

# Feedback and the Pulpit

2026 WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership

Michael D. Schultz – Faith Lutheran, Tallahassee, FL

## Brief Introduction

- 36 years of preaching
- influenced by my father's passionate preaching (it meant something to him)
- several months jotting down comments; several interviews
- a two-Sunday open forum on this topic at home congregation

## Objective

Explore ways that sermon reviews by congregation members can benefit the preaching of the gospel for both preacher and listeners

- Does sermon review by members happen at your church?
- Does your pastor have sermon reviews at a circuit or conference level?

## Specific Target

Determining if what the preacher intended to communicate is being communicated (John 1 example)

## Numbered/Lettered Lists (pp. 2-4)

Thought provokers and conversation starters (not the main thing)

## Sample Forms

Provided in this handout

## Takeaways

- Might this be a beneficial process at my home church?
- Can our national church body explore/commend best practices for such reviews?

1. Commission on Worship / *Christian Worship* Preaching Helps
  - a. Preacher's podcast
  - b. *Commentary on the Propers*
  - c. The Foundation – series preaching
  - d. *Listener review/feedback*
  
2. Content
  - a. AI for historical examples
    - i. Elizabeth Smart (Luke 15:1-10)
  - b. "I really felt convicted"
  - c. God made Jesus sin. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.
  - d. A gospel that should knock them on their can
  - e. Chad Bird – the absolution – God's response: I have no earthly idea what you are talking about.
  
3. Manuscript
  - a. Outline vs. actual manuscript, crafted to say specific things in specific ways.
  - b. Cadences in phrases – these words of Luther are worth a listen.
  - c. Alliterative phrases – alliteration, alphabetical, numbered lists, lists themselves to rattle off a bunch of examples (I know that's going to slow down memorizing it)
    - i. family issues, health issues, money issues, relationship issues, things at school, things at work (something for everyone?)
  - d. Recurring, idiosyncratic phrases
  - e. First person explanations or "This is Jesus talking"
  - f. Use of the second person
  - g. Quoting a hymn verse
  - h. Quoting the text/not quoting the text
  - i. *Localegedaechnis*
  - j. Length – word counts and minutes
  - k. Repeatable themes – [Prayer...] not according to our preferences but according to your promises, not just to pray for what we want from him, but to pray for what he wants for us. 'Lord, you know what I'm struggling with right now. You know what I need right now. Help me to trust in Jesus more than ever and not in myself. Stay with me, Lord, **just as you have promised**. Steer me away from despair and strengthen me to persevere, Lord, **just as you have promised**. All this stuff I'm facing right now that seems like such a mess—work it all out for my good, Lord, **just as you have promised**.'
  - l. Illustrations or stories that people focus on more than the point ("Money" Pink Floyd)
  - m. Story-telling in general
  - n. The paragraphs I know I want to get to... Jesus loves me, this I think (1 John 5)

#### 4. Homiletical Miscellanea

- a. Introductions that demonstrate a need, historical, personal, textual, current events
- b. Sasse – preaching about the gospel or preaching the gospel
- c. EGS – write sermons on a 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade level
- d. Two rooms – law, gospel. If what that man says is true...
- e. Including yourself in law preaching
- f. So what?
- g. Sanctification preaching – Christ for us / Christ in us and through us; faith-based promises “I will strengthen you, I will help you.” “All his energy so powerfully at work in me” vs. “You can do it.”
- h. Preach every sermon as if it were the only time your hearers might ever hear the gospel.
- i. Appropriation (what I am to believe) / Application (what I am to do) Closing Prayer – We thank you for teaching us the things you want us to believe and do.
- j. Paul’s preaching tailored to his audience
- k. Active and passive obedience of Christ
- l. Memorable theme, unique to the text – “Absolutely!” (but text color?)
- m. Alliterative themes, parallel parts
- n. Structure – outlines that end up being fashioned in dozens of different ways, rather than just inductive or deductive
- o. Theme is a declarative sentence
- p. Conclusion that is memorable – Sy Quam – most time spent on this

#### 5. Delivery

- a. No manuscript, no pulpit
- b. Microphone and dynamics and whispering (and quality of streaming audio)
- c. Memorizing
  - i. Color coding or *Localegedaechnis*
  - ii. Saturday ritual; preaching to an empty church
- d. Practicing delivery; communication rule – 80% how you say it
- e. Reality check by looking at people’s faces; sight lines and looking people in the eye
- f. J Jeske - preaching to one person at a time vs. getting through what you memorized
- g. If I can’t memorize it, it probably has points that don’t flow or are already hard to follow
- h. Phrases or points that would hit specific people the wrong way or make them think I was talking only about them.
  - i. Looking away from people to whom something directly applies
- i. Pauses that let the listeners breathe (the opposite of sprinting start to finish)
- j. Repeating a line twice
- k. Hearing the whispers of answered questions
- l. Light comic relief (and that was just the first verse; yeah, I’m making this up)

## 6. Reviewability

- a. Awareness for the preacher (like the years during which I had a vicar)
- b. People meeting at a coffee shop or a connect group and they review the sermon
- c. Difficulty I have in watching myself or listening to myself
- d. Circuit Meetings sermon review
- e. Members observing that they get more out of the children's message than the sermon
- f. Ethan and I observing no law or no gospel
- g. Real relevant relatable authentic – words that have been the butt of quite a few jokes
- h. Balancing the personality of the preacher/connecting vs “he must increase...
- i. He's boring, he reads it, it certainly covers the text and it conveys the gospel, but...
- j. I can tell that this means something to him
- k. Is the message multi-generational?
- l. Does it connect with the younger generation?
  - i. This would be more than just making Instagram or TikTok references; using words they use quite possibly an imprudent endeavor (Progressive commercials)
- m. Generation classifications in general – how millennials think (“home ownership has its challenges, doesn't it?”)
- n. Confirmation Class – sermon review or sermon evaluation
  - i. Actually a rather helpful gauge for “did they get what I wanted to communicate?”
- o. Might there be pastors who don't want this because they're afraid of what they'll hear?
- p. What about members who feel they're not qualified to weigh in on doctrinal matters?
  - i. “You might not be able to fully assess if I hit the main point of the text, but you certainly can tell me if I was logical or boring or rambling. I'd kind of like to know that too.”

# General Survey

## Content

### Law/Gospel

- **Centrality of Christ:** Was the sermon ultimately about Jesus Christ—his life, death, and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins?
- **Law and Gospel:** Did the sermon properly differentiate between law and gospel?
  - **Application of Law:** Did the sermon use the law to show our sin and need for a Savior, rather than as a set of rules to earn God’s favor?
  - **Application of Gospel:** Did the sermon apply the good news of God’s forgiveness, love, and grace through faith in Christ alone?

### Biblical Exegesis (Interpretation)

- **Text-based:** Was the sermon clearly grounded in a specific biblical text? Did it reflect the original meaning and context of the passage?
- **Christ-centered reading:** For Old Testament texts, were the passages presented in light of their fulfillment in Christ, rather than as a standalone story or moral lesson?
- **Avoids moralism:** Did the sermon avoid reducing the biblical message to a series of “do’s and don’ts,” and instead focus on how the gospel creates/strengthens faith and empowers good works?
- **Accuracy:** Were scriptural references used accurately and in context?

## Structure

### Structure and Organization

- **Clear main point:** Could you easily identify the sermon’s main idea or theme?
- **Logical flow:** Did the sermon have a clear and organized progression of points?
- **Effective introduction:** Did the sermon’s beginning capture your attention and lead you into the topic?
- **Strong conclusion:** Did the ending effectively summarize the main point and reinforce the main point of the message?
- **Relevance:** Did the sermon connect the timeless biblical truth to the practical realities of your life and the world today?

## Illustrations and Examples

- **Helpful illustrations:** Were illustrations and stories used effectively to clarify or illuminate the sermon's points?
- **Appropriate use:** Did the illustrations support the biblical message, or did they distract from it?
- **Personal experience:** Was there an appropriate balance between the biblical text and the preacher's personal insights or experiences?

## Delivery

### Communication Style

- **Passion and authenticity:** Did the preacher seem to believe what he was saying? Was his delivery passionate and sincere?
- **Engagement:** Did the sermon hold your interest?
- **Avoided distracting habits:** Were there any distracting verbal or physical mannerisms?
- **Good eye contact:** Did the preacher connect with the congregation through eye contact?

### Vocal and Auditory

- **Vocal variety:** Was there appropriate variety in the preacher's pitch, tone, and volume?
- **Clear enunciation:** Was the preacher's speech clear and easy to understand?
- **Effective pace:** Did the pace of the sermon seem appropriate, and were pauses used effectively? Was the sermon too short or too long?

Excerpt from...

## WELS Pulse Survey

The question below has multiple choices ranging from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied,” with room for prose rationale.

**How satisfied are you with the sermons at this congregation?**

*“Satisfaction” obviously incorporates a broad spectrum of issues. Examples:*

- *Do the sermons proclaim law and gospel?*
- *Do the sermons help you better understand the text?*
- *Do the sermons touch both your head and your heart?*
- *Do the sermons provide application for daily living when the text would suggest it?*
- *Do the parts of the sermon flow logically? Is it easy to follow?*

*This question asks you to pull together your thoughts for all those considerations as you share your overall satisfaction with sermons.*

People are allowed to give the rationale for their answer. So, for example, if we note that most are saying they are “somewhat dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with the preaching, we can go through the open-ended rationale and see if we can narrow it down for the pastor.

## Survey Recently Used by a WELS Congregation

### Faithfulness to the Word

*From the very first post-resurrection sermon Jesus preached to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus, Christian proclamation has always begun with the text of God's Word. In this section, please think about how the preacher connected with that Word.*

Rate this sermon's faithfulness to the Word (with 10 as the best)

- Say something about how well this sermon responds to the Word. How clearly is it based on a passage of scripture? How well does it allow the Word to have its own integrity and voice?
- What new or interesting point does the sermon make about the passage?
- If you were to preach on this passage, would you choose the same parts to zero in on? Why or why not?

### Structure and Rhetoric

*This is the category where you are called on to draw on all your old high school and college skills in composition. You don't need to know the difference between adverbs and prepositions. Just be a good listener. Think about the logical progression of the ideas presented.*

Rate this sermon's overall structure and rhetoric (with 10 as the best)

- Please comment on the sermon's structure. Could you follow the sermon? Did it follow a logical progression? Did it make sense?
- What would you say are the main points of the sermon? Were they adequate? Or was there too much information packed in for one sermon (that is, could this have been turned into two or three different sermons)?
- How appropriate was this sermon for this particular group of hearers?

## Illustrations

*One of the ways a preacher can bridge the chasm between the ancient world of a biblical passage and the world that pew-sitters live in is by using illustrations. Illustrations can come from scripture itself (see 2 Timothy 3:16 — “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” NIV), from history, literature, and personal experience. Think about how the illustrations connected with the Word.*

Rate this sermon’s overall use of illustrations (with 10 as the best)

- What was the most helpful illustration? Why?
- Could the sermon have used more or fewer illustrations? How well did they support the passage of God’s Word or overshadow it?
- Was there any illustration that seemed inappropriate? If so, why?

## Language

*From the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the Word has been present. And John refers to Jesus himself as the Word made flesh. From the formless void in Genesis to the burning bush, from the singed lips of Isaiah to Jesus’ charge to the disciples to “go and tell,” God has been present in the Word. For the church’s public proclaimers, language is thus of utmost importance. Christ’s benefits need to be delivered without the package being damaged. Think about how the preacher used language in this sermon.*

Rate this sermon’s overall use of language (with 10 as the best)

- How careful was the sermon with language? Was it pedestrian or interesting?
- How well did the language match the setting and the character of the sermon’s hearers? Too intellectual? Too casual?
- What was a turn of phrase that grabbed you in the sermon? Why?

## Theology

*You may not realize it, but you are a theologian every day of your life, as you seek to put your experience into some sort of framework and reconcile it with what you know about our relationship with God. Now you get to put this sermon into some theological boxes and see how it fits.*

Rate this sermon's overall theology (with 10 as the best)

- Did this sermon touch you, work on you, grab hold of you? Or did it allow you enough distance to ignore God's activity and get off the hook?
- How well did this sermon integrate both God's judgment/demands in the law and what God does in the person of Jesus Christ for those who are bound by sin?

## General

Rate this sermon as a whole (with 10 as the best)

- What other feedback and encouragement can you provide for the preacher?

## Some Concluding Thoughts

After-worship comments that lead a pastor to conclude that the connection was made:

- “Pastor, it’s as if you were there this week.”
- “How did you know?”

...but wanting to go substantively farther than that.

\* \* \*

Hearing back from two reviewers who took away two very different main points from the same sermon

\* \* \*

Reviews and feedback such as this serve in a ministerial way, to help the process, allowing all parties to be able to answer more clearly the question: Are the listeners getting the preacher’s point?

\* \* \*

Might there also be a review of the use of screens and visuals (in locations where they are used)?

\* \* \*

If this kind of person (fill in the blank) walked in, how would your preaching address that person?

\* \* \*

Does the preacher care...

- about the task?
- about the people?
- about the text?

and does that show?

\* \* \*

What is “room for growth?” What does it mean for preaching when it is said “everyone can improve”?

- One item would be an awareness of whether or not people received what I was seeking to deliver, and “more of this” or “less of that” would be additionally helpful.

\* \* \*

Length of sermon relative not only to what the preacher feels is appropriate/necessary or overall service length but also to actual average listener attention span.

Just initiating the process can demonstrate that you care deeply about this topic and that you want parishioners to know that you care about this topic because of how it is for their benefit as well.

\* \* \*

Is there anything in your congregational setting that would make you think it might be risky for this process to take place? How can that risk best be mitigated?

\* \* \*

**What would be the best methodology for this process in your particular location/circumstances?**

\* \* \*

**WELS Commission on Worship possibly working toward...**

- a standard sermon review form (with a brief manual), for congregational use
- a Bible Class on the topic, for congregational use
- a preacher's group with regular reading assignments and Zoom speakers

\* \* \* \* \*

Encouragement to this breakout group to support or join a synod-wide effort in this direction

Subscribe to "Devote Yourself" to read articles from the WELS Commission on Worship.

- <https://welscongregationalservices.net/ministry-resources/devoteyourself/>