

Ten Key Preaching Issues Identified from the Research

With the completion of the research, seeking to identify key issues and ideas from that research was no small challenge. The sheer amount of material provided by the interviews alone was daunting (251 pages of text). Yet to fail wisely and well to organize and synthesize the fruits of this research would be to neuter its ability to actually impact the preaching of parish pastors. So, what the reader will find below are key issues and ideas for growth in preaching grouped under ten focus points.

Why ten points when what was learned from the research could easily be listed under many more headings? As mentioned previously in this project report, the opportunity has been presented to me to serve for two years as the editor of *Preach the Word*, the bimonthly preaching newsletter received by all the pastors of the WELS. This opportunity to serve as editor would allow for twelve issues of that newsletter in which to introduce the fruit of this project. As will be outlined in the next chapter, the plan is to use the first and last issue of my tenure as editor to introduce and then summarize the importance of continuing to grow in preaching skill. That leaves the ten issues in the middle in which to introduce ten key specific focus points for growth in preaching. Once that opportunity to serve as editor was presented, and the decision was made to accept the offer and use it for this project, those ten issues of the newsletter have served like a magnet to help organize the volumes of material before me. In sorting and re-sorting the input from the research, many of the issues (writing sermons for the ear, not essays for the eye; dealing with growing biblical illiteracy, for example) proved to be related subcategories of a larger preaching issue (preaching in a postmodern, post-Christian culture). Other issues (genuine emotion in the pulpit, for instance) appear to be byproducts

that will almost take care of themselves when larger preaching issues (sufficient time spent applying the text devotionally first to the heart and life of the preacher) are attended to wisely and well.

The pattern for the rest of this chapter will be to lay before the reader the ten focus points that will be presented issue by issue in *Preach the Word*. As each focus point is introduced I will seek to capture key input from the research that indicates why this was selected as a critical area on which to focus CPE in preaching. Where appropriate, insights from homiletical experts will also be shared to substantiate what the research has uncovered.

Allow me to include one other item for perhaps no other purpose than to keep it front and center before me as this project is completed and put into action in the WELS. A listing of areas on which to focus for growth in preaching could easily give the impression that I believe preaching in the WELS is in a sad state of disrepair. That would be a doubly dangerous impression to give. First, it would almost certainly torpedo the implementing of this project among the ministerium if they believed the one putting it together thought preaching in our midst was a mess. But second, and more importantly, it would be a gross untruth. Therefore I want to state clearly here and elsewhere that it is my conviction that preaching in our midst is alive and in relatively good health. Yes, it would be less than honest to insist that preaching is flourishing everywhere in the WELS with only minor improvements possible. And yes, I also must grant that when speaking of preaching by more than 1,500 parish pastors in more than 1,200 unique parishes means I am speaking in generalities (that would be more or less true about any given pastor in any given congregation). So what can be said in general that is worth saying? Our church body has not forgotten the emphasis on

the preaching of the Word that has been a part of Lutheranism ever since Martin Luther mounted the pulpit in Wittenberg. And this emphasis is far more than a fondly remembered relic of our history kept under glass somewhere in the synodical archives. It is also worth noting that of all the many specific ministry skills needed by a pastor serving a 21st-century congregation, none receives more curricular time and attention at WLS than does preaching. At present, five of a student's six semesters on campus find him enrolled in a required course focused on homiletics (one of those semester courses has a dual focus on presiding at worship as well as on preaching). As our curriculum is currently structured, before graduating each student will have written at least six sermons for which he receives detailed step-by-step faculty member evaluation on his exegesis, sermon organization, writing style, and delivery.

What is most encouraging of all for me has been the refreshing variety of ways that many pastors in the field are consciously working at improving their preaching. Just fifteen years ago, a professor at WLS wrote this in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* as he quoted a WELS mission counselor:

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. (Gerlach 1994, 281)

As true as that belief of that unnamed mission counselor may have been in 1994, I have found the opposite to be the case as I spoke with mission counselors and pastors and as I read the input from the survey. It is more and more becoming the rare pastor who has *not* read at least one book on preaching since his graduation. More and more pastors are putting their time behind their conviction that preaching is important to the health of Christ's church.

What conclusion does all of this lead me to draw as I look at preaching as a whole in my denomination? Such historic and contemporary emphasis on the art of preaching will not and has not gone without God's blessing in the WELS. In seeking to encourage CPE in preaching in the WELS, I am not rushing to the bedside of a patient who is sick and about to die. I am walking alongside a relatively vigorous area of ministry as one who is encouraging steps to even greater health.

Key Issue 1: Growing in Being Truly Christ-Centered

That brings us to the ten key issues (and their related sub-issues) as identified by my research. The first key issue is one that is near and dear to the heart of any Lutheran who still treasures what that name means: maintaining and strengthening the Christocentric nature of Lutheran preaching.⁶ Everything else in preaching is really a corollary of how to communicate the wonders of what Jesus has done by his substitutionary life and death in our place. Everything else that we can preach is either telling us why we need such a Savior or is a fuller description of the blessings that come to us always and only because of the grace of our dear Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 8:32). It is this issue that gives meaning and purpose to every other issue that will be addressed.

When it comes to the treasure of Christocentric preaching, the challenge and very real danger is at least threefold: we can lose this treasure by careless assumption; we can

⁶ A print of a famous painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder hangs in the halls of WLS right next to the doors to the library. The painting depicts Martin Luther in the pulpit in Wittenberg. All eyes in the church are not on the preacher. In the midst of the sermon all eyes—of both preacher and people—are focused on what Cranach has portrayed in the middle of the church between pulpit and people: Christ crucified.

neuter the wonder of the gospel by mindless repetition of empty pious phrases that fail to grasp the full depth and breadth of all that Christ has done and the varied richness of how each text of Scripture uniquely paints that for us; or (closely related to the previous danger) we can achieve a pseudo Christocentricity by taking un-textual and hermeneutically invalid leaps and shortcuts as if it were up to the preacher to magically pull the Christ-rabbit out of the text-hat, rather than working hard to discover how true Jesus' words are that all Scripture quite naturally testifies to him (John 5:39).

All three of those challenges and dangers are very real issues for 21st-century WELS preachers. First, what is taken for granted is all the more easily taken from us! I have used Bryan Chapell's book, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Chapell 2005), for three years now as a textbook for the two semesters of second year homiletics. The book is used not just because it is a thorough review of basic homiletics for budding homileticians. As Chapell waxes eloquent about the loss of a Christ-centered focus in many pulpits among Evangelicals, his words serve as a powerful warning for Lutheran pastors not to sell their birthright for a miserable meal of Messiah-less moralisms.

Does the research indicate that it is unsafe to assume that WELS sermons will be Christ-centered? In an interview, a mission counselor—who travels regularly to many congregations to assist pastors and their people in outreach—shared his experience from a fourteen-week period in which he listened to fourteen different WELS preachers as he traveled the country. “I was really trying to be objective. I just noticed a lack of Jesus in sermons. That seems like a strange thing to say about Lutherans. ... In a very large WELS church I honestly listened to every word and hung on every word. There was no direct reference to Jesus or to

Christ, or to objective or universal justification, in the whole sermon ... not even one.”⁷

Another pastor remarked about two sermons he heard. One was preached for a pastor’s installation and another for a conference for pastors—both times when you might expect the preacher to be putting his best foot forward. Yet he noted that both sermons lacked any clear gospel at all. Another pastor recalled in an interview a time when he was sitting at a study meeting with some other WELS pastors from his area. The discussion turned to a funeral sermon one of them had recently heard in a Roman Catholic parish. The other pastors were bemoaning the lack of gospel spoken by the priest in his homily. And yet the pastor who was interviewed remembered some recent sermons preached by those same brothers that had been nearly as devoid of gospel. In the survey, a pastor shared this concern: “[I’ve] been to too many churches where even our children have wondered, ‘Where’s the gospel?’” “Still another pastor remarked in an interview about the practice of his family to attend other WELS churches whenever he has a Sunday off. He was dismayed the previous summer when during a three-week vacation he heard clear preaching of the gospel only once in three different

⁷The terms confessional Lutherans use here (objective or universal justification) may require some explanation so as not to be misunderstood. As confessional Lutherans, we believe that God has already declared the world “not guilty” (justified) on Easter morning when he raised his Son from the dead (Rom 4:25). It is *objective* in the sense that his reconciliation is something that he proclaims as fact—it is true whether we believe it or not. It is *universal* in the sense that it counts for everyone who has lived, is living, or will live. Both the objective and universal nature of God’s declaration of justification or reconciliation are emphasized by Paul in 2 Cor 5:16-21. Objective or universal justification must not be confused with the heretical teaching of universalism, though some non-confessional Lutherans do abuse objective or universal justification to try to give a biblical slant to this teaching (Peters 2000, 355). By contrast, confessional Lutherans teach that unbelief damns since it calls God a liar when he declares himself at peace with us through his Son (1 John 5:10). This teaching of objective or universal justification is why Lutherans proclaim the gospel not as potential salvation (“Jesus can be your Savior if you believe” or “Your sins are forgiven if you let Jesus into your heart”) but as a fact of the grace of God to be heralded (“Jesus is your Savior! Believe it!” or “Your sins are forgiven! Trust him!”).

sermons in three different WELS churches. He granted immediately that this was not a scientific survey, and he hoped he had only caught those pastors on a “bad day.”

But is chalking all of this up to a “bad day” for those various preachers dodging the real issues? What may be at work behind such “bad days” in the pulpit? The causes for such gospel omissions could be many. I will mention only three here. Perhaps at times we may tire of preaching what we are convinced the people already know. Without being consciously aware of what we are doing, we may be treating the gospel merely as a piece of cognitive information about God’s past activities that the people already know. We fail to grasp consciously the homiletical implications of the fact that the gospel is the living power of the mercy and compassion of God in Christ that is new every morning (Lam 3:22-23) to absolve, comfort, and empower believers’ hearts as they daily struggle against sin and temptation.

The second problem may be a misunderstanding in the minds of some pastors what it means to be faithful to their chosen text.⁸ It is certainly true that their selected text may not have any explicit gospel whatsoever. If the text is chosen from one of the appointed first lessons (typically, though not always, an Old Testament reading), it may be a narrative from the life of one of the patriarchs. If their text is chosen from one of the second lessons (from one of the New Testament letters), the lesson may be from a hortatory part of an epistle

⁸ As part of a church body that values the historic liturgy of the Western church, WELS preachers, in general, preach on one of the selected texts (first lesson, second lesson, or gospel) from the pericope for their Sunday sermons. According to the results of the survey, 83 percent of those pastors reported preaching on pericope texts at least 70 percent of the time. While only 21 percent of respondents said they preach on the pericope all of the time, only one pastor reported that he always preaches consecutively through a book of the Bible and only one indicated that he regularly (60 percent of the time) preaches on themed series for his Sunday sermons.

in which specific encouragements to live a sanctified life dominate the text. The danger is that many pious biblical truths may be shared, but they may be preached in isolation from their relation to the one about whom all Scripture testifies.

One is unlikely to assert that we are justified by sanctification, but, whether done intentionally or not, that is what happens when we allow the teaching of Christian living, ethical imperatives, and exhortations to holiness to be separated from and to take the place of the clear statement of the gospel. We can preach our hearts out on texts about what we ought to be, what makes a mature church, or what the Holy Spirit wants to do in our lives, but if we do not constantly, in every sermon, show the link between the Spirit's work in us to Christ's work for us, we will distort the message and send people away with a natural theology of salvation by works. Preaching from the epistles demands of the preacher that the message of the document be taken as a whole even if only a selection of texts, or just one verse, is to be expounded. Every sermon should be understandable on its own as a proclamation of Christ. It is no good to say that we dealt with the justification element three weeks ago and now we are following Paul into the imperatives and injunctions for Christian living. Paul wasn't anticipating a three-week gap between his exposition of the gospel and his defining of the implications of the gospel in our lives. Nor was he anticipating that some people would not be present for the reading of the whole epistle and would hear part of its message out of context. (Goldsworthy 2000, 237)

Fitting here also is Bryan Chapell's encouragement to the preacher not only to take out his magnifying glass but also his fish-eye lens (Chapell 2005, 275) to see how the text relates to its immediate context in that book and to its overall place in salvation history. Textual preaching that does not deal honestly with the immediate and wider context is a caricature of itself.

But there may be at least one other factor at work when Christocentricity is lacking. Could it also be that our sermons at times are giving gospel-muzzling evidence of the subtle pressure we feel to prove to our people how relevant our preaching is? Could it be that we find ourselves offering our people many helpful and relevant insights for daily living as Christians all the while rushing right past him who alone gives purpose and power and

meaning for such Christian living? Again, how important for every pastor to ponder carefully what it means that without the vital energy of God's grace flowing to us from the Vine, we are nothing but branches suitable for kindling (John 15). It is still God who works in us through the power of his gospel "to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:13). And so what happens is that we end up offering our people nothing but what Graeme Goldsworthy calls "naked law" (Goldsworthy 2000, 14). We lose sight of the fact that there is a world of difference between describing/urging sanctified living and actually supplying the power to live it. Every WELS preacher would be wise to ask Chapell's bottom-line question when the bit and bytes of their sermon seem to have finally come together: "This is the bottom line of Christ-centered preaching: When a sermon is done, do people look to themselves or to God for their security? Only when they know to look to God alone has a sermon been truly beneficial and biblical" (Chapell 2005, 327).

Judging by the comments from those interviewed and from the survey, perhaps the most common sin against Christocentricity is the mindless repetition of gospel mantras that have little or nothing to do with how that particular text proclaims the gospel. It's not that the gospel is absent, it's just that it is proclaimed in such a routine fashion that it gives the impression that Jesus was one thing that he most certainly was not: dull. A seminary professor from another school quipped: "I have often thought about how we kind of include the gospel to save the sermon. And as long as I throw this phrase in, it makes it a Lutheran sermon." A WELS parish consultant who may hear more different WELS preachers than almost anyone else made this comment: "Some statements of gospel are almost like they are obligatory, instead of drawing out of the text with its uniqueness or applying to the situation

in life richly; it is just obligatory gospel.” Especially when preaching on the Old Testament, the temptation may be to make an un-textual and very predictable leap to Christ.

Some of the students I teach at Moore Theological College discussed their concerns with me about listening to preachers who deal with the Old Testament in such a way that the students were moved to think, in the course of the sermon, “Ho hum! Now here comes the Jesus bit.” These preachers were attempting to avoid an exposition of the Old Testament without Christ, which so often leads to a moralizing approach. Obviously a preacher needs to have a clear sense of the relationship of Old Testament texts to the person and work of Jesus, but that preacher also needs to be able to communicate this relationship in ways that avoid such stereotyping. It is also obvious that something is very wrong if the preacher’s way of relating the text to Jesus is felt to be boring and predictable. (Goldsworthy 2000, xi-xii)

Much more could be said about this challenge to Christocentricity, but this particular aspect will be dealt with in depth when it comes to the second key issue. There the focus will be on textual freshness and variety in proclaiming both law and gospel.

The final enemy of true Christocentricity that will be more fully addressed under this first key issue is the hermeneutical challenge of making a legitimate textual move to proclaiming Christ rather than resorting to fanciful allegorical interpretations to “find” Jesus in the text. It is alarming to find allegory making a comeback even among some confessional Lutherans.⁹ As I correct dozens of student sermons each year, it is not a rare thing to run

⁹ I have firsthand experience for the startling inroads that allegorical interpretation seems to be making among at least some influential teachers in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). I was a guest at a well-attended LCMS conference on teaching Luther’s catechism where the keynote speaker was a respected doctor of the church who serves as an editor of a periodical popular among the more liturgically minded LCMS clergy. This editor made one perplexing allegorical interpretation after another, pressing beyond all recognition various details of the Easter narratives. In the open question and answer session that followed, I was dumbfounded that not a single conference attendee challenged him for his allegorical interpretations. When I privately asked him after the conference why he made use of allegorical interpretation to support the points of his address, I was stunned when he retorted with evident disdain for my hermeneutical scruples: “Luther allegorized. Are you more Lutheran than Luther?” In addition to the harm such allegorizing inflicts upon confidence in the clarity

across those who make essentially an allegorical leap to proclaim Jesus. The temptation is particularly strong when they are wrestling with an Old Testament text. Haddon Robinson's words from *Biblical Preaching* often come to mind. "Misapplication of the Old Testament has had an embarrassing history. One unsatisfying approach lies in using these passages like a sanctified Rorschach test. Interpreters allegorized Old Testament stories to find in them hidden meanings that were not buried in the text, but in their own minds" (Robinson 2001, 87-88). In a postmodern world where many believe the reader and not the author reigns supreme, Lutheran preachers will do well to recognize carefully when they are finding legitimate exegetical paths to proclaiming Christ and where they are engaging in illegitimate and fanciful allegorical "eisegesis."

Before leaving the first key issue, I am convinced that another often-mentioned preaching issue is at its heart often a byproduct (for good or ill) of whether or not a pastor has worked hard to find how his text legitimately proclaims the grace of God in Christ. It is the issue of preaching with evident emotion. It will certainly surprise no one that such concerns were raised by lay people in the Delphi group. One lay person put it this way when listing weaknesses of preaching in the WELS: "Appropriate expression of passion and enthusiasm is at times lacking." That pastors show such "passion and enthusiasm" in the pulpit is important not only for those already within the fold, but it is often a key feature of what will draw the attention of unchurched visitors. Our postmodern world is especially tuned in to the emotional

of Scripture (convincing lay people that only experts must be able to handle the Word), I am convinced that allegory is the lazy theologian's path to Christocentricity. Why wrestle for hours to find how a particular text legitimately relates to Christ in its literal meaning when you can make Jesus appear almost magically with a little imaginative theologizing?

quotient of a message. In a cynical world that believes everyone is out merely to sell them something, the hearer is consciously or subconsciously asking, “Do you really believe what you are preaching, or are you just someone else trying to sell me a product you don’t use yourself?” Anyone who longs to communicate the gospel cannot afford to ignore the pathos of his sermon. Thom Rainer, in his book *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, notes that the authenticity and conviction of the pastor are the third and fourth most frequently mentioned factors by unchurched visitors who eventually became part of a worshiping family (Rainer 2008, 57). A sermon delivered with emotion that seems incongruent to the message—or worse, that seems to be an emotionless discharging of a duty—will quickly be read as a lack of authenticity and conviction by unchurched hearers.

The real solution to this is not putting a sign on the pulpit facing the preacher that says: “Show emotion!” or “Be authentic!” To approach a lack of emotion in our preaching merely in such an outward way may easily add only a veneer of mimicked emotion to sermon delivery that will subtly signal anything but conviction and authenticity.¹⁰

So what is the answer, and how does it relate to the issue of Christocentricity? When insufficient gospel is found in the sermon, it almost goes without saying that insufficient

¹⁰ It must also be stated that there may be a tendency among some preachers in the WELS to view the showing of emotion in the pulpit as a flaw. The historic roots of the WELS can be traced to pietistic mission societies in Germany. Partly in response to that early history, many of our theological leaders have warned legitimately about the dangers of emotionalism (feelings trumping doctrinal truth). But truth is always a narrow beam between opposite errors. While those warnings were aiming at the emotionalism of pietism, what can easily be hindered is the expression of genuine emotion that springs from the piety of a heart moved by the beauty of the grace of God. That means that, for some, it might actually be helpful to have a sign that says “Don’t be afraid of expressing the genuine emotion worked in your heart by the gospel!”

gospel has been resonating in the heart of the preacher during his preparation to preach. And the impact of that on the emotion of the preacher can be devastating. Where the implicit or explicit gospel of a text has not captured and captivated the heart of the preacher, that will have a devastating impact on the delivery of the sermon. But when the implicit or explicit gospel of that text has comforted, delighted, and strengthened the preacher as he studies the text, unless it is unnaturally blocked, that will show itself in preaching. It is still true that “out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). One pastor in his interview spoke of that connection eloquently: “I pray that the Holy Spirit moves me with the gospel to preach the good news of Jesus Christ boldly, clearly, and with such enthusiasm as if Christ died yesterday, rose today, and is coming tomorrow.” When it comes to genuine emotion in the pulpit, there is no substitute for Spirit-worked zeal in the heart of the preacher. When the text leads him to the beating heart of God’s mercy in the gospel, there does not need to be any shortage of genuine emotion in his preaching. This statement will come back again in other key issues, but it deserves to be stated here already: most delivery problems don’t have their origin in the pulpit but in the pastor’s study! And the answer is there as well.

As I bring each key issue to a close, there will be brief listing of tools and resources related to that key issue that were discovered during the research as well as a listing of tools and resources still needing to be developed. There were no new specific resources uncovered in the research that would be particularly helpful in keeping pastors Christocentric in their preaching. Bryan Chapell’s book *Christ-Centered Preaching* is a tool that will already be on the shelf of every future WLS graduate for the foreseeable future, although he is still unfamiliar to most current WELS pastors. Another tool that deserves to be mentioned is C. F.

W. Walther's classic *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*.¹¹ This book is a series of evening lectures delivered by Walther to his students at Concordia Seminary St. Louis in the 19th century. While this book will have special application to the second key issue about to be discussed, Walther again and again returns to the theme of why the gospel must have a general predominance in our preaching (Walther 1929). Almost every WELS pastor has this book already on his shelf, but encouraging pastors to pick this book up again could prove to be very helpful to anyone struggling to keep his sermons focused on Jesus.

Of course, as with all the key issues, there are materials that will need to be developed specifically for the implementing of this project. A series of brief articles for *Preach the Word* will be needed focusing on the specific challenges of remaining Christocentric. Those brief articles would be summaries of more lengthy articles that would be available on the seminary Web site (and some also in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*) for those who wish to pursue the specific sub-issue more in depth. The final piece of the puzzle would be a course that could be taught on campus, off campus, and online (already scheduled to be taught both on campus and online in the summer of 2011). Because of the close relationship between

¹¹ As much as I have personally gained for my faith and preaching from repeated readings of Walther's classic, there is one concern that needs to be mentioned. Unlike the typical Lutheran sermon today that focuses almost exclusively on the sheep already in the flock, C. F. W. Walther's pattern of preaching was typically to address a portion of his sermon to the unconverted who may be present that day at worship. That is why in his book Walther is at times focused on how to proclaim law and gospel to the *unbeliever*. A less-than-careful reading of Walther in context can lead a preacher to speak to the sheep of the flock as if they were unbelievers. That already is one of the most common mistakes of the young (and the not-so-young) preacher as Walther himself points out at length. Some feel this emphasis in Walther's preaching was a leftover of the influence pietism had had on him in his college years. A lively debate continues within the LCMS about how much Walther was affected in his writing and preaching by pietism. For those wishing to delve more deeply into that discussion, it would be very helpful to read John Wohlrabe's article in *The Pieper Lectures: Preaching through the Ages* (Concordia Historical Institute & the Luther Academy 2004).

this issue and the next, the full course on campus and online would incorporate both issues in one, although this could be broken up into distinct pieces for briefer presentations to groups of pastors off campus. Professors are often given the opportunity to make such presentations to pastors conferences and circuits with anywhere from four to ten hours of agenda time.

Key Issue 2: Law/Gospel Freshness and Variety

While a key goal of this project will be to help pastors see *all nine* of the remaining key issues as corollaries flowing from Christocentricity, the issue most clearly and intimately connected to Christ-centeredness is this second key issue. An emphasis on clear distinctions between law and gospel has long been a hallmark of Lutheran preaching, and it has always been understood that the clear distinctions serve the gospel in particular. Even the preaching of the law of God has been seen by Lutherans primarily as a handmaiden to the proclamation of the gospel. Lutherans have historically believed in their preaching (and teaching) that the chief purpose of proclaiming God's law is to serve to heighten awareness of believer and unbeliever of their desperate need for Christ.

To put this point into terminology familiar to every Lutheran catechumen, Lutherans typically speak of three uses of the law. The law serves as a *curb* as with its warnings it seeks to make the natural sinful heart of all people afraid to sin. The law serves as a *mirror* as it reflects to all people the perfect holiness of God, seeking to show every sinner how far short he or she has fallen from the perfection of God's image. Finally the law serves as a *guide* or *rule* as it helps Christians see clearly how they desire to live to bring honor and glory to their Savior. It is the law as *mirror* that predominates in Lutheran preaching because of its

ministerial function to the gospel.¹² The law prepares hearts to hear the beauty of the gospel as it seeks to silence “every mouth” and render “the whole world ... accountable to God” (Rom 3:19). The law blocks every proud human path back to God in order to prepare hearts to hear of the highway of salvation God has opened for all in Jesus. To use still another metaphor, unless we recognize the true depth of our sickness, we will not delight in our physician and his cure. This symbiotic relationship of law and gospel is not just a necessity until someone is converted. Because believers remain dual-nature creatures (saint/sinner) until the day God takes us home to heaven, the crucifixion the law works on our sinful nature and the power of the gospel to give us forgiveness, life, and health remains a daily necessity for the spiritual health of every child of God. The apostle Paul appeared convinced of that same necessity not only for himself (Rom 7) but for the souls under his care (Eph 4:20-24; Col 3:5-11).

But does the research indicate that there is an educational need to spend time in CPE focusing on an issue so fundamental to Lutheran preaching? Will this part of the project be in danger of gagging experienced pastors by offering them warm milk and strained peas when what they really desire is to chew on more solid homiletical food? At first glance, both the interviews and the survey would seem to answer in the affirmative. In the survey, when asked to rate themselves from 1 (weakest) to 5 (strongest) on seven preaching tasks, the pastors rated themselves highest in applying specific gospel relevantly and third highest in applying

¹²This emphasis on the law as mirror has at times led Lutheran preachers to use the law as both curb and guide/rule far less than Scripture itself does. More will be said later in this issue about the former problem and much more about the latter challenge under the eighth key issue.

specific law relevantly.¹³ Even more striking was looking at the responses to that same survey question from the other end of weakness. Only one pastor marked himself with either a 1 or a 2 for applying law or gospel. In the interviews, a similar phenomenon was found when the first question was asked: “What are the strengths of preaching in the WELS?” Again and again statements would be made about the proper distinctions of law and gospel. If these responses in the survey and interviews were isolated from the rest of the research, it would appear to be futile to interest pastors in grappling seriously with improving in proclaiming relevant and specific law and gospel.

But a closer examination of the data reveals a different story.¹⁴ Just such an acknowledgement that there is still considerable room for growth can be observed in many other places in the research. For example, in another survey question respondents were asked to rate the relevance of twelve CPE preaching courses previously taught on campus or planned for the future. For each course the respondent marked that particular course for its relevance to his ministry. Nothing received a higher percentage of high-relevance responses than did a course entitled “Freshness/Variety in Law & Gospel.” Twenty out of thirty respondents listed that as high as far as relevance to their ministries. And as more survey questions are factored in, it becomes clear that the favorable rating this course received is not because everyone is

¹³The seven tasks were as follows: planning your preaching, studying of the text, organizing the flow of the sermon, applying specific law relevantly, applying specific gospel relevantly, finding/using good illustrations, delivery of the sermon.

¹⁴I am convinced that the results of the aforementioned rating question in the survey and the responses to the first question of my interviews are prime examples of reactivity at work in research. For a Lutheran pastor to rate himself as weak in an area so near and dear to the heart of Lutheran theology would be akin to writing one’s letter of resignation from the ministry.

convinced they are good at this crucial preaching task and just want to get better. The answers to two particular questions stand out. When each pastor was asked to list in his own words the greatest challenge he faces in preaching, and when each pastor was asked for the one thing he would pray for in growth in preaching for himself and/or the other pastors of the synod, again and again statements were made that revealed considerable struggle. Here is one typical survey response when asked about the greatest challenge of preaching: "Development of specific law and specific gospel from the text and keeping it textual." A similar phenomenon emerged in the interviews. While proper distinctions in law and gospel were mentioned as an answer to the first interview question (strengths of preaching in the WELS), challenges in making these same distinctions were also routinely mentioned as we moved into the second interview question (weaknesses in preaching in the WELS). In all of this what came to mind was the Penn State research that showed accountants subjectively expressing great confidence in their basic interview skills when a more objective evaluation of their work revealed that such fundamental skills were actually their greatest educational need (Queeney 1995, 13-14). But there is a major difference here. Unlike the accountants in that study who appeared to be ignorant of their educational need, the pastors I surveyed and interviewed gave considerable evidence that they were not, in the final analysis, blind to their need for growth in this area. This meshed well with what a professor at another seminary had noted. In an interview, he mentioned that even in the midst of his doctor of ministry classes on preaching, when pastors are given open class time to raise their own questions, they tend to go back to issues that are the fundamentals in preaching.

But what are the key areas of challenge (and the answers) that were identified in the area of preaching law and gospel? There are basically three challenges identified: Predictable

and formalistic preaching of law and gospel, a failure to display a clear understanding of the difference between talking about the law and the gospel and actually proclaiming law and gospel, and a failure to truly let the gospel predominate and to celebrate it in the presence of God's people.¹⁵

The challenge when preaching law and gospel mentioned most consistently in the survey and interviews was the danger of formulistic and dull proclaiming of law and gospel. Again and again pastors mentioned that in their own sermons (and in the sermons of others they hear or read), preaching law and gospel easily degenerates into artificial templates and dull repetitions of law and gospel mantras that render preaching dull and predictable. The richness and variety of the many-colored ways that the Scriptures proclaim law and gospel are drained from preaching much as the fall colors of the Midwest give way to the dull and dingy black and white of winter. The text's own unique way of proclaiming law and gospel is not discovered, and instead a straightjacket is imposed upon it. Here is a very brief sampling of the voluminous concerns related to this point as raised by pastors and professors of preaching in surveys and interviews.

Jesus is our Savior, the Bible is true, he lived and he died for us, he died on the cross to pay for all of your sins ... you know ... and then they kind of take a look at the text, "The text says" What you could have heard in a Sunday school room when you were five, and what you heard in grade school ... the same phrases the same way. ... Man, I tell you that is incredibly boring. What drives me when I'm writing ... believe it or not, maybe it's not more than

¹⁵ There was also a fourth challenge mentioned regularly in both interviews and survey. That fourth challenge was allowing a postmodern, tolerant, amoral society to intimidate us so that we do not boldly confront ourselves and our hearers with what God calls sin. While this challenge would fit well under this key issue, it will be saved until the seventh key issue when all the challenges of preaching in a postmodern storied culture are gathered under one heading.

anything else ... but one of the things that drives me is that as I'm writing I'm thinking, first of all I'm going to say what I write, but then I'm thinking, how boring would this be to me if I had to sit in the pew I can't stand it, you know, so then I've got to rewrite.

[One of the weaknesses is] an overemphasis on law and gospel in the sense that sometimes it seems that the sermons that I hear, it doesn't matter what the text is, it just becomes part one, law, part two, Jesus has taken our sins away. And there's nothing bad about that, but it can be ... almost any kind of text ... even if it is sanctification or a Bible story, or anything, it just kind of comes out ... OK, here's the law, and here's the gospel, even if we had to kind of drag it in. And then Amen.

However, as I get around, and listen to a lot of different preaching, the one prayer that I have is this: that our preaching would go deeper. And what I mean by that is ... I think that some of my sermons ... yes, I understand the need for law/gospel, big law, big gospel, little law, little gospel ... but it's very simplistic, it's very repetitious, it's the same, I know what the pastor is going to say before he says it.

The weakness is that too many of us fall into, "OK, I'm going to preach law for 7/8 minutes, and then I'm going to preach gospel for 7/8 minutes," and it's not a well-synthesized kind of process. And it may not necessarily even be attending to the text.

This sad litany could continue for quite some time, but the point is already made.

But what are the answers to this challenge of trite and formulistic preaching of law and gospel?

One answer is helping pastors think through more carefully the difference between systematic theology and homiletics. Our pastors, by their training, have had a significant exposure to systematic theology.¹⁶ As it is taught on our campus, systematics is not focused primarily on

¹⁶WLS requires for graduation the same 14 credits of systematic theology for every student. No graduate steps off our campus without having been exposed to more than 250 class hours of systematics. The *outline* used to teach systematics during the four semester-long required courses is almost 1,400 pages long! Next to exegetical and isagogical study of Scripture, nothing receives as much emphasis in our curriculum. My point in this section is *not* to argue against such an emphasis on systematics. That would be a foolish misreading of the age in which we live. In an anti-dogmatic postmodern culture, every one of those class hours is critical to preparing pastors who are able to say

the history of doctrine or the various schools of theological thought. At WLS, systematics is topical exegesis first and foremost. In doctrine after doctrine, many unique yet related passages are gathered and from them are drawn a single propositional truth to which they all testify. In other words, the pattern is to move from the concrete of each unique passage to the more abstract general truth. “Theology deals with concepts in working out its formulations while preaching uses more concrete and graphic vocabulary, words that evoke and create images, terms that stir the senses” (Craddock 1990, 49).

As wonderful a discipline as that is, if that dogmatic pattern is followed in homiletics, we easily cease to expound the text as a unique portion of Scripture. It cripples textual preaching if we see as our primary purpose in preaching to abstract from texts a doctrinal truth while treating the concrete situation and language of that text as little more than husks that can be left on the study room floor. While systematics by its very nature is built around the more abstract and the general, homiletics thrives on the more concrete and specific. Already fifteen years ago, Joel Gerlach, then a WLS professor, quoted another WELS preacher about this same issue in an article in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.

“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 application to life, and in the use of illustrations. Some may attribute this to the way we train pastors in the WELS. But if that’s 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 message specific and concrete, and instead settle for quicker (but less effective) generalities.” (Gerlach 1994, 284)

with confidence, “This is what the LORD says!” Instead, I am only pointing out that a pattern is being ingrained into the minds of our students that is wonderful for systematics but that must not be transferred wholly to homiletics as the way to design every sermon.

Obviously, while identifying the same malady (abstract and generic preaching), that unnamed observer and I disagree on the degree to which this is affected by how we train our pastors. While I would second his hunch that time pressures are probably the largest factor at work here (that will be the third key issue), I would argue that our pastors' systematic training is not a small factor. When push comes to shove and time is of the essence in getting the sermon out, the pattern of abstraction learned already in catechism class as children and repeated at length in systematics becomes the default mode for how to speak about Scripture. And the result? Dry abstractions and real-life-less generalizations of law and gospel leave God's people panting for a soul-refreshing drink of "What does this mean?" It is little wonder that the number one weakness of preaching in the WELS identified by the lay Delphi group was this: down-to-earth application to our daily lives is too often lacking or done in too abstract a manner (failure to connect text to today's world).

If in our preaching we unconsciously lean more toward systematics than homiletics, then we may quickly drain much of the life out of our texts. While every graduate of WLS is able cognitively to tell you this difference between systematics and homiletics, I do not believe that most pastors maintain a conscious awareness of that difference and how it applies to their sermons. Just helping pastors ponder that distinction in relation to their sermons could be sermon impacting. In the past year, I have begun to make this distinction as I teach both on and off campus. I have seen the light go on for brothers as they pondered it.

Another potential cause for the generic approach to proclaiming law and gospel too often evident in sermons may be the downside of another very good thing. We are a confessional Lutheran church body. We rightly value the historic confessions of the Lutheran

Church.¹⁷ While only Scripture is the ruling norm (*norma normans*) of the church, the confessions are the ruled norm (*norma normata*) to which every confessional Lutheran pastor subscribes because (*quia*) they faithfully testify to the truth of Scripture.

What does that have to do with generic preaching? The confessions are to a significant degree dominated by refuting Roman Catholic false teachings. They are especially focused on the debate surrounding the article by which the church stands or falls, the doctrine of justification. Since the forensic language of justification was the most helpful biblical picture to use to set in clear contrast the teachings of Rome with the teachings of Scripture, other biblical imagery for God's grace to us in Jesus tends to fade into the background. I am convinced, though I have no objective data on which to base this statement other than hundreds of student sermons and the sermons I hear at worship, that the default mode for confessional Lutheran pastors to speak about God's work for us in Jesus remains the forensic language of justification. I am convinced that much of the other unique imagery that Scripture uses to picture the beauty of God's grace fails to receive as much attention as Scripture gives it. To the degree that this is true, we will shortchange true textual exposition of those other beautiful pictures and metaphors as we default back to our basic mode of speech learned from the confessions. This leads to sermons whose language for law and gospel is theologically accurate but textually off the mark.

¹⁷ The six historic confessions recognized by confessional Lutherans around the world are as follows: the Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, the Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord.

But I'm convinced there is even more at work at times to render our law and gospel preaching far too dull and repetitive. There is also a tendency in sermonizing to narrow the definition of what it means to speak law and gospel. While this may be a bit of a crass overstatement, at times it becomes almost a simplistic assumption that the law has not been preached unless the word *hell* has been used in the sermon, and the gospel has not been preached unless the word *cross* has been spoken. Consider how much of Scripture would seem to fail the test of proclaiming law and gospel if that were true!

What is often missing from a broader scriptural definition of proclaiming law and gospel? In gospel preaching, missing in action is often any mention of the active obedience of Christ no matter how much the text begs for the preacher to notice it. As the previous point about the impact of the confessions mentioned, missing in action is making the most of textual pictures such as reconciliation and being the bride of Christ. What is also often missing in our definition of proclaiming the gospel is recognizing the full impact of what Paul said in Romans 8:32. If God "along with him [Jesus] graciously gives us all things" then we have not forsaken gospel preaching when faithful to a particular text our chief focus in on the First Article gifts that are ours solely because of God's grace to us in Jesus.

In law preaching, what is often missing in action is what Paul Raabe has called the "future tense" of preaching the law (Raabe 2004, 6). Too many have failed to see that the law is being preached not only when the law convicts of past sins but also when it warns us of the future impact of growing careless in our Christian living. At times we fail to recognize that it is fully legitimate preaching of the law in a sermon to sound a warning such as Paul

did in Romans 8:13: “If you live according to the sinful nature, you will die.” This is the law as *curb* functioning for the believer as a helpful club to his or her sinful nature.

But what easily may be the greatest cause for lifeless and generic law preaching is at work when the preacher fails to ponder the specific sin the text reveals and doesn’t carefully consider how and where in real-life situations that same sin shows itself in the lives of his hearers. What is more, when that sin the text reveals is an outward sin of word or action, we often fail to probe thoroughly enough in text or context to get behind the wicked words and works to the underlying lie of Satan that confuses the heart in the first place. It is still the heart that is “the wellspring of life” (Prov 4:23). Instead of studying the text to probe his own and his hearers’ hearts and lives, too often we rely on thundering simplistic generalisms of law from the pulpit. “God expects perfection, and you know that no one is perfect!” “We are all sinners!” Such phrases (and all their close cousins) by overuse are in danger of becoming so insipid that Satan hardly needs to summon his usual flock of birds to remove such seed. The ground of many human hearts no longer even recognizes those statements as seed worth pondering! The hearers are busy counting the number of stones in the front wall of the church while crying out in their hearts, “How long, O Lord, how long!” in an entirely different way than the Spirit intended. The saddest part of all of this is not what it does to our law preaching but what it does to our gospel preaching. If my law preaching is dull and lifeless, my hearers have no hunger for a cure. Then when I do strive to proclaim the gospel, it is the gospel that ends up seeming even more dull and lifeless.

Of course, everything that was said about probing the text for the unique richness of how it preaches the law is true about probing the text for how it preaches the gospel. If I

only sound the depths of the text's law, and don't equally seek to discover the unique beauty of the gospel explicit or implicit in the text, I risk allowing the law to dominate my sermon. Since the law is a resident by nature in the heart of human beings, but the gospel is only a guest brought by the Spirit, that would be a critical error. One interviewee sought to underline that point. "[My fondest prayer for preaching in the WELS is] that the quantity and richness of the gospel would be so much more apparent in our preaching. My suspicion is that ... people hear the law so much more clearly than they hear the gospel, that it is both quantity and variety in preaching the gospel that is necessary for it to get through."

There is at least one more potential cause of caricatured law and gospel preaching that deserves mention. I am convinced from my own preaching, and from informal conversations with other preachers, that at times we grudgingly insert specific law and gospel statements into our sermons as if we were doing obeisance to some tired Lutheran rubric that hinders true textual preaching. With a guilty homiletical conscience, we throw into the sermon a few required "damnables" and "crucifieds" to pay our theological debt to Luther or C. F. W. Walther. Then we are free to get on with business of actually attending to the text. To the degree we think that the law and gospel dichotomy is some template we foist on texts, to that same degree our law and gospel preaching will be nothing but a forced march without vim or vigor. It should shame every Lutheran preacher who has grown tired of a law and gospel approach to preaching to realize that Bryan Chapell and Paul Scott Wilson at times seem to grasp better the law/gospel nature of Scripture than Lutherans do! But when we move away from our caricatures and narrowed definitions, we can begin again to discover the unique law and gospel (sin and grace) content and context of every passage that the Spirit (not Martin

Luther) placed there. When we leave behind what truly are forced law and gospel templates, then preaching law and gospel becomes the exhilarating quest into the mind of the Spirit that it truly is. What we need to do is divorce ourselves from our caricatures of Lutheran preaching while marrying again the terrifying and yet comforting beauty of law and gospel as Scripture reveals them!¹⁸

The second key challenge to freshness and variety in law and gospel preaching is the tendency many identified in the research between talking *about* law and gospel and actually *proclaiming* law and gospel. The great challenge here is articulating clearly what that difference is. Hearers tend to know the difference intuitively when listening to a sermon, but it defies plain definition. I have sought for years—sometimes vainly!—to define this clearly so as to help beginning homiletics students to recognize this problem in their sermons.

This is the way I currently seek to define the difference: don't tell me that "the gospel is powerful" or "wonderful" or "beautiful"; paint before me the beauty, wonder, and power of the gospel so that I begin to think, "Wow, the gospel sure is powerful" or "wonderful" or "beautiful." Don't tell me that "this sin is evil," depict before me that sin in all of its ugliness so that I begin to think, "Wow, that sin is evil!" Don't just define repentance for me. Put me to death! Don't just define forgiveness for me! Heal me!

One interviewee in particular captured in a very memorable way what it means to speak about law and gospel rather than actually proclaiming law and gospel.

¹⁸ A further solution to stilted law and gospel preaching would be to get to know ever better the real hurts and fears in the hearts and lives of our people so that we can speak specific gospel that answers real-life challenges. Since an entire key issue will be devoted to partnering with lay people, the critical importance of a shepherd who knows his people will be discussed there.

It's this sense that one has once in awhile in listening to someone talk about God in the third person, or the truths of God in a coldly objective way, and it's not really ... but it hasn't really intersected his life, because his law preaching is all you people out there ... or that there are all these bad things that are happening, or some kind of general way, "Oh, yeah, we are all sinners." But that ... oh man ... I've got this loathsome hag that has got ahold of me ... this prostitute called sin that is infected with AIDS has embraced me. Because I think the problem ... it's sort of like Calvin Coolidge. Calvin Coolidge was asked, what did the preacher preach about, "Sin." What did he say, "He was against it." That sense that we all agree that sin is a bad thing and we are against it, but the trick with law preaching is to help people see that sin is a loathsome whore that's killing them. And when you embrace it, you are embracing death.

And it wasn't just about the law side of the equation that this interviewee waxed eloquent.

A struggling heart recognizes and can say in the abstract, "Jesus loves all people." And maybe even in general he can say, "Jesus loves me." But the hardest thing for a struggling conscience to believe is that Jesus loves me in just this particular struggle or sin that I have. And while a preacher is going to be guided by his text, rather than to try to imagine all the possible struggles that his congregation's having ... nevertheless [he] has to have as his goal that kind of specificity that he is going to help struggling believers frame this problem, whatever the malady of the text is, in the light of the gospel. And he's going to see how the gospel applies to just that fear, just that sin, just that guilt, that this person has That's what you got to love about Luther. When he talks about sin, he talks about it in very real ways. Even when he talks about faith he talks about faith in real ways. I was just reading in John 14, it's just wonderful the way he talks about, "Yeah, we know all this about Christ ... and yet Jesus has to say to us, 'Let not your hearts be troubled,' because so often we are just overwhelmed by doubt and fear and guilt." So he talks about believers in ways that are honest, you are not hiding behind masks anymore.

What's the difference between preaching about law and gospel and actually proclaiming law and gospel? The preacher isn't merely telling me that sin kills. He is at that moment killing me with the bitter reality of the particular sin of heart and life this text uncovers. And most importantly, he isn't merely telling me that Jesus saves. He is at that moment applying the saving balm of Gilead to my heart in precisely the place where the law just crucified me! He isn't just telling me that the law kills and the gospel gives me life, as true as that is. He is

killing me and giving me life as he preaches to me! How critical for the preacher to recognize that he is doing so much more than dispensing true propositions as he preaches (though those objective and unchanging truths stand behind everything he says!). He is applying those propositions to concrete situations to unmask the ugliness of *my* heart and to unveil the beauty of *my* Savior!

So what's the cure for merely talking about law and gospel rather than actually proclaiming them? Please allow me to go back to the same interviewee who spoke with such passionate eloquence about what the problem is. He also addressed the answer with equal passion.

What does it look like? It looks and it sounds like somebody who himself has been cut by the very thing that he has been preaching and consoled by the very things that he is proclaiming. That's why in some respects, when I was teaching homiletics, I encouraged and talked about ways of incorporating devotional study into preaching. We needed to see ... to preach the text and to live with the text first in ourselves, and feel its bite and feel its joy, not that the pastor's feelings are the index of a good sermon, but ... it's this sense that one has once in awhile in listening to someone talk about God in the third person, or the truths of God in a coldly objective way, and it's not really ... but it hasn't really intersected his life, because his law preaching is all you people out there or that there are all these bad things that are happening, or some kind of general way, "Oh, yeah, we are all sinners."

As that same interview ended, he added these comments as his greatest prayer for preaching in the WELS.

I think I would go back to that law/gospel that is real and engaging, that really cuts, that really celebrates, that I see the gospel applying to just that which I struggle with. That I think is my goal in all my preaching. Preaching has always been a struggle for me. It's always been a struggle because I work out problems and it's always what I am struggling with often that will engage me the most in a text, and to try to come up, listen carefully to what God is saying, as being the answer to that problem. So that's how I tend to approach the homiletical task, and ... what I guess sometimes disappoints me, is when I don't hear that kind of engagement that apparently has happened with the man

that I'm listening to. I can usually hear when it's there and when it isn't. That sounds extremely judgmental, but you just have a sense, "Here's a guy that has walked with this text. It's been on his heart. Here's a guy that has some nice things to say, but it's just ... that kind of engagement with the text where a person takes off his shoes and says, "I'm on holy ground here, and I expect to have an encounter with God. And when I get into the pulpit I expect that whatever encounter I've had with God this past week as I've meditated on this text I am going to be sharing that with you today. And boy what a thrill it is to be able to be here with you today, to be able to share that." It's that kind of thing that I would like to see most.

It is almost impossible to speak merely *about* law and gospel when you have yourself experienced a death and resurrection in the process of writing the sermon! All of this revolves around devoting significant time to a devotional study of the text. Much more will be said about that as in the third key issue we discuss time management and in the fourth key issue we discuss the pastor's devotional study of the Word.

There is still one more challenge to freshness and variety in preaching law and gospel that needs to be addressed under this second key issue. The last quotation alluded to it. It is the challenge of learning to celebrate the gospel more in the presence of the people. Another WLS professor who has taught homiletics put it this way.

Maybe it's just because I'm listening to too many students' sermons, we tend to be real good on preaching the law aspect of things, or our emphasis, but that whole business of gospel celebration still really strikes me as being somewhat formulaic. We don't celebrate and talk about and proclaim the gospel in ways that really cause the heart to sing with the same fervor that we do the law.

A comment from the survey echoes those words almost exactly. "Preaching of specific law is one of my strengths. I'm not so sure that I preach specific gospel as well. I want the gospel to predominate, so that people leave worship thinking about the great Savior that we have and not at all about the preacher." These words sound very similar to words written by Fred Craddock.

Many of the parishioners are not so much evil as they are bored, and their entire Christian experience has never provided them a chair in order to sit for an hour in the heavenly places with Christ. They do not need an argument; they need air. Why not sermons that celebrate the unconditional love of God? Instead of using Thanksgiving to scold the ungrateful, why not a doxological message? Instead of weary harangues against commercialism at Christmas and the attacks against the once-a-year churchgoers at Easter, would it not be just as courageous to announce the Good News? Some Sunday mornings the minister should take the congregation by the hand and with them step off the dimensions of their inheritance as children of God. Some of them have been “preached at” for years but have never been given a peek into the treasury, much less to run their fingers through the unsearchable riches of Christ. (Craddock 2001, 71-72)

I won't quarrel here with what may be more than a hint of questionable anthropology lest I miss a point I must take to heart! Craddock is asking me to do what my Lutheran convictions should lead me to do anyway. While the amount of time spent in law or gospel in any given sermon will be determined by the text, I am convinced that I am unfaithful to a merciful God if the gospel does not have a general predominance of impact in every one of my sermons. As a church body with a deeply held conviction of the depravity of man, I can easily allow my most imaginative words and images to paint the ugliness of the sinful human heart. Then, as my internal sermon clock begins to wind down, I may assume that a few quick (and possibly formulaic) sentences of gospel will somehow overcome the sting my hearers still feel from the vivid law preaching that preceded. This problem may be further exacerbated by the fact that in sermon preparation many pastors may often ponder how they will proclaim the law, only to turn attention to how to speak the gospel when the sermon *preparation* clock begins to wind down as Sunday approaches. Without meaning to, I can fail to save time in preparation and then in the sermon to soak in for myself and my hearers the full beauty of the gospel. Gospel celebration is then muted, and perhaps from the pew, there may appear to be little or nothing

to celebrate at all. Much can be learned here from the tradition of the African American pulpit, which has a long history of gospel celebration in preaching.

Because of the similarity between the first two key issues, every resource mentioned under the first key issue would also apply here. One additional set of resources that should be mentioned is the excellent series of articles on preaching law and gospel that was the focus of the *Concordia Journal* in January 1999. As part of this project, I would hope to secure permission to make those articles readily available on our Web site.

Key Issue 3: Developing Time Management Skills
That Help Reserve Sufficient Time
for Preparing Sermons

Even without doing any research, I would have anticipated that the first two key issues would need to be included near the top of issues for strengthening preaching in the WELS. I'm not so sure, however, that I would have sufficiently recognized the impact of this third key issue so as to include it as prominently as it is. Yet the voices of many pastors in the interviews, backed up by some findings of the survey, led this issue not only to be included as one of the ten key issues, but led it to be included relatively early among the ten.

As I listened to the input pastors were supplying, what came into clear focus was this: if the challenge of wise time management in ministry in general is not met, many of the issues discussed in this whole project will not matter. The pastor who is already harried and hurried by all the demands on his time will only nod his head politely about this CPE program while he tells himself this is just one more thing that he will never have time for in the press of the other ministry, family, and personal obligations that are already overburdening his schedule.

What were the voices saying about this in interviews and surveys? In a survey question that asked pastors to identify the greatest challenge they faced in their preaching ministry, several noted this challenge of time management. One wrote, “Prohibiting other ministry responsibilities from taking time and energy away from sermon study.” In one of the closing survey questions, when asked what may have been missed in the survey that needed to be kept in mind as this CPE program was put together, two respondents put down comments that captured well this issue’s significance. “Deadlines and the press of other duties can often zap the joy out of preaching and preaching prep. How do we keep the zeal and passion for souls on the hearts and in the minds of our preachers?” Another pastor agreed: “I don’t recall answering any questions that asked what prevents or impedes adequate sermon preparation time. Of course, it’s easy to find out what consumes a pastor’s time, but not so easy to provide a solution that will benefit everyone.” In a question that asked pastors if they had ever worked on sermon texts with other pastors, *every* pastor who marked the choice “Never done so, but would like to try” listed the challenge of finding time as the barrier that has kept him from doing this.

These concerns were echoed repeatedly in the interviews as well. When asked what would be the one thing he would pray for to improve his preaching, one pastor responded:

There’s no question in my mind: more time. More time for thinking. Just more time to think about a text and about where I’m going with it, and what I’m going to do with it, and what God’s people are struggling with, and what I’m personally struggling with in what this means for me, so that I cannot just type and be, “Oh gosh, it’s done!” But actually that it really, really is the best I can offer God and his people this week in gratitude to him for giving me his best.

Another shared both sides of the picture. “For me, when I have the time to enjoy writing a sermon, there’s nothing better in the world. But when you don’t have time to enjoy it, it

becomes drudgery.” When asked about the most important thing he would pray for to improve preaching in our midst, a long-time parish pastor, now seminary professor, commented about this challenge for himself and other pastors he has observed.

The first thing I picked was simply that our congregations and pastors would always recognize that good preaching and the study and the preparation required for it takes a good amount of time.... Pastors and congregations just take on a lot more things to do, and I’m positive my preaching suffered as there were just more and more things that the congregation was doing, so that just plain old shut the door of the office, shut the door of the study and be able to study for awhile, was often really squeezed.

Right here it would be easy to leap to encouraging pastors to devote the time needed so that their sermons will be textually rich and edifying—and that will be dealt with as the major emphasis of the fourth key issue. But what is critical right here is to help pastors deal with the bigger issue: how do I balance the use of my time as a whole in order to take care of all my responsibilities as a pastor, husband, and father? In the midst of everything crying for the pastor’s time, what tends to be crowded out where time management is poor? Little focused time is often left for sermon study. Equally devastating, what also falls away is time set aside for focused study and growth in any area of ministry. With apologies to Maslow, in the hierarchy of pastoral needs, CPE will not rise very high on the pyramid when the pastor is scrambling just to get through next Sunday. This project will be doomed to failure if it appears I am merely urging more time to be devoted for study in general, and sermon study in specific, when many a pastor already feels like he is trying to keep more plates spinning than is humanly possible. The project would risk merely piling more guilt on someone whose conscience is already badly troubled, with little hope of real changes in ministry practice. One synodical official pointedly warned of this. “If I’m the guy who’s just totally overloaded with what’s going on both in my pastoral life, and my personal life, and my family life, I need a

different model. I don't just need to work harder at something, because that's just putting more on the plate. How am I going to find the time for this thing?" What this key issue is striving to accomplish is to identify clearly for pastors what gets in the way of wise time management as a whole and then provide answers and resources to help make real changes.

The challenges that get in the way of good time management seem to fall into three general areas. There is a cultural barrier, several potential personal barriers, and a critical theological barrier that all need attention if any real progress is going to be made either in the big picture (managing one's entire ministry well) or in the smaller pictures (saving sufficient time to devote to CPE in general or sermon work in particular).

The cultural issue can be framed in terms of a pericope from Luke 10: How is it possible to live like Mary in a Martha world? Our culture does not celebrate quiet contemplation, and the post-Christian culture around us certainly does not value time spent in quiet study and reflection on the Word of God.¹⁹ With Martha we are encouraged to be "worried and upset about many things" (Luke 10:41). While it is understandable why those who live without Christ would try to keep themselves as busy and preoccupied as possible so as not to consider how presently and eternally meaningless life is without God, what is pitiful is when Christians follow suit.²⁰ So much empty and meaningless busyness beckons us Siren-like. To borrow author Neal Postman's book title, in the midst of such frantic activity of many kinds, many

¹⁹ As I watch my four oldest children with their MP3 players as their constant companions, I wonder about the impact on spiritual self-reflection.

²⁰ The book of Ecclesiastes deserves a higher profile in our teaching and preaching as 21st-century Christians struggle with the pressure of living in a postmodern world that is relentlessly chasing meaning but finding none.

are amusing themselves to death. Many spend countless hours each week lost in the virtual depths of cyberspace (including the at least partial deception that social networking is an at-par substitute for the depths of real face-to-face human interaction) or enjoying virtual gaming fellowship courtesy of the Web-connected video platform of their choice. As pastors, especially the younger generation of pastors who have grown up in a wired world, we can easily be more creatures of our culture than we know. Life becomes a hurried and hectic chasing from one activity to the next with little contemplation on whether much of the activity is helpful or harmful.

In addition to the cultural pressure that works against quiet time for study and reflection, there are also many personal issues at work to sidetrack wise management of God's precious gift of time. That reflects the fact that the heart of this issue is not really managing time, since God gives to each of us the same perfect amount each day and week. The real challenge is managing and disciplining ourselves in our use of this gift of God. The same sinful nature that can so easily embrace the empty business of the culture around us also knows how to tempt us toward laziness in matters that pertain to the kingdom of God. John Stott, as he addresses what keeps pastors from a life of devoted study, refuses to mince words.

Let me be frank. Only one thing: laziness. Was it not Ralph Waldo Emerson who said that "man is as lazy as he dares to be"? It is true. And we pastors can be very daring in this area, because we have no employer to supervise our work or to reproach us for our neglect of it. Besides, we have neither set tasks to do, nor set times in which to do them. We are our own master and have to organize our own schedule. So it is possible for us to fritter our days away, until our time-wasting lapses degenerate into a life of gross indiscipline. (Stott 1982, 208)

The very nature of a pastor's work means that often no one other than God may know how he spends his time. The often-heard joke from lay leaders that pastors only work one day a week

is obviously meant in jest, but it may also reveal how little many people understand what a pastor actually does with his time between Sunday services. We can squander an entire week of work, and, if we somehow manage to preach and teach marginally well, no one may be the wiser (other than God). A former president of our seminary frequently warned future pastors that the ministry could easily be turned into a soft and comfortable pillow on which to put our own souls to sleep. With those words he echoed a Lutheran seminary professor of several generations ago. “A pitiful object is the young minister who enters upon his office with the thought that his days of hard labor and toil are over, that he has now entered a haven of rest and peace, which he decides to enjoy, since now he is his own boss and need not take orders from any person in the world” (Walther 1929, 209). Not a single one of us who serves in the public ministry is above the temptation to abuse the freedom of being able to set our own schedule by turning it into an opportunity to “indulge the sinful nature” rather than as opportunity to “serve one another in love” (Gal 5:13). Even the often-heard concern about procrastination can often fit here under laziness, since we tend to procrastinate about difficult and challenging ministry issues that we vainly hope would just go away.²¹ Certainly, no one but God may be the wiser when we waste time, but such little secrets cripple pastors and paralyze ministries.

Fortunately, the solution to the personal challenge of laziness is not hard to find. Stott, again, cuts to the heart.

So we need, as I find myself, constantly to repent, and to renew our resolve to discipline our lives and our schedule. Only a constantly fresh vision

²¹ I am also aware that procrastination may result as a protection against perfectionism. I put off a task until I have to rush it, thus quieting my unrealistic perfectionist streak by telling myself I would have done better if only I had the time.

of Christ and his commission can rescue us from idleness, and keep our priorities correctly adjusted. Then we shall make time to read and think, and, as the fruit of our conscientious studies, our preaching will be fresh, faithful and relevant, yet also simple enough for people to understand. (Stott 1982, 209)

C. F. W. Walther also speaks directly to the answer.

Blessed is the minister who starts his official work on the very first day with the determination to do everything that the grace of God will enable him to do in order that not a soul in his congregation be lost by his fault. Such a one resolves that by the grace of God he will do all he can, so that, when the day comes for him to put down his shepherd's staff, he may be able to say, as Christ said to His Father: Here I am and those that Thou gavest me, and none of them is lost. Even the blood of those who shall stand on the left side of the judgment seat, he resolves, shall not be on his hands. (Walther 1929, 209)

Without giving in to the opposite temptation of a pastoral Messiah complex (as if the church finds its ultimate hope in me rather than Christ), the goal is to find the strength of God's grace in Jesus to be able to echo Paul's words: "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Cor 15:10).

While the temptation to laziness in the pastoral ministry is very real, it is also dangerous to jump too quickly to the conclusion that laziness is the chief personal problem besetting a pastor struggling with time management. What can often in time mimic the outward symptoms of laziness is a growing discouragement (perhaps even depression) in ministry. In reality, this heart problem often finds its beginnings in the very Messiah complex mentioned before: a pastor (often a young one) scurries about in his ministry with zeal and enthusiasm, certain that with each sermon he is solving forever another spiritual challenge within the congregation. But when the problems persist despite his zeal, what often comes next is the crash of discouragement. With the best of intentions we can forget that the once-for-all sacrifice

of Christ was sufficient for the church. We help no one if we re-pristiniate on the altar of our ministries the sacrifice of our health and emotional well being. It's not just Catholic priests who try to offer unbloody sacrifices!

That pattern can be seen so clearly in the biblical account of Elijah after the exhilarating events of Mt. Carmel and his marathon run (senior division) from Carmel to Samaria in front of Ahab's chariot. All it took was Jezebel's terse thank-you note to send him spiraling into discouragement. Those who didn't know that background, and viewing a snapshot of Elijah sitting under the broom tree, might conclude that they were seeing key evidence for the prosecution of a lazy prophet. But the heart issue behind his impromptu ministry siesta was not laziness but discouragement. Later, as Elijah poured out his heart to the LORD at Horeb, his first words testify to anything but laziness. "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty" (1 Kgs 19:10). It's hard for God's public servants, ancient and modern, to work hard day after day only to see so much of the seed (to quote a hymn by Martin Franzmann) "snatched, and scorched and matted flat." When our hearts cry out "Oh, what of that, and what of that?" (*Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, 544:4) it is hard to keep pressing ahead in ministry in trust that the LORD's Word hasn't returned empty (Isa 55:10). As discovered in my interviews, it is worth noting that the academic dean of a well-respected and academically rigorous seminary (not to mention biblically conservative) sees their greatest CPE challenge not as providing degree programs but in coming alongside discouraged pastors in the field. A CPE program in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (the program is called Doxology) that got rave reviews from one of my interviewees has as one of its primary foci helping pastors overcome a spirit of discouragement.

It is a critical mistake to judge too quickly that a pastor's poor time management is laziness when it may really be Elijah-like discouragement. Why? Because the solution given will be the thunder and fire and earthquake of the law's rebuke when what is really needed most of all is the same comforting still small voice of gospel assurance that the LORD gave Elijah on the mountain. Pastors need to hear again and again that God is still powerfully at work in his means of grace to keep many a knee and lip from offering homage to Baal. It is in such confidence that God sends Elijah and us back out to busy ourselves with the tasks of ministry assigned to us. That is why, for years already, I have used Paul's play on words in 1 Corinthians 15:58 as my parting words on the last day of a semester class or the last moments of a pastoral workshop. There, as Paul brings to a close his great resurrection chapter, he reminds us of a key truth to which we cling by faith: the work of the ministry will often be κόπος (frustrating and fatiguing) but it will never be κενός (without purpose). And why is that? Because the work we carry out is carried out ἐν κυρίῳ (in our gloriously risen Lord)!

It is certainly true that if this project is too timid to point out pastoral laziness wherever it exists, it will have failed to deal honestly with a real temptation for us all. But if this project fails to have the wisdom to recognize where similar symptoms flow from a vastly dissimilar source, then I may unwittingly crush spirits already broken. I will have approached others as a judgmental church-hierarchy cop with a big stick when what I needed to do was come up next to them as an understanding pastoral brother with a big heart.

The next personal issue that can make time management a challenging area for many pastors is maintaining balance in schedule between our calling as a pastor and our other callings, in particular the callings many pastors have as husbands and fathers. The issue

is seeking a proper balance. As challenging as this issue is, it becomes even more tricky since generational differences appear to have swung the pendulum in different directions. Among what are often called the builder and boomer generations, the more common imbalance seemed to be favoring the calling as pastor over the calling of husband/father. This led to books being written such as Ben Freudenberg's *Family Friendly Church* in which he eloquently confessed to allowing the church to become so dominant in his life that his wife and children faded into the background (Freudenberg 2009). To urge pastors who are already imbalanced in their lives to spend more time in study could easily be injecting them with more of the drug to which they are already addicted. The focus of their ministry time may still not be wisely spent, but the question isn't a matter of adding more ministry time.

However, among younger pastors, my research suggests that, as is typical of human nature, the pendulum may now be swinging in the opposite direction. In one interview, an author and respected seminary president offered at length an impassioned concern that many young pastors are protecting themselves from the church. "Young pastors ... fear the church will be hard on them and hard on their families, so pastors often go into the church with a strong sense of protectiveness." In discussions our seminary faculty has had with our synod's mission counselors (confirmed also by personal interviews with two of them), they regularly mention seeing young pastor husbands/fathers with wives working full time trying to accomplish ministry from their home office while trying to keep their preschoolers changed, fed, and entertained. Such an im-balancing act leaves them exhausted and frustrated, and it leaves critical pastoral ministry undone or done poorly.

The answer is not to favor one of our God-given callings over the other, but to recognize them all as high and holy callings from God while assigning to each a sufficient

block of our best time. There will be times when ministry deserves the lion's share of our time.²² There will be other times our family will need to dominate more of our time and attention. I have found Randy Frazee's book, *Making Room for Life*, to be personally helpful in seeking to achieve a balance that honors all sides of the equation (Frazee 2003). While I would never advocate for all of his suggestions, much of what he has to say could be helpful discussion starters for pastors wrestling with imbalance in either direction. Here is one place (many more will come under the next key issues) where iron sharpening iron (Prov 27:17)—especially across generations—could prove a blessing for many pastors.

This area of imbalance offers one more insight from the research that cannot be left out, lest again it torpedo much of what this project is seeking to accomplish in preaching. As a helping profession, the pastoral ministry can be emotionally draining, and the more a pastor takes seriously that the souls in his care are blood bought by God (Acts 20:28), the more true that may be. The key remedy for this is a vital and growing personal devotional life, which is part of the focus of the next key issue. But since we are not Gnostics or Docetists, that is not the only assistance that is available. When you add to that fact the rather sedentary nature of much of the work of the ministry, issues of diet, exercise, and sufficient rest (both sleep and regular time away from ministry pressures) become significant issues. The degree

²² I know it is too easy to write "the answer" in the paragraph above. The difficulty, of course, is in living this out by the grace of God. Having been born into a busy builder-pastor's family near the end of the baby boom years, I will confess to being a true son of my father and a true boomer in my own personal lack of balance in this area. My focus on public ministry has often left my wife and five sons hoping for at best second place. Their patient forgiveness for a recovering workaholic is a testimony to the power of the gospel! I pray my own struggles in this issue will make me a more patient and compassionate encourager of others!

to which we allow our health to suffer will easily be the degree to which even time devoted to ministry becomes something far less than effective. One long-time pastor and now synodical administrator, as he spoke about time management challenges, confirmed this insight:

And I would even throw into the mix something like exercise and general health. It's partly because I've learned from some bad habits what happens if I do too much at the desk and not enough to take care of myself. You hear all this anecdotal stuff about those people who do give priority to exercise. [I know] how much better I felt, how much more energy I have, how it affected my outlook for the rest of the day ... or people who are prone to depression, not clinical, but just down in the dumps, and how that activity seems to raise their energy and their ability to deal with life. Is that an issue among pastors?

His smile gave clear indication that his question was rhetorical. Those who know him could testify that his life gives eloquent testimony that he has taken steps to find the answer to that question for himself. In order to address this part of the issue, much more thoughtful encouragement and helpful resources will need to be either discovered or developed.

Another cause contributing to a weakness in prioritizing sufficient time for study in all areas of ministry is a cross between a personal issue and one that is cultural (at least in the sub-culture of how WELS has trained parish pastors). Many of our pastors may never have made the transition discussed in chapter 2 from being dependent childlike learners (learning is fed to me by others at required pre-ministerial courses or pastoral conferences) to being truly self-directed lifelong adult learners. Speaking personally, while I am convinced that the caliber of the training I received for pastoral ministry was outstanding in many ways, it was often delivered in a way that placed much (most) of the burden on the instructor. The professor delivered the rich fruit of his learning, and I tried to take notes as fast as I could for as long as I could pay attention. When that superstructure of education falls away, it is somewhat easy for a pastor to ride at anchor in ministry. After all, he can convince himself, he can always

summon from his rich storehouse of notes both mental and on paper whatever was needed at the moment. Beyond expected attendance at conferences, and perhaps circuit meetings, little focused and organized thought is given to growth in ministry.

This may be the only area in which WELS pastors subscribe to radical postmodernism since the growth plans of too many pastors resemble chaos theory. Experience and random serendipitous learning opportunities seem to be all that some have to draw on. Certainly experience is always at work to teach, but experience alone can allow a pastor to draw as many theologically and practically faulty lessons as useful ones. “Experience is indeed a teacher; but only as a member of a larger faculty” (Craddock 1990, 75).

I would be dishonest to my research if I did not reiterate here that there is a considerable sea change going on within the WELS when it comes to pastors and formal or informal CPE. While still seeking without apology to pass on faithfully the heritage of the truth, the teaching methods used to pass on that good deposit are undergoing significant change at WLS and our other schools. Perhaps even more significantly, many among the rising generation of pastors, raised in a rapidly changing culture, appear to understand almost intuitively that they need to continue to grow if they are going to minister wisely and well to a 21st-century world. I did not find a single interviewee inside or outside our synod who would argue against this cultural shift occurring among young pastors.

What many older and younger pastors still lack are sufficient models of what a disciplined study life might look like—suitably nuanced for the many different learning and personality styles of the pastors whom God has called into the ministry. One interviewee offered the simple insight of gathering as many scheduling templates as possible from pastors who

have established sound time management habits in general, and disciplined study habits in particular. Several resources offer eloquent sections on what a disciplined study life could look like. Four resources in particular from which I will be able to cull significant help are John Stott's *Between Two Worlds*, Fred Craddock's *Preaching*, Stephen Carter's *Pastors on the Grow*, and *A Lifelong Call to Learn* edited by Robert E. Reber and D. Bruce Roberts. What certainly also bears watching are two simultaneous efforts going on in the ELCA and the LCMS. The ELCA has begun to implement a three-year program for new pastors that could almost be compared to a medical residency program. In the LCMS there are seeds of a plan (mentioned by two interviewees) to require pastors to file an individual learning plan each year with their district office.

In the summer of 2009, I was also privileged to present to more than 500 WELS called workers a study paper on the importance of a called worker's personal devotional life (a critical part of key issue 4) as well as the importance of developing a plan for professional growth. The presentation was assigned to me because the leaders of the conference were familiar with my doctoral work. In the presentation, I keyed off a suggestion made in a book by Daniel Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, to devote two days each summer for planning personal and professional growth (Deutschlander 2008).²³ The dates suggested were June 24 and 25, dates set aside in the church year for commemorating the Nativity of St. John the Baptist and the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession. I am thankful that the presentation was so

²³The author of that book is a retired professor who served at our pre-seminary ministerial training college.

well received that I was asked to return to this conference again in the summer of 2010 to present a follow-up presentation.²⁴

The last barrier to wise ministry time management that allows room for study and growth may be the most challenging of all. It involves a shift of some very basic patterns of how gospel ministry and the necessary supporting work are carried out day to day within the congregation. The issue is taking to heart the encouragement of Acts 6 and Ephesians 4 (to mention only two of many biblical references). There those serving in the public ministry are clearly encouraged to make the most of the spiritual gifts and talents of all God's royal priests (including calling some of them into positions of public ministry).²⁵

While this understanding of the key biblical passages is lodged firmly in our heads, carrying out such joint gospel work in practice continues to be a struggle. The challenge comes from both sides—both clergy and laity. What is the challenge on the clergy side? Many a pastor, while confessing that there is a royal priesthood of all believers and knowing cognitively that the New Testament allows for many forms of public ministry in addition to

²⁴ The entire presentation is scheduled to be printed in the next issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Some of the SWOT analysis documents included in that essay's appendix actually were developed and distributed after the conference. Much more needs to be done to improve these resources.

²⁵ Our church believes that someone is serving in a position of public ministry whenever the royal priesthood of believers asks another royal priest to represent Christ and then by carrying out or overseeing some area of the congregation's joint gospel work. That means we would include as serving in public ministry not only full-time paid positions such as our pastors and teachers, but also those whom a congregation calls or elects to serve as Sunday school teachers, elders, evangelists, deacons, and similar positions. We may also consider someone to be included in the public ministry even if the work they do is not directly involved in the proclamation of the means of grace but serves more to support gospel ministry. An example would be staff ministers who oversee the administration of some of our larger congregations.

the parish pastor, still operates day to day in his ministry as if he must himself personally carry out all the direct means of grace ministry in the congregation.

In the research, many attempted to offer explanations for why this phenomenon takes place. In a church body with a sensitive meter for false doctrine (a good thing), several noted that it may be “quality control” on the part of the pastor who may not be convinced others could carry out many of these tasks well without the amount of training he has received. What may indeed be true about preaching from the pulpit becomes generalized to almost any area in the congregation’s ministry in which the Word is shared. One pastor offered this comment:

The issue is our controlling nature ... If it happens in my church, I better be on top of it, because I am responsible for it. I’m unwilling to let lay people just do things. A, they are going to screw up. B, I don’t have time to train them, and C, I’m going to have to answer for their screw-ups. And so in that model, you just shrink the amount of time for the most important thing you do every week. I think that is a challenge for most pastors, is to find a model of ministry that really is the Ephesians 4 outline. I realize that you can abuse that dramatically.

A good concern for ministry *quality* (faithful sharing of the Word) becomes something that paralyzes the *quantity* of ministry that can be done as many supporting ligaments of the body are in danger of atrophying without a focused attempt to equip them for fuller use. The pastor’s desk becomes the place where good ministry ideas go to die. Chasing his own tail day after day in all kinds of ministry details that could have been shared with others, the pastor not surprisingly finds himself joining the apostles in Acts 6 with little or no time to devote to prayer and the ministry of the Word. His concern for getting the Word out faithfully and well easily morphs into the exact opposite in his own ministry! To put it in a way that should send shivers down the back of any Lutheran pastor, while teaching Lutheran in the doctrine of church and ministry, his practice may smack of Roman Catholic clericalism and hierarchicalism (Stott 1982, 205-7).

There is really an additional personal issue at work here as a sub-current. Personality tests routinely administered on our campus, and similar tests used in the field by parish assistance consultants, show that those attracted to the WELS pastoral ministry tend to love to provide hands-on ministry to hurting souls. They tend not to be so strong in skill sets that related to equipping others to share those ministry tasks. In other words, many of our pastors find their greatest joy not so much in equipping the saints to serve others, but in serving the saints directly themselves. Obviously, such a pastoral heart that is eager to serve people in their time of need is a rich blessing to be desired in parish pastors. However, it becomes a problem when a pastor insists on doing all (or almost all) that hands-on one-on-one ministry when, especially as a congregation grows, it hinders the training of lay leaders to assist that work and other critical duties of his parish ministry. It also tends to exaggerate a pastor-focused ministry style for the whole congregation, robbing God's people of the sense that they too are ligaments of support for the body (Eph 4).

There may also be another less-than-pious and selfless motivation at work here. There is another strong reinforcement often at work to keep a pastor focused in his time on providing direct one-on-one ministry. It is often faithfulness in such ministry activities that brings many if not most of the accolades from members to the pastor. The shepherd will be dearly loved by his sheep if he shows himself willing to drop everything else to be present whenever any individual member of the congregation expresses a spiritual need. Of course, perhaps what he may not even realize himself is how much ministry is left undone—ministry that would allow the Word to impact even more people—because he fails to train others who have gifts for such encouraging and comforting ministry with the Word.

Of course basking in such accolades means feeding—perhaps unwittingly—a two-headed beast. If the congregation grows to such a size that he can no longer remain sane if he tries to get to all of those crying out in need, many seeking a prime piece of the pastor’s time won’t get it—at least not as quickly as expected. Then it’s not accolades but complaints the pastor will hear. Either way, his schedule is almost completely dictated by the cries of others. He has failed to consider that “there is a difference between being a servant and being servile” (Craddock 1990, 73).

We have already crossed the boundary that acknowledges that the problem of grasping the importance of Ephesians 4 and Acts 6 is not merely on the side of the clergy. Many parishioners have come to expect that the pastor must be the one who carries out all the ministry of the Word in the congregation. At times the same fear that works in the hearts of the pastors is at work in the hearts of WELS lay members. They too value the Word being shared faithfully and accurately (that’s good!), but they draw the debilitating conclusion that only the “professionals” can correctly handle the Word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). In workshops and seminars I’ve done in the past focused on helping parents treasure the privilege of sharing the Word with their children at home, this challenge was often not far from the surface. In one workshop, when I mentioned the importance of fathers and mothers sharing the Word in their homes, one lay leader rather angrily retorted, “That’s why we send our kids to the Lutheran elementary school.”

What happens when all of this is added together? Mix in one part pastoral leadership that typically prefers (and delights in) hands-on sharing of the Word. Season to taste with a congregation that sees the role of Christians as being almost exclusively on the

receiving end of sharing the Word. Bake for several generations and out of that oven pops a recipe that quickly robs the pastor of any time for serious study of the Word or formal or informal CPE in any area of his ministry.

This is probably the most challenging barrier in this whole project to serious CPE in preaching or any other area of ministry. But there are many reasons for hope that this too is changing in our midst. First, a critical saving grace is that we know and confess with our mouths that this is not the biblical pattern for ministry. The second key is that equipping the saints has been a stated critical emphasis of WLS for the past two decades. The third key is that more and more of our younger pastors have been raised in a much more interactive and collaborative culture. Not only biblically, but culturally, the concept of sharing the responsibility for gospel ministry between pastor and people seems to resonate with them.²⁶ Finally, I also heard a consistent message from many lay people that they want to enjoy more the kind of partnership in the gospel Paul particularly noted in Philippi (Phil 1). One layman almost pleaded with pastors to do so!

Use them (the laity) They want to. Many of them ... want to be involved. They don't know how Use your lay people. Challenge your lay people. Are they going to make mistakes? Absolutely—mistakes in the sense that something is going to go amiss in something that happens. But so what ... you didn't send them out purposefully to make something bad happen. It didn't work. So ... back up and do something else.

²⁶ I make this statement even though a well-respected author and president of another seminary actually feels that the younger generations of pastors he sees trust lay leadership even less. He is convinced that the general lack of trust in institutions among the rising generations is affecting this area of church life. As much as I respect this stellar homiletician and Christian leader, I hope that here he is not among the prophets.

No matter how large and complex this particular challenge is in our synod's culture, I pray God may give me both boldness (2 Tim 1:7) and patience (2 Tim 4:2). Boldness that addresses the issue frankly and forthrightly as I call all of us to live out our biblical convictions more clearly in how we order our ministries. Patience which understands that patterns established over generations will typically not disappear overnight (and often when they do—the change brings more damage than help!).

What is apparent in all of this is that the issue of time management is a Hydra with no shortage of necks at which to aim. But aim we must if time saved for planned and organized study is going to become the norm for more and more WELS pastors. Of course, for the purpose of this project, the prayer behind all this learning to manage ourselves more wisely in the use of time is that more and more pastors take and use a generous portion of the time cleared in their schedules to study the Word more thoroughly both devotionally and professionally. Can you picture ever-bearing fruit trees in God's garden (Ps 1)? That is the emphasis of the next key issue!

Key Issue 4: Spending Sufficient Time Mining the Gospel for Self and Others

This key issue must begin with the importance of the personal devotional life of the pastor. Immediately we run into the first of two false dichotomies that must be overcome in this issue. Some pastors, who may be too busy for their own good, and who allow personal time in Word and prayer to begin to disappear from their daily routines, can be very quick to suggest that those encouraging personal devotional time are laying on pastors needless guilt trips since they surely spend plenty of time in the Word for preaching, Bible classes, and

countless other duties of ministry. Several years ago, in the process of having senior systematics students develop a study and devotional plan for their first year of ministry, I had asked the students to correspond with active pastors in the field and ask them for ideas on how to keep up with study and devotional life in the hectic schedule of parish ministry. Perhaps I should have seen it coming, but the response from pastors was not always positive. Here was one response received by a student:

Thanks for asking. I'll be completely honest ... I don't have any daily devotional plans. I run five days a week and pray and meditate while running. I am reading personal growth material that I need at this time in my life. I try to read Luther about ten minutes a day four days a week. I read the Quarterlies. I study the Word for class preparation and sermon preparation. While I agree that it's a good thing to have a daily devotional plan, I am also uncomfortable with the guilt trips laid on pastors that if they don't spend X amount of minutes each day reading a special Scripture portion, they are less than a God-approved pastor. That's my story.

So would I be doing nothing but laying "guilt trips" on pastors by urging a strong devotional life? If the program designed here is trying to shame pastors into saving time for the Word and prayer in their personal life, then I have reason to reorganize this part of the plan. But if I allow the idea to remain that the need for personal time for study of the Word and prayer can be completely negated because a pastor is already involved in Scripture study for his ministry, then I could easily be allowing significant harm to the faith of pastors and their preaching. Certainly there is much truth that the wise pastor approaches all study devotionally. He is always wise to allow the text to approach him as an individual child of God in need of law and gospel before considering what it has to say to others. "Pertaining to the minister's own faith journey, it is the reflection of many who have spent a lifetime in ministry that of all the exercises for keeping athletically fit one's Christian values, perspectives, and faith, none excels that of preparing and delivering sermons" (Craddock 1990, 23). That

reflects the same insight Paul asked Timothy to ponder. After urging him a few verses earlier to “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 2:1), Paul asks Timothy to ponder the application to himself of this proverbial statement: “The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops” (2 Tim 3:6). Who of us who has preached has not experienced the exhilaration of being fed well by a text?

But, that still does not make devotionally focused study of the Word for our various ministerial duties a replacement for personal devotional study. For every time we as pastors have known the exhilaration of enjoying a text devotionally—perhaps even forgetting we were preaching on it for a time—we also know what it’s like to feel the pressure of getting a sermon (or Bible class) done in an all-too-short window of time. Our focus in study is quickly drawn to what we can mine from the Word for the sake of others. We can then quickly fall into a merely professional handling of the Word. That means our soul remains thirsty in the midst of dispensing the water of life! Since falling into this trap of merely professional handling of the Word can so easily happen to the public minister, woe to the preacher who does not have a parallel personal devotional life at work to call him out of his growing stupor. Without that, the “confirmation equals graduation from the Word” syndrome that WELS pastors so often bemoan among the laity becomes a reality for the pastor. He may have twelve more years of study under his belt since eighth grade, but the devastation of graduating from growth in the Word does no less damage.²⁷ In fact, since he is a leader of other sheep, the devastation has the potential of multiplying exponentially!

²⁷ By far the most common time for the rite of confirmation in our congregations is at the end of eighth grade.

If I required another wake-up call to realize this is a challenge for pastors—and especially young pastors—the survey provided it. Among the youngest pastors in my survey (2003 graduates of WLS), 50 percent reported that they took time for personal devotions less than three days per week. And even when time was set aside, 78 percent of those young pastors devoted thirty minutes or less to such devotional study. These youngest of pastors in my survey by far spent fewer days in personal devotional study than the older pastors (1983 and 1993 graduates), and when they did study, it tended to be for shorter periods of time.

What can explain this discouraging disparity among the younger pastors? Daniel Deutschlander makes the case eloquently that the youngest of pastors is most susceptible to the pastoral Messiah complex (Deutschlander 2008, 203-4). Fresh from seminary, they want to prove to their congregations what eager servants they are. They are sure that with devoted hard work, they will shortly solve all the problems of the church militant. More and more the tasks of ministry consume their day, and the beckoning pages of the Scripture that can keep their zeal burning brightly (and comfort them when the realities of kingdom work this side of heaven strike them) gather dust on their desk—other than for professional purposes.

I would only add one additional cause for this phenomenon. It would seem to work hand in hand with Deutschlander's point. I believe the downside of something very good about our training of pastors is also at work. Our seminary's curriculum is weighted strongly toward a thorough study of the Word. Our curriculum is not dominated by practical how to's in various areas of ministry. It is dominated by the goal of filling our students up to overflowing with the gospel of Jesus Christ so that they may be full of faith for the salvation of their own souls and full of zeal to dispense that gospel to others. Of course, what was never

intended was that our students would leave here and forget how they were filled so full of grace and truth in the first place. Too easily, they leave behind that immersion in the Scriptures as they grow busy with ministry tasks. For a time, they can live off what they received in seminary. But they may not recognize what is wrong when they begin to run on empty. As the months and years pass, the survey seems to indicate that most pastors begin to realize that output without input eventually equals bankruptcy. But woe to the pastor who doesn't realize what he is doing to his own faith! Burnout that leads to resignation easily follows. But there is something even worse. He carries out a ministry more and more devoid of the real zeal the Spirit produces through the Word and finds counterfeit strength to continue in ministry—all the while perhaps leading his people down the same potentially deadly path!

So why is personal devotional life such a critical companion to the study of the Word that is required by ministry duties? While Satan knows how to frustrate that focus here also by leading us into empty formality and dull routine, the beauty of personal devotional study is that its sole focus is on feeding the pastor's own soul. This is time that has been set aside each day because I am a sinner/saint who needs the rebuke and comfort of the Word of God. There is something to be said for a time of devotional study of the Word that has no other primary purpose than to allow me to try again to measure how "wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph 3:18) for *me*. It is true that blessings for my people can be gained here as well as a wonderful byproduct of personal study. Yet what this is all about is providing opportunity for the Spirit who lives in that Word (John 6:63) free access to our hearts so that "after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Cor 9:27). In our personal devotional life, we are taking our Savior up on his gracious

invitation when he winsomely invites us to seek his gracious face (Ps 27). What is more, having listened to his Word that convinces us that we are dear children of our dear Father in heaven, we can then in the quiet of that moment on our Abba's lap take him up on another invitation to cast all our cares on him who cares for us (Ps 51:10). What could be more wonderful than this: the Creator of the universe is willing to hold a private conversation with me whenever I open his Word and whenever that Word enables me to open my mouth in prayer that flows from faith? In the midst of the ministry rush that wants to fool me into thinking of the Word as merely a tool of the pastoral trade, this time powerfully reminds me day after day that I do not live by bread, or busyness, alone, but by every word that comes from my Father in heaven (Matt 4:4). If the incarnate Son of God considered important frequent quiet times to commune with his Father (Luke 9:17, 29), why would I consider my need for such strengthening to be any less? Perhaps one of the most important insights for pastors to ponder about their devotional time is this: time for personal study and prayer is not some demand we fulfill to keep God happy with us, but it is a rich invitation to be filled to all the fullness of God (Eph 3:19) and to tap into the storehouse of blessings God has promised to those who ask, seek, and knock (Matt 7:7).

But there is one more byproduct blessing that the flock enjoys when their shepherd himself is personally grazing in the green pastures of the Word. The most important benefit sheep under my care may gain is not that some nugget of truth gained in my personal study may find its way into my preaching and teaching. Though that often may happen, that is not the greatest blessing the people receive from their pastor's regular devotional life. This blessing has nothing directly to do with the logos of preaching, but rather with its ethos. When

we work on sermons, we are rightly concerned about delivering a sermon whose logos is perfectly in line with Scripture. But God knows the task is bigger than delivering a sermon. He is at work to deliver the very life of the preacher as an eloquent sermon in its own right. God is at work to mold and shape me (not just my words) more and more into the image of his Son. In my one-on-one communion with God's law that kills and his gospel that gives life, God is at work to accomplish precisely that. One pastor captured this ethos-focused preaching blessing this way: "But I think sermons are the place to take out the jewel for the day... and you've got to make it in such a way that first they grasp it and then they take it into their lives. And the example of the pastor has to already have been showing them that by his lifestyle. So it has to be a telic note that is part of your life already." If the telic note of our preaching (the logos of preaching) is out of tune with the telic note of our lives (the ethos of our preaching), the disharmony between them more than we may know is at work to cancel our message. While I thank God that the Holy Spirit can and often has overcome such inconsistency between my preaching and my life, his preferred method is still to shape not only sermon but the sermonizer into ever-greater conformity with the message. Phillips Brooks, as he develops his thesis that preaching is truth through personality (Brooks 1919, 4), makes the point far more eloquently than I.

I must not dwell upon the first of all the necessary qualities [of the preacher], and yet there is not a moment's doubt that it does stand first of all. It is personal piety, a deep possession in one's own soul of the faith and hope and resolution which he is to offer to his fellow-men for their new life. Nothing but fire kindles fire. To know in one's whole nature what it is to live by Christ; to be His, not our own; to be so occupied with gratitude for what He did for us and for what He continually is to us that His will and His glory shall be the sole desires of our life, I wish that I could put in some words of new and overwhelming force the old accepted certainty that that is the first necessity of the preacher, that to

preach without that is weary and unsatisfying and unprofitable work, that to preach with that is a perpetual privilege and joy. (Brooks 1919, 38-39)

Here the beauty of the two (personal study and professional study) come together in clearest relief. In professional study our primary focus tends to shift at some point to the logos of our message. But in personal devotional study, God is at work to craft the ethos of the message by shaping the heart and life of the messenger. In our preaching, these two opportunities to be immersed in the Word engage in a beautiful and harmonious interplay.

What is needed by pastors in this area is both constant gospel-centered encouragement to see the beauty (not the burden) of their devotional time as well as a rich supply of methods and means to carry out their devotional study. Martin Luther's four strands (four questions) as shared with his barber, Peter, can be most helpful in devotional study. But as someone who has sought to weave those strands into my devotional life for more than twenty years, I also know that frequently I need to move to something else lest dull routine rob Luther's method of its vitality for heart and life. The key in any method of personal Bible study is that it slows down the reader sufficiently to compel him or her to ponder the Spirit's message. The objective and changeless external Word must be the focus. Otherwise we easily become mystics searching for God not in the mountain peaks of his Word but in the deep recesses of our own hearts. The spirit we find in the latter is often not so holy. It remains an unfinished task, as this CPE project moves forward into implementation, to gather from pastors (and others) as many wise and workable ideas for personal study as possible. I know how much I have gained from a bi-annual reading of the study and devotional

plans put together by senior systematics students.²⁸ The key is to find many different patterns for personal study and prayer that will work well for different personalities and learning styles while at the same time avoiding dull routine.

But now comes the equally critical issue of spending sufficient time immersed in the Word when preparing a sermon. Once the umbrella issue of managing oneself in the time God has graciously given has been addressed (issue three), perhaps here we might expect that no earnest pleading would be needed to convince pastors that it is critical to block out a copious amount of time for sermon work.

Indeed, my research indicates that WELS pastors seem to be slightly above average in the time they put into sermon work as compared to other pastors in the United States. In research published in 2002, the Pulpit and Pew Center of Duke University reported that the median Protestant pastor spends forty-six hours per week in all pastoral duties (excluding time for devotional and other theological reading). Those pastors devote 33 percent of that time to preparation for worship and preaching (<http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/clergyweek.html> accessed January 16, 2010). In number of hours that would translate into slightly more than fifteen hours devoted to worship and preaching. Assuming for the sake of comparison that 80 percent of those hours for worship and preaching are focused on preaching, that yields about twelve hours per week for preparing a sermon. In my research 47 percent of the WELS pastors in the survey indicated they spent more than fifteen hours in sermon work from the time they

²⁸The professors in our systematics department teach courses on a two-year rotation. I spend one academic year teaching second year students (middlers) theology, anthropology, and Christology, and then in the following year I teach seniors soteriology and eschatology. That is why giving feedback to seniors on their personal study plans is only a biannual privilege of my teaching.