

PREACH

the Word

Vol. 1, No. 1

August 1997

Welcome to *Preach the Word*

Preach the Word is a bimonthly newsletter designed to help preachers continue in the heritage of well-crafted, Lutheran sermons. If these pages remind you of something you've forgotten since your last homiletics class; if they refresh you in the study of the sacred languages; if they help your sermon preparation, writing, and delivery focus more sharply on the theology of the cross, then our prayers have been answered. To this end, help us Ascended Lord Jesus!

Special thanks to Professor Emeritus John Jeske for graciously consenting to serve as editor of this publication during its first year. His wealth of experience in the field of homiletics and his love for the souls that sit patiently under the pulpit will, I'm sure, be a great blessing to Christ's flock.

God be with you as you engage in that vital, sacred act of preaching his Word!

Wayne Laitinen
Chairman - *Preach the Word* Subcommittee
WELS Commission on Worship

An Exciting New Worship Resource

Welcome to this premier issue of a newsletter dedicated to the pastor's premier task. The synod's charge to the Commission on Worship reads in part: "The commission shall have an interest in the style, the forms, and the setting of worship: in *preaching*; in liturgical orders and rites; in church music for the congregation, choir, soloists and instruments; in architecture and ecclesiastical arts."

From that broad assignment the commission focused for many years on liturgical orders and rites, especially as it prepared a new hymnal. It's exciting now to provide a new resource for one of the most important parts of worship: preaching.

I join Wayne Laitinen in commending this newsletter to you.

Bryan M. Gerlach
Administrator
WELS Commission on Worship

A WORD OF THANKS

The Commission on Worship acknowledges with appreciation the grant from Aid Association of Lutherans that helped launch *Preach the Word* and the artistic gifts of Tyra Baumler in designing it.

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Preach the Word is published
bimonthly by the
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Why this Newsletter?

You may very well have as many misgivings about reading a synod-sponsored newsletter on preaching as I have about writing one. Believe me when I tell you this editorial task was not my choice. Homiletics is an art, not an exact science. The unspoken message of this “official” newsletter might be perceived as: “This is the right way to construct a sermon, and if you’re not doing it the way we’re suggesting, you’re doing it wrong.” Truth of the matter is, as every one of us knows, that every time we write a sermon the area of the subjective bulks large. There’s more than only one right way to write a good sermon.

And yet a quarter-century in a homiletics classroom on the hill has convinced me that there are some basic principles which must be

respected by the man who constructs sermons. All of us write sermons

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that we hope are workmanlike;
we want our sermons to deserve
to be called Lutheran.*

under less than ideal conditions. We work under time constraints and must cut corners where we can. What helps is that there are shortcuts—legitimate ones. Unfortunately, there are also a bunch of illegitimate ones. This newsletter, scheduled to appear in your mailbox every other month, will offer opportunity to remind ourselves of some basic ground rules for crafting workmanlike sermons. Reviewing the “how” of

good homiletics is one reason for this newsletter.

There is however a second reason why the Commission on Worship commissioned this new publication. All of us are *Lutheran* preachers. We not only write sermons that we hope are workmanlike; we want our sermons to deserve to be called Lutheran. We all know that many sermons coming from Lutheran pulpits belie and disgrace their Lutheran heritage. This newsletter will therefore, as its second goal, help us address the question: “How can I be sure my sermons (even the rush jobs) are consistently Lutheran?” In other words, it will review not only the *how* of homiletics, but also the *what*. Be assured that your comments and suggestions will be welcomed.

A Garland of Four Strands

Are you aware of the answer Luther once gave his barber, who asked for help to make his personal Bible reading more beneficial? Luther gave this answer to his friend: “When I read the Bible, I try to *braid a garland of four strands*.”

The first strand is **TEACHING**. As you read a portion of the Bible ask yourself: “What is God teaching me here? Is he reminding me of something he did for me as my substitute? Or is he perhaps giving me some directives for my life of sanctification? Or what?”

The second strand is **CONFESSION**. Where does this text make me tremble? (I have dared to argue with my Creator. I have failed to be/do what God calls me to be/do. Worse yet, I am a person for whom this sort of thing comes naturally). With this admission I place myself under God’s judgment.

The third strand is **THANKSGIVING**. Ask yourself: What in this text makes me glad? What specific mercy of God does it offer me? Is the emphasis here on the *grace of justification*—that because Christ lived the perfect life none of us could live and died the death each of us deserved to die, God has pronounced a whole world of sinners innocent in his court? Or is it on the *grace of sanctification*—that the Spirit of God has broken the power of evil in me and planted a new nature, to enable me to be what he has called me to be? In your devotional Bible reading, ask yourself: “What specific reason(s) does this passage give me for thanking God?”

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A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Many of the readers of this newsletter have fond memories of Dr. Siegbert Becker, professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary from 1969-1984. The best piece of advice I ever heard for the pastor who wants to preach law and gospel properly was from the lips of this gifted theologian: “Read Walther’s *Law and Gospel* once a year for the first 10 years of your ministry.”

Strikes me that could very well be the biggest favor we could do our congregations. What would you think of suggesting that a discussion of one of its chapters be part of the agenda for your circuit meetings or your study club?

The Remoter Preparation

Would you agree with this statement: “Work on your sermon has to get the top priority in your weekly time schedule”? I hope you don’t. It ought to be obvious that I’ll be no better a preacher than I am a Christian. Three-quarters of a century ago August Pieper made the statement: “The church’s spiritual renewal begins in the pastor’s study.” When we think of sermon preparation, we dare not think first of text study. That’s the preacher’s *immediate* preparation. But there’s a *remoter* preparation which must necessarily come first, and that’s the attention we pay to our personal devotional life.

*The care and feeding of your own faith
has simply got to get higher priority than your family
or your congregation.*

When St. Paul tells us: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” he’s reminding us that each of us is responsible for his own salvation before God. We’re not only sons of God; we’re sons of Adam, too, and that makes for two sorts of problems. You and I are sinners with a perverse nature. But we’re also vessels of clay with frailties and limitations. (It would be worth your while to lay this newsletter aside for a few minutes and reread 1 Kings 17-19 and Jeremiah 20, to see how Elijah and Jeremiah faced these same twin problems). Satan has all the cards to intimidate us if we’re not consistently feeding our faith. The care and feeding of your own faith has simply got to get higher priority than your family or your congregation.

Text Analysis

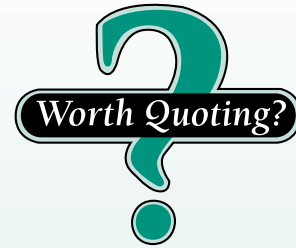
Thomas Carlyle once spoke of “enormous and repeated thrashing of the straw”—a reference to some speakers’ bad habit of reshuffling familiar themes, imposing new patterns on the same limited assortment of ideas. When the preacher does what Carlyle so aptly describes, pulpit fare becomes pretty thin soup, even though it may be attractively served.

Although the term “text analysis” may be unfamiliar to somebody who hasn’t been in a homiletics classroom for a decade or two, it is an indispensable part of sermon preparation. Rightly done, it will safeguard the preacher against

I have no business standing in a pulpit announcing: “This is what the Lord says!” unless I am absolutely sure I know what the Lord actually said in the text I just read.

treating his sermon text superficially. It will help to make sure he won’t pick out a random thought or two from the text (perhaps even a thought peripheral to the main thrust of the text), and build a sermon around that, thereby becoming guilty of “majoring in minors.”

There may be areas in the sermon construction task where I can take



*“The big value of
your religion
is not how it fits
your viewpoint,
but how it changes
your viewpoint.”*

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shortcuts, but not here. I have no business standing in a pulpit announcing: “This is what the Lord says!” unless I am absolutely sure I know what the Lord actually said in the text I just read to the congregation. But how can I be sure unless I take the time to be sure? Precisely that is the reason for performing a text analysis. I confess I’m unable to perform a text analysis in my head; for me this is job that has to be done on paper or on the computer screen. There are two important steps to a text analysis.

First, the preacher **lists each of the distinctive thoughts/truths/**

Continued on next page

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of the text. That list represents the raw material from which the sermon will be constructed. A single verse may have more than one spiritual truth. Conversely, several verses (perhaps in a narrative text) may together contain only a single truth. But the first purpose of performing a text analysis is to make sure I have not overlooked any truth which the Spirit of God wants to offer his people in that text. This is not just busy work. The purpose of this first step is not to compile an impressive-looking list a page and a half long. We're not interested in bulk; we're interested in a complete listing of the homiletical resources of that text.

The second and equally important step in making a text analysis is to **assign a rank** to each of the thoughts/truths listed in step #1 (perhaps on a scale of one to ten). Obviously, some truths will be more prominent in the text than others. Some will be more basic to the Christian religion than other truths only incidental to the main thrust of the text. The ones you rank as "tens" could very well become the major parts of your sermon outline.

A text analysis, rightly done, will enable the preacher to reach a valid answer to the question: "Now that I have considered all of the truths taught in this preaching text, which are the ones which deserve to be prominent in this sermon? Which are the truths which will determine what the specific goal of the sermon must be?" Lord willing, more about specific sermon goals two months from now.

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Sermon Themes or Sermon Titles

Ideally, the result of your text analysis will be that the text thoughts which you ranked highest (i.e. most important) will form the major subdivisions of your sermon. The preacher will try to word these major truths in as parallel a way as possible. Since they are of equal rank, they are *coordinate* truths (in contrast to subordinate ones), and they should sound like they're coordinate.

Now the task confronting the preacher is to formulate a sermon theme. He wants the theme to express the unity of the sermon by summarizing those coordinate truths (his major parts) for his hearers. When wording his theme, the preacher must avoid the mistake of confusing a theme and a title (or topic). A properly worded theme is more than a title; it's a *proposition*, a declarative statement.

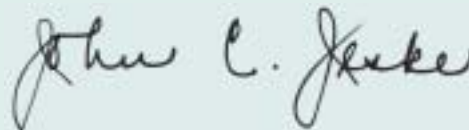
If you're preaching on 1 Corinthians 12, which deals with the gifts of the Spirit, it would be illegitimate to have a sermon theme: "Spiritual Gifts." That's a title or a topic, not a theme. A title is appropriate for a speech (the purpose of which is to share information about some topic), but not for a sermon (the purpose of which is to move the hearers from point A to point B). "God Shows Us How to Use Our Gifts" would be a theme for a sermon on 1 Cor. 12.

Say you're preaching on Galatians 5. Which of these sermon captions will be more helpful to your hearers?

1. "Christian Liberty" or
2. "Christ Has Made You Free"

Again, one is a title; the other is a proposition. The first doesn't even tip off the hearers as to whether the pastor is for Christian liberty or against it. The second gives direction; it's a statement of propositional truth. A good sermon theme is always a proposition.

May the Spirit touch your heart, your hand, and your tongue!



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Luther's fourth strand is **PETITION**. What specific prayer does this text lead me to pray—for myself, for my family, for the congregation I serve?

In your personal/family devotions, make it your practice to let Luther help you to "braid a garland of four strands." This will probably slow down your Bible reading, but it will nurture your spiritual life. You can't live on skim milk all week and preach cream on Sunday. Luther's suggestions will help you grow to be a better Christian—and a better preacher.