

Sermons with Substance

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So you have your sermon text in the original language and in the translation of your choice. You have your favorite commentaries and perhaps a word processor or other apparatus. Now what?

You prepare a sermon, a message, an exposition of God's Word. Regardless of what you may call it, and regardless of whether you will be expounding the Holy Scriptures from an outline or a complete manuscript, the task will be the same: you will endeavor to communicate God's Word to His people.

A sermon with substance will be one in which divine revelation constitutes the point of departure—the launching point. The challenge is to articulate the message at the heart of a given biblical text in language that your audience understands. As Scott Stiegemeier wrote recently, “It’s about understanding the Scriptures AND understanding the people so that the one can be applied faithfully to the other.”

The people gathered to listen to you may be a mixture of people across the whole range of beliefs and understanding, from seasoned Lutheran believers to the unchurched or even de-churched. This is where you as a curator of souls are called upon to make diagnoses and apply the appropriate remedy to your patients. For this reason, the Law and Gospel paradigm is widely taught as intrinsic to a sermon's structure.

Everyone listening to you suffers from the same sickness—sin and guilt—real or perceived. Since some will, no doubt, be oblivious to or in denial of their sins, it is the preacher's job to awaken their consciences with the truth that God's Law reveals. Yet the “disclosure of sin,” as the Lutheran Confessions call it, may be the easy part, but it is not the supreme aim of the preacher.

The sermon is to be a proclamation of the Gospel above all. Without the good news about Christ as Savior being pre-eminent, the sermon is at risk of becoming more poisonous than helpful—a pitfall that has historically plagued many a sermon in the past. As the Formula of Concord warns,

“In regard to the disclosure of sin: the veil of Moses [2 Corinthians 3:13–16] hangs in front of the eyes of all people as long as they only hear the preaching of the law and nothing of Christ, and thus they never learn to recognize the true nature of their sin from the law. Instead, they either become presumptuous hypocrites, like the Pharisees, or they despair, like Judas.”

Melanchthon summarizes the true aim of a sermon when he writes, “The sum of the preaching of the gospel is to condemn sin and to offer the forgiveness of sins, righteousness on account of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life, so that having been reborn we might do good. Christ includes this in a summary of the gospel when he says in the last chapter of Luke [24:47] ‘that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [my] name to all nations.’”

Preachers are taught to conclude sermons with a Gospel thought rather than a Law challenge because the Gospel, rather than the Law, is what truly motivates people. A Gospel thought leaves people with grateful hearts, searching for ways to react with service, as the Psalmist says, “What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people” (Psalm 116:12–15). Grateful hearts are devoted hearts, and thankful people to whom the Gospel has been given will commit themselves to service more willingly than people who are issued with demand after demand of the Law.

Remember who your main audience is. Most will be regenerate sinner-saints, fully equipped with new selves being ever more conformed to the image of their Creator. They will be Christian people more in need of “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16) than heathens in need of regeneration.

Believers who listen to your sermons will always be encumbered with an old Adam that only reluctantly listens to what you say. But they will also be blessed with a new self that God has prepared to hear His Word. For this reason, human beings need a dynamic proclamation of both Law and Gospel. Rev. William Cwirla once wrote that the late Dr. Kenneth Korby was admired because he “preached the Law lawfully, not a moralizing, defanged legalism that gums you, but a Doberman that locks its jaws on you and won’t let you wiggle out of its grip. Korby’s law preaching was short, swift, and surgical. The wages of sin is death, and no one, including you, dear hearer, ever misses payday. No pious platitudes of rehab and recovery. No bargaining with God, or buttering Him up with greasy religion. The Law’s killing accent was always on the penultimate syllable of God’s Word, however, the ultimate was always the Gospel. He preached the Gospel evangelically, proclaiming Jesus Christ and His all-reconciling bloody death by which sinners are justified and all things are made new. It was an imperative Gospel that called for faith and created the faith it called for.”

Nor should the ordinary sermon situation be demeaned as mere “preaching to the choir.” The most effective sermons are those that build up believers in need of help

to become what St. Peter called “living stones . . . being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”(1 Peter 2:5). A sermon that is useful to the choir will effectively multiply the ministry of the pastor by helping equip those whom God expects to be useful ambassadors for Him in their day-to-day vocations outside of the walls of the church. Deliver a sermon of substance, and you will have done your part to be God’s messenger, and preaching will “so sweet a service be that angels well might envy me”(LSB 560).

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