

Preach the Word

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Go Deep

By Nathan Nass

As you know by now, I'm a fan of simple preaching. I love Luther's assessment of a good preacher: "He's the best preacher who can teach in a plain, childlike, popular, and simple way" (AE 54:384). A good preacher refuses to talk in secret pastor code language. He understands the reality of biblical illiteracy and meets his people where they are in their life of faith. He focuses his hearers on a central truth in his sermons, instead of wandering all over the map. Above all, he points people to Jesus with clear law and gospel again and again. I'm a fan of simple preaching!

But I'm afraid that phrase—"simple preaching"—can be easily misunderstood. It might sound like "simple preaching" means preaching simplistic sermons without much meat or depth. It might sound like "simple preaching" means sticking to easy sections of Scripture and simply rehashing the plan of salvation week after week. It might sound like "simple preaching" means avoiding anything that challenges our hearers' understanding. If I've given you that impression, Jesus has other ideas. Jesus sends us out to "teach them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20). Jesus wants us to preach and teach everything in his Word.

"Simple preaching"—can be easily misunderstood.

A brother pastor asked me this perceptive question: "What about the sections of Scripture that are not simple? It's good that you began here with Jesus' parables and Paul's simple preaching. But Peter noted that Paul is often difficult to understand.... What if the text is not so simple?"

Here's the reality in Scripture: Some texts aren't so simple! As our brother mentioned, Peter noted that Paul can be difficult to understand: "His letters contain some things that are hard to

understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pt 3:16). So here's how Peter ended his letter just two verses later: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen" (2 Pt 3:18). It's true that some sections of Scripture are hard to understand. So what does God want? He wants every Christian—from a new convert to a long-time pastor—to keep growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ. God wants us to go deep!

Paul—who wrote things that are hard to understand—emphasized that same truth: "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready" (1 Cor 3:1-2). Paul longed for his hearers to grow spiritually. In fact, Christ has given pastors and teachers to his church so that "we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Eph 4:14-15). Jesus wants his people to grow!

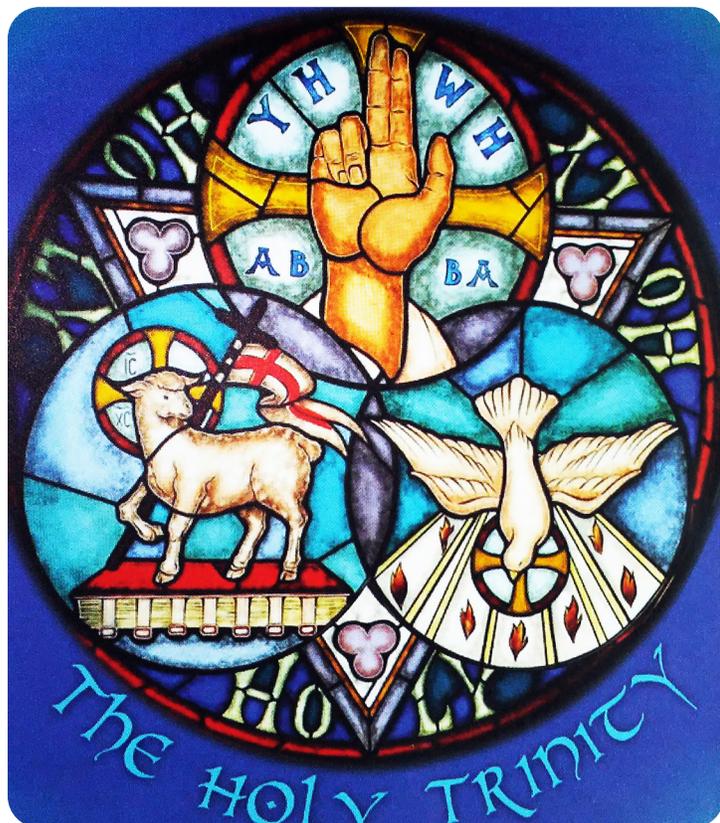
The book of Hebrews includes a striking lament. "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!" (Hb 5:11-12). Can you sense the frustration in the author's voice? "I want to say more, but I can't because of your spiritual immaturity." Wow! Strong words. Every pastor can relate to the feeling of having to teach the same basic truths over and over again to people who ought to have matured further in their faith. "I want to say so much more, but..."

Here is the author of Hebrews' encouragement: "Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so" (Hb 6:1-3). The author certainly wasn't encouraging his hearers to abandon core teachings about Christ. But he was challenging them to take their understanding of Christ to a deeper level. Isn't that also our goal as preachers? We want to challenge our hearers to grow. We want to go deep!

It sounds counterintuitive, but simple preachers lead people to go deep.

But here's a caution: This encouragement to "go deep" doesn't nullify anything I've written about "simple preaching." Don't challenge your people with your theological vocabulary or stuffy grammar. Don't challenge your people with a convoluted outline or a myriad of disconnected biblical references. That's not "going deep." Do challenge your people with the deep truths of God. "From everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps 90:2). Simple words. Deep thoughts! "He chose us in him before the creation of the world" (Eph 1:4). Simple words. Deep thoughts! It sounds counterintuitive, but simple preachers lead people to go deep.

These Bible verses have led me to examine my own preaching. I want it to be simple and clear. But I also want to go deep! Am I?



Every one of us has had the experience of sitting through a disappointing conference presentation. The topic had excited you. You had eagerly anticipated impacts on your life and ministry. But then the presenter spent an hour saying the same thing over and over again. You left deflated—maybe even angry! No depth. No value. How often is that me? Do people walk away from my sermons thinking, "I was expecting a whole lot more..."

There's evidence that I haven't been challenging my people as much as I think I have. How often am I surprised that my members don't know what God says about important teachings? I moan, "How do they not get that sex before marriage is wrong? They act like it's normal!" But then I realize that I hardly ever preach about sexuality. What else? Unfortunately, I can think of lots of examples. "How come they are not concerned about homosexuality?" "Why do they keep bringing up millennialism?" "How do they not know what the Bible says about predestination?" Well, have I preached about any of those doctrines lately—or ever? Maybe I need to go deeper!

Lazy mouths can lead to lazy ears.

There's an interesting phrase in the Hebrews passage I quoted above. "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn" (Hb 5:11). The phrase "slow to learn" is literally "lazy in respect to ears" (νωθοὶ γέγονατε ταῖς ἀκοαῖς). Isn't that a clever phrase? How often are our people "lazy in respect to ears"? But now here's the catch: How often aren't we preachers "lazy in respect to mouths"? Do you think there's a connection? If my people sense that I'm preaching the same thing every week, that I haven't gone deep, that I'm not willing to challenge them.... Do you think lazy mouths can lead to lazy ears?

Often our reasoning—or excuse—is to say, "That topic is better for Bible class." Sure, it's easier to explain something with an hour in a class. It's much more challenging to craft a sermon on the same topic. But you know the problem. In my congregation, less than 15% of adults attend Bible class. How about yours? If diving deep is reserved for Bible class, we shouldn't be surprised when 85% of our members think that Lutherans and Catholics believe the same thing. We need to preach—not just teach—on the deep truths of the Bible. I wonder if our people don't have a greater desire to go deeper into God's Word than we give them credit for. That's why they bring up predestination and muse about the Trinity and ask for more Revelation... People want meat!

People want meat!

This means that you, preacher, have a big job! To challenge and motivate the 75-year-old elder who's been a member his whole life. To convict and forgive the 44-year-old straying member who happened to show up for the first time in years. To connect with

the 27-year-old who hasn't ever stepped in a church before. To keep the attention of the 13-year-old who is supposed to be filling out a sermon summary. All while keeping the central focus on Jesus' work of redemption.

Does this mean that every word of your sermon is going to be understood by every person there? No. Does it mean that every application should hit home for every person? Impossible. But if I'm preaching on the deep truth of predestination, I want the 13-year-old to walk away knowing that she is loved. I want the 27-year-old to go home trusting that his life has purpose. I want the 44-year-old to be amazed at God's grace. I want the 75-year-old to have peace when he thinks of death. Going deep into doctrines has practical applications for every one of God's people.

Here's where to start: **Give yourself time to pray and mature for yourself.** Luther wrote, "You should completely despair of your own sense and reason, for by these you will not attain the goal.... Rather kneel down in your private little room and with sincere humility and earnestness pray God through his dear Son, graciously to grant you his Holy Spirit to enlighten and guide you and give you understanding."¹ When was the last time you "went deep" into a biblical doctrine apart from your sermon prep? In our circuit, a brother recently suggested we read the recent translation of Walther's "Church and Ministry." It's deep. And long! It's made me realize how rarely I go deep into God's Word to grow personally in my knowledge and understanding.

Give yourself time to pray and mature for yourself.

Then, **think carefully about how you go about choosing which text to preach on each week.** As you choose a text, there are lots of factors to consider. What texts have I preached on before? Which has the clearest message for me to communicate? Which hits at a particular need in our congregation right now? Add these to the list of things to consider: Which text presents the greatest challenge to my sinful nature? Which text pushes my biblical understanding to a deeper level? Which has truths from God that my people probably haven't heard for a while—or ever?

As you consciously look to challenge your people to grow in their spiritual maturity, here's a caution: **We're not talking about randomly mentioning hot-button issues from the pulpit.** In a recent devotion for a group of non-members studying English at our church, I mentioned abortion in passing as an example of sin in our world. The shaken looks on many of the women's faces immediately convicted me of a serious pastoral mistake. **If you're going to go deep, go deep.** Preach a whole sermon—or two or three—on abortion: why it's sinful, what hope and forgiveness Christ offers, what godly options exist for those with unplanned pregnancies.

This might be a place for a sermon series at an appropriate time of year. In my previous congregation, we took a survey

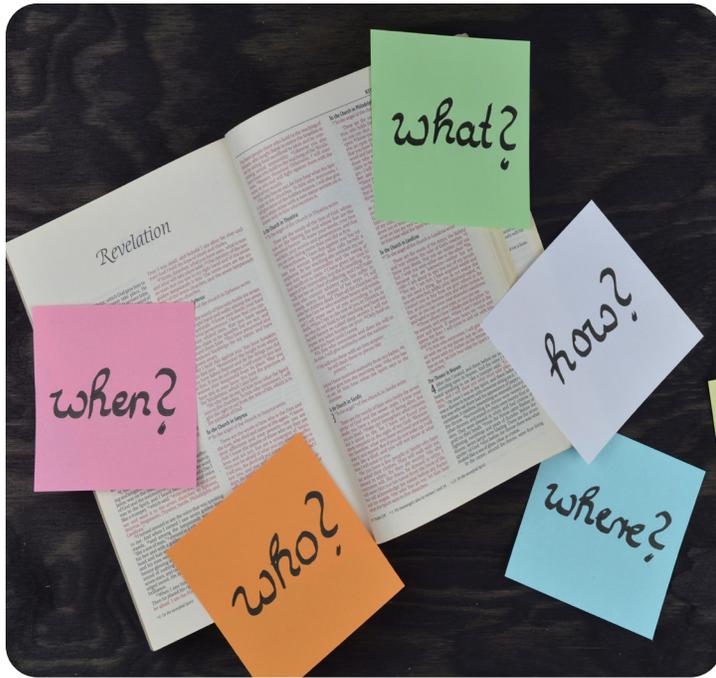


of our membership. We had a huge response—over 175 completed surveys. One unexpected blessing was the opportunity to see which biblical teachings our members were struggling with, including some deep doctrines like the roles of men and women, hell, fellowship, and the Lord's Supper. In response, we designed a summer sermon series called "Clearing the Roadblocks."² We dove into each of those doctrines. Our people genuinely enjoyed "going deep." Members asked, "I'm going to be gone next week, but I really want to hear what the Bible has to say about _____. Can you share your sermon with me?"

I remember one particular Thursday evening worship service. In a very liberal, ELCA-dominated small town in Minnesota, I got to preach on the roles of men and women. That evening, one of our faithful male members finally convinced his wife—a very committed ELCA member—to join him for worship. I saw her and thought, "Oh, boy." The idea flashed through my mind to preach on something totally different. Thankfully, I didn't. After the service, she said she had never heard what the Bible actually says. Going deep into a challenging doctrine was a blessing for her—and me too! I had nothing to fear, because God's Word is true. People need all of it!

Into what areas of Christian doctrine would it be beneficial for your people to go deep? In an election year, God has a lot to say about government. Are your people going to hear it? Identity—it's on everybody's minds. Will you dive deep into what it really means to be a child of God? The Trinity: "Are all gods really the same?" Church fellowship: "Why are there so many Christian churches?" Nobody gets it, but the Bible explains it. Go deep!

As you do, **remember the deepest, most challenging doctrine of Scripture.** Do you know what it is? Here's how Luther explained Peter's words about the difficult teachings in Paul's writings: "He saw that many frivolous spirits were jumbling and twisting St. Paul's words and teaching, because some things in the latter's epistles are difficult to understand, as, for example, when



he says that ‘man is justified by faith apart from works’ (Rom. 3:28)” (AE 30:198). What’s the most challenging doctrine of all for our sinful natures? Justification by faith. We better make sure we clearly teach that difficult, deep doctrine of salvation by faith in Jesus!

As I write this, concern over the coronavirus is spreading. This week, WELS churches were forced to suspend in-person worship services. I pray that by the time you read this, those fears have subsided. Here’s what I’ve learned from the pandemic so far: **Each time you preach, you are preparing your people for the day when you and your church will no longer be there.** Preach the gospel in every sermon like it’s the last time your people will be in a church, *and* go deep into God’s Word to prepare your people to study the Bible on their own when you and your worship services are no longer available. Give them the gospel and challenge them to go deep.

That’s what Paul did. While he didn’t face a pandemic, he was often forced to leave the churches he served on a moment’s notice. A notable example is his stay in Thessalonica. A mob forced Paul to flee after a short stay. Yet, his letters to the Thessalonians reveal

a depth of teaching on matters like the end of the world and the antichrist. Paul got deep with those people quickly. Even Paul’s long stay in Ephesus only amounted to two and a half years. Yet, Paul could confidently say, “*I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God*” (Acts 20:27).

In every sermon, consciously or not, you are teaching your people how to read and understand God’s Word. In other words, **every sermon is a sermon on hermeneutics.** Only please don’t use that word in your sermons! Every sermon you preach is an opportunity to teach your people how to search for answers in the Scriptures, how to use context to aid understanding, how to let Scripture interpret Scripture. Every sermon you preach is an opportunity to teach your people how to dive deeply into God’s Word, so that when the day comes that their preacher is gone or their church is shuttered, God’s people are equipped to continue digging deep into his truth.

*Brothers, in your simple preaching,
go deep.*

Isn’t this exciting? Week after week we preachers get to open up God’s Word for God’s people, “*like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old*” (Mt 13:53). There’s urgency for us preachers. Each week, we look at a portion of God’s Word and realize, “This is so important. This is so applicable. This is just what my hearers need to hear!” Then, the very next week, we look at a completely different portion of God’s Word and realize, “This is so important. This is so applicable. This is just what my hearers need to hear!” That joy and urgency is what led Luther to say, “If I today could become king or emperor, I would not give up my office as preacher.”³ Brothers, in your simple preaching, go deep.

¹ *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), Volume 3, p. 1359.

² If you’re interested, you can find an overview of our “Clearing the Roadblocks” sermon series at worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-23/

³ Meuser, F. W. *Luther the Preacher*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983, p. 39.

