

PREACH

the Word

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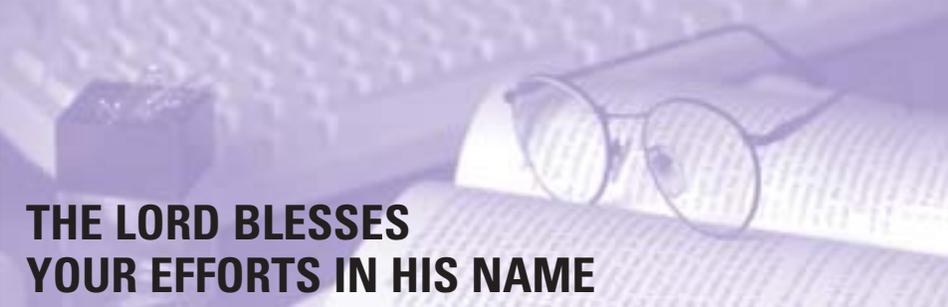
CONNECTING TO THE WORD AND CONNECTING TO PEOPLE

This issue of *Preach the Word* is the last for this editor. The next volume will be in the capable hands of Professor Keith Wessel from Martin Luther College.

Volume 6 offered articles that encouraged you to get into the Word and then connect that Word to people. We depended heavily on Mark Cordes to encourage and also challenge us to keep the pump primed through continued growth in exegetical study. For those whose exegetical skills may have slipped in recent years, I highly recommend a Bible search program such as *Logos* or *Bible Works* to assist with study and research in the Hebrew and Greek.

We gave you a few illustrations for your sermons along with two articles on finding illustrations. Professor Dan Leyrer's articles on Full Strength Law and Gospel Preaching have whet our appetite for more from Dan in the future.

I appreciated the e-mails, letters, and suggestions sent to me. Don't hesitate to pass on ideas and comments to the new editor <wesselkc@mlc-wels.edu> as we encourage and support one another in "holding out the Word of life."



THE LORD BLESSES YOUR EFFORTS IN HIS NAME

Here is part of an e-mail message sent by Pastor David Neuman encouraging our newsletter to strive for the best in preaching without discouraging our readers.

Dear Pastor Degner,

You ask for suggestions for *Preach the Word*. I have a couple for your consideration.

Over the course of my ministry (thirty some years), I have struggled in the writing of sermons. Certain abilities in preaching the Lord has seen fit not to grant to me. Nonetheless, I have recognized the merits in composing and delivering a sermon after the model put before us in our seminary training. It has been my goal each Sunday, even though I fell short of it.

The Lord blesses faithfulness.

How often I have felt discouraged because the sermon fell short of the ideal. Still, there was no reason for me to have been discouraged. From time to time the Lord revealed that he blessed my humble efforts to be faithful to the task in spite of the limitations in my abilities.

Be careful not to discourage your readers by presenting the ideal as though anything less is an unworthy product. We need the reminders of what makes for good preaching. We need encouragement to strive for it each week. We also need to be reminded that even though we fall short of the goal, the Lord blesses faithfulness.

This thought is not a criticism of the way things have been presented in *Preach the Word*. It is just a simple caution, lest your efforts turn pastors away from reading the publication.

Over the course of my ministry, I often heard the comment that I was easy to understand. My service as missionary to the Lakota people in South Dakota began at the same time that I was introduced to the computer. It didn't take long to realize that if I wanted to get through to the Lakota people and hold their attention I had to speak at their level of understanding of the English language. The 5th grade level is their level. After some months I managed to write consistently at a 5th-6th grade level. The computer was of great benefit, since the word

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SERMONS THAT HELPED ME

“Steve, what sermons influenced you most in your 30 years of ministry in the WELS?” Without a doubt I would point to the sermons by Martin Luther on the Gospel of John, remarkably preserved for us by those who hastily penned them as they were being preached. These sermons underscore the dramatic difference between preaching about Christ and preaching Christ.

Luther began his verse-by-verse preaching on John in 1537 during the absence of Johannes Bugenhagen, the parish pastor in Wittenberg. The ailing and overworked Dr. Luther could not pass up the opportunity to ascend the pulpit for his pastor and expound on his beloved Gospel of John. It was not easy. He wrote, “I am so overloaded with tasks and so troubled with sicknesses that I have often been compelled, and still am, to leave my duties unperformed.” These sermons stand as testimonies to the promise given to Paul, “My strength is made perfect in weakness.”

In these expository sermons one can almost see the good doctor’s face lighten up and his words soar whenever he talks about Jesus. Imagine for a moment that you are listening to him preach as he speaks the following words about the need to believe that Jesus is God.

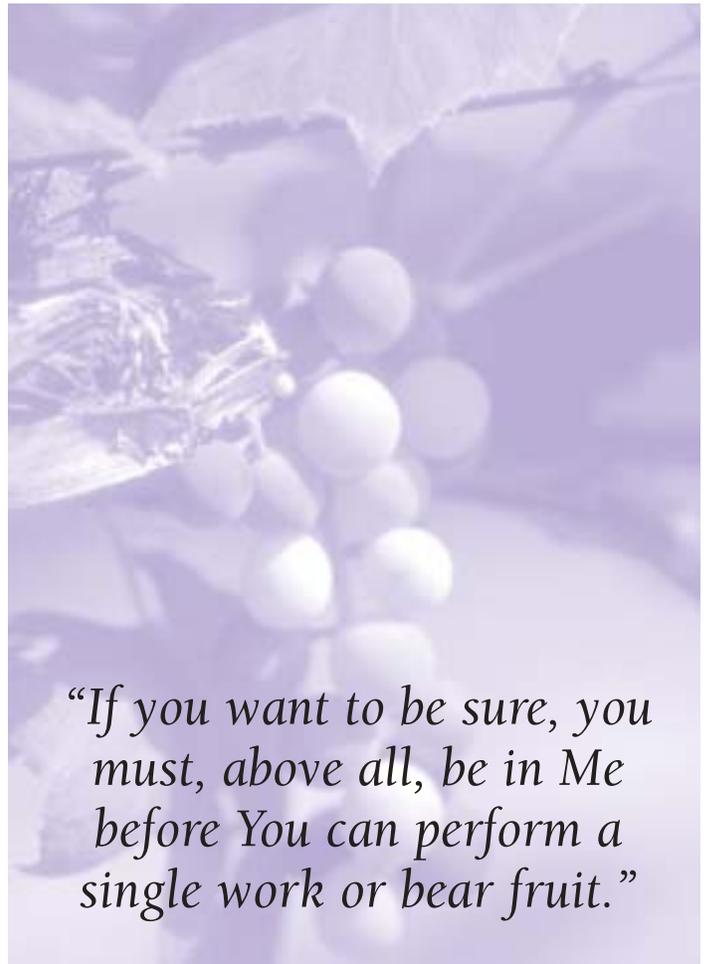
And if Christ is divested of His divinity, there remains no help against God’s wrath and no rescue from His judgment. Our sin, misery, and distress are so enormous that they require a ransom too great for angels, patriarchs, or prophets to pay. For this God’s Son had to become man, suffer and shed his blood. (Luther’s Works, Vol. 22, p 22)

Hear the voice rise in crescendo and thunder the words that without Jesus we have nothing.

But if a man is to find mercy, Christ alone must be the means. He alone makes us paupers rich with his superabundance, expunges our sins with His righteousness, devours our death with his life, and transforms us from children of wrath, tainted with sin, hypocrisy, lies and deceit, into children of grace and truth. Whoever does not possess this Man possesses nothing. (Ibid., p. 131)

See the extreme joy that must be on his ailing face as he points clearly to the only place where sin can be removed.

It is extremely important that we know where our sins have been disposed of. The Law deposits them on our conscience and shoves them into our bosom. But God takes them from us and places them on the shoulders of the Lamb... There are only two abodes for sin: it either resides with you, weighing you down; or it lies on Christ, the Lamb of God. If it is loaded on your back, you are lost; but if it rests on Christ, you are free and saved. (Ibid. p.169)



“If you want to be sure, you must, above all, be in Me before You can perform a single work or bear fruit.”

Luther loved to set up situations where he spoke for Jesus in the first person. Here Jesus the Vine speaks to the branches.

If you want to be sure, you must, above all, be in Me before You can perform a single work or bear fruit. All your works must proceed out of and from Me. After this, however, you, too, can bear fruits that are really good. But if you reverse the order and want to bear fruit before you are in Me, neither the branches nor the fruit will endure.” (Luther’s Works, Vol. 24, p. 233)

The devil was never a match for Christ in Luther’s sermons. We can almost hear him chortle with delight as he preaches,

Let the devil, death, and sin be against me! I am holy nevertheless. I believe in Christ and have learned to know Him; I understand and use the Word and the sacraments aright- all this I owe to the Holy Spirit, not to my own brains. (Ibid. p. 168)

I highly recommend purchasing the three volumes of Luther’s sermons on the Gospel of John. You will find yourself returning again and again to those areas that preach Christ clearly, especially if you underline them as you read.

Steven Degner

THE EXEGETICAL GROUNDWORK OF GOOD SERMON PREPARATION

The sermon is still the pastor's best time to reach the greatest number of souls with the law and gospel, sin and grace, of Christ-crucified.

Do we pastors sometimes become discouraged in our exegetical preparation because we forget how unique and awesome is the training we have received? Do we convince ourselves that we lack the language gifts and time to dig in because we have so many "practical" things to do? What can be more "practical" than this "double-edged sword, [that] penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; [that] judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12)?

We do well to humbly bow our heads before every sermon study and beg the Lord of the Church for his skill and blessing to first apply his law and gospel, sin and grace, to our own hearts, and then, in ways beyond understanding, to the hearts and lives of God's people sitting at Jesus' feet. When his cross is our focus, they will see it, too. Then we can forget ourselves in the holy joy of sharpened steel in the Savior's hand.

Trying to prepare a sermon only from translation, whether English, German, or any other language, is like trying to sharpen poorly tempered steel. The cutting edge is dull. Surely God saves souls through his Word in translation. But because Christ was crucified *for me*, I want his double-edged sword to cut clean and sharp with the Holy Spirit's own words which he inspired in Hebrew and Greek. I may never be the best preacher, but I always want to be a better preacher for the sake of that dear Name that saved my soul from hell.



God's people may not notice our tools or see how sharp we've honed the steel. The robe is meant to cover the man. What matters is the message – sharp, tempered, and skillfully applied with all the loving precision of the Divine Surgeon. WELS pastors are trained to hone the tempered steel of the Spirit's sword. They are tempered by the heating process of *tentatio* in the Spirit's school of grace. They cut deep and clean into human hearts because "the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God," forged in Hebrew and Greek. God alone can make His law clean and clear without work-righteousness or antinomian neglect. God alone can soothe the souls of preacher and parishioners alike with sweet gifts from our Master Teacher and Preacher. God loves to show us in this techno-sentimental age that we lack nothing to reach souls for Jesus when we rejoice first in solid sermon preparation.

Since the sermon still is the pastor's best time to reach God's people with his grace, it deserves our very best resources. Some preachers may spend too much time memorizing their own words instead of digging into the vocabulary of God. It can be like sitting next to a lake with eyes fastened on the pavement portside, while off to the right are the blue skies, clear water, and emerald green of the Creator.

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CAN YOU USE THIS?

The Lord Is **My** Shepherd

There is a beautiful story about a minister who, on his vacation in the mountains, taught an illiterate boy the 23rd Psalm and its rich meaning.

When the minister returned a year later, he found that the lad had frozen to death the previous winter. In trying to comfort the bereaved mother, the minister told her how he had taught her son "The Lord is my Shepherd" by having each finger represent a word. The word "The" was the first finger, "Lord" was the second, and so on.

Suddenly the mother understood the strange circumstance of her boy's death. With a gleam of joy she said, 'When we found him we wondered why his right hand was frozen around the fourth finger of his left hand.'

It was the finger for the word **my**. The boy knew and loved Christ the Good Shepherd as his very own.

Is Christ yours? Can you confidently say the Lord is **my** Shepherd? Then you can rejoice with David and say, "I shall not want."

*Lutheran Hour Broadcast July 9, 1961,
The Rev. Armin C. Oldsen, speaker*

But I have a lazy streak. My last sermon at seminary was a rewrite (a.k.a. “F”) because the good professor knew I only did it “to get it done.” I want my sermons to glorify God for his grace and honor my dear Savior. I want to remember at the start of my study that only my Bible and God’s promise (“what to say and how to say it” – Matthew 10:19; John 12:49) will accompany me into the pulpit. Time and again the Holy Spirit has given me better words and illustrations in the pulpit than what I wrote in the manuscript. My mind may go blank while preaching. But when I read again from the text, God fills my mouth with his words. I’m merely imitating Jesus pictured on my study wall, preaching freely on the mount as he pours forth the words his Father poured into him.

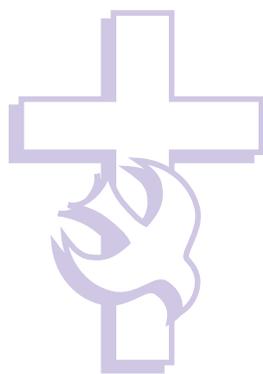
**But because Christ was crucified for me,
I want his double-edged sword to cut clean and sharp
with the Holy Spirit’s own words which he inspired in
Hebrew and Greek.**

Could God do otherwise for us? “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32) Whether my personal need is better discipline, sharper language skills, or more concise and compelling delivery, I can pull my Father’s heart strings because Jesus’ name-reputation means eternal glory for him and blessing for souls.

The same Holy Spirit who inspired the Hebrew and Greek can open those ancient windows to reveal the treasures inside to each of us.

כִּי לְעוֹלָם תְּסֻדּוּ

(Psalm 136 – refrain)



Mark Cordes

processing program I use tells me at what level I am writing. The 5th-6th grade level is what newspapers aim for. It seems to me that we preachers need to do the same for most audiences. The 7th-8th grade level is too high these days.

In the past few years I have had opportunity to hear many of our preachers speak from the pulpit. I am convinced that one of the things we preachers need to work on is doing a better job of not speaking at a college or high school level. I am not thinking only of theological terminology that must be explained. Sometimes, common words we use that accurately express what we want to say have to be discarded in favor of a few simpler words or even a couple of sentences. Shorter sentences are a must. Forget the conjunctions. Forget the explanatory clauses. Make new and shorter sentences. These things can be done without talking down to those in our audience who are learned individuals. It is work for us with the greater education and vocabulary to get down to a 5th-6th grade level. But, surely it is effort our Savior wants us to make for the sake of nurturing his lambs and sheep.

The Lord’s blessings on your efforts in his name! Have a good day in the Lord’s grace!

Dave Neuman

Editor Degner responds: Thank you, Dave, for showing us the importance of connecting the Word to people by connecting in a language they can understand and appreciate. Your comments remind me of an incident when a seminary student, Leon Piepenbrink, preached in our congregation in Tucson. I was especially impressed at how his vivid language, simple style, and good illustrations kept the kids leaning forward in their pews to hear every word he preached. The sermon had good depth and content, and faithfully expounded the text. It also connected with all levels in the congregation from those who taught in the university to the elderly and the kids.

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