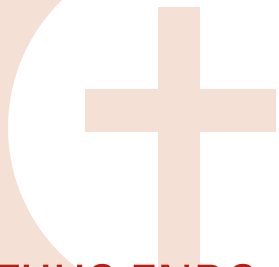


PREACH

the Word

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THUS ENDS VOLUME 5

With the July/August issue of *Preach the Word* comes the end of our fifth year of publication. As I look back on the rich and diverse gifts our editors have contributed over the years, I especially thank God for the rare gift of being one in mind and spirit. The single focus has been the cross.

On behalf of the brethren, I would like to express my deep appreciation to Pastor John Koelpin for encouraging us in the volume now coming to a close. Likewise, my prayer goes up for God's blessing on Pastor Steven Degner of Santa Maria, California. He will take the helm of volume 6. As the pastor of Star of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, he preaches to an average of 100 people each week. I look forward to learning from his years of experience. I hope you will, too.

Wayne A. Laitinen
Managing Editor, *Preach the Word*

SITUATION

Spend a week with me and you will get to know my situation. You will see my work habits (both good and bad). You will get a feel for my ministry priorities and the congregation's vision. You will look at our facilities, examine our demographics, and better understand our culture. The same would be true if I came to visit you for a week. In both cases, it would be a learning experience because our situations are not the same.

Every preacher's circumstances are different. The various situations a preacher finds himself in greatly influence his method, manner, and message.

One situation that the preacher must wrestle with as he prepares each sermon is the situation of the text. Each text lives within its own house. There is one room for the immediate context, another for the historical context, and still another for the text's place within the entirety of the Scriptures. As the preacher prepares to pull up a seat within that house for his people to sit in, he must get as comfortable with the situation of the text as he can.

The preacher, however, not only stands underneath the text as its servant, he also stands underneath his own circumstance, a situation that helps mold his ministry.

We live in the situation of our times. A preacher cannot escape the context in which he lives nor can he help being influenced by it. We live in an era of rapid technological growth. Words like PowerPoint and Shuttle and initials like MRI and www mean something different today than they did just twenty years ago. Who of us ever used the @ sign on our *typewriter* until e-mail came along? Technology has brought its own solutions but also its unique problems. The preacher can't ignore the impact that the situation of our technology has on both how and what we communicate.

Our times are also flush with material success. Both preacher and people have more things. The accumulation of things has made life easier in some ways, but it has also fanned into flames a greater zeal for greed and materialism.

Our times are as tenuous as ever. Is anyone's preaching the same after 9/11? New fears grip the nations of this world. Renewed threats of ecumenism and tolerance attack Christianity's proclamation of the "way, truth and life." A preacher would be a fool not to realize the blessings and perils of our times.

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THE VALUE OF THE FOUR DIVISIONS OF THEOLOGY FOR OUR PREACHING

Lutheran preachers generally share the impression that American Evangelical preaching is excessively and obsessively moralistic. Bible church sermons proclaim endless lists of principles for becoming a better person and living a better life. This evaluation is not merely a case of narrow denominational pride on our part. Leading Evangelicals have offered the same critique of their preaching for years. (For one example, see the March/April 1993 issue of Michael Horton's *modernReformation* magazine.)

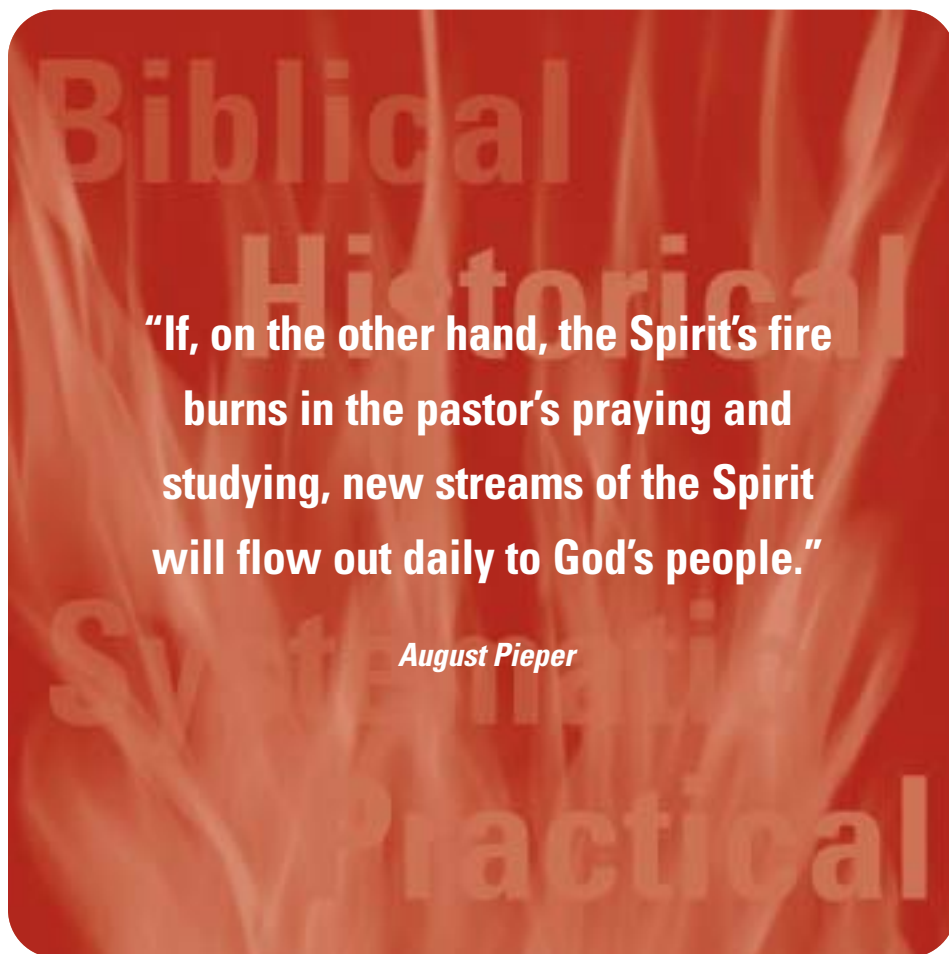
American Evangelical seminary training follows a similar approach in the preparation of its future pastors. I recently had the privilege of instructing a local evangelical seminary drop-out who came to us hungering for the gospel. A non-stop diet of classes and lectures on the "how-to's" of pastoral ministry had left him burned out and despairing of his abilities before he served a single day in the parish.

Pastoral theology classes occupy an important place in our own seminary training. They do not, however, comprise the entire curriculum. Our well-balanced training in the disciplines of Biblical Theology, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology—as well as Practical Theology—prepares us for not only the general demands of pastoral life, but also for our pulpit work in particular. Let's take a brief look at the impact each of these areas of study can have on our homiletical skills.

Biblical Theology

It's no surprise that we consider Biblical Theology of first importance to our preaching. We can't share what we ourselves don't have. If our purpose in preaching is to share with our congregations the words and promises of God, a thorough acquaintance with those words and promises on the part of the preacher is paramount. God did not call us to preach and then ask us to create interesting, comforting, or motivational messages of our own. He has called us to preach the interesting, comforting, and motivating message of his Holy Scriptures.

The seminary prepared us for this task by instilling in us sound principles of Biblical interpretation, teaching us the art of



exegesis, and making us familiar with the broad themes of each book of the Bible through isagogical studies.

The danger here is not that we fail to appreciate the Biblical studies which occupied so much of our attention during our seminary years. The danger is that we cease to hone and apply these skills in our weekly sermon preparation. Nearly eighty years ago August Pieper warned:

We American pastors, also we who are German-Americans, with the exception of a few bookworms, study too little. Only too often we are satisfied with what we learned in school. When we are in the ministry, we do not of our own accord continue the studies we were more or less forced to pursue when we were in school....Most days of the week we may even leave the Bible itself unopened on our desk....The Bible is, of course, our textbook, the book that we should preach. Why then do we know so much about so many other books,

but the book of our profession we do not know, or know only superficially? That surely is not faithfulness in the ministry!....Not as a salesman buys his wares in order to sell them again, but as a bee sucks honey from blossoms so as to nourish itself at the same time, so we by our studying ought to draw the gospel out of the Scriptures in order to save ourselves and those who hear us (*WLQ*, Vol. 84, No. 4, p. 274-275).

Experience shows that when we have wrestled with a text all week in our study, then we enter the pulpit with eagerness and purpose, and our preaching becomes the overflow of our hearts.

Historical Theology

Henry Ford said that history is bunk. Others warn that those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it. While we do well to heed Harold Senkbeil's warning, "...it's always dangerous to run a church by archeology"

(*Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*, p. 78), our study and review of the controversies and heresies that troubled the Church in the past can prevent us from saying things we don't want to say when we stand up to preach.

How? Every preacher wants to be clear. We strive to make God's message accessible to even our youngest or newest worshippers. In order to do so we may resort to illustrations and metaphors to explain God's word, and in this we are simply following the example of Biblical expositors like Paul or Christ himself.

Some things about our God and what he has done for us, however, defy human comprehension. Trying to make them simple fails to do justice to the complexity, the "mystery," of what our God has revealed. Church history is littered with heretical "-isms" that grew out of just such attempts: Modalism, Monarchianism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, Synergism, etc.

One needs to read no further than the letters to the editor in *Christianity Today* to see that such misunderstandings of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and the way of salvation are still spooking around among the clergy of Protestant churches today. Whether you still remember which heresy describes Christ's two natures as two boards glued together, Nestorianism or Eutychianism, the ability to recognize the problem with this illustration grows in part from your training in Historical Theology. An occasional review helps to maintain accuracy in our preaching, especially for days like Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, or Holy Trinity Sunday.

Systematic Theology

Few, if any, branches of Christianity devote so much attention to the systematic study of Scripture as the confessional Lutheran church. Dr. Gene Veith described the catechetical instruction he received in order to become a Lutheran layman, "...as thorough and as long as the college courses I had just finished in graduate school..." (*The Spirituality of the Cross*, p. 110).

But as long as our sermons are textual, does our training in dogmatics really play a important role in our sermon work? Or is this study chiefly to prepare us for specific questions we need to address in Bible class, catechism class, and counseling?

We need to be careful not to try to squeeze a text of Scripture into a part of our systematic mold which it simply does not fit. Nevertheless, since systematic studies equip us with a ready grasp of the great truths of the Bible and how they fit together, our training in dogmatics can help prevent us from developing novel interpretations of Bible texts that are contradictory to the rest of God's word. Preachers with defective or deficient doctrine can unwittingly fall prey to pitting one text against the rest of God's revelation.

A second advantage of thorough instruction in systematic theology is that it can alert us to preaching values in texts which serve as the *sedes* for certain Christian doctrines. When the Church has historically identified certain passages as key proofs of particular Christian teachings, those teachings deserve consideration in sermons based on those texts.

Practical Theology

Since this is the branch of theology to which our homiletics classes belong, the value of these studies to our preaching ought to be self-evident. Here we learn how to take the truths we have accumulated in our textual studies and craft them into a message which will confront, comfort, and encourage our people. Without such training we run the risk of falling into the extremes suggested by the caption of one cartoon: "In contrast to last week's sermon which had twenty-three points, this morning's message will be pointless."

This is not an exhaustive listing of the value our theological training has for our preaching. Hopefully it reminds us to take up and dust off some parts of our training that we have let lie on the shelf for a while. Listen again to the encouragements of August Pieper:

In the parsonage, in the pastor's study, in his little den are the sources of the church's strength. If this little den becomes cold and empty, or if it is dedicated to the Old Adam and the spirit of this world, the church's strength will evaporate, and the spirit of the world will overwhelm it. If, on the other hand, the Spirit's fire burns in the pastor's praying and studying, new streams of the Spirit will flow out daily to God's people (p. 276).

John A. Vieths

MAKE IT *Personal*

When I visit congregations, people tell me how consistent the quality of preaching is in WELS. It is true. Our pastors do a good job of mining the truths of God's Word and then sharing the gems of God's Law and Gospel with their people.

However, it occurred to me on a recent trip that our preaching absorbs the mind of our hearers when we make the message personal. "When it is you being wheeled down the hall to the radiation room in the hospital", or "when you are the one following the pallbearers out of the church," are examples of making the message of God personal.

Such use of the second person pronoun draws the worshiper into the message. He or she becomes part of the sequence of events being addressed. The listener builds a mental picture of what is being said and sees himself in the picture. In this way the truth of God is welded to a life experience.

Next time I am on the gurney being wheeled down the hospital corridor, or the next time I am following the casket of a loved one out of church, I will remember the comforting voice of the Savior that still echoes from a sermon heard many months before.

Try it. Preach to your people in a personal way. Make the message personal!

Vilas R. Glaeske



A PREACHER'S LOOK AHEAD

Throughout this year these editions of *Preach the Word* have attempted to offer some “heads up” concerning sermon texts in the *Christian Worship* lectionary.

It was the author's intent to help the busy pastor get a feel for the forest before he delved into the trees. Advance planning and preparation can aid the preacher in seeing subtle ebbs and flows within the lectionary that can give his preaching an added depth absent when the preacher “shoots from the hip” from week to week. Such planning also makes the preacher better aware of sermon series that have been gently hidden within the lectionary. When the preacher has prepared for such a series, he can promote it among his people and whet their appetite for its message. Taking a long look ahead may also give the preacher the “guts” to choose a more difficult text instead of avoiding it when the week turns busy.

With the Gospel lessons of Pentecost nestled comfortably into the rhythm of Matthew, the second lesson firmly entrenched in the words of Paul from Romans, Philippians and 1 Thessalonians, and the first lesson meandering its way through Moses and the prophets, it is time for you to make the exercise your own. Take a few days of office time this summer and give the upcoming church year a long *Preacher's Look Ahead*.

God bless your preaching.

Continued from page 1

The situations that influence preaching don't have to stretch from sea to shining sea. They also stretch from pulpit to pew. Every congregation has its own culture. The congregation celebrating its 100th anniversary has a much different set of circumstances than a congregation still in the exploratory stage. Likewise a congregation of predominantly new converts will have different challenges than a congregation of lifelong Christians.

As the preacher pronounces appropriations and proclaims applications he will keep the situation and make-up of his congregation in mind. Is the congregation embarking on a building program or just finished with one? Are the energies of the congregation focused on strengthening the stakes or lengthening the cords? Has there been some controversy that needs to be dealt with or has the congregation enjoyed some relative peace? Is the congregation in a rural setting or urban? Is the congregation predominantly blue-collar, white-collar, or a mix? What is the racial make-up of the congregation? Is the congregation celebrating more births or retirements? These (and more) are the situations that the preacher has in mind as he considers the angle and direction that will make God's Word most applicable to the people in the pews.

Finally, the situation of preaching can be as narrow as the preacher himself. Every preacher is unique, gifted by God with his own abilities and skills. The preacher committed to his Lord and to God's people will spend his entire ministry honing his gifts through practice and continuing education so that he can be the best preacher possible. But such advancement in skills will not make us all the same. Each preacher will always have his individual strengths and weaknesses.

But even beyond our latent skills, each of us has come through a unique system of learning. Perhaps some preacher from your youth influenced you on your decision to serve God in the pulpit. You wanted to be like him and some of his style still lives on through your pulpit.

Each generation has also had its own homiletics mentors. Teachers are products of their times, too. As innovations in preaching come and go, they are reflected in what teachers teach and what students learn. What seminary students learned and saw modeled fifty years ago is not exactly the same as seminarians learn and see today.

It is a wise preacher that understands the influences both from within and from without that shape his preaching. So, too, the occasional visiting pastor or word-of-mouth critic must understand that every sermon is unique because of the varied situations that come to bear upon the preacher.

In the constantly changing landscape of our world, thanks be to God that one situation remains the same—God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ. And so our task remains the same, namely, to share that situation in whatever situation we find ourselves.

John M. Koelpin

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