

Encouragement

By Paul Prange

Normally I am wary of demanding a specific fruit as a sign of repentance, sorrow over sins and faith in forgiveness of sins through Christ Jesus. I have seen too many examples of a spiritual leader—a parent, a teacher, or a pastor—demanding bananas when the Spirit was clearly giving apples as the fruit of a heart that appreciated the gospel.

But recently I have been more and more impressed by Martin Luther's insight into a specific fruit of the Spirit. Luther said, "In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. For it was not without purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages alone—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in Greek. Now if God did not despise them but chose them above all others.... And let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained" (from *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*, LW 45, 359-360).

The unconditional gospel of forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ Jesus has been preserved among us with remarkable clarity. And the Spirit has led us to honor the learning of Greek and Hebrew in our preparation for the pastoral ministry. How do we show that honor for the gospel and the biblical languages as we continue to carry out our ministries? That is for the brothers to discuss in this issue of *Preach the Word*.

The Use of the Original Languages in Sermon Preparation

Pastor B: Every week that I am preaching, I review the sermon text in the original language, looking especially at the verb forms and etymologies of the nouns and verbs. But I spend a little more time looking at various English translations of the text.

Pastor A: Why do you do that?

B: Because I find that I get more insights from seeing how other translators deal with the text than I do from just looking at my own translation.

A: Recently I have been checking the three translations that the synod's Translation Evaluation Committee is studying. But I still spend a lot more time on my exegesis than I do checking other translations. I like to develop my theme and parts directly from my exegesis.

Pastor C: I can't remember the last time I did that. I develop my theme and parts from the good old English of NIV 1984.

A: Do you even look at the original languages?

C: Every week. I check the original word-for-word to see if it says what the English does. But once I'm done with that process, I just use the English. I can't think in Greek or Hebrew.

B: What do you do when the English is not the same as what the original says?

C: Good question. I try not to draw attention

to it, so the people don't doubt that what they are reading is the Word of God. But I say it differently when I say those words in my sermon.

A: If I discover a better way to translate a phrase, I've made it a practice to change the text in the bulletin, even for the readings, since I almost always preach on one of the texts in the pericope.

B: I've wondered whether that is legal. I suppose if you are not listing in the bulletin what version the reading is coming from, it wouldn't mislead anyone to improve the translation.

A: I am more afraid of misleading someone about what the Word of God really says!

C: What do you use for the Greek and Hebrew texts?

A: I use the books that I purchased at seminary. I've written a lot of valuable notes and insights into them over the years. I have a pretty highly-developed system of text study with my go-to volumes of the Brown Driver Briggs Index, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Rienecker, and Kittel.

B: I am using Logos Bible Software 4. I love the feature where you hover over the word and it gives you the analysis, and then the dictionary definition pops up over in the right column.

C: I do like that about Logos. But I find that if the text is from one of the books we studied in detail at the seminary, I get more out of my notes from those days than from any other source.

B: It would be nice to have the time that we had when we were sem students to really dig into the text. I don't have to preach every Sunday in my congregation, and I find that the usual two-week preparation time is really helpful to me.

A: Preaching nearly every Sunday, I find that I have to be pretty self-disciplined about the text study. It's got to happen on Monday for me to get the rest of the week to work.

C: I am interrupted so often on Monday, and I find that I have so many follow-up visits to make that day, whether to visitors or to members who have mentioned some difficulty the day before, that I just can't find that much time for text study.

A: You don't spend that much time on it anyway!

C: Not on writing out verb analysis and things like that. But after I check the original language, I spend a lot of time thinking about what the text says—in English. When I read the text out loud in English, I can almost always distinguish the law and gospel immediately, and I can usually develop a pretty good malady right away. Usually when I am spending time in form analysis, I can't think that clearly.

B: Do you ever mention the original languages when you preach?

C: Never. In my very first sem sermon I wrote, "the Greek says," and the prof wrote in red pencil: "Who is the Greek?"

A: I think I say "the original language says" pretty often in my sermons, maybe too often.

C: Don't you worry that when you say that, the members of your congregation will always doubt whether they are reading the real Word of God when they read their English Bibles at home?

A: If they do, they don't mention it to me.

B: I try to finesse this issue, especially with etymologies. I won't say, "The Hebrew word has this root meaning." I'll say something like, "This Bible word has a beautiful meaning," and then I'll talk about whatever the etymology is.

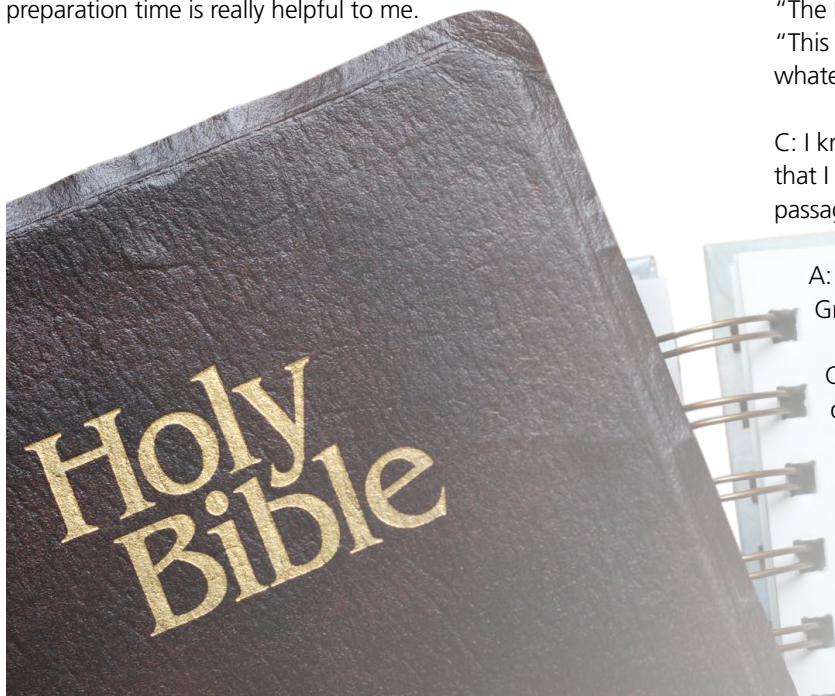
C: I know the catechism proof passages and cross references so well that I usually illustrate the meaning of a word by using a parallel passage, letting Scripture interpret Scripture.

A: Do you check to see whether it is actually the same word in Greek or Hebrew?

C: No, I have to admit that I don't usually go that far. But in my defense, I'm not sure it has to be the same word to make a correct doctrinal point.

A: I like to check all three readings in that Sunday's pericope, including the Septuagint for the Old Testament, for common words and phrases. You'd be surprised how often that leads to homiletical insights.

B: I'm not surprised. The more I use the pericope, the



more impressed I am at how often the texts fit together and complement each other.

C: Do you ever skip checking the original entirely?

A: Can't say that I have.

B: It's pretty rare. Maybe only in emergencies, or when I am reworking a short-notice funeral sermon for someone else.

C: I'm tempted to skip the Greek or Hebrew, especially in the busiest weeks. I've preached a handful of sermons without having spent any time in the original. But in the back of my mind, I'm very hesitant those weeks. I want to be able to say, "This is what the Lord says," and I always have that doubt. A couple of times I've gone to the original after preaching the sermon, to make sure that I said the right thing. That basically taught me the lesson never to skip that step in the preparation.

A: "Thus says the Lord." That's always on my conscience as well.

B: And more than being on my conscience, it makes me more confident as a preacher when I have done the work with the original languages, especially when I have to speak specific law that I know will not be popular with some.

A: For me, it is the original language work that helps to keep my speaking the gospel fresh. It's a rare week where the gospel portion of the text does not offer some insight that inspires me to put a little more time and effort into that part of the sermon with fresh language.

B: Don't you love it when you get that little chill of gospel insight for yourself, and you know you can use it for the sermon as well?

C: I'm always looking for insight. Do you ever read theological commentaries as part of your sermon prep?

A: Lenski, man!

B: I like the Concordia series.

C: I have checked online sometimes. But I don't know how to type the Greek and Hebrew words into Google, so I have not had a lot of success.

B: Our monthly circuit meeting has a text study for an upcoming Sunday. One guy prepares it, and everyone comments on it. I get a lot of good ideas from the brothers.

C: I wish there was a way to do that online every week.

A: I think I would be tempted to lean a little too much on another man's work.

C: I used to worry about stuff like that. But my preaching style is so much my own that I have stopped worrying about it.

B: I like listening to my associate preach. Sometimes I can take off on an idea that he only had time to mention briefly the previous Sunday—of course, only if the text leads that way!



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

- Which pastor's use of the original languages in sermon preparation comes closest to your own practice?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each practice?
- Do you think it is wise to change the amount of time you put into work in the original languages depending on how much time you have available for sermon preparation that week?



Next Issue's Conversation: The Use of the Pericope



Excerpt from the "Shepherd's Study," a book review blog by WELS pastors, part of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's "Grow in Grace" website, www.wlsce.net. For the full text of the review, see the website.

Book Review: *Communicating for a Change*

By Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006. 196 pages.

Reviewer: WELS Pastor Phil Casmer

Andy Stanley is the founder of North Point Ministries and senior pastor of North Point Community Church, Buckhead Church, and Browns Bridge Community Church. Stanley is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary.

Lane Jones is the campus director of Browns Bridge Community Church, a North Point Ministries campus. Lane is also a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary.

In chapter one of our familiar *Preach the Word*, professors Balge and Gerlach list five points every sermon should ideally accomplish. Point five is "Preach Clear, Coherent, Goal-oriented Sermons" (4). They explain, "A sermon is intended to make a point, one specific and clearly defined point, relevant to the lives of God's people" (12). *Communicating for a Change* is also a book about preaching, and it treads similar territory. Andy Stanley's guiding principle in preaching is, "to take one simple truth and lodge it in the heart of the listener" (12). The purpose of the book flows from this

principle. The author intends to help pastors in the “process of engaging and inspiring an audience with one solitary idea” (13).

Stanley’s partnership with Jones is reflected most clearly in the book’s two-part division. Part one, entitled “How’s My Preaching,” is Jones’ ten-chapter parable of a “pastor (Ray) who knew he needed to upgrade his communication skills but didn’t know where to turn for help” (12). Help comes in the form of Will Graham, over-the-road trucker and preacher extraordinaire. With its memorable trucker anecdotes and superficial objection answers, part one serves as a simple, yet entertaining entry to part two’s more in-depth explanation and application.

Part two, entitled “Communicating for a Change,” relates Stanley’s seven “imperatives” for preaching that effects “life-change.” Stanley assumes his “imperatives” do that more effectively than any other method because they frame sermon preparation and preaching primarily around the life of the believer (88-89). Each chapter includes practical applications and illustrations of its “imperative.” A brief summary of each “imperative” follows:

- 1. Determine Your Goal**— The goal one wants to reach ought to shape the approach one takes in communicating (93).
- 2. Pick a Point**— The message needs one central idea. Get there by digging into Scripture until you find it, then build every part of your message to serve that point only, and make it stick (e.g. give it a memorable theme like, “To understand why, submit and apply”).
- 3. Create a Map**— The practical centerpiece of Stanley’s advice, this is an outlining method “built around the communicator’s relationship with the audience” (119).
- 4. Internalize the Message**— Internalize and “own” your message by breaking it down into memorable chunks (e.g. Introduction—Tension—Text—Visual—Application—Conclusion).
- 5. Engage Your Audience**— “Presentation matters. A lot” (146).
- 6. Find Your Voice**— Be authentically you because that engages people.
- 7. Start All Over**— Pray to God throughout preparation and presentation.

In “Communicating for a Change,” Stanley clearly presents what he claims: a method by which he feels “life-change” can be accomplished. However, at times he uses weak caricatures to highlight his own points. For example, in the transition between parts one and two, Stanley asks, “Will you consider letting go of your alliterations and acrostics and three point outlines and talk to people in terms they understand” (89)? In similar, unfair

oversimplifications, he basically says, “If you’re really committed to communicating, you’ll use my method.” In truth, anything becomes old and tired when used poorly or too often – Stanley’s method the same.

And yet, the book practices what it preaches. It is filled with practical insights and illustrations that engage the reader.

At the same time, the outline does present a few points the reader ought to ponder. The preacher will take care in structuring such a message around the listeners’ experience so that Scripture is still the main course. Readers also ought to watch out for the way Stanley’s method addresses sanctification. The gospel preacher ought not point believers to themselves for motivation. This is more law (despair or delusion). God moves believers with his love and reminds them of it, so that they love even when the results aren’t measurable. The gospel preacher does the same.

In general, Stanley encourages readers to analyze their preaching to make sure they are honest with themselves in pursuing excellence in reaching their hearers and touching their hearts with the gospel. The main thought to carry away might be: to do everything we can to clearly communicate one, simple truth from God’s Word to the hearts of God’s people so that they see their sin, their Savior, and their sanctified opportunities. This sort of encouragement we gladly receive.

Overall, Stanley’s point has merit and the book is eminently practical. His strength is in the many encouraging reminders and bits of advice for structuring a memorable sermon. The book is littered with a few straw men and is directed primarily at a time-window larger than most WELS pulpits allow. There are also some expected, non-denominational theology missteps. That said, the careful reader can still benefit from Stanley’s advice. At the very least, the author provides another tool in the sermon toolbox: another way to structure some of the many messages he will deliver. For that and his other practical reminders, *Communicating for a Change* is a worthwhile read.

