

HOMILETICS AT WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

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Its task as it is conceived by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is to prepare men for the public ministry. The seminary *Catalog* states, "The specific purpose of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is to offer theological training for men who desire to enter the public ministry of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod or of the churches within its confessional fellowship" (p 3). The *Catalog* explains that "the Seminary carries out this purpose by training all of its students to preach and teach the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ and to carry out the pastoral ministrations of the public ministry in accordance with the Holy Scriptures as the verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God and in conscious agreement with the historical Confessions of the Lutheran Church."

The seminary's Self-Study of May 1978 points out that "if the church is to be true to her Lord's commission of making disciples of all nations, then the church's ministerial training program must be designed to produce men trained to preach the Gospel." It goes on to say that "since the Synod's primary need is for pastors, WLS has designed its program to train men specifically for the parish ministry" (p 8).

The seminary's aim is, therefore, to train preachers of the gospel, and it goes without saying that a preacher's first business is to preach. It is self-evident, then, that homiletics, the art of preaching, receives a strong emphasis at WLS. The student begins his training in homiletics when he enters the seminary, and he continues to learn the principles of preaching and how to apply them all through his four years as a seminary student, including the practical experience he gains in his vicarship.

The seminary *Catalog* describes the course as follows:

The Theory and Practice of Preaching (Homiletics) -The training for pulpit work begins in the Junior year. Three periods per week during the first quarter, two during the second and third, are devoted to studying homiletical principles, to practice in writing outlines, and to writing two sermons on texts that have been studied by the entire class. The course includes practice preaching before the class. After these sermons are reviewed by the instructor, the students are encouraged to preach them in public, but not until after Easter of their Junior year.

The course for Middlers calls for two periods per week during the first and third quarters and three during the second. Each student is required to preach two sermons before the assembled class with critique by the class and the instructor.

Sermon practice is continued through the Senior year, two periods per week. Each student is required to preach two sermons, with critique by the class and the instructor. An Old Testament text is assigned in the first quarter and a text from the Epistles in the second quarter. In the third quarter P. sermon on a Gospel text is submitted in manuscript form as a final assignment. The class periods in the third quarter are used for a Homiletics clinic to discuss practical problems involved in preaching.

During the entire course the method of personal consultation between instructor and student is followed, in order to help the latter to meet the problems of text, outline, and final draft. Videotape equipment helps the student in self-evaluation and correction.

Except in cases of emergency, students are not to deliver in public any sermon which has not been passed upon by a member of the Faculty or the pastor in whose church the sermon is to be preached (pp 27ff).

In the seminary's Self-Study the homiletics department listed its objectives as follows:

1. To train students correctly to expound the text for a sermon;
2. To guide them in applying the truths of the text to the faith and life of the Christians to whom they will be preaching;

3. To direct them in developing a sermon style which is clear, logical, interesting and chaste;
4. To provide them with the opportunity to preach their sermons to their class and its professor so that by subsequent constructive criticism on the part of those who have heard the sermons they may be helped to recognize shortcomings in either the sermon or its delivery and to recognize and retain the strengths which were evident in the content and delivery of their sermons (p 19).

To give a more complete picture of the classroom procedure and instructional methods followed in each year of the homiletics course we quote the following from the course syllabi as found in the Self-Study:

Junior Year

Lectures on homiletical theory are supplemented with assignments which help students learn how to study a sermon text, prepare a text analysis, a basic outline, an expanded outline, and finally the written sermon. Basic outlines for the first sermon are selected by the instructor from outlines prepared by the students. Students prepare their own expanded outlines and written sermons. Both are discussed in private consultation with the instructor.

Class preaching begins during the second quarter and continues through the third quarter. Sermons are preached in chapel to classmates. A student critic leads the class discussion of the sermon and the delivery. The instructor concludes the evaluation with his own comments. The student preacher has opportunity to view himself on videotape.

Epistle texts for the second sermon are studied in class. Basic outlines suggested by the students are selected by the instructor. Each student prepares his own expanded outline and sermon, which are evaluated by the instructor in private consultation with the student.

Extra periods at the end of the year provide opportunity to discuss transmission and outlining skills (p 153).

Middler Year

Lectures are again at the beginning of the first quarter and during time available before and after preaching of the second sermon. In periods before preaching of the first sermon, students (two with the same Gospel text assignment) present their text study, analysis, and basic outline to the class. Each student's expanded outline and written sermon are subsequently presented to and discussed with the professor prior to preaching before the class. At that time delivery and sermon (content and style) are evaluated by a student critic together with the instructor and the entire class. The same procedure is followed with the second sermon, except that the text study and basic outline are presented to and discussed with the professor (p 154).

Senior Year

Before preaching begins in the first quarter, homiletical principles and style are reviewed, the special problems of preaching on Old Testament texts are discussed, and a number of Old Testament texts are studied in class. Each student is assigned a text and is required to submit for the instructor's approval a text study together with a basic outline and, subsequently, an expanded outline. He then writes the sermon and submits a copy to the instructor and a designated student critic.

At the discretion of the Instructor, consultations may be held with the student at any time during the sermon construction process. The preaching is done in a worship setting. The class sings a stanza of a hymn selected by the preacher. The student enters the pulpit and delivers the sermon, concluding with the vatum. The class then sings a closing hymn stanza before beginning its discussion of the sermon. After the student critic and the class have offered their criticism, the instructor adds his comments. If necessary, a private consultation is arranged with the student. Criticism includes an evaluation of the sermon outline, content, style, and delivery. The sermon is videotaped, and the student preacher has an opportunity during the following week to see and hear himself in the pulpit. To help the student become independent in his sermon preparation, the text study is

not handed in in the second quarter, and only the sermon is submitted in the third quarter. The sermon clinic in the third quarter is devoted to questions and problems submitted in advance by the students themselves. The texts assigned for student preaching are chosen in such a way that the student may use the sermon in an actual church service soon after he has preached it in class. A different series of pericopes is used each year (p 155).

Since the publication in 1978 of the homiletics textbook, *Preach the Gospel*, by Professors Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, students have the advantage of being able to prepare for class by reading the book's presentation of the principles of preaching. Class discussion of these principles gives them the opportunity to ask questions about points on which they would like further clarification. As indicated above, they are given practice in such procedures as text study and analysis, constructing basic and expanded sermon outlines, preparing introductions and conclusions, and evaluating their style. Having the textbook also makes it possible for the students to consult it in the sermon preparation process in order to review principles and procedures they may not have fully grasped or successfully put into practice. Examples are given in the book with which they can compare their work. Recognizing their strengths or weaknesses will help them to develop and sharpen their homiletical skills.

In all of the training in homiletics offered by the seminary emphasis is placed on personal consultation between the instructor and the students. Weaknesses in such areas as doctrine, grammar, logic and style are noted, and the students are encouraged to improve their skills. Criticism is offered in a constructive manner to give the students the benefit of a positive learning experience. By the time they reach the Senior year most of them have become quite adept at sermon writing. The vicarship in particular gives them the opportunity to prepare and preach a larger number of sermons. Here the role of the supervising pastor in reinforcing the homiletical principles learned at the seminary is of great importance.

We list here the Table of Contents of *Preach the Gospel* to give an overview of the material covered in the homiletics course.

Introduction

1. Nature and Purpose of the Sermon

- The Sermon as Worship
- The Primacy of the Sermon
- The Preacher as Ambassador
- The Purpose of the Sermon
- God's Intent and Purpose
- Distinguish Properly Between Law and Gospel
- Proclaim the Whole Counsel of God
- Relate the Word to Daily Life
- Preach Clear, Coherent, Goal-oriented Sermons
- Summary
- For Study and Discussion

2. Studying the Sermon Text

- Preaching Must be Scriptural
- Advantages and Implications of Using Texts
- Begin with Prayer and Meditation
- Determine the Original Meaning
- Discover What the Text has Meant to Others
- Find Preaching Values for Today
- File Your Text Studies
- Summary
- For Study and Discussion

3. Analysis of the Text
 - A Method of Analysis
 - The Coordinates
 - The Subordinates
 - The Propositional Statement
 - Brainstorming
 - Examples
 - Summary
 - For Study and Discussion

4. Structure of the Sermon
 - The Need for Structure
 - Structure for the Preacher's Sake
 - Structure and Order
 - Structure and Proportion
 - Structure and Progression
 - Structure and Memory
 - Structure for the Hearer's Sake
 - Structure Helps Maintain Interest
 - Structure Provides Relief
 - Structure Aids Retention
 - Essential Features of a Basic Outline - The Theme
 - Essential Features of a Basic Outline - The Parts
 - Formulating the Theme
 - Dividing the Theme
 - Summary
 - For Study and Discussion

5. Sermon Types
 - Terminology
 - Topical
 - Analytic
 - Synthetic
 - Homily
 - Summary
 - For Study and Discussion

6. Expansion of the Outline
 - Concern for Unity of the Sermon
 - Concern for Relevance
 - Purpose of Expansion
 - Importance of Good Mechanics
 - Material from the Text
 - Dialog with the Text
 - Proper Use of Suitable Material
 - Material from Other Biblical Sources
 - Materials from Extra-Biblical Sources

Expanding the Outline More Fully
Planning Application
Motivation
Final Checking of the Outline
Summary
For Study and Discussion

7. Introduction and Conclusion

The Need for an Introduction
Characteristics of a Good Introduction
Faults in Sermon Introductions
Sources of Material for the Introduction
Check Questions for Introductions
Conclusions
The Need for a Conclusion
Essential Qualities of the Conclusion
The Form of the Conclusion
Faults to Avoid
Points to Practice
Check Questions for Conclusions
Summary
For Study and Discussion

8. The Style of the Written Sermon

Gaining and Holding Attention
You Have a Style
Oral and Written Styles Differ
Why Write
We Address Intellect, Emotions and Will
The Need for Clarity
Safeguard Logical Order
Continue the Dialogical Process
Define, Explain, Illustrate
Repetition and Restatement
Concrete, Not Abstract
Concern for Human Emotions
Conversational and Natural
Variety, Euphony, Rhythm
Concrete and Picturesque
The Importance of Tone
Persuasion
Again, Concrete
Anecdote, Repetition, Example, Quotation
Popular Preaching
Self-improvement
Summary
For Study and Discussion

9. The Delivery of the Sermon

- Free Delivery
- The Role of the Voice
- The Primary Consideration
- The Practical Considerations
- Speak with Proper Volume
- Speak Naturally
- Speak Clearly
- Speak with Modulation and Emphasis
- The Role of the Body
- Facial Expressions
- Body Movement
- Be Yourself
- Pulpit Procedure
- The Preliminaries
- The Greeting
- The Text
- The Address
- The Votum and Silent Prayer
- Summary
- For Study and Discussion

10. The Choice of Texts

- The Ancient Pericopes
- Other Pericopic Series
- Advantages and Disadvantages of Pericopic Preaching
- Continuous Preaching on Entire Books
- Topical Sermons and Series
- Weekday Lenten Sermons
- Random Selection of Texts
- General Guidelines for the Choice of Texts
- Summary
- For Study and Discussion

11. Sermons for Special Occasions

- The Inaugural Sermon
- The Farewell Sermon
- The Wedding Sermon
- The Funeral Sermon
- The Characteristics of a Funeral Sermon
- The Content of a Funeral Sermon
- Special Cases
- Doubtful Cases
- The Confirmation Sermon
- Communion Sermons
- Christian Education Sermons
- Children's Sermons

The Ordination -Installation Sermon
Anniversary Sermons
Miscellaneous Occasions
Summary
For Study and Discussion

12. Preaching the Church Year
The Unity of the Service
Annual Review of Christ's Work
Historical Development
Structure of the Church Year
Utilizing the Church Year
Developing a Church Year File
Planning Ahead
Summary
For Study and
Discussion

Appendix A: Samples of Text Analysis and Expanded Outlines

Appendix B: Sermon Check List

Appendix C: Two Examples of Homilies

It is not our intention to describe in this essay the entire sermon making process from the choosing of a text to the delivery of the sermon as this process is taught at WLS. Questions concerning any of the steps involved may certainly be taken up, however, in the discussion which is to follow this paper.

Among us it is probably self-evident that a sermon will be based on a text. The reading of a text is a promise to expound and apply that text. Expounding and applying the text are the two essentials of a sermon. That is really what preaching is all about. At the end of the sermon the members of the congregation should be able to say, "Now I understand that part of God's Word better than I did before." That's why text study is so important. In addition, the Word of God should touch the hearers' conscience, lift their spirits and change their lives. To achieve these goals the preacher must work hard to make his sermons instructive, Christ-centered and persuasive. Under no circumstances should he leave the pulpit without having preached the good news of Jesus Christ.

The question is sometimes asked: Is the type of sermon the seminary teaches and encourages its students to write with a theme and two, three or perhaps more parts really the most effective? Is not a less structured type of sermon more natural? Isn't it easier to prepare, less demanding on a pastor's time and more appealing to listeners? One former WELS pastor, for example, stated recently "I have abandoned the dogmatical, theme-and-parts type of sermon familiar in synodical circles in favor of a running exposition and application of the Word."

The latter type of sermon, called a homily, also receives some attention at the seminary. A book of outstanding homilies by Prof. George Lillegard was published in 1956 by Northwestern Publishing House under the title *From Eden to Egypt, Genesis: The Book of Beginnings*. Homilies, too, have a theme and a logical line of thought. It is generally agreed, however, that it is difficult to write a good homily, that is, one in which the thoughts are tied together by a common thread like pearls on a necklace. The thoughts in a good homily do not scatter in all directions like pearls that fly all over the floor when the strand breaks. A good homily, like a theme-and-parts sermon, has unity. For variety's sake experienced preachers may wish to try their hand occasionally at a homily. It is the consensus of the WLS homiletics department, however, that it is desirable that the student master the theme-and-parts kind of sermon first.

As for the relative-merits of the two types of sermons, your essayist can speak from his own experience in four decades of preaching. I have not preached many homilies, but I am convinced that the theme-and-parts form is a most effective teaching tool.

Preaching should, of course, also be teaching. A skilled and effective teacher establishes an aim for each lesson and carefully organizes his material logically so his students will assimilate it easily. An effective preacher will also want to choose and carefully formulate the main thought or theme of his message. For the sake of clarity, this ought to be a proposition, that is, a complete thought, not merely a topic.

It is important for the hearers that they also know what the preacher's aim or goal is. For that reason the preacher should not fail to announce his theme in such a way that it can be recognized. A theme ought to be short, clear and interesting. Then it will be more easily remembered.

Careful organization of one's material into clearly defined, logical parts is as essential for good preaching as for good teaching. A good basic outline is a must. The parts should not be too long. Rhetorical features like alliteration, rhyme, rhythm and symmetry add interest. A good outline is important for the preacher. It helps him to think through and organize his material clearly. It is important also for the hearers. It enables them to follow the thoughts of the sermon more readily and take them home.

Nothing is more frustrating when traveling than to be lost, and nothing is more frustrating when listening to a sermon than not to know where the preacher is or where he's going. A wise traveler prepares an itinerary for his trip. He maps out the route he will follow and decides where he will stop for or the night. A wise preacher maps out his sermon. He plans the route his thoughts will take and what he wants to emphasize. When his hearers know what the theme of the sermon is and what its major divisions are, the sermon is more satisfying to listen to and makes a deeper impression on the mind and heart.

Logic is simply clear thinking. While some people may not be very logical by nature, when they hear a logically constructed lesson or sermon, they, too, instinctively have a better understanding of what they have heard. A preacher who rambles in circles for twenty minutes will leave his listeners as dizzy as a tilt-o-whirl will. The only impression such a sermon leaves is unpleasantness.

In my own experience creating a good basic outline is the most difficult part of sermon construction. But practice makes a master. Once the outline has taken shape, the skeleton of the sermon is in place. The rest of the work consists simply in fleshing it out. A helpful booklet for this part of the task is *The Lively Skeleton* by Gerhard Aho (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977). This is Book 4 in *The Preacher's Workshop Series*. The other eight booklets in the series are also filled with practical advice.

We are, as Paul says, Christ's ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20). The high responsibility that a pastor has as God's spokesman calls for nothing less than his best efforts in his sermon work. A sermon that contains no spiritual food is not worth listening to, no matter how energetically it is delivered. On the other hand, a sermon that is rich in content will be largely wasted effort if it is not well delivered. A preacher who does not make an effort to project his voice so that he can be heard might as well save his breath. One who uses language that goes over his hearers' heads will not even benefit the birds. It would be well for every preacher to remember Luther's remark that if Grandma Schultz could understand him, he was sure Master Philip would also understand.

Free delivery is without question the most effective; free delivery means that the preacher has such a mastery of his material that he can speak freely, confidently, directly and convincingly. He looks his hearers in the eye and talks to them on a person-to-person basis. It does not mean that he mechanically recites the sermon, mentally reading from an invisible manuscript.

A seminary professor in Australia asserted a few years ago that preaching in the Lutheran Church of Australia is poor. One of the reasons he gave for this situation was the widespread practice of reading the prepared sermon. "Now, whatever reading a sermon is," he said, "it is not preaching. Preaching demands independence of the manuscript or typescript, it demands rapport with a congregation, it demands visual contact" (H.P. Hamann, "Preaching a Theme," *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 12:3, December 1978, p 100).

In world mission fields there may, of course, be valid reasons for reading sermons. A missionary may be unable to think on his feet in the native language, or it may be necessary to make certain that a national pastor does not introduce false doctrine into his message.

Another reason given by the Australian observer for what he considered to be poor preaching in the Lutheran church of that country was the failure of many sermons to do justice to the needs of the congregation. The weakness of student sermons in this respect is well known. This is generally overcome, however, as the students gain experience, and especially when they begin to serve their own congregation and learn to recognize the spiritual needs of their people.

In this area it is important to remember that homiletical appropriation always outranks homiletical application (in the narrow sense). This might be stated in these terms: Preaching justification is more important than preaching sanctification. The reason lies in Jesus' words, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good" (Mt 12:33). A believing heart, like a good tree, just naturally produces fruits of faith. If a tree bears little fruit, the remedy is to fertilize the tree. If a Christian produces few fruits of faith, the remedy is to build up and strengthen the person's faith by means of the gospel. Homiletical appropriation consists in proclaiming the great saving acts of God, showing what he has done for us, what he offers and gives us through his redeeming and pardoning grace. These great truths work faith, and by faith the believer appropriates and takes to heart the blessings of God's grace. A living faith expresses itself in love (Ga 5:6).

Homiletical application should, of course, not be neglected. This parallels the hortatory parts of the New Testament Epistles. In Paul's Epistle to the Romans, for example, after eleven chapters in which he has set forth God's grace, he continues, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - which is your spiritual act of worship" (12:1). Then he shows how this is to be done in the practical terms of everyday living. The Bible is filled with examples, both positive and negative, to show us how to put away sins and live a more Christlike life.

With Paul the faithful preacher will want to be able to say, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Ac 20:27).

A sermon ought also to be interesting. Someone once said, "It is a sin to bore your fellow creatures." While this may be an exaggeration, and while it is true that what you say is more important than how you say it, it is, nevertheless, a fact of life that a preacher who does not try to make his sermons interesting by adding illustrations, avoiding cliches and refraining from tiresome repetitions will probably find some of his less committed people shopping for a different church. It is well known that when a congregation gets a new pastor, the first question asked is, "What kind of a speaker is he?" How this may apply to preachers in world mission fields, I'm not sure, but I suspect that people the world over are not much different from Americans.

This is not a plea for eloquence for the sake of eloquence. We recall that Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." He continues, "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on man's wisdom, but on God's power" (I Cor 2:1-5).

It would be a serious misreading of Paul's words to use this passage as an excuse for dull, lifeless, uninspired and uninspiring preaching. Note that the contrast Paul makes is between man's wisdom and God's power. A simple, sincere and clear confession of the faith that is in the preacher's heart will under God's blessing bear much spiritual fruit. That no human wisdom can ever produce, no matter in what eloquence it is clothed. Preaching from the heart, a man of God will give testimony to the faith and hope that is in him.

A good advertisement is one that sells the product without calling attention to itself. A good preacher's message will touch the mind and heart and will of his hearers without drawing attention to the speaker. It is said that when Aeschines spoke, the ancient Greeks said, "How well he speaks!" But when Demosthenes spoke, they said, "Let's march against Philip!"

This does not mean that a pastor will step into his pulpit without carefully preparing what he will say. A good cook may spend many hours preparing a well-balanced, tasty and nutritious meal that may be consumed in half an hour. A conscientious preacher will likewise spend many hours at his desk preparing a well-balanced, tasty and nutritious spiritual meal for the souls entrusted to his care. It may be delivered in a mere twenty minutes.

While experienced preachers may be able to preach well on the basis of an expanded outline, many veteran preachers have found it best to continue writing out their sermons in the interest of precision, logic, variety and fluency. Regardless of how he goes about it, a faithful servant of the Lord will always be mindful of Paul's exhortation to Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tm 2:15).

Of prime importance in correctly handling (*orthotomounta*, literally, hewing to the line of) the word of truth is a proper distinction between law and gospel. Many pitfalls threaten the preacher in this area. In his deservedly famous book on this subject Dr. C.F.W. Walther discusses 25 theses, 21 of which show how preachers often fail rightly to divide the Word of God. Walther's book could well serve as a textbook for a refresher course in homiletics. Even veteran preachers would do well to review their sermons from time to time in the light of the pitfalls Walther mentions. Unconsciously and unintentionally they may perhaps have fallen into one or another of them.

Consider, for example, Thesis XIII:

The Word of God is not rightly divided when one makes an appeal to believe in a manner as if a person could make himself believe or at least help towards that end, instead of preaching faith into a person's heart by laying the Gospel promises before him (*The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, translated by W.H.T. Dau [St. Louis: Concordia, 1928] p 35 .)

"This thesis," Walther explains, "does not score as an error the demand on the part of the pastor, be it ever so urgent, that his hearers believe the Gospel ... When demanding faith, we do not lay down a demand of the Law, but issue the sweetest invitation, practically saying to our hearers: 'Come, for all things are now ready' (Lk 14:17)" (ibid., p 260). Walther even says that "a preacher must be able to preach a sermon on faith without ever using the term faith." What he means is that "it is not important that he din the word faith into the ears of his audience, but it is necessary for him to frame his address so as to arouse in every poor sinner the desire to lay the burden of his sins at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ and say to Him: 'Thou art mine, and I am Thine' "(ibid)

Thesis XIV reads:

The Word of God is not rightly divided when faith is required as a condition of justification and salvation, as if a person were righteous in the sight of God and saved, not only by faith, but also on account of his faith f or the sake of his faith, and in view of his faith. (ibid p 35.)

In commenting on this thesis Walther explains, "When the Lord says 'Believe,' He does not utter a demand, but issues an urgent invitation to man to take, to apprehend, to appropriate what He is giving, without asking anything in return for it. The gift must, of course, be accepted. Non-acceptance forfeits the gift, but not because there was a condition attached to it" (ibid p 272).

These brief excerpts must suffice to demonstrate that Walther's *Law and Gospel* is a veritable gold mine of practical advice for those who desire to be faithful preachers of the gospel.

This paper has not, of course, addressed all aspects of homiletics as it is taught at WLS. In the last quarter of the Senior year, as was mentioned earlier, the class periods are spent in what is called a sermon clinic or preaching seminar. In this seminar dozens of questions relating to preaching are submitted by the students and discussed. Many hours are spent on this. This paper has touched only a few bases. You, the participants in this conference, will, I am sure, want to touch a great many more.

