



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Preaching the Word (Homiletics)

Lesson #30

F. Helpful Ideas from Various Sources

Ever since God first introduced the Gospel of Christ to Adam and Eve after their disobedience in the Garden of Eden, God has used human beings to proclaim His Gospel in the world. There has been a long history of preaching God's Word during which God has used many different preachers in many different languages with many different gifts and styles. Our generation is not the first to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of the preachers from previous times have passed on some ideas or thoughts about preaching that may help us today. The following paragraphs contain helpful ideas from various sources.

1. Martin Luther

Luther warned preachers not to expect the Holy Spirit to speak to them directly and individually to give them the words for their sermons. The Holy Spirit speaks through the Holy Scriptures, and it is through our reading and studying of the Scriptures that we hear God's Word. It is only when we speak God's Word that we can be confident that the Holy Spirit is speaking through us.

Often you will see little or no fruit from your faithful preaching. You may think that you should be preaching and teaching something different. In response to such thoughts Luther said: "Do as you please, nothing seems to help. Yet faith in Christ should and must be preached, no matter what happens. I would much rather hear people say of me that I preach too sweetly... than not preach faith in Christ at all" (*What Luther Says*, #3603).

Luther noticed that some preachers want to be known for their long words and fancy language, so he said: "A sincere preacher must consider the young people, the servants and maids in the church, those who lack education... They should be simple in their sermons" (*What Luther Says*, #3609).

It is easy to look for praise from your listeners and choose your words with that in mind, that is, to try to gain approval from your audience. But Luther said: "Let us preach to the glory of God and pay no attention to the judgment of men... Let us preach only Christ and the Catechism. This is the wisdom that exalts us, because it is the Word of God" (*What Luther Says*, #3612).

2. C. F. W. Walther

Walther was a preacher and teacher of Lutherans in America in the nineteenth century. In his book titled *Pastoral Theology*, Walther listed what he considered the chief requirements of a Christian sermon:

1. "The first requirement of a sermon is that it contains nothing but God's Word – and that pure and unadulterated" (p. 97).
2. "The second requirement for a sermon is that God's Word is also rightly applied in it" (p. 98).
3. "The third requirement of a sermon is that the whole counsel of God is proclaimed to the hearers in it for their salvation" (p. 109).

He does not mean that every teaching in the Bible must be found in every sermon. He explained it in this way: "Every fundamental article of the Christian faith has its place over the course of a year" (p. 109). Yet "it is also necessary for every single sermon he preaches to contain enough of the entire order of salvation that a person, even if he heard only this single sermon, could learn the way of salvation through it" (p. 113).

4. "The fourth requirement for a proper sermon is that it corresponds to the specific needs of the hearers... One of the main tasks of a pastor in preparing his sermons is to keep in mind the particular condition of the congregation and the particular needs that follow from their condition" (p. 114).
5. "The fifth main requirement of sermons is that they should be contemporary" (p. 124). That is, "one preaches in a contemporary way if he is not satisfied that his sermons merely contain the Word of God, but consistently takes special account of the prejudices, errors, sins, vices, and dangers that predominate in his era" (p. 125).
6. "The sixth and seventh main requirements of a sermon are that it should be well structured and not too long... Disorder in the sermon cannot help but cause confusion in the hearers" (p. 127). "A sermon... should thus treat one main truth" (p. 128).
7. Walther quotes Luther: "It is the office and mark of a good speaker that he stops when people enjoy hearing him the most and think he is just beginning to speak" (p. 128).
8. "There is another point that we may not fail to bring to mind regarding the sermon. There are many sermons regarding which one cannot say whether they contain any false teaching or clearly violate one of the main requirements already listed. Nevertheless, they still lack one of the most important attributes of a good sermon. They do not affect the heart and conscience of the hearers" (p. 128).

3. R. C. H. Lenski

Lenski was an American Lutheran preacher and teacher. He studied the Greek original text of every book in the New Testament and wrote a series of commentaries on the whole New Testament. In his book, *The Sermon* (pp. 246-261), he mentions various materials that you can use in a sermon to explain the text and emphasize the main point of the sermon.

1. "Scripture Passages. For every thought in the text there are other Scriptural statements, supporting that thought in one way or another... Use only telling passages, such as are to the point and easily understood. Use none that themselves need further explanation. Use only a few for any one point."
2. "Confessional Statements. In the confessional writings there are many excellent passages that deserve to be used in sermons. Among them are illustrations, definitions, and choice ways of saying things." Luther's *Small Catechism* is a good example of one book that you can use.
3. "Quotations from the Church Fathers, especially also Hymn Writers... Luther will always be a favorite." Quoting hymns or spiritual songs that are familiar to your audience may be helpful in emphasizing your point.
4. "Historical Incidents. Bible references are the best, and the preacher should master their use."
5. "Conditions and Happenings in Every Day Life. The preacher must have a keen eye and a keen ear for all that meets him day by day. He will discover a wealth of material for his sermons, in fact, so much of it that he will be unable to use it all, selecting only what is most telling for his spiritual purpose. He will see about him many things that tally with the good or the bad mentioned in his texts."
6. "Illustrations of All Kinds... The Bible is a masterpiece in the art of using illustration. The preacher must produce his own illustrations. Only occasionally will he be able to pick one up elsewhere suitable for his purpose."
7. "Individualization, Specialization... Instead of speaking at length on the general topic of brotherly love, describe actual cases of one Christian showing love to another, or of neglecting to show it. Instead of piling up sentences on worldliness or godliness, picture an actual worldly man, an actual godly man, how each thinks and acts. Do not merely define faith, but rather show us a man who trusts the Lord or His promises in actual life."

4. Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge

From their book *Preach the Gospel*:

“Four important corollaries derive from the truth that a preacher serves as an ambassador of Jesus Christ.

1. “The first corollary is that the sermon must be scriptural” (p. 2).
2. “Secondly, the sermon must proclaim the pure Word” (p. 3).
3. “Thirdly, the sermon must be Christ-centered” (p. 3).
4. “Finally, preachers who understand their role as ambassadors for Christ will restrict themselves to subjects Scripture certifies for pulpit proclamation. Their sermons will serve the salvation of souls the Savior shed His blood to redeem. They will promote sanctified Christian living... Nor is the pulpit a forum for economic, social, or political matters except when scriptural principles are involved and God’s people face the prospect of being misled” (p. 3).

“The purpose of preaching...is two fold. It is (1) to lead sinners to Jesus and (2) to edify those who already confess Him as Savior and Lord” (p. 4).

“Every sermon... will have as its purpose to teach, or to rebuke, or to correct, or to train in righteousness, or to encourage hope” (p. 5).

5. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Lloyd-Jones was a preacher in England from 1938 to 1968. The following comments on preaching come from his book *Preaching and Preachers*, published in 1971.

Chapter One: The Primacy of Preaching

“To me the work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called.” “The most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching.” “The primary task of the Church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God.”

Chapter Two: No Substitute

“The ultimate justification for asserting the primacy of preaching is theological... The moment you consider man’s real need, and also the nature of the salvation announced and proclaimed in the Scriptures, you are driven to the conclusion that the primary task of the Church is to preach and to proclaim this, to show man’s real need, and to show the only remedy, the only cure for it.”

“The primary task of the Church is not to educate man, is not to heal him physically or psychologically, it is not to make him happy. I will go further; it is not even to make him good... The Church’s primary purpose is rather to put man into the right relationship with God, to reconcile man to God.” [Note: The reconciliation is complete; but the Word of reconciliation must be brought to sinful man.]

“The Church has been trying to preach morality and ethics without the Gospel as a basis; and it simply does not work.”

“If a man is not a Christian you cannot give him spiritual help. If he is not a Christian the first thing you have to do is to help him become a Christian... A spiritual rebirth is generally produced by the preaching of the Gospel.”

“The Church is a missionary body, and we must recapture this notion that the whole Church is a part of this witness to the Gospel and its truth and its message.”

Chapter Three: The Sermon and the Preaching

“What the natural man needs above everything else is to be humbled.”

There are “two elements in preaching. There is first of all the sermon or the message – the content of that which is being delivered. But secondly, there is the act of preaching, the delivery.”

“I deliver to them what has been given to me. I have been given it, and I give it to them. I am a vehicle, I am a channel, I am an instrument, I am a representative.”

Chapter Eight: The Character of the Message

“The preacher has to assess the condition of those in the pew and to bear that in mind in the preparation and delivery of his message.”

Chapter Nine: The Preparation of the Preacher

“The preacher’s first, and the most important task is to prepare himself, not his sermon.”

“Always respond to every impulse to pray.”

“Read your Bible systematically... All preachers should read through the whole Bible in its entirety at least once every year.”

Chapter Ten: The Preparation of the Sermon

“Deal with the meaning of your text... You have got to be honest with your text.” “You must sacrifice a good sermon rather than force a text.”

Chapter Twelve: Extemporaneous Preaching

“Prepare as thoroughly as you can so that you will know in your mind what you want to say from beginning to end.”

“Some men read their sermon in the pulpit... That must be bad.”

“There never has been a preacher that has not had to learn by experience. Do not be discouraged... Experiment... Try various modifications and variations.”

“Stories and illustrations are only meant to illustrate truth, not to call attention to themselves.” “Our business is not to entertain people.” “If you use too many illustrations in your sermons your preaching will be ineffective.”

Chapter Thirteen: What to Avoid

“I have always opposed the idea of trying to force people to attend church services; what I am saying is that our preaching ought to fill them with a desire to do this.”

“Pride is the greatest of all the temptations that assail a preacher.”

“What is the rule then? It is: be natural; forget yourself; be so absorbed in what you are doing and in the realization of the presence of God, and in the glory and the greatness of the Truth that you are preaching, and the occasion that brings you together, that you are so taken up by all this that you forget yourself completely... Self is the greatest enemy of the preacher.”

Chapter Fourteen: Calling for Decisions

“The appeal must be in the Truth itself, and in the message.”

“Make yourself available, let it be known that you are available, and so you will find that people... will come to speak to you.”

“Do not force these things. This is the work of the Holy Spirit of God... We must learn to trust the Spirit and to rely upon His infallible work.”

Chapter Fifteen: The Pitfalls and the Romance

“We should never give a performance; we cannot reprobate [condemn] this too strongly.”

“I know of nothing comparable to the feeling one has as one walks up the steps of one’s pulpit with a fresh sermon... when you feel that you have a message from God and are longing to give it to the people.”

“You will reach the stage in which you will be longing for the next Sunday to come.”

Chapter Sixteen: Demonstration of the Spirit and of the Power

“Careful preparation, and the unction of the Holy Spirit, must never be regarded as alternatives but as complementary to each other.”

6. John Stott

The following outline is condensed from John Stott’s book, *Between Two Worlds* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 211-216.

I. Choose your text.

II. Meditate on the text.

- A. Whenever possible, plan out the text on which you will preach weeks or months in advance. This gives the benefit of “subconscious incubation.”
- B. Begin concentrated “incubation” at least one week before preaching. This involves the following:

Read, re-read, and re-re-read the text.

Be sure you understand what it means. Do your own interpretive work. Don’t use commentaries until you have formulated specific interpretive questions which you have been unable to answer, or until you have completed your interpretive work.

Brood longer over how it applies to your people, to the culture, to you, etc.

Pray for God to illuminate the text, especially its application.

Write down notes of your thoughts, ideas, etc.

Get the insights of others through recordings, talking with other preachers, etc.

III. Isolate the dominant thought.

- A. Your sermon should convey only one major message. All of the details of your sermon should help your people grasp that message and feel its power.
- B. You should be able to express the dominant thought in one short, clear, vivid sentence.

IV. Arrange your material to serve the dominant thought.

- A. Chisel and shape your material. Ruthlessly discard all material which is irrelevant to the dominant thought. Subordinate the remaining material to the dominant thought by using that material to illuminate and reinforce the dominant thought.
- B. Your sermon structure should be suited to the text, not artificially imposed. Avoid structure which is too clever, prominent or complex.

- C. Carefully choose words that are precise, simple, clear, vivid and honest. Write out the key sections, phrases, and sentences to help you in your word choice. Stick to short declarative and interrogative sentences with few, if any, subordinate clauses.
- D. Come up with illustrations and examples which will explain and convict. Employ a wide variety: figures of speech, images, biblical stories retold in contemporary language, inventing fresh parables, true historical and/or biographical events, etc. Avoid making illustrations and examples so prominent that they detract from the dominant thought. Also, avoid applying them inappropriately or overusing them.

V. Add the introduction and conclusion

- A. The introduction should not be elaborate, but enough to arouse curiosity; whet your audience's appetites and introduce the dominant thought. You can do this by a variety of means: explaining the setting of the passage, story, using a current event or issue, etc.
- B. The conclusion should not merely summarize your sermon – it should apply it. Preach through the head to the heart (i.e. the will).

VI. Write down and pray over your message

- A. Writing out your sermon forces you to think clearly and sufficiently. It exposes lazy thinking and cures it.
- B. After you are thoroughly familiar with your outline, reduce it to small notes.
- C. Pray that God will enable you to “so possess the message that the message possesses you.”

Questions

1. What five pieces of advice from this lesson that you think will be the most useful to you in preaching sermons?
2. Write down any advice that you have received from other preachers or friends that you think will be very useful to you as you preach.
3. Why do you want to be a preacher of the Gospel of Christ?