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Making the Case for Preachers Who Read

Ethan Stoppenhagen



Ethan Stoppenhagen is a fourth-year student at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne. Raised on a farm near Ossian, Indiana, he studied Classics and German at Valparaiso University and was a Christ College Scholar. He and his wife, Lauren, look forward to serving Christ's Church wherever the Lord calls them.

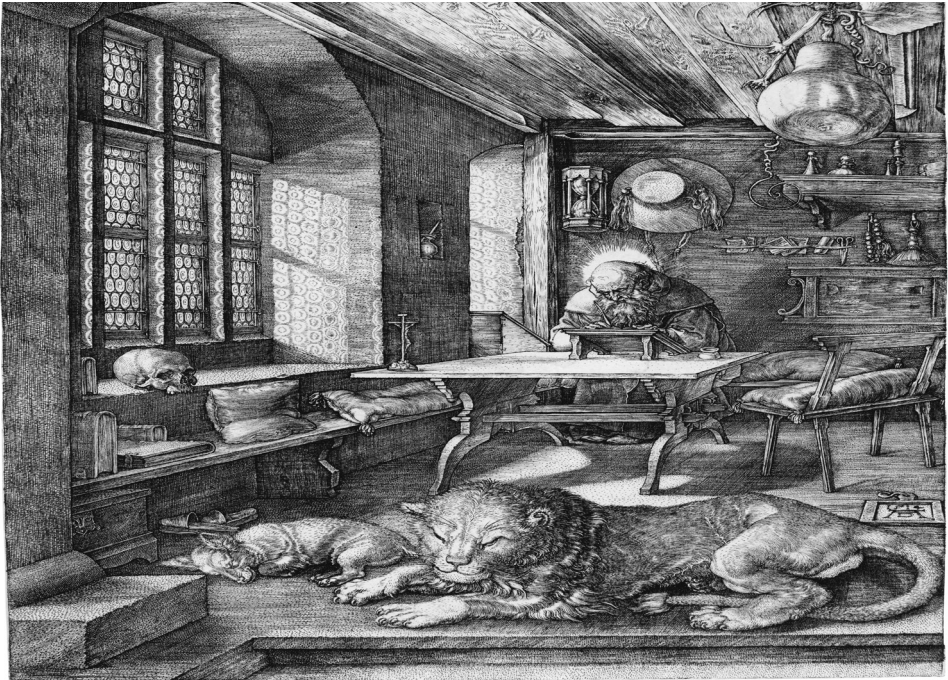
Once heard a story about a new pastor in the early 1990s who was settling into his first call in Pembroke, Ontario. A man walked into his study and silently began perusing the shelves. The pastor noticed him, but carried on with his business. The stranger spent several minutes pulling books off

the shelves, flipping pages, nodding and murmuring, and setting some books apart by laying them on their spines. Occasionally he'd hold up a book with a quizzical look on his face. "Required for class," the pastor shrugged, and the man would scoff and shove it back on the shelf. Finally, the stranger came to a shelf with a few copies of the recently founded journal *First Things*. "You're a subscriber?" he asked. The pastor nodded. The man smiled, walked over to the desk, stuck out his hand, and finally introduced himself. "I'm Richard Neuhaus. I've come to invite you and your wife to lunch next Sunday, but now that I see what you read, we're going to have a nice lunch." And he walked out the door.

What a pastor reads will usually reveal his theological convictions. That's why we're quick to check out a classmate's library whenever we get the chance. Of course, not all of us will have Richard John Neuhaus critiquing our shelves, but we generally know what makes for good Lutheran reading. If your friend's library is filled with the leading thinkers of Lutheran Orthodoxy, all the volumes of that Concordia Heritage Series, a set of Luther's Works, the writings of Hermann Sasse, and a handful of Concordia Commentaries, you can probably be sure that he's a "solid guy." On the other hand, if his library looks eerily similar to your small-town Christian bookstore, then you should probably be a little more suspicious.

But reading does more than inform one's theological convictions. It shapes how one thinks and speaks, as well. This is especially apparent in preaching. If a pastor's sermons are scripturally sound yet lacking any sense of form or style, then you can rest assured that he's still digging deep into his Lutheran dogmatics texts. But if his preaching is theologically insubstantial and sounds more like a reading of his Twitter feed from the past week, then he might not be reading much at all.

For the preaching task, continuous and deep study of the Scriptures (in their original languages), the Lutheran Confessions, and the writings of orthodox theologians are a given necessity. But a pastor's reading certainly shouldn't be limited to these texts. His deep study of theology should be matched by a wide reading of good literature. For as much as preaching is a unique form of communication, it does have place within the literary tradition. Preachers stand alongside poets, authors, and essayists as stewards of the word—albeit a livelier and more active Word. As such, the gifts of writers—a love of language, the power



Jerome in His Study. Albrecht Dürer. 1514. Public domain.

of observation, a sense of drama, an aptitude for metaphor and simile, the rhythm of a well-constructed sentence, and the overarching desire to pursue and convey truth—ought to be developed and engaged by pastors for the sake of the Gospel proclamation.

The writers of Sacred Scripture possessed these literary gifts, as did the great preachers of the Church through the centuries. (“The Bible is more than literature, but it certainly isn’t less than literature,” one of our theologians has said.) However, our presuppositions about these texts being primarily theological have hindered us from seeing their literary richness. For the modern reader, such treasures are often unlocked only after encountering them in other written works and being guided to recognize them. The study of grammatical and rhetorical devices in classical texts, as well as the conversation that seeks to understand their ends, can enlighten our minds as we continue to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the biblical text.

Most seminarians are often encouraged to read non-theological texts for the sake of sermon illustrations. Novels, magazines, and newspapers thus become sources for aphorisms, anecdotes, and pop culture references that help connect the reader to the biblical text. These are indeed valuable resources to have in one’s homiletical arsenal. But even more than building a bank of illustrations and examples, reading improves grammar and expands vocabulary. At a very basic level, one’s sermon writing can be improved simply by reading an article or book and taking notice of new words and how the author uses them in a sentence. As one reads more regularly, rhetorical devices like repetition, assonance, and hyperbole become more noticeable, and one (often unwittingly) begins to incorporate them into their own writing.

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When a preacher's writing improves, his sermons become more coherent and engaging. He doesn't feel the need to distract with useless repetition, confuse with theological clichés, or bore the listener with endless anecdotes to "make things relevant." Instead, a pastor's own desire to write his sermons logically and beautifully draws the reader more deeply into the text on which he is preaching. Indeed, preaching done well should not only convey the theological truths of a biblical text, but also reveal the dramatic and poetic character that the scriptures inherently possess. It ought to provoke questions in the hearer's mind, pique his curiosity, and reveal the dynamic character of God's Word. The hearers then come to see the Bible not as a dusty old storybook, rule manual, or theological textbook, but as the living and active Word that it is.

Beyond learning to write well, a preacher should read to understand their cultural milieu and the state of mankind in general. Writers and poets, artists and musicians tend to have their finger on the pulse of humanity. They're intimately aware of the undercurrents of society and the desires of the masses, and they are often the ones bold enough to offer a critique. In this way, the creative vocations parallel the preaching task, as both seek to understand the human condition, find something lacking, and offer the truth (sometimes to a hostile and unreceptive audience). They see the sin, temptation, and corruption of earthly life and desire to offer hope and comfort in the midst of despair.

This pursuit of truth is certainly shared by both the preaching and writing tasks. This isn't always obvious, given the less-than-wholesome lives many writers and artists live in comparison to pastors. For example, many authors of the Beat Generation, a twentieth century American literary movement, appeared to be some of the most faithless, down-and-out, debauched people of their era. Nonetheless, many of them argued that the truth they were pursuing—their "Beat"—was ultimately the Beatific Vision. (Sometimes the further people are pressed into the margins, the closer they are brought to the truth.) When it comes to truth, however, preaching rise above the work of other writers. While preachers and writers both seek truth in some capacity, the preacher ultimately lays claim to possess the Word of Truth which he has been given him to proclaim. His is truly the highest creative task as he preaches the Word through whom the world was created. Nonetheless, in order to deepen his understanding of mankind and his culture, the preacher ought to recognize what he holds in common with writers and can learn from them.

How then does a preacher begin the journey into reading good literature? With small steps and a traveling partner or two. The paths of literature are innumerable, and it's easy to accidentally head down the wrong one. The essential first step is finding someone well-versed in the tradition who is willing to get to know you, curate a reading list for you, and then discuss the texts with you. This could be a mentor, a classmate, a fellow pastor, or even a congregation member once you're in the parish. It should be someone who is willing to read, meet regularly, and ask questions of both you and the text. It's not an easy task to read texts deeply, to analyze carefully, and interpret charitably. But the desire to learn and a dose of intellectual humility will go a long way to strengthen your mind and enhance your proclamation of the Truth.