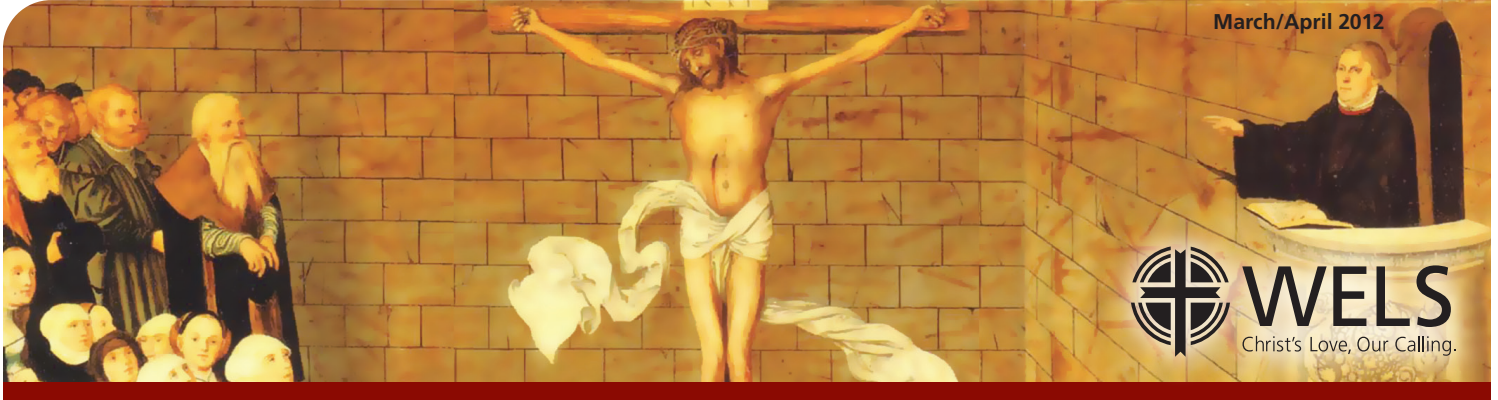


Preach the Word

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Growing in Sermon Delivery That Honors the Gospel

Proclaim Grace! Key Issue #9

By Richard Gurgel

For this issue a side trip to a small mythical Minnesota town appears necessary. What some call the Lake Wobegon Effect may be at work.

A seminary professor noted that the vast majority of pastors in his denomination routinely rate themselves as “above average” in delivery skills. However, his observation was quite different. “Pastors rate themselves as above average or excellent in their preaching, across the board, so that nobody is below average, and yet I think what happens is that you’ve got pastors who take their manuscript into the pulpit, who think they’re preaching it, but they’re actually reading it.”

But it isn’t just that denomination’s pastors who’ve paid a visit to Lake Wobegon. In the survey conducted for this series, WELS pastors give evidence that we too may have spent at least a little time within its borders. In a question that asked pastors to rate themselves on seven homiletical tasks, sermon delivery was rated the highest of all. Eighty-three percent gave themselves either a “4” or “5” on a five-point scale. In fact, of the seven areas of homiletical work listed, this was the only area in which not a single pastor gave himself a “1” or “2”!

That’s quite surprising since delivery typically receives little pastoral attention. Haddon Robinson maintains: “While ministers spend hours every week on sermon construction, they seldom give even a few hours a year to thinking about their delivery” (*Biblical Preaching*, 201).

A WELS pastor agreed:

With so many things going on each week, I want to make sure I have something to say. That’s first and foremost. But that leaves little time for really focusing on what’s the best way to deliver this. My perception is that there’s such an exhaustive effort in regard to our preparation and then not as much time taken in how do I want to deliver this so that it’s exciting to listen to.

Certainly having something worth saying comes first and foremost. And it is possible to focus too much on delivery so that, as one WELS pastor put it, we “commend ourselves rather than commend Christ.” But that danger doesn’t transform neglect of delivery skills from vice to virtue. It’s a strange full-circle conundrum: while an overemphasis on delivery—vainly polishing pulpit reputation—draws attention to the speaker, so does failing to give sermon delivery sufficient attention.

“Sermon delivery derives its reason for existence from its relationship to sermon content. The relationship may be specified as one that *maximizes the message and minimizes the messenger*. Too often the opposite is true” (Al Fasol, *A Complete Guide to Sermon Delivery*, ix). Later, Fasol states bluntly, “Ineffective delivery focuses attention on itself” (101). If we refuse to give much attention to our delivery (as if that’s beneath our theological sensitivities), we end up drawing attention away from the very content we long to deliver. Poor sermon delivery attacks the centrality of our message because it calls attention to the messenger. Nervous habits we never quite overcame from seminary days can be mischievously distracting hearers from the message of Christ we wish to commend.

“Sermons do not come into the world as outlines or manuscripts. They live only when they are preached. A sermon ineptly delivered arrives stillborn” (201). Professor Joel Gerlach adds: “A mediocre sermon effectively delivered will strike people as a good sermon. An excellent sermon poorly delivered will strike people as an ineffective sermon” (*“Revitalizing Our Preaching,” WLQ*, 91:4, 287).

This series has been urging us to strive for excellence in preaching the gospel. While most of the ten key issues focus primarily on content, this ninth key issue urges us to devote sufficient attention to delivering that content. The reason is simple: we want to craft excellent, Christ-centered sermons and then deliver them with all the skill God has given each of us. The goal is that the congregants of Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church would love to sit before our pulpits because content and delivery are truly way above average!



AUTHENTICITY 101

Do Lutherans Appreciate Emotion in the Pulpit?

Here's what hearers are eager to see in sermon delivery: their pastor seems as genuinely engaged in his message as he wants them to be. Many call that "authenticity." Even if we don't like that buzzword, it's simply evident pastoral love that longs for hearers to possess the treasure in our text. "We dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

A key ingredient of authenticity is this: the pastor is as comfortable expressing emotion in the pulpit as he is when expressing important matters in other settings.

The elocution movement that taught speakers there was one correct way to gesture, stand, or sound died nearly a century ago The preachers most respected are those most able to sound like themselves when they are deeply interested in a subject. Bombast and oratorical flourishes remind one of pulpit caricatures; they do not stimulate pastoral respect. At the same time, staid, unenthusiastic solemnity communicates irrelevant tedium rather than sincere seriousness. Congregations ask no more and expect no less of a preacher than truth expressed in a manner consistent with the personality of the preacher and reflective of the import of the message. Today, pulpit excellence requires that you speak as you would naturally talk were you fully convinced that God has charged you to deliver a life-changing, eternity-impacting message. (Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 329)

Lutherans put it this way: evident in the pulpit is the same emotional depth and breadth that the text's law and gospel worked in our hearts. We shouldn't hide that in the pulpit any more than we would if we were discussing the text heart to heart with a friend. It's just that more than a few "dear friends" are listening in.

When preaching lacks textually congruent emotion, the root problem may not be in the pulpit. Time pressures can lead us to rush sermons to market before they've matured in our hearts. Our emotional tank may be on "E" if we're running ourselves ragged while simultaneously failing to find rest for our souls (and bodies). Either problem can lead to dull pulpit-professionalism or, for those with more chutzpah than content, to cheap cheerleader-esque imitations of genuine emotion.

But there is at least one barrier waiting to trip Lutherans at the pulpit steps. Our aversion to Pietism's emotionalism can lead to stifling any display of genuine emotion.

This can lead to a failure to celebrate the gospel in the presence of God's people. The wonder of the verbally stated gospel conflicts with a contrived pulpit soberness. The preacher shares wonderful news, but his face seems unconvinced.

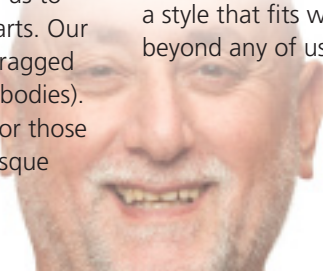
No two pastors display text-wrought emotion identically. Yet observe any pastor talking on Saturday about what delights his heart. Should hearers expect less on Sunday? "Actors speak of fiction as if it were real; too many preachers speak truth as if it were fiction" (Jerry Vines, *A Guide to Effective Sermon Delivery*, 62).

Evident in the pulpit is the same emotional depth and breadth that the text's law and gospel worked in our hearts.

Does fear of becoming pulpit actors (no small temptation) lead us to send a distracting nonverbal counter-message to our people? A recent study (see book reviews) suggests that 60% of hearers may process the sermon primarily through the channels of ethos (40%) or pathos (20%). For both groups, their pastor's visible engagement is the primary cue for whether they will give their attention to the sermon or count bricks behind the pulpit. If the logos of the message is *echt*, but our ethos and pathos are derelict, we are tempting hearers to disregard the message.

Does that mean becoming someone we aren't in the pulpit? Hardly. "Be who you are. But be the very best communicator you can possibly be. To do that you must be willing to sacrifice what's comfortable—what has become part of your style—for the sake of what is effective. And over time the changes you make will become part of your style" (Andy Stanley, *Communicating for a Change*, 170-171).

That's bitter medicine for my ego. But as long as the medicine is administered under close gospel supervision, such death to my preacher-ego hurts no one. The task is recognizing bad habits and discarding pulpit caricatures that keep us from communicating in a style that fits who we are in Christ. Such authentic delivery is not beyond any of us!



AUTHENTICITY 102

Pardon Me, But Your Manuscript—Or Lack of It—Is Showing

Being physically and psychologically free from our manuscript is another critical element of authenticity.

But a disclaimer, lest we encourage the opposite delivery danger. Let's commend the 87% of pastors who reported writing a manuscript at least 75% of the time (77% always do!). What delivery problems arise when the preacher has not written a manuscript?

- What looked good in outline, didn't work when preached. What went unnoticed in the outline was that a single line of thought splintered into loosely related textual (or not so textual) thoughts. Law and gospel make brief appearances at random sermonic moments.
- Failing to clothe thought in full dress, we don't notice our sermon is wearing only flimsy clichés (the pulpit version of the emperor's new clothes). Pastor and people wade in the kiddie pool even though the text beckons towards a faith-invigorating swim into its deep end.
- Without a manuscript, our mind, searching for ways to express the text's unique points of law and gospel, easily abandons unique textual language and imagery as it latches on to safe and familiar law and gospel stock phrases (or paragraphs).

But here endeth the disclaimer. One thing trumps the authenticity distorting effect of not having a manuscript. That's having a manuscript and being physically or psychologically chained to it! Walther, who painstakingly committed his manuscript to memory word by word, confessed that he wished he'd never formed the habit.

Many hearers assume a dichotomy between what's on our page and what comes from our heart.

It's great that 87% regularly write out manuscripts. It's a concern when 63% report taking that manuscript into the pulpit. A seminary professor from another denomination also identifies these two extremes.

You have a manuscript written for literate reading, and it's being proclaimed orally. The pastor thinks he is looking up and doing it, but he's not. He's just reading it. At the other end of the spectrum are guys who are comfortable going without a manuscript, but they are just rambling. It ends up being circular, hard to follow, repetitive. So you've got guys

who have great eye contact, great engagement, but the material is just not clear. At the other end you have guys who put the material together, but their engagement is lacking.

Many hearers assume a dichotomy between what's on our page and what comes from our heart. We may vigorously argue that what's on our paper came from our heart. But do we often use prepared notes when addressing matters of the heart with friends and family? This is no new postmodern hang-up. Dale Meyer reminds us that ancient audiences believed a speaker using notes "was *deinos*, terrible, not to be trusted, a slippery spin doctor" (*Liturgical Preaching: Contemporary Essays*, 19).

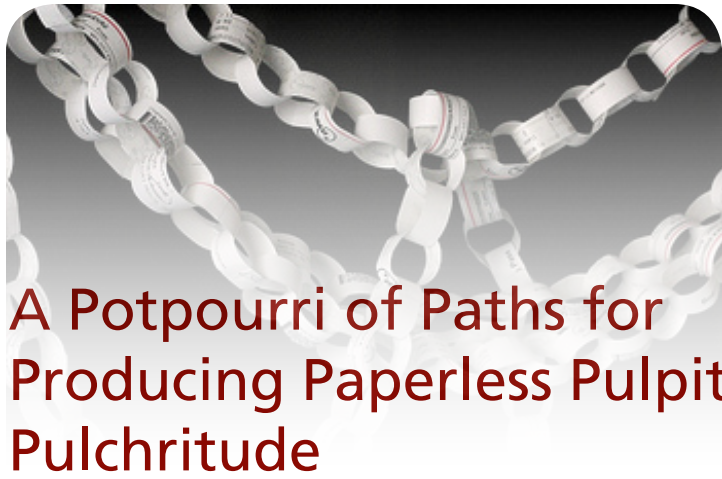
To be fair, the manuscript can trouble us even if left at home. We can be fooled into thinking that the ultimate goal of preaching is completing the internal transfer of getting our finely crafted manuscript's words out of our heads and onto our lips. We can thereby miss the external cues that assist us in achieving the related but distinct goal of preaching: confirming eyeball to eyeball that we are safely delivering the heart of the text to our hearers. We end up settling for a safe but too faint likeness to genuine proclamation. A WLS professor expressed it this way: "I am so tied to what I wrote that I just work my way through it. You read the invisible teleprompter. It invariably gives the impression that you don't feel real strongly about this."

So what's the answer? We can still learn something from Greece and Rome.

The ancient prejudice against crafted speeches never went away, and the great orators, although they prepared and memorized their speeches ahead of time, seldom let paper detract their eyes from reading the faces in the audience. And when those faces looked back and said, "You're not getting through," they'd shift their plan . . . We have lost the ancient discipline of scrutinizing the crowd as we deliver our Sunday sermons. Academic papers read from the pulpit promise to pull our eyes from true dialogue. The people may not shout "Amen," but they speak with their faces. (Meyer, 20)

How can we recapture more of this lost art? That, my brothers, is on the last page of this newsletter!





A Potpourri of Paths for Producing Paperless Pulpit Pulchritude

Here's how one pastor described the goal. "Making sure you are connecting with the people, and not having some written document going over their heads, or having nothing written so that you are talking around their heads."

Sans Manuscript Sans Logic?

Have you moved away from manuscripts? Honestly consider the price of freedom. The cost is too great if what you have freed yourself from is focused, thematic preaching with a clear progression.

In the comprehensive study of hearers mentioned earlier, 40% listened to sermons on a "logos setting." For them, clear sermonic progression and well developed ideas are what they look for most. Those hearers grow frustrated if they seem to be working harder than the preacher to make sense of the sermon.

Here's a suggestion. Pick a season of the church year to commit yourself to both a carefully ordered outline and a fully written manuscript. (Use the suggestions below to keep you from becoming chained to that manuscript once it exists!) At the end of that season, use some mature, clued-in hearers to help evaluate whether the clarity and logical progression of your sermons improved without any loss of engagement with hearers.

Breaking the Paper Chain

Do you need to break the visible or invisible chain that binds you to a manuscript?

- **Discover your text's own outline.** Work hard to grasp the natural progression of thought in your text (an analytic outline) rather than rearranging the pieces (verses) to create your own outline (a synthetic outline). Preacher's often need notes because they have fashioned such a convoluted or complex logical monstrosity that no one could commit it to memory.
- **Tell the narrative!** When preaching on narrative texts, allow the narrative to carry the sermon's flow of thought. The narrative progression provides a memorable path.

- **Write for the ear.** Speak in the concrete images of your text. Every text has its own language. Using that language keeps your sermon from sounding like a dogmatics paper. Dogmatics papers, filled with text-less abstractions, are painful to memorize.
- **Preach to an empty church.** You don't want to worry about delivery issues when you are actually preaching. Al Fasol uses this analogy in *A Complete Guide to Sermon Delivery*: No one does well on the golf course if he is thinking about all the mechanics of his swing. That's a quick way to hit a hook that lands across the adjoining fairway. You practice on the driving range when no one is keeping score. The most common way pastors "hit the preaching range" is to grow comfortable preaching the sermon out loud to an empty church.
- **Watch yourself on video.** It's hard to watch ourselves preach, but our people watch us week after week. Noting small delivery changes could make the difference for them between counting bricks and thanking us for a message delivered eyeball to eyeball and heart to heart. Watch for reading of the invisible teleprompter, sentences or paragraphs spoken on autopilot, the amount of eye contact. Is your face aware that the gospel is being proclaimed?
- **Trust your memory.** Our minds, and the standard equipment memory with which God equipped them, are a far more amazing creation than we may allow for. Trust that memory to enable you to step up in the pulpit and find the delightful pleasure of thinking about concepts as you proclaim them. Trust your mind to know how to grab the next point when needed.

Online Resources

Check out these companion resources at preaching.wlsce.net:

- A discussion guide to help study groups or circuits to wrestle with the concepts in this issue.
- A review of *Hearing the Sermon* by Ronald Allen. This book presents findings from interviews with 263 members of 28 Protestant congregations.
- A review of *Preaching without Notes* by Joseph Webb. Webb offers a wealth of practical advice for building from the ground up a sermon that can much more easily be committed to memory.
- Three sermon videos by WELS pastors that provide examples of delivery that matches sermon content.