witness to an ethos short on rigor and lacking in integrity. Excellent preaching of any kind requires significant foresight, careful planning, and all-around effort. The lectionary is not the easy option because preaching is not the easy option. All preaching is hard when practiced seriously and sincerely.

I suggest that we settle on this common ground and focus on more fruitful ways to analyze and compare series preaching with lectionary preaching. We must still discern a credible path from the premise, “series preaching requires more planning than lec-



tionary preaching,” to the conclusion, “therefore series preaching yields greater contextual relevance compared to lectionary preaching.” Is such a path possible or plausible?

## Relevance is at stake

Differences over lectionary preaching vis-à-vis series preaching seem to arise most frequently in conversations about what makes preaching *relevant* to a particular cultural demographic or cultural moment. It seems that context and relevance, not ease or difficulty, are the real points of contention. This is significant for understanding and addressing the issue. The assumption appears to be that the lectionary cannot reliably engage the context of the congregation or the community in which the congregation operates. The question, then, is why anyone thinks this.

One commonly-held answer seems to be rooted in the static nature of the lectionary. The lectionary tells and retells the account of a God who promised (and subsequently accomplished) to become our human brother in order to decisively redeem mankind from its entanglement in the cords of death and to definitively raise us to new life in a God-owned identity and vocational purpose that stretches from this moment through eternity. And because these things happened in the past there can never be new things that happened “once for all,” as the writer to the Hebrews puts it. The core story in the lectionary is static in the same sense that history is static.

This means that the lectionary cannot know who was elected president or what progressives want to teach kids these days. The lectionary does not react to the latest ministry blogs, nor does it comprehend that superhero movies are a big deal. The lectionary hasn’t been imbibing the latest pop psychology and religious self-help. The lectionary doesn’t know any memes. The lectionary hasn’t reviewed the latest Barna studies. Therefore, the thinking goes, for preaching to be relevant to a contemporary setting (as opposed to flowing from a historical consciousness) there must be an intermediary individual or group, like a pastor, group of pastors, or a planning committee, who regularly surveys the surrounding culture anew to discern what topics need emphasizing for preaching to enjoy relevance in the coming months.

This is, to say the least, an extremely popular approach to preaching. Aside from the expository model in which a congregation will work through whole books of the Bible over lengthy periods of time, the entire Evangelical industrial complex appears to be geared toward the task of churning out series after series. Such an approach thrives in the theological framework governed by the presumption that if the church and her ministers will only just embrace the surrounding culture with gusto, then the surrounding culture and its denizens will be more open to the church’s message in return. In this dispensation it seems the concept of relevance is meant to mean the task of calibrating preaching to harness the most engaging subjects or styles of the times, even if it means making heroic leaps of logic to somehow connect intellectual fashions and cultural fads to biblical theology.

*This is not the relevance that Lutheran preachers ought to seek.*

I am unconvinced that this is best described as relevant. *Predictable* may be a better word for it—and not the good kind of predictable, like Christmas coming every year. The point at which the series approach as commonly practiced could be called innovative appears to be in the rear view mirror. Whether it's the barely camouflaged fundraising effort (#generosity) or the soft-core commentary on sex (#intimacy), series preaching as a trend appears to have become a rote procedure by which a cultural product of some kind, like a fascinating book, hit movie, major event, or social trend becomes the catalyst for the question, "How can I preach a multi-week series on this subject?" Indeed, some such books come with twelve chapters, which—voilà!—become twelve sermons.

This is not the relevance that Lutheran preachers ought to seek. Unless the goal is to communicate that the church's message is a Christianized expression of the surrounding culture, it's an awfully big assumption to think that what's trending in culture or what's on the pastor's Kindle is also genuinely relevant to the actual predicament of particular people in the padded seats, to say nothing of relevance to the formation of thick, resilient, long-term Christian communities. In fact, a serious concern to consider is whether by focusing on *cultural* relevance the preacher is directing the eyes of his people away from where they need to be focused, that is, preachers can easily point people away from the Person in whom genuine relevance is found. To answer this concern with, "Jesus is in every one of my sermons," is, frankly, inadequate. Jesus is in an awful lot of hip-hop tracks, too. The heart of the issue is what role Jesus plays in preaching.

## Jesus is essential, not instrumental

The series paradigm too easily positions Jesus as *instrumental* instead of *essential*, that is, when a congregation's preaching is presented as a species of cultural commentary, religious therapy, or intellectual inquiry, Jesus must inevitably come across as one of the many great minds that people could choose to follow for good advice. In this paradigm the preacher can really only *recommend* Jesus, and because he can only *recommend* Jesus he must go to great lengths to present Jesus as the *best way* to accomplish whatever the stated goal of the sermon series is. The preacher may say something quite biblical, like Jesus is the *only way* to salvation, but such a message, while technically true, is overwhelmed by what the medium says. Things soon start to sound less like preaching and more like motivational speaking or life coaching.

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After all, if this month isn't "The Greatest Month of Generosity Ever," then what was it all for?

The underlying logic of an instrumental deployment of texts tends to create people who hear *only way* as *better way*—and even then, it's only the better way *for now*, that is, until they discover an even better way. This underlying logic of instrumentality is subtly implied if not explicitly stated in the form of advice-centric series themes and topics. "Come to hear how Jesus makes *blank better*," is the main message, even if a few sentences of gospel are sprinkled in to rescue the sermon from formal charges of legalism. The fact is that there are other great minds out there and many people who recommend them as the good, better, or even best way to get after your goals. Only Jesus asks his followers to bear a cross. At some point following Jesus does not make everything better, it makes many things quite a lot worse. If Jesus is offered to people as relevant insofar as he can be a means toward some other end—especially a self-directed end—then he is not relevant at all.

*The psychological captivity of the church.*

I file this entire tendency under a concept described as the psychological captivity of the church.<sup>2</sup> The notion that the most relevant pastor is the one who looks to the world around him to determine where to head with his preaching has probably ceded any remaining position of strength against profoundly strong cultural currents. The church and her preachers are mired in a trade deficit of sorts; we import more ideas than we export.

None of this is to say that good preaching won't engage with the cultural context of the congregation in significant and meaningful ways. It is to say, however, that it is too simplistic to think that the series paradigm is itself the engine of relevance. Quite often the

result is literal irrelevance, especially if what's on offer is merely a Christianized version of what others offer. People will go elsewhere to get the same practical benefits but without the Christian cross. Can we blame them?

## The gospel is relevance incarnate

A helpful way to understand the issue of relevance is to analyze what kind of communication *the gospel* actually is. Christian doctrine is clear that salvation comes “from hearing” and what's heard is a “message about Christ.” Here it is not pedantic to point out the plain meaning of the word *gospel*, that is, “good news.” Because the gospel is a report of an event or state of affairs, we must understand our preaching as the delivery of *news*. If we are not preaching news, then we are merely hosting a speaking event. Whether this event takes the form of a droning lecture or a trendy TED talk is immaterial. Both manifestations are the same—devoid of the distinctive power at our disposal to call lost souls from death in sin to life in Christ.

What does this have to do with the question of relevance? Everything. A sermon that offers commentary, advice, or application about the world that someone could, in principle, come upon elsewhere and apart from the Christian gospel is, by definition, *irrelevant as news*. It may be good and useful information that everyone is glad to have heard, but it is not, in the final analysis, news—and certainly not gospel.

*Nothing ever will be as relevant as the words and works of Jesus Christ.*

What animates the lectionary paradigm is the insight that nothing is or ever will be as relevant to as many people in as many situations as the words and works of Jesus Christ. The relevance people need most comes in the form *news*, an announcement of events that no one could come upon by any amount of their own thinking or choosing, events that happened “once for all,” but must be proclaimed again and again, generation after generation.

This is why I suggest that Lutheran preachers be less concerned about the quest to make their preaching relevant in culturally conditioned terms and to work instead at saying what is genuinely relevant to people living under the effects of sin and death. You can be sure that everyone will one day find themselves facing a deadly spiritual thirst (indeed, they face it already). Your task is to ensure that they have been drenched with words that point to the one who can and does quench their thirst. Aim your preaching at

the moments when people will need to have heard good news, not endless therapeutic applications of biblical proof passages. Aim your preaching at relevance worthy of the word.

## The lectionary does make one thing easier

I want to be clear that my claim is *not* that the series preacher never preaches the gospel, but that the series paradigm as a medium, with its reliance on a culturally-conditioned definition of relevance, makes genuine gospel proclamation either more difficult to accomplish or makes the gospel into an instrumental footnote attached to what people otherwise sense is the obvious goal: religious therapy, cultural commentary, intellectual inquiry, or spiritual motivation.

For example, one Sunday after Easter I was enjoying dinner at a neighbor's house. Our host, knowing that I am a pastor, asked, “What was your sermon about today?” I briefly summarized the thrust of my sermon on the appointed gospel in which the recently-resurrected Jesus shows his wounds to Thomas. Then, knowing that our host attends one of San Diego County's largest multi-site Evangelical churches, I asked, “What was your pastor's sermon about today?” The answer: “How to lead like Moses.” I have little doubt that Jesus was mentioned in that sermon just as I have little doubt that the Lord was mentioned mainly as the means to a practical end.

I am not saying that everyone who follows the series approach to preaching does *that*, but I am saying that the lectionary makes it a whole lot harder to traffic in legalistic life lessons. It would take a monumental effort to somehow feed God's people leadership training seven days after Easter while preaching the lectionary. If the lectionary makes one thing easier it's this: maintaining focus on the words and works of Jesus and delivering the good news in a way that is—as I will argue in the following parts of this series—uniquely poised to matter most in our cultural moment.

There are almost limitless opportunities to engage contemporary culture within the lectionary preaching paradigm. It's still *hard* work, too; but where it matters most the lectionary may really be the *easy* option.

<sup>1</sup> This article is the first in a series of three that evaluates *free text* series preaching, not the kind of lectionary-based series featured in the new hymnal's *Commentary on the Propers* and offered in The Foundation at [welscongregationalservices.net/the-foundation](https://welscongregationalservices.net/the-foundation).

<sup>2</sup> This concept was coined by academic theologian L. Gregory Jones, former dean of Duke Divinity School and provost of Baylor University.

