

PREACH

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PRECISION

Preachers may not fancy themselves surgeons, but they are. With the Word of God as their implement, pulpit messengers cut finely diagnosed openings into the human heart for spiritual surgery. With one cut they expose the cancer of sin. With another they apply the salve of the Gospel. With every cut there is a need for precision because spiritual surgery is delicate business.

Part of the pastor's precision comes in carefully dividing between Law and Gospel. Paul lays such precision on the conscience of every pastor when he says to Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15). Sloppy exegesis or as one author put it "Saturday night notions"¹ won't do if the preacher intends on dissecting the text properly. Instead, he must get to know the text inside and out. Such intimacy with the text is only forged through careful and continued study. There is no shortcut around good exegesis. Take the time to dig into the original and begin to mine the treasures the Lord has for his people. Precisely because we want precise pastors we have been precise in demanding a working knowledge of the precise Greek and Hebrew. But since every text is set in the context of an entire book, the pastor must also familiarize himself again and again with the Scripture books *in toto*.

And yet it goes still farther, beyond the individual book, into the entire Scriptures. When the pastor's own life and breath depend upon the Word of God that he regularly breathes in, his ability to divide between Law and Gospel with precision increases.

Hand in hand with properly understanding the Word comes properly applying the Word. C.F.W. Walther, in *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, says the following:

A preacher must not throw all doctrines in a jumble before his hearers, just as they come into his mind, but cut for each of his hearers a portion such as he needs. He is to be like an apothecary, who must give that medicine to the sick which is for the particular ailment with which they are afflicted. In the same manner a preacher must give to each of his hearers his due: he must see to it that the secure, care-free, and willful sinners hear the thunderings of the Law, contrite sinners, however, the sweet voice of the Savior's grace.²

A doctor only knows what medicine to prescribe and a surgeon what area to cut when they know their patients well. Precise preaching also means knowing your people. The pastor may learn to *know* his text in his study, but he learns to *apply* his text in someone else's.

Precision in preaching also calls for the preacher to choose his words carefully. Choosing one's words carefully can be a

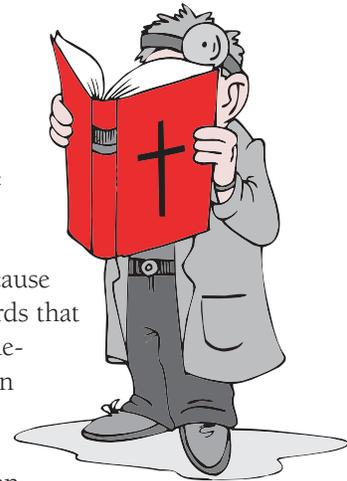
double-edged sword.

Theologians are able to craft ecumenical agreements because ambiguous words that allow for double-speak have been precisely chosen. That's not the precision

I'm asking for. Instead, let the preacher choose his words so that he *cannot* be misunderstood. Let Walther speak again:

Bear this in mind, my dear friends, and consider that as ministers of the Gospel it is your duty not only to *believe* as the Church believes, but also *speak* in harmony with the Christian Church. Accordingly, before you commit your sermons to memory or deliver them to your congregations, you must subject your manuscript to a severe *critique*, to ascertain not only whether your sermons are according to the analogy of faith, but also whether you have throughout chosen proper terms, lest against your own intention you destroy where you want to build up. This is of the utmost importance.³

Finally, precision implies a certain sharpness to preaching. As a preacher it is my intent to cut when I preach the Law. I don't want a slight flesh wound. I don't want a sloppy cut. I want to



WHY GUEST PREACH AT YOUR OWN CHURCH?

Three Ideas for a More Personal Delivery

“Today,” Pastor Barker announces before the sermon, “our guest preacher is Pastor Barker, and we thank him for his message.” He shifts his facial features, alters his stance, and speaks in a different tone.

Sounds a little strange, doesn't it? It may, until a preacher realizes how much the people of his congregation appreciate seeing and hearing their real pastor in the pulpit—you know, the one who hit the losing out at the church picnic, the one who visits grandma, the one who greets them brightly after each service.

By being himself in the pulpit, a preacher gains a credibility that his congregation is happy to extend to him despite his weaknesses. He also shares a conviction with his congregation that amplifies the significance of the message. Here are three ideas that can help you be yourself in the pulpit for a more personal, meaningful delivery.

Self-Engage

Vested preachers like being “hidden” behind their robes or their pulpits so as not to upstage the central message of Christ with a gaudy suit or dramatic calisthenics. However, there's a difference between a preacher hiding *from* the gospel and a preacher hidden *in* the gospel.

Hide in the gospel! Instead of distantly leaving yourself outside of it as a casual observer, bring yourself into it. Don't be satisfied with simply erasing yourself from the eyesight of the people. Lose yourself in the message. Preach with a heart frantically pounding to the pulse of resurrection faith, a personal, pastoral faith made public through the proclamation of the Word.

Self-engagement, of course, starts in the quiet hours of a preacher's solitude. Those hours accomplish so little as far as the Palm Pilot or project action list are concerned. Truth be told, they

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powerfully, miraculously immerse a man of the Word into his message of the Word. Consequently, when he writes the sermon it flows not just from the mind but from the soul. And later, when he memorizes the sermon, it's not so much sucking up black ink from the printed page into his head but rather squeezing words of living water out of his sponge of faith already saturated with the Spirit's power. The result: a sermon easier to deliver and easier to hear because it's personal to preacher and hearer alike.

Self-Express

News reporters are told to retain their objectivity when reporting a story. Yet on September 11, 2001, I sought my information from the reporter on the streets of lower Manhattan more than the anchorperson disengaged behind the desk.

Similarly, members and visitors alike relate more personally and meaningfully to the man who is engaged in the message, who “reports” the Good News with the same expression of his personality they have otherwise observed.

Express yourself in your style with the traits of your personality. The fact that the congregation sees the same man in the pulpit they watched playfully share snack time with children at VBS or lovingly embrace family members at grandpa's funeral improves your delivery more than any golden-mouthed words of wisdom ever could. Don't let the children's sermon be the only place where you are “yourself” in your preaching. Give the pulpit its share, too. Share personal anecdotes of your own life, especially common experiences

to which hearers can meaningfully relate. The color of the sermon text, some common sense, and a pastoral heart will determine when, how often, and in what way your self-expression personalizes the message of God's Word for your people.

Self-Evaluate

In their homiletics textbook, *Preach the Gospel*, Balge and Gerlach connect the meaningful delivery of the sermon to self-expression rather than a copycat imitation of the “best” preachers. Self-evaluation goes a long way in improving such a delivery. “Good delivery consists not so much in trying to imitate good qualities observed in the delivery of others as in overcoming faults and mannerisms which arise in your own ... Do not neglect to practice self-criticism” (p. 126).

Choose whatever method of evaluation you like. Better yet, employ a variety of feedback methods over a period of time so that the resulting evaluation is less subjective and more accurate in reporting “patterns” of behavior.

Why guest preach in your own church by turning into someone different in the pulpit? Recognize familiarity as yet another tool of the trade of preaching that can improve sermon delivery. A familiar waiter, a familiar doctor, or a familiar mechanic all provide a personal connection that others of the same trade cannot, even if they offer the same quality of service. That means a great deal to people, especially when much is on the line.

Be yourself when you preach. There's much on the line. Your hearers want to be shepherded through the dark valleys, into the pleasant pastures, and around the deceptive paths of life by a Word they trust coming from a preacher they know.

Pastor Daron J. Lindemann

RECITATION OR PREACHING

Helmut Thielicke, in a book on preaching, describes heart-felt preaching as “living in the house.” His point was that the compassion, the passion, the urgency, and the implications of application of a given portion of God’s Word can only be communicated from one heart to another when the first heart speaks from experience; when the first person has “lived in the house.”

Few would argue with knowing the sermon well enough to speak without notes or manuscript. My question is this: is it an exercise in memory or is it a heart to heart communication of God’s Word for God’s people at a given time? We would say it is the latter. Of course, this is the right answer. However, is this the way it comes across to the person in the pew? Do the hearers get the impression you have “lived in the house” or are you just a real estate agent out for a sale?

I am not suggesting that you have to increase animation. I am not saying that you need to take lessons in elocution. To do such would be to become an actor, which is the opposite of the point being made. Be yourself. If you struggle to understand why God makes a certain statement, let the people in on your struggle. They won’t think less of you. They will appreciate it. Let them agonize with you as the Word is milled through the stones in your gizzard in your search for understanding.

As you turn loose the message on Sunday morning, it should flow from a heart that has been filled by that very Word. It should not just be running out of the orifice of your mouth. It should be “living water” oozing out of every pore of your burlap body. You will know the difference and so will your people.



Vilas R. Glaeske

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wound. And I want the wound to go as deep as the heart. God has given us the one tool that can cut so precisely, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12) That means my Law preaching is going to have to have some bite. I cannot be satisfied with vague generalities that bounce off the armor of self-righteousness. Nor can I faint back out of a desire to be liked or not to offend. Sharp Law preaching will always offend. Sharp Law preaching will always hurt the preacher when he is motivated by love.

With the bloody mess that sharp Law preaching leaves behind, the preacher must be equally precise with the resuscitations of the Good News. The Good News of forgiveness gives life where the Law has killed. But such Good News is of no value if it is not applied to the wound. If the Law calls for sharp preaching, then of even greater importance is the sharpness with which one must preach the Gospel. I cannot be satisfied with vague Gospel generalities that treat with aspirin wounds that need surgery. Pity the congregation that is left bleeding, and shame on the pastor that lets them bleed. The joy of preaching and the poignant moments the pulpit can provide come when the Good News resurrects dead or dying hearts. The Gospel is sharp when the preacher applies its salve right on the wound instead of over the entire body.

May the Lord grant you precision in your preaching.

John M. Koelpin

Last April active pastors received copies of the *Preach the Word* video, including a survey. As you use the video, please send in your completed survey even though the original deadline is past. Your input will continue to shape decisions about future projects.



¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978). p. 127 as quoted by Markquart. Edward F. *Quest for Better Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) p. 45

² C.F.W. Walther. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986). p. 33.

³ Ibid. pp. 276, 277.

A PREACHER'S LOOK AHEAD



This edition of *A Preacher's Look Ahead* surveys December and January, covering the beginning of the church year in Advent (CW lectionary series A) through the Third Sunday after the Epiphany. Note that the calendar provides a couple of unique arrangements during these months.

First, since Christmas Eve and Christmas Day fall on Monday and Tuesday respectively, the preacher will have an opportunity to address his congregation on three consecutive days. Second, The Epiphany of Our Lord falls on a Sunday. With a little advance preparation the pastor can lead his congregation in celebrating this often-neglected festival.

All the Old Testament lessons in these months come from the book of Isaiah. None of the other CW lectionaries include such a lengthy set of readings from this book. Many of these texts, for example the prophecy concerning the virgin birth in Isaiah chapter seven, occur only once in three years.

The word-pictures that Isaiah uses in this set of readings are a preacher's dream. Here is a brief description of these rich texts in order: the mountain of the Lord; the Branch from Jesse; the paradise in the desert; the sign of Immanuel; to us a child is born; beautiful feet; the angel of His presence; the glory of Zion; two texts on the Servant of the Lord; and the prophecy concerning the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali. Except for the final Isaiah reading from chapter nine, the texts divide between five readings from the first book of Isaiah and five readings from the second book. Isaiah, one of the best Old Testament wordsmiths, leaves us with a host of powerful texts and images to preach on. An Isaiah sermon-series is certainly compelling.

The Epistle readings in this section are much more eclectic than either the Old Testament or Gospel lessons. In Advent, Romans gets three readings and James one. The James lesson is the only one from that book to appear in the lectionary aside from a four-week *lectio continua* in Pentecost series B. The Christmas Eve (Titus 2:11-14) and Christmas Day (Hebrews 1:1-9) readings match the Historic lessons. Certainly, preaching the Gospel lessons on high festivals is to be encouraged; however, since the Epistle lessons were written after the events, just as we are living after the events, they give us unique perspective on these high festivals. If you have spent a number of years preaching the Gospel lessons on Christmas Eve and Day, perhaps a one year venture into the Epistles would be refreshing for both you and your congregation. The Epistle lessons for the First Sunday after Christmas, The Epiphany, and The Baptism of our Lord are well chosen to match the Gospel lessons for those respective Sundays. If they are not your sermon text, they most certainly ought to find a place in your message. Finally, the Second Sunday after the Epiphany begins a continuous series of readings from 1 Corinthians for the remainder of the Epiphany season (excluding Transfiguration Sunday). A quick glance at the three-year series in CW reveals that each Epiphany season contains a *lectio continua* from 1 and 2 Corinthians. A three year plan on the pastor's part could set aside the Epiphany season to preach through a good portion of these two books.

Series A of the CW lectionary follows the Gospel of Matthew. In anticipation of a year's worth of Matthew texts, the preacher could take time now to read through the entire book together with a reliable commentary or New Testament introduction. Most of the Gospel lessons from this section recount events of Jesus' life with little commentary from Jesus himself. The Gospel for the last Sunday in Advent tells the Christmas account through the eyes of Joseph. On the very next evening the Christmas account from Mary's eyes is the Gospel lesson from Luke. On the next morning the Christmas account from God's eyes is the Gospel lesson from John. That's three consecutive days that the preacher can preach the Christmas Gospel, one account from each of the Gospel writers who include it! The final Gospel readings follow closely the liturgical year. It is interesting that in each of the three series the Second Sunday after the Epiphany strays from the regular Gospel into a text from John. This year's selection covers John the Baptist calling Jesus the Lamb of God together with Jesus calling his first disciples.

God's blessings on your Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany preaching.

PREACH
— the Word

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