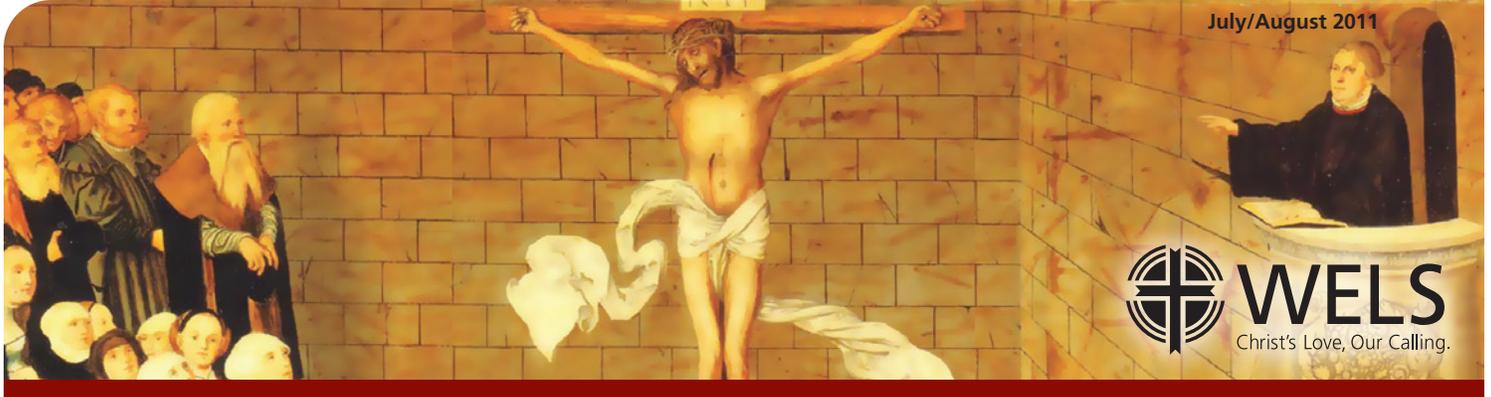


Preach the Word

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Partnering with the Pew

Proclaim Grace! Key Issue #5

By Richard Gurgel

I write these words while still basking in the glow of Good Shepherd Sunday. Is there a more tender picture of our Lord's compassionate care than the biblical analogy of shepherd and sheep?

A powerful element of that comfort is our Shepherd's individualized care for each of us. In John 10 the Good Shepherd "calls his own sheep by name" (3) and assures us, "I know my sheep" (14). In Isaiah 40:11 we hear that our shepherd "gathers the lambs in his arms" and "gently leads those that have young." The table prepared and the overflowing cup (Psalm 23:5) are readied for us with individual care. Note the first person singular quality of the entire psalm.

Even though preaching casts the Word broadly, under-shepherds with the Good Shepherd's heart (Jeremiah 3:15) desire to make it clear that the Word proclaimed touches the deepest needs and the innermost longings of each sheep before us.

The preacher mouth cannot say to the laity hand, "I don't need you!"

That is why it will trouble those who take preaching seriously to ponder that, in the research conducted for this project, the #1 challenge identified by WELS lay people was that too often the "Amen" came before they heard a clear "so what" or "now what" for heart or life. A mission counselor interviewed for this project, who himself has interviewed hundreds of WELS lay people, repeatedly heard the same concern from God's people. Another pastor captured the concern this way: "Preachers do a very good job in preaching the text, but the sermon never learns to live in the lives of the people."

Is a significant part of the problem that we perceive preaching as a solo performance? Remember the meaning of the Latin verb *homileo*. It means to converse. I may be the only one speaking during the sermon. But before I open my mouth, it is critical that my eyes and ears pay careful attention not only to the text but also to the lives of my hearers. If my hearers are going to hear a clear "so what" and "now what," it is essential that I am found listening far more than speaking. If I treat preaching as a soliloquy in which those who hear are a mute audience, should I find it particularly surprising that too often their hearts and lives seem to have only a bit part?

Even more than carefulness in speaking, preaching demands accuracy of listening. Yes, that means first and foremost listening to the text, but it also means listening to my hearers. John Stott's book, *Between Two Worlds*, paints the analogy of the preacher placing one foot squarely into the life of the text and the other squarely into the life of his hearers. Our task is to connect the text's "what" to the "so what" and the "now what" of hearers' hearts and lives. When I stand only in the text and not sufficiently in my hearers' lives, my sermon easily loses its balance, stumbling badly between greeting and vatum. Then I am in danger of performing the most deadly slight of tongue possible: I make the always relevant and living Word of God appear dead and distant.

That leads us directly to the bottom line of this issue of *Preach the Word*. Preaching that much more clearly and regularly offers a clear "so what" and "now what" is available to any preacher who makes wiser use of his valuable preaching partners: the sheep whom he is seeking to feed. To loosely paraphrase Paul in 1 Corinthians, the preacher mouth cannot say to the laity hand, "I don't need you!"



Overcoming Barriers to This Partnership

There are two chief barriers that block better use of our preaching partners. One barrier resides on either side of the partnership

Isn't Lay Help Often Uninformed?

At times we've all told ourselves that feedback from God's people may not be so helpful. Won't they be tempted to call a good sermon bad—perhaps because it spoke piercing law to a need of heart that many weren't eager to probe? Or maybe they will call a bad sermon good—perhaps because it was delivered with a winsome smile as the preacher proceeded to butcher the text. Doesn't inviting such feedback put pressure on us to scratch itching ears?

But this speck in our members' eyes may be the tip of a considerable beam lodged squarely in our own. If my people lack spiritual depth and discernment to grasp the difference between pulpit trash and treasure, might the greater fault lie with the one called to edify them?

Inviting honest feedback is evidence that we take seriously communicating the life giving Word.

In one of the first books to treat this partnership in depth (*Partners in Preaching* by Reuel Howe), the author made this stunning statement: "For many years I have checked with both clergy and laity about the instruction given and received on preaching. Rarely have I found a layman who has ever been instructed on how to listen to a sermon" (92).

One pastor had an epiphany on this after being repeatedly asked questions such as this: "Does the synod have books from which you get your sermons?" Instead of just shaking his head, he developed a way to help his people understand what preaching is all about. You will find what he developed (and two similar efforts) in the supporting online resources (preaching.wlsce.net).



But Honest Feedback May Sting!

The greatest barrier to pursuing a richer partnership resides on my side of the relationship. It's my own pride.

A seminary professor from another denomination acknowledged how protective we can be about our ministry in general and preaching in particular. "I'm the master of the kingdom, and don't you tell me how to do it in my little kingdom." After all, we can reason, we are trained in homiletics. Our people are not. Picture an arrogant chef who believes his restaurant's clientele have no right to comment on the tastiness of the meal. After all, only he has training in culinary arts!

In the survey, one pastor noted the same challenge. "We pastors get defensive. School teachers are visited all the time for improvement. People in the business world have ongoing review. . . . Good honest criticism that is helpful for building each other up is needed to keep us from being dry, boring, and stale."

As those who live and serve by Jesus' grace, we don't need to fear even if what is revealed is a sin to confess. It is God's grace that alone makes us capable of any ministry task (2 Corinthians 2:16). That grace often comes clothed in the form of brothers and sisters in the congregation who offer us godly redirection where needed. That grace also comes clothed in sheep expressing appreciation for where they have been well fed! When this is received with thanks for God's blessing rather than with self-centered pride, we receive grace upon grace.

The key in all of this is to follow an encouragement given by Dale Meyer in *Liturgical Preaching: Contemporary Essays*. "We shouldn't take ourselves too seriously, but the work of preaching? Yes, indeed, for sooner or later the faithful come into church looking . . . for a good word from God" (12). We are willing to hear honest feedback even if it wounds our ego, because such dying to self assists us in not taking ourselves too seriously. At the same time, inviting honest feedback is evidence that we take seriously communicating the life giving Word.



Homilia et Homiliae: Using Pre-Sermon Feed-in

Mid and post-sermon *feedback* (page 4) identifies when sermons hit home. Pre-sermon *feed-in* helps sermons start with better aim.

Well-aimed sermons provide battle support for the church militant. “Your troops will be willing on your day of battle” (Psalm 110:3). The Spirit maintains troop morale by resupplying them with the gospel. As his supply line workers, pre-sermon intelligence from the battle lines provides preachers with critical information about battle hot-spots. “The pastor who wants to communicate the gospel effectively dare never forget that the decisive battles of the faith are not fought within the four walls of a church building, but in the social, political, economic, and cultural areas where our parishioners spend most of their waking hours” (“Communicating the Gospel More Effectively,” WLQ, 79:1,16). If we neglect seeking reports from those battlefields, we risk rushing supplies to well-defended areas while a well-informed Enemy exploits weaknesses in the lines.

Pre-sermon communication also exposes faulty assumptions about what hearers know about a text and how it offers strength.

When I listen to listeners in the pre-sermon dialogue group, I realize just how different I am from most of them. We read a passage of Scripture and they react. Sometimes I wonder how in the world they could not see what I see or think what I think. I’ve realized more than once that if I had preached what I had planned to, I would have been very far from where they were. (“Pastor Ain’t Broke,” *REV!*, July/August, 2009, 73)



Fortunately, opportunities abound to learn from our partners. In *Liturgical Preaching*, Dale Meyer develops the useful analogy of multiple ministry conversations (*homiliae*) impacting the featured Sunday conversation (*homilia*).

Maximizing Existing Ministry *Homiliae*

- Use your text for sick or shut-in devotions. One pastor commented: “I gave a devotion to a woman on bed rest, and I used the sermon text. It really helped to

talk though the text with someone else. She had comments that helped me refine what I was trying to say. I uncovered the jewel in my study so that I could uncover that jewel in the pulpit.”

- Use a brief discussion of the text to open meetings.
- Listen to the culture. Read a magazine like *Time* or *Newsweek*. Pay attention to the latest movies and *New York Times* best sellers. One pastor remarked: “Too often pastors don’t read any kind of contemporary literature outside of theology. Their world shrinks just a little bit. People pick up on that.”

Pre-sermon feed-in helps sermons start with better aim.

Creating Feed-In *Homiliae*

- Use part of an existing class to ask for comments/questions on your text.
- Create an entire Bible class to discuss the text. Here’s a lay endorsement: “This is the most wonderful spiritual experience I have every week because it is such a free flowing exchange of questions . . . [Our pastor] doesn’t assume the role of leader. We suggest things he hasn’t thought of, and he brings us suggestions we hadn’t thought of. We focus him on, ‘You gotta apply this sermon. You can’t preach it and have people say ‘so what?’ You’ve got to put it into their laps and say this does apply to you.”
- One pastor sought input from selected individuals (seeking out different ages and some prospects).
- “John Wesley read some of his sermons to an uneducated servant girl with this instruction, ‘If I use a word or phrase you do not understand, you are to stop me.’ By this exercise [he] . . . developed the language of the mines and the marketplace” (Haddon Robinson, “Listening to Listeners,” *Leadership*, Spring 1983, 71). As Lutherans, this calls to mind Luther walking marketplaces so his translation would speak to common Germans, not just to Philip Melancthon.
- Inaugurate “take your pastor to work day.” One pastor shared his reaction: “I will never again complain about being a parish pastor, because I don’t know how well I would deal with the tensions and realities.”

Many of these *homiliae* can **save** time by maximizing mileage from text study while surrounding us with partners who keep us from wasting time guessing about application to life.

The Conversation Continues: Post Sermon Feedback



Sermon work begins by listening to text and hearers (page 3). It ends by listening once more to what hearers gained from that text as preached.

The most common feedback among WELS pastors appears to be written sermon summaries by catechumens (47% have used this). As someone whose students regularly submitted summaries, it was humbling whenever a sizable majority of those immersed in catechetical study couldn't navigate my sermon. Often, the problem wasn't so much with their ears but with my mouth.

Other forms of feedback mentioned included seeking out more formal (planned, pre-determined questions) and informal feedback from specific lay leaders. One pastor commented:

We've been blessed with some mature individuals. One of our elders read through the Large Catechism every month for the last year. He's read more Luther than I have. He's one of those gentlemen who's blunt. "You know, you just got to tell me how it is, according to the law." He's a very gospel centered man too. He understands the distinctions of law and gospel. He's helped me tremendously tighten up my sermons in the law and gospel aspect. An elderly lady called me today too, and made some comments on a sermon—just honest, open feedback.

Several pastors mentioned how much they valued their spouse's response since she was willing to give more honest and detailed feedback than the nebulous "Nice sermon, Pastor!" at the church door. Several pastors also took a portion of a class to encourage questions and comments on the sermon.

In addition, two interviewees mentioned an idea from a former professor. When in parish ministry, he randomly placed brief feedback forms into ten service folders. Those who received those forms as they entered worship were asked to write down quick feedback during the offering.

Finally, Reuel Howe (*Partners in Preaching*) describes a process for forming a group that meets for sermon discussion. He strongly urges pastors *not* to be present but to record the discussion.

I cannot emphasize too much that the best discussions, and therefore the best feedback, come from groups that meet without the preacher being present. If he is there, the

discussion will be inhibited no matter how good a relationship he may have with the participants. Members of the group will tend to address themselves to him, and that easily results in a question-and-answer discussion. When the preacher is not present the people will discuss the sermon with each other, thus giving him a more honest recording of how laymen think and respond not only to him but to one another. (97)

All this partnership with the pew cannot thrive without a healthy dose of pastoral pride-swallowing. If my hearers perceive defensiveness, a few alligators may smell blood in the water and attack, but most will quickly retreat from any feedback that might hurt our feelings. We thereby condemn ourselves to receiving little more than church-door-handshake-platitudes. But when God's people sense we long to speak law and gospel more clearly to the needs of their hearts and lives, useful feedback will come. Such supporting ligament partnership befits the body of Christ! Such partnership honors the gospel!



Please share ideas for key issue #7

Use the ideas link at *Grow in Grace* (wlsce.net) to submit resources or ideas related to key issue #7: *Proclaiming the gospel to a storied postmodern culture*. What do you believe assists you in proclaiming law and gospel in ways that communicate to our increasingly diverse and rapidly changing culture?

Online Resources for Partnering with the Pew

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.
- Three samples of Bible study material to help hearers be better listeners.
- A book review on *Partners in Preaching* by Reuel Howe.
- A book review on *Better Preaching: Evaluating the Sermon* by Lowell Erdahl.
- Erdahl's complete book on obtaining sermon evaluation from various sources.
- A section from Howe's book on organizing a post-sermon discussion group.