

## Commentary on the *War*: Toward Gaining Ground in the Liturgy

### Getting Better at Teaching Bible Class

David H. Petersen



It is incredibly difficult to assess one's own abilities in most any field, including aptness to teach and preach. Much of this can be explained as the Dunning-Kruger effect: incompetence denies us the competency required to gage our

skill or ability.

Across 4 studies, the authors found that participants scoring in the bottom quartile on tests of humor, grammar, and logic grossly overestimated their test performance and ability. Although their test scores put them in the 12th percentile, they estimated themselves to be in the 62nd. ("Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 77[6], abstract)

In my experience, it is common for LCMS preachers to believe themselves to be above average preachers but think, at the same time, that where they really excel is as Bible class teachers. Because they believe this, they see little reason to work toward improvement in either area. They do not seek out or read books on either homiletics or pedagogy. They often express disdain for such books. Some of these men could, in fact, be functional but incompetent. They could be mere technicians who can muddle through the work but don't actually understand what they are doing and are without awareness that there is something to understand and that there are ways to grow in skill.

There is some comfort, however. The Dunning-Kruger study demonstrated not only that incompetence gives a false sense of competence but also that growing in competence does the opposite. As all of us have experienced in various fields and endeavors, the more one knows, the more aware he becomes of what he does not know. Feeling somewhat unequal to a task or incompetent is often a mis-assessment based upon actual competence, leading a person to assume that others actually know more than he does because he realizes how little he knows. The Wikipedia article on the Dunning-

Kruger effect can lead interested readers to a host of materials about the phenomena.

The bottom line is that it is entirely possible that whether you think you are a good preacher and Bible class teacher or you think you are the opposite, you are wrong. The good news is that the rational response to both situations is the same: take up an attitude of humility, study and work at it. There is perhaps no better generic advice for the ministry than that ministers should treat their work as work. I understand that it is not a job in the traditional sense, but at the same time, if ministers get too wrapped up in their work as a higher calling and art, they run the risk of not actually working.

I've written in this column in the past about resources and techniques for becoming a better preacher. This time I want to provide some ideas and tactics aimed at improving Sunday morning Bible class.

#### 1. Have a plan

While it may not be necessary to write out a lesson plan, it is important to actually have a plan, and in my experience, it is best to have something written. That could be nothing more than an outline or a list. It could be shared with the class via slides or a handout, but it need not be. The point is that the pastor has a plan to actually teach, to convey knowledge to the students via a rational argument that the students can follow and understand.

At the bare minimum, the pastor should have specific points that he wants to make, and he should know why he wants to make them, why they are important or matter. These things should be based upon and rise up out of the text that is being studied. They should be discerned and prepared before the class begins and supplemented with additional material from the Lutheran Confessions and other materials. The pastor should also think and plan how he might illustrate these points or have examples ready. It is certainly possible that other things will come up in Bible class. Those things could arise from the discussion, from class questions, or even from inspiration rising from the text in the moment. The pastor should, however, prepare before class and have an intent of what he wants to teach. He should do that not only because teachable moments, questions, and insights are guaranteed to happen, but also because when they do, if he is prepared, he will better be able to take advantage of them.

#### 2. Have an opening

A Sunday School and Bible study opening is a marvelous opportunity to demonstrate to the congregation how to conduct family devotions. I think it is most ideal to have everyone together and to have a simple, brief opening. At a minimum, the opening can contain the Collect of the Day, a recitation of a bit of the

Catechism, and the singing of a stanza from the Hymn of the Day or from a hymn that will be used that morning that the people are unfamiliar with or claim to find difficult. More can be added, of course, but I suggest that it be kept simple and somewhat informal. The pastor can act as the father of the household and feel free to make a remark or two about the Collect or Catechism. Sometimes more time can be spent on the hymn, with difficult phrases being repeated or practiced. It is especially useful to have the whole congregation reciting the Catechism each week, as it demonstrates to everyone that the Catechism is not just for children.

What discretion might add to this is a weekly Bible passage for the whole congregation to learn by heart along with the Catechism, the pertinent portion of Luther's Catechetical hymns to match the Catechism, intercessory prayer, and even seasonal variations—but, again, I suggest that it be brief and simple, the sort of thing that could easily be reproduced and imitated at the family table without lots of books and with toddlers.

### 3. Reading for meaning

Part of the purpose of Bible class is to have the students actually read the Bible, and not just for information but also for meaning. Whether the pastor himself reads the text out loud or, in order to save his voice and give himself time to think, has volunteers read it, it is important that the Bible is heard out loud and that the people have Bibles in front of them to follow along. But we also want more than the Bible to be simply heard or read. We want the people to understand it and to discern spiritual truth in it. The first step toward this end is that they understand the literal, historical reality of the text.

Rather than reading one verse at a time, I find it helpful to read by paragraph or according to the headings in the English translations and then to ask the class to summarize it. I, myself, have done this in advance and I use slides. I sometimes ask for a summary sentence or two, and sometimes I ask, one by one, for the Five Ws. My parishioners typically just yell out their answers for this rather than raising their hands. Sometimes they can't do it at all. If that happens, I re-read the passage and ask them to pay closer attention. They never fail to get it on a second reading, and over time they get better at it. Eventually, of course, they are able to do this work well, and I put my summary up on the slides as a comparison to what they are saying.

The point of the exercise is that the people learn to pay attention and think about what they are reading. Once they can express the historical reality or summarize what is being said in a literal way, they are ready to talk about the text in more detail, and I present the points that I want to make.

I can imagine that this process might sound as though it would be condescending. I can only say that I

don't mean it to be and that, in my experience it has been very well received. I have seminary professors in my Bible class and I think even they benefit from this approach. That is because the class itself is an exercise in discipline. Students come to class expecting you to make their task of learning easier, not for there to be effortless learning. There is no effortless learning. Asking them to summarize a text forces them to pay attention and to think about the text rather than drifting off. So also, in listening to other people attempt this, they are forced to check the answers that are being given against the text and to discern whether or not what is being proposed is essential detail or not or, if the opposite is the case, absolutely essential and critical details are being left out or missed.

The ability to summarize is perhaps the most effective way to demonstrate comprehension. In asking the students to do this, the teacher has an opportunity then to judge the knowledge of the class and respond appropriately. Even if the teacher deems that the summary is perfect, he has the chance to remark upon it for the class and to talk about it.

### 4. Classroom management

Sunday morning Bible class is a casual affair. There aren't assigned readings or homework or tests. The pastor, however, is a teacher and is seeking to give pastoral care by careful exposition and application of the Scriptures. In doing so, he has to respond to occasional misbehavior and also to confused and even false statements made by students. While the desire of the pastor is that all the students feel comfortable and included, sometimes it will be necessary to ask certain members privately to save their questions or comments for outside of class for the sake of others so that the class doesn't get derailed or taken into rants and tirades that the class has already heard many times. Sometimes it is necessary also to gently correct students or even to contradict them.

Sometimes, however, particularly when a student is well-known by all in attendance and likely has some mental issues or extreme circumstances, the pastor can simply nod his head and move on. Typically, however, at the very least, the pastor needs to in some way state clearly the Truth. It is not always out of line for the pastor to actually pretend that the person meant the very opposite of what he or she said and to express agreement, while stating the thing clearly and unequivocally. We can do this because it is easy for us to understand that words sometimes come out confused and because we trust that our members are truly orthodox according to the work and gift of the Holy Spirit even though they can't always articulate it. Imagine, for example, some seriously disturbed person who is known by the pastor and the congregation saying in Bible class: "African Americans are black because Ham had sex with a

monkey.” Depending on the circumstances, the pastor might respond by saying, “I think what you mean is that African Americans are likely descendants of Ham because after the flood, he and his wife settled in Africa. I think that is probably right. Africans are descended from Ham. Jewish people, like Jesus, are descended from Shem, and the rest of the world is descended from Japheth. We are all descendants of Noah, loved by God in Christ. None of us are descended from monkeys. Anyone who preaches that black people are inferior to white people can’t really be a Christian.”

Such issues can hardly be planned in advance. The pastor needs to know his people and to love them and then to respond as he is able in the moment. At the same time, he should do some thinking about potential scenarios like these outside of class. Particularly with regard to difficult people or people who threaten to dominate the class, he should strategize how he might not only serve that person best but also keep the whole class engaged and actually get his material across.

### Conclusion

Despite the devastating reality of the Kruger-Dunning effect, we can improve our skills and become both better preachers and teachers. Whatever steps are taken toward that goal or strategizes utilized, I am convinced that the most important thing is that we realize we need to do something and not become comfortable in our ignorance and incompetence. ✠

## Taking Pains

*Reverence is not primarily a matter of feeling pious, but rather of taking pains. – The Anglican Breviary*

## The Offertory

Mark P. Braden

*In the Easter 2019 issue of Gottesdienst, this column began a series on the rubrics for the reverent conduct of the Mass. We continue the series this issue beginning with the Offertory.*



In his 1523 *Formula Missae*, having condemned the sacrificial theology of the Roman Offertory, Martin Luther writes, “After the Creed or the sermon let bread and wine be made ready for blessing in the customary manner.” He then debates whether to keep the rite of the mixing of the wine with water, calling it a “human invention,” and decides ultimately that it cannot be “considered bind-

ing” (AE 53:26–27). In the *Formula Missae*, the Preface and Proper Preface follow the Altar preparation immediately.

In Luther’s 1526 German Mass, a “public paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer and admonition for those who want to partake of the sacrament” immediately follow the sermon. Interestingly, this admonition includes *Anamnesis* language: “That you remember and give thanks for his boundless love which he proved to us when he redeemed us from God’s wrath, sin, death and hell by his own blood” (AE 53:79–80). The *Verba Domini* follow the admonition immediately.

This sequence of events is retained in Martin Chemnitz’s *Church Order*, as a prayer is offered after the sermon, at which time those desiring to go to Communion immediately approach the chancel and kneel. The “Preface of the feast . . . shall be sung in the cities as time allows.” Then follows the “Exhortation to the people intending to go to the Sacrament,” three forms of which Chemnitz provides. “After the Exhortation, let the priest sing the Our Father and the Words of Institution of the Supper of Jesus Christ . . .” (86–90).

In Wilhelm Löhe’s *Liturgy for Christian Congregations of the Lutheran Faith*, the Creed, sung by the minister, follows the Gospel, and the sermon follows the Creed. As the minister descends the pulpit, the congregation begins to sing the Offertory. Two forms for the Offertory are given. The first is Psalm 51:18–19, “Do good to Zion in your good pleasure . . .” The second is Psalm 51:10–12, “Create in me a clean heart, O God . . .” During the Offertory the offerings are received and brought forth, and the Altar is prepared. The General Prayer follows immediately (18–22).

In the Common Service the Offertory likewise follows the sermon. The congregation, still standing from the *Votum*, remains standing for the Offertory. Having spoken or sung the Offertory, the congregation is seated (Reed 17). Paul H. D. Lang laments this rubric as a lack of ceremonial recognition of the close of the Service of the Word. The *Service Book and Hymnal (SBH)* has the congregation seated for the *Votum* and directs the gathering of the offering before the singing of the Offertory, at which the congregation stands, making the liturgical distinction absent in *The Lutheran Liturgy (TLL)*. In *The Conduct of the Services*, McClean notes that the chasuble and maniple, removed for the sermon, are “resumed” before the singing of the Offertory, marking the transition from the Liturgy of the Word to the Liturgy of the Sacrament (42). McClean also includes a footnote directing that “[t]here should be a definite break between the sermon and the offertory. The sermon concludes the liturgy of the word; the offertory begins the liturgy of the sacrament” (42, note 54).

Piepkorn explains the *TLL* Offertory rubric this way: “The Minister goes from the pulpit to the center of the