

Welcome back!

By Paul Prange

Thank you to everyone who commented on the first issue in this new volume of Preach the Word. The general reaction is probably summarized best by this simple e-mail from a brother: "I want to say that I appreciate the new format that you are using. I find it to be stimulating." Because of your encouragement, we will continue with the format of having three brothers with different perspectives converse about some practical matter of preaching.

The three men in this second issue, different brothers from the first three, have also allowed their conversation to be edited for publication here. You can continue the conversation with them live at the Grow in Grace Web site.

We have changed the electronic format of conversation on the Grow in Grace Web site just a bit for this second issue, hoping to make it easier for you to join and participate.

May we all be able to say with that famous preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, "Personally, I have to bless God for many good books . . . but my gratitude most of all is due to God, not for books, but for the preached Word."

The Use of Personal Stories in Sermons

Pastor A: I will lead off. I never tell personal stories in any of my sermons. One of our most respected professors warned against that, and he did it in his usual powerful way. He simply said, "When I listen to you preach, I am not interested in hearing you yammer on about what you did on your family vacation."

Pastor C: And I will reveal that I purposefully tell a personal story in nearly every one of my sermons, and it is usually something that happened during the past week.

A: That just doesn't seem Lutheran to me.

Pastor B: I used to think that as well, but then I started to read Luther's sermons. It seems to me that he does not hesitate to use a personal story if it is a good illustration of the biblical point he is making.

A: That's true. I never thought of that. Of course, I am no Luther.

C: And I never considered that, but I'm glad to know it.

B: I heard a church historian one time compare Luther to another Reformer—maybe it was Calvin or Zwingli, somebody like that. He said something like, "As a historian, I prefer Luther. We know a lot more about his personal life because he talked about it in his sermons, many of which were published. The other man must have had a personal rule that he would never mention personal matters in his preaching." That got me thinking about what it meant to be Lutheran as a preacher.

C: I will try to explain to you why I try to tell a personal story in every sermon. The majority of the people in my congregation are either new to the Christian faith or new to being Lutheran. Because they all seem to struggle with a biblical worldview, I try to put something, really anything, from my life every week into biblical perspective.

B: So you are trying to give examples of what a Christian perspective looks like?

C: Exactly. And most of my people are from the same community, or at least get their news from the same basic sources, so if I can comment on my own reaction to something going on that everybody knows about during the past week, I am really saying, here is the way a Christian, a Lutheran Christian, can understand these things in terms of law and gospel, sin and grace. People say that they really appreciate that.

A: I think I accomplish that in many of my sermon illustrations without making it a personal story. Instead of talking about myself, I try to use something from the timeless biographies of the Old and New Testament believers.

C: Believe me, I have those in there too!

B: I am a little leery of too many personal stories. I keep coming back to the Greeks who went to Philip and said, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." I have heard that some guys tape John 12:21 to a place where they can see it in their pulpits.

C: Are you sure that's a proper use of that passage? I guess it doesn't hurt.

A: So how do you keep a sermon with a lot of personal stories from being about yourself?

C: I am willing to confess to you that sometimes I have failed in that. When the people talk to me after the service and seem to be able to remember the story but not the biblical point I was making, I can see the weakness of my approach.

B: I was reviewing a book for Northwestern Publishing House one time, a book published by someone outside of our fellowship, and I noticed that the entire thing was made up of stories about what a good father he was, what a good husband he was, what a good friend he was—stuff like that. Even the stories where he admitted he had done something wrong seemed a little self-aggrandizing. I looked up that author's website and listened to one of his sermons. That's what they were—just stories about himself.

C: I am careful to have Jesus as the main point of every one of my sermons. I will not preach a sermon without mentioning his crucifixion to take the punishment for our sins. I try to make it clear that the biblical perspective of life has Jesus at the center of it.

A: When I am working on a sermon text, I try to apply my whole self to the text, and the whole text to myself. So I do end up

thinking of personal stories and applications. But because I am so careful about "he must increase, I must decrease," I word the applications so they are about Christians in general, not me in particular.

C: Do people think that your sermons are personal enough?

A: Good question. I don't really ask for that kind of feedback.

B: I'm not sure personal is one of the top things that I am going for when I preach. But I do like to be able to hold people's attention, and I can see how personal stories almost always do that.

A: So I come back to the use of narratives from the biblical text. I do think that people these days follow stories more easily than they follow theme and parts, so I often try to illustrate a part or even my theme with some engaging details from the biblical text. That is easier to do with Gospel and Old Testament texts than it is with the epistles, of course.

C: I know that the basic Bible truths can be illustrated with Bible accounts. But I think it's kind of artificial when I pretend that one of the people in the Bible is reacting to something that happened in my community during the past week or month.

B: It might be more difficult, but I think it could be done without seeming artificial. In fact, it might be a good skill for people new to the faith to learn.

C: Do you try to apply the biblical accounts to the everyday lives of your hearers?

A: I do. I can't say I always succeed, although it depends on what you mean by "everyday lives."

C: How do you mean that?

A: My sermons are not "Ten Points for Being a Good Husband" or something like that. But I think that forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus is pretty important in everyday life.

C: No doubt. But people need to know how it is important in everyday life, especially if they have never heard unconditional gospel from the people close to them. I think personal stories are a strong way to bring that home.



B: My childhood pastor was really good at bringing that home.

And occasionally he would use personal stories to do it. But I felt sorry for my classmate, his son, when he was in the stories. Even though his dad never really said anything bad about him, to me it was just embarrassing.

C: If I am going to use family members in my personal stories, I get their permission—at least once they are old enough to give permission!

B: OK, confession. I used a personal story from my childhood in one of my sermons last month, but I'm pretty sure the event didn't happen the way I told it.

A: You made it up?

B: Not exactly. It was pretty foggy in my memory. But I put some details into the story to make it the perfect illustration for the point I was trying to make.

A: That may be enough to keep me away from the temptation to use personal stories. At least when I tell a general story from everyday life, I don't have to pretend that some or all of the details happened to me.

B: Point taken.

C: I know that conventional wisdom is to avoid personal stories. And I can feel the temptation to make myself or my wonderful family the center of attention. So I try to avoid that. But I wonder if some of the objections are generational. My dad's generation, if I'm reading it correctly, had the impression that it was a little impolite to talk about yourself in public. I think people today wonder what you are hiding if you speak about everything in the third person.

B: I have the suspicion that it's a little regional as well. You know, the stereotype of quiet, unassuming Midwesterners vs. Easterners or Southerners who are little more comfortable with self-promotion.

A: I don't know. I've heard young people who are well-versed in Lutheran theology and living outside of the Midwest say things like, "Pastor, when you're in the pulpit, I don't want to hear about you. I just want to hear about Jesus."

Continue the conversation at the *Grow in Grace* Web site. Go the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Web site (www.wls.wels.net), click on *Grow in Grace*, and follow the instructions there, either to register or to join the discussion.



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

- Which pastor's use of personal stories in his sermons most closely matches your own?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each style in the use of personal stories?
- Have you noticed any truth to the assertion that people today follow stories more closely than previous generations did?



Next Issue's Conversation: The Use of the Original Languages in Sermon Preparation



Excerpts from the blog Pastoralized: *Shepherding Like a Prophet, Priest, and King*, a perspective from outside of our fellowship. Eric McKiddie is one of the pastors at College Church, Wheaton, IL. Thanks to Pastor Daniel Witte for bringing it to our attention.

How to Do Application Without Becoming a Quick-Fix Artist

By Eric McKiddie

Doing application in your sermon can feel like using the bathroom at a gas station. You need to do it. You're not looking forward to it. And once you take care of your business, you feel gross and glad at the same time. The glad feeling (with application that is) comes from knowing you did what you were supposed to do. You're *supposed* to apply your message to your congregation. But you feel a little gross for giving advice on how start [sic] living holier *now* that probably doesn't fit everyone in your congregation. You guessed, and you hope for a couple people you guessed right.

A paradigm shift for sermon application

Most of the problems with doing application in sermons can be solved by changing the way we ask the question. Instead of asking yourself, "How do I apply this *to* my congregation?" Ask, "How do I *demonstrate* application *for* my congregation?"

The first question assumes that it's the preacher's job to hold the congregation's hand each step of the way. But that's impossible, since each person needs to apply it differently. If you try the 3-Step Method of application, you will sound practical, but in reality you will be superficial, since you will have to be general to include everyone.

The second question recognizes that you can't give steps, but you can give fundamentals. You can't hold their hand, but you can show them where the path begins. You can't do their thinking for them, but you can provide wisdom to guide how they connect their life to the passage.

The hands follow the heart

The seeker movement made the mistake of preaching to the hands but not the heart. Sermon titles that start with *Seven Principles For . . .* imply two things: 1) you have the capacity to improve your spiritual life, and 2) your problem is not your sin, it's your lack of directions. Neither of those addresses the fallen condition of our heart. We don't have the capacity to improve our spiritual life. That's why we need Jesus.

Tim Keller, following D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, emphasizes preaching to the *heart*. If you can preach to your congregation's hearts—so that they sense God's exalted glory, they love Jesus for his gracious sacrifice, and rely on the Spirit for power—they will figure out what tangible actions they need to take to glorify God with their life.



Do You Make These Excuses to Avoid Sermon Illustrations?

There's a nasty rumor going around that says you're either a natural at illustrations, or a dud. There are some preachers who think so creatively that they call forth their illustrations *ex nihilo* while preparing their sermons in a chaise [sic] lounge, sipping Arnold Palmers. Then there are preachers who have two left brains. The toes of their congregation suffer every time they try a simple illustration two-step.

The fallacy behind both sides of that false dichotomy is the misconception that illustrations don't take work. Either you're so good at illustrations that you don't have to try, or you're so bad you shouldn't even bother. But the truth is anyone can get good at using illustrations in their sermons if they put forth a little effort.

If you're more the guy holding up the wall, and less the guy breaking it down on the illustration dance floor, I wonder if you've consoled yourself with any of these excuses. (I know I have.)

1. **I'm not good at illustrations.** What you probably mean by this is that you're not good at thinking them up when you need them. A few habits will help you get around that.

If you learn to keep your eye out for illustrations, find some, and store them before you forget them, you'll hit an illustration growth spurt hard enough to make a short high school boy jealous.

2. **I'm not a good storyteller.** Where the first excuse had to do with your reservoir of illustrations, this has to do with your delivery of them.

Maybe you aren't a *great* story teller, but anyone can be a *good* storyteller. In fact it only takes six sentences to tell a good story. It may take thought and work, but, like anything else, the more you work at it, the easier it becomes. Keep your eye out for story telling tips, and you'll get better.

3. **Illustrations are just for attention and entertainment.** This simply is not true. On the Christian side of things, Bryan Chapell has disproved this notion in his book, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*. On the secular side, in *Made to Stick* and *Switch*, Chip and Dan Heath have shown that illustrations are the cake, not the icing, of motivating toward change.

Besides those recent books, I know of another one that was completed around 2000 years ago that is full of illustrations. You wouldn't accuse God's Word of stooping to the level of ear-candy, would you?

There are plenty of other excuses to avoid sermon illustrations, I'm sure. These are just the ones I used to tell myself. What are your excuses? Are you ready to give them up and step on the floor?

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