

Preach the Word

Vol. 16 No. 5

May/June 2013



Observation

By Paul Prange

I love a good catechetical sermon.

When I hear my pastor read a proof text from the catechism as his sermon text, I look forward to hearing how he is teaching it to his current catechism students. I appreciate the review of my own catechetical instruction, and the new applications of the text to my current life.

The original Handbook to the Small Catechism was dedicated "to all faithful and upright pastors and preachers." I gain quite a bit from catechetical review in a good catechetical sermon to help me in my role as a Christian father, since Martin Luther suggested that the truths of his Small Catechism were for me to present to my household.

And I know how this has worked in history. Good catechetical preaching has borne fruit in Lutheran congregations.

Almost 500 years ago, a group of families moved to where a mine had opened in the present-day Czech Republic. They named their new town Joachimsthal. That silver mine produced the metal for the coins in their area, which became known as "Thalers," from which we get our English word, "dollars."

The year after they founded their town, Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the church door at Wittenberg, and the Reformation began.

The mining families all became Lutheran. Their story is told by Christopher Boyd Brown in his book, "Singing the Gospel." The townspeople opened and supported two Lutheran elementary schools, one for the boys and one for the girls. They supported a number of pastors in a large congregation that contained, at its peak, 5,000 mining families.

Many of their legal and church records have been preserved, and what is striking is the documented evidence of each

family being sure that the children learned Bible accounts, Luther's Small Catechism, Lutheran worship, and in particular, the words of dozens of good Lutheran catechetical hymns. All of that family catechetical work was supported by good catechetical preaching from the pulpit.

After imperial armies took over the territory and banned Lutheranism, a Roman Catholic priest named Franciscus Albanus was sent to the village. He had his doctoral degree from a college where they trained men to oppose the unconditional gospel. Franciscus Albanus worked hard in Joachimsthal. But the children under his care told him the truths of the Bible as they had learned them in Luther's Small Catechism. The men and women of the village patiently insisted on forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus as their Savior. And the families sang Lutheran hymns in public and private. Of course, there was strong cultural pressure to compromise the truth. But the people held firm. Even armies could not stop them.

Albanus was forced to begin reading through the Lutheran theological volumes stored in the Joachimsthal library in order to "strike the people with their own sword, and convince them out of their own writings."

Instead, he himself was convinced by the Holy Spirit. Albanus resigned from the priesthood and became a Lutheran pastor.

Do you think he engaged in any good catechetical preaching after that?

God bless your faithful preaching, catechetical and otherwise.

Enjoy this issue.



The Length of the Sermon

Pastor C: I will put it as clearly as I can. I'm convinced that lay people are being alienated by lengthy sermons.

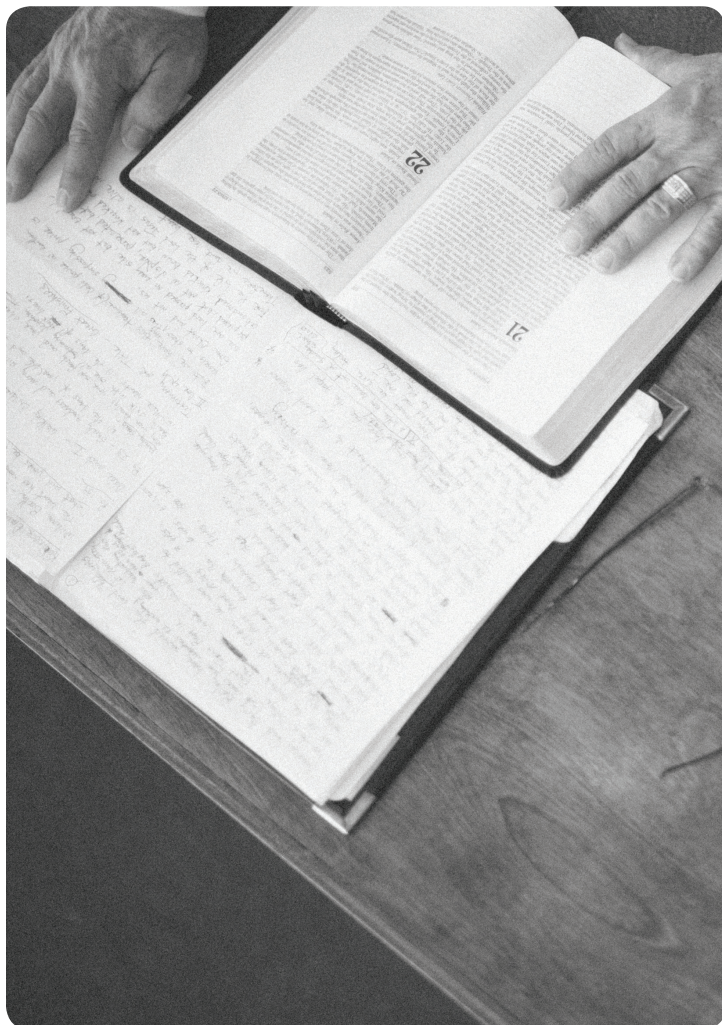
Pastor B: OK, I'll take the bait. How would you define lengthy?

C: When I started preaching over three decades ago I would often preach for 23-25 minutes. I now aim for 12-14 minutes; I sometimes fail to hit that, and my sermons once in a while run 15 or 16 minutes. But I'm convinced 12 minutes is a good goal to shoot for.

Pastor A: When I was at Sem, which wasn't too long ago, we talked about hitting the 18-22 minute mark. In fact, when we critiqued one another's sermons, we might have said, "It was only 17 minutes," as if that were too short. To me, 12 minutes for a regular Sunday morning sermon seems a little short, but if it is over 20 minutes, it better be good.

B: I agree. Twelve minutes, in normal circumstances, seems awfully short.

C: Our people are living in the TV generation. For them, watching one person talk for 12 minutes seems awfully long.



B: So then how did you settle on 12 minutes as the ideal length for your own sermons?

C: My predecessor usually preached no more than 12 minute sermons, and the vacancy pastor's motto was, "If you don't strike oil in the first ten minutes, stop boring."

A: I don't know if 12 minutes is the right answer, but in the few years I've been out in the field, I've come to the conclusion that 16 minutes is a good time to shoot for.

B: The length of my sermon changes every week. I time out all of the other elements of the service, and I write my sermon to fill in the remaining minutes so that the service comes out to very close to an hour.

C: So what does the sermon length turn out to be?

B: Sometimes as long as 35 minutes, and sometimes as short as 8. Usually about 20 minutes. I can tell you how many words each manuscript has to be in order to arrive at the appropriate length.

Law and gospel, with text color, are there every time.

A: Tell me that you always do justice to the text.

B: Law and gospel, with text color, are there every time. The people know they are forgiven through faith in Jesus, their Savior.

A: I don't think the service has to be just an hour. But if services regularly go over an hour and fifteen minutes, I can understand people's frustration.

C: People do get frustrated. That's just my point. One of my members, in a loving, jovial, but firm way, once said something to me after a service, criticizing the length of my sermons. I replied, "Martin Luther used to preach 45 minutes to an hour."

B: I already know the answer to this one.

C: Yup, you guessed it. My member answered, "You're not Martin Luther." He was right.

A: I agree that it's easy for a pastor to think his sermon is more interesting than it actually is.

C: Yes, truth is, most of us aren't as interesting sermonizers as we think we are. I would guess there might be a half dozen WELS preachers who could preach half-hour sermons, or longer, and hold people's attention. Perhaps a dozen more could get away with preaching 25 minutes, and two or three dozen more could preach 20 minutes. But most of us lose our hearers' attention before the 15-minute mark.

A: That may be unduly critical. People are listening. If they love their pastor, they will listen, even if the sermon isn't one for the *Quarterly*. They know it is a sin to despise preaching and the

Word, even when they are in the sanctuary listening to a sermon, and I know that their New Man wants to hear the gospel.

- B: Listen, I think the attention span argument has less to do with time and more to do with the proper construction of sermon. If a sermon is well-conceived and well-constructed—and drives home its point—then I don't think its length is that much of an issue.
- C: Have you guys actually talked to your lay people about this issue? I have come to my conclusions after talking with lots of lay people.

It's easy for a pastor to think his sermon is more interesting than it actually is.

- B: I admit that I haven't asked my congregation members real scientifically. I rely on my wife to tell me when I have gone on too long.
- A: Maybe I'm not even the right guy to ask. I have an associate, and it's fun for me to listen when he riffs on about something he clearly finds very important, even if I don't think it is that important. Would he tell me if I went too long? I'm not sure.
- B: OK, if you're not prepared and interested in writing a well-conceived and well-constructed sermon, then less is definitely more. Then, I might opine, even twelve minutes is too long!
- C: I am really not talking at all about saving time in preparation or being lazy. I'm putting the same amount of work into sermon preparation. In fact, maybe I have to work a little harder to have the sermon at 12 minutes cover everything that it should.
- A: To me, honesty is key: if I'm preaching from the heart and talking to the people like I would talk to them face to face (as opposed to delivering a speech), I think people will stay with me.
- B: You know, if we go on much longer, we could be accused of not practicing what we preach!



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

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

What are the strengths and weaknesses of each view?

What do you think of timing the service so that it takes exactly an hour every week?

Next Issue's Conversation: *The Intellectual Level of the Sermon*

Edited excerpt from firstthings.com, a perspective from outside of our fellowship. Printed originally in March 1999. Used by permission.

Preachers

By James Nuechterlein

In some six decades of churchgoing, I have listened to scores, if not hundreds, of preachers, many of them over extended periods of time. I have heard great preaching, awful preaching, and everything in between—though I am happy to report that on balance I have encountered more good preaching than bad.

In my childhood, it was difficult to distinguish the good preaching from the bad, partly because children do not so much judge sermons as endure them in a pre-critical fashion, partly because the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) pastors of that era all followed a certain formula in preaching that made their sermons sound more or less interchangeable. The staple of LCMS preaching was the three-point sermon: you have sinned and by that sin merited eternal separation from God; Christ died to save you from the consequences of your sins; you should in grateful response strive to live in obedience to God's will.

A pastor need not be a heretic to be a bad preacher. Laziness will do.

Points one and three typically received less elaboration than point two. I grew up assuming that all sermons necessarily include a full exposition of our inability to make recompense for sin and of Christ's substitutionary atonement for that sin on the Cross. The emphasis throughout was on a rigorously precise understanding of the gospel as grace alone through faith alone—which, we were given to understand, is what distinguished Lutheran doctrinal purity from sin-obsessed fundamentalism on the one side and works-beguiled Romanism on the other.

He entered the pulpit full of confidence and empty of theme or point.

As I grew into adolescence, I came to regard good preaching as that which could bring the three-point formula to life. In time, I became impatient with the formula itself—though later still, as I found myself in congregational settings far removed from Missouri Synod certainties, I sometimes looked back on that formula with a certain nostalgia. Better a pat orthodoxy than inventive heresy.

A pastor need not be a heretic to be a bad preacher. Laziness will do. "So tell me pastor," a friend of mine once inquired of a preacher after church, "what did you do with the time you saved from sermon preparation?" Poorly prepared sermons often make for incoherent ones as well. There was one pastor, an occasional substitute preacher at the congregation I then belonged to, who I heard preach just four times, and on each agonizing occasion he

entered the pulpit full of confidence and empty of theme or point. The last time, he went on for forty-five minutes—it was not only the worst sermon I ever heard but the longest—blindly in search of a topic or even of consecutive thoughts. As the congregation's stirrings edged toward open mutiny, he groped for an ending. Finally, he hit on the following (which, of course, had nothing to do with anything that had preceded it): "Well, next Tuesday is election day. I don't think I can vote for George Bush. But, then, I don't think I could vote for any Republican. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Few Lutheran pastors today preach more than twenty minutes.

The length of that sermon was as unusual as its mindless political conclusion. Few Lutheran pastors today preach more than twenty minutes, a considerable reduction from the twenty-five to thirty-five minutes that was common in my childhood. Many pastors, indeed, are quite careful as to the length of their sermons. My current pastor, for example—whose fine preaching I have noted earlier in these pages—preaches, Sunday after Sunday, precisely eleven-minute sermons. Not ten minutes, not twelve minutes, but eleven. (I know this is so because of my obsessive-compulsive habit of timing sermons—a habit inherited from my father that, try as I might, I cannot shake, even though I'm aware it drives preachers crazy.) Fortunately, the high quality of the sermons at our parish is as predictable as their length.

Good preaching comes, of course, in a variety of styles: long and short, plain and rhetorically elevated, interpretive and narrative. Theological sophistication helps, but it is not the critical ingredient. Few beginning pastors, even those with the best seminary education, are excellent preachers. They lack the emotional intelligence, the knowledge of the soul, that develops only with experience of life.

Much of that knowledge comes from suffering, experienced in oneself or apprehended in the suffering of others. It is no accident that two of the most effective preachers I have known were recovering alcoholics. Another outstanding preacher taught me that it is invariably the case that to come to know someone well is to become aware of some fundamental pain or regret in that person's life.

The greatest preachers are those whom life has humbled.

The greatest preachers are those whom life has humbled. (I have on more than one occasion felt the effect of an otherwise admirable sermon ruined by the sense that the pastor had been told once too often what a fine preacher he was.) One wants a pastor who knows what it means to pray, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Which is not to say that one wants preaching whose primary intention is to heal wounded psyches or offer assurance that things will, after all, turn out all right. Good preaching engages, in Lutheran terms, the dialectical conversation of sin and grace. "Preach grace!" is the necessary imperative addressed to all who enter the pulpit, but grace without sin dissolves into Hallmark theology. The essence of our fault—our own most grievous fault—is that we are, as Augustine noted, turned in on ourselves. Good preaching directs us out of our crippling self-preoccupation and toward the promises of the gospel. It is from there that injunctions to live well can persuasively begin.

For all preachers, even the very best, there are moments when inspiration fails. On those occasions, they could do worse than consider artful variations on the traditional three-point sermon. I remember, from many years ago, the farewell sermon of an LCMS pastor of the old school. His pastoral career, he acknowledged, had been a modest one, but he wanted us to know that he left the pulpit with a sense of satisfaction. "I have always," he said, "preached Christ crucified." That was all, and that was enough.

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