

Thank You

By Paul Prange

Our premise for the last five issues was simple. For each issue, I asked three different brothers with differing perspectives to have a conversation on some practical matter of preaching, and to allow their conversation to be edited for publication here.

The idea was that the conversation on that topic would be continued among you preachers as you gathered in circuits and communicated in other ways, in person and online, to the glory of God and the good of his Church.

I want to thank you for playing along. Thank you for letting me in on some of those continuing conversations. Thank you for sending me e-mails with your thought-provoking responses.

A special thank you to the brothers who allowed their comments to be edited and printed. Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedules to contribute to *Preach the Word*. I never heard that anyone guessed who you were, so we must have taken out enough of the identifying details in your comments!

I hope that you enjoy this final number. It was my privilege to serve as editor of this volume. May the dear Lord continue to bless your faithful proclamation of his Word.



The Intellectual Level of the Sermon

Pastor C: I have strong feelings on this subject. I think that there is pressure to dumb down sermons today to some lowest common denominator.

Pastor B: What makes you think that?

C: When I preach on something simple, I don't hear much about it. But when I preach on something a little deeper, I sometimes hear, "You lost me, Pastor." I just get the sense that people want to be entertained rather than challenged. The guy in the pew has some work to do on Sunday mornings too!

Pastor A: I do believe that listeners should be required to think. In fact, I think they want to be required to think. But I don't believe raising the intellectual level of the sermon is the best way to do it. I'm pretty new to this, but I've tried out something I really like. In the introduction of your sermon present a problem that needs to be solved. Don't solve the problem right away. Spend the sermon thinking through the problem and working towards a solution. This will keep your hearers mentally engaged. In his books *The Homiletical Plot* and *How to Preach a Parable*, Eugene Lowry explains how to construct a sermon this way.

B: I'm not sure you can do that with more than a couple of sermons a year. This is a tricky issue. You've got to know your people. I think Luther said, "Preach to the milkmaids, and the doctors will be edified." I know that's the safe answer, but it's true.

A: My challenge is knowing who the milkmaids are. Are we talking about people with not so much education or people who are new to the faith?

B: I think it means people with not so much education. In my current congregation I have to keep it simple, really simple, like the same level as my catechism class, only with



adult life applications. At my former congregation, where there was a high concentration of engineers, I could ramp it up quite a bit.

- A: I'm still at my first congregation, and it's so diverse, I really can't decide where to aim. I have a number of professionals who can handle pretty complicated stuff, but I also have quite a few people who probably really struggled in high school and certainly did not have much formal education after that.
- C: The pressure in my congregation to dumb it down is even coming from those with advanced college degrees. They just don't seem to want to dig into the Scriptures with me.
- B: Are you tackling subjects that are more suited to Bible class than to the pulpit?

I've heard that Reader's Digest is written at a 9th grade level.

- C: The people are not showing up for Bible class, so the sermon is really the only place they are going to hear about things like predestination or the millennium.
- A: I don't know if I've even mentioned those topics in my first couple years of preaching here. But I do like the feature that Word has for checking the Flesch-Kincaid grade level of any manuscript.
- B: The what?
- A: The grade level your sermon is written at. In Word, just go to wherever you check "Spelling & Grammar" in your version of Word. Then under "When correcting spelling and grammar in Word," check the "Show readability statistics" box. At the end of your spellcheck process you will see Readability

Statistics, and it will tell you the grade level your manuscript is written at according to the Flesch-Kincaid scale.

- C: OK, I need another advanced college degree to understand this.
- A: Not really. I noticed at Sem when I first wrote my sermons they would be at maybe an 11th grade level. If I shortened up the sentences, explained the theological jargon a little better, and added more clear transitions, I could usually get it down to maybe an 8th grade level. I've heard that *Reader's Digest* is written at a 9th grade level.
- B: I wish I had known this earlier. I think for the first five years of my ministry I was probably guilty of preaching a little dry, kind of like just saying the dog notes, without a lot of application. I was probably hitting that upper high school level, maybe beyond.
- C: But as you got to know your people—
- B: Yes, that really was the key for me. I realized that my people had a lot of life questions, the kind that were often answered by the text I was preaching on. Answering the life questions is kind of an intellectual exercise for me, but I try not to make my sermons sound like a PhD thesis delivery.
- A: I feel more challenged by balancing my sermons between the people who have been Christians all their lives and those who have just finished Bible Information Class. I don't want to bore the lifelong members, but I don't want to lose the newbies.

God doesn't answer the "how" questions (at least not regularly). He answers the "why" questions.

- B: OK, no matter how long you are a Christian, you do not outgrow sin and grace. You always have an Old Self that has to be called to repentance and a New Self that has to hear about Christ crucified again.
- A: I've noticed that I can get into a good sermon-writing groove if I picture myself trying to explain the text to a single person. But it seems to work the best when it's someone newer to the faith.
- C: I prefer writing my sermons for the veterans. They need to progress beyond the milk and get to the solid meat. I feel like I need to challenge them intellectually so they don't get stale.
- B: For me, preaching "intellectually" implies trying to answer the "how" questions. How did God simply speak, and it all came to be? How could Adam fall if God knew ahead of time that he would—and God is still good? Stop! God doesn't answer the "how" questions (at least not regularly). He answers the "why" questions. Why did God create the world? To show how awesome he is and for his glory. Adam fell. Why didn't God just turn him to a carbon spot right there? Because he loves his creatures.
- C: Either way, that's intellectual stuff.

- A: But if I am understanding you correctly, intellectual questions, even deep intellectual questions, are often answered by the story of salvation.
- B: The narrative accounts in the Bible which always lead you to talk about Jesus.
- A: Yes, I feel like I can go pretty deep when I am telling the facts of Jesus' life in a narrative.
- B: That is one of my touchstones for the kinds of life questions or intellectual dilemmas that I will introduce in a sermon. If I can answer them from the narrative of the text I am preaching on, I know that I am on safe ground.
- C: I am wary of too many stories in a sermon. I think they often feel like fluff.
- B: I don't think so, at least if they are keeping to the theme of your sermon and making your main point. Have you tried using children's lessons before the sermon hymn?
- A: I cannot bring myself to do that. To me it disrupts the flow of the service.
- C: I tried them for a while. It was a compromise with people who wanted my sermons to be far simpler. But I did not like it when people were tuned in for the cute children's lesson and then started shifting in their seats after just five minutes of a decent adult-level sermon.
- B: If I have an application for children, I have taken to making that application during the sermon, but introducing it by saying something like, "Now, kids, especially for you. . ."
- A: My oldest child was in kindergarten at our Lutheran elementary school this year, and I found it a big advantage to know what the main Bible story was in the school that week. If it worked with the text I was preaching on, I would use details from that story, and I could watch kids in the congregation perk up when they heard those familiar names.
- B: It's good when kids can pay attention to a portion of the sermon, but I'm not sure you can aim the intellectual level that low. We have our educational programs for kids because we know that they all need special applications by grade level.
- C: Exactly. And adults should be expected to put effort into listening to a sermon like kids are expected to put effort into school.

Some pastors encourage the people in the pew to take notes during the sermon.

- B: How exactly have you trained your adults to do that?
- C: I admit that I have been weak in that area. My frustration has probably showed a little too often.
- A: I know that some pastors encourage the people in the pew to take notes during the sermon in order to make them better listeners.
- B: I go back and forth on the topic of sermon notes. But I suppose that in this world of social media, it's proven that people like to participate in some way.



If you are discussing this conversation with others, you may use these questions:

Which pastor's views on the intellectual level of the sermon are closest to your own?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of each view?

In view of the Luther quote, who are the "milkmaids" and the "doctors" in your congregation?

How have you helped the people in your congregation to become better at listening to your sermons?



Edited excerpt from Reformation 21.org, a website of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. A view from outside our fellowship. Originally posted in August 2010. Used by permission.

Luther on the Marks of a Good Preacher

By Carl Trueman

The eighth mark of a good preacher is, for Luther, that he should put his life, limb, possessions and honor into it. There is a ninth mark, but we'll come to that in a moment.

I suspect Luther is here pointing to the need for the preacher to be so existentially involved with the task that this flows over into his sermons, not as constant references to self but as passion.

I thought of this a few weeks ago when visiting at another church. At the time when the sermon was meant to be preached, the pastor gave a fine lecture on the Bible—a good, redemptive historical exposition of an Old Testament passage. The congregation waited politely for the abracadabra-hey-presto! moment when, like a bunny from a magician’s top hat, Jesus is pulled as if by magic from the chosen Old Testament passage. And, hey presto, there he was, right on cue, where he’d never been seen before!—though there were no gasps of amazement, as the congregation had, I presumed, seen the trick performed a thousand times before with other texts. The old “I bet you never saw Jesus there before” gets a bit predictable and tiresome when it’s the only application, I guess. This was truly a lecture and no sermon.

Now, I may not be able to articulate precisely the difference between lecturing and preaching, but, like defining art and pornography, my inability in this regard does not mean that I don’t recognize it when I see it. And a fascinating Christological lecture on a passage from the Old Testament that leaves me merely impressed with the ingenuity of the speaker and not confronted with the living Christ is just that, and no more.

It struck me as ironic that, in a place where talk of law-gospel was common, where Luther was honored, where justification was a central doctrine, the lecturing could be so far from Luther’s preaching in terms of its absolute lack of existential confrontation, of any element of surprise and wonder, and of the awesome bringing home of God as God rather than simply as an idea. Everything said was right and true, but only in the way that, say, the laws of gravity, or the advice that it is advisable to change one’s underpants on a daily basis, are good and true. So what? Sadly, the modern Reformed penchant for clichéd phrases and blather such as “the indicative is the imperative blah-de-blah-de-blah” seems more often used as an excuse for boring lectures pretending to be sermons than as a basis for passionate, confrontational preaching of the Luther kind, a kind truly built on an understanding of the doctrine of justification as a living, personal reality, not a mere concept, and which in turn actually built a Reformation.

And before somebody trots out the old “we don’t do legalism” line, nobody can accuse Dr. Martin of confusing the gospel as good news with the gospel as inspirational pep talk. The law and gospel were objective declarations—and yet they tore hearers apart and put them back together again as they were preached, a point of which Luther was only too personally aware and which flavored everything he did in the pulpit, from overall sermon structure to tone of voice and all points in between.

Of course, we are not Donatists. The Word is powerful because it is the Word; God can use boring lecturers as he can use Luther to extend his kingdom; but the fact that delivery is not everything does not mean that style and delivery are not important at all; and that element of urgency, of existential confrontation which permeates the New Testament accounts of sermons and Paul’s letters—and the sermons of Luther—is much more than a mere matter of style. Boring lecturers pretending to be preachers

kill churches. Period. End of story. And interesting lecturers pretending to be preachers kill churches too—not necessarily in terms of numbers (a lecture can, after all, be fascinating and pull in the intellectual punters week after week) but in terms of the formalism they engender—precisely the kind of formalism against which Luther raged so effectively.

Lecturing is not preaching. That’s what Luther is getting at when he flags up the life or death commitment it requires. Congregations deserve better than long-winded lecturers with more time on their hands than good sense between their ears.

Well, I’m guessing quite a few of the Truly Reformed will be lurching for their keyboards to express violent disagreement with some or all of the above. And that, coincidentally, brings me to Luther’s ninth mark: the good preacher should be willing to accept ridicule from everyone. So if there is anyone out there who is about to have a go, please bear that in mind.

As usual, Luther got that one right as well.

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