

MEANINGFUL PREACHING ON THE FIRST COMMANDMENT FOR TEENS

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ABSTRACT

Attention spans are short. Distractions are screaming for acknowledgment. Listening to an entire sermon is difficult. This may not be true for an entire congregation, but it might be a commonality among many people. When a preacher makes his sermon engaging for those present, he provides a greater opportunity for his hearers to listen to the whole sermon and to make personal applications in addition to any applications he makes during his sermon. As a preacher strives to accomplish this, he ought to keep his preaching relative to the struggles he sees in his members. One of the biggest struggles for Christians of all ages is keeping God as number one in life. Teens particularly have difficulty with this as they search for an identity among their peers. **The author of this paper proposes that exploring how Luther preaches about the first commandment is a great resource in helping to create an engaging presentation about the first commandment in which teens will be fully engaged.**

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INTRODUCTION

*The office of preaching is second to none in Christendom.*¹

Martin Luther held a high opinion of the office of preaching. Although Luther refers more to the whole ministry of a preacher than to the role of preaching itself, he did view preaching as an incredible blessing and opportunity to proclaim the works and words of Almighty God. One would guess that most public ministers would agree with him. When a minister preaches, he has the eyes, ears, and hearts of many fixed on him and what he is about to say. There is no better time to proclaim Christ crucified than at that moment. Scripture overflows with the wonders of God; on every page there is a new wonder waiting to be discovered and expounded. Read through the Old Testament and find Scripture foretelling of the words and works of Christ the Savior. Read through the New Testament and find passage after passage explaining the comfort of justification. Scripture holds a vast array of promises and blessings all people desperately need to hear.

Preaching is a perfect opportunity to relate the truths of God's Word to any people; a preacher knows that when he proclaims Scripture, he opens up a door for the power of God's Word to create, sustain, and strengthen faith any time it is proclaimed, no matter who proclaims it. The prophet Isaiah testifies to this:

As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it

1. Martin Luther and John Nicholas Lenker, ed., *Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 373.

without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Is 55:10–11 NIV)

Referring to the power Scripture has to accomplish the purpose for which God sent it, theologians often speak of God’s Word working both supernaturally and psychologically. When public ministers faithfully proclaim Scripture, they trust the supernatural working of the Word to create, sustain, and strengthen faith. They also understand the Word works psychologically, that is, it affects the intellect, emotion, and will as it is perceived through the senses.² The Word does not work magically—without a person communicating it in some way—which is precisely why Luther and many others have held the office of preaching so highly among the duties of the public minister. Preachers are a “ministerial cause” of God’s saving work through Scripture.³ If the Word works *only* supernaturally, as the ministerial causes of God’s saving work public ministers would not need to do anything more than simply read God’s Word. Rather, since God’s Word also works psychologically, and preaching appeals to a person’s intellect, emotion, and will, it is imperative that preachers constantly strive to get better *as preachers*. No man on earth can make God’s Word more powerful, but by striving for excellence a preacher removes as many obstacles as possible.

As a preacher looks to improve his preaching, he must realize the reality that he is not simply preaching to adults but also to children and teens. Unfortunately, what might sometimes happen is that public ministers do not realize “we have managed to communicate to our youth

2. Jonathan R. Hein, *Treasures in Jars of Clay: The Synergy Between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God’s Plan of Salvation*, [WLS Essay File], 6.

3. Hein, *Treasures*, 22.

that preaching isn't really for them," even if nothing is ever said to indicate the sermon is not for youth.⁴ This provides a challenge for preachers. Teens are an integral part of the church having been publicly declared as mature Christians at their Confirmation. They are just as capable as any adult to understand sermons when pastors preach in clear, relative, and memorable ways. However, teens might not comprehend a message that is void of visuals, stories, and illustrations whereas an adult might. Luther fully understood this. Quoted by David Valleskey in his essay, "Luther as Pastor to Pastors," Luther once said, "Good God, there are *sixteen-year-old girls* (emphasis mine), women, old men, and farmers in church, and they don't understand lofty matters! If one can present fitting and familiar comparisons...the people will understand and remember. Accordingly he's the best preacher who can teach in a plain, childlike, popular, and simple way."⁵ Teens were present in congregations in the 1500s; teens are present in congregations of today. What Luther said echoes a vital (and maybe somewhat painful!) truth: if teens do not understand a preached message, the preacher is not doing his job. Not only, then, should a preacher continually improve his preaching, but he must also improve his preaching so that his teens hear and understand him.

In an attempt to help the preacher reach teens in his preaching, this essay will examine three areas: making preaching engaging for teens, struggles teens have with keeping the first commandment, and how Luther preaches about the first commandment. If a preacher is to fulfill his duty as Luther explained in the above paragraph, he must present his sermon in a way that

4. Anna Carter Florence, 2000, "Preaching To the Exiles Who Live at Home: Youth, Testimony, and a Homiletic of 'True Speech'," *Journal for Preachers* 24, no. 1, [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost], 24. Anna Carter Florence is a professor of preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary (Presbyterian) in Decatur, Georgia. In one of her continuing education classes on preaching, the class as a whole came up with this conclusion after they took surveys of teens in their respective churches. One of the survey respondents said, "In our congregation, there's a children's sermon and an adults' sermon. But there isn't anything for us."

5. Curtis A. Jahn, ed., *Reformation 500: The Enduring Relevance of the Lutheran Reformation* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 145-146.

not only speaks to adults, but also speaks to teens. While there are many topics presented in Scripture, a particularly difficult struggle that teens have is keeping the first commandment, which will become evident further along in this paper. Martin Luther has already been noted as a powerful preacher; while preachers are 500 years past the time of Luther, nevertheless, he provides great insight into preaching an engaging sermon.

PART 1: MAKING PREACHING ENGAGING FOR TEENS

Preaching a message that adults can understand is a difficult task; preaching a message that both adults *and* teens can understand is exponentially more challenging. To even begin accomplishing such a task, it is important to examine what is at the heart of preaching a message that can be understood: communication.⁶ Any public speaker knows this is a vital element to a good presentation. Yet, even a good speaker might have difficulty presenting a message with the hope of his audience retaining any information. “According to the publication *Communication Briefings*, people forget 40 percent of a speaker’s message within 20 minutes. They forget 60 percent after a half day. And after a week they lose 90 percent.”⁷ A survey taken of fifty teens across the WELS backs up this statistic. While 22% of teens remembered the main point of a sermon at least one week after being preached, a disappointing 32% of teens failed to remember even the main point after one day.⁸ If good communication is lacking, any understanding and remembering of the message will most certainly be lacking. The preacher must work hard at becoming an effective communicator before he will be able to communicate a sermon effectively to teens.

Preachers of the Gospel already have a foot in the right direction. Ken Davis, a powerful public speaker and entertainer, believes that “being a good speaker does not come from seeking

6. God’s Word is, of course, the heart and core of Christ-centered preaching. Here, the author is speaking of simply getting a message across to a people in a way that they can understand it.

7. Thom and Joani Schultz, *Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church: And How to Fix It* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 1993), 191.

8. See Appendix 1.

to entertain, but from seeking to communicate a great truth.”⁹ Many great truths are already provided from Scripture, so all that a preacher needs to do is learn how best to communicate those truths in an engaging way, maximizing the chances that teens understand and remember God’s message for them.

Why is it so important to make preaching engaging for teens?

Think about the teens in a particular congregation. How are they receiving the message of the sermon? Are they listening to the whole sermon? How do they feel about church overall? These are important questions to answer. Teens are “the most challenging, unique, and wonderful audience in the world. On the one hand, young people are hostile and skeptical, spoiled by a barrage of top-quality entertainment and turned off to much of traditional religion. On the other hand, they are moldable and tender, capable of great loyalty and commitment.”¹⁰ According to Barna, one out of four teens say their pastors have a lot of influence on them.¹¹ That is huge during a time in life when so much is based on identity. Chapman states, “From the early days (1940s) of emerging teenage culture to its contemporary counterpart, the underlying themes have been the same: independence and self-identity. Throughout the years, teenagers in our American

9. Ken Davis, *How to Speak to Youth...And Keep Them Awake at the Same Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 11. Ken Davis has been the keynote speaker for thousands of major corporate and faith-based events. As president of Dynamic Communicators International, he developed the SCORRE and LAUNCH conferences that for 30 years have taught the art and business of public speaking to ministry professionals and corporate executives. In the forward to Davis’ book, Tony Campolo illustrates the ability Davis has as a public speaker, especially to teens, as he relates his experience at a youth convention: “Ken was the scheduled speaker for the Wednesday evening session. The young people greeted him with polite applause, and they offered him the same discourteous lack of interest they had offered the other speakers. But Ken seemed undisturbed by it all. He went ahead and gave his talk in an enthusiastic, committed manner. Within minutes he had the group’s undivided attention. With each passing story and illustration, interest intensified. During the next fifty minutes he carried the kids through a whole range of emotions. He had them laughing and crying. He had them shouting and sitting in stark silence...In one address, Ken Davis had done more than just entertain, he made the kids want to listen and respond” (9-10).

10. Davis, 20.

11. George Barna, *Real Teens* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 42.

society have been active in searching for their identity while trying to establish their independence from parents.”¹²

Many people, parents especially, might agree that teens are in possibly the most influential years of their life. They need the message of Christ to help shape and mold their beliefs. They need the love of Christ to give them hope in times of distress and worry. They need the power of Christ to guard against any rising threats of danger. It is absolutely imperative that pastors give them a helping hand. Some teens already feel like they do not belong or that they are still treated as kids even though they have been confirmed as spiritually mature; some even view going to church as a burden.¹³ For teens who feel that way, this becomes a huge hindrance to a preacher’s ordained duty to be their shepherd.

When there are teens in church, many do not stay engaged for the whole sermon.¹⁴ In fact, there are even some who view the sermon as “boring, irrelevant to their lives, and might as well be rated X: for adults only.”¹⁵ Anna Carter Florence proposes that even before a pastor begins his preaching, in order to be sure of who his message is directed to and how effectively he is presenting it, he must ask several questions:

- Where are the adults during the sermon, and where are the youth?
- Are the youth listening from the margins, and if so, why?
- How safe is that marginal space? (Third-floor window ledges do not qualify as safe space.)

12. Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers* (Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2000), 42.

13. Rev. Jon Enter, Email Interview (October 4, 2016). Rev. Enter has worked hard at growing his teen ministry, from Sunday morning teen study to an annual youth retreat in Florida. He is also co-editor of the newly published youth program, *TRANSFORMED*.

14. cf. Appendix 1.

15. Anna Carter Florence, 2007, “A Prodigal Preaching Story and Bored-to-Death Youth” *Theology Today* 64, no. 2, [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost], 237.

- Do the youth feel that the sermon is addressed to them, or is it in another language they cannot understand?
- Are they alert, or are they getting sleepy?
- Are any of them in danger of falling out of the window (like Eutychus)?¹⁶

These are serious questions that many cannot sufficiently answer because they see the adults grasping what they say and assume their teens are too, or those teens do not care. *Pastors* should care, though. Because of their search for identity, many might already think teens are in the most influential years of their life. On top of that, in terms of communication being received, the teen years may also be the loudest and busiest, illustrated by Ken Davis' experiment in the following section. Davis claims that teens refuse to listen to a message unless they are engaged by that message. He says, "Sharing the message of Christ's love with the young people of our world is a challenge unequalled in its importance and urgency. Only an unquenchable desire to share that message of love will carry us through."¹⁷ The desire to know how to engage teens through communication is imperative for their understanding and remembering of a preacher's message.

Redirect their attention

Understanding the difficulty preachers have in communicating a particular message effectively with their youth, Ken Davis conducted a three-phase experiment at Rockford College with over one hundred college graduates preparing for youth ministry:

Phase 1 – A volunteer left the room. The rest of the audience was instructed to come up with a simple task for the volunteer to perform within the confines of the room and, from their

16. Florence, "Prodigal Preaching," 240. Throughout her essay, Florence uses the story of Eutychus to illustrate the reaction that teens have with preaching. She suggests that preachers are dangerously close to causing their teens to fall asleep, as in the case of Eutychus. In order to prevent teens from becoming "bored-to-death" of preaching, the preacher needs to change how he presents his messages. Teens do have some responsibility in staying engaged in a preacher's sermons, but when he *makes* his preaching engaging for them he also optimizes the possibility of them becoming and staying engaged in what he says.

17. Davis, 20.

seats, shout their instructions at the volunteer once he returned. A second volunteer, a member of the audience, attempted to persuade the first volunteer, in the same manner as the rest of the audience, to complete a pre-determined task—climb the steps at the back of the auditorium and embrace the instructor. The first volunteer returned to the room, unaware of any instructions given to the audience and bombarded by an explosion of shouted instructions, was dazed and confused. Not able to discern any particular instruction, the volunteer wandered around aimlessly until the first phase ended.

Phase 2 – The first volunteer again left the auditorium and the audience was informed about the person attempting to get the volunteer to perform the designated task. Another person from the audience was then chosen to, at all costs, keep the volunteer from performing the specific task. Both of those people were allowed to stand as close to the volunteer as they wished and shout their opposing messages without touching the volunteer. The volunteer was called back into the room, still with no knowledge of any instruction given to the audience, and once again the room erupted with shouts. This second time, the volunteer was able to hear two distinct messages from the two people standing right next to him. Instead of completing one of the tasks, the volunteer seesawed from following one task to the other until the phase was terminated.

Phase 3 – The first volunteer left the auditorium for the third time. All instruction for the audience remained the same, but there was one added dimension. The person instructed to persuade the volunteer to complete the pre-determined task was allowed to touch the volunteer. When the volunteer re-entered the auditorium, loud shouting once again commenced. The person with the vital message, being allowed to touch the volunteer, gently put his arm around the

volunteer's shoulder and spoke directly into his ear. Slowly, but surely, the volunteer, comforted by the gentle touch of the person around his shoulder, completed the pre-determined task.¹⁸

By this experiment, Davis claims that, with all the loud noise bombarding people from society, getting a vital message across to them is extremely difficult; they see the message as just another loud noise. This is true of teens just as it is true of everyone else. A preacher needs to break down the barriers created by a bombardment from all the loud noises of society and the peer community and open the door to making his preaching engaging for teens; he must show teens that his message—God's message—is not just another loud noise. In order to accomplish that, a preacher must first show his teens that he cares about them.¹⁹

Show them you care

There is a certain element to communication that often gets overlooked but is instrumental in presenting an effective message. A preacher ought to show he cares about his message by communicating his preaching from the heart before he expects anybody else, much less his teens, to care about what he proclaims. Ken Davis attempts to illustrate this element of communication. He says, "Imagine yourself listening to two pianists of equal ability playing the same piece. One's playing is technically correct, while the other plays with feeling and heart. How do you respond? Without a doubt you find the second piece much more enjoyable. In one you hear correct notes, in the other you are moved by those notes."²⁰ If a preacher is not engaged in his own sermons, how can he expect anybody else to be engaged? "The first step in making our

18. Davis, 26-28.

19. The volunteer was asked why he followed the instruction of the person giving the vital message. He said, "Because it felt like he was the only one who really cared" (Davis, 30).

20. Davis, 15.

preaching engaging for teens is to show them that we care about what we are saying. We know our teens matter to us, but they may not know that. When we preach in a way that shows we want them to hear what God has to say to them, they will know we care.”²¹ This element of communication can be accomplished in any number of ways.

Get to know them

For a preacher to effectively show that he cares through the communication he provides in his preaching, he must communicate that he cares outside of his preaching. Presenting an engaging message will be exponentially more difficult if he does not first know his audience.

It is imperative that we know the people with whom we share this preaching ministry, and a large portion of those are youth. Even those of us with teenagers in the house may not be fully aware of the paradoxical complexities of their lives in this society. So do the obvious: read up on youth culture. Spend time with youth. Talk to them about their lives. Find out what exile is, from their perspective...But no reading can replace time spent with the young people in our congregations.²²

This is not something new, either. Our Savior and brother, Jesus Christ, imitated this very necessity:

When Christ reached out to us, he didn't schedule a meeting in heaven and wait for us to show up. He came and lived among us. Nothing communicates our love to teenagers more than our willingness to go into their world to reach them. It is frightening and sometimes frustrating, but in the end, our words carry unbelievable power when backed by proof of our love.²³

Jesus understood the importance of living among the people who needed him. Teens need God; teens need their pastors.

21. Enter, Interview.

22. Florence, *Preaching to the Exiles*, 27.

23. Davis, 186.

Probably one of the biggest communication barriers between a preacher and his teens is culture—*their* culture. Granted, the more time a preacher devotes to getting to know his teens, the more opportunity he has to understand the different aspects of their culture: language, habits, hobbies, clothing styles, etc. Yet, even the time he spends among his teens is not enough to fully grasp what teen culture is, especially since that culture is constantly changing. So how does a preacher stay up-to-date on his teens? Read up on teen culture; find news articles, psychology magazines and blogs, teen blogs, and studies on trends of youth cultures to help break into the abode of teen life. Listen to music and TV programs that are popular with teens. Although a preacher will never compete with entertainment, social media, and everything else that tug at teens for attention, anything he can do to learn more about teen culture will aid him in understanding his teens.²⁴ Once he knows his teens better and has actively showed them he cares, he has a foot in the door to show them in his preaching that they matter.

Be transparent

Most people might agree, especially teens, that they are not in search of hope and encouragement from a man who portrays himself as better than everybody else. The author certainly is not insinuating that any preachers preach as if they are perfect, but if they are not transparent in their preaching, their teens might perceive them, as the saying goes, as “holier than thou.” Showing transparency can work wonders in establishing rapport with teens. Granted, the preacher ought not to let his preaching be a soap opera of his life, for then his hearers will think him egotistic. Rather, occasionally revealing who he is and what happens to him shows his audience that he, like them, is human and what he is preaching applies to him as well. There is a balance between

24. Davis, 25.

revealing too much and not revealing enough; the preacher needs to find the balance and preach it.²⁵

Not only is transparency important *in the pulpit*, the preacher also needs to show that God's message is meant for him *outside of the pulpit*. "The most effective [communicators]—those who get results—are not necessarily the most eloquent, but instead are those who believe in their message enough to live it and deliver it with passion."²⁶ Preachers must 'practice what they preach.' However, this does not mean they need to try to be perfect or show their teens they can keep God's commandments because they cannot. So what might teens look for? Will teens listen when a preacher encourages them to fight temptation if he never mentions his own struggle to fight temptations? Will teens listen when a preacher tells them to show compassion if they rarely see compassion flow from him? Will teens listen when a preacher tells them to love their neighbor as themselves if he does not actively show the same love? Will teens listen when a preacher tells them to be joyful, standing under the righteous robes of Christ, if they rarely see a smile on his face? Some of these examples may seem extreme, but the point is clear: a preacher ought to intentionally show teens through his own actions that what God says is meant for all, including him.

Speak on their level

After three years of focused study at the Seminary on top of reading countless books about doctrine, what a preacher must be sure to refrain from is forgetting that his teens might not all

25. Rodger Nishioka, 2000, "Preaching and Youth in a Media Culture," *Journal for Preachers* 24, no. 1, [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost], 42.

26. Davis, 31.

know the essentials, i.e. forgiveness, salvation, redemption, justification, sanctification.²⁷ He teaches all the essentials in catechism class, but teens most likely have forgotten at least bits and pieces of all the information that was crammed into their minds; the preacher must make sure teens understand what he is talking about. Teens are not looking for a long lecture explaining every little facet of what is preached; they likely get lectures in school. The preacher is not teaching a Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary doctrine class; he is preaching to teens searching for an identity, most of whom might not care about big doctrinal terms. What is better for preaching: showering people with facts and truths that go in one ear and out the other with pieces being retained or pound a few facts and truths that fully stick?²⁸ Keep it simple, but make sure they understand.

Even when a preacher keeps his message simple, if he does not make what he says reach down to the teen level, some topics simply will not stick with them. For example, marriage might be years out of range of some of a preacher's teens. They think, "I'm a teen. I'm not married." They could close their ears to all of what the preacher says about marriage unless he speaks on their level and makes it applicable to them: "For any of you not married, looking forward to marriage, this is incredible! God will give you points right now so that you will have the happiest marriage you can have once you're married! For those of you who are married, this stuff will make your marriage even better."²⁹ Try to be cognizant of how teens feel in high school and make them see why the sermon is beneficial for them.

27. Schultz, 50-52.

28. Schultz, 52-53.

29. Enter, Interview.

Be yourself

Ultimately, what will give a preacher the most credibility with his teens is how he presents himself both in the pulpit and out. When he shows his teens he is the same person when he is preaching as he is when he is at youth group, he will have reached a level in their minds (which are bombarded by hundreds of voices all vying for attention) as someone worth listening to.

You don't need to develop a weepy, shaky preaching voice. You don't need to furrow your brow and take on an air of authority. You need to be you. Trying to copy someone else's style or mannerisms only dilutes you. You are the messenger. Teenagers may be amused at your likeness to some great television preacher, but when it comes time to be touched by God's word or when they need personal help and counsel, kids will want to communicate with someone who is genuine...use whatever techniques necessary to enhance your message, but be yourself. The most valuable paintings in the world are originals, not copies of originals.³⁰

Teens want to see their pastor cares about them, but they absolutely do not want to determine he is a fake. Will a teen who is searching for an identity to solidify his own personality, look for hope and answers from God when the message is preached by somebody who cannot remain true to his own personality?

Utilize different presentation methods

Assume the preacher knows his teens well. He is regularly speaking transparently with his teens. He has successfully preached on the teen's level. He shows originality in his preaching and daily interactions with his teens. His teens know he cares; they see it and hear it. They are ready to listen because they know what he will say has meaning for them. The preacher must take a step through the door of attention his teens have opened for him and give them reason to keep the

30. Davis, 33.

door open. How does a preacher do this? What must he do in his preaching? Davis explains how Jesus has the perfect answer:

Jesus never spoke without a clear purpose, but he used a variety of methods to get his point across. He used picturesque metaphors and compelling stories to bring truth to an illiterate society. These methods are very powerful in today's culture as well. Today, images and sound bites have replaced the written word as a means of disseminating information. Kids spend much more time watching television than they do reading books. We should never stop encouraging kids to read, especially the Word of God, but because many of them don't read, we must vary the methods we use to reach them.³¹

Jesus never stuck to only one method of presentation. He spoke in parables. He capitalized on opportunities for object lessons with his miracles. He taught by lecture. He used illustrations.

Jesus is the ultimate preacher. According to research done among teens, there are primarily four presentation methods, all ones Jesus utilized, which teens hook onto and engage in.³² If those methods are utilized properly in different ways and at different times rather than a strictly lecture-based approach, according to the learning pyramid developed by the National Training Laboratories of Bethel Maine,³³ a preacher is much more likely to engage teens.

Use story-telling

All people can relate to story-telling. Nearly all entertainment is based around story-telling. People are able to put themselves in the shoes of a character and imagine themselves acting out the scenes and events of the story. “Find an illustration and tell the story that nails the point and the teens and adults will find themselves in the story and apply it even if it’s about a middle-aged man – if you’ve hit the core of the teaching, it will apply to the whole congregation.”³⁴

31. Davis, 77.

32. cf. Appendix 1.

33. cf. Appendix 2.

34. Prof. David Scharf, Email Interview (September 20, 2016). Prof. David Scharf, professor at Martin

Story-telling also appeals to emotions. “Teenagers tend to remember more that has an emotional impact than cognitive impact. They retain things that create more feeling more than things that are strictly factual.”³⁵ Furthermore, teens are more likely than their parents and grandparents to be focused on doing something strictly for emotional reasons than for reasons related to relationships.³⁶ Dr. David Sousa explains why this is the case. He points out how brain research indicates that the limbic areas of the brain (i.e. the parts of the brain which control emotions) reach 100% development around the age of 12. By contrast, the frontal lobes – the brain’s rational system – don’t develop to 100% until around 24 years of age.³⁷ This emotional development occurs because of the points in development known as the sensitive periods.

Periods during which the brain is most responsive to input from the environment are known as *sensitive periods*. During sensitive periods the brain is at its most flexible, or *plastic*. Importantly, the rate at which the brain matures is not uniform across different systems. Because sensitive periods are associated with the stage of maturation of a system, it follows that different brain systems show sensitive periods at different ages...for example, the visual system shows an earlier period of maximum plasticity than the system responsible for critical thinking.³⁸

The teenager’s brain is at full emotional, visible learning flexibility. Story-telling attempts to place the mind of the hearer into a mental-visual display. The teenager will naturally be more prone to understanding and remembering a sermon when the preacher utilizes story-telling.

Luther College, deals with teenagers on a regular basis. He daily witnesses the struggles and victories, the strengths and weaknesses that teens have.

35. Ross Campbell, M.D., *How to Really Love Your Teenager* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, 1981), 113.

36. Barna, 65.

37. David A. Sousa, *How the Brain Learns*, 3rd Ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Publishing, 2005), 26.

38. Victoria C. P. Knowland, and Michael S. C. Thomas, 2014, “Educating the adult brain: How the neuroscience of learning can inform educational policy,” *International Review of Education* 60, no. 1, 101.

Use real-life illustrations

According to research among teens, a second engaging presentation method is real-life illustrations.³⁹ This makes complete sense because nothing will relate a teen to a situation more than giving them something real from life to put their shoes into. As a preacher gets to know his teens, he may find illustrations which, inevitably, will directly relate to his teens; he might even entertain the option of intentionalizing his search for relatable illustrations. Rodger Nishioka suggests an option for ensuring a preacher has timely, relatable illustrations in his sermons:

Once a quarter, invite five or six youth and young adults to your home for pizza (what else?). While you're together, spend some time talking about the themes and texts you'll be using as the basis for your preaching in the next few months. Play these themes out with the group and see what stories emerge. Ask permission to use these stories (with names changed) when you're preaching. This process of "harvesting illustrations" does more than give you relevant stories that relate to the text. This process also builds your relationship with these youth and young adults and their relationships with each other.⁴⁰

Using illustrations that teens can directly relate to, because they have already been there, might work wonders for harnessing the attention of teens. Research also shows that, like story-telling, real-life illustrations work for teenagers because of the development stage of their brains.

The age pattern of STM (short-term memory) performance for item-context bindings was different...teenagers showed higher levels of performance compared with children and older adults. Taken together, our results indicate that the ability to learn and retrieve associations between items and the context in which they are encountered in STM undergoes prolonged development up to young adulthood.⁴¹

There might not be one single illustration that hits a home-run, but every preacher ought to experiment with using memorable, real or hypothetical hooks to reel in the attention of his teens, especially in an age of so much media entertainment.

39. cf. Appendix 1.

40. Nishioka, 41.

41. Yana Fandakova, Myriam C. Sander, Markus Werkle-Bergner, and Yee Lee Shing, 2014, "Age Differences in Short-Term Memory Binding Are Related to Working Memory Performance Across the Lifespan," *Psychology and Aging* 29, no. 1, 146.

Use engaging introductions/conclusions

A preacher's first and last sentences are the most crucial for directly appealing to an already attentive audience. According to Ken Davis those words are the "most important words you will speak."⁴² While preachers would all agree God's words are, without a doubt, the most important words they speak in a sermon, regarding the attention of their audience Ken Davis hit the nail on the head. Any good speaker knows that without an engaging introduction and conclusion the rest of his speech might be more difficult to pay attention to. Not only does a preacher's first and last fifty seconds grab attention, they also establish rapport with his teens. They know he cares, but they still want to know why they should listen and remember. The introduction and conclusion tell them why: because what God says to his people is important.⁴³

Ask thought-provoking questions

Jesus was the master preacher. Anything he said people listened to with undivided attention. Asking thought-provoking questions was one great tool Jesus used to get a point across to his hearers. Thom and Joani Schultz make a strong statement regarding this. They say,

Jesus didn't come to settle minds, but to jolt them. He didn't come to make us more comfortable, but to stir our thoughts, to help us learn, to make us think.

- "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin." (Matt 6:28)
- "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matt 7:3)

42. Davis, 114.

43. Thom and Joani Schultz provide a wonderful example of an engaging introduction: "One Sunday morning the pastor went to the pulpit and said, 'I'm sorry. I've been so busy this week I didn't have time to prepare a sermon. It's just been one of those weeks.' Then he sat back down. The congregation was incredulous! What do you mean too busy? He just sat there long enough to make everyone very uncomfortable. He finally returned to the pulpit. Only this time with another message. He spoke about priorities—that we've all been given 24 hours a day to spend as we choose. It's not that we're too busy to do things, it's that we don't choose to do some things. He etched his point by evoking strong emotions in people" (203).

- “Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’” (Matt 9:5)
- “Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why do you doubt?’” (Matt 14:31)
- “What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?” (Matt 22:42)⁴⁴

While Jesus did not *only* come to jolt minds,⁴⁵ Thom and Joani provide a great example of one of the many teaching tools Jesus used. Thought-provoking questions always engage a person’s mind. If a preacher asks open-ended, thought-provoking questions in his sermons, especially at a time when he knows he has his teens’ attention, he will undoubtedly get mind motors moving and keep any attention he has already grabbed.

Vary your preaching style

Who might be more successful with engaging his teens in his preaching: the preacher who uses a variety of styles or the preacher who speaks in a monotone, lecture-based style? Most might agree the former preacher would appeal more to a teen’s emotions. Style can do one of two things: create interest and grab attention or severely distract. The preacher needs to be sure to attain for the former of the two. Creating eye contact might, for some, be quite difficult to accomplish. It may create tension and uneasiness but it is also one of the most crucial in establishing meaning with teens. Any eye contact tells a person, ‘This message is for you.’

Gestures and facial and body expressions can also be very distracting if used in overabundance.

Don’t be a flipper, flipping wrists in half-hearted attempts. You see flippers practice this art with the elbows bent and the hands fairly close together at about waist level...Don’t be a flapper! Don’t make uncontrolled, wild throwing motions of the arms...Be a fantasy merchant! These people have developed the ability to paint with their hands, body, and face a picture illustrative of their message. They effectively use gestures to take you

44. Schultz, 92.

45. Ex. He settles minds and makes people more comfortable when he says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matt 11:28)

beyond words to the place of which they speak. They make you feel the emotions they are feeling.⁴⁶

Make use of varying volume, pitch, resonance, and speed when preaching. Avoid filler words—they only make a preacher sound as if he is unprepared. If he wants to make his preaching engaging for teens, in order to speak on their level he must set the stage by using visuals to illustrate a point, using humor to provide a fun, silly illustration, or creating an easy “hook” to hang the Gospel message on.⁴⁷ If a preacher refrains from preaching in the same monotone, lecture-based style, and in so doing appeals more to a teen’s emotions, he gains huge strides in the race against the other voices itching for a teen’s attention.

Stick to the basics

As the preacher racks his brain for ways to present his preaching in an engaging way for teens, there is something he must never forget: preach specific law and specific Gospel. If he begins to stray from what is at the heart of Christian teaching and preaching he will do more harm than good. This is where good preparation comes into effect. A good sermon stays focused; a good preacher rarely drifts off on tangents. Every pastor learns in homiletics and education classes at Wisconsin Luther Seminary the importance of developing a purpose statement, a theme that outlines the overall sphere of a message, and main points which highlight the theme. This has a huge implication for preparing sermons: stick with the basics because they work.

Law is meant to hurt, which can be beneficial for getting a message to stick with teens. As stated earlier, teens remember more what impacts them emotionally. When a pastor preaches striking law, he will create emotion. Where there is law, though, Gospel must always follow. The

46. Davis, 137-138.

47. Enter, Interview.

Gospel produces emotions that provide the perfect comfort nothing else can; law preaching must never be void of Gospel preaching. “If the learning experience is a pleasant one, a teenager’s memories of religious things will be pleasant and can then be incorporated into his personality.”⁴⁸

Appeal to the “learner” in them

“The preacher spoke for 30 minutes. His content was solid, theologically correct in every detail. He said all the right things, using good grammar and sophisticated vocabulary. He *taught* some great stuff. But did anybody *learn* any great stuff? The next night...the parishioners were asked, ‘What was the point of the pastor’s sermon yesterday?’ Only two out of 50 had any idea.”⁴⁹ If a preacher is doing all he can to redirect his teens’ attention, how does he still have teens drifting off and not becoming engaged? There could be two reasons: either teens are mentally not able to stay engaged for a whole sermon (which certainly also applies to children and adults) or the preacher understands teaching and learning to be synonymous, which they are not. Many pastors might agree that preaching has more to do with proclaiming a truth than it has to do with teaching, but, in the opinion of the author, effective preaching also involves learning something. While this is not a primary avenue for making preaching engaging for teens, understanding what types of learners are present in the congregation could certainly help with how effectively teens are engaged.

48. Campbell, 114.

49. Schultz, 29.

Know how they learn

Capehart and Niles suggest there are four basic learning styles: looker, thinker, talker, and explorer. The looker needs to be able to *see* what is presented. The thinker needs to be able to *think through* what is presented. The talker needs to talk out ideas to *relate to* what is presented. The explorer needs physical movement or sensory experience to *personally experience* what is presented.⁵⁰ Appealing to the various learning types greatly influences how a preacher will connect with his hearers. While Dr. Nelson uses a different approach to learning types, he reinforces the importance of connecting with one's hearers. He says,

Accommodate the three basic learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic. If you understand that in any audience all three learning styles are present and that it usually breaks down into thirds (1/3 class learns best visually, 1/3 learns best through sound, 1/3 needs to move) and then use methods/approaches that connect with each style, things go much, much better. Of course, knowing your material helps, but if I know what I am talking about but cannot deliver it in a way that connects with my students, then I am just blabbering and they will tune out.⁵¹

Capehart and Niles suggest that a preacher can even look to Scripture in Deuteronomy 6:6–9 to illustrate how important this is to appeal to all types of learners:

- The looker: “*Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*” (vv. 8-9)
- The thinker: “*These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children.*” (vv. 6-7)
- The talker: “*Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*” (v.7)
- The explorer: “*Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down, and when you get up.*” (v. 7)⁵²

50. Jody Capehart and Lori Haynes Niles, Rev. Ed, *Touching Hearts, Changing Lives: Becoming a Treasured Teacher* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 1999), 33-34.

51. Dr. Joel Nelson, Email Interview (October 10, 2017). Dr. Joel Nelson has a M.S. in Education with an emphasis on Family Studies and an Ed.D. in Education with an emphasis on Leadership for the Advancement of Learning and Service. For 40 years, he has been involved in family ministry, from children's Sunday school and outreach programs to teen fellowship and outreach programs to adult bible study programs. His expertise coupled with experience provides a good basis for understanding teen life and communication.

52. Capehart, 37.

Know how to help them learn

Just knowing how people learn is not enough to enhance an engaging presentation for teens. The preacher ought to also know how to apply that knowledge to his own preaching style. Since every preacher is different, what follows are simply suggestions and must not be understood as the only right way.

For the looker learner, techniques are somewhat self-explanatory. The preacher can provide visuals to assist learning, i.e. PowerPoint, props, pictures or videos, etc., so they can *see* what he presents. The preacher can even help looker learners just by the words he speaks. When he tells stories or uses illustrations, painting concrete word-pictures enables teens to mentally *see* what he is saying and place themselves inside the story or illustration.

For the thinker learner the preacher can include facts and questions in his preaching; they want to be able to *think through* things. Thinker learners can also learn through visuals. Like the looker, provide visuals (outlines in the bulletin, Bible passages) to show them resources that explain the Gospel in a sequential and analytical way.⁵³

For talker learners a preacher might create “thinking” noise by giving the learner an opportunity to *say* something to understand it, such as reading a Bible passage out loud.⁵⁴

The explorer learner needs techniques to help them *move*. Though options to accommodate the explorer learner during the sermon are much more limited, a couple things Capehart and Niles suggest that could be done include providing an opportunity to look up Bible passages or suggesting ways the text could be put into action in day-to-day life.⁵⁵

53. Capehart, 163-164.

54. Nelson, Interview.

55. Capehart, 163-164.

PART 2: TEENS AND THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3). God designed the first commandment as a guard against replacing him with anything or anyone else in the spiritual life of a believer.

Christian teens know that, yet they mightily struggle with this commandment, as do all believers.

Guinness and Seel suggest that when people think of idolatry, most people think of Old

Testament idolatry, which creates a complete misconception of what true idolatry is. They say,

As modern people we usually think of an idol as an animal or human figure made of stone or wood. We see it as an object for religious devotion or magical power for premodern people who might prostrate themselves on the ground before it. If we have updated the idea at all, we might use “idolatry” to describe someone’s obsessional preoccupations with money or of an “idol” like Elvis Presley. We have, in effect, distanced ourselves from the whole idea of idolatry by pushing it out to the extreme cultural and psychological margins of life.⁵⁶

Although people do struggle with putting objects in front of God and viewing them as tantamount to a god, i.e. money, there are other invisible things that are more hidden within the life of a teenager, as well as everybody else, which cause the same struggle of holding God as number one in life. Because ‘hidden idols’ are imaginations of the heart and grow from the deepest recesses of the heart they can be some of the most dangerous for the growth and development of any teen.

What takes the place of God in the life of teens?

There are really two primary ideologies in the influential teenage years that stick out as the biggest struggles with holding God as number one. The first is an identity based on peer acceptance. Dr. Joel Nelson explained the struggle in this way:

56. Os Guinness and John Seel, “The Idol Factory,” *No God but God* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 30.

The number one idol in my view would be the peer group and the desire to stay connected to and “in” with friends. Staying connected is a physical and virtual reality today...Peer group connection is consistent with the “journey to independence” teens take in which the peer group becomes family #2 for the teen for a period of time. The peer group becomes a place where values (new and from family) get tested. The peer group becomes the comfortable place to associate with like-minded others in the whole up-and-down rollercoaster of adolescence. This “comfortable” place has value for the teen but can also be a place of great concern. The materialism, fashion, hobbies, interests, etc. choices teens make, to me are all about courting the peer group.⁵⁷

Might this particularly be a big struggle for the teen because, in the opinion of the author, teens spend so many of their waking hours around teens, especially during the school year?

The second biggest ‘hidden idol’ for a teen is self-identification. For the teen, “everything is a 9-1-1, and it’s all about me.”⁵⁸ David Scharf describes the struggle teens have with the idol of self-identification in this way:

We are all naturally born “turned in on ourselves” as Luther puts it, but that trait becomes more evident in the teen years. “Self” sounds like a generic idol, but in reality, much of a typical teen’s attention is focused on “what I deserve because of X effort,” “what do other people think of me,” “Am I weird, attractive, popular, etc.” It seems that at that age, the teens’ self-awareness goes off the chart and the idol becomes making yourself as good and successful in your own eyes and others. The devil seems particularly skilled at striking one of two chords with a teen. Either, “I know all about Jesus and what he’s done, but what does that have to do with my difficult teenage years right now?” (I believe many teens carry around a lot of guilt and have not seen what Jesus’ work for them really means. The devil blinds them to the fact that the very thing they most desperately search for – “self” esteem – is found in infinite measure in Jesus and his love. Jesus’ estimation of your value is the only thing that matters – not what others think of you, but what Jesus says of you!) Or “Jesus died for my sins. But my sins are not that big of a deal” and they remain devoted to the pursuit of selfish ends, clouded from seeing that a child of God’s walk of faith involves actual repentance and looking more and Jesus and less at ourselves. In reality, they probably haven’t committed sins with grave consequences yet – the devil uses that!⁵⁹

Dr. Nelson adds, “The big problem with identifying any teenage idol is that most teens are doing

57. Nelson, Interview.

58. Nelson, Interview.

59. Scharf, Interview.

the same things. Unfortunately, technology and social media makes this ‘self-identification’ idol so much easier to live out.”⁶⁰

Why do teens struggle with keeping God as number one in their lives?

A teen’s struggle with the first commandment starts in the home. If parents are not creating a good model for their teens to follow, chances are much greater their teens will not be on the lookout for potential ‘hidden idols.’⁶¹ When holding God as number one in life is modeled for a teen (or any child), there is a greater percentage of them doing it too; this is basic visual learning. Teens need to see what it looks like to keep God as number one.⁶² While it is certainly not a preacher’s duty to take the place of parents, he ought to address the importance of modeling the first commandment at home. Even if he provides an engaging sermon on the first commandment, if the parents do not show their teens what it looks like to love and serve God above everything else, teens may not take it as seriously as they should.

Loneliness and distractions also play a huge part in the teenage struggle with keeping the first commandment. “Teens are never disconnected. Between social media, smart phones, constant internet access, and oppressive focus on sports teens never have time to slow down and think. Yet, at the same time, teens feel a sense of loneliness because of the ‘hidden idol’ of self-identification; peers become pawns in a teen’s game of gaining greater self-esteem.”⁶³ This stems from a lack of perspective; teens get absorbed in instant gratification, the here and now.⁶⁴ This

60. Nelson, Interview.

61. Nelson, Interview.

62. Enter, Interview.

63. Scharf, Interview.

64. Rev. James Hein, Email Interview (October 8, 2017). Rev. Hein has done extensive research on the

‘hidden idolatry’ is not an easy struggle. As the preacher works at making his preaching engaging for teens, he must address such a difficult struggle.

As a discussion of teens (how to engage them and how they struggles with the first commandment) comes to a close, there are some important truths to keep in mind. While there is much to take away from this discussion that can be applied to children, teens, and adults, there are two areas that make teens really unique. First, more than any other age group, a teen’s brain learns and remembers most effectively when emotions are involved. Second, teens are in constant search of an identity. Understanding these two dynamics, a preacher will have the best chance to prepare his sermons in an engaging way for his teens by spending time with his teens and showing he cares about them. To make a sermon really resonate with the teens, a preacher can address the issue of identity by appealing to their emotions using a variety of presentation techniques including story-telling, real-life illustrations, engaging introductions/conclusions and thought-provoking questions.

PART 3: LUTHER'S PREACHING ON FIRST COMMANDMENT ISSUES

Preaching over 2,300 sermons, 2,010 of which were in the last 24 years of life, Martin Luther would most likely be regarded by Lutheran pastors across the country as the greatest preacher, aside from Jesus, in all of Christendom.⁶⁵ Luther, however, did not preach with any more authority than anyone else. His view on preaching was the same as every Lutheran pastor; he viewed his preaching as God speaking through him.⁶⁶ As a matter of fact, often Luther preached with utmost respect for God and the power of his Word. Paul Wendland, in his essay *Martin Luther—God's Voice*, demonstrates this as he paraphrases how Luther viewed God's Word. He wrote, "God's voice is transformative. He speaks and things that never were come into existence while things that do exist are radically remade. Kingdoms fall. Battle bows are broken. Peace descends upon an unruly humankind. This is the expectation with which Luther stood up to preach."⁶⁷

Luther's preaching

Paul Wendland summarized Luther's preaching well when he said, "At the risk of oversimplification, I am going to summarize Luther's approach to preaching under three headings: 1) he aimed at head and heart; 2) he prized clarity and simplicity; and 3) he preached in a way that was relevant to his listeners."⁶⁸ Luther's approach to preaching manifested itself in

65. Elmer Carl Kiessling, *The Early Sermons of Luther and Their Relation to the Pre-Reformation Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1935), 42-43.

66. J. Mark Beach as referenced in Paul O. Wendland, *Martin Luther—God's Voice*. [WLS Essay File], 5.

67. Wendland, 11.

68. Wendland, 30.

two areas: the style and structure of his preaching and his commitment to preaching law and Gospel.

Style and structure

Luther was a simple preacher. He once said, “In my sermons, I try to take one theme or statement and stick to it and show the people so plainly that they can say: This was the sermon.”⁶⁹ Though Luther strove for preaching plainly and with clarity, his sermons were by no means void of emotion (which is huge for teens). Kiessling writes, “At least once his words had such an incendiary effect on certain persons among the audience that the whole service was disrupted and he had to stop preaching because of a turmoil.”⁷⁰ Right in line with his drive at preaching plainly, Luther also strongly opposed long-windedness and fluffy wordage. Kiessling explains, “If the preacher had nothing to say he ought to preach only a half or a quarter of an hour rather than to talk without saying anything.”⁷¹

Regarding the homiletic character of his sermons, Luther relied heavily on the verse-by-verse expository sermon, though he would often use a combination of expository and topical methods.⁷² Although he might be regarded as “master of smooth transitions,” often Luther would grow too impatient to utilize his mastery and he produced very abrupt transitions.⁷³ Luther stressed nothing more than to preach pure doctrine in terms that the lay person could understand, but even he fell short of such a goal at times. Kiessling illustrates this when he writes,

69. Kiessling, 56-57.

70. Kiessling, 58-59.

71. Kiessling, 59.

72. Kiessling, 60-62.

73. Kiessling, 65.

His sermons are unusually full of illustration and their language is popular, racy, and colorful. Occasionally his efforts to visualize an abstract doctrine, like the Incarnation or the union of the divine and human in Christ, demonstrate at one and the same time his versatility in finding concrete illustrations and his inability to make the difficult abstractions more intelligible through them.⁷⁴

Luther utilized a vast array of techniques to grab the attention of his hearers. He was notorious for quoting proverbs and coining effective phrases, such as “The more you realize your impurity, the purer you are;” “Out of the same rose, the bee extracts honey, the spider poison;” “If there were a physician at the end of the world who could cure the disease of sin, all countries would be emptied, because everyone would risk his property and life to find such a doctor”⁷⁵

Luther loved using real-life illustrations to highlight a point. For example, in a sermon on Matthew 22:34–46, when talking about regulating life and conduct around the love of God and of neighbor, he said,

Here is a priest or monk, who is to read his prayers or the rules of his order, or to hold mass, or say penance. At this moment there comes a poor man or woman to him who has need of his help and counsel. What shall this priest or monk do? Shall he perform his service, or shall he assist the poor man? He should therefore act prudently and think: True, I am required to read my prayers, hold mass, or say penance; but now on the other hand, a poor man is here; he needs my help and I should come to his rescue. God commanded me to do this; but the others man devised and instituted. I will let the mandates of men go, and will serve my neighbor according to God’s commandment.⁷⁶

Other tools Luther effectively used throughout his sermons include heaping of synonyms, dramatization of material, and polemical argument.⁷⁷

74. Kiessling, 67.

75. Kiessling, 142-143.

76. Martin Luther and John Nicholas Lenker, ed, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 175.

77. Kiessling, 143.

Law and Gospel

Without question, Luther held a high regard for including both law and gospel in preaching. Luther's theology on the law's place in preaching permeates Luther's works: "the law is preached in order to make sin manifest and prepare hearers for the gospel."⁷⁸ Luther fully understood that every human being is *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously justified and sinner). Because of that, Luther "never shirks from preaching the law in its first use—both before and after the proclamation of the gospel, and sometimes even apart from it!—as the context demands."⁷⁹ Luther believed no preaching should ever be void of the gospel because it "is God's promise of forgiveness, acceptance, and reconciliation in Jesus Christ that *comforts* the believer and *creates* faith."⁸⁰ Simply put, "for Luther, God's law establishes our responsibility toward our neighbor (what we should do) and, along with the gospel, establishes our identity in relation to God (who we are). What we should do is love our neighbor; who we are is sinners for whom Christ died and who, for Christ's sake, God declares righteous."⁸¹ Both law and gospel must always be present in preaching.

Luther's sermon on the first commandment

Martin Luther preached a sermon series on the Ten Commandments from November 30 to December 18, 1528. As Luther introduces the series, he emphasizes the extreme necessity of learning and knowing all parts of the catechism, not just the Ten Commandments. Luther says,

78. David J Lose, "Martin Luther on Preaching the Law," *Word and World* 21, no. 3, [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost], 253.

79. Lose, 261. In another place, Lose explains what Luther viewed as the first use of the law: "[Luther] designates the first as the 'civil' (or 'political') use, describing the law's work to *compel* civility through legal restraint and the threat of punishment" (254).

80. Lose, 255.

81. Lose, 253.

These portions, which you have heard me recite, were called by the ancient fathers the catechism, that is, an instruction for children, which the children and all who want to be Christians should know. And one who does not know them should not be counted among the number of Christians. For when a person does not know this, it is a sign that he has no regard for God and Christ...A person who wants to be a good citizen owes it to his family to urge them to learn these portions of the catechism, and if they will not, do not give them any bread to eat. If the servants grumble, then throw them out of the house.⁸²

Luther leaves no room for any excuse for not knowing the Ten Commandments. He also strongly urges continued daily meditation on the Ten Commandments with a couple suggestions: learn and read Scripture; pray at morning, evening, and before and after meals.⁸³

Luther lays out his explanation of the first commandment very plainly throughout his sermon. He does not drift into lofty language, but speaks on the level of his hearers. He hammers home the command to fear and love God above everything else with simple, yet sometimes fierce language that hearers of any age can understand. In order to retain the language and intended force with which Luther speaks, the author will thus let Luther speak for himself:

“You shall have no other gods before me.” This is a commandment which gives all the doctors trouble to understand. But it should be taught to the children just as it stands in the words, “I am your God,” or, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Anybody can learn this, no matter how ignorant he may be. But if you won’t learn it, then you shall be of the devil. But what does this mean: not to have any other gods or “I am your God”? To have God is to fear God and trust him. I will say it as crudely as I can: He who fears God and trusts him is keeping this commandment, but he who fears something else and trusts it is transgressing.⁸⁴

One who fears something else and trusts it makes of it a god. That is why all sorcerers transgress this first commandment; they neither trust God nor fear him. You see, then, what faith is and what idolatry is. If you fear the prince more than God, then the prince is your god. If you trust your wife or money more than God, then these are your god. But God is held not in the hand but in the heart. If you fear him and trust him then you need fear no one and trust no one except God. Therefore the first commandment claims the two parts of your heart: fear God and trust him. You learn from this that to fear God is

82. Martin Luther and John W. Doberstein, ed., *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 51: Sermons I (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 137. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

83. *LW* 51: 137.

84. *LW* 51: 138.

not merely to fall upon your knees. Even a godless man and a robber can do that. Likewise, when a monk trusts in his cowl and rule, this is idolatry.⁸⁵

Because of the seriousness of the first commandment, Luther hammers the law quite harshly. He does not entirely leave out the gospel, however; the gospel is where the heart of comfort rests in this commandment, just as in any other commandment. Peters explains, “Both are constantly driven against crude idolatry as well as against the subtle self-idolization of man.”⁸⁶ Instead of preaching separate law and separate gospel, Luther weaves in the gospel with the law. Luther proclaims,

Thus the first commandment requires that you fear no one and trust no one except God alone, who says: If you fear me and trust me, I will protect you and supply you with nourishment and all that you need and you shall have what is sufficient. Therefore fear nobody but me, for I can smite you, and put your trust in none but me, for I can help you. No prince will give you either good or evil, for both are in my hand. Therefore fear me and trust in me...the Lord wills that we should practice [the commandments] in all affairs of the household, so that when a servant does wrong the master may say: Don't fear me, fear God! You are not my servant but God's servant. You can very well do me an injury without my knowing it. If you will not obey me, then fear God and be obedient for his sake. It is of no account that you be obedient for my sake, but trust God and obey his commandment!⁸⁷

We probably think that the Ten Commandments are there only to be preached from the pulpit, but they need rather to be applied to use. For God has commanded you to fear and trust him. So the young can be well brought up in the discipline of the Lord [Eph. 6:4]. For they must fear God if they are to cease from doing evil for his sake and [they must trust God if they are to do the good for his sake]. It is small wages when I give you three or four gulden, but God gives you a happy life here and, after that, eternal life.⁸⁸

85. *LW* 51: 138-139.

86. Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Ten Commandments* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 82.

87. *LW* 51: 139-140.

88. *LW* 51: 140.

As Luther closes his sermon on the first commandment, he brings attention to why God's command to fear and trust Him above all else is so vital for the broad scope of life and the decisions people make. Luther concludes,

All the wisdom which is in the Scriptures follows from the first commandment... Thus one becomes greatly learned through this [commandment]; for when the family fears and trusts God you will be able to deal well with every external situation... No matter how many people teach you to go contrary to the first commandment, dismiss them and say, I must fear and trust God more than you. Then they will become fine people; otherwise they will grow up to be blockheads. The chief part of all wisdom and knowledge is the first commandment, namely, that you should fear and trust no one but God alone. He will richly reward you. In the course of time you will learn to apply it well in every situation and action.⁸⁹

Luther's preaching about first commandment issues

Luther preached with the belief that the first commandment weaves through all other commandments—if a person observes the first, he observes all of them; if a person breaks one, he breaks the first because he is holding something else as more important than God.⁹⁰ With this belief, Luther often made reference to the first commandment in his preaching, typically in language that follows the command to love God alone.

Luther very clearly distinguishes what is meant when God says to “love God alone,” often pointing to Scripture to illustrate what true love for God looks like. He says:

For the commandment: “Thou shalt have no other Gods before me,” I cannot explain or interpret otherwise than: Thou shalt love God alone. Thus Moses himself interprets it in Deut. 6:4-5, where he says: “Here, O Israel; Jehovah our God is one Jehovah; and thou shalt love Jehovah thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might”... Thou, thou, it says, thou, and everything thou art; and especially does it mean the heart, the soul and all the powers. It does not speak of the tongue, or the hands, or the knees; but it speaks of the whole body, and of all thou hast and art. If I am to have no other God, then I must surely possess the only true God with my heart, that is, I must in my heart be affectionate to him, evermore cleave to him, depend upon him, trust him,

89. *LW* 51: 140-141.

90. Peters, 132.

have my desire, love and joy in him, and always think of him. Just as we say at other times when we delight in something, that it tastes good in our very heart.⁹¹

Now I think you understand what it is to love God with all the heart, with all the soul and with all the mind. To love God with all the heart is to love him above all creatures...to despise and forsake all [creatures] for God's sake, whenever God my Lord desires it...To love God with all the soul is to devote your entire bodily life to him so that you can say when the love of any creature, or any persecution threatens to overpower you: All this I will give up, before I will forsake my God; let men cast me away, murder or drown me, let what God's will is happen to me, I will gladly lose all, before I will forsake thee, O Lord! Unto thee will I cling more than to all thy creatures, or to anything that is not thyself...To love God with all our strength is to devote all our members and whatever we may be able to do through our bodies to the love of God, and sacrifice all rather than do anything contrary to his will...To love God with all the mind is to take to nothing except that which is pleasing to God.⁹²

On occasion, Luther also pointed out examples of men from Scripture who displayed such a love from the heart in order to create concrete real-life illustrations. Luther says,

That the Jews had to practice circumcision was indeed a foolish ceremony, yea, a command offensive to reason, even though it were given by God still to-day...Why then did God give the command? In order that this commandment and law might show them whether they really loved God with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their mind, and whether they did it willingly or not. For if there were a devout heart, it would say: I verily do not know why God gave me circumcision, inasmuch as it does not profit any one, neither God, nor me, nor my neighbor; but since it is well pleasing to God, I will nevertheless do it, even though it be considered a trifling and despised act.⁹³

It was a foolish command God gave to Abraham, to slay his son, Gen. 22:2. For if reason had been the judge in this, both it and all mankind would have come to no other conclusion than this: It is an unfriendly and hostile command, how can it be from God, since God himself said to Abraham that he would multiply his seed through this son, and it would become as innumerable as the stars of the firmament and as the sand by the sea. Therefore it was a foolish commandment, a grievous, hard and unbearable commandment. But what did Abraham do? He closes his senses, takes his reason captive, and obeys the voice of God, goes, and does as God commanded him. By this he proved that he obeyed from the heart.⁹⁴

91. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 21-22.

92. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 24-25.

93. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 172.

94. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 172-173.

Luther knew God does not limit his children's love to Him alone; God also allows his children to love other things. So Luther proclaimed that. He also made sure his hearers understood God allows such love as long as it never supersedes their love for Him.

Therefore it should have been preached that images were nothing and that no service is done to God by erecting them; then they would have fallen of themselves. That is what I did; that is what Paul did in Athens...he preached against their idols, but he overthrew none by force...St. Paul, as we read in the Book of Acts [28:11], sat in a ship on whose prow were painted or carved the Twin Brothers [i.e., Castor and Pollux]. He went on board and did not bother about them at all, neither did he break them off. Why must Luke describe the Twins at this point? Without doubt he wanted to show that outward things could do no harm to faith, if only the heart does not cleave to them or put its trust in them.⁹⁵

Thus God can also allow us to love his creatures; yea, they are created for this purpose and are good. The sun is an excellent creature; gold and silver and all things that are attractive and beautiful by nature cause us to love them. This God indeed permits us to do. But that I should cling to the creature and love it with the same love with which I love God the Creator, this he can and will not allow.⁹⁶

Law and Gospel must be present in every sermon; Luther believed that to be especially true in talking about loving God alone. He vividly hammers with law:

Human nature alone will never be able to accomplish what God in this commandment requires, namely, that we surrender our will to the will of God, so that we renounce our reason, our will, our might and power, and say from the heart: Thy will be done. And indeed, nowhere will you find a person who loves God with his whole heart and his neighbor as himself.⁹⁷

But there is not a man on earth who thus fulfils the law; yea, we all do just the opposite. Thus this law here makes us all sinners so that not the least letter of this commandment is fulfilled, even by the most holy persons in the world. For no one clings so firmly to God with all the heart, that he could forsake all things for God's sake. We have, God be praised, become so competent that we can almost not suffer the least word, yea, we will not let go of a nickel for the sake of God.⁹⁸

95. *LW* 51: 83.

96. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 24.

97. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 178.

98. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 25.

Although stretching into an allegorical approach with his reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan, the following excerpt provides a powerful example of Luther's vivid language and striking law illustrations:

The man who here lies half dead, wounded and stripped of his clothing, is Adam and all mankind. The murderers are the devils who robbed and wounded us, and left us lying prostrate half dead. We still struggle a little for life; but there lies horse and man, we cannot help ourselves to our feet, and if we were left thus lying we would have to die by reason of our great anguish and lack of nourishment; maggots would grow in our wounds, followed by great misery and distress. The parable stands in bold relief, and pictures us perfectly, what we are and can do with our boasted reason and free will.⁹⁹

Even with so much law, which is certainly needed for all who break any commandment, much less the first and greatest commandment, Luther never hesitates to gently wrap the battered wounds of his hearers with the loving comfort of the gospel:

[Christ Jesus] loved God with all his heart and his neighbor as himself, and submitted his will to the will of his Father, fulfilled the law in every respect; this I could not do and yet I was required to do it. Therefore, he accepts him; and that which he fulfilled in the law, he offers me. He freely gives me his life with all his works, so that I can appropriate them to myself as a possession that is my own and is bestowed upon me as a free gift. He delivers us from the law, for when the law says, Love God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself, or thou wilt be damned, then I say, I cannot do it. Then Christ says: Come to me, take me and cling to me by faith; then you shall be rid of the law.¹⁰⁰

But Christ, the true Samaritan, takes the poor man to himself as his own, goes to him and does not require the helpless one to come to him; for here is no merit, but pure grace and mercy; and he binds up his wounds, cares for him and pours in oil and wine, this is the whole Gospel from beginning to end... There is scarcely a more lovely picture in the entire Gospel, than where Christ the Lord compares himself to a shepherd, in Luke 15, who carries the lost sheep on his shoulders back to the fold. He still continually carries his lost sheep thus at the present day.¹⁰¹

Thus when we now come before God the Father and are asked: whether we have also believed and loved God, and have wholly fulfilled the law; then the Samaritan will step

99. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 28. Here Luther seems to be leaning on Augustine's allegorical approach of the parable of the Good Samaritan. While we would disagree with this interpretation, the quote serves well to illustrate the vivid, strong language with which Luther presents the law on the first commandment.

100. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 181.

101. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 30.

forth, Christ the Lord, who carries us lying on his beast, and say: Alas, Father! Although they have not wholly fulfilled thy law, yet I have done so, let this be to their benefit because they believe in me...Let this be sufficient for the present, and let us call on God for grace.¹⁰²

For whatever is conceived and born in sin, lives and works and dies in it (unless Christ comes to its aid), is beyond human nature. God's mercy is won for us by [Christ's] works, not through our deeds, and so we fulfill the demands of the First Commandment through him and have a God on whose grace we may rely with the complete trust that in Christ he forgives us all our sins without any merit on our part and grants us eternal life.¹⁰³

Luther understood the power of the Word; his sermons reflected that. When he preached law, whether with careful exposition or with vivid stories and illustrations, he let Scripture guide his presentation. When Luther preached gospel, whether with clear exposition or beautifully painted illustrations, he let Scripture be his guide. Martin Luther allowed God's Word to work supernaturally and, through the structure and style of his preaching, to also work psychologically. His preaching made his concern for the 'hidden idols' of his hearers, even the teens, quite evident and a good example for preachers of today to follow.

102. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 34-35.

103. *LW* 52: 252-253.

PART 4: APPLYING LUTHER TO HELP MAKE PREACHING ON THE FIRST COMMANDMENT ENGAGING FOR TEENS

Over the course of this essay, most likely applications for one's own ministry and preaching were already formulated. Maybe techniques and methods to make preaching engaging for teens were already pulled out for one's own use. Maybe Luther and what he said in his sermons can already find a place into a sermon or two about the first commandment. That is fantastic. All preachers should always strive to get better, applying what they read to their own ministry in their own ways. The author of this essay does not presume to suggest what follows is absolutely necessary or the only right way in applying Luther to help make preaching on the first commandment engaging for teens. What follows are simply suggestions to guide or aide any attempts at putting into practice what was stated thus far.¹⁰⁴

Apply Luther when preaching law on the first commandment

The law is powerful. It strikes down so that the Gospel can lift up. The law naturally appeals to emotions; law was meant to hurt, so let it hurt. Luther magnificently utilized this. He often used strong, sometimes even harsh language when preaching the law, especially when preaching about the first commandment since he viewed all other commandments intertwined with the first.¹⁰⁵ Do not be afraid to model Luther's harsh language. Teens (really, the whole congregation) might hurt much more with stronger language, but that opens up the door even wider for the comfort of the Gospel. Luther did not present a harsh law narrative, with lengthy,

104. The suggestions the author of this essay provides are largely intended to be directed toward teens. However, he highly suggests not limiting applications to just teens since they are not the only ones to whom pastors preach and everyone is just as guilty of breaking the first commandment.

105. Peters, 132.

wordy presentation. He presented a harsh law pamphlet, with a concise, straight-to-the-point presentation. Often times, especially in his first commandment sermon, Luther repeats his simple points throughout his sermons.¹⁰⁶ If a preacher mimics Luther and preaches repeated, straight-forward law with harsh tones, think of how powerful God's message and the seriousness of breaking the first commandment becomes. Not only does it hurt, but it hurts many times. If teens learn how much it hurts to break the first commandment, to hold other things above God, they might be much more hesitant to fall into that trap.

Luther explains the sin against the first commandment as not simply worshipping some image; he explains if a person is not wholly (mind, tongue, heart) devoted to trusting and loving God, that person has committed idolatry.¹⁰⁷ How many of a preacher's hearers, especially his teens, really realize how much of their lives are spent in 'hidden' idolatry? As teens are searching for an identity, 'hidden idolatry' would be a huge influence. Thus, a proper, clear explanation of the first commandment is a must.

Luther kept his presentation of law on the first commandment simple, but thorough. He explains what it means to break the first commandment,¹⁰⁸ what it looks like to break the first commandment,¹⁰⁹ and what breaking the first commandment does to believers.¹¹⁰ Though clear and simple, Luther does not make his presentations of law boring. He showed that he understood how the brain works by providing illustrations and stories and teens love stories and illustrations because of how they affect emotions.

106. Kiessling, 56-57.

107. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 21-22.

108. cf. pages 29-30.

109. cf. page 32.

110. cf. page 33.

One particular illustration Luther uses both to greatly affect emotions and appeal to identity, thus a hugely beneficial illustration to reach teens. He does a fantastic job illustrating the seriousness of sin when he illustrates how Christ is like the Good Samaritan. Use the analogy he makes by explaining that no one is able to do absolutely anything on his own, that all people are lost and hopeless with maggots crawling through their skin.¹¹¹ What teen would want such an identity? With such a graphic picture, a preacher is bound to produce a mental visual effect. After painting the picture that Luther uses, instead of immediately explaining where a sin against the first commandment leaves a person, give the thinking learners a thought-provoking question like, “Where does this leave us? What does this make us?” Again, although what the author of this essay provides are simply suggestions, he highly suggests using Luther’s powerful illustration here. Such vivid, strong language is bound to engage teens while presenting the seriousness of breaking the first commandment.

Apply Luther when preaching Gospel on the first commandment

From Luther’s language throughout his sermons, a reader will easily come to the conclusion that Luther had no trouble preaching law. More importantly, though, one will find Luther craftily allows Scripture to work psychologically. When Luther preaches Gospel, he does so with utmost care for his hearers; he wholeheartedly believes the law has ripped wounds in the people and then he brings much needed healing with the Gospel. Remember, teens are searching for identity. For Luther, the Gospel *is* identity.

Luther appeals to emotions with simple, clear explanation of the identity found in Christ. He found that no identity is more comforting than that which is found in the robes of Christ. To repeat an earlier quote, Luther says,

111. cf. page 33.

[Christ Jesus] loved God with all his heart and his neighbor as himself, and submitted his will to the will of his Father, fulfilled the law in every respect; this I could not do and yet I was required to do it. Therefore, he accepts him; and that which he fulfilled in the law, he offers me. He freely gives me his life with all his works, so that I can appropriate them to myself as a possession that is my own and is bestowed upon me as a free gift. He delivers us from the law, for when the law says, Love God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself, or thou wilt be damned, then I say, I cannot do it. Then Christ says: Come to me, take me and cling to me by faith; then you shall be rid of the law.¹¹²

Luther knew Scripture is clear and powerful; Lutheran pastors know that. Sometimes all teens need to hear is the clear, simple presentation of identity in Christ from Scripture. A preacher should present the Gospel with the goal of engraving such an identity in the minds of his teens.

Understanding the power of illustrations in appealing to emotions, Luther uses two illustrations, the Good Samaritan and the Good Shepherd,¹¹³ to address loneliness and identity, both of which teens mightily struggle with.¹¹⁴ As two of the most comforting illustrations Jesus himself uses, teens and adults will find true comfort as they are pointed to Jesus as being like the Good Samaritan and as their true Good Shepherd. Loneliness is broken as Jesus, like the Good Samaritan, does not pass by but rather becomes a guardian and friend, bandaging the wounds caused by the devil's crafty schemes in leading believers to break the first commandment. Show pictures of the Good Samaritan and what he does or share a video clip to enhance learning for the looker learners. Identity is found in the fold of the Good Shepherd who call all believers his own. Guide people through a variety of Scripture passages showing the Gospel message of the Good Shepherd and the comfort found under his protection. Encourage them to turn to each Scripture reference in a pew Bible. Let this Gospel be heard and learned because it is exactly what teens want to hear.

112. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, 181.

113. cf. page 34.

114. Scharf, Interview.

CONCLUSION

Teens are unique. They listen to what has more of an effect on their emotions than on their cognition. Knowing this, preachers can trust they will reach the hearts and minds of teens in an effective way by telling stories, by providing real-life illustrations, by utilizing strong introductions and conclusions and by asking thought-provoking questions. However, it is vital to keep in mind that teens want to listen to somebody who shows them he cares about them. One of the ways to accomplish this is by addressing their biggest struggle: identity. Teens are constantly searching for identity, fighting the ‘advice’ of their peers and feelings of loneliness. The preacher who points teens to an identity found only in Christ will show his teens really how much he cares. Luther was able to accomplish such a task. He harnessed emotions to appeal to the emotions; he preached with simple, clear language; he told stories and used illustrations. He was a masterful preacher.

Many teens, as well as adults, can fall victim to becoming bored during a sermon; in the opinion of the author, attention spans seem to be growing shorter and shorter these days. It is imperative that preachers find ways to engage not just their teens, but their entire congregation in their preaching. As teens walk through their years of searching for an identity, often in a difficult struggle with wholly devoting their mind, tongue, and heart to the Lord, preachers must model Luther. His approach remains fresh in the 21st century because he preached first commandment issues vividly, clearly, and passionately with love for God and for the people whom he served. In so doing, preachers maximize the opportunity to proclaim the importance of keeping the first commandment, and they themselves hold God and his Word as number one, not just in their lives but in the lives of all for whom God made them shepherds.

APPENDIX 1: TEEN SURVEY RESULTS

Survey of 50 Teens in WELS					
How much of any given sermon do you pay attention to?			What part(s) of a sermon grabs your attention the most? (Please select all that apply.)		
<i>Answer:</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>% of Teens</i>	<i>Answer:</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>% of Teens</i>
0-25% of sermon	1	2.00%	Introduction/Conclusion	14	28.00%
25-50% of sermon	15	30.00%	Story-telling	19	38.00%
50-75% of sermon	15	30.00%	Real-life illustration	22	44.00%
75-100% of sermon	16	32.00%	Quoting the Bible	10	20.00%
Depends	3	6.00%	Visuals	1	2.00%
			Singing songs	2	4.00%
In general, for how long after the service are you able to remember the main point of the sermon?			What presentation method(s) helps you relate best to any given section of a sermon? (Please select all that apply.)		
<i>Answer:</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>% of Teens</i>	<i>Answer:</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>% of Teens</i>
Several minutes to hours	9	18.00%	Story-telling	25	50.00%
One day	8	16.00%	Real-life illustration	33	66.00%
A few days	22	44.00%	Hypothetical situation	7	14.00%
1 week or more	11	22.00%	Quoting the Bible	7	14.00%
			Visuals	3	6.00%

APPENDIX 2: LEARNING PYRAMID¹¹⁵

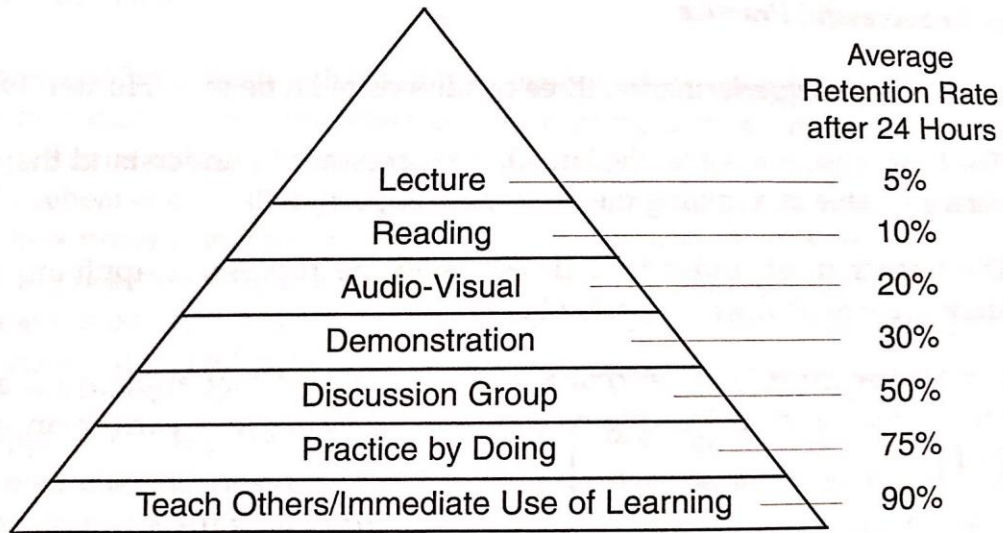


Figure 3.8. The learning pyramid shows the average percentage of retention of material after 24 hours for each of these instructional methods.

115. Sousa, *Teacher's Guide*, 43.

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