

PREACH

the Word

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The Dialogical Element in Preaching

We have been conditioned historically to think of preaching as a monologue. In older churches even the architecture contributes to the conditioning. The pulpit elevates the preacher above the congregation. He stands while the congregation sits sequestered in the pews. He talks; they listen. He is active; they are passive.

Thirty years ago Reuel Howe's *Partners in Preaching* challenged me to think about the importance of including a dialogical element in sermons. In the preface he says, "The weakness of preaching stems from its wordiness and monological character." He contends that preaching is more effective "when it is dialogical, when preacher and people become partners in the discernment and proclamation by word and action of the Word of God."



The word proclamation interested me. The word discernment puzzled me. How does a preacher make his people "partners in the discernment" of the Word of God? Prof. John Jeske answered that in part in Vol. 1 No 3 in his article "Preaching: Inductive or Deductive." His son Mark, pastor at St. Marcus in Milwaukee, has learned the art of dialogical preaching well. We have asked him to share his thoughts on the subject with us in this

issue of *Preach the Word*. He did so in the form of a letter, intentionally, with the comment, "Dialogical preaching attempts to be personal and low-key, and it seems appropriate to me that the article should be low-key too."

Dear Joel,

You inquired about my views on "dialogical preaching." I'm afraid that I haven't done any reading or research on the subject. What you will get from me is a collection of opinions and impressions based on my subjective experience. If this is of any use, share away!

It is actually possible to have a true dialog sermon—with two preachers. One Reformation Sunday some years ago the vicar and I re-enacted the

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Leipzig debate as the sermon. After having seen the Louis de Rochemont Luther movie a few times, we improvised a script. I was Luther, of course, and took the lion's share of the time, had all the heroic lines, and got the last word. Unfortunately, the vicar was such a sly and compelling Dr. Eck that he had the congregation half won over to the papacy.

Everybody knows that it is more interesting to have a conversation on the phone than to listen to a recording. Every TV producer knows that one of the deadliest visual images possible is the dreaded "talking head." That's why all the networks have news "co-anchors"—to give some sense of human interaction while they read the teleprompter. That's why it is advantageous to have liturgists and lectors if possible in addition to the preacher. They provide a lively variety in the human drama of the liturgy.

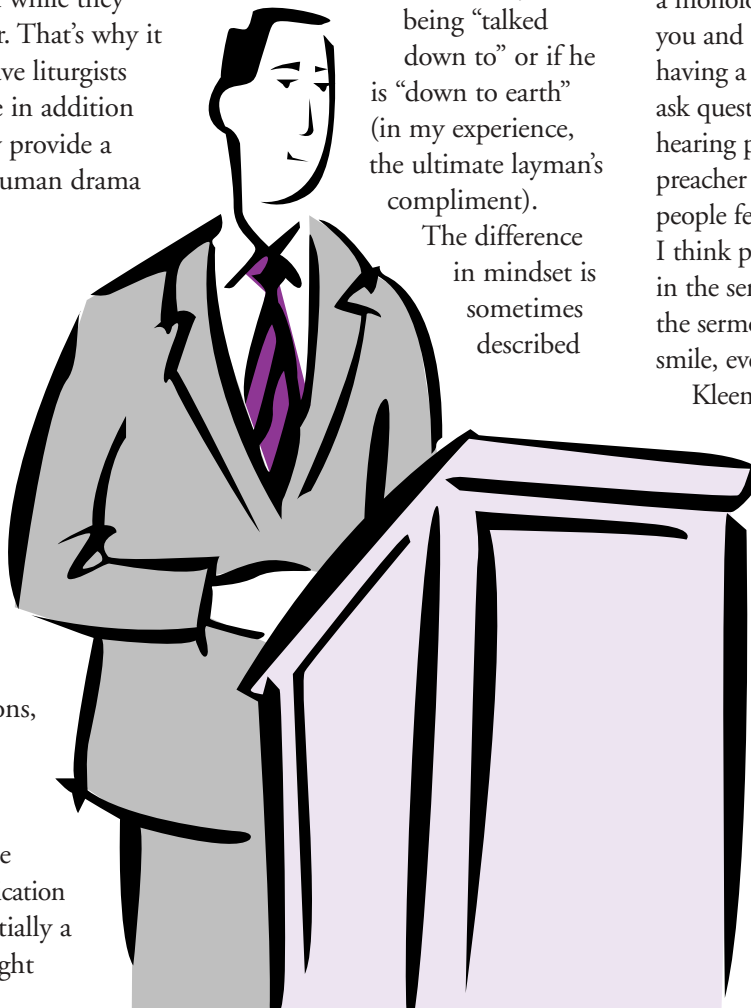
At first glance, the concept of "dialog preaching" with one preacher is nonsense. A sermon is a monologue. Lutheran rules dictate that the pastor does all the talking and the people do all the listening. And yet, within those limitations, some degree of interactivity is possible. If a preacher wishes to use "interactive" communication tools in what is essentially a monologue, what might they be?

Attitude. What worshipers see, even before the preacher says a word, can push the sermon into seeming remote, formal, and abstract. The clerical robe and elevated chancel (and perhaps pulpit elevated above that) visually suggest that a lofty oration is coming. Preachers who tremble at the Word of God sometimes further that sense when they choose a speaking style that strives to be solemn, serious, and holy.

A preacher who adopts an interactive mindset thinks, "I'm not delivering an oration—I am just talking with my friends. I'm not lecturing to my students—I'm exploring God's Word with people I like." Listeners can sense from the preacher's tone and

attitude if they're being "talked down to" or if he is "down to earth" (in my experience, the ultimate layman's compliment).

The difference in mindset is sometimes described



as "deductive" vs. "inductive" preaching. The one approach says, "This is what God has said and done and here is what it means." The other says, "Let's see what God has said and done and explore what it means.

Manuscript. An interactive sermon cannot be read. Every time a preacher looks away from the people to find his place, he breaks off the emotional intimacy that he started to build—it's like a repeated interruption. Eye contact is everything. I think an interactive sermon is probably best not memorized word-for-word—it will have more immediacy, urgency, and sense of being "real," "from the gut," if some of it is improvised as you look at people's faces.

Response. Although the sermon is a monologue, you can pretend that you and the listeners are actually having a conversation. You can ask questions and pretend you're hearing possible answers. The preacher can create a climate where people feel permission to respond. I think people want to "participate" in the sermon. They love to look up the sermon text in the pew Bible, smile, even laugh, take out a

Kleenex, raise their hands when polled, read a verse or two out loud, or finish quoting a well-known passage. The listener feedback informs and rewards and spurs on the preacher.

I hope this helps. God bless your efforts to lift our preaching to give God greater glory and our listeners greater insights into God's wonderful works.

In Him,
Mark



• • •
“The preacher will ask himself what message [this point] has for his own life . . . what objection his old will advances . . . what appeal the text makes to the new man.”

Reu, *Homiletics*, p. 382

• • •
“Many of us harbor a nostalgia for Cranmerian language, but we must accept the fact that this is no longer the idiom, and that those who continue to use the archaic forms will only strengthen the impression that religion is divorced from life, that what we say in church has nothing to do with what we say and do the rest of the time.”

• • •
Christian love is seeking to identify myself with God's interest in other people.
• • •

Reuel Howe's Observations

“When the monological principle is employed, one person tells another what he ought to know, and the communication is content-centered; when the dialogical principle governs a communication, the speaker feels responsible for and responds to patterns of experience and understanding that his listener brings to the situation, and thus the listener is encouraged to grapple with his own meaning in relation to the speaker's meaning.”

“When addressed dialogically, the listener knows that *he* is being addressed by another, and that the content is living truth which speaks to meanings coming from his own experience. He experiences an invitation to participate even though at the moment he cannot speak aloud. But because he is addressed dialogically, he will speak and act later.”

“There are certain people in the congregation upon whom a preacher depends because, in various ways, they indicate that they are hearing and responding to him. . . . The imperceptible nod or shake of the head, the smile, the puckered brow, the stillness of concentration, the restlessness of their inattention are all meaningful statements about their participation in the act of preaching.”

“Speaking can be merely verbal. I can say, ‘I love you,’ but because I am only saying the words, you are not grasped by the meaning of my statement. But I can say, ‘I love you,’ in a way and with a meaning that make the saying of the words an act of love, and the hearing of them an experience of being loved. Preaching the gospel is meant to be the latter kind of communication.”

What Others Have Said

In a new book, *Preaching Doctrine for the Twenty-First Century*, authors Robert Hughes and Robert Kysar offer this comment on “Preaching as Dialog.” “If theological reflection is to take place at all in our preaching during the next several decades, it will take place as dialogue, not monologue. . . . In the new century preacher-congregation interchange will become an absolute necessity. One homiletician who writes about preaching in a postmodern age takes this as a primary emphasis, preferring the word *conversation* to what we are calling dialogue.

“The sermon as a monologue may be experiencing its last days. To be sure, there are currently remarkable stories of church growth in which the congregation is treated as spectators at a grand performance. But the generations brought up on computer games and interactive television will no longer find it meaningful to be talked at for 15 minutes. Congregations will expect to be engaged as partners in the sermonic experience and will reject the role of spectator should that be implied by the preacher's style.”

Examples

The following examples are gleaned from sermons preached by WELS pastors.

So many times I talk to people—often well meaning Christians—who tell me that they figure they're going to heaven, and I ask, "Why?" and they tell me, "Because I believe in God." May I let you in on a little secret that the world around us and a whole lot of unbelievers who are members of churches haven't figured out yet? Listen carefully: Believing in God isn't going to get you into heaven. Did you get that? You are not going to heaven because you believe in God. Everybody believes in a god. Doesn't the devil believe in the true God? Of course he does! The Bible tells us "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." (James 2:19)

In a moment, in response to the Word, we will sing, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." The fact that we are asking God to "restore" our joy says a lot, doesn't it? Too often we let the cares and worries of life crowd out . . . [Note how the addition of the words "doesn't it" solicit a response from the hearer. Omitting those words makes the sentence a mere statement of fact—monological.]

Mission work is more God's work than ours. Do you see how not just the product, but the whole process of Jonah's mission work is a miracle? And so is yours, whether you're a called minister or a lay witness. Jonah's calling is a miracle; it's God's work.

Jonah didn't make an application for membership in God's family, or fill out a form so he could be sent to Nineveh. God created him. God redeemed him, called him to faith, and called him to mission work. And just as God called Jonah to be a prophet, you are a disciple whom he has called with the words, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Listen to those words of your Savior. Do you hear not just a command, but a promise? Jesus takes responsibility for your ability as a mission worker, when he says, "I will make you . . ." He doesn't connect some probationary period when he calls his disciples, or demand certain success figures, or leave you looking elsewhere for help; no, Jesus makes you his mission worker. He trains you, he matures you, he makes you able and willing.

Did you ever notice that the more excited you are to find someone's house, the harder it is to locate? You get an invitation to a holiday party. You've got the address, but it's dark before 5 p.m. The street signs are so small, and the house numbers are hidden in the dark. Wouldn't it be great to enter a division and have big lighted arrows and a consecutive string of signs that lead you right to the door? That's what God is doing with this prophecy. It's his big index finger sticking right out of the page of Scripture, pointing in an unmistakable way, "This is my Son. This is your Savior."

Homiletics Workshops at Worship Conference

The Commission on Worship's July 18-21 worship conference includes numerous workshops for pastors. Two concern homiletics. The conference is structured so that interested pastors may choose both options below as well as other choices. For more information, see <www.wels.net/sab/frm-cow.html>.

- **Using Logos Software for Sermon Preparation**

Computers can provide great assistance to the study of God's Word and preparation of sermons. This entry-level demonstration shows ways to prepare a sermon with instant access to the original languages, the Lutheran confessions, several English Bible translations, the hymns and psalms, *Christian Worship*, and more.

Pastor Bruce Becker, the presenter, is administrator for the Commission on Adult Discipleship.

- **Current Trends in Preaching**

How has preaching changed in American pulpits since the founding of our nation? What are the current trends in preaching today? What are the "hot topics" in modern preaching? In this seminar we will trace the change in preaching from the early days of our nation to the modern era. We will also evaluate the most popular approaches to preaching today. As time permits, we will watch some of the more famous American preachers on video. This five session seminar begins on Sunday afternoon, July 18, 4:45 to 6 p.m.

Presenter Pastor Silas Krueger, from Carlsbad, Calif., is a member of the Commission on Worship's Preach the Word subcommittee and has trained WELS preaching consultants. His interest in preaching led to a doctorate in homiletics from Westminster Seminary, Escondido, Calif.

