

PREACH

the Word

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PREACHING *It's Worship. It's Outreach.*

When I served as a pastor in the foothills of the Appalachians, a man from West Virginia addressed me with a title I have cherished ever since. He called me “preacher.” I’m sure it was the name for a minister that he had become familiar with from his upbringing in that part of the country. Nevertheless, I accepted it as an important recognition on his part, namely, that one of the things I took most seriously as a pastor was to preach the Word of God to people. When you consider what Jesus allows us and expects us to do when he calls us to be pastors, “preacher” truly is a glorious title. For preaching is a glorious task. What pastor wouldn’t want to be called “preacher” once in a while?

Most of the preachers we know – and that includes us – preach most often in public worship. A hospital devotion or an evangelism presentation might be called “preaching,” but that isn’t the way we usually use the term. When my Appalachian friend called me “preacher,” he was thinking of the man who addresses a group of church people in church. Obviously, there is a strong public worship component in preaching. But church people aren’t the only ones who come to church. Unchurched people and dechurched people also come to church, and so preaching also

includes an evangelistic component. This volume of *Preach the Word* will focus on both aspects of preaching: preaching as part of public worship and preaching as an act of evangelism. My colleague, Prof. Jim Tiefel, will offer three articles on the worship aspect of preaching, and I’ll treat the subject of preaching as evangelism in two other articles in addition to this one.

I will be bold to say that we WELS preachers do not think enough about the evangelistic purpose of our weekly sermons. None of us needs to be convinced of the edification purpose of our preaching. We realize that Christ has entrusted a flock of believers to our care, and the one way we care for most of them most of the time is in the Sunday sermon. As such, our sermons bring God’s Word to bear on the Christian’s heart and seek to strengthen believers for their faith-walk by letting the gospel predominate. Our sermons, God willing, edify the found.

Isn’t it true, however, that our sermons also confront the lost with the claims the gospel makes about who Jesus Christ is and what he has done? The same gospel that strengthens faith in the church member can create faith in the prospective member. We know that

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God “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). We also know that “God was pleased through the foolishness of *what was preached* to save those who believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21). One of God’s goals for gospel proclamation is to work faith in the heart of the non-believer.

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Thus it is also one of the preacher’s goals. Just as Jesus did with that prospective disciple Nicodemus, so the preacher speaks of Christ’s cross with the goal that his hearer “believes in him” (John 3:14, 15). Was the apostle’s divine task essentially different from what Jesus has commissioned us to do as WELS pastors? Here’s how Jesus put it according to Paul’s retelling of his commissioning story in Acts 26: “I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive the forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Indeed, Jesus did open the eyes of unbelievers and move them into the family of faith through Paul. And most often he did it through Paul’s preaching.

The pastor’s regular preaching is not the only part of a congregation’s ministry of outreach. But it is a part without which everything else will fall flat. No matter where our congregations are located, we all have mission fields. No matter where we serve, we’re all mission pastors. And no matter what our preaching style, we would all do well to realize that our preaching is much more evangelistic than we might think.

Recent studies of the formerly unchurched (those who in the last two years joined a church) seem to bear out this connection between preaching and evangelism. In his book *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Zondervan, 2001) Thom Rainer interviewed 353 people who fit that description. When asked what factors led them to choose a church, 90% of the group mentioned “the pastor’s preaching.” It topped the list of responses. Interestingly, at the bottom of the list were “worship style/music” and “location.” Certainly statistics can be deceiving; we are not advocating that the location of a new church building is unimportant in reaching out to the unchurched community. On the other hand we preachers need to stand up and take notice that the unchurched who do visit our services are impacted by our preaching. And they say so.

Please allow another story from my parish ministry. Fresh out of the seminary and eager to reach the lost in my mission setting, I would spend a good portion of my week searching for prospects. Nothing wrong with that. But it didn’t take me long to realize that I had better spend more time each week preparing my sermon just in case some of those prospects *actually came to church*. I began to have the sinking feeling that what I said to a prospect on Wednesday didn’t mean much if I didn’t offer an appropriate message from the pulpit on Sunday. Somewhere along the line I

had lost sight of an important pastoral truth: focusing on preaching is not just for inreach, it’s also for outreach. And the wonderful relationship that develops from regular preaching is not just between pastor and members. It’s between pastor and prospects too.

A preacher who ponders how his preaching will touch the ears of the unchurched by necessity will think of himself as placed by the Lord of the harvest in a community. This, of course, does not make him the pastor of a “community church.” Nor does this thought militate against the call he has accepted to minister to a particular flock. Yet, within that divine call from Christ Jesus, the mission-minded pastor also hears a call to place the gospel on as many hearts outside his church as possible. His preaching is affected by such a spirit. When he finds out what is on the minds and hearts of the unchurched in his neighborhood, his sermons speak to these issues directly. The man of God understands that all community problems have their genesis in the problem of sin. The man of God trusts that Jesus is the answer to the problem of sin and Jesus’ saving work provides answers to the problems his community is experiencing. The man of God preaches accordingly. His preaching is not social gospel, though he does not hesitate to express Christ’s gospel message in terms that resonate socially among the unchurched. His preaching does not turn a biblical text into a pretext for his own personal soapbox, but he does think long and hard about the unchurched when he crafts sermon applications that may be legitimately drawn from that particular Word of God. He prays, he studies, he outlines, he writes, he preaches with the sheep of both pens in mind.

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Your preaching is part of your congregation’s evangelism plan. I hope to discuss the specifics of preaching law and gospel with an evangelism mindset in my next two articles. When we remember this outreach-to-the-lost aspect of our weekly preaching, something wonderful happens to the found flock. They think about the lost more. They think about what it will take for our congregation to reach them. They think this way because the Holy Spirit has opened their eyes a little bit more to the mission field that surrounds them. They think this way because the Holy Spirit has convicted them of their sin and shown them their Savior. The Holy Spirit convinces them that the unchurched have the same spiritual needs they do. The Holy Spirit does this through your Sunday-after-Sunday preaching.

“Preacher.” What a glorious title!

Daniel Leyrer

RELATIONSHIPS OR PREACHING?

Readers of PTW are likely familiar with Charles Arn's findings about why people come to church (*How to Reach the Unchurched...*, n.d.).

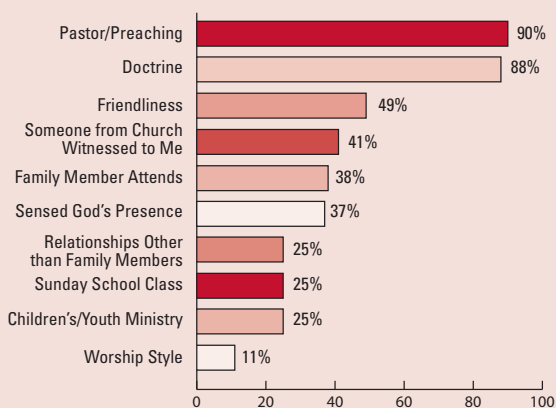
Special need.....	1-2%
Walk-in	2-3%
Visitation	1-2%
Church program	2-3%
Mass evangelism	0-5%
Sunday school	4-5%
Pastor/staff	1-6%
Friend/relative	75-90%

Thom Rainer cites Arn's research and offers this analysis, stating "we see not a contradiction but a difference in levels of importance" (pp 73-74).

Arn's research obviously focuses on the importance of relationships in reaching the unchurched. Indeed, his study shows that relationships are overwhelmingly the most important issue.

Our study of the formerly unchurched, however, indicated two significant differences. First, we found that the reasons the formerly unchurched choose a particular church were complex and could not be simplified into one or two major issues. Second, while we found that relationships were important in bringing the unchurched to the church, this single factor was not the overwhelming reason as most studies have indicated.

Then follows Rainer's chart giving answers to an open ended question that allowed multiple responses: "What factors led you to choose this church?"



Rainer's book begins by shattering myths about the unchurched. The pastor does not need to be a dynamic leader for the parish to reach the unchurched. Solid doctrine does not inevitably turn the unchurched away. These and other insights seem to disagree with some of the principles found in the church growth movement.

PREACHING FROM THE SUPPLEMENTAL LECTIONARY

"The lazy man," Solomon observes, "does not roast his game."

The more prosaic among us, lacking the Spirit's inspiration, might continue, "but the diligent man does." Instead, Solomon writes, "The lazy man does not roast his game, but the diligent man prizes his possessions" (Proverbs 12:27).

By God's grace, are you industrious? Do you crave the Spirit's strength to be a more diligent preacher? That strength comes from the same gospel you study and preach. You, more than any other workman, have reason to prize your possessions, your tools of the trade.

Satan and the flesh never waver, though. "Maybe," we think, "there's an easier way." For the lazy man whom God has called to preach his Word, sermon preparation slides. Text study wanes. Prayer over God's precious truths dwindles.

Christian Worship: Supplement (CWS) and its supplemental lectionary, about which this is the first in a series of six articles, cannot fix that problem singlehandedly, but they may help. For instance, preaching CWS's lectionary now or in the future may be one way to avoid the temptation to re-preach regularly sermons you prepared in the past.

What's wrong with dipping into one's own barrel of sermons? Listen to Martin Luther. In late 1536 Luther heard that his books were in the vaunted library of Elector John Frederick I. To that news, Luther said, "My books ought by no means to be placed in that library, especially not the earliest books which I wrote at the beginning, for they are offensive not only to my adversaries but also to me" (AE 54:213).

When it comes to your preaching, you are under no ceremonial laws from Sinai – or from Wittenberg. But Luther's comment echoes the experience of many who have faithfully wielded the sword of the Spirit from the pulpit: Your *old* is likely not *gold*.

Similarly, Richard Gurgel of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary writes, "We cannot be blind to the fact that what God is doing as we preach that Word is precisely what he did to us when we studied it."

In a footnote, he elaborates: "Is this also why the best canned sermon you gleaned from another pales in comparison even to a mediocre sermon that God produced by putting you through the sweat and toil of its production? Preaching another's sermon is often little more than a third-person report about another's struggle. Our people may not know what's wrong, but they will often sense it. This is also closely related to the problem of warming up your old sermons. The death and life that happened in your study is a distant memory! The 'logos' of both the 'borrowed' sermon and the 'canned' sermon may be accurate – perhaps even exemplary. The 'pathos' as well as the 'ethos' will typically be sorely lacking" (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 104:2, page 142).

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Luther's and Gurgel's comments call to mind a question heard at a pastoral conference years ago. A pastor asked what we thought he should do. He had been at his parish for nine years. There, on a well-planned schedule, he had preached through the appointed Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons for years A, B, and C. Now that the nine years were up, what should he preach on?

The first answer to such a question is hardly to dump the CW lectionary, and search elsewhere. Can't we go back to the same texts we preached in the past, re-study them, and preach them (or parts of them) again, anew?

Daniel Deutschlander writes, "Every text contains a thousand sermons with the possibility of any number of different points of emphasis. To treat any text, much less one text in a setting of texts, exhaustively on one Sunday is simply not possible. Anyone who thinks that he has succeeded in presenting all of the themes and thoughts of a text or even most of them in one fifteen to twenty minute sermon has without doubt been shallow in his thinking and superficial in his preaching" (Preface to *Planning Christian Worship II*, available at the new Connect worship site, under General Resources. We are in the process of moving worship resources to Connect. To login or create an account on Connect, go to <http://connect.wels.net>.)

Then there are the needs of our listeners, even well-grounded, long-term Christians. Peter was so clear: "I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. [...] I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things" (2 Peter 1:12, 15).

Back to the brother at the conference: Memory gets fuzzy, but I think other pastors there advised him to consider making use of some of the other year-long preaching series in Northwestern Publishing House's *Sermon Texts* (1984). These selections are:

- Historic
- Eisenach
- Thomasius
- Synodical Conference
- Soll

Now a new option commends itself to pastors in our midst: the supplemental lectionary (pages 80–82) in CWS. You can also find that three-year series online at the Connect worship site, under Quick Links/Christian Worship Supplement.

Skim the supplemental lectionary. In its print version, you will notice many First Lesson, Second Lesson and Psalm selections

printed in italics. In the online version, the same selections are in blue print, rather than black. These italics or blue selections alternate for the selections in the *Christian Worship* lectionary.

Why new selections? Why no new Gospel readings?

Johnold Strey, Keith Wessel and Paul Zell have written about the rationale behind the CWS lectionary in three articles available at the Connect worship site, under Quick Links/Newsletters/Preach the Word.

- Strey: *Introductory Resources*, pages 20-22 of the CWS introductory workshop booklet)
- Wessel: From *Preach the Word*, Vol. 7.5 - May/June 2004, modified
- Zell: *Worship the Lord*, No. 31, July 2008

Wessel writes: "It is not the intent of the Rites Committee to supplant the current lectionary, as if it were to be used no longer. Rather, it is our intent to offer the preacher additional lessons he may use for worship / preaching. Specifically, the Rites Committee was asked to address the Second Lesson selections, either changing them or choosing entirely new readings that better tie in with the Old Testament and Gospel readings.

"The major impetus for such a change is the desire of worship planners to emphasize the theme of Sunday worship. In addition to the theme of the season, most of our churches have grown accustomed to the idea that each service also centers around one main theme. The Second Lesson – the *lectio continua* – often is the 'odd man out' when it comes to organizing a service around a theme. Thus this lectionary expansion seeks to tighten the bond between the three readings.

"Yet it is not only the expansion of New Testament lessons that is being considered. All the Old Testament lessons are also being revisited, with an eye toward cutting back on the (copious) number of readings from the prophets and placing before the congregation again a healthy number of the familiar Bible stories."

In this series' future installments we will explore how the CWS lectionary achieved these goals and explore practical ways to use that lectionary.

Meanwhile, online appendices to this article provide charts of the CWS First Lesson and Second Lesson choices in biblical rather than church year order. They may help you plan. That material is also available at the Connect worship site/Quick Links/Newsletters/Preach the Word.

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