

PREACH

the Word

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Making the Leap from Specific Law to Specific Gospel

The subject matter of this issue of *Preach the Word* was dictated by comments several of you submitted in response to articles in earlier issues of this newsletter.

One brother wrote: "I hope you can give a few more hints about developing good specific gospel. I heard a sermon from a WELS brother recently that did a great job of convicting us so that we all hung our heads in shame. But his gospel presentation reverted to the kindergarten Sunday school class style. 'Isn't it good to know that God sent Jesus to save us from our sin?' Specific gospel doesn't mean repeating 'Jesus loves me, this I know. . . .'"

How does one make the transition from preaching specific law to specific gospel? Offering suggestions here is risky business, brothers. My taste in doing this may very well not be yours. But since a brother asked, let me offer three (obviously very condensed) samples of how it might be done. If you find the suggestions helpful, fine. If they can provide only the germ of a thought you can improve on, that's better yet.

1. "In the synagogue at Nazareth that day (Lk 4:18ff) Jesus had more to talk about than how our inherited sinfulness has broken the relationship between us and God, and has put every human being under God's curse. He made the startling announcement that he is the only one who can make things right between us and God. Through the perfect life and the innocent death of Jesus Christ, God, who has a right to condemn us, found a way to pardon us without violating his own perfect standard of justice. The heavenly Father found a marvelous solution to the problem of our sinfulness. His solution required his own perfect Son to live the life we owed, and to die the death we had coming. In Christ, God has declared every person who ever lived to be perfectly covered with Jesus' perfection."
2. "Some of the truth Jesus speaks to us is downright hard on our ears and on our nerves. Many people feel he's unrealistic and unfair when he demands



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Illustrating Your Sermon

Another comment received in response to this newsletter came from a brother in world missions who asked for help in the matter of illustrating the sermon.

We're responsible to God not only for what we say, but equally for how we say it. Werner Franzmann once remarked: "Just because a sermon is doctrinally correct doesn't mean it has to be as dry as Shredded Wheat." A problem every preacher faces every week is that the message of Christianity deals with abstract concepts: God, faith, revelation, redemption. Not only the body of our spiritual knowledge, but also our language tools for communicating it are entrusted talents, to be used for serving God and God's people.

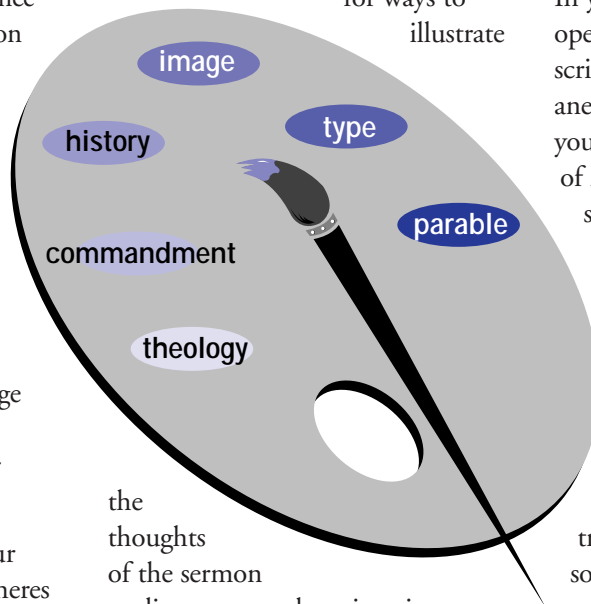
When the Creator designed our brains, he gave us two hemispheres of mental activity, each with its unique capacity. The left side of the brain is the rational hemisphere. It's the analytical side, the no-nonsense, matter-of-fact side. Mathematicians, engineers, psychologists, who think in abstractions and formulas, tend to be left-brained. (That's not an insult, any more than it is to call somebody left-handed).

The right side of the brain is where imagination and flights of fancy originate. Artists, poets, film-makers tend to be right-brained. They tend to see the world in terms of images and pictures.

What's all this got to do with your sermon? The preacher needs to develop both sides of his brain to develop a healthy balance. The Bible is history and commandment and theology, but it's also image

and type and parable. Each week the preacher will first of all construct a sermon outline, testing it for theological correctness and sound logic.

The skilled homiletician will then turn to the right side of his brain for ways to illustrate



the thoughts of the sermon outline, to turn them into images. He'll ask: "What experiences have my hearers had that will help them grasp this truth? What word-pictures can I give them that will help them remember this?"

If Jesus were preaching in our cities today, he'd most likely illustrate with supermarkets and freeways and satellite communication systems, instead of with sheep and millstones and yeast dough. Jesus chose word pictures that tied spiritual truth to things his hearers would be doing, so that they'd be reminded of that truth every time they did them. Can we illustrate truth with things our hearers did in the last seven days, or will be doing the next seven?

Is there a source where a pastor can find material that will add vividness and interest to his sermon? If you're

a right-brained individual, who thinks in pictures, you've got a head start. But even if you're not, recognize that the Lord endowed us with a far greater measure of creativity than many of us care to exercise.

In your reading, keep your eyes open for anything that illustrates scriptural truth. It may be an anecdote or a quotation. Perhaps you come across an interesting fact of history, or even a significant statistic. (Example: 56 million American—that's one out of every five—now have an incurable sexually transmitted virus). An item that has attracted your attention may lend itself to use in a sermon. It could be a window through which people can see the truth you're emphasizing at some particular point in your sermon.

How about this? The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut adopted in 1639 state: "We, the inhabitants of Connecticut . . . do associate and convey ourselves . . . to maintain and preserve the liberty of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus which we now profess." Could you use that historical tidbit in the sermon you'll preach on Independence Day weekend? When you find an item like that, don't trust your memory to retain it. Frank Gaebelin, one of the founders of *Christianity Today*, once said: "Every pastor ought to have his own commonplace book"—a collection of statements that have impressed him.

Years ago I started to file "sermon illustrations" on 8-1/2" x 11" sheets; my original 3 ring binder is

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Worth Quoting?

*“Twenty centuries ago a man turned up
and went about talking as if he was God.
His claim is so shocking that only two views
of this man are possible. Either he was a raving lunatic
(on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg),
or else he was and is precisely who he says he is.
You must make your choice.
Either he is the Son of God,
or he is a madman.
You can shut him up and call him a fool,
or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God.
But let’s not come with any patronizing nonsense
about his being a great human teacher.
He has not left that open to us.
He did not intend to.”*

Mere Christianity
C.S. Lewis

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now two. (Today you’d more likely open a computer file). Say you come across an interesting item which illustrates or elucidates some Bible truth. Identify the specific truth, and then type out the item in your illustration file under that subject category (so that you can find it when you need it). File the C.S. Lewis quote (found on this page) under “CHRIST.” File the reference to Connecticut’s original constitution under “AMERICA,” the awful statistic about 56 million Americans either under “AMERICA” or “SEX.”

Well-chosen illustrations can serve several useful functions in your sermon. They help you make your meaning plain. They provide a pleasant form of repetition, enabling you to restate important points without seeming to. Illustrations give variety to a sermon (instead of a steady diet of argumentation and exhortation). They increase the popular appeal of the sermon, making a dry discourse become alive.

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absolute perfection from us. They resent it when he points out that our sin puts us under the white-hot anger of a holy God. That’s got to be bad news for any son or daughter of Adam and Eve.

“Jesus said some other things that have raised eyebrows—some news that’s so good it’s almost unbelievable. He said: ‘If anybody wants to be right with God, he’ll have to know me.’ The reason he can make that claim is that, as our substitute, he gave his Father the perfect obedience which God demands of us, and God has exchanged his Son’s perfect holiness for our unholiness. And that isn’t all. Jesus chose to intercept God’s curse on our sin, the curse that should have crushed us forever. The poet has said it well:

‘Upon a life I did not live,
Upon a death I did not die,
I stake my whole eternity.’”

3. “God is love not because he is soft on sin, but because he found a way, a costly way, to satisfy his need to punish all sin while at the same time sparing humankind. The method God used to accomplish this rescue amounted to an exchange—an exchange in which God substituted his Son for sinners. God’s solution gave sinners what his holiness demanded of them. On the basis of the *perfect obedience his Son* gave him, God has declared that *every human being has met his demands*. And on the basis of his *Son’s innocent death*, God has declared that *all human beings are forgiven* of their sin, and invites all sinners to accept this general announcement.”

Reading Scripture Out Loud

Would you agree that the most important thing you do during the 20 minutes you spend in the pulpit each week is to read the Word of God out loud? What the Bible has to say for itself is far more important than anything we might have to say about it. What brought this to my attention was the comment of a layman: "I almost never hear the Word of God read well." Why should that be?

There are probably a number of reasons why, but none that can't be identified and corrected if you will listen to a tape of yourself reading the Scriptures. Can our hearers tell that their pastor prepares for his weekly reading assignment? Or are we so preoccupied with the total service that our reading is automatic, less than our best?

When you prepare to read next Sunday's sermon text/appointed lessons, what are the things to pay special attention to?

Be sure to pronounce words correctly. When reading Mark 1:8, remember that the word is bap-TIZE, not BAP-tize, and that "water" is not pronounced as if it were spelled "wadder." "Being" and "our" are two syllable words; "mirror" (Jas 1:23) does not rhyme with "mere." "Root" (Mt 3:10; 13:6) rhymes with "fruit," not with "foot." If you're not sure how to pronounce "deter" (Mt 3:14), check the dictionary.

Perhaps the fault that causes most problems for hearers is that many pastors read too fast, and run words together. Unless hearers can follow a printed copy of the reading, the words come at them singly, and in a constant stream. The reader

simply must help the hearer **separate the mass of words into meaningful units of thought.** As you listen to a tape of your reading, ask yourself: "What more can I do to make this reading more intelligible to my hearers?"

Are there pronouns at the beginning that need clarifying? If the reading begins "He said to them . . .," your hearers won't know if Jesus is speaking to his disciples, or if Caiaphas is addressing the Jewish Council. The rule is: **Supply antecedents for pronouns that are not immediately clear.** You can do this either with a two-sentence introduction to the reading or, more simply, by substituting the antecedent for the pronoun as you read the lesson.

If the appointed reading is a conversation between two people, the sacred writer will usually preface each quote by identifying the speaker. ("And Jesus said . . ."). Often enough, however, the NIV will give the quote first, identifying the speaker only later.

As an example, take this condensed snippet from John 3:

Jesus declared: ". . . No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born again when he is old?" Nicodemus asked.

Jesus answered, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit . . ."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

To help your hearer recognize the change of speaker and to enable them to follow that midnight

conversation more intelligently, **establish eye contact with your hearers** when you come to the underscored words. (Highlighting those words in yellow will make sure you won't lose your place).

Make sure you enunciate clearly. Dropping the final consonant of a word can change its meaning totally. If I say: "Jesus comes to bring me help," but my hearers can't hear that final "p," they're going to hear something considerably different from what I meant. Do you regularly sound the final "d" of "Lord", the final "v" of "love?" If you hold your hand in front of your mouth when speaking "while" or "when," you should be able to feel breath on your hand.

Ministers don't normally think of public reading and public speaking in the same terms. Yet the truth is that reading is best when it is most like talking. As you practice the reading you will do in next Sunday's service, **decide where the proper places are to pause.** Unless a sentence is short, don't read it non-stop, but pause where there's a break in the thought. Good readers don't pause just for effect, but . . .

1. to inhale and replenish their air supply, and
2. to grasp and absorb the meaning of the next phrase before speaking it.

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

John C. Jakes