

Preach the Word

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Overcoming Pulpit Discouragement

Proclaim Grace! Concluding issue

By Richard Gurgel

It was the best of Reformation years. It was the worst of Reformation years. (With all due apologies to Charles Dickens!) Mention the year 1530 to a Lutheran theologian and the first thing that pops into mind is the bold stand of theologians and princes before the emperor in Augsburg. We are still richly blessed to this day by that powerful confession of the truth.

But in Wittenberg, 1530 brought the exact opposite of powerful confession. It brought an almost complete, deafening silence from the voice of Martin Luther.

As Fred Meuser points out in *Luther the Preacher*, for the first nine months of 1530, Luther stopped preaching in Wittenberg! After preaching more than 200 sermons in 1528, and 121 in 1529, Luther preached only three times in Wittenberg from January through September. Two of those sermons were at the pleading of the Elector. While it is true that mid-April through September found Luther at the Coburg and therefore outside of Wittenberg, still, in three and one half months Luther had preached less than he often did in a single week.

The cause was not health or primarily a lack of opportunity, but discouragement. As 1529 drew to a close, Luther's sermons contain increasingly testy warnings to the people of Wittenberg. If they did not produce more evident fruits of faith, he would simply stop preaching to them." Luther was growing convinced that his beloved Wittenbergers, having been freed from the burden of the law, were turning gospel freedom into license. As 1530 dawned, Luther proved that his threats were no idle words.

Yet, when he returned from the Coburg in September, he began preaching again. In fact, Meuser points out that in 1531 Luther preached 180 sermons.

Here is the key question to ask for any of us who have wondered (at least in our hearts) whether this thing called preaching really matters. What got Luther preaching again after his period of discouragement? And how did zeal for preaching remain burning

brightly for the rest of his ministry despite the fact that there was no sudden flowering of evident gospel fruit in Wittenberg?

Here's how Meuser summarizes what got Luther back into the pulpit and kept him there until three days before his death.

Not that he wasn't tempted to quit on other occasions, but the Scriptures, he said, overcame the temptation because "they constantly testify to the God who still has not gotten tired of loving the fallen world and calling it back to himself." If he is tireless in his love, he shares that tirelessness with us or restores it when our disillusionment has driven it away. Luther remained a preacher of the gospel, not because he had been too pessimistic about the people of Wittenberg or the world, but because God loved the people still, because only the word of both judgment and grace could help them, and because only God is to determine when the proclamation of the gospel is to cease But until God renders that judgment, the call to his preachers to preach stands firm, and all God's promises of strength, courage, and help remain in force.

This crisis of 1530 did, however, leave a permanent mark on Luther. After 1530 he was different. No longer did he expect the whole world to be won to the gospel. Believers would always be a minority. His expectations became more realistic, his spirit more cautious and chastened. Yet even in his very last sermon, just three days before he died . . . the passion for preaching—as voice of God, herald of Christ, and soldier of the Spirit—still flamed. Those of us who have been called by God as fellow preachers of the same gospel could do worse than to let that passion inspire and shape our preaching. (34)

Let all God's preachers say, "Amen!"

This last issue of the two-year *Proclaim Grace!* series emphasizes some final encouragements to continue to grow in preaching.



“Thank You, Pastor! And May I Also Add . . . ?”

In the survey done for this series, one pastor listed this as a strength of WELS preaching: “Pastors genuinely love the people in the congregation, so they take the task of preaching seriously.”

In interview after interview and survey after survey, that love for the people and the task of preaching came across clearly.

But allow me also to confirm that truth in the opposite direction. As I worked with a group of 40 lay people from 40 different congregations, it was also very evident that there is love and thankfulness on the part of God’s people for the pastor(s) God has given them and the preaching they hear. Not uncommon was a comment such as this, “I personally thank God for our devoted, dedicated Christian pastors.” Even as I asked the lay people to list weaknesses of the preaching they observed, it was not unusual to find everything in the “weakness” column moderated by a qualifying remark. One put an asterisk by his list of weaknesses. His explanatory note read: “infrequent, seldom observed.”

The high regard for preaching that these lay people showed confirmed a strong conviction heard in an interview with a WELS mission counselor who conducted interviews with hundreds of lay people across our synod.

The people really do want and will listen to good preaching. I think some of our pastors think that preaching is old fashioned. That it needs to be slick or trendy or electronic. And that is just not true, at least from what I’ve heard from lay people. If you just speak passionately and have something to say that has something to do with their lives. They are crying for good preaching.

When I do these planning days in congregations, and we get around to the part of saying, “Alright, these are the things you want to do. Where do you want clergy involvement and where don’t you?” We end up talking about how many hours are appropriate for sermon preparation. I hear lay people put that figure higher than pastors. They will say, “We want good sermons! Pastor, we want you to have the time. If we are burning you out doing too much else, we want you to tell us.” The members are willing to accord him the time. The pastor’s got to be convinced that they want good preaching.

As I bring this series to a close, I regret that the voices of lay people have been heard too sporadically in these 12 issues of *Preach the Word*. It is only fitting that we devote the center of this issue to listening to their words of thanks for good preaching

and pondering their words of encouragement for what they believe would yield even better preaching. All of it expressed with two recurring themes: a deep love for preaching and for those who preach.

Here’s where these voices come from. Each pastor who responded to the survey conducted for this series was asked to share a name of a spiritually mature lay man and lay woman from his congregation. From the more than 100 names suggested, 20 men, 20 women were randomly selected.

Those 40 from around the country provided input by mail in three stages. First, they submitted a list of up to five strengths and five weaknesses they observed in WELS preaching.

While striving to maintain their wording as much as possible, similar responses were grouped. This yielded 27 distinct strengths and 29 distinct weaknesses. The respondents were then asked to select the 10 strengths and 10 weaknesses from that list which best summarized the strengths and weaknesses of preaching as they observed it in the WELS. This second round of feedback resulted in seven strengths and seven weaknesses chosen by at least half of the respondents.

Finally, the lay men and women were asked to rank each list from one to seven. The statements of the strengths and weaknesses listed below are the wording of the respondents—often joining two very similar ways of expressing the same point.

The top seven strengths of WELS preaching:

1. Sermons give evidence of the conviction that Christ comes to us through the means of grace. Jesus is kept at the heart and center of the sermon.
2. Sermons are based upon the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. Sermons give evidence that Scripture alone is the infallible source of spiritual information and authority.
3. There is a proper distinction between law and gospel in every sermon to convict and refresh.
4. Sermons give evidence of confidence that the Bible interprets itself. We do not try to explain what can not be explained. We just accept God’s Word.
5. Knowledge of Hebrew and Greek assures that our pastors have a comprehensive understanding of the Bible and gives greater insights to people in the pew.
6. An individual can go to any WELS church and have confidence that the preaching is trustworthy.
7. Pastors display an ability to apply the Word to our everyday lives. Sermon content is applicable to the culture of 21st century congregations.

The top seven weaknesses of WELS preaching:

1. Down to earth application to our daily lives is too often lacking or is done in too abstract a manner—failure to connect sermon text to today's world.
2. Not enough preaching about vocation—God's call to each of us as father, mother, husband, wife, son, daughter, employer, employee, etc.
3. Not enough emphasis on mission and mission work—not enough challenging of the congregation to show their faith in the community.
4. The WELS doesn't have a consistent way to help pastors evaluate and improve their preaching.
5. Pastors have too much to do, too little time. We fail to allow pastors more time to "retreat," reflect, and to pursue classes, etc., for personal growth.
6. Pastors use "Christian-ease," theological language (doctrinal terms newcomers don't know like atonement, righteousness, sanctified) and do not explain what such terms mean. Sermon language ends up being over the heads of some.
7. Pastors need to include more frequent encouragement to spend time on daily personal Bible study and regular family devotions.

It was encouraging to this preacher to see the high regard for the task of preaching that these lay people showed.

There is an apparent contradiction in that weakness #1 and strength #7 are the same: clear application of the Word to our everyday lives. Perhaps that simply reflects that this is so vital in the view from the pew that, when it is weak or absent, it is immediately noticed. One lay woman, even while listing life related application as strength, eloquently captured the paradox (all emphases hers):



The ability to apply the Word to our everyday lives! *Please* tell these men this is *important!* I know we must not focus on ourselves to the exclusion of the glory of God, his kingdom, and his saving work on the cross, *but*, we need you to meet us *here*, in the midst of our everyday lives. In my struggle to walk the walk of faith, to love, to have hope, and to work hard in the service of my Lord, I need tools like wisdom and discernment, sound teaching, and honest counsel on relationships. This helps *me* spread the gospel to those around me.

We need you to meet us here, in the midst of our everyday lives. In my struggle to walk the walk of faith, to love, to have hope, and to work hard in the service of my Lord.

A man echoed that plea: "People are often looking for application of the sermon to their daily lives—often this is lacking or done in too abstract a way."

It should also gladden the hearts of Lutheran preachers to notice that the top four strengths listed essentially mirror the three *solas* of the Reformation. Again and again comments were read such as:

Jesus is kept at the heart of preaching.

We are reminded regularly that eternal life awaits all who trust completely in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Using the Bible as the only inerrant Word of God. It is the living truth!

Faithfulness to God's Word—no matter what the world believes or how unpopular a belief—do not back down from the truth. May God continue to bless us with spiritually mature men and women who speak with such evident love for the preached Word and those who proclaim it! May he bless us as preachers with ears to listen. If we honor the task of preaching, and if we love his people, we can learn much to inform our preaching.



Endlessly a Student and Perpetually Humble

"I have discovered that this question of good preaching keeps one endlessly a student, and perpetually humble" (Frank Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, xi).

It's my prayer that these twelve issues have helped to keep you "endlessly a student and perpetually humble." Our pulpit work will prosper if God keeps us "endlessly a student" of the privilege of preaching and "perpetually humble" that he would use jars of clay like us for eternal-life-changing work.

It's also my prayer that I've communicated clearly that such a ministry-long quest for growth in preaching (or any ministry skill) is not merely for those who might someday be canonized in a "preacher's hall of fame." If God had wanted only the most gifted to speak for him, he could have cloned Luther and placed him into all our pulpits. Instead, he placed you and me precisely into the pulpits he intended for us before we were even born (Jeremiah 1:5). The Savior who loves you and the people you serve is not a hard man who demands that we conjure up talents we don't have (Matthew 25:24). Instead, he empowers you by his love to fan into flame whatever gifts he has given you (2 Timothy 1:6). Fred Meuser urges us on this way.

The sermon is a battleground on which God and Satan contend for the hearts of the people! How will we approach the task of preaching if we really believe this? How much study, care, effort, and prayer will we want to put into it? It is no wonder that Luther called preaching the highest calling of all. (*Luther the Preacher*, 26)

I close my time as editor with the words I use every year to close the first day of junior homiletics. I say to the eager and fearful young homileticians before me: "Great preaching may be beyond every one of us in this room. God gives such gifts where he wills. But good preaching, very good preaching, does not need to be beyond any of us in this room." And then I point them to why I say that with confidence. I direct them to Lucas Cranach's painting (this newsletter's masthead). "Good preaching, very good preaching, is possible because God has seen fit to entrust to us the message of a great Savior, and the heart of very good preaching is to point to the glory of his saving and empowering love."



Not having preached their first sermon, I'm not sure how many seminary juniors believe me when I say that. But to you to whom God has entrusted eternal souls, it is imperative that you grasp the truth of that statement.

God longs for the salvation of those who sit before your pulpit. For that purpose he has put his powerful words into your mouth (Jeremiah 1:9). Brothers, pursue throughout your ministry the endless challenge of speaking the gospel as beautifully and powerfully as the Spirit has spoken it to you. May that goal keep you "endlessly a student and perpetually humble."



Tools for the Pursuit of Better Preaching

- Remember the online resources gathered for this series. Click on Cranach's painting on the *Grow in Grace* web site for:
 - o A searchable database for all 15 volumes of *Preach the Word*
 - o 17 sermons with commentary (9 audio, 4 video)
 - o 19 book reviews (2 complete study guides)
 - o 11 articles, 2 book excerpts, 1 complete book
 - o 7 study guides for *Preach the Word*
 - o 3 video interviews on time management
 - o 3 Bible classes on sermon preparation and purpose
 - o 3 sermon assessment tools
- The goal is to develop the key issues into courses and presentations. One course, *Freshness and Variety in Proclaiming Law and Gospel* is already being offered on campus, at conferences and satellite locations, and online. (Room is still available for a satellite course in New Ulm. The online course is sold out—offered again in 2013.)
- How you can partner with one or more brothers to study sermon texts or provide honest sermon feedback? The death to our ego we may experience at times from feedback may pave the way for a homiletical defibrillation that sparks fresh life into our preaching!