

began the text study until they were ready to step into the pulpit. If we add into the total those who indicated that they spent on average “ten to fourteen hours,” then we find that 87 percent report spending at least ten hours per week on their sermon.

That is encouraging, but that doesn't mean there isn't a challenge here to meet. Pastor after pastor reported in both interviews and surveys the pressure he feels to be busy with everything else but his sermon. And right here we meet the second critical false dichotomy in this fourth key issue. The false dichotomy is this: seeing time spent in text study (and other sermon work) as if it were in opposition to time spent with his flock (or with the sheep not yet of the flock). While the tension of balancing the two will never fully leave the pastor's heart, it can be incredibly unburdening to a pastor to recognize clearly that time spent in the text *is* important time spent serving his people. That is just as true as it is that time spent with his people can be critical text study time. These two are not opposed to each other but feed off each other. The pastor takes his people with him as he enters into his study, and in an equally important way the pastor takes his text with him as he goes out to minister to his people. The president of Concordia Seminary St. Louis, Dale Meyer, relates the daily conversations that happen in ministry (*homiliae*) to the sermon on Sunday morning (*homilia*) as it applies to proclaiming relevant law and gospel.

Good sermons are born from *homiliae*, planned and unplanned contacts, pastoral and social interactions with your people wherein you see and hear firsthand the effects of the Law. In hospitals and nursing facilities, in homes and in office sessions, at wedding receptions and funerals, at sports events, the health club, parties, everyone has a story to tell. They'll tell where they're hurting. They'll let us know if they have Pharisaic pride. They'll show us if they have Epicurean indifference. They love to tell their stories, and the church has trained us to listen spiritually. Out of those conversations, out of *homiliae*, comes an appropriate, tailored preaching of the Law on Sunday mornings. ...

Pastoral oversight means that someone has been called not only to lead the liturgy but to be with ... the ... faithful in the *homiliae* of daily life outside of the church building. The result? In the sermon that shepherd, that overseer, knows where to pour in the balm of the Gospel. (Meyer 2001, 16, 23)

When kept in proper balance, far from hindering sermon work, work among the people to whom God has called us gives us more acute eyes to see and ears to hear when we do sit down to study and meditate on our text. Just as the Word of God was never spoken in a vacuum but was God's response to real needs of heart and life of the original hearers, so we do well not to study in a vacuum. When our head and heart are full of images of our own real spiritual needs, and the needs of those we serve, that's when we learn to see so clearly how strongly and beautifully God does address the real issues of life. Our time in the midst of the people often allows our sermon work to be more efficient and fruitful. "Common purposes and commitments greatly enable communication, and the minister who sits at her desk already weary from the exercise of mission is more open and ready for dialogue with her apostolic predecessors than the preacher who, guilty and embarrassed, interrupts idle hours to study the text for Sunday" (Craddock 2001, 112).

But it is usually not arguments on the "spending time with people side" of the equation that are needed for the pastor who loves his people. For most pastors, especially those whose people skills may trump their study skills, the stronger encouragement may need to come on the side of seeing sermon study time as time well spent for the sake of the flock. This well-known fact still bears constant repetition: nowhere else does the typical pastor have the opportunity to touch the hearts of more of his people more often with the Word than from his pulpit. And when one considers the sad fact that all too many of God's people appear content to allow the minimum weekly allotment of the Word to be what is fed them from the

pulpit, the importance of having solid food to offer rises up even more. One seminary president, in his interview, expressed this conviction about what the laity of the typical congregation would say when it comes to the amount of time their pastor spends in preparing his sermon.

The solution ... is to get your congregation on board to see [the time it takes to put a good sermon together]. ... I don't think there is any group of lay people who actually analyze a pastor's time that would come up with the conclusion, "No, pastor, we want you to spend 5 percent of your time devoted to a study of the Word, so that we can hear good sermons." My sense is that most lay people would say, "The most important thing you do is preaching, and we need good sermons, Pastor, so let's up that percentage of time." I think if you could get lay people enlisted and say, "OK, if that's the amount of time you want me to spend, let's talk about ways of implementing that so that this other stuff doesn't get neglected too."

The layman from the Delphi group who asked to be interviewed confirmed what that seminary president sensed. "To me that hour on Sunday is your time when people aren't going to talk back to you, it's your time to instruct, it's your time to preach the wonderful message of salvation and charge up the people to get through the next six and a half days. It's gotta be the most important hour of the week, for a pastor, it would seem to me."

That the pastor is loving those he serves when he spends hours pondering his text and crafting his sermon, is true even from the perspective of the "other sheep" not yet in the fold. As Thom Rainer came back to again and again, 90 percent of the formerly unchurched maintained that it was the pastor and his preaching which influenced them to join the church they did. Other than the doctrinal commitment of the church (a key factor for 88 percent), no other factor was mentioned by even half of the respondents (Rainer 2001, 21). How foolish to spend hours seeking the lost, only to have them show up in worship for a hastily assembled sermon that confirms in their minds how irrelevant the church really is. Rainer points out that his research indicates that churches that consistently reach the lost have pastors who spend on

average five times as long on their sermons than what he has found to be the national average (Rainer 2001, 184). No pastor who loves the lost can ignore the implications.²⁹

The fruits of a consistently large quantity of time devoted to preaching will be manifold. First of all, it would allow the pastors of the WELS in a much less hurried way to make the most of one of the richest gifts God has given to us through our church body: the gift of facility in the original languages of Scripture. No student arrives at WLS without a working knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. In fact, more than 90 percent of our students come to their first exegetical or homiletical course with at least eight semesters of Greek and at least four semesters of Hebrew. While most do not have the God-given aptitude to be Greek or Hebrew scholars, no pastor leaves WLS without at least as much facility in the biblical languages to be able to do a thorough text study in the original languages, and, when pondering the exegetical conclusions being drawn in commentaries or similar study resources, to be able to recognize the difference between sound and unsound exegetical insights. Our goal is to produce pastors/theologians who can study a text in order to say with confidence: “This is what the LORD says!”

The challenge, of course, is to maintain those skills. The survey reveals that these skills are not unaffected by the pressures to cut corners in sermon work when the time crunch is on. The survey indicates that the regular use of Greek and Hebrew is affected quite

²⁹ Rainer indicates that his research shows the difference to be an average of twenty-two hours on sermon preparation for pastors of churches that have a track record of reaching the lost compared to an average of four hours for pastors whose churches are not reaching the lost. Without disputing the reality that such a difference can be observed, I have not been able to find another survey in which the average time on sermons for the comparison group of pastors is as low as Rainer indicates.

dramatically the more years a pastor has been out of seminary.³⁰ Following is a chart that traces patterns in the use of the original languages in sermon study over the years of ministry.

Table 1. WELS pastors' use of original languages in sermon preparation

Percentage of time original language is used in preparing a typical Sunday sermon	Pastors with 5 years of ministry experience	Pastors with 15 years of ministry experience	Pastors with 25 years of ministry experience
Greek: > 75%	80%	78%	25%
Hebrew: > 75%	70%	67%	25%
Greek: < 50%	20%	0%	50%
Hebrew: < 50%	20%	23%	75%

What seems to be clear is that the further pastors get away from their seminary training the less frequent is the use of the original languages. The real drop-off occurs at some point between fifteen and twenty-five years of experience, and the drop-off is more severe for Hebrew. The more significant drop in the use of Hebrew may be true for at least two reasons. First, the survey shows that pastors preach on New Testament texts at least twice as often as

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It is probably also significant that the more experienced pastors in the survey were much more likely to be serving in larger congregations (where the press of ministry duties can easily be even more intense). For instance, the percentage of pastors out five years serving in congregations larger than 600 souls is only 20 percent, for those out fifteen years that moves slightly higher to 24 percent, but for those out twenty-five years that number jumps to 50 percent. Here it may also be helpful for the reader to know that WELS congregations tend to keep track of their size by two numbers. We tend to count souls, which would include all baptized members of the congregation, and communicants, which would list all those who have completed thorough instruction in Luther's Small Catechism (usually by the end of eighth grade). While congregations do also track average worship attendance, I did not ask that in the survey. That was an oversight on my part.

Old Testament texts. Second, in college, Greek was studied for twice as many semesters as Hebrew. The initial competence in Greek was typically stronger than in Hebrew.

Lest we get lost in the numbers, ponder what happens for the pastor when he strengthens his practice of using the biblical languages that were entrusted to him in his schooling. When he does not feel the press of time so that all he can do is give the Greek and Hebrew a passing glance (or no glance at all), there are wonders untold just waiting for him to discover in the rich pictures of the original language. One veteran pastor put it this way: “Sometimes you look at the Greek words—some of them just scream at you. I’ve been at this for fifteen years but you just floor yourself when you get in the languages something else just jumps off the page. That’s just an amazing thing.”

Before moving on to other fruits of saving sufficient time for text study, right here it would be beneficial to note briefly some tools that have recently become available in the WELS that lend significant help to those pastors who would like nothing more than to scrape the rust off their Greek and Hebrew skills. WLS has recently developed interactive CDs and accompanying print resources intended primarily to help pastors in the field teach beginning Greek and Hebrew to non-traditional pre-seminary students (the emphasis is on teaching first- or second-generation ethnic minorities within their culture). A wonderful side benefit of these materials is that they can serve as tools for pastors to make a fresh start in using the original languages. Martin Luther College, the pre-seminary training school for our traditional students and majority culture second-career students, has developed an annual one-week summer program for refreshing Hebrew skills, as well as an intensive week of advanced Hebrew studies for those desiring to take their skills to the next level. In the summer of 2010, MLC will also

offer a refresher course in biblical Greek. With all of these resources readily available, the first step as this program moves forward would be to do all we can to make sure our pastors are aware of these resources to strengthen language skills.

But now we need to consider all the other wonderful fruit that can be produced when pastors safeguard sufficient time for sermon preparation. When the text has sufficient time to work on our own hearts—when the press of having to produce a sermon does not come crashing down immediately to call to a halt meditating and pondering a text—perhaps the most important fruit of all is the genuine emotion and zeal that come from hearts killed and brought back to life by the sword of the Spirit. Pastor after pastor in interview and survey gave abundant testimony to how true that is. One pastor noted, “When you are excited about delivering that sermon, you show the true joy that you have experienced in the preparation. I think that is going to come out in the delivery.” Another added, “If I have the time to do a really proper text study, where I can just sit down and spend some time in that text ... that to me is the best gift if I can do that, and ruminate on those words awhile before I’m actually forced to commit them to some kind of product. I find that the preaching is more from the heart and it’s more visceral and it’s all the good things that you want it to be.” Still another commented, “Immerse yourself in the Word and the excitement and joy and love and passion comes. Each week I am excited to walk before God’s people and share with them the profound Word of God and what it means for them in their life.” One other added this: “Preaching and sermon prep is intense, exciting, and invigorating—but it can also become tedious and stressful. 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?”

The last comment reminds us what is at stake here. How much of the dullness and tedium of preaching felt by both preacher and people is a result of the fact that the first heart to be left cold was the preacher's? We bore ourselves long before we bore others. But when the preacher has provided the Holy Spirit with sufficient time to work through the Word on his own heart, he typically won't have to wonder what to proclaim to his people nor will it be delivered as just so many bits and bytes thrown together on his computer screen. Most failures in the pulpit in the area of a lack of genuine emotion are not really delivery issues! The failure occurred behind the study door. And the solution is there as well as the preacher takes time to wrestle with the Word for his own soul and for the souls of his people.

When there is sufficient time for sermon study, closely related to the wonderful fruit of more genuine emotion in preaching is the fruit of greater richness and depth in the sermon. This richness and depth tends to show itself not only in more accurate and insightful explanation of the text but also in application of the law and gospel of the text to the hearers in ways that penetrate far beyond all-too-well-worn maxims and simplistic generalities. When time for sermon study is scant and another Sunday service approaches on the schedule, one pastor believes he often has seen that reflected in errors of expounding the text that would have been obvious to the preacher if he had dug a bit deeper into the background and context of the text. Another noted that when time is short, the tendency for him and too many others is to grab on to the first thing in the text that happens to catch his attention. With the clock ticking, he forms and fashions that one idea into a passable sermon, and whether or not that is really the heart of the text will no longer be an issue. All that counts at that moment is having something relatively worthwhile to say. Phillips Brooks has some strong words for us when we find such trash being passed off as true biblical treasure.

The simplest of all causes of failure [for ministers is] the same that brings failure in every department of life. That cause is mere unfaithfulness, the fact of men's not doing their best with the powers that God has given them. I think that it is hard to believe how common this trouble, underlying all troubles, is in the minister's life. I want to urge it upon you very earnestly. You watch the career of some man who does not seem to succeed. You know his piety; you recognize his intelligence; you make all kinds of elaborate theories about what there is in his peculiar character that unfits him for effectiveness; you dwell on his fastidiousness, his reserve, the wonderful sensitiveness of his nature. You picture him to yourself writing exquisite sermons, full of thought, which the people are too coarse to comprehend. And then, with this picture of him in your mind, you come to know the habits of his life, and all your fine-spun pity scatters as you learn that, whatever other hindrances there may be, the hindrance that lies uppermost of all is that the man is not doing his best. His work is at loose ends; he treats his people with a neglect with which no doctor could treat his patients and no lawyer his clients; and he writes his sermons on Saturday nights. That last I count the crowning disgrace of a man's ministry. It is dishonest. It is giving but the last flicker of the week as it sinks in its socket, to those who, simply to talk about it as a bargain, have paid for the full light burning at its brightest. And yet men boast of it. They tell you in how short a time they write their sermons, and when you hear them preach you only wonder that it took so long. (Brooks 1919, 100-1)

How much better to provide to God's people the best and brightest of that week's jewel from the Word! Instead of the deadly Saturday night special, what if what we deliver to them is the fruit of hours of study wisely sprinkled amidst active ministry? What if more and more the depth and insights of a rich harvest gathered from each unique text replace the grim gleanings of the canned and trite repetitions of what lies on the surface of any and every text? Yes, this will never cease being a struggle in the real world battlefield of the parish. Satan hates it when the hearts of the shepherds are invigorated by breathing deeply from the fresh, heavenly air of rich scriptural insights, and he hates it when we deliver that vivifying fresh air from the text to the hearts of our people. Certainly it is truth that we will never exhaust the depth of the wonders of a single text. That is part of the agony of preaching. But the pursuit of the goal is just as certainly part of the ecstasy of preaching.

Of course, even here there is a danger to avoid. Having plumbed the depth of a text for hours, the temptation can be to try to fit into any one sermon everything we have gained in our study of that text. We can easily fail to recognize the key difference between giving people a drink from the water of life and sticking a fire hose in their mouths and blowing them away! The preacher has failed to make the difficult and heartrending choice of what to focus the people's attention on this time and what to leave on the cutting room floor for another time. Instead, he takes the path of far lesser resistance and seeks to deliver in summary fashion all the fruits of his labor, soothing his conscience all along that it was the Spirit, not him, after all, who saw fit to include all those insights in the text. Such sermons may even wow the congregation with the pastor's depth of learning, but having been asked by the pastor to try to focus on everything, they easily go home with nothing. One WLS homiletics professor, after listing language training as one of the strengths of preaching in the WELS, turned right around when asked about weaknesses and said this:

Language training. Because some guys don't make the transition from the text to the application of the text. They are spending too much time on little nuances when they should be working on applying the text to the people. ... That's true in a whole lot of things that a good thing can have a downside if you don't recognize that there are strengths and weaknesses in a good thing. I think, just in reading students' sermons, sometimes they get all wrapped up in minutiae and forget the [heart of the text]. ... It becomes a homily kind of thing, advanced Bible class, or whatever you want to call it.

Helping pastors with the vital step of text analysis—leading to a clear and crisp single focus for that sermon—is crucial.

One last wonderful fruit that comes from giving sermon work sufficient time has been hinted at before when speaking of Thom Rainer's research. The pastor who loves the lost can rest assured that he is not necessarily neglecting evangelism when he devotes a

sufficient quantity of quality time to his preaching. The fruit of sufficient time spent crafting a good sermon is double when it comes to reaching the lost. First, parishioners who are regularly well fed in worship are moved by that rich feast of the gospel to be more eager to bring along unchurched or dechurched friends and relatives. Conversely, will they be eager to invite others to worship if they are already bored to tears by the typical sermon? Second, when the unchurched do cross the stained-glass threshold, if the pastor has been busy mining the treasure of God's Word during the week, those guests will hear a sermon delivered with genuine emotion that lays the Word before them with clear import for heart and life.³¹ Such authenticity and relevance is winsome, inviting unchurched guests to ponder what is being said. What happens then, of course, is the Spirit's business!

An unmet challenge for this key issue is gathering sufficient tools and ideas to help pastors plan out how to save sufficient times for sermon work. The ongoing research mentioned in the third key issue (gathering multiple templates for how to plan ministry time) will certainly be helpful here. But one specific challenge in setting aside time for sermon work is that different personalities and learning styles among pastors may affect how best to set such time aside in the weekly calendar. Some, like John Stott, seem to be able to thrive by gathering up bits and pieces of time for sermon work that, by the end of the week, prove that the whole can indeed be greater than the sum of its parts (Stott 1982, 204). However, several pastors interviewed find such a scattering of time almost worse than no time. They prefer to

³¹ I am well aware that the phrase "stained-glass threshold" is not original with me. But I have heard it for so long in so many places, I have lost track of the path that would allow me to track down its original author. A Google search for that precise phrase found three hits, all of which also spoke of it as a familiar phrase. None identified the origins.

save larger chunks of time at key times during the week. Neither is right or wrong. But a wise pastor must find out where his inclinations lie and plan his week accordingly.

Key Issue 5: The Glorious Gospel Blessing of Being Only One Part
of the Body of Christ: Forging New or Better Partnerships
with Those in the Pew

This key issue will be handled together with the next issue because the two are so closely related.

Key Issue 6: The Glorious Gospel Blessing of Being Only One
Part of the Body of Christ: Forging New or Better Partnership
with Ministry Peers

These next two issues are being taken together for reasons that will be obvious even beyond the similar phraseology used above. I have often said when I was a parish pastor, and have repeated it frequently to my students, that we can easily die for lack of useful and informed feedback in the parish. Few in the congregation—perhaps none—have an intimate acquaintance with the full scope of our ministry. That makes it difficult to gain substantive feedback on strengths and weaknesses in our ministry, and perhaps nowhere may that be truer than in our preaching. While we may hear at the church door many a well-meaning “Nice sermon, Pastor!” we have a sneaking suspicion that those words often come from members who may be just too gracious to mention if we failed utterly that day in addressing their lives. While there may also be the occasional alligator who loves to chew up the pastor and his sermon and spit them both out before enjoying post-worship brunch at the local cafeteria, yet the criteria by which they often judge what we have proclaimed leaves us merely bleeding, not helped—and certainly not edified. With peers, the challenge is often that we don’t have

much exposure to the sermons of others, and, even when we do, the tendency may be to be too kind to point out obvious weaknesses in sermon construction and delivery. The goal of these two key issues is to provide ideas and tools to a pastor to help him design and develop a rich and varied network of members and peers from whom he can gain informed and honest feedback before, during, and after a sermon is preached.

How encouraging it was to find that many a pastor has done some fine needlework already in knitting for himself just such a supportive and helpful network of informed feedback. I must confess that it was here that I was led to repentance most regularly in my research. I had far too low an expectation for how many pastors would have already shown themselves willing to fight through their own defensiveness to gain honest feedback from their members and their brothers in ministry. I was delighted to discover the multifaceted ways that various pastors are partnering with members. That makes my task in these key issues relatively easy: for the most part I simply need to provide the public platform from which to trumpet their ideas to their brothers.

But there is a barrier here that must be overcome before the trumpet toccata begins. The key barrier to breach here is to help convince even more of my brothers in the WELS ministerium that the time (there's that issue again!) and effort of building this network is more than worth it. I am also convinced that the approach I take to this issue is once again critical. So much of the literature tends to approach such issues of feedback on ministry from lay leaders and ministry peers with the language of "accountability." The often-repeated argument is that we need such accountability structures to help us stay honest in our efforts in ministry. While there is certainly a place for such a curb of the law to help me crucify my lazy sinful

nature, Lutheran pastors will be especially suspicious of that which seems to say that unless someone is looking over my shoulder that I won't perform in the ministry. They are concerned that the power of the gospel is being shortchanged in the process. It is fair to say that WELS pastors need to ponder whether at times our pious cries of "Legalism!" may really be hiding dangerous antinomianism. There is not a one of us for whom the helpful club (and mirror) of the law applied by someone else to our ministry could not be helpful to enable us to crucify daily that old sinful nature within us.

But could it also be that a Lutheran grace and gospel-predominance sensitivity is actually onto something here? It is often hard to find any author who approaches this issue of receiving feedback and encouragement from the gospel side of the equation. What is the gospel beauty to be found here? The beauty is the rich gift of grace it is that I am only one member of the body of Christ and that God surrounds me in a congregation and in a synod with many supporting ligaments. These others parts of the glorious body of Christ are there to help the whole body grow to maturity—and that includes me as a Christian, as a pastor, and in particular for this project, as a preacher.

Of those I read, John Stott, in *Between Two Worlds*, seemed to get closest to capturing the gospel-angle of this whole issue. "I am convinced that there ought to be more co-operation between clergy and laity in the process of sermon-making, and that this is required by the New Testament picture of the Church as the multi-gifted Body of Christ" (Stott 1982, 200). However, even as he begins to open our eyes to the rich vista of the glorious image of Christ's body, he brings us back down by saying what "ought" to be the case and what is "required" when we ponder the body of Christ. I don't believe my left arm—personifying it

for a moment—would speak of the “requirement” of working together with my right arm or that it works with my other arm primarily because it feels it “ought” to (although it is not sure why). My left arm—if it could think for itself—would more than likely view my right arm as a wonderful partner to allow him to accomplish many critical tasks that he could not do alone. Just as it is in the human body, one part of the body of Christ making use of the other parts isn’t chiefly a matter of “oughts” and “musts.” As Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 point out abundantly, it is a rich treasure of grace that I am just one gifted part of the body under my loving Head (Christ) and that he has seen fit to surround me with many other uniquely gifted supporting ligaments and sinews. It is one of the best gifts for this life that the risen Christ has supplied his church. It is primarily a gracious gift of gospel, not some dutiful requirement of law that I am required to use. Sadly it is a unique gift of my sinful heart to turn gracious gifts into baneful burdens. Every bit as much as I am called to be a gift of God to others as I see Christ in the needs of even the least of my brothers (Matt 25:40), so God would have me see my brothers and sisters as gifts he has given me to support me in my needs. One of my chief needs as a pastor is to proclaim the gospel ever more beautifully, and one of God’s richest gifts to accomplish that can be the support system of my brothers and sisters within the congregation and of my peers in ministry. The preacher eye is really quite blind if it says to the laity (or ministry peer) hand, “I don’t need you!” (1 Cor 12:21).

There certainly is another law side of the equation (in addition to the curb from which I can benefit and the rebuke I may need to hear). When we are the ones in position to offer help and support, we are commanded to use our gifts and resources to “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). Yet even that, when viewed correctly, is not burdensome (1 John 5:3).

But when we are the receiving end of enjoying the help and support and encouragement just waiting for us in those gifts and resources of our brothers and sisters in Christ, that is preeminently a pure gift of God's grace to us in Christ.

Of course, I can already hear the prime objection—to seeking lay input on sermons—that I too may once have raised. Many pastors may be convinced that the feedback many of God's people may give on a sermon might actually call a good sermon bad (perhaps because it spoke piercing law to a need of heart many in the pew weren't so eager to probe!) or a bad sermon good (perhaps because it was merely delivered in a lively and interesting style while it proceeded with a winning smile to butcher the text or let its wholesome meat rot uneaten). Yet little have we pastors recognized that this speck we believe we have noticed in our members' eyes may in fact be the tip of a considerable beam lodged squarely in our own! If my people lack the spiritual depth and discernment to grasp the difference between trash and treasure from the pulpit, the fault may actually lie to a great degree with those whose calling it is to edify them! Instead of writing off the rich assistance the flock can provide to their shepherd in his preaching, how much better to get busy with the fact that good sermons require discerning listeners.

It was here that I bumped into what should have occurred to me long ago. In an interview with a synodical official from another denomination, he pointed me to a pastor in his denomination who had recently completed his doctor of ministry project on this very issue. One of the fruits of that pastor's study was some Bible study tools that would enable his members to become more discerning consumers of sermons. A WELS pastor who was interviewed also has developed such a Bible study for his people. He mentioned that one

thing that sparked him to do this was the fifth or sixth time a member asked him, “Does the synod have books out of which you get your sermons?” Both men shared their Bible study resources with me. These resources could prove a rich benefit to many pastors looking for ways to produce more discerning hearers of sermons.

Before turning to even more specific ideas with how to partner with both lay people and ministry peers, perhaps one more pastoral point needs to be made. A key element at work throughout both of these key issues is that as a preacher I swallow my pride. As I invite feedback, what may come back are insights that reveal very real preaching weaknesses. One seminary professor from another denomination noted how protective he believes we pastors can be about our ministry and in particular our preaching. He mentioned how that hinders seeking feedback from others. “I’m the master of the kingdom, and don’t you tell me how to do it in my little kingdom.” In the survey, one pastor echoed the concern about building such barriers against feedback. “We pastors aren’t good at analyzing ourselves. We get defensive. School teachers are visited all the time for improvement. People in the business world have ongoing reviews. But many pastors aren’t willing to learn any new tricks. Good honest criticism that is helpful for building each other up is needed to keep us from being dry and boring and stale.”

There is little doubt that this is an area of great sensitivity for pastors—especially for those who work very hard at preaching. After hours of prayerful work we have given birth to a bouncing baby sermon that we then present to our little corner of God’s kingdom. It hurts to have someone point out that our baby may not be so beautiful.

To shift the analogy a bit, ignorance of preaching shortcomings is not bliss since I may be badly missing the target with my sermons. Since the payload we are delivering is the saving Word of God, and the target is the souls of people, it is absolutely critical that we not be merely discharging our preaching guns, but that as much as can be humanly discerned we are hitting the target. As those who live by the grace of Jesus, I do not need to fear even if what is revealed to me is a sin to confess. It should not come as a surprise that no one is sufficient in himself for this task of gospel ministry (2 Cor 2:16). It is God's grace that alone can make us capable of any task of ministry. That grace often comes clothed in the form of brothers and sisters in the congregation and in ministry who can offer us a godly rebuke where needed, and God's renewed strength and encouragement as well. At the same time, where and when our preaching is hitting the mark, seeking input from others will provide encouraging confirmation of that fact. If this approbation is received with thanks for God's blessing rather than self-centered pride, such encouragements can also prove to be a rich blessing. In all of this, it is critical for pastors to remember what the goal is. The goal is proclaiming the Word of God ever more clearly.

Now we turn to making wiser use of input from congregational members. As we turn our attention there, it would be helpful to note the difference between what was discussed under issue four and what is the focus here. In issue four, as time in study of the Word was discussed, we noted that ministry time among God's people is also a rich blessing to sermon study. We considered Dale Meyer's point that the many formal and informal *homiliae* of daily ministry prove a rich blessing to the *homilia* of Sunday morning (Meyer 2001). In those situations we are not typically consciously focused on our sermon. Here,

however, we are looking for intentional ways to turn contacts with God's people into tools to strengthen our preaching. Especially with the instruction on what to expect from a sermon that was referenced above, God's people can become a rich source of insights and encouragement for our preaching.

Perhaps the simplest way to divide up such opportunities is to speak of input that comes *before* and *after* the preaching event. In the reading, survey, and interviews, there were many and varied ways in which pastors are seeking input from their people before they preach the sermon. One of the simplest, mentioned by several pastors, was using the sermon text as a devotion with the sick or shut-in, or as the opening discussion for a committee or board meeting. From any feedback received, the pastor may gain insight into the questions and concerns that a particular text raises in the minds of God's people. He may also gain insight on the beauty of the text as spiritually mature members reflect back to him what they hear from that part of God's Word.

Several others spoke of using a formal Bible class as a venue for gaining input on the next Sunday's text. In the survey, 10 percent mentioned making use of Bible classes in one way or another to gain such feedback pre-sermon. In an interview, one pastor mentioned that he regularly used the final ten or fifteen minutes of a weekly midweek Bible study to read the text to those present and to hear their initial feedback and questions. The lay person who asked to be interviewed indicated that his pastor invites members to a weekly midweek Bible study that has no other purpose than to wrestle with the text that will become that next Sunday's sermon. This spiritually mature lay man, who served ably for years on the coordinating

council of my church body, could not speak highly enough about how much he and his wife enjoyed that class.

That is just the most wonderful religious and spiritual experience I have every week. It is just so good ... I can't emphasize it enough.... It's far more fascinating to me to do than to have a Bible class after the sermon and discuss it. Not that that's bad, but the richness of exploration, prior to the sermon, is what makes it so interesting.... We suggest things that he hasn't thought of, and he brings us suggestions that we hadn't thought of. That's of course the good part of it. The other thing that it does is that it makes the sermon so much more meaningful ... we kind of know where he's going with that.... We listen with more interest to see ... because when we get done on Thursday, our parting comment is, "Good luck! We gave you enough stuff for an hour, and you've got to condense this down to fifteen to twenty minutes." It's a huge challenge ... it's still his sermon ... we don't try to tell him what to say and how to say [it]. That's his business. We raise the issues. And we focus him on, "You gotta apply this sermon. You can't preach it and have people say "So what?.... You've got to put it into their laps and say this does apply to you." Some work better than others. No one hits a home run every game. We need to be appreciative of that. And we are.

Please notice in his words a potential wonderful byproduct of involving God's people in such study. They learn to appreciate even more the richness of the grace and wisdom of God that is found in every text. Those who are involved in that piece of sermon study can gain an entirely new understanding of the challenge of preaching.

Similar to the previous example, but a bit less formal, is what a mission counselor's young pastor is doing. That pastor seeks to meet with two or three people individually each week. He intentionally looks for people of different ages and spiritual maturity, even, if possible, asking to discuss the text with an unchurched person from the congregation's prospect list. He shares the sermon text with them and asks them for their questions and concerns as they hear it. Closely related, one other pastor shared the practice of his former associate, who uses an imaginary group. That pastor imagines four or five members with

varied backgrounds (young and old, male and female, new to the faith and mature in the faith) gathered in his study as he works on his sermons. He tries to envision what their questions and concerns would be as he studies the text and seeks to make pertinent application to their lives.

In the reading and research, others shared ideas of pre-sermon input that weren't quite so focused on getting questions and concerns about the text. One WELS pastor in his interview mentioned the practice of a large LCMS congregation that had been near his former parish. That congregation had assembled a team of members whose task it was to look for resources, current events, or other connections in the culture that resonated with texts or topics for future sermons. Another WELS pastor shared an idea he had yet to put into practice of organizing a similar sermon resource group. John Stott mentioned gathering a diverse focus group before beginning a sermon series on a topic (Stott 1982, 197).

Moving another step away from considering specific sermon series or a particular text, John Stott also mentioned his practice of gathering a book study group that would read bestsellers together in order to understand the thinking of the prevailing culture (Stott 1982, 194-5). They intentionally did not focus merely on religious books since one of the goals was to seek to understand the spirit of the times. In this way, a double blessing was realized. Not only would there be feedback from members as they helped the pastor to think biblically about the trends of the day, but in the reading, the preacher's ears were being directed toward those still outside the church. This can be a helpful way to remember that though we are not of the world, Jesus has also not yet seen fit to take us out of the world (John 17:13-16). As we listen to how others think and express the challenges of the age, we

learn ways to speak law and gospel in language understandable even to the unchurched who sit in our pews. One perceptive parish consultant emphasized why it is important for the pastor to do just this kind of reading and listening beyond theology. “[Pastors] don’t read newspapers. They don’t read any kind of contemporary literature outside of theology, so I think their world shrinks just a little bit.... Those are the things that people pick up on.”

One last pre-sermon feedback idea combines some of the best benefits from the previous ideas, both learning to understand the post-Christian culture around us and learning better what it is like to be a Christian living in the midst of that. We can call this idea “Take Your Pastor to Work Day.” One WELS pastor who did tag along to members’ jobs spoke quite bluntly about its impact on him. “Frankly, it scared the crap out of me. I never again will complain about being a parish pastor, because I don’t know how well I would deal with the tensions and realities, and sometimes the sheer stupidity of the people they have to interact with.” When this idea was shared with the lay member in his interview, he reacted with great enthusiasm.

Wouldn’t that be an eye-opener! And it would be a great opportunity for a member of a congregation to have some time, one on one, too.... We lay people ... go out on Monday morning and we put a totally different hat on in the sense that we go into a different world ... and it’s not a friendly Christian world, for the most part. It’s an unfriendly world, for the Christian, because there is every kind of activity and behavior displayed in that world that we know is incorrect. And ... you find yourself a little bit like Peter when, “You know him? Nope! He’s not my friend.” I think back to the days when I was in the health care field, you just run into all kinds of different things. We need to equip those people to deal with that in the workplace, in their homes ... etc., homemakers, just being able to work with people, mothers and spouses who are in the home.... I think pastors understand that it exists, but they don’t get down to the nitty-gritty of how it really exists. We talk in generalities.

As valuable as all such input before the sermon may be, there is also the other side: Gaining feedback from members after the sermon. The most common form in which this is done among WELS pastors appears to be asking seventh- and eighth-graders in confirmation class to write a sermon summary on what they heard the previous Sunday. Of pastors who answered the survey, 47 percent reported that they have at some time made use of such feedback on preaching. While I believe most pastors would say they do this to help students learn how to listen to a sermon, the process can give the pastor some valuable feedback on whether his sermons are hitting the target. As someone who used this form of feedback regularly for the last six years of my parish ministry, it was a humbling experience whenever a sizable majority of those immersed in catechetical study could not make heads or tails of a sermon. The problem was almost certainly not so much with their ears but with my mouth.

Other forms of post-sermon feedback mentioned frequently in interviews and in the survey included seeking out more formal (using a form designed for sermon feedback) and informal feedback from specific lay leaders. Several pastors in the survey also mentioned how much they valued their spouse's response. They mentioned how she was willing to give more honest and detailed feedback than the nebulous "Nice sermon, Pastor!" often spoken by members at the door. In addition, two interviewees mentioned an idea shared by a retired seminary professor. This professor, during his parish days, had randomly placed brief feedback forms into ten service folders. Those who received those forms randomly as they entered worship were asked to write down some quick feedback while the offering was being taken in church. The forms were then placed in the offering basket as it came by.

The overall impression I received in gathering post-sermon feedback ideas is that there are some interesting bits and pieces of feedback being gained. However, this activity seems to be the activity of a (sizeable) minority of pastors, and even where it is practiced, it is often sporadic and seems to need greater focus. In addition to the Bible studies mentioned above that could help people listen to sermons with more informed ears, there also seems to be a real need to provide pastors with better forms and patterns for gaining feedback from God's people. I have just begun during the research to gather some forms that various pastors use. As this project begins to play out, there is still need to gather more useful materials others may have created.

Before moving on to partnering with ministry peers, a powerful incentive for making the most of both pre- and post-sermon lay feedback needs to be mentioned. One of the most frequently-heard concerns about preaching is that it lacks relevance. Hearers wonder if the message being shared is really addressed to their hearts and lives. Hearers long to understand better the "so what" and the "now what" of the sermon. In my work with the Delphi group of lay people, this was the greatest weakness they identified in preaching in the WELS.

Certainly the number of pastors who refuse to concern themselves with such relevance in preaching is undoubtedly very small.³² But knowing that a sermon should be relevant to real needs in the hearts and lives of hearers, and actually accomplishing that in

³² There may be some pastors who believe that going much beyond the "what" of the text infringes upon the work of the Holy Spirit. They would maintain that the "so what" and the "now what" happen as the Holy Spirit works on hearts pondering the message they have heard. For some, this may also be a "new homiletic" over-reaction against preaching that is nothing but detailed "how to's" as, in almost Puritan fashion, almost every conclusion is drawn for the hearers. Once again, the answer is to find a wise middle ground.

preaching, remains a tremendous challenge. One former pastor and current seminary professor put the challenge this way:

[One problem with preaching is that we speak in] a language that is perhaps more reflective of the kinds of issues and questions that were brought up in the seminary or in the dogmaticians' day rather than the kinds of questions and issues that really our people struggle with—almost as if spirituality and Lutherans just floated through life like a duck on a pond. We don't engage with what's really going on in the everyday lives of our people.

I am convinced that the key to much more relevant preaching resides right here: in seeking regular and specific input on our preaching from those in our pews both before we preach and after we say "Amen." Is there any better way to connect with "what's really going on in the everyday lives of our people" than both to observe as we minister among them and to ask them? One seminary professor from another denomination states it quite pragmatically.

You want your people to listen to you on Sunday mornings, doesn't it make sense that you would listen to them the other five or six days during the week? If they only see you as a talking head, someone who is always willing to give them your opinion about thus and so, even if it is a wonderful righteous opinion about God's Word, but if they don't perceive you as being willing to listen to them, are they really going to be motivated to be listening to you?

In this discussion, we would also do well to remember that the sermon does not belong just to us. All God's people are invested in this proclamation of the Word. As Richard Caemmerer reminded the church with the title of his book *Preaching for the Church*, we not only speak for God to the people, we also speak for the people to God and to the world (Caemmerer 1959). The more those in our pew recognize our "Amen!" at the end of the sermon as their very own, the more the issue of relevance will be answered.³³

³³ There is a critical encouragement that has been missing from this section, but that deserves to be mentioned before completing this section on seeking lay input. While making regular pastoral visits to the homes of members is important for many reasons beyond preaching, the homiletical

There is, however, one significant caution to offer here. While input from God's people (and from the culture) needs to inform the specific direction of applications to heart and life in my sermon, I must not make the mistake of failing to allow the Word to say what it wants to say about the real needs of human hearts and the real answer of Christ alone. I do God's people no favors if I become so tuned in to the feedback of my people that I become fearful about confronting them with God's calls to repentance. The same seminary professor who urged us to be sure to listen so that people will listen to us added this very caution as he concluded his statement. "Obviously, we need the revelation of God's Word from the text itself, we don't just want to preach to their felt needs." While that may be "obvious," that doesn't make it easy. Many have begun listening to the expressed needs of their hearers with the best of intentions, only to end up presenting sermons that have more in common with secular counseling than biblical preaching. Only the Spirit can give us the courage to confront ourselves and our hearers with the bold honesty of the prophets. How important to remember with Timothy that "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim 1:7).

As we turn to making the most of the support and encouragement of ministry peers, the same distinction used above works here. There are many things that pastors are doing to help one another before preaching, and there are other methods of seeking assistance that happen after the sermon has been preached. When it comes to what is being done with

impact of this old pastoral custom should not be passed by in silence! The far-less-than-scientific observation of this writer is that in both of his parishes it was home visits that taught the congregation concretely that their pastor was concerned about them as individuals and as unique families. The ethos of the sermon is clearly in play. My only regret is that in my second parish, I never finished visiting all six hundred homes before my six years as their pastor ended.

peers before preaching, joint text study groups were by far the most common forum in which brothers worked with brothers to strengthen their sermon study.

Only here and there did there seem to be significant vestiges left of a “rugged individualism” among pastors that saw themselves as lone rangers rather than as partners with other pastors. Even some of the strongest statements speaking against getting together for text study gave indication that they could be persuaded to see benefit here. Here’s one conflicted comment made by a pastor in the survey as he described why he selected the choice “Haven’t done so—not interested” about doing sermon work with other pastors.

It is not that I have any opposition to this. Once again, I simply feel that if a man is able to give some honest effort to an exegesis, he will never be at a loss in developing a text. Perhaps I am a poor time manager, but I see the scheduling of time to do this as an issue. Once again, I am not at all against this in any way; in fact I appreciate that “iron sharpens iron.” But I have always felt that one of the strengths of our system of training pastors is that we try to equip men to be pastors who can work independently in the original languages.

It is certainly true that, if working together means pastors cease doing thorough text study on their own, they could be undoing years of training that sought to make them capable exegetes of Scripture. However, the challenge once again is helping more pastors develop “both/and” thinking. Working hard and thoroughly on independent text study is not an alternative to working with others. Individual wrestling with the text is often the key factor in making joint work even more profitable!

So what does make such joint study so profitable? I will let the voices of two pastors who were interviewed make the point.

We go through the language and start looking at the words. We’re kind of quiet, and then we put our heads together and talk about what the word means, and just talking it out with someone else seems to help so much, what one guy doesn’t say, the other guy does, and you put forth a pretty good theme and

parts and ideas.... That's been a great blessing for my personal ministry here, just to be able to come back all pumped up too ... some times more than others ... but I tell you sometimes you get into the word study and it just floors you ... and that is just so neat ... and you share the ideas back and forth, sometimes so many ideas that you spend half an hour trying to figure out theme and parts just because you want to narrow it down.

“Two heads, or three, are better than one. I think you get a lot of insights, modern insights that you aren't going to get, necessarily, out of a commentary, either dated or skewing the content, or one of these illustration books, canned illustrations.”

What is encouraging in all of this is that the younger pastors seem to crave this interaction with their brothers. A mission counselor, nearing retirement himself, commented in an interview on this culture shift among younger pastors. “In my age, everyone was kind of ... you were on your own. ... I think it is the whole small group mindset of younger people, and they like to interact with others.” His observation seems to be confirmed by the survey responses. Among the oldest pastors in the survey (twenty-five years of ministry experience), the positive and negative responses about working with others were perfectly balanced. For the middle group of pastors (fifteen years of ministry experience), 78 percent of the responses were positive. For the youngest group (five years of ministry experience), the positive responses increased to 82 percent. As long as pastors don't see this as a substitute for their own personal wrestling with Scripture, there is much wonderful potential for growth to be found here. Do you hear that beautiful clamor? It seems to be the sound of “iron sharpening iron” (Prov 27:17) growing louder and louder as it echoes from pulpit to pew!

There is a great variety in the format for the joint pre-sermon work among pastors. The variety first of all is in the size of the group that meets. In interviews and surveys, there

were pastors who met with just one, two, or three other WELS pastors in their area.³⁴ Others have found ways to erase the barriers of distance altogether as they gather for online live chats with a similarly sized group of pastors. As part of my research I decided to join one such group when I was preparing a sermon. While there were technological glitches along the way, I found that it was a surprisingly fruitful way to carry out joint study. Others get together in slightly larger groups such as pastoral circuits.

The variety is not only in size, but there is also variety in the frequency with which they gather to study. In general, the smaller the group, the most likely it is that they have agreed to meet every week or every other week. Larger groups tended to meet once a month or less. Still others agreed to work together weekly but only for a limited time as they worked on a sermon series.

That smaller groups typically met more frequently appears to hinge on two factors. Coordinating common schedule times for meetings becomes more problematic when the group gets too large. Also, coordinating common texts for preaching becomes more challenging when the worship plans of more congregations are involved.

In addition to pastors gathering to work on text studies, another form of joint study that could be listed here is joint study of a preaching book. The interviews and survey indicate that monthly circuit meetings are the most common venue for such joint reading. The usual pattern is that the group selects a book to read and then spends part of their meeting

³⁴What it means that those they study with are “in their area” is a rather elastic concept. For those very motivated to do this joint study, “in their area” may mean a drive of an hour or more, each way!

for several months discussing individual chapters or sections. Last year the editor of *Preach the Word* suggested that circuits study Fred Craddock's *Preaching* (Craddock 1990). The editor also put together online study materials to facilitate group discussion. The rather frequent mention of this joint study by those interviewed and surveyed would seem to indicate that a considerable number of circuits around the country participated. There were many other books listed by pastors in the survey and interviews that they had found helpful in personal reading and/or in joint study.

Here it would be useful to take note why studying a book together may be more beneficial than simply reading it alone. While certainly all potential for growth is not lost when one reads a book alone, there certainly seem to be sound educational reasons why reading through a book together with one or more ministry peers provides a superior learning environment. One seminary professor put it this way as he talked about a group of two other ministry peers with whom he often studied:

I don't think I've ever seen somebody making significant strides in their preaching merely on the basis of individual reading and study. If that were accompanying something else ... then yes. For instance, your second category, working together with one or more other pastors.... With my peers, it was maybe if the three of us talked, and somebody would say, "You really need to read this book by Tim Keller." Then we get away and read it, but it wasn't just reading it, in isolation, it was because we were doing this together.... I've seen that the individual study when it was tied to something else, seems to have a greater impact, now I know there are exceptional cases, people who just learn well, [but] I think the real transformation comes when the reading of the book is tied to conversation, discussion, with other pastors.

As we move to working together with peers post-sermon, there are again many options that pastors are pursuing. In interviews and survey, pastors mentioned their monthly circuit meetings as a venue for this kind of joint work. Several reported that this would be

tied directly to work that was done previously in joint text study. One pastor would bring a videotape (or preach “live”) of a sermon from the text they previously studied together. After viewing/hearing the sermon, the other pastors in the circuit would give feedback to that pastor on sermon content and delivery.

While this sounds wonderful in theory, many reported that they no longer follow this practice, or if they still do it, that it leaves something to be desired in how it is carried out. The key challenge identified without exception is the difficulty pastors find in opening themselves up to peer review and in giving substantive feedback to one another.

[My associate pastor] and I were just talking about that half an hour ago, that’s exactly what happens in our circuit, we just simply say, “Oh, that was good,” and that’s about it. I think people have ... I know they have comments ... because I’ll talk to guys and they will say, “I wanted to say something, but ... you know.” I think we feel comfortable with one another, I just don’t know why we don’t.

Again and again pastors struggled with how to give honest criticism that identifies homiletical weaknesses without tearing the preacher to shreds.

It is really heartbreaking to see something that could be so beneficial for pastors being stymied by this roadblock. While this is an area that deserves much more study on my part, what is clearly needed is to provide help in two directions. One direction would be to assist pastors who are being critiqued to be less defensive by helping them reframe such situations. It is critical that they remember the goal is to proclaim the gospel ever more clearly with as few distractions as possible. For the sake of the gospel, it is critical that I swallow my pride and find strength in God’s grace so that I truly listen to those who are trying to help me improve my preaching. In the other direction, those who are offering feedback need help to find a challenging middle ground. We cannot allow ourselves to be so paralyzed by the fear

of hurting the preacher's feelings that we cave in to dishonesty that refuses to clue a preacher in on weaknesses evident to all who hear him preach. On the other side, we must also avoid loveless criticizing that invites a brother to raise his defenses. Because eternal souls are being fed by this brother, we need to speak the truth. But that preacher is also our brother in Christ, so we need to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15).³⁵

Moving on to other examples of post-sermon feedback from peers, the next most common ideas listed by pastors included individually watching or reading the sermons of others. At times there would be some mutuality to the process. One pastor noted in the interview that he and his father and brother (all WELS pastors) regularly share their sermons with each other in order to learn from one another how to handle the same or similar texts. While the familial angle of that example was unique, there were others who regularly shared sermons with one or two friends. To their credit, almost everyone who noted this sharing of sermons stressed that they share sermons after all involved have completed that round of preaching. They did not want to grow accustomed to borrowing the ideas of others and preaching them as their own. I would add how encouraged I was to note that concern. Even

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Although outside the scope of this project, our seminary worship department must make this a key element of our agenda. Over the course of three years on campus, there will be detailed face-to-face feedback given from professor to student as well as from student to student on six required sermons. The patterns set on this campus are critical to helping criticism be received and given with grace when those students become pastors in the field. If they learn on our campus that giving and receiving such feedback is nothing but awkward and painful, then they will more than likely avoid such feedback in the ministry if at all possible. If instead they find on our campus that giving and receiving such feedback can be helpful and even uplifting, then it would seem much more likely that similar opportunities in the field might be welcomed. In addition, developing better resources to use in giving more formal feedback would also appear to be helpful in providing a balanced and comprehensive review of a brother's preaching that doesn't become too narrowly focused on one or two weaknesses. One fruit of this project may be discovering such feedback templates that have been developed by pastors in the field.

though the logos of the sermon might be great, severe problems arise in the pathos and ethos of preaching retail such material that was borrowed wholesale.³⁶

Several pastors reported partnering with others in ways that the “others” may not even be aware. Pastors reported subscribing to sermon mailing lists of preachers they admire. They also mentioned frequently downloading sermons that congregational Web sites make available online. One pastor shared this as his frequent custom: “There are days I just take two or three hours and I will go to their Web site and download a few sermons and lie on a raft in the pool and read.” While nothing can quite take the place of hearing the sermon live in the original context of that congregation’s worship, technology has certainly made it much easier for pastors to read and perhaps even see the sermons of others. A barrier of the past, that pastors who are preaching Sunday after Sunday cannot hear the sermons of others, is rapidly being dismantled in a digital age.

The last post-sermon partnership mentioned by several in survey and interviews was the feedback that can be received from associate pastors serving in the same congregation. Here the advantage is that the sermon is heard live in a setting that is familiar to both the preacher and the one offering feedback. While several mentioned that the feedback tends to remain on

³⁶ While plagiarism—made even easier by readily available online resources—is a very real issue for pastors in general, my research suggests that it is not presently a significant challenge among WELS pastors. Only 30 percent of survey respondents have ever used online resources for anything more than finding a brief sermon illustration. Only 7 percent of respondents (two out of thirty) indicated that they regularly (50 percent of the time or more) use a significant amount of material from others. Only one respondent reports having used an entire sermon from another source. Lest we turn a blind eye to the ever-present temptation to preach the material of others as one’s own, this certainly calls for honest discussion in our midst. Either in a *Preach the Word* article or in an online companion piece, this will need to be addressed.

the surface (for similar reasons to what was mentioned previously), there were also those who gave evidence of having moved past that barrier. Several could not speak highly enough of the regular feedback they receive from an associate pastor. One surveyed pastor offered these glowing words of praise for his associate. "My greatest benefit in ministry has been an associate who I have been able to watch and also who has given me valuable insight and advice." In an interview another made this comment:

I'm just blessed with [name of associate] ... and [name of a seminary professor] around here too. They are not afraid to say stuff. And rarely does [the professor] have much to say, unless you hit the nail on the head that day and Jesus stood out clearly. Then he'll say something that's kind of nice and that makes you feel good. But [my associate] is not afraid to say, "Ah, you ended with a hymn stanza again, you wimp! You kind of chickened out on the conclusion because your brain is tired from writing so ... throw a hymn stanza in." That's cheating in his mind. We hold each other accountable. We give each other some feedback, kind of more informally rather than formally.... We have a very open relationship, and he just has been the greatest help.

While such blunt directness may not be every ministry team's forte, the sharing of open and honest feedback cannot help but prove beneficial to each pastor when he steps into the pulpit.

This last form of assistance would seem to fit under the category of growth through an influential preaching mentor. That has long been a cherished part of the training of pastors in the WELS. Many would consider the vicar year served under a mature and experienced pastor to be the crown jewel of our pastor training system. Quite regularly we see rather astounding growth in preaching from the time our students leave for their vicar year (after their second year on campus) and when they return for their senior year. While not everyone's experience on the vicar year is quite as positive, there are many who so appreciated their supervising pastor's insights (or who heard of the help other classmates received) that the idea of seeking out a mentor in ministry after graduation might not be much of a leap. Here,

Thom Rainer's research comes back again to offer an encouragement. His research reports that when pastors are asked to list (from eight choices) the most important single influence that helped them grow in preaching, what they consistently rank as the most influential was having a mentor (Rainer 2008, 217). Coming in second was years of experience, and following close behind was college/seminary training. When it comes to this project, one of those influences is passed (college/seminary training), the other is a factor of time (years of experience), but the last one (an influential mentor)—the most critical in the opinion of many pastors—could be facilitated much more in our midst.

Before leaving behind this issue of partnering with ministry peers, honesty demands dealing with the ugly underside of this issue. Especially in the Midwest where WELS churches are often located in close geographic proximity to one another, what should be a partnership can degenerate into competition. One pastor noted in his interview that this competition tends to be fueled at least in part by church shoppers—both unchurched shoppers and WELS members who are searching for greener preaching pastures. Many awful things happen if pastors begin to see themselves competing with one another in the WELS version of the bowl championship series to see who is number one among area confessional Lutheran preachers. Such competition among brothers in New Testament ministry is as old as the repeated arguments of the Twelve (see Matt 20:20-21 as James and John even have the gall to get their mother involved in the fracas!). Among the many awful results of importing this worldly competition into our ministries is that it supplies another reason to be fearful about saying what needs to be said from the pulpit. One pastor, as he discussed the pressure he at times feels to measure up to neighboring pastors (or television preachers) made this

comment: “One of the main challenges for us as pastors is not to be lured in by that but stand firm on what God says.... We dare not back down to this postmodern, make-me-feel-good, it’s-all-about-the-here-and-now ... kind of preaching.”

What’s the solution to this ugly competition? Open and honest repentance for any pride or envy toward other preachers is the first part of the answer. Even more important is to grow in the comforting assurance that by grace alone we are children of God in the blood of Christ, and by grace alone we have been called into the public ministry. Once those basic issues of sin and grace have been addressed, then words like these from Thomas Long can prove exceedingly helpful.

It is true, of course, that some preachers have a rare measure of talent and charisma and are readily identified as “naturally” and extraordinarily gifted, but it would be wrong for the rest of us to envy them and theologically shortsighted to set them up as the standard of effective preaching. The church is blessed by the occasional preacher of exceptional ability, but the church is nourished most of all by the kind of careful, responsible, and faithful preaching that falls within the range of most of us. (Long 1990, 21)

Key Issue 7: Growing in Skill in Preaching to a Storied Postmodern Culture

Using John Stott’s analogy of the preacher straddling two worlds, from beginning to end this key issue finds its locus in the culture in which our hearers live. As we preach in the midst of a postmodern, post-Christian, and post-literate culture, and as we recognize that even the most pious in the pew are not unaffected by the sea in which they swim, it is critical that we analyze the communication pitfalls and opportunities presented by that culture.

Right from the start we must find yet again a safe homiletical middle ground. On the one side is the danger of falling so in love with the culture around us and in particular

its patterns of communication that we do not recognize what in those patterns is actually deadly to gospel proclamation. Dean Inge's often-quoted maxim deserves to be repeated: "If you marry the spirit of your own age, you will be a widow in the next" (Stott 1982, 194). But especially for a biblically conservative church body such as the WELS, the greater danger will often be to circle the church wagons, hunkering down for a long siege all the while longing for the halcyon homiletical days of the past. While marrying the spirit of the age may indeed render us a widow, refusing to learn how to speak to the current age may leave us a lonely spinster. Both are deadly to the church's mission.

Far better is to keep two truths in balance: no cultural movement of an unbelieving world will ever be without peril to the gospel or without opportunity as well. Yes, the subjectivism, moral relativism and sound-byte attention span of a media-saturated culture—which while growing technologically savvy is also growing biblically ignorant—pose immense challenges to sound preaching. Yet at the same time its willingness to listen to things spiritual beyond what can be empirically proved, and its pessimism about humanity's abilities to solve all crises, offer many a willing opportunity to be heard. One seminary professor identified well this two-sided challenge.

Our culture is changing ... I think we are going to have to think through, in light of how things are, are there better and worse ways to reach the ear of the hearer? Are there certain vocabulary that are going to need to be defined, whereas a generation ago they didn't need to be—or certain patterns, inductive, deductive, a greater variety there perhaps? Do certain patterns that seemed natural a generation ago in the pulpit seem stilted to younger generations? And if so, how do we respond to that? Do we change our pattern, or do we try to get them to embrace the old pattern? Those kinds of issues, just in terms of reaching the ear. I think we have to think through, especially as the culture is becoming more visual, and ... more oriented toward the sound byte, how do we respond to that without playing into the hands of something that long term would be detrimental to preaching?

This key issue is all about answering such questions! Such questions will be dealt with under four headings: regaining an appreciation for the power of biblical narrative, preaching the law to a relativistic world, dealing with growing biblical illiteracy, and making wise choices about the use of technology.

Noticeably absent from that list is the importance of the authenticity and transparency of the preacher. While authenticity and transparency have always been important, a postmodern culture seems to have raised the degree to which a weakness in those areas can render a message null and void. In a skeptical, postmodern age in which many are convinced that the one calling for their attention may only be out to sell them something to gain power or influence, the ethos and pathos of any communicated message cannot be ignored. People's "phony meters" are set on high. No matter how accurate the logos may be, if the speaker gives any impression that he has not bought what he is selling, the message will be shrugged off no matter how well crafted or entertaining it may otherwise be. To use terms more congenial to preaching, if the preacher's emotional connection to his message does not seem congruent to his content and personality, and if his life is out of step with his message, then he is in grave danger of his words being summarily dismissed.

So if the twin issues of authenticity and transparency are so crucial to preaching today, why do they receive only a passing nod here? Because the real way to address this problem has been dealt with above! When a pastor has taken sufficient time with the Word, and has remembered that its law and gospel must cut and heal him first, the impact of that text on his life and an emotional engagement congruent to his personality and message are already being addressed. The key issues of a message's ethos and pathos are not primarily

delivery issues handled in the pulpit but are personal issues handled in the study. To fail to note that truth easily leads to gimmickry. We don't want to end up as deceptive manipulators who skillfully learn the art of how to mimic genuine ethos and pathos. We want to be honest communicators of the same power of the Spirit that put us to death and brought us to life as we studied the Word. What will be addressed in this key issue are primarily communication issues. Authenticity and transparency are not primarily communication issues. They are primarily spiritual issues.

That brings us to the first key sub-issue that appears to be so critical for engaging a postmodern culture. In a storied postmodern culture, many biblical preachers would do well to regain an appreciation of the beauty of biblical narrative. Preaching in a logical modern world often seemed to view Paul's epistles as the epitome of preaching and fashioned sermons from any genre of Scripture after the depth of his logical arguments.³⁷ Preaching in a storied postmodern world needs to recapture the skill of telling biblical narrative and to recognize that much narrative beauty is readily available in every genre of Scripture. All of Scripture is at its heart the story of a jilted Lover who will not rest until he has brought his often-unfaithful bride back home—no matter what the cost to him! The story begins with a garden paradise ruined and the path to the tree of life sadly barred by flaming angelic guard (Gen 3). It ends with eternal paradise restored, and a tree of life readily available

³⁷ This statement should not be read as a knock on the Apostle Paul. He is an inspired author. It is a knock on the approach we often took to preaching on his letters. The genre of epistle as found in Scripture has a far greater narrative quality than we may take time to see. If you cut the epistles, they bleed too. Paul was never merely addressing doctrinal issues for the sake of their beauty as argument, but because those doctrines address real issues in the hearts and lives of real people whom God had called him to serve. As an inspired writer, those people include us.

for the healing of the nations (Rev 22). And in between, the story is filled with twists and turns in which human sin seeks to cancel God's grace, but God's grace in Christ always proves more resourceful (Rom 5:20). That's why it is so shortsighted if, in our zeal to show an anarchic, relativistic, subjective world, that there is authoritative, unchanging, objective truth, we squeeze the concrete life out of our text in order to display the abstract point of the text. We may comfort ourselves that we hold the logical high ground, but we may hold it alone. While the new homiletic foolishly despaired of ever finding an objective point, they have still done the preaching world a great favor. We may argue with them when they seem to conclude that the experience of the journey replaces the destination, but the journey is still critical.

Here is how one pastor spoke about his personal journey back to enjoying preaching on biblical narrative for the sake of the storied culture around him.

God communicated to us in a way that we could understand him, by how he intervenes in the lives of people, and how by his Son he intervened in history. And I think, making the story come alive is significant, and then ... in some way or another, obviously, connecting it to either real life story or illustrative story, is critical to communicating in this age. Again, I have changed the way I preach, I don't think I'm particularly good at it, dramatically, with the shift in culture, from what I was before, I was the logical, linear, let me lay out some clear thinking for you, to realizing now that I have to deal more with the narrative of Scripture and the life and narrative of people.... I think at the beginning of my ministry I much preferred preaching epistles. And that is no longer true. In fact, I have come to love preaching the Old Testament. Even the prophets, there is a narrative that underlies some of the propositional stuff. And there are stories that sometimes are only hinted at in the Epistles.

A seminary professor from another church body articulated the challenge this way.

I would say that ... a big issue is the understanding of narrative, and how narrative preaching is a little bit different.... We always tend to take the objective approach instead of the subjective approach. We believe that it starts with the objective and becomes subjective, because we start with meta-narrative

first, instead of realizing that postmodernism begins with personal narrative that then grows into the acceptance of meta-narrative. Simple things like that, we preach from a meta-narrative perspective most definitely, but there are ways of preaching in which personal narrative ... other types of narrative can be used that then lead you to the larger narrative.... But when you look at how people now in television ... especially in mass media how meaning is communicated and you see how disjointed that is with how we communicate.

What specific help would seem to be useful to WELS preachers here? Consider this statement by a WLS professor made just shortly after he indicated that language training was one of the greatest strengths of preaching in the WELS. When asked to list weaknesses, here is how he began.

Language training: because some guys don't make the transition from the text to the application of the text. They are spending too much time on little nuances when they should be working on applying the text to the people.... It becomes a homily kind of thing, advanced Bible class, or whatever you want to call it. But [what is missing is] how to apply the truths of Scripture in a relevant, practical way.

A pastor in an interview seemed to be picking up on that same area for growth in preaching.

Sometimes our sermons can end up being a little bit like history papers or just a thesis on something, and not a sermon. Because we so exhausted the text ... and again I don't ever want to shortchange that, that is our biggest strength and I want that to stay the same ... but we've got so much information, and so many wonderful points within that text, that we sometimes have to have thesis and antithesis, and that, I don't think that is all that fun to listen to, at least personally.

Trained academically, we can easily fall into writing essays for the eye rather than sermons for the ear. A pastor in the survey captured the challenge succinctly: "Seeing preaching not just as delivering a proper lecture without heresy, but rather a conversation and communication between speaker and audience which is both reverent and relevant."

I have remained convinced throughout this project that right here a great leap forward in preaching in the WELS could happen almost overnight. It would occur if pastors

would determine not to skip over a lively and engaging retelling of the biblical narrative found in the text or in its context. We too easily assume that people don't want to hear again the stories with which they are familiar. That errs in two directions: many no longer know the stories well or at all, and those who do cherish hearing them again when they are told with imagination securely tied to the text. Fred Craddock addresses especially the error of the latter assumption.

What is being urged is a way of the preaching that assumes the listeners' recognition of much of the material. And how does that assumption function in designing the sermon? First, it means that the preacher will share, not omit, details. For example, it is a common fault of ministers to allow the listeners' familiarity with a passage to eliminate details, perhaps out of fear of boredom. The principle of recognition says no to such a practice. If treating the story of Jesus raising Lazarus, for instance, covering the details of the narrative to activate recognition produces the nod necessary for the shock of its impact. If some present do not know the narrative at all, then they have learned, and that is no small benefit.

Second, assuming listener recognition means presenting the familiar with interest and enthusiasm. Again, some ministers are full of excitement when covering daily news and telling stories, but drag through the biblical expositions in chore-like fashion. Why? One reason is the assumption that parishioners have heard it before and therefore are uninterested. To assume lack of interest can produce delivery with lack of interest, which, like any self-fulfilling prophecy, creates lack of interest, making the preacher accessory to the condition being lamented. The renewal of biblical preaching waits not only on more and better exegesis, but on abandoning the pulpit attitude that comes across to the listener as, "If you will be patient and sit through the biblical stuff, I promise to tell you very soon now the interesting story about Uncle Clyde surviving a plane crash." The principle of recognition liberates the preacher to move through familiar territory with more, not less, conviction and enthusiasm. (Craddock 1990, 161-62)

Something so wonderful as learning again to paint the beauty of biblical narrative seems almost to be that rare positive that has no downside. But as much good that can come from this, there are dangers lurking here as well! We are in danger of being blindsided if we don't recognize that the delight with narrative in many circles in the church has an ugly

underbelly. Many delight in narratives because narratives seem to allow hearers in our pluralistic culture to draw any conclusion that “works” for them. Fearful of all objective propositions, some preachers flee to narrative since they believe here the subjective can reign. Almost without realizing it, we can fall into the age-old homiletical pit of allowing style to trump substance. Our goal must be much more than to move our hearers by the powerful experience of finding their story in the midst of the text’s story, all the while allowing them to go home with untextual and perhaps unbiblical conclusions!

The parallel danger is the loss of doctrinal meat in the preaching. The spirit of a postmodern age is by definition skeptical of any doctrinal pronouncements, seeing firm and objective doctrinal confession as the bygone relics of arrogant modernism. We cannot fall so in love with telling biblical narrative that we end up with sermons that are image rich but content poor. A seminary professor from another denomination as he viewed preaching in his church body lamented what he sees as a growing loss of catechetical content.

Sermons tend to be lacking the whole counsel of God. I think that when they moved away from thematic preaching, we moved away from doctrinal preaching, and so a lot of our sermons, the basic doctrine that everybody learns is you are a sinner and Jesus died for you, and that is what we learn in the sermon, but when it comes to teachings about prayer, eschatology, the two kingdoms ... vocation of parenting, that type of stuff, and these are all things that are mentioned in the Confessions by the way, as to what Lutherans said they were preaching in contrast to Rome, these things we don’t do anymore.... We have lost the idea that the sermon is also our catechetical moment that forms people in terms of the larger teachings of the faith.

Certainly we must not lose the distinction between preaching and teaching

(Hendricksen 1981, 249).³⁸ As a regular practice, we dare not turn preaching into Bible class,

³⁸ Here, in full, is the very helpful reminder by William Hendricksen: “Between preaching and teaching there is a difference, though it is true that good preaching is also teaching. The

losing the pulpit as the unique place where proclamation, not education, dominates. Yet we must not let postmodern style trump sermonic substance. We want to match Scripture's beauty of expression, but we also want to match Scripture's depth of content as well.

Here again Thom Rainer's research can bolster those who wonder if we will empty our pews by being unashamed of solid doctrinal preaching. The doctrinal depth and conviction of the pastor/church was the second most frequently mentioned element of what attracted unchurched to a particular congregation (Rainer 2008, 21). Similarly, the seminary president of a denomination noted for its thorough expositional preaching reported what he has found again and again when he is guest preaching and teaching at the local congregations of his church body. In Bible class he regularly asks those new to his denomination (usually a sizeable majority of those present) to offer why they joined that particular congregation. The regular answer he hears is this: "They preach the Bible here." In an interview with a WELS pastor whose congregation is well known for solid preaching, he reported hearing similar comments again and again from new members.

If this surprises us to hear such comments in the midst of a postmodern culture that rejects objective truth, there is an explanation that seems to explain what at first appears disjointed. It is utterly impossible to live life for long without anything unmovable and unchangeable beneath one's feet. God "has set eternity in the hearts of man," and although "they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (Eccl 3:11), yet even the ear of the unbeliever is powerfully drawn when the Spirit steps forward to explain what man

emphasis, nevertheless, is not the same. The word used in the original for *preaching* means *heralding, announcing, proclaiming*. ... *Teaching*, on the other hand, indicates imparting more detailed information regarding the announcement that was made" (Hendricksen 1981).

cannot without his power fathom or understand (1 Cor 2:14). Isn't that why, while with their mouths postmoderns may reject those who proclaim objective truth, in their hearts they find themselves drawn to it in spite of themselves? Certainly, preaching God's objective truth with conviction would be the thing to do even if everyone ran from it—which many still will do in the stubbornness of their unbelieving hearts (consider Jesus' ministry!). But it is encouraging to know that the power of God's Spirit will always bring some—and at times many—to see in the proclaimed Word of God that which lasts forever while all man's proud theories eventually lie discarded in the dust of history (Isa 40:6-8).

One reason that this project began with an emphasis on things objective (Christ-centeredness, sound law/gospel distinctions, spending time with our feet planted in the world of the text) was precisely to prepare WELS pastors so that we are not “blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Eph 4:14). Only when we are rooted and built up in the unchanging truth of Scripture can we safely venture out into the shifting winds of culture to find what we can learn about communicating clearly what those around us need to hear.

All of which brings us to a second key area when it comes to learning how to speak to a postmodern world: it is the challenge of how to speak God's law in a postmodern society. That challenge comes from two directions. One pushes toward legalism and the other toward antinomianism. In a culture in which, for instance, sexual mores and basic definitions of marriage and family are being cast aside, it becomes very tempting to lose our focus on what the church's primary purpose of preaching the law is. Proclaiming the law is first and foremost to help sinners become “conscious of sin” (Rom 3:20) so that those same sinners

can see the beauty of the Savior. If, in a desperate attempt to maintain outward morality in a crumbling society, the church begins to preach the law with its primary focus on compelling outward behavior through the law's directions, threats, and promises, we are in grave danger of repeating the very same mistake of the ancient Pharisees. They were skilled at whitewashing tombs all the while forgetting that the real problem was that those tombs were full of dead men's bones and everything unclean (Matt 23:27). When cleaning up outward morality begins to be the prime focus of the church's preaching rather than producing repentant hearts that bear fruit in lives that are salt and light, then moralism has become confused with preaching law and gospel.

One seminary professor from another denomination shared his experience while studying and serving in the ministry for two years in Scotland. He noted that European society has fallen so far from any moral grounding that anyone making a moral statement was assumed to be a Christian, and, vice versa, Christians were assumed to be all about promoting outward morality.

To say anything Christian, is already to be so distinctive, that even if the thing you say is moralistic, it still sounds Christian. But I would say that it isn't distinctively Christian, it's ... to say ... we need to uphold the law, we need to not murder ... those are good things, those are good biblical obligations, but are we doing those things just so that we can be better than everyone else around us? Why are we doing those things? And how will it be possible for sinners to become the kind of people who do those things? The answers to those questions are tremendously important, but when just saying, just holding that position is itself identified as being Christian, which I think happens more in an increasingly secular culture, then what constitutes gospel preaching easily gets lost. Christianity equals having a concern for morals ... that's close enough to the truth to sound right, it's a very incomplete answer. It's not inaccurate, it's incomplete. So I think if our culture continues to become more secular, then we will have to, as preachers, fight harder to make a distinction that Tim Keller makes, and I think he does this in a helpful way. He distinguishes secularism from religion, and both of those from the gospel. And so if the enemy becomes

secularism, then religion can be passed off as Christianity. He defines it as sort of another self-help approach, and the gospel isn't self-help at all. The mess you are in is so big you cannot help yourself out. I think that would be an even greater danger if the culture continues to become more secular.

When all hell breaks loose in a culture, tender pastoral hearts that recognize what sin does to consciences and lives can easily be lured into what appears to be a beneficial shortcut. Rather than calling to repentance with the law, using the gospel to work faith in a Savior for sinners, and then urging sanctified living as a patient farmer waiting for the powerful gospel to bear fruit, it seems quicker to stop the hurt by lobbying or thundering for outward changes in behavior all the while seeking to lure people to morality by showing how much more beneficial for all such behavior will be. But from the standpoint of the gospel and the real purpose of the church, the cure is worse than the disease. It was the Pharisees who utterly spurned Jesus. It was the tax collectors and prostitutes who flocked around him. And they flocked around him not because he condoned sin, but because his solution was not the arrogance of demanding mere outward moral purity while ignoring that the problems are the inborn realities of the sinful human heart (Matt 15:19). Jesus' answer was to take upon himself the shame of their sins and offer in its place the garment of his holiness to perfectly cover their nakedness (Rev 3:18). What alone changes hearts is learning the beauty and power of that grace. The gospel, in its time and in a way far more powerful than the law, can bring a harvest of a hundred times what was sown (Luke 8:8).

But the challenge of preaching the law in an amoral postmodern society is not simply on the side of becoming legalistic. It is also on the side of becoming antinomian. While moralisms can be found in Lutheran pulpits, the side of the problem that may be most appealing to Christocentric Lutherans is growing afraid in a tolerant age to call sin by its proper name. Here's what one WELS pastor said in an interview as he reflected on the specific question about preaching in a postmodern world.

I thought about being lax with the law, especially I think that one of the big tools that Satan is using nowadays is toleration. We tolerate everything, and all of a sudden the law starts to fade away because we don't want to hinder, offend somebody. I put down that you have weak law; that equals weak gospel. I certainly noticed that in my sermon a couple of weeks ago, I just thought, "Why isn't the gospel coming out clearly here?" I just didn't have a good handle on the law. I went back and reworked some of that.

What this perceptive pastor realized was that growing fearful to confront with the law does its greatest damage not to our proclamation of the law, but to the gospel. If I grow weary of confronting hearers with the ugliness of our natural heart's rebellion against God, what I will be doing is creating weariness in my hearers for the message of the gospel.

A president of another seminary believes that losing courage to confront with the law is a rapidly growing challenge among younger pastors.

If I don't see myself as prophet as well as shepherd, prophet as well as priest, or with the authority of God's Word even king as well as priest, then that can limit the authoritative nature of preaching. I can speak to help people, to minister to people, to provide them guidance, to comfort them, but to actually challenge them. So I think without a sense of my job as the shepherd of souls, my job as physician of souls, then I may not speak with a sense of authority in what I do. I do think there is a certain loss of authority in our preaching these days, not loss of a desire to help, but a loss of ability to challenge.

It would be good for pastors no matter what their years of experience to ponder the impact on their preaching of rubbing shoulders day after day with a tolerant world in which the only sin people can agree on is that it is a sin to label anything as sin in the life of another.

But the previous quotation brings to light one last challenge in preaching the law that actually can send us right back to a harsh legalism. When a postmodern world questions all absolutes, it is really questioning whether anyone can speak to others with an authority that has a claim on them. Does the law we are speaking have the power to command the attention of our hearers? It always will possess that authority to the degree that what we are saying can be clearly established as the Word of God and not the opinion of a mere man. Every time we are able to show clearly from Scripture that "This is what the LORD says" (Jer 2:5), then we are speaking with God's own authority. If we have not mixed human straw with divine grain (Jer 28:28), then we are unleashing on human hearts "the hammer that

breaks a rock in pieces” (Jer 28:29). While some mouths may ridicule or revile us for what has been said, every conscience there will be echoing with an uncomfortable awareness that he who wrote his law on our hearts (Rom 2:14-15) is the one at whom they are laughing or against whom they are railing.

But if I forget that this authority is inherent in the Word proclaimed, the danger in a world that rejects authority is that I begin to hammer away directly at the issue of authority as if proclaiming with conviction an authoritative Word is not enough. While that can also be an issue in preaching the gospel, it is particularly in preaching the law that this problem reveals itself. The danger is very real that we confuse preaching the Word with authority with adopting an authoritarian preaching style. At those moments we are, often without realizing, shifting the “locus of authority” (Stott 1982, 58) from the preached Word to the preacher. We don’t give Scripture its authority by our stern countenance, the volume of our voice, or how often we point our finger. Authority is not measured by whether I use the second person pronoun as God’s spokesman to convict of sin or the first person as I identify with my hearers (inspired authors used plenty of both—often within one sentence!). My task is simply to be willing to say everything the Word says in all the multiple ways Scripture knows to say it—after having let the Word say all of that to my own heart first!

We need to distinguish carefully between preaching with authority and merely sounding authoritarian.

A pastor confident of the Bible’s truth is able to preach with great force or with great gentleness and still speak with authority. Preaching with authority relates more to the confidence and integrity with which a preacher expresses God’s truth than to a specific tone or posture a preacher assumes. The authority of the Word enables us to say the most challenging things to any person without apology, but the same authority lets us speak tenderly without compromising strength. Too often expository preachers get stuck in one gear, believing that preaching with authority means they must inject a certain hardness