

PREACH

the Word

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Sermon Style

It is common to hear veteran preachers say that they seldom go back to the barrel to dig out an old sermon to preach it again. The more a preacher has worked at improving his preaching skills over the years, the less likely he will feel comfortable preaching an old sermon. Fifteen year old sermons simply are not up to par anymore.

This is not because sermons in the barrel are not textual or doctrinally sound, or because they weren't structured the way we were taught in homiletics classes. Mostly what has changed between then and now is the style.

Preach the Gospel includes a chapter on "The Style of the Written Sermon" (pp 95-110). This excellent chapter deserves a rereading (I can say that because I didn't write it—you can tell by the style). Under the heading "You Have a Style," Prof. Balge says, "The way in which you use language is your style." He insists that your style can be improved. He says, "To a certain extent, style can be taught, and we can learn from others. But for the most part it needs to be learned by you, the practitioner, by practice."

This issue of *Preach the Word* focuses on the subject of sermon style. Balge says it succinctly: "The way in which you use language is your style." Your language use includes not only what you write but also how you speak what you write. Make no mistake about it, good style is inseparably connected with the writing of the sermon. That's where improvement begins.

Balge says that we can learn from others and improve. Rather than repeat what he wrote, we will introduce you to others from whom we can also learn. We'll hear what they have to say, and then provide a variety of examples to illustrate.

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Preach the Word is published bimonthly by the WELS Commission on Worship
2929 N Mayfair Rd
Milwaukee WI 53222-4398
414/256-3265
FAX, 414/256-3899
<brygerlach@aol.com>

Joel Gerlach, editor
Wayne A. Laitinen, managing editor

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What Others Say

The most practical counsel about sermon style I am aware of is in Jay Adams' Pulpit Speech. Chapter seven is entitled, "Acquiring a Preaching Style." Adams writes:

Good style in communication must be balanced with the norms of custom. In maintaining a balance between individual freshness and understandable form, the speaker runs into most of the problems that are connected with style. Good style, then, is individualism within accepted norms. That is to say, while on the one hand one's style may be unique, nevertheless his style must always be *in style* and not out of style.

Style cannot be avoided. It is there the moment you open your mouth. It is the manner in which you communicate your thoughts. The real questions with respect to style are questions like these: Is your style vital, alive, interesting, or is it dull, drab, and uninviting? Is it clear or muddled? Is it conscious or unconscious?

The only person you can hope to emulate is yourself; your style must flow out of your own interests and talents, not out of somebody else's.

Is it simple or ornate? Is it under control (your servant) or out of control (your master)? Is it flexible and growing or is it rigid, canned, and refrigerated? Is it appropriate or inappropriate to your subject, to your audience, and to yourself? Are you cultivating your style daily or has it gone to seed? In short, is your style good or poor?

Robert Farrar Capon, an Episcopal priest, caught my attention a decade ago with his three books on the parables. His most recent book, The Foolishness of Preaching (Eerdmans, 1998), is a sourcebook of contemporary style. He provides this word of caution:

The only person you can hope to emulate is yourself; your style must flow out of your own interests and talents, not out of somebody else's. No matter how much you may admire another preacher's gift of gab, that way lies the madness of standing up in clothes that don't fit and preaching in a language you'll never master. Don't imitate!

On the subject of vocabulary, he offers this bit of advice:

Don't be leery of words and phrases like "crud" and "great stuff." Preachers who avoid "crud" because it doesn't sound dignified (or, God help us, homiletical) are missing out on the chance to

express their dislike of nonsense in one trenchant word, rather than stuff it into an oversized suitcase like "distasteful inanity" or "tiresome verbosity." And preachers who use "impressive material" to avoid "great stuff" are peddling Sleep-Eze when they ought to be selling No-Doz.

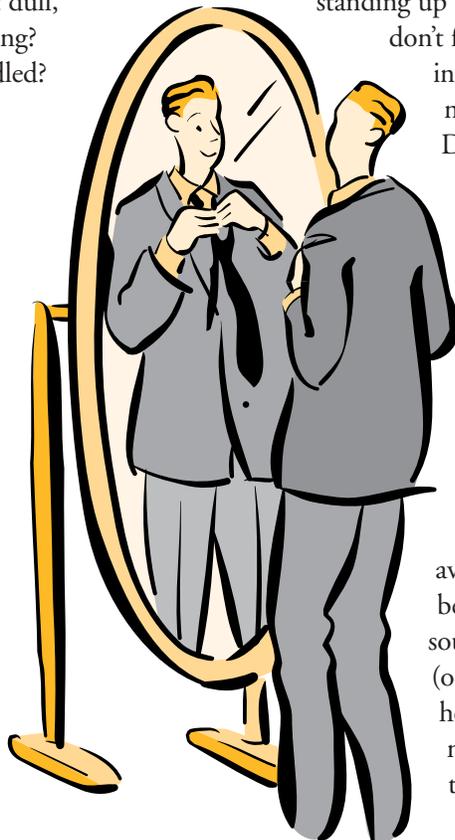
Capon provides a sample of his unique style in this word to preachers about communicating the gospel:

The mess of history is fixed once and for all in the mystery of (Jesus') death. Happily Ever After has arrived.

But the most passionately wonderful thing about it is the way it delivers you, as a preacher, from having to spout uplifting hokum from the pulpit. No useless programs of life improvement need ever pass your lips; no empty threats about what will happen to your people if they don't improve will ever insult their intelligence, or yours.

You won't have to tell them that love will make their lives soar upward like eagles, if only they'll work harder at it. That's a lie. It's precisely their efforts at love that have given their lives the glide angle of a dump truck; and it's the disasters of those efforts—the crucifixions to which their loves inexorably lead—that are their salvation from the road accidents of their history.

You won't have to warn them that they must stop sinning if they want God to like them. That's another lie. In their death, by Jesus' death, their sins are no problem for the God who has taken away the



“The preacher, in my estimation, has no rivals—not in the scientific laboratory, or the psychiatrist’s couch, or in the philosopher’s study.”

—Ray Stedman

handwriting that was against them and nailed it to his cross.

Above all, you won’t even have to tell them they need to be morally upright to earn God’s favor. That’s the biggest, bad-news lie of all, because God has gone and accepted every last one of them in his beloved Son and is pleased as punch with them in Jesus. If you can make up your mind, when you go into the pulpit, to forget everything except Jesus Christ and him crucified, you’ll have nothing to give them but Good News.

Examples of Lively Style

On baptism and forgiveness

The Lamb of God has taken away the sins of the world, not laid them on us like a coat of tar. Furthermore, we celebrate the absolution in the Nicene Creed: “We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” Notice what a remarkable statement that is: it proclaims that by the grace of God, we live our lives in an irremovable suit of

forgiveness. It tells us that every sin we ever commit will be committed inside that suit—and therefore that every sin in our lives is forgiven before, during, and after our commission of it. We don’t need to get forgiveness, we need to learn how to cheer up in the forgiveness we’ve had all along. “There is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Of course there must be repentance. But even repentance is a celebration, not a bargaining session in which we work up enough resolve against sin to con God into putting up with us.

On prayer

That’s it. I have no further expertise with which to guide you into prayer. I do, however, have a few things to say about it that may guide you away from certain attitudes I think are off mark.

For one thing, using the phrase “the spiritual life” when talking about prayer has always struck me as a dangerous piece of puffery. Urging such a noble-sounding enterprise on people gives them the impression that there’s a finer, less corporeal level they have to reach if they’re to pray correctly—or to be Christians at all.

That’s dead wrong. God saves us in our broken-down flesh, and he raises us up with glorious bodies. He has no intention of turning us into angels or any other species of spiritual giant. Yes, we have spiritual faculties. And yes, we’re allowed to sharpen them. But our honing of them is neither more nor less legitimate than our efforts at improving our psychic abilities, our business skills, our cooking performances, or our golf swing. All such activities are proper

human pursuits; but none of them, not even “spirituality,” is necessary for salvation—which, alas, is the air many of us seem to give off when we get all wound up about the wonderfulness of our own spiritual life (or, in particular, about the lack of such in others). Spirituality may be nice, but God doesn’t depend on it to get his work done.

*Prayer is just talking
with someone who’s
already talking to you.*

For another thing, prayer is not “going to God” (he’s already in you), or “seeking God” (he’s already found you), or “opening yourself to God” (you couldn’t keep him out if you tried), or “becoming spiritual” (he’s already sent you the Spirit—who would rather show you Jesus than help you display your spiritual prowess). And it’s certainly not buttering up to God with abject apologies for your existence—because in his beloved Son, he already thinks you’re dandy. Prayer is just talking with someone who’s already talking to you.

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three

**“Predicatio verbum
dei est verbum dei.”**

—Luther

**“Preaching the Word of God is the
Word of God.”**

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On stewardship (for Easter 5-A, Acts 17:1-12)

After recounting how the Lord blessed the congregation during the past year—two full worship services, dramatic growth in the school, two-room addition to the school and an additional teacher, the preacher continued:

What can we say about this? “Thanks, Lord, for blessing us. . . . in a time of economic uncertainty.” That’s the good news. The flip side isn’t so much bad news as it is a challenge—from the Lord, not from me.

Ever get one of those coupons in the mail when you haven’t used a department store charge card for a long time? A coupon for 10% off on anything in the store if you use your card again? Or the “sale on top of a sale” technique: take an additional 25% off of merchandise already marked down 30%? Boy, do some people respond. I have. Such a deal. Getting by so cheaply you can almost feel like you’re getting away with something.

Does anything similar happen in the church? I fear it does. What if a family’s annual offering is less than one house payment? Or less than one car payment? It happens. Well, church membership can be quite a good deal. Through Jesus

100% off on all your sins. Great! Now, how am I going to express my commitment? The question is not, “How cheaply can I get by?” or “Is there a discount?”

Early Christians were often accused of turning the world upside down. God gives us opportunities to earn the same accusation. As his disciple, are you ready for the challenge? Do you want this year’s momentum to continue, and even to grow? Is it reasonable to hope for growing momentum?

Following a reference to the text and to 2 Corinthians 8:1f, the preacher pointed out that the Thessalonians were still turning the world upside down for Christ. Then he noted, “And God is giving us opportunities to turn our world upside down for the cause of Christ—with our ‘rich generosity.’”

Editing Your Sermon in the Interest of Style

A cartoon in the *New Yorker* portrays a gangly high school boy in English class reciting Gertrude Stein’s famous line. “A rose is a . . . sort of like, I mean a . . . you know . . . rose . . . is like . . . you know . . . a rose, right?”

The obvious point is that the sublime can be reduced to the ridiculous. Preachers can do that too when they opt to use 20 words where one will do. After all, didn’t someone once say, “Nothing succeeds like excess”?

Artists understand the importance of eliminating excess—less is more. If a sermon is a literary art form, then a good sermon will exhibit precision along with an

economy of words. That requires careful editing.

The delete key simplifies the task of editing sermons. But editing still requires an eye for what needs to go. Jay Adams condemns weasel words and lace curtains. Words like “very” and “really” weasel their way into sermons, but they don’t add anything. Lace curtains are all the unnecessary details we include in anecdotes.

Capon says, “You must surround your sesquipedalian creations with terse sentences. Punchy sentences. Sentences without verbs. And in particular, sentences without adverbs. Note that last one well. Don’t write ‘really punchy sentences.’ Or ‘sentences entirely without adverbs.’ Adverbs and adjectives pull punches more often than they deliver them.”

A sermon that aspires to be an art form should justify itself in every line and in every word. That means that before you click the print icon, if you really (sic) want to improve your style, you need to do the work of a careful editor.

Oral vs. Aural

One thing we all learned at the seminary is that writing a sermon is not like writing a church history or a dogmatics paper. That’s because there is a basic difference between oral and written communication. Dr. Peter Eldersveld, radio minister on the Back to God Hour of Christian Reformed Church, was a master at writing oral communication. Reading his sermons for years helped me learn the difference. Who’s your mentor?

**“Let everything be done so
that the Word may have
free course . . .”**

—Luther