

Preach the Word

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The Use of the Manuscript in Sermon Preparation and Delivery

Pastor C: I want to start with a confession: I don't write out my sermons any more.

Pastor B: I don't write out mine word for word, either. I go phrase by phrase.

C: No, I mean I don't write out anything any more. I know exactly what I am going to say, and I say it the same way in both services on Sunday morning, but I don't write anything out. Should I feel guilty about that?

Pastor A: I could not get away with that, and I'm not sure I want to. My congregation expects to have the manuscript of the sermon available to them before, during and after the services. And they expect me to follow it pretty closely when I am preaching. Many of them read along.

B: Do you memorize it word-for-word, then?

A: In my best weeks. Normally I have the manuscript in the pulpit with me, and I refer to it pretty often. I've found that if I depart from it too much, it just confuses the people who are following along in the pews.

C: For me, to have people reading along rather than making eye contact with me takes a lot away from the worship experience.

A: I know what you mean. But I want to increase the percentage of my sermon that people remember, and I think that having them read it at the same time they hear it will accomplish that.

Welcome!

By Paul Prange

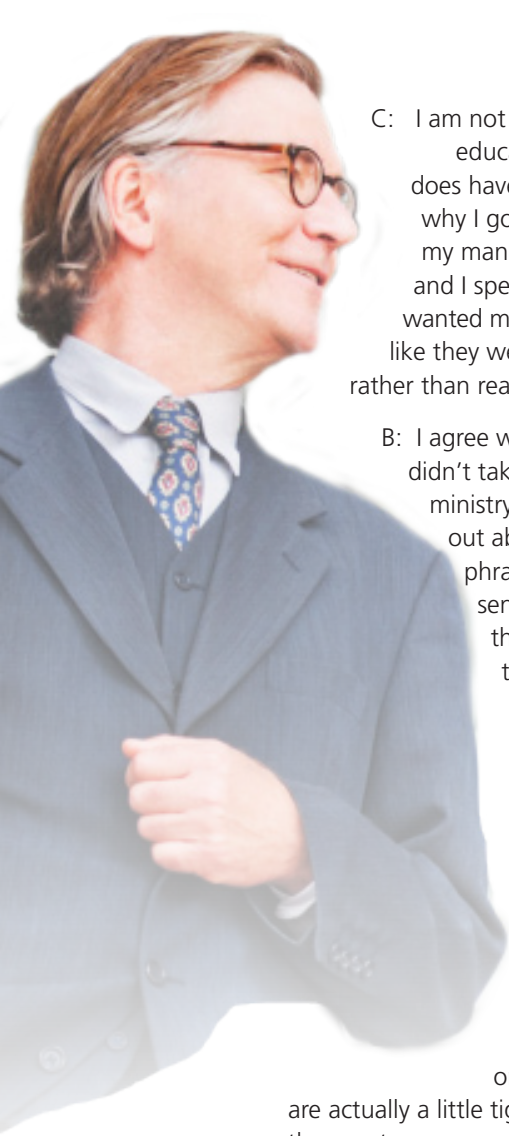
Welcome to a new volume of Preach the Word, a bimonthly publication of the WELS Commission on Worship. I'm your editor for this year. As the WELS Administrator for Ministerial Education, I don't serve just one congregation; instead, I preach in a different pulpit as a guest nearly every Sunday. I hope that particular perspective will prove helpful over the next six issues.

I have appreciated Preach the Word since it began fifteen years ago. For most of the years of its existence, I expected to get a helpful tip or two from each issue. But for the last couple of years, I have had the very helpful experience of discussing each issue with the other men in my circuit at our regular meetings. Their insights have given the articles in Preach the Word added value for me.

That experience has led me to try a different format this year. For each issue, I've asked three brothers with different perspectives to have a conversation on some practical matter of preaching and to allow their conversation to be edited for publication here. You can find their conversation on the Grow in Grace Web site, where, if you are registered, you may join the conversation.

May God bless the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers among us.

This new volume brings a new look. The image, Christ as the Light of the world (Ego sum lux mundi), is from the "Book of the Gospels" at Faith Ev. Lutheran Church, Sharpsburg, GA. Photo © Caleb Bassett.



C: I am not so sure that's good educational science. But it does have something to do with why I got away from writing out my manuscript. I write in one way, and I speak in another way, and I wanted my sermons to sound more like they were meant to be spoken rather than read.

B: I agree with you. That's why it didn't take me too long in the ministry to move to writing out about a page's worth of phrases rather than whole sentences when I prepared the sermon. I didn't have to worry about my literary style, but I could still make sure that the sermon made sense and flowed.

A: That's a good point. Aren't you in danger of rambling when you don't write the manuscript out?

C: No, I don't think so. I find that in order to stay on the theme, my sermons are actually a little tighter than when I wrote them out.

B: I've had the rambling problem. Sometimes I'll get a thought while preaching and just go with it, something I don't have in my manuscript, and I find myself going on and on.

A: How long do your unwritten sermons go?

C: That is a problem. I don't always know how long I am going unless I have timed the sermon when I said it to myself ahead of time.

A: I always know how long my sermon will last, because I have written a certain number of words, and I know from experience how many minutes that will take.

B: I can say the same thing about my phrase-by-phrase manuscripts. But my reason for writing something out every week has a lot more to do with an experience from early in my ministry. I had a retired professor in my congregation, and I really appreciated him. After one early sermon attempt, he gently asked me to go back to my manuscript and look for specific gospel. I was horrified to find that I had none. Ever since then, it is part of my sermon preparation to take my one-page manuscript and highlight the specific gospel.

A: That's a good idea.

C: I have to say that I try to make the specific gospel my theme so that I know I will come back to it again and again.

B: So you really do have structure to these sermons that have no manuscript.

C: Yes, I think of the structure in terms of "moves." I move from the first thing you might think of when you read the text to the next logical thing you might think of. A lot of times it is like a conversation, and I ask a rhetorical question or two to move to the next point. I come back to the theme pretty often.

A: I admit that I prefer the logical sermon structure we learned at the seminary.

C: That's what makes me ask whether I should feel guilty for going away from that structure.

B: I don't think so. There are no ceremonial laws for New Testament sermon preparation and delivery. Is Christ and him crucified still central to your preaching? Do you divide law and gospel correctly?

C: Prayerfully, I hope so. Those continue to be my goals. I find that I end up using a lot of the illustrations that I use when I teach catechism and Bible Information Class, and I know where all of those fit in good Lutheran theology.

A: My congregation members say that they get a lot of mileage out of reading my written sermons again at home, or delivering them to a friend or shut-in when they think that my message would have special application to them.

C: Yes, my members have to get a copy of the CD that we make after each service if they want to deliver the message to somebody else. And we just started putting it on mp3 files. But we post the video of me preaching each week on the church website, and most people can click on an internet link these days.

A: Again it comes back to the point that some people prefer reading.

B: And others prefer hearing, especially those with a little less education. Are you tempted to be lazy with your text preparation when you don't write anything out?

C: Actually, I often write things down when I study the text, because I find that it helps me to collect my thoughts. But those notes are nothing like a sermon manuscript. I get a lot of ideas about the tone of the text from the text study, and I try to match my sermon to that tone. I think I get greater variety in tone that way than when I wrote out my manuscripts, because my writing kind of tends toward the same tone.

A: I do sometimes feel like my sermons are all starting to sound the same.

- B: Don't you find yourself relying a little too much on the manuscript in the pulpit?
- A: I think I have mastered the art of having a look at the manuscript without distracting the people. My wife will tell me when I have relied on it a little too much on a given Sunday. But I have to admit that, with so many people looking down to follow the manuscript, it doesn't make that much of a difference whether I look down a few times.
- B: I think that's the beauty of the phrase-by-phrase manuscript. Even at the few times that I have distributed it, it's not the kind of document that you would want to follow closely when I am preaching. I have tried printing some of the phrases in the bulletin, with room to take notes in between, but that ended up feeling too much like a Bible class to me. There's something about holding people's attention with the narrative of sin and grace that appeals to me.
- C: I think that my method lends itself to the narrative culture that we have become. People like stories, and I am forced to use stories a little more than when I was writing out my sermons because they are convenient ways to remember the points that I want to make.
- A: I do find my sermons easier to memorize when I have used some mnemonic devices in developing the theme and parts.
- C: My method forces me to be very deliberate about memorization, because there's nothing to go back to if I forget what I planned to say.
- B: That's too much of a tightrope walk for me. I like to write out my phrases on Tuesday, maybe Wednesday of each week after doing the text study on Monday.
- A: You won't be surprised that I have the whole sermon written out by Friday, right?
- C: I'll do the text study early, and think about it during the week, especially when I am driving—but I don't settle on exactly what I'm going to say until the day before I preach. I say it to myself in the shower on Sunday morning to be sure I know it.
- A: I practice in the sanctuary on Saturday. My goal is not to need the manuscript in the pulpit with me, but it's rare that I make that goal.
- B: Most of the time I can get by without any manuscript in the pulpit. If I think I don't know it that well, sometimes I will tuck the page in the back of the Bible so I know it's available if I get seriously stuck. To be honest, I can't remember the last time I had to go to the manuscript while preaching.
- A: Don't people ask you sometimes for a written copy of your sermon?
- C: They do. And I'll explain that I don't have a written copy. But if they make a case for having one, I'll type out what I

said that morning. That actually doesn't take too long. When I do it, I still find myself changing what I said in order to get a better written style.

- A: I have a file of all of the sermons that I have written. I like to consult them when I prepare the text again to see how I handled it the first time.
- C: Of course, I'll never have that kind of file. But it does take away the temptation to rely on my earlier preparations when I see a text again.



Continue the conversation at the *Grow in Grace* Web site. Go the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary website (www.wls.wels.net), click on *Grow in Grace*, and follow the instructions there, either to register or to join the discussion.



If you are discussing this conversation with others, you may use these questions:

- Which pastor's manuscript preparation practice most closely matches your own?
- Which pastor's manuscript use in the pulpit most closely matches your own?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each method of preparation and delivery?



Next Issue's Conversation:
The Use of Personal Stories in Sermons



*Excerpt from **The Wall Street Journal**. A perspective from outside of our fellowship. Thanks to Pastor Matthew Arnold for bringing it to our attention.*



The Hunt for a Good Sermon

Are American churches really suffering a crisis of bad preaching?

By John Wilson

Is preaching in America in a particularly bad state?

Several commentators have recently raised the question, yet it has a long history. "It has become an impertinent Vein among People of all Sorts," wrote Jonathan Swift in the 1720s, "to hunt after what they call a good Sermon, as if it were a Matter of Pastime or Diversion."

And often those on the hunt declare their disappointment, as when Britain's Lord Hugh Cecil said in the mid-20th century that "the two dangers which beset the Church of England are good music and bad preaching."

Today's complainers include Ross Douthat, whose recently published "Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics" describes churches whose preachers promise prosperity to the faithful or dispense the gospel of narcissism. Others wonder about a pulpit presence so charismatic that it draws more attention to the preacher than to his message.

And yet, on the basis of a lifetime of churchgoing, I have to report that week after week, year after year, I have heard the Word of God faithfully preached. And I am particularly skeptical of sweeping claims, as by the Barna Group's David Kinnaman, that the upcoming generation of churchgoers has tastes and needs radically different from those of any previous generation in human history.

So what explains the recently announced million-dollar grant from the Lilly Foundation "to cultivate excellence in preaching" at Calvin College's Institute of Christian Worship? Does this eye-catching grant suggest that worship is on perilous ground?

It doesn't. Preaching—and worship—is in need of renewal because it is always in need of renewal. No pastor, congregation or denomination will ever get it right once and for all.

At the Lilly-funded program, pastors—men and women from various denominational backgrounds—will study together in "Micah Groups," named for the biblical passage that has become a touchstone for many Christians of this generation: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). The goal of the program,

says director Mark Labberton, is "the convergence of worship, preaching, and justice."

"Justice" (a notoriously elusive concept) wouldn't have defined a comparable program in the 1950s, especially not in evangelical circles, where the accent would have been on saving souls. To put "preaching" and "justice" together doesn't imply indifference to the eternal fate of our souls, but it does propose a corrective—a stress on realizing the Kingdom of God here and now. The history of the church is made up of moves like this.

Consider the alleged exodus of young people from the church. "We won't lose students because we didn't entertain them," said the dreadlocked Philadelphia activist and preacher Shane Claiborne on Twitter. "We will lose them because we haven't given the FULL gospel." Mr. Claiborne's comment made me think of another gifted preacher, Jesus, who also met with a mixed reception. "From that moment," we read in the sixth chapter of John's gospel—after Jesus said that "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you"—"many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him."

Why did some disciples draw back while others continued to follow Jesus? Why does the church surge to life here or there, while at the same moment, across the street or across the ocean, it seems to be increasingly moribund? Can't we find a method—underwritten by neuroscience and evolutionary psychology—to guarantee successful preaching? To ask the question is to answer it.

In his memoir "The Pastor" (2011), Eugene Peterson identifies one of the most serious threats to biblical preaching—a "pragmatic vocational embrace of American technology and consumerism that promised to rescue congregations from ineffective obscurity" but that "violated everything—scriptural, theological, experiential—that had formed my identity as a follower of Jesus and a pastor."

The obsession with measurable "results," the rebranded promise of some technique or strategy: Preachers are bombarded with this stuff every day (four keys to success, six marks of a healthy church, seven principles of growth). Many ignore it and get on with their work in "scripture, sermon, and sacrament." Praise God for that.



Mr. Wilson is the editor of Books & Culture, a bimonthly review.

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