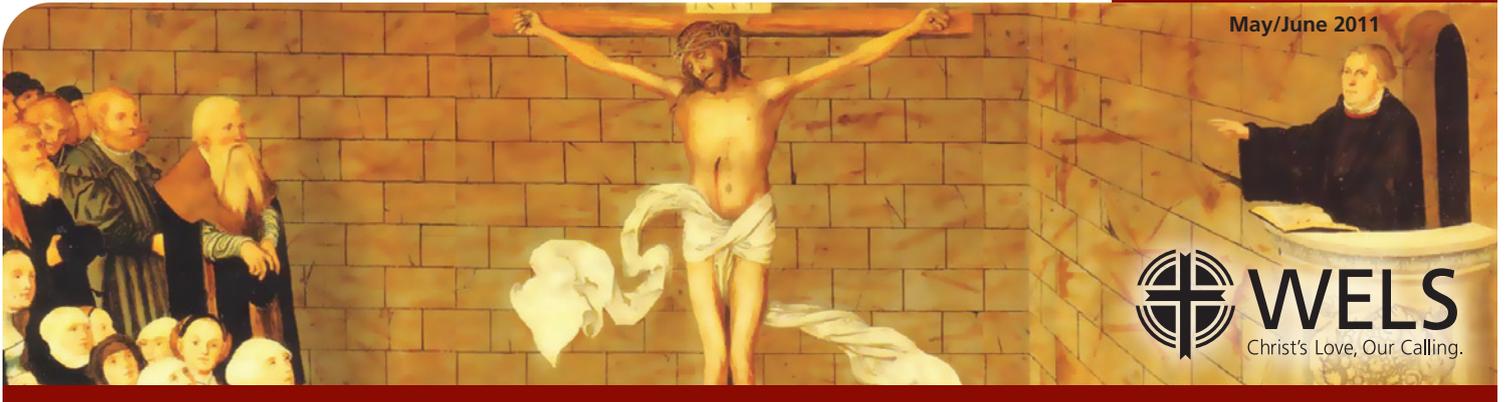


Preach the Word

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Making the Most of Time in the Word

Proclaim Grace! Key Issue #4

By Richard Gurgel

"The most dreadful thing on earth is being alone with our sins and the miseries of life. The most blessed thing is being alone with Christ" ("Anniversary Reflections," *The Wauwatosa Theology*, III, 290).

August Pieper touched a sensitive nerve as he encouraged pastors to immerse themselves more in the Word. My heart easily becomes defensive and raises objections. Chief among those objections is often this: If I approach preaching as a week-long textual feast, am I not daily confronted and comforted by law and gospel?

Answer: "This is most certainly true!" It draws a false "either/or" to paint personal devotional study as utterly different from devotional sermon study. Yet two points beg for attention.

A trap lurks whenever Scripture study's final purpose is a "product" for others. We know the thrill of approaching a text devotionally. We also know the chill of pressure to produce. As the clock ticks, focus quickly shifts to mining nuggets for others. We become wholesalers of spiritual commodities passing through our hands but not our hearts.

Personal devotional study also has traps, yet it has this advantage: it's not wholesale distribution. *My* soul's salvation is its beginning, middle, and end.

But Pieper shares another reason the "either/or" debate is foolish: pastors just need more of the Word.

[The pastor] needs much more of God's Word for his soul than an ordinary Christian because he is tempted much more. Doubt of the truth, weariness in ministry and depression, despair and fear, pride and a domineering spirit, men-service and hypocrisy, laziness, lust, greed, and worldly pleasure plague him more than ordinary Christians. More than anyone, he needs daily strengthening . . . so that he does not preach to others and himself be rejected ("Scripture Study as the Special Task of the Pastor," *The Wauwatosa Theology*, I, 122-123).

When meditation lags, every corner of life and ministry suffers. In ministry, nowhere is this more devastating than preaching. Whenever schedule pressures turn ministry into a forced march through a broad devotional desert, parched hearts speak loudly! Hearers sense something is wrong. At first it's not sermon content (*logos*) that suffers. The first casualty is genuine emotion (*pathos*) followed by an erosion of trust (*ethos*) between speaker and hearers. "Rejoice!" becomes a mere vocable vibrating our vocal cords rather than the overflow of what has captured our hearts and impacted our lives. "No one can increase the volume in the pulpit to such a level as to muffle the echo of lost convictions" (Craddock, *Preaching* 24).

As in public worship, the beating heart of private devotions isn't our service to God but his to us.

But as Satan constantly sets traps, Jesus ceaselessly sends invitations.

Just as Jesus so often in the gospels took the disciples aside to talk to them privately, so Jesus wants to take his pastor aside and speak to him about the temptations unique to his holy office. He wants to call him away from the siren summons to success. He wants to call him away from contempt for the ungrateful and the stubborn, the indifferent and the careless. He wants to call him to repentance for his own sins first. He wants him to see the patience that Jesus still has even for his pastor. He wants to catch him again and again with the net of his grace and mercy. He wants the pastor ever and again to be lost in wonder and awe at the love and patience of Christ for the lost, the erring, the foolish, the perverse, the love and patience of Christ—in a word—for him! (Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 204-205).

Heed the invitation, brothers! He loves you and has bled for you. He loves and has bled for those at your feet. This issue's goal is to help us maximize all our opportunities to spend time "alone with Christ."

Gospel-Focused Lutheran Devotional Piety

As a devoted monk, Luther prayed the canonical hours and followed to the bloody letter every discipline championed as a superhighway to holiness. But striving to prove himself a devoted lover of God only drove him deeper into despair.

Then the morning star arose, replacing a law-driven monk with a gospel-powered reformer. Failing to prove himself devoted to God, he found instead a God devoted to him!

How hard to remember that Reformation lesson! How often I view devotional life as striving to prove myself devoted to God.

[Luther] recognized that by our practice of piety we try to justify ourselves before God and before others . . . We think of our devotions as our duty or work, our achievement and the product of our determination and self-discipline. And that assumption sets us up for failure and spiritual disillusionment. Luther devoted much of his energy to the teaching and practice of evangelical piety to prevent this failure. (Kleinig, *Grace upon Grace*, 12)

Luther's "practice of evangelical piety" revolved around God's three-part curriculum for raising up true theologians: *oratio*, *meditatio*, *tentatio* ("Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings," AE 34, 283-288).

Oratio, meditatio, tentatio: Lutheran devotional piety that is all gift, all blessing, all grace.

Meditatio

As in public worship, the beating heart of private devotions isn't our service to God but his to us. We approach his Word as beggars owed nothing but promised everything.

Stepping up with arms ready to cradle gifts, we refuse to rush past the words as if mindlessly fulfilling an onerous obligation. Invited by grace, we linger over his words, "reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection" (286).

[Luther] discovered that all the Hebrew words for meditation referred to various forms of vocalization and sub-vocalization, ranging from speaking to murmuring, chattering to musing, singing to humming, muttering to groaning. So when we meditate, we hear God's Word as it is spoken personally to us. We concentrate on the Word and attend to it; we speak it to ourselves again and again; we read and reread it; we compare what it says in one place with what is

said about it elsewhere in the Bible; we chew at it in order to digest it; we rub at it, like a herb that releases its fragrance and healing powers by being crushed. (Kleinig, 19)

That fragrance has two scents. It reeks of death as God strips us naked, exposing where Satan's deceits decay heart and life. But we also breathe deeply the aroma of life emanating from an empty tomb where Jesus posted death's obituary.

But here too we live by faith, trusting when we feel no immediate harvest from the Spirit's sowing. The harvest is inevitable, though we often cannot explain how or when or where.



Oratio

As the gospel renews our minds, we view prayer in rich gospel hues as well.

The gospel reveals Jesus as the perfect prayer, fulfilling everything the Second Commandment commands. Jesus' devotion replaces our guilt of being so slow to pray and so easily wearied when we do! In addition, as we ponder God's promises, God arms us with words with which we, Jacob-like, seize him and refuse to let go. His gifts loosen our tongue-tied lips, and such loose lips sink Satan's ships!

Tentatio

Satan knows he's captaining the Spanish Armada when children of God immerse themselves in Word and prayer. So Satan responds to our devotions with his own renewed devotion! As he pounces on us in earnest, we may have difficulty seeing any gracious gift in *tentatio*!

But Satan proves himself God's fool. "As soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults will teach you to seek and love God's Word" (Luther, 287). Satan's attacks drive us back to Word and prayer. What to us is a repeating cycle of grace, to Satan is a vicious circle he's doomed to help us keep turning!

Oratio, meditatio, tentatio: Lutheran devotional piety that is all gift, all blessing, all grace.

Spanning Two Worlds

"The preacher who is not a pastor grows remote. The pastor who is not a preacher grows petty" (Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching*, 77). Sermon study's challenge is being pastor-theologians thoroughly engaged in the lives of our people and thoroughly immersed in the life of our text. We all lean to one side or the other.

The Challenge for the People Person

For those who chafed in classrooms, it's easier to be lured from regular patterns of thorough text study. And we believe for good reason: there's always another bleeding soul in need of our ministrations. We apologetically offer our text a farewell peck on the cheek, abandoning her at the altar like a jilted bride!

*"The preacher who is not a pastor grows remote.
The pastor who is not a preacher grows petty."*

With study skimmed, exegetical skills atrophy. Horace Hummel's observation begins to ring true about our sermons: "Too many sermons I hear could be hung on any text. Preachers pick on one or two phrases in the text, and really preach a topical sermon" ("The Pastor's Devotional Life," *Concordia Journal*, 12:11). We promiscuously steal from a text's surface beauty without discovering its fuller magnificence in committed relationship.

Counter-intuitively, brief textual liaisons may hurt pulpit veterans more than newbies.

The more mature we become in the faith, the more exegetically rigorous we must become. This is not a task from which we graduate. These words given to us in Scriptures are constantly getting overlaid with personal preferences, cultural assumptions, sin distortions, and ignorant guesses that pollute the text. The pollutants are always in the air, gathering dust on our Bibles, corroding our use of the language, especially the language of faith. Exegesis is a dust cloth, a scrub brush, or even a Q-tip for keeping the words clean (Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 53).

Exegetical promiscuity produces "sermons [that] not only leave a congregation undernourished but . . . also starve the preachers" (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 27). Temporarily, pastoral winsomeness may distract hearers from rumbling bellies, but nothing can long substitute for the contagious genuine passion the Spirit ignites as the preacher falls in love with his text.

When a preacher proclaims what he has ever so often experienced in his own heart, he easily finds the right words to speak convincingly to his hearers. Coming from the *heart*, his words, in turn, go to the hearts of his hearers,

according to the good old saying: it is the *heart* that makes eloquent (Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 112).

Engrave this on your study door: **time in my text is time with my people**. A layman pleads with us:

That hour on Sunday is your time to preach the wonderful message of salvation and to charge up people to get through the next six and a half days. It's gotta be the most important hour of the week for a pastor.

Do you love people? Lashed to your desk, pray and wrestle until the text melts your heart on its way to melting theirs. Love the lost? The unchurched return when struck by a sermon's depth. They can download *Chicken Soup for the Soul* on their Kindles. They instinctively expect more from us.

The Challenge for the Book Worm

Then there are those who must cut the cords binding them to their desks.

If we fail to interact sufficiently in our hearers' worlds, we may fail miserably to bridge the *apparent* gap between our text and their lives. A professor remarked: "If your one-on-one ministry is hypothetical, because you are just not spending time with people, then your preaching will have this hypothetical ring to it." A pastor added:

The better sermons are when I've spent the most time with people in their homes and on the street, sharing the gospel with them, maybe for the first time. Having an active calling portion of your schedule during the week reminds you why you are doing it.

Engrave this on your study door: time in my text is time with my people.

You Want Balance? Schedule to Your Opposite!

Mission counselor Jim Radloff urges pastors: "Schedule to your opposite." For the people-persons among us, block out sufficient time for text study. For the more bookish, block out sufficient time to be at doors and in homes.

Such balance helps us inhabit the text's world while claiming for Christ our hearers' worlds.



Please share ideas for key issue #6

Use the ideas link at *Grow in Grace* (wlsce.net) to submit resources or ideas related to key issue #6: *Partnering with peers*. What have you found helpful in working with other pastors in preaching, whether in getting ready to preach or gaining objective feedback after preaching?

Guarding Another Rich Heritage

Interviewing professors from other seminaries was fascinating. We often don't recognize a blessing until seeing it through the eyes of those who don't have it. One homiletics professor noted the challenge of text study when a majority of incoming students have known their $\alpha\beta\gamma$'s for only three *months*. WLS enjoys an unparalleled blessing when a vast majority of beginning homileticians have been exposed to Greek for four *years*.

What a rich heritage of years reading and hearing the very sounds and syllables the Spirit brought from heaven!

Are WELS preachers guarding this gift? Four survey questions sought an answer.

Please estimate how often your text study includes Greek when preaching on the New Testament.

Frequency	2003 Grads	1993 Grads	1983 Grads
0%	0%	0%	0%
1-24%	10%	0%	42%
25-49%	10%	0%	8%
50-74%	0%	22%	25%
75-99%	50%	22%	17%
100%	30%	56%	8%

While time spent may vary significantly depending on text length, on average how much time do you devote to working with the original language when the text is Greek?

Length	2003 Grads	1993 Grads	1983 Grads
1 hour or less	20%	0%	50%
1-2 hours	50%	56%	42%
3-4 hours	30%	33%	8%
5 hours or more	0%	11%	25%

Please estimate how often your text study includes Hebrew/Aramaic when preaching the Old Testament

Frequency	2003 Grads	1993 Grads	1983 Grads
0%	0%	0%	17%
1-24%	10%	22%	42%
25-49%	10%	11%	17%
50-74%	10%	0%	0%
75-99%	40%	33%	25%
100%	30%	33%	0%

While time spent may vary significantly depending on text length, on average how much time do you devote to working with the original language when the text is Hebrew/Aramaic?

Length	2003 Grads	1993 Grads	1983 Grads
1 hour or less	30%	0%	60%
1-2 hours	20%	56%	40%
3-4 hours	50%	33%	0%
5 hours or more	0%	11%	0%

Thank God, many maintain or strengthen skills. Yet, somewhere between 15-25 years after graduation, a significant drop occurs in frequency and time spent in the languages.

Let's encourage one another to reclaim, maintain, or strengthen these skills! Hold high how much we gain for ourselves and our hearers when we ponder the original languages' patterns and pictures. Who can measure the question-mark-removing impact as we grow in the pathos-and-ethos-building conviction to proclaim: "This is what the Lord says!"

We are surrounded by rich resources to regain, maintain, or strengthen skills.

- ✦ John Jeske's *Treasures Old and New* provides a daily reading in Hebrew and Greek.
- ✦ MLC offers annually a week-long Hebrew review and a week-long Hebrew Institute.
- ✦ WLS's *Pastoral Studies Institute* offers online resources used to train non-traditional pre-seminary students.
- ✦ WLS offers on-campus, online, or satellite exegetical courses. (Every professor was a parish pastor who knows how skills can rust in a busy parish.)
- ✦ Software provides language resources that, used wisely, can make exegesis more efficient and in-depth.



Online Resources for Making the Most of Time in the Word

On WLS' preaching web site (*Proclaim Grace!* preaching.wlsce.net) are these resources for individuals, study groups, or circuits:

- Suggested questions to aid discussion of this issue.
- A book review of *Grace upon Grace* by John W. Kleinig.
- *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings* (Volume 34 of *Luther's Works*).
- An excerpt from Luther's commentary on Psalm 1 (Volume 14 of *Luther's Works*).
- Two journal articles by John Kleinig on meditation from a Lutheran perspective.
- Downloadable audio files and printed outline of *The Pastor's Bible Class* by Daniel Deutschlander (February 2011 seminar).