

# PREACH

*the Word*

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## A Change in the Editorial Guard

In the first volume of *Preach the Word*, Pastor John Jeske laid down the foundational theological principles of sound Lutheran preaching. In the second volume, Pastor Gerlach focused our attention on the somewhat more subjective art of communication: how we speak and how people listen.



The upcoming volume will focus on some of the practical aspects of preaching. The editor of the third volume is a man whose practical approach to preaching was shaped by an entire ministry, 40 years, in a parish pulpit. He also served for 12 years as the chairman of the Commission on Worship. He is Pastor Victor Prange.

In 1998 he retired from his parish in the pastoral setting of Janesville, Wis., and moved to sunny Tucson, Ariz. However, the climate was not the only thing that changed. Now Pastor Prange has the regular perspective of one who sits on the receiving side of the pulpit. The advantage of this was aptly expressed by the 18th century Scottish poet, Robert Burns:

“O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as others see us!”

Perhaps he can help us see ourselves as we appear to others. Under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, we will grow to proclaim the whole counsel of God in such a way that people will see less of us and more of Christ.

Even so, Pastor Prange has the occasional advantage of returning to his native side of the pulpit. From that vantage point he may suggest to us what works and what doesn’t—the nuts and bolts of preaching.

With that, we welcome Pastor Prange aboard and pray that our ascended Savior would bless his efforts to the Savior’s glory!

In his service and yours,  
Wayne A. Laitinen  
Managing Editor

## Preacher to Preacher

As *Preach the Word* launches into its third year it is good to pose the question: “Why is this newsletter being published?”

The idea for such a publication came out of a consultation on preaching sponsored by the Commission on Worship in February 1997. One of the discussion questions asked what could be done to help our pastors improve their preaching. Pastor Joel Petermann suggested that it might be helpful to provide a single monthly page to pastors about preaching. This four page newsletter, which comes to pastors every other month, is the result.

It’s obvious that this newsletter can’t do what reading a good book on preaching will do for you. Nor can it do for a preacher what a summer quarter spent at the seminary on improving preaching skills would do. This newsletter can’t be tailored for each individual preacher like a preaching consultation would be.

What this newsletter can do is spur on preachers to keep working hard at giving God and his people their very best whenever they step into the pulpit. Preaching is hard work.

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Preparing to preach is hard work. One hopes that this newsletter will give you some of the help and encouragement you need to preach the Word with all your heart and strength and mind.

Our plan is to include in each issue an article by a guest writer sharing some of his thoughts about preaching. Our thanks to Tom Kock for focusing on the important question: "What is the sermon's purpose?" Tom is a 1992 seminary graduate who vicared at St. Matthew, Benton Harbor, Mich. He has served the past seven years at Living Word, Johnson City, Tenn. Tom is the South Atlantic District coordinator for adult discipleship and one of the PTW preaching consultants.

Page four will be devoted to a preaching preview for the upcoming two months. Its purpose will be to prime the pump by looking at what's coming up. We'll also be including some quotations about preaching and updates on opportunities to improve preaching. Your suggestions, reactions, and comments are always appreciated. Send them to <vhptucson@aol.com> or to the Commission on Worship office.

## What is the Sermon's Purpose?

When you step into the pulpit, what's your purpose? Have you wrestled with that question? If your people asked you the sermon's purpose, what would you say? I wonder if the quality of preaching in our circles varies at least in part because we're unclear as to the sermon's purpose. If we polled our pastorate, I'd guess that we would come back with a variety of responses to the question: "What is the sermon's purpose?"

Consider the narrow context: the sermon is a part of worship, when we "fall on our face" before God. Humbly I fall on my face to confess; gratefully I hear the message of forgiveness. Joyfully I sing, eagerly I listen, earnestly I pray. God has done great things for us, so we fall on our face in reverence and awe.

More broadly, the sermon fits into and complements all the various aspects of the congregation's ministry: shut-in visits, BIC, evangelism, confirmation classes, youth group, counseling, and more. Would you approach the cradle roll the same way as marriage counseling? Of course not!

I wonder: is it possible that we've tried to use the sermon to accomplish things that better fit into other aspects of ministry? Think about some of the sermon's suggested purposes: "To expound the text." Wouldn't that be better accomplished in Bible study? "To teach the truths of Christianity." Wouldn't that be better accomplished in BIC, youth confirmation? "To apply God's Word to lives." Wouldn't that be better accomplished in a counseling session, a member visit, a Bible study?

Have we thought about what we are trying to accomplish with our sermons? For most of us, the sermon is the opportunity to touch the most people. So it makes sense that the sermon would consistently focus on the Bible's central message that "our God is a God who saves." That being so, the purpose of the sermon would be: to use law-as-a-mirror and good-news gospel to lead people to say, "Wow! Who is like our God, a God who saves?" (combining Psalm 68:20, "Our God is a God who saves" and Micah 7:18, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives?") That's consistent both with the sermon's narrow context (worship), and its broader context (our entire ministry). "Wow! Who is like our God, a God who saves?"

What are the implications? First, it directs the preacher as he studies the text: "For what reasons does this section of Scripture lead me to say, 'Wow! Who is like our God, a God who saves?'" While each sermon would have the same purpose, its particular flavor would be determined by the text, the law of that text, the gospel of that text.

Second, the content will consistently be law-as-a-mirror and good-news gospel, with the gospel dominating. Rather than fishing for second table of the law applications that may—or may not—hit their mark, we'll focus on the first table (sins of doubt, selfishness, pride, etc.) and our broken relationship with God. Our good-news proclamation will indeed be proclamation, joyous and excited, that God has done it! He's saved us! Wow!

Third, we'll have very few specific applications in the area of sanctification. That, of course, will foster more sanctification, for when the law kills and the

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gospel thrills, that inspires and motivates Christians. And the “how-to?” We’ll be teaching that in those other aspects of ministry (Bible classes, home visits, counseling sessions) where they properly fit. And the Holy Spirit will lead our hearers to make the specific applications appropriate to their lives.

Our gracious God chose to record few of what we’d call “sermons” in the Bible. He doesn’t tell us specifically how to construct a sermon. But however you approach the task of preaching, I’d urge you to keep asking: “What am I trying to accomplish? What is this sermon’s purpose?” I’d suggest a basic purpose is to lead people to say, “Wow! Who is like our God, a God who saves!”

*Thomas Kock*

## PTW Update

In addition to this bimonthly newsletter, there are two other components to the Preach the Word (PTW) effort. Coming your way soon will be the first in a series of interactive preaching videotapes and study guides. Since most pastors are in the pulpit every Sunday, they have few opportunities to hear other preachers. The PTW committee has planned this videotape series to provide a useful glimpse into other preachers’ pulpits, habits, and skills. All pastors will receive the first videotape along with a survey about the video and other PTW work.

Summer vacations are ending and September routines beginning. Now might be a good time to schedule a preaching consultation if you’ve been thinking about doing that. Initiative for preaching consultation lies with the pastor who would like to use this form of analysis for professional growth. The goal for these consultations is to make good preachers better. Contact the Commission on Worship for more information or visit the Web site <[www.wels.net/sab/frm-cow.html](http://www.wels.net/sab/frm-cow.html)> for a description of the consultation process and a list of consultants.

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*Bryan Gerlach*

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“Quoting”

Preachers can learn much from Martin Luther. In 1519 Luther published a series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer. At this point in his life, he understood the fourth petition as referring to spiritual bread, our Lord Jesus Christ. He writes: “The bread, the Word, and the food are none other than Jesus Christ our Lord himself.” He goes on to emphasize the critical importance of preaching Christ: “Sermons and doctrines which do not bring and show Jesus Christ to us are not the daily bread and nourishment of our souls, nor will they help us in any need or trial.” Preachers have the responsibility of making sure that Christ is at the center of their message: “Therefore

we should preach only Christ and relate everything to him. All writings should point to him and proclaim why he came, what he brought us, and how we should believe in him and conduct ourselves toward him, so that the people can comprehend Christ and know him through his Word” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol 42, pp. 56,58). Lesson #1: preach Christ.

We can also learn something from Luther about communication, how to preach the Word. He will often break into an imaginary conversation that a Christian might have with himself or someone else like Satan. An example of this is his commentary on Psalm 2:4 (“the One enthroned in heaven laughs”) where Luther pictures a person speaking to Satan: “He, then, who has rightly reflected

on this verse will laugh at Satan as well as at his accusations and threats. He will say: ‘These things are nothing to me, which even moves my God, who dwells in heaven, to laughter. You will not prevail with your accusing and gloom-spreading, nay, rather, I also shall laugh with my God, for I know that your attempts are vain. For even if I am a sinner, even if the punishment of sin is eternal death, this will not keep me from laughing. For at the right hand of God sits he who made satisfaction for sins and conquered you in his own flesh and overthrew you. You assail not me alone, but him who vanquished you, the Son of God’” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol 12, p. 27). Look for opportunities to introduce this kind of conversation into a sermon.



## Preaching Preview

During September and October the church year moves from the 15th Sunday after Pentecost to a celebration of the Reformation on Oct. 31.

Since Reformation Day falls on Sunday this year, there is the opportunity to use the proper for the festival (*CW Manual*, p. 463) rather than those for Reformation Sunday. Having Reformation fall on Sunday gives added incentive to make something extra of that day this year. Involve your musicians and teachers in planning special singing or other activities.

During the fall of the year, it is not unusual for congregations to celebrate Mission Festivals and have some type of stewardship emphasis. Often special sermon texts are selected for such occasions.

However, if you are responsible for preaching, at least take a look at the readings for the Sunday for a possible sermon text. Sometimes one of the lessons is very appropriate. *CW Manual* includes a list of propers for various special occasions (pp. 468-476).

Some have criticized the CW Lectionary because in the non-festival half of the year the second lesson is not designed to fit the gospel and first lesson. In September and October the readings will be from Romans, Philippians, and First Thessalonians. Philippians is read on four Sundays, Pentecost 18 through 21. If a preacher has the practice of each Sunday selecting one of the three lessons as his sermon text, he

might consider preaching on the second lesson those four Sundays and encourage members to do their own reading and study of Philippians. Use texts from Philippians for devotions at meetings and tie them in with the sermons.

There are a number of advantages to using one of the Sunday readings as the sermon text. It certainly makes worship planning easier for the preacher, organist or pianist, choir director, and teachers. And the people benefit from hearing one of the readings expounded in depth. They also have opportunity to do some worship preparation at home by reading through the lessons.

Good preaching preparation always begins with thorough exegesis. Even if the text is a very familiar one, there are always new insights that come through a careful study of the Word. The world in which we live also changes and so suggests new applications.

After thoroughly studying a text, I would sometimes look back on previous sermons I had preached. Occasionally I was so pleased with a previous sermon that I would revise it and preach it again. But most often the text study and thinking would lead to an entirely new sermon.

Take for example the gospel for Pentecost 15 (Sept. 5): Matthew 16,21-26. Notice that this is the second half of the gospel from the previous Sunday. One Sunday Jesus called Peter "Blessed;" the next

Sunday we hear him say: "Out of my sight!" Think about that.

I preached on this text four times on Pentecost 15, and each of the sermons treated the text somewhat differently. In 1972 my theme was "Watch Your Step." That's something Peter did not do. To follow Jesus suggests that we need to watch our step. Note also the use of Psalm 121 and the words of the Prayer of the Day.

In 1978 I chose a rather obvious theme: "Follow Me." Making use of the first and second lessons will help flesh out a sermon on that theme. Jeremiah had to learn the hard way to follow; Paul spells out some details about how the Christian follows Jesus.

The next time I preached on this text was in 1987, focusing on v. 26: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" Theme: "Ponder the Bottom Line." Jesus did ponder the bottom line as is evident from v. 21. By the way, this theme would lend itself to some comments about Labor Day.

Finally, in 1996 I used the theme: "No Cross, No Christ." Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, but he wanted a Christ without the cross. There is no Christ without the cross.

Every text lends itself to a variety of emphases. A preacher will struggle to apply God's Word to himself and his people in the best way he can, praying always for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.