

Revitalizing Our Preaching

WELS Board for Parish Services

January 20-21, 1994

By Pastor Joel Gerlach

A couple of years ago I had an opportunity to watch the BBC's dramatization of Anthony Trollope's "Barchester Towers" on Milwaukee's Channel 10. My lethargic viewing was suddenly interrupted when one of the actors quoted Trollope's harsh indictment of preaching. "There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries than the necessity of listening to sermons." Trollope's contemporary, Sydney Smith, was equally as scathing when, in "*Lady Holland's Memoir*", he wrote, "Preaching has become a byword for long and dull conversation of any kind; and whoever wishes to imply in any piece of writing the absence of everything agreeable and inviting calls it a sermon." Do we say "Amen" or do we say "ouch" to that?

That was 150 years ago. Now that homiletics courses and homiletics textbooks include instruction on the delivery of a sermon as well as the preparation of sermons, has the sermon's reputation improved? A generation ago when Dr. Hermann Stuempfle was installed as professor of homiletics at Gettysburg Seminary, he noted in his inaugural address:

You would have to be sanguine indeed to claim the pulpit for the world's prow today as Melville did in *Moby Dick*. In the estimate of many, it should be placed somewhere well to the rear of amidships—possibly not far from the stern. The preacher no longer commands the position he once enjoyed as the most-heard, most respected voice in the community. Even when he has the chance to speak, he sometimes has the feeling that hardly anybody is listening—at least seriously.

That there has been a shift in the position of the pulpit in our generation, few would deny. In fact, certain kinds of evidence, taken at face value, could easily lead to the conclusion that the pulpit might just as well be dismantled and removed from our churches. ("Where Shall We Place the Pulpit," *Bulletin, Lutheran Theological Seminary*, Vol XLIII No. 2, 1963, p.5)

About the same time Stuempfle was lamenting the fate of the pulpit, I attended a pastoral conference in San Diego. I was invited along with four or five other pastors to have lunch one day with Pastor Edgar Hoenecke, one of the better preachers of his day. The table talk that day dealt with preaching. Hoenecke observed that there is probably no other group of professional people who devote as little time and attention to improving their skills once they enter their profession as do the clergy. He was referring specifically to preaching skills, not to pastoral skills. Most of the rest of the conversation that day centered on what could be done to change that situation. I guess that's what we're here to talk about again today. I'm not here to convince you of the need. I'm here to share some ideas about what we can do to revitalize our preaching

Incidentally, that pastoral conference was 30 years ago. I'm not sure we've done much to solve the problem from then until now. I happen to be of the opinion that preaching in the WELS has made considerable improvement during that time. But I don't happen to think that preaching's reputation has improved in the opinion of many people in the pew.

In the new book "*Exit Interviews*" by William Hendricks, he offers a summary of the interviews he conducted with people who had left the church. In a chapter titled, "What Have We Heard?" he writes, "Sermons were not very popular among this crowd; at best, sermons were tolerated; at worst, they infuriated. It was not just that these gatherings were not interesting, they were not worshipful. They did little to help people meet God. However, I did not hear this as a call for more entertainment, but for more participation" (p.260).

So there you have it. For the past 150 years preaching hasn't fared very well in the opinion polls. But that in itself wouldn't justify spending time today talking about revitalizing our preaching. The WELS is so little and so isolated that the public's opinion doesn't necessarily apply to preaching in our circles. But even if we could establish that the criticisms don't apply to us, this white paper study would still be appropriate. That's because our preaching, regardless of how good we are, is always in need of being revitalized. The best

preachers are always working at improving their preaching. Paul Scherer, in his homiletics textbook, "For We Have This Treasure," says, "The only thing in God's economy that can ever take the place of preaching is better preaching. And every preacher is capable of that. Not of good preaching. Good preaching may be quite beyond us. But better preaching. That is beyond none of us" (p.22). Any preacher can become a better preacher of the gospel, if he is of mind to do better. We're here to talk about how.

A VIEW OF THE PULPIT FROM THE PEW

Before we try to get a handle on how to revitalize preaching, we need to ask what the reasons are for the bad reputation that preaching has earned for itself. About 20 years ago, Reuel Howe, an Episcopalian who headed the institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies, systematically examined the criticisms lay persons made of preaching. I listed them for discussion in a summer quarter course I taught back in 1974 (P.T. 451 Preaching Laboratory). I think they are still worthy of consideration.

1. **Preaching is often too abstract, too theoretical, and too theological.** Lay people complain that sermons often sound like theological essays, unrelated to life as they experience it every day. Sermons like that abound in the exposition of ideas, generalizations, abstractions, and unsubstantiated assertions. We often overdo assertions at the expense of narrative. And in that respect our sermons are in marked contrast to the Gospels. Someone has noted that the Gospels are 90% narrative in form. Maybe that could serve as an important clue to revitalizing our preaching.

2. **Sermons frustrate people when they try to say too much.** Too many complex ideas offered in rapid succession bewilder and frustrate the listener. All worthwhile homiletics texts stress the importance of designing a sermon around one major theme. That one central truth needs to be elaborated and reinforced with a story, an illustration, an anecdote, a parable or an apt quote, all of which serve to drive home the one main point of the sermon. As the old quip goes, "Better to drive home one point than to leave stranded on base." I used to tell students that when we preach, we dispense the water of life. But that doesn't call for inserting a fire hose in the mouth and then turning it on full blast so that the water is squirting out people's ears.

3. **Sermons reflect too little awareness of and concern for people's needs.** Determining and responding to people's felt needs is part of the jargon of the Church Growth Movement. I have a problem with the ethics of that emphasis because it smacks of manipulation. But there is a legitimate side to showing a concern in the pulpit for people's needs. There's a difference between addressing felt needs and real needs. Polls determine the one; Scripture determines the other. People tune in intuitively when the sermon speaks directly to them about their situation. That doesn't mean that we should scratch itching ears. But it does mean that there's little point in scratching people where they don't itch.

4. **Sermons contain too much esoteric, theological jargon.** Theological buzzwords is what John Jeske used to call such language. It's language that makes a sermon sound like a Dog paper rather than a word from God to ordinary people. Wally Kallestad at the Community Church of Joy (ELCA) in Phoenix, Arizona thinks that words like justification, sanctification, salvation, redemption, incarnation, and others have outlived their usefulness. I think he's overstating the case. But we certainly ought not to be throwing those words around without explanation if they aren't understood by our hearers. One of the Christmas gifts I received this year was a copy of Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, his version of the New Testament in contemporary English. He frequently makes me squirm, but he also makes me think. He is a master communicator. If you are familiar with his erudite style in books like *Reversed Thunder* or in his articles in *Christianity Today* and in *Leadership*, you will be amazed at how simple he can make things in *The Message*. The point here is that if "coffee and donuts" language was a worthy vehicle for transmitting God's truth to us via *κοινη* Greek, that same kind of language ought to be suitable for the pulpit.

5. **Sermons devote too much time to past history and too little time to present reality** (a variation of point 3). Biblical preaching must certainly take time to expound the text and to place it into its context. But some preachers tend to overdo the exposition to the detriment of application. By the time they get done explaining the text, there's too little time left to say what it means for the people in the pews.

6. Sermons contain too few illustrations. When I started out in the ministry, E. Arnold Sitz used to tell me, “You’ve got to put more windows into your sermons.” I knew he was right. I had to learn to do it, but I still don’t get enough windows in. Sometimes illustrations are opaque instead of transparent. That happens when preachers use too many literary illustrations they glean from books instead of ordinary illustrations they get from rubbing shoulders with people. Jesus should be our model in this respect. He talked about shepherds and sheep, fish, boats and nets, weeds and wheat, lost and found things, and the list goes on and on. The point is that he took his illustrations from the every day experiences of the people.

7. Sermons contain too much bad news and not enough good news, too much diagnosis and not enough prognosis. If what the critics mean here is that they don’t like to feel the cutting edge of the law while they’re sitting in the pew, then we can disregard this one. But if what they mean is that they tire of hearing tirades against that bad, old, mean, decadent world out there, then we need to pay attention to this criticism. The good news does not come off as good news when it is offered as a foil against all the bad news coming out of Bosnia, or Washington or the inner city, or the editorial page of the *Milwaukee Journal*, or MTV.

Moreover if what the critics mean here by good news and prognosis is that they want to hear more “possibility thinking” sermons or “health and wealth” promises from the pulpit, then too we can disregard this criticism. But if we take good news and prognosis in a biblical sense, then again we need to pay attention to the critics. Preaching good news is, not easy, at least for me it isn’t. To find fresh, new ways to keep listeners attuned to the gospel is always a challenge. Perhaps what people are telling us is that we need to employ more of our creative energy and to devote more of our pulpit time to things like resurrection, reconciliation, rebirth, new life in Christ, kingdom, freedom, peace, hope and joy.

8. Sermons are too predictable and preached without passion. Introduction, theme, two main parts—analytically determined (sometimes three parts for variation) and a conclusion. Next Sunday the same thing. Fifty-two times a year. Familiarity with the pattern breeds boredom if not contempt. It is so easy to slip into a rut and then to stay there because it’s comfortable or because it’s a time-saver. Variety in preaching takes time and effort. But it’s time well spent if it helps keep yawns to a minimum.

And if our words sound as though they are coming from the head instead of from the heart, if there is no passion in the proclamation of God’s love for the lost, if there is no enthusiasm in the announcement of good news, or if unnatural passion betrays that when we step into the pulpit we are embarking on an ego trip, then we shouldn’t think ill of people who are less than enthusiastic about the preaching they are hearing.

9. Preaching is too moralistic. I’m going to pass this one by because I’m not convinced it applies to us. If there is one thing WELS preachers are not, it’s moralizers. If there is one thing we understand well, it is that God accomplishes his will and purpose in the lives of his people through κερύγμα, not through διδασχε. Moralistic preachers succumb to an exaggerated desire to be relevant. WELS preachers exhibit a wholesome desire to be faithful.

10. Preachers do not take quality time for study and for sermon preparation. How people in the pew would know this, I don’t know. But perceptive people sense it. During a summer quarter course I taught, I asked the class to read a chapter a day from Helmut Thielicke’s *The Trouble With the Church*. (I think we could do a lot to revitalize preaching in our church if we could get every pastor to read that book.) Thielicke’s opening paragraphs are a lament about the fact that, “In the hectic bustle of ecclesiastical routine, preaching appears to be relegated more and more to the margin of things.” “I am appalled,” he says, “at what has happened in the church of Luther...” My guess is that one reason some preachers do not take the time they should for sermon preparation is because they do not organize their time well.

11. Preaching often suffers from procrastination in sermon preparation. Reuel Howe’s conversations with hundreds of preachers at his Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies disclosed that many sermons are the product of last minute pressure. Some people, it seems, can produce only under pressure, but few people can produce their best under pressure. And God’s people deserve the best we can give them, not merely something that gets the job done.

Revitalizing preaching in the WELS could well start with an encouragement to our pastors to give serious thought to what the people in the pew are saying about the preaching they are hearing. Admittedly the 11 observations we have just reviewed are not observations from WELS churchgoers. But they do apply, some obviously more than others. We'll have more to say later about a way to get helpful evaluation of our preaching from our own members.

THE STANDARD OF GOOD PREACHING

Revitalizing preaching implies that there must be some standard by which we determine whether or not a sermon is good. So we need to ask also, What is the standard of good preaching? The answer to that question is both objectively and subjectively determined, objectively to the extent that good preaching is determined by the Word of God, subjectively to the extent that good preaching is an art form.

So what does God have to say about good preaching? God's concern is primarily with the content. "Preach the word," is his succinct directive given through Paul to Timothy. Paul helps us to understand that to preach the Word means to proclaim Christ "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Co 1:24) and to do so "with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" so that the faith of God's people "might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (2:4-5).

Dr. Norman Madson used to tell budding preachers at Bethany Seminary to preach in such a way that people in the pew cannot see the preacher without seeing the cross. The preacher should never hide the cross; the cross should hide the preacher. Martin Marty got the same advice from a retired pastor in the congregation in which he vicared. After hearing one of Marty's sermons, his kindly critic told him, "You are close to the gospel, because you talked about God, about Jesus, about the disciples. You were close to the gospel because you talked about the effects of Jesus, about the ways the boldness of life can witness to his impact. Yet you forgot one thing: the cross." He went on to offer some sage advice all preachers need to remember, "Never look out at a congregation directly. Always plant the cross between yourselves and it, so you have to look around, or over, or under, or through it. You have no reason to be up there except for the fact that they would see the cross of Christ in your preaching..." (*The Word - People Participating in Preaching*, Martin Marty, Fortress, p.44)

Every good sermon is a law/gospel sermon. It will rebuke the old Adam. It will offer reassurance to the new man. It will never stop at exposing a problem and offering a solution in the manner that frequently characterizes Reformed preaching. For example, if you aren't feeling on top of the world (the problem) then look to the Bible for a little pep talk to get you going again (the solution). But at the same time a good sermon will not neglect to expose a problem and offer a solution. In a word, the problem is sin and the solution is Christ. The response that follows is a thankful living of the new life in Christ.

Neither will a good sermon be me-focused to accommodate the interests of what Tom Wolfe called the me generation. "Find a need and fill it", Robert Schuller says. That philosophy of preaching draws thousands of people to the Crystal Cathedral, especially people who have been led to believe that the new reformation is all about self esteem. But that kind of preaching intentionally avoids dealing with the one real need we all have. To merely get close to the gospel in Reformed or Arminian fashion is still to be tragically far away from it. The Word of God determines that the content of every sermon must be the Word of God, God's Word about sin and grace, and grateful response to that grace.

The cross is the constant of good preaching. But that still leaves room for variables. The variables remind us that as Lutherans "We believe, teach, and confess that the congregation of God of every place and every time has the power, according to its circumstances, to change such ceremonies in such manner as may be most useful and edifying to the congregation of God" (F.C., Epitome, Art X).

The defense of Christian freedom, which the Formula of Concord presents in Article X, applies as much to preaching as it does to anything else. But that does not mean that when it comes to the variables of preaching, one way is just as acceptable as another way. We still need to exercise good judgment when we make decisions about the variables.

One of the most hotly debated variables today has to do with the question of liturgical preaching versus expository preaching. The adoption of *Christian Worship* by the Synod in convention last August stamps us

unmistakably as a liturgical church. Perhaps it ought to go without saying that what is true of our worship ought also to be generally true of our preaching. To incorporate expository preaching into liturgical worship strikes me as an incongruity. Liturgical preaching is not the only way, but it is the better way.

Prof. James Westendorf makes that point in an article, "Liturgical Preaching - Still the Best way," in *Parish Leadership*, Vol 1, No 2, 1993. He rests his case on four points.

1. Liturgical preaching reflects a fellowship with the saints throughout the ages.
2. Liturgical preaching applies God's Word to people's lives in a more natural manner.
3. Liturgical preaching enables preachers better to present the whole Word of God.
4. Liturgical preaching allows the pulpit to be used for that for which it is best suited.

When we contrast liturgical with expository preaching, we are contrasting pericopic preaching with non-pericopic preaching. Advocates of expository preaching in the Evangelical camp usually mean preaching sermons in series based on a single book of Scripture or on a topical theme like the sermons preached on the Milwaukee WELS Federation's "Message From the Master." But what serves the purpose well on a nonliturgical radio program is not necessarily appropriate for a liturgical worship service, at least not on a regular basis.

Ministry magazine is currently running a twelve part series on Expository Preaching by Dr. W. Floyd Bresee. In the introduction to the series, he says, "Effective preaching has humanity within it and divinity behind it. The humanity within comes from a study of human nature in general and your own congregation in particular. The divinity behind comes largely from a perpetual, persistent exposition of Bible truth—expository preaching." He then asks, "What is expository preaching?" His answer is similar to what WELS—seminarians are taught in homiletics classes with one exception: we follow pericopes; he employs free texts.

The answer to the question: What is the standard of good preaching? does not rule out expository preaching from Lutheran pulpits. But it does relegate it to a position of secondary importance. It has value for the sake of variety, but not as standard fare. Incidentally, conservative WELS traditionalists are not the only ones who are making a case today for liturgical preaching. Last November Northern Baptist Theological Seminary's Center for the Renewal of Churches sponsored a conference for pastors and lay people entitled "Building the Church Through Renewal of Worship and Preaching." I didn't attend, but I did recognize the names of the major presenters, most of whom are advocates of liturgical worship and preaching. Dr. Robert Webber was one of the featured presenters.

Other variables fall under the headings of style and delivery. These are areas in which subjective judgment looms much larger. Yet there are some basic rules of thumb which help to determine whether or not preaching is good. Sermons are oral communication. Oral communication requires eye contact. No one who reads sermons will ever be regarded as a good preacher. Frequent reference to notes or to a manuscript is also distracting. Good preaching is from heart to heart, not from head to heart. I do not know what percent of WELS pastors rely on a manuscript in the pulpit. But during my mission counselor days, I was distressed by the number of mission pastors who did so. Revitalizing our preaching ought to address that problem.

Another rule of thumb is to be yourself in the pulpit. Preachers who communicate one way when in a Bible class or in another congregational setting and in a markedly different way when they are in the pulpit are saying something about the Word of life that they ought not to want to say. Recently I asked one of my children about the preaching of someone they hear frequently (not their own pastor). I was told, "When you talk to him, he's congenial and friendly, but when he gets into the pulpit, he's a totally different person." When I pressed for a further explanation, I was told, "He's uptight. His whole demeanor is stern and so is his tone of voice. The good news doesn't come off as really good." That doesn't call for any further comment other than to say that this preacher had not just graduated from the Sem. He's been doing the same thing for years.

The list of variables includes a variety of additional things. Most preachers in our circles stay within the confines of the pulpit. Some make minimal use of the pulpit. Some use visual and/or audio visual aids to assist them in communicating their message. Some make regular use of object lessons. Some employ a flair for the dramatic (a la John Jeske). At St. John's my associate and I have occasionally offered dialogue sermons on

festival occasions such as Ascension Day. Prof. John Ibsch presented the sermon at St. John's on a recent Good Friday accompanied by a group of WLHS students who silently dramatized the crucifixion in a powerfully effective way.

The appropriateness of such variables depends on whether they enhance or detract from the sermon's purpose. Whether they enhance or detract from good preaching depends on a number of factors. What's appropriate for some pastors is not appropriate for others. What's appropriate in some congregations is not appropriate in others. Whatever calls attention to the preacher at the expense of the cross of Christ is always inappropriate.

Three things that detract from good preaching need to be considered. One is entertainment preaching. An integral component of Wally Kallestad's "Entertainment Evangelism" is sermons that are intended to entertain as well as to edify. Robert Schuller errs in the same direction. There is an important difference between a sermon that leaves hearers with a good feeling and a sermon that leaves them feeling entertained. A member gave me a desk calendar a couple of years ago that features a religious cartoon a day. The one for January 30 depicts a nattily dressed man shaking hands after church with the pastor saying, "That was fun. Let's do that again sometime." He was probably entertained by the sermon. I'm not saying that humor never ever has a place in a sermon. If something funny is incidental to what's being said, it passes. If it dominates the style, it fails.

Another detraction is what I call "impact" preaching. Impact sermon preachers seem to be more concerned about what the hearers are experiencing as they interact with the preacher than they are about whether the hearers are being edified by the Word. Impact sermons are often convoluted. They make liberal use of the first person singular personal pronoun. References to personal experiences abound. Theatrics are sometimes part of the presentation. People who are not discerning listeners go away impressed by all the fluff unaware that there was little or nothing substantive in the sermon. Advertisements for canned sermons that come to our mailboxes often feature sermons like that.

Another detraction from good preaching is sermons that manipulate people. Good biblical preaching will avoid the temptation to be manipulative. After a few years of experience in the pulpit, most preachers will know what buttons to push to get people on their wavelength. You've all seen televangelists who were manipulators, not preachers. They ignore the ethics of the pulpit. Our responsibility is to speak for God and to communicate an awareness of him, not to woo people with our own personal charm. As Dr. Madson used to say, the cross has got to be out in front of you when you are in the pulpit, not behind you.

All three of these things, entertainment preaching, impact preaching and manipulative preaching betray an ego problem on the part of preachers. If their preaching is to be revitalized, it will take more crucifying of the old-Adam.

Furthermore, good preaching is preaching that bridges the gap between an ancient text and a modern culture. John R.W. Stott has dealt masterfully with that subject in *Between Two Worlds - The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Eerdmans, 1982). More recently *Leadership* treated that same subject in a feature article in the 1992 spring quarter issue. *Leadership* interviewed three radio/television preachers, Episcopalian Terry Fullam, the Back to God Hour's Joel Nederhood and Moody Bible institute's Joseph Stowell. Commenting on the importance of the relevancy of sermons, Fullam said, "We don't have to make Scripture relevant; it already is. But we need to exhibit its relevance." In response to that, Nederhood observed, "A friend of mine always said you should never preach a sermon that could just as well have been preached in the first century. I agree, I want the sermon to be faithful to the first century text of the Bible, but I also want it to be relevant to the century in which I preach."

I have been receiving *Back to God Hour* radio sermons ever since my student days at the Seminary. Both Nederhood and his predecessor, Peter Eldersveld, provide excellent examples of preaching that bridges the gap between an ancient text and a modern culture (no endorsement of their TULIP theology intended). Revitalized preaching in the WELS has to be preaching that reflects a cultural awareness, just as the

proclamations of the prophets did in their day. I'll say more about that when we address the question of how to revitalize preaching in the WELS.

THE QUALITY OF PREACHING IN THE WELS

To this point we have discussed preaching in a general way—what's good preaching and what isn't. It's time for an assessment of the quality of preaching in the WELS. What are the strengths and weaknesses of our preaching? In an effort to provide an objective answer to that question, I have solicited input from several sources, - a homiletics professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, and several mission counselors in different parts of the country, and the pastors who served as parish consultants as part of the Synod's Spiritual Renewal program. The four years I spent as a mission counselor a decade ago also gave me the opportunity to observe and evaluate a cross section of WELS preachers.

Let's begin on a positive note. One correspondent wrote, "Over the last few years I have also had opportunity to observe several dozen preachers from both conservative and mainline denominations. Never have I felt that we in the WELS had anything to be ashamed of when it came to the quality of our preaching." A mission counselor seconded that opinion. He wrote, "In general I am impressed with the gifts and abilities of the new men I work with and their teaching and preaching ability." He went on to acknowledge that new graduates assigned to outreach explorer stations probably represented the cream of the crop. One respondent expressed appreciation for the tendency he observed in younger preachers to employ a conversational style of delivery as opposed to a "preachy" style. Preaching is one-way communication. The effectiveness of preaching is hampered by anything that accentuates the one-way communication while it is enhanced by anything that masks the one-way communication. A conversational style contributes to what has been called the dialogical aspect of preaching.

Most of the input I received from observers had to do with weaknesses in our preaching, and then offered suggestions about ways to revitalize preaching. The criticisms fall into three categories: content, style and delivery. Content elicited the majority of the comments, so we'll begin with them.

Content

"The most common weakness I have observed in WELS preaching," one evaluator observed, "is a widespread tendency to prefer the abstract to the concrete, the generic to the specific. This is true in the explication of doctrine (e.g. law and gospel), in making applications to life, and in the use of illustrations. Some may attribute this to the way we train preachers in the WELS. But if that were a factor, I would consider it to be a minor one. My conjecture is that our harried and hurried preachers do not have—or do not take—the time needed in order to do the admittedly hard work of making their messages specific and concrete, and instead settle for quicker (but less effective) generalities."

Another contributor expressed a similar conclusion. "It is difficult for most preachers to present and apply the gospel in fresh and compelling terms, with vivid illustrations. Thus too many sermons are law dominated."

A third contributor carried that criticism a step further with the observation that "Jesus is the answer to every need and problem. We just need to help people see that and to make such personal and 'timely', as well as 'eternal' application of the gospel. Being practical and relevant is the key to effective preaching. The gospel is both practical and relevant."

Two critics pointed to the need to sharpen exegetical skills with a view toward a specific way of improving our preaching. One said, "For all our emphasis on pericopic preaching, exposition is lacking too often, with topical preaching using a **pre**-textual basis as a result." The other posed the question, "How do we keep guys growing in exegetical skills? We have to be at home in exegesis. Exegesis enables us to find imagery in words." (I've heard that observer preach on several occasions and can testify to the fact that he practices what he advocates.)

That same respondent said, "The theology of sermons also needs to be evaluated. I've heard preachers quip, 'We're real good at justification, but not as good at sanctification'." He went on to say, "I'm not so sure that we are as good at preaching justification as we think we are, and as a consequence sanctification suffers.

That's evident in generic law. There is no tearing down followed by building up. Some preachers end up merely badgering their hearers."

In a similar vein, another respondent said, "We do not have a clearly articulated doctrine of sanctification. (Senkbeil reminds us of what we're against, but does too little to teach positively.) As a result the Christian life is painted in hues of somber gray."

The same responder offered two further comments about content. As society becomes more wicked, less godly, there is a tendency to preach law as curb, with society as the audience. The "shoulds" and the warnings that accompany that kind of preaching come close to moralizing. Too little **direct** preaching of the law as mirror means that repentance is mitigated and the gospel lacks the stark contrast with law that it deserves."

He offered one further observation that deserves serious attention. "The gospel is preached one-dimensionally too often, as forgiveness for sin but not as the empowering truth and love of God to live life, enjoy life, serve God in live."

Style

All of my respondents expressed a concern about the use of shop-worn language that does not capture the imagination and does not stimulate hearers. One said, "Sometimes we sound like broken records, repeating the same truths in the same words. The same gospel message applied to all circumstances of life with a variety of expression should be the goal. One of the big hazards of some preachers is failing to 'fill the well' with new words and ways of expressing the same important truth because of a lack of general reading and gathering of resources."

Another one said, "Language is one thing that needs to be addressed. To use and reuse phrases like 'the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh' wearies hearers." He went on to note that there is a marked difference between hearers born before 1940 and after 1940. You can take the same sermon and the same preacher. People born before 1940 will rate the sermon high on a scale of 1 to 10. People born after 1940, influenced as they are by TV, will rate the sermon low. It sounds like a recitation to them. It's boring."

Another observer asked, "In a visual society, how can we make preaching more than a strictly auditory experience? Is there a role for the visual or the dramatic to introduce or to reinforce truth?" A worthy question. We'll come back to it later.

The need for the visual was expressed also to one of our mission counselors by an older member of one of our congregations, a man who has two brothers who are WELS pastors. He said, "Our pastors need to do a better job of painting a picture for us in their sermons." The mission counselor went on to say, "I believe he was advocating more of a 'story teller' approach to preaching with the goal of making the text come alive so that you could actually picture it in your heart and mind and see a pattern to follow in Christian living."

On the subject of style, let me conclude with what in my judgment was the most perceptive comment offered. "We are too wary of emotion and the subjective, with the result that our preaching often fails to connect with people's living. Most preachers lean toward the intellectual; most listeners don't. As pastors visit members less (and in some cases, withdraw from the world more), their frame of reference for preaching becomes narrow. Preachers are not all good listeners... and listening/reading is critical."

Delivery

That comment serves as an introduction to a consideration of the delivery of the sermon. Emotion will always be more apparent in the delivery than in the style of the sermon. Emotionless preaching will often fall on dead ears. An old locus in dogmatics comes to mind. "The mode of the operation of the Word of God is both supernatural and psychological" (*W.L.S. Dogmatics* notes, Soteriology, means of Grace p.32). We depend on the supernatural way in which the word works to accomplish the miracle of God's grace in the heart. We depend on the psychological way in which the Word works to get our hearers on the same wavelength and to get them involved emotionally.

Other comments on delivery focused on the mechanics of delivery, the necessity for eye contact, on the use of props, on a "pulpitless" approach citing the example of Al Sorum at Garden Homes, and on "the use of an overhead projector and other visual aids."

One respondent summed up his comments about delivery with the observation that “delivery is as important as theology and exegesis.” We need to “attach more importance to it.” I agree. A mediocre sermon effectively delivered will strike people as a good sermon. An excellent sermon poorly delivered will strike people as an ineffective sermon.

Only one respondent offered a comment about the structure of sermons (other than the comments made about expository vs. liturgical preaching). He said, “Not every preacher should try to master the intricacies of a carefully reasoned/outlined analytical or synthetical sermon. Some can’t do it well. They should be encouraged to preach in an expository style.” I have mixed feelings about that observation. It is true that “some can’t do it well.” But recalling discussions in homiletics classes, I also know that some aren’t convinced of the value of a carefully reasoned/outlined analytical or synthetical sermon.

The point that needs emphasis is the fact that a carefully structured sermon is an aid to the hearer. There is order and progression in the sermon. You can follow it. Sermons that are not carefully and logically structured are usually hard to follow and frustrate the hearer. I have also observed that preachers who employ an unstructured style often resort to story telling to keep the attention of their hearers, and that often it is difficult to see the point of the story.

Good homily preaching and good expository preaching are not any easier than a “carefully outlined/reasoned analytical or synthetical sermon.” But having said that, I do acknowledge that some preachers do a creditable job in the pulpit who do not employ the same kind of structure that most of us do.

AN ACTION PLAN FOR REVITALIZING PREACHING

Thirty years ago, Winthrop Hudson, a respected historian of American Christianity, shared his vision for an American Protestantism renewed by a Lutheran catalyst. His prognosis for a revitalized Protestantism in the U.S. says something about us Lutherans worthy of serious consideration.

“The final prospect for a vigorous renewal of Protestant life and witness rests with the Lutheran Churches ... The Lutheran Churches are in the fortunate position of having been, in varying degrees, insulated from American life for a long period of time. As a result, they have been less subject to theological erosion, which so largely stripped other denominations of an awareness of their continuity with a historic Christian tradition. Thus the resources of the Christian past have been more readily available to them, and this fact suggests that they may have an increasingly important role in a Protestant recovery. Among the assets immediately at hand among the Lutherans are a confessional tradition, a surviving liturgical structure, and a sense of community which, however much it may be the product of cultural factors, may make it easier for them than for most Protestant denominations to recover the integrity of church membership without which Protestants are ill-equipped to participate effectively in the dialogue of a pluralistic society” (quoted by John Pless in a book review of “Lutherans in Crisis: The Question of Identity in the American Republic” by David Gustafson, *Logia*, Oct 1993 P.66)

Unfortunately Hudson’s prognosis has not turned out to be a valid one. Pless says, “Instead we observe Lutheranism becoming increasingly like its Protestant neighbors to the left and to the right. While the ELCA takes on the characteristics of either Episcopalians or Presbyterians, ... the LCMS and the WELS are busy in attempted imitations of the conservative Evangelicals.”

An action plan for revitalizing our preaching has to recognize the necessity of maintaining our distinctive Lutheran identity as an evangelical, confessional, liturgical church. We can’t capitulate, especially in the pulpit, to pressures to conform to the Evangelicals model of “success.”

That, in my estimation, is what we can’t do. Here are some suggestions for what we can do.

1. We can help preachers understand how people’s expectations differ today from expectations that pre-date TV and the electronic age, and to understand how those changed expectations affect what we do in the pulpit. Those changed expectations include:

- People want communication to be concise (a consequence of the influence of sound-bytes).
- People expect the message they hear to be relevant.

- People expect a measure of sophistication in preachers (though Rush Limbaugh may change that).
- People expect a good image (ironed shirts, polished shoes, pressed pants, color-coordinated ties; - the mod look is not considered appropriate for anchormen on network newscasts, or even for the Tonight Show host).
- People expect sermons to be easily comprehended. (The closely reasoned sermons of Spurgeon and McLaren would strike most people in the pew today as pedantic.)
- People tend to attach importance to style at the expense of substance. (The medium is the message.) This is not to suggest that we allow style to take precedence over substance, but that we learn to combine the two in ways appropriate to the message.

In my own preaching, I have severely limited what goes into sermons in comparison to 25 years ago, though I still tend to overload them. People of my generation tend not to be bothered by an overload. Baby boomers have trouble handling it.

Perhaps we need to provide models of sermons by preachers who show that they understand how people's expectations have changed. I could suggest the names of some good WELS models.

2. We can help preachers understand the necessity for engaging American culture. Or as John Stott would put it, we can help them to relate an ancient text to a modern culture by helping them to be more familiar with the fabric of modern culture. Concordia Seminary in St. Louis recognizes the importance of that and responds by offering pastors a Theological Symposium to help them engage American culture. The theme of the 4th annual symposium, scheduled for May 3-4 is "Christ and Culture: The Church in Post Christian America." A couple years ago, Doug Wellumson, the Synod's Program Planning Analyst, gave me a copy of a listing of cultural trends that impact the church. The study was prepared by his office for use by the Coordinating Council and Boards for long-range planning. Familiarity with its contents could help add a note of relevancy to our sermons. It was updated in September of 1993 and is available on WELSnet. The original appeared in the *BORAM* for 1991.

A blurb for Concordia's Symposium says:

"Pastors and congregations in the United States find themselves in a cultural environment that is becoming increasingly alien, if not hostile, to the life of the church. A post-Christian society presents formidable challenges for Lutherans, making it imperative to study, evaluate and critique the dominant culture. In other words, pastors have two 'texts' to read: the authoritative text of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions on the one hand, and the 'text' of people, the community, the culture and, the *Zeitgeist* on the other hand" (*Concordia Journal*, Oct., 1993, p.306).

American cultural ideals that preachers need to respond to include:

- The privatization of religion; faith and moral convictions are considered private opinions and thus become marginalized from the public square (cf. the problem of Christians living-in).
- Individual autonomy; each individual insists on the freedom to find God and to create a personal religion, the more uniquely individualized the better, apart from the church and her historic tradition (cf. the eclecticism of the New Age, and the resistance to Scriptural fellowship principles).
- Relativism and pluralism; the multiplicity of religious and moral options relativizes any particular view.
- Pragmatism; determining truth and value simply by asking, "Does it work?"
- A therapeutic culture; the goal of any religion is to provide a sense of personal fulfillment and worth (e.g. Norman Vincent Peale, Oral Roberts, Robert Schuller et alii recognize cultural trends such as this one and err by allowing it to shape their whole ministry). (Adapted from *Concordia Journal's Theological Observer*, Oct '93.)

The implications for the church and the pulpit of these and other cultural trends are manifold. They pose tough questions for preachers. What in Scripture needs special emphasis? What does the history of the church teach us about engaging the culture in which the church finds itself so that we do not become an ecclesiastical ghetto? When do attempts to engage the culture constitute an accommodation to the culture? What does it mean

to follow Jesus into the world to seek the lost without becoming “of the world?” How do we address these questions in the pulpit while staying within the law/gospel shape of good Lutheran preaching?

If we want to revitalize preaching in the WELS, we need forums in which such questions can be addressed. And that leads to a third suggestion about things we can (and should) do.

3. One of my contacts that served as a parish consultant made the previous point the main emphasis in his response. He said:

“The majority of pastors in the WELS engage in continuing education of one sort or another—individual reading and study, attendance at workshops or seminars, or enrollment in formal classes—but a good number of congregations do not provide the encouragement, the funding, or the time needed.” He illustrated his point with an example from the medical profession. Then he added, “In an age when parish ministry is as varied and complex as any profession, a renewal of preaching will not happen unless parishioners view the continuing education of their pastors as just as normal and necessary as what they would expect of their dentists and doctors—or their auto mechanics.”

As second and third points, he offered the following:

2. “I am reasonably certain that the one area of ministry that is pursued the least in either formal or informal continuing education is preaching. It is a rare pastor who has read even one book on homiletics since graduating from the seminary. A renewal of preaching will not happen unless preachers themselves are convinced of the value of continuing to study the theory and practice of preaching.

3. Once they are convinced of that, then realistic means of providing that study are needed. The regular one-week workshops offered in the seminary’s summer quarter is a good approach. Two- or three-day workshops in the field might allow more people to participate. Pastoral circuits or study clubs would benefit from having video-based resources accompanied by printed study guides.”

Another former parish consultant asked, “Whose going to own this task? The Seminary? The Board for Parish Services? The Worship Administrator? - all with encouragement from the COP?” The fact that we are here in this forum studying this subject suggests that the B.P.S. acknowledges a sense of ownership. What are some practical things the B.P.S. could encourage and/or sponsor to revitalize preaching in our pulpits?

Let’s begin at the Seminary. I heartily endorse the parish consultant’s suggestion in point 3 above. During my decade at the Sem, I had two opportunities to teach homiletics courses during the summer-quarter. Both times more pastors registered for the courses than the class could accommodate. To me that is evidence that many of our pastors “are convinced of the value of continuing to study the theory and practice of preaching.” During the 21 years that the Seminary has conducted the Summer Quarter of Graduate and Supplementary Studies, the Pastoral Theology Department has offered eight regular courses in homiletics. In addition the seminary has offered three one-week workshops as part of the summer quarter. They have been well received.

Also, the Parish Ministries Enhancement Program that brings seminary graduates back to the campus one year after graduation for a week of studies includes a review of homiletics. My experience with P.M.E. was less than satisfactory because a miscommunication left participants unprepared for what I had planned to do. But it was obvious in the discussion that did take place that these pastors were open to ways in which they could improve their preaching skills. Presumably that program is now accomplishing its objectives. Perhaps the B.P.S. should ask the Homiletics Department to consider whether the continuing education program it offers is adequate to meet the needs of our pastors.

As helpful as the Seminary’s summer quarter course offerings have been, ‘the fact remains that many of our pastors who would like to participate in summer quarters cannot for a variety of reasons. The cost and the time spent away from the parish are probably the main reasons. Have all the ways been explored to make it possible for more pastors to participate?’

One parish consultant suggested, “Two or three-day workshops in the field might allow more people to participate.” Some pastors feel overworkshopped. But a workshop designed to help preachers improve their preaching would have an appeal that some other workshops do not. This is a suggestion well worth pursuing on the part of the B.P.S. with help from the Homiletics Department at the Seminary.

Pastoral conferences provide another forum for revitalizing our preaching. In five years of attendance at Metro-south Pastoral Conferences and at joint metro conferences, I cannot recall any agenda that devoted time to the presentation of a theme related to preaching. As Edgar Hoenecke noted 30 years ago, there is probably no other profession that devotes as little time and attention to improving its skills as preachers do.

Is there something the B.P.S. can do to help change that? If that cannot be accomplished in pastoral conferences, then perhaps Parish Leadership can play a larger role in filling the void. I think that in my own experience reading well-crafted sermons over the years by good preachers helped me to improve as a preacher more than any other single thing. If we are looking for non-threatening ways to help preachers improve, perhaps one way to do so is to provide good models, in print and/or on tape. Reading good sermons can help improve structure and content. Hearing and seeing good sermons can help improve style and delivery. One of my respondents posed four questions that call for serious consideration. He asked, “Is the twenty-minute sermon for all but the very good preachers (and apparently, the non-denominational)?” A related question asks, “How about the combination of a six-minute children’s sermon on one of the readings and a ten to fourteen-minute sermon on another of the lessons?”

I have delivered many children’s sermons in regular services in several different churches. I have never heard a negative comment about those sermons from anyone. The comments that I have heard were always positive—sometimes leaving me wondering if all the effort expended on the major sermon was worth it in view of all the good feedback on the minor sermon.

As for the twenty-minute sermon, if it isn’t good, it is better to be not good for fourteen minutes than for twenty minutes, in the sense that hearers will be more tolerant of the shorter than the longer sermon. The other two questions raised this point: “In a visual society, how can we make preaching something more than a strictly auditory experience?” That question is answered in part by its companion question. “Is there a role for the visual or the dramatic to introduce or reinforce faith?” My answer is yes to both the visual and the dramatic—within bounds of propriety. I called attention earlier to the effectiveness of John Jeske’s employment of the dramatic element. I am not by nature dramatic. And many preachers would probably say the same of themselves. But all it takes to add the visual element to sermon is a little effort and imagination—coupled with an awareness of the value of the visual. Jesus himself endorses the idea of the visual and the dramatic.

GETTING FEEDBACK

An important element in any effort to revitalize preaching is feedback. The usual feedback we get at the door while shaking hands after the service will do little, if anything to revitalize preaching. If we want to improve our preaching, we need something more substantial than a few people to say, “Good sermon, pastor.”

How do we get substantive feedback, even at the risk of exposing ourselves to pot shots by chronic complainers? During the last years that I served at King of Kings in Garden Grove, California, I told the Board of Elders that I expected them as part of their responsibility to offer constructive criticism of my preaching. We periodically set aside time for it on the agenda. I made it clear that I expected straightforward criticism for the good of the kingdom, and that if that created problems for my ego, so be it. Perhaps they could help me with an ego adjustment as well.

Unstructured though they were, those brief sessions were profitable and appreciated. One man, a technical writer for McDonnell Douglas continued to share worthwhile comments long after he was no longer an elder. Another former elder, who is still a close friend, does not hesitate to offer his evaluation of a sermon he occasionally hears me preach after all the intervening years.

At the seminary during the 70’s, I became acquainted with Reuel Howe’s “Partners in Preaching.” We used it as a supplemental textbook in a summer quarter course to encourage preachers to provide a structured way to solicit feedback from the congregation. One of Howe’s suggestions was to select a small group of

members to meet with the pastor after a Sunday service to provide feedback. After several months a different group took its turn.

More recently William Willimon, dean of the chapel at Duke University, addressed the subject of getting helpful feedback in an article in the 1992 spring quarter of *Leadership*. He refined a Sermon Reaction Questionnaire developed in the 1970's by Boyd Stokes as part of his doctoral work at Emory University. The questionnaire is attached as an appendix.

As preachers we want to be faithful to our Lord. And that means we are accountable first of all to his Word and then also to a confessional Lutheran tradition. But in a secondary sense we are also accountable to the people who sit in the pews on Sunday morning. One way we can give evidence of our accountability to the people is by soliciting substantive feedback from them. If that can contribute to the revitalization of our preaching, as well as to the well being of the church, it is something we ought seriously to consider doing.

I am delighted, more than that, I am thankful to the Lord of the church that the B.P.S. has undertaken this study. I am grateful for the opportunity to have had my say. May God prosper whatever you decide to do to revitalize preaching in our church, and may he open the minds and hearts of our pastors to make them receptive to the encouragement and help offered to them. For it is still true that "Nothing attaches people to the church as does good preaching" (Apology, Art XXIV, para 51).