

# PREACH

*the Word*

Vol. 12 No. 4

March/April 2009

## POWERPOINT IN THE PULPIT

It boggles the mind to think how rapidly technology has advanced in the past couple of decades. These advances have impacted much of our lives, including our preaching. As a seminary student in the 1980's, I was aware of only a handful of classmates who owned computers. The manuscripts I handed in to my homiletics profs were typed on my trusty Smith Corona. For the first several years in the ministry, I wrote my sermons longhand on yellow legal pads. Now, like most of you, I can hardly imagine writing a sermon without using my computer. When I was forced to do just that while flying home from a synod convention a few years back (due to a 24-hour flight delay and no laptop), it was like pulling teeth.

The computer has altered more than just the way we put our sermons on paper, however. For many pastors, it has changed the way we preach them. Microsoft's PowerPoint and other presentation software, such as Apple's Keynote, have found a home in many pulpits, including WELS pulpits. If an admittedly non-scientific survey I recently conducted among WELS pastors of various ages and serving in varied settings is at all accurate, the majority of pastors in our synod have made use of PowerPoint during their sermons on at least a few

occasions. While some said they have never made use of this technology from the pulpit, others reported that they use PowerPoint on a weekly basis. A poll I did of some non-WELS churches in my area indicated that they make use of PowerPoint weekly as well.

Those preachers who champion PowerPoint note that many of our members see and use PowerPoint at work on a regular, perhaps daily basis. These members might expect their pastors to do the same. Others point to the fact that more and more, it seems, we are becoming a society of visual learners (compared to just a couple of generations ago, when children would sit in front of radios, enrapt by the mere sounds of the Lone Ranger and Li'l Orphan Annie). And still others remember being taught that one of the fundamental principles of learning is the more senses involved, the more the audience will comprehend and retain.

Yet recent research suggests that preachers ought to be careful about how they use technology in the pulpit. John Sweller, a professor of education at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, has developed a theory called "Cognitive Load." Among other things, Sweller's theory posits that the human brain has

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# PREACHING WITH POWERPOINT: A USER'S PERSPECTIVE

By David R. Clark

Technology can be a tremendous boost to our ability to preach the gospel. Imagine what it must have been like for Paul to walk from Jerusalem to Greece. The pony express sounds fast when you consider how mail was carried in those days. The internal combustion engine, the internet, and email have made it much easier to communicate.

PowerPoint is a communication tool which WELS congregations have been using for years. It is used most often in Bible classes, and less frequently in worship.

As powerful a tool as it is, it is important to consider the nature of a sermon before using PowerPoint. Law and gospel are the most important part of our preaching. Explaining God's Word to the saints is also important. In the Old Testament transmission of God's Word was done primarily through prophets who proclaimed, "This is what the Lord says." In the New Testament Christ *taught* in the synagogue, but the example we have in Luke 4 seems to be what we would consider *proclamation*. His "sermon" was telling them, "Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." The essence of Paul's message was: "the Scriptures have been fulfilled in Jesus who died and rose again." In our preaching we do not *teach* the gospel as much as we *proclaim* what God has done and what he says.

This is a significant consideration when one is contemplating the use of a communication tool that is primarily for education, not proclamation. A sermon is not aims and inferences. It is theme and parts. It is propositional truth, not just facts. The question for each preacher then: As I use PowerPoint, can I continue to clearly draw this distinction for my hearers?

I have been utilizing PowerPoint for sermons since 2002. Here are some thoughts and observations for those who might have a similar interest.

Some practical questions:

- Do I have the equipment to do justice to this in worship? Is my projector bright enough? Is my screen easy to see for everyone?
- Some members regularly see presentations at their places of business. They are accustomed to a good deal of sophistication. Can I meet such a level, or do I need to enroll in a local community college that teaches PowerPoint?
- When you use pictures, people will be locked into the picture. Is it better to allow people to use their own imaginations as you paint a similar picture to them verbally?

Some suggestions:

- The strength of PowerPoint is its ability to use pictures and color. Although it is possible to use it to project your expanded outline, you could do that in your bulletin. Consider using PowerPoint for something you cannot do in your bulletin.
  - Show a map of Azotus and Gaza so people see what a miracle it was for Philip to appear in Azotus after the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch.

- Show a picture of the Temple Mount from the Mount of Olives to illustrate what Jesus saw as he wept over Jerusalem.
  - In preaching about the bronze snake on the pole, I was able to have a picture of the bronze snake dissolve into Christ on the cross. A "picture was worth a thousand words" on that day. Even children got the connection in a powerful way.
  - When Jesus says, "the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Mt 16:18), why did he use those specific words? Show a picture of Caesarea Philippi and the Roman ruins at the "gates of Hades" to explain Jesus' play on words.
- Most people I know claim to be visual learners. Reading a translation of the Bible is a powerful way for the Spirit to move our hearts as we read God's love letters to fallen mankind. Doing your text study in the original language means putting the color back in the text. Have you found that the original languages speak to you in pictures as I have? If that is so, why not use PowerPoint? If preaching is painting pictures then exegesis fills out my palette and paint brush.
    - HAMARTIA is "missing the mark." Two pictures can illustrate sin in God's eyes: a missed bull's eye and a direct hit.
    - Don't merely describe the courtroom scene in DIKAIOW, show it.

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Some final thoughts:

- Members appreciate when I use PowerPoint with my sermon, but there is a price to pay. I figure an extra ten hours to put the sermon into pictures!
- Images don't all have to be Bible story-based. I use Google and Goodsearch along with clipart that is readily available.
- Many people are tired of PowerPoint in their work situations. I suggest using it sparingly. I have never had more than ten sermons in an entire year using PowerPoint.
- Practice so that you face and talk to the people, not the screen behind you.

I'm sure that you try to vary the style of your preaching. PowerPoint is certainly one way to vary the style of sermon delivery. God's blessings as you proclaim the mysteries of God... in word and picture!

*Pastor David Clark of Grace, Glendale, AZ, is one of those WELS pastors who uses PowerPoint occasionally in his sermons. He shares with us some perspectives he's gained from his experience. He also shares PowerPoint slideshows he has used with two sermons in the past. You will find them on the Commission on Worship Web site: [www.wels.net/jump/ptw](http://www.wels.net/jump/ptw).*

## LENT: A MONTH (AND A HALF) OF SUNDAYS

I once heard someone describe Lent like this: "It's the time of the year when we go around pretending that Jesus never rose." Ouch. Maybe some people treat Lent like this. Lutheran preachers, however, treat Lent as an amazing time in which we get to lead our members to the cross. There we see the full extent of the shame and guilt of our sins, as well as the full extent of the grace and mercy of our God. The six weeks of Lent are truly a precious time.

There's no question about the emphasis during the Wednesdays of Lent. Whether we follow the Lenten series produced annually by Northwestern Publishing House, or use a homegrown series, midweek Lenten services and sermons always view the cross in all its shame and glory. They are somber. They are subdued.

Some Christians (including Lutheran preachers) get a bit confused about how the Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Easter fit in with the Lenten theme, however. If you count the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, you come up with 46, not 40. (Google "Sundays in Lent." You'll find umpteen Catholic websites answering questioners who have sacrificed sweets for Lent. Yes, they may, indeed, indulge in some chocolate on Sunday.)

It's argued that the Sundays in Lent really aren't part of Lent, but rather ought to retain their "little Easter" flavor. Certainly, it is true that we live in Easter hope and worship a risen Savior every Sunday (and indeed, every day), regardless of the liturgical season. Christ's resurrection means he triumphed over sin and Satan, and we do not pretend otherwise, Lent or not. Nevertheless, the entire season of Lent, including both Wednesdays and Sundays, is one that focuses on the conflict of the cross. And therefore, the penitential tone and somber note of Lent are appropriately expressed on Sunday as well as Wednesday.

But as with all other Sundays, it's the Gospel rather than liturgical tradition that sets the theme and tone for the Sundays in Lent. The Gospels for the Sundays of Lent, regardless of which year or series we're in, all center on this basic theme: "Christ confronts his enemies and ours." This is brought out most clearly in the Series B Gospels for Lent:

- Lent 1: Mark 1:12-15. Jesus confronts Satan in the wilderness.
- Lent 2: Mark 8:31-38. Jesus confronts Peter's attempted roadblock to the cross.
- Lent 3: John 2:13-22. Jesus confronts those who would place roadblocks to worshipers in the temple.
- Lent 4: John 3:13-21. Jesus shows Nicodemus how he would confront our sins by being lifted up on the cross.
- Lent 5: John 5:20-33. Jesus is encouraged by the voice of the Father as he is about to confront Satan at the cross.
- Palm Sunday: Mark 11:1-10. Jesus is encouraged by the crowds as he makes his way to the final confrontation.

God bless you as you make this annual somber, exhilarating journey!

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difficulty processing information if it is coming to us in both written and verbal form simultaneously. In fact, Sweller suggests, contrary to the above-mentioned principle of learning, that if one form of instruction (the spoken word) is intelligible and adequate, then providing the same material in another form (projecting the same words that are being spoken) can actually hurt understanding.

I'm reminded of a *Far Side* cartoon in which a student raises his hand and asks to be excused because his brain is full. Are our listeners' brains in danger of becoming too full if PowerPoint is used to present visually the words we are speaking, or even an outline of the sermon? (One also can't help wondering what this says about the wisdom of passing out manuscripts and then reading them verbatim when papers are delivered at conferences. This might even call into question the practice of encouraging the congregation to follow along in pew Bibles as the Scripture lessons are read.)

So, preachers should ditch PowerPoint, right? Not so fast. Actually, Prof. Sweller's research indicates that while it is not effective to speak words that are also being projected, it is effective to speak to a diagram, because it presents information in a different form. Appropriate maps, charts, diagrams, and illustrations may well be effective when projected during a sermon, depending on the text and type of sermon.

Before preparing a PowerPoint presentation and taking a remote control into the pulpit, preachers would do well to consider how the visual stimulus of the projected images will impact their audience. What's on those slides? If it's merely the words in our

manuscripts, zipping across the screen to take their place in neat rows of bullet points, then perhaps the time we'd spend preparing the slideshow would be better spent in additional text study or honing the final draft of our manuscript.

Other factors when considering use of PowerPoint in the pulpit include the equipment and layout of the chancel. Built-in projectors and integrated screens that lower from the ceiling? Good. Card tables in the center aisle and clunky screens set up in front of the altar? Not so good. Consider also the preacher's ability to use the equipment and the time he has to prepare a slideshow.

Whether we choose to make use of this technology in the pulpit or not, our goal as preachers of the Word must always be to proclaim God's law and gospel as faithfully as we can. It goes without saying that we cannot enhance the gospel, but only detract from it by our weaknesses and shortcomings. Regardless of what, if any, technology we use in our preaching, God forever be praised for his promise: "My word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire."

As you consider use of PowerPoint with sermons (or evaluate current use), review *Worship the Lord* issue #28 (January 2008) and its supplemental online content at the WELS Worship Web site. With such guidance in mind, consider if the PowerPoint examples shared with this issue of PTW would be improved by using fewer slides, fewer words on some slides, or fewer animations. Pastor Clark concurs in evaluating his early work in light of these guidelines.



## PREACHING OBJECTIVE JUSTIFICATION ON EASTER

Easter is an exceptional time to preach the comforting truth that Christ paid for the sins of everyone and that every sin is forgiven. C.F.W. Walther preached an Easter sermon, based on Mark 16:1-8, under the theme, "Christ's Resurrection—Your Absolution," which brought this truth out clearly. Here's a quote from that sermon:

Jesus, when He was raised from the dead, was absolved for all sin, but since it was not for himself but for all people that Christ died, who was it really that was set free, who was it really that was absolved when Jesus rose from the dead? It was all people! Just as all Israel triumphed when David defeated Goliath, so all humanity triumphed when Jesus defeated sin, death and hell.

(Translated by Daniel Preus, quoted on the Web site, [www.reclaimingwalther.org](http://www.reclaimingwalther.org))



*Preach the Word* is published bimonthly by the WELS Commission on Worship  
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