

# PREACH

*the Word*

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## Objectivity and Subjectivity in Lutheran Preaching

A lot of sermons betray that the preacher is not clear about the relationship between the objective and the subjective. Martin Luther had some pretty positive opinions in this matter.

The Bible teaches, and orthodox Lutheranism holds, that our faith does not establish our peace with God or our future happiness. God and his objective truth exist apart from my consciousness. When we say that, we part company with humanists and existentialists who argue that man's subjective consciousness gives reality to all things. Everything then becomes anthropocentric, and the conclusions are predictable: "God wouldn't ask me to believe anything that isn't reasonable." "I am responsible to nobody but myself." Then absolute truth is a no-no: Christian faith and life become subjective, and relative. "I gotta be me" becomes a legitimate motto for living.

We recall how Luther's heart ached for something solid, something outside of himself that could give him assurance of where he stood with God. He spent more than half his life without that objective assurance. Of that period of his life he later said, "Life had become a living hell." It was out of his own painful experience that Luther wrote, "There is no more miserable frame of mind than doubt."

So what difference does this make to spiritual sons of Martin Luther when they step into a pulpit? In a theological climate of uncertainty and of the idolatrous worship of the question, we can offer our hearers certainty. Instead of "It seems to me . . ." or "Let's talk about this . . .", we can say, "This is what the Lord says. . . ."

You can always trust God; you can't always trust your feelings. "Seeing is believing" was Thomas' motto (perhaps better: "Feeling is believing"). A week after Easter, no

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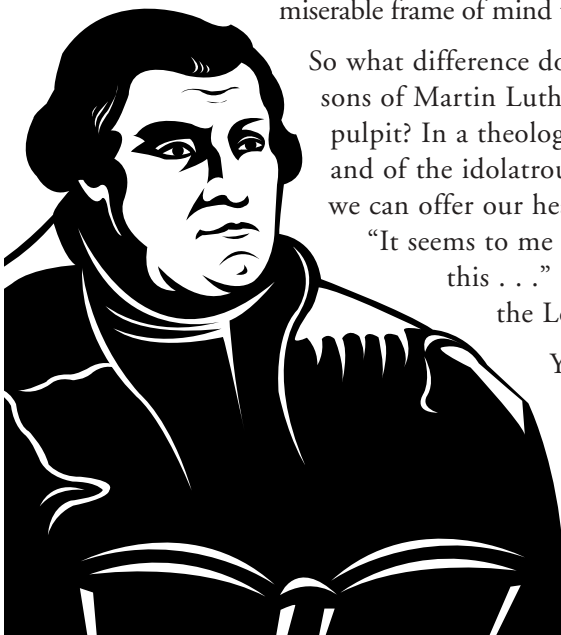
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2929 N Mayfair Rd  
Milwaukee WI 53222-4398  
414/256-3265  
FAX, 414/256-3899  
<brygerlach@aol.com>

John C. Jeske, editor  
Wayne A. Laitinen, managing editor

PREACH  
*the Word*



## Appropriate Language for Your Sermon

Every now and then I take out the first student sermon I wrote years ago and reread it. My reason for doing that is not just that it's fun to take a sentimental journey back half a century. Actually it's rather a humbling experience, but one I need to remember each time I write a sermon. On returning my manuscript, the instructor had written (with a very dull red pencil), "Your style is fairly careful, but literary. Would you really talk to people like that? Too many technical abstractions; convert to verbs!" That I used the word "salvation" 18 times in that sermon may have had something to do with the instructor's comment.

### Good pulpit language is clear

Well-written sermons do not leave our hearers guessing what we mean. Way too often preachers use "the language of Zion" instead of the language of people. A statement like "Jesus saved us from sin" is not good language for your sermon. The statement is ambiguous; it can be understood to mean several totally different things:

1. "Jesus saved us from the damning guilt of our sin."
2. "Jesus broke the controlling power that sin formerly exercised over us."
3. "Because of Jesus Christ, we will one day be free from the very presence of sin."

Similarly, if you say, "God announces his judgment," you may be using the term "judgment" in the sense of "condemnation," but your hearers may understand the term in the sense of "evaluation." Again, that's not communicating God's truth well. If you commonly refer to "the world" in the restricted

# Good Pulpit Language . . .

sense of "the unbelieving world," but your hearers understand "the created world" (as in "God so loved the world . . ."), there's a communication gap between preacher and hearers. Sermon language must not only be clear enough to be understood, but so clear that it cannot be misunderstood.

A Lutheran campus pastor tells of a Bible study discussion in which he used the term "original sin." Wondering whether he had taken too much Bible knowledge for granted, he asked if any member of the group could define the term. One participant volunteered, "A sin nobody ever thought of before?" Shooting over the heads of your hearers doesn't prove you're a superior marksman; it may show that you're a poor shot. At a Princeton Seminary institute, a layman was asked to evaluate the sermons he heard. His response, "If I used that much jargon with my customers, I'd lose them."

About clarity, Rudolph Flesch says in *Plain Talk*: "Clarity increases as sentence length decreases. A clear writer will average 17-18 words per sentence and will not allow any sentence to wander over 30 words."

### Good pulpit language addresses the hearer's felt needs

Effective sermons address the real interests of the hearers. Mediocre sermons take for granted the ways people are thinking. They sidestep what people are really thinking and concerned about. Jesus addressed his hearers' concerns—about knowing where they stood with God, about their need for security, about loneliness and worry, about their need for personal worth, about their uncertainty regarding the future.

### Good pulpit language appeals to the senses

There is nothing in the mind that is not first in the senses. It's therefore important for the preacher to make sure that there is a constant stream of concrete sensory images behind his words. One of our Africa missionaries shared this experience: "After writing a sermon, I'll reread it, first, to see where I have used abstract expressions (i.e. salvation or righteousness or kingdom of God). I'll highlight each of these with a felt-tip pen, and afterward go back and replace each one with a concrete expression. Africans don't think in abstract terms."

Neither do Americans. If a sentence of my sermon recalls nothing but abstract ideas, I must lower that sentence down the ladder of abstraction until it approaches the hearers' world of daily experience, until it suggests a concrete image. Listen to Jeremiah: "Israel is a senseless pigeon" and "Judah is like a camel in heat."

The best language for your sermon is language that gives your hearers windows through which to see God's truth. Language that appeals to the senses is the kind of language that belongs in the pulpit. Which of these two phrases is more interesting to you:

1. "When Judgment Day comes . . ."
2. "When God's magnificent trumpet breaks into our world . . ."

The first is only words; the second appeals to one of our senses. The psalmist didn't say, "Your word is pleasant for me to read" but "Your word is sweeter to me than honey from the honeycomb." The more kinds of sensory perception you can introduce into your sermon, the clearer it will be for your hearers.

### **Good pulpit language is a balance of formality and informality**

The historian Thomas Carlyle once defined Christianity as "a creed of sorrow." The worship service you plan and conduct dare not be a solemn, dull business. Would you agree that too many sermons are rigid, super-serious? Isn't it an anomaly when a pastor who has a naturally sunny disposition and a delightful sense of humor lets it come out only at a party or a wedding celebration? People say, "It's too bad he's a

preacher; he had such a good sense of humor."

If, by nature, you're a cheerful person but there isn't a spark of cheerfulness in your preaching, you're signaling to the congregation that, in an essential part of your temperament, you're not affected by what you're saying. To inject just a twinkle, just a sparkle of pleasant wit into your sermons can add to their appeal. ("Bible scholars who deny the miracles in the Bible apparently want us to think Moses and Matthew had scrambled eggs for brains.") A frowning face repels, but the robust good news we've been given to share deserves a face that lets the congregation see that Jesus Christ has made us happy.

On the importance of being winsome instead of argumentative, Abraham Lincoln observed: "You can catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than you will with a bucket of spit."

### **Good pulpit language is conversational**

As you write the paragraphs of your sermon, remember the etymology of "homiletics." The Greek verb, "*homilein*" means "to carry on an elevated conversation" (like the two disciples did as they walked to Emmaus on Easter afternoon). But how can a monologue be a conversation? Think of yourself as carrying on a conversation with your hearers, and you'll ask them questions. You'll inject statements like, "Perhaps the thought just came to you . . ." or "Please don't misunderstand . . ." Your hearers will sense, "The pastor isn't just reciting a speech. He's concerned about our reaction to a message he's sharing with us."

### **Good pulpit language makes large use of contrast**

What would you think of the statement (from the lips of a preacher): "Sin is the problem against which I preach, and the gospel is the remedy"? That's simplistic. The gospel of Jesus Christ offers no generic remedy, but a specific remedy for each malady afflicting human beings. The wise preacher will make use of the Scripture's many-splendored presentations of our malady and Christ's remedy. "When I preach, I try to find a contrast," Luther said.

Try to follow Luther's advice. If your text is Ephesians 2:13, and you're describing **atonement**, what contrast could you describe for your hearers? Why, **separation from God** (Isaiah 53:6; 59:2)! You're preaching on 1 John 1:7 and want to explain that Christ **cleanses** us. The obvious contrast is that our sin has made us **filthy**. To describe the blessings of **sonship**, contrast it with what life would be like as an **orphan**. The blessing of **angelic protection** becomes more obvious when contrasted with our **defenselessness** without it.

## **A VOICE FROM THE PAST**

*"Many church members leave the worship service saying, 'The pastor had a lovely sermon today.' But when you ask them, 'Exactly what did he have to say?' they answer, 'I don't really know, but he certainly said it beautifully.'"*

**Martin Luther**

Continued from page 1

way was Thomas going to believe the testimony of the women, or even of the 10 apostles. Before he could be sure, Thomas required the touch of his 10 fingers. And you remember he was properly rebuked by the Lord Jesus.

Our longing for God, or our earnest prayer, cannot bring God to us, or us to God. But our job and our joy is to announce the objective truth that through Jesus Christ, God built a bridge to us, so that we can come to him. Unless God reveals himself to us, he remains a hidden God. But he has graciously chosen not to remain hidden. In the Bible God pulled back the veil. And when he "spoke to us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:2), God said all that he had to say, all that he could say, all that there was to say, to a sinful world. As God speaks from your pulpit, people learn they are special to God and that he created them for himself.

They also learn that between us and God stands the awful but objective

reality of sin. But another objective reality is that God's chosen substitute provided the perfection God demanded, and paid in full the awful penalty God threatened. No wonder Luther said:

"Every sermon must contain both law and gospel. When either is missing, the other is wrong."

Someone once asked him, "Do you feel forgiven?" Luther answer, "No, I do not feel that my sins are forgiven, but I know it just as surely as there is a God in heaven. Feelings come and feelings go, but the Word of God shall stand forever." Every time you mount your pulpit, remember you're a spiritual descendant of the man who said, "Even if your world is topsy-turvy, even if you feel the earth cracking beneath your feet, you can respond, 'So what? I know that God has pronounced me not guilty, and God cannot lie.'"

### Worth Quoting?

*On the need for preaching explicit law:*

*"Whoever does not believe in his own sinfulness does not believe in the Savior either."*

**August Pieper**

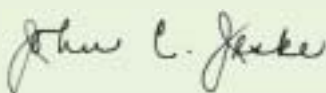
**Correction:**

The February 1998 issue labeled "Vol. 2, No. 1" should have been "Vol. 1, No. 4."

four

With this issue of *Preach the Word*, my one-year editorial assignment from the synod's Commission on Worship has been completed. It has been a privilege to share with one's brothers significant conversation about our unique homiletical task as pastors in a confessional Lutheran church body. The writer is grateful for the comments many of you have seen fit to share with him.

May the Spirit continue to touch your heart, your hand, and your tongue!



With this issue we close the first volume of *Preach the Word*. A grateful synod joins me in thanking Pastor John Jeske for the homiletical encouragement he has given to his brothers, many of whom were his students.

God-willing, volume two will arrive in August. Pastor Joel Gerlach has graciously consented to be the editor of the next six issues. Sandwiched between his considerable experience as a parish preacher are his years as a professor of homiletics at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. As it was with Pastor Jeske, many of Pastor Gerlach's former students will be reminded of the basics of good pulpit communication. Student or not, all of us will have the opportunity to sit at his feet and be edified through the vehicle of *Preach the Word*.

Pray that our ascended Lord Jesus continue to bless our humble efforts to proclaim the glory of his name!

With warm regards,

Wayne A. Laitinen  
Managing Editor

