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## More Lively Participation

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## More Lively Participation

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How do we motivate our parishioners to lively participation in the life of the congregation? How do we conduct our ministries so that members feel good about their church? I don't mean "feel good" in a way that subordinates divine truth to pandering to people's whims, but rather that our laypeople will go into their workweeks ready to speak about the hope that is in them, the hope nourished by their lives in our congregations. Central to this is their most basic need, although not everyone appreciates its fundamental importance, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (Jn 12:21). Without Christ-centered congregational life, it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6).

Listening to sermons on and off campus, I notice a tendency that may explain in part declining participation in our congregations. Our presentations of the gospel often relegate God's actions to the past. "God sent his Son to die for your sins. You are forgiven." The cross, perhaps also the empty tomb, is often the sole focus of the gospel presentation, boringly followed by some application. Past events. Past tenses. Often the only present tense is a here-and-now third use of the law. Browse through your sermon manuscripts to see what tenses you use for the gospel. Our devotion to the passion and resurrection is absolutely necessary, but when a listener hears past events and past tenses, even granting the impact of the past for our present (e.g. "you are baptized"), the listener understandably will not truly appreciate that the gospel is present reality. Similarly, an exclusive focus upon the gifts given in the divine service to the exclusion of the hearers' lives shortchanges the power of God in the gospel. Living in an age of compartmentalization, boxing the acts of God into the past or into Sunday's means of grace doesn't fully foster an awareness of the presence and work of God in our lives now, a holistic understanding of Jesus's claim on us. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Dt 6:5). The worshipper who hears only past events and past tenses in our preaching can conclude that going to church means going to a museum. *Interesting displays but tomorrow I have to go to work and face here-and-now problems.* Perhaps our past tenses have even contributed to the redefinition of church attendance. Regular church attendance used to mean every Sunday; now it means once or twice a month. What happened in the first century AD is the sine qua non of saving faith, but God put us in the twenty-first century to ponder his presence in our daily lives, and he calls us to preach and teach it for our hearers in the lives they live the whole week long.

The chief Shepherd has guidance for us under-shepherds. "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction" (Rom 15:4). The first epistle of Peter is especially able to guide us into crafting sermons that bring eternal truths into the hearer's present. Peter was concerned that the centrality of Christ and congregational life was eroding among believers in mid-first-century Asia Minor. Most mainline American pastors can appreciate that concern! Because Peter's hearers lived as a minority in a society that at best was indifferent to Christians and at worst hostile to them, Peter wrote with Silvanus to encourage them to

a common sense of their unique, divinely-conferred identity and purpose, a sustaining social cohesion, and fervent commitment to mission nurtured by a unifying faith and hope involving steadfast loyalty to God, Jesus Christ, and the brotherhood. It is precisely this constellation of factors that the letter was designed to promote.<sup>1</sup>

The erosion of cohesion and commitment centered upon Christ and the congregation jeopardized the goal of Christian faith, “the salvation of your souls” (1 Pt 1:9). Today our desire to motivate parishioners to more lively participation in the congregation should continue to be about the ultimate salvation of their souls. Because the “social cohesion” of congregations around Jesus Christ had eternal consequences for church members, Peter presented God’s saving action not only as a past event but also as a claim upon their present with a dominant view toward their eternal future. We can do the same.

We have an example in 1 Peter 1:13–21. These verses are pivotal in the development of the epistle. Keep in mind that most people in the Roman Empire were illiterate; the minority Christians heard the word of God read and proclaimed. They were listeners, not readers, of the epistle. In the first two verses these listeners have been greeted; the salutation in verses 1 and 2 opens key themes of the epistle (alien status, foreknowledge, holiness, and the obedience of faith). Then the listeners hear the awe-inspiring actions of God in their lives, past, present, and future, culminating in verse 12: “The things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.” Their breath taken by hearing that sweeping opening affirmation of their special status (at least it should have left them breathless), Peter and Silvanus now focus their listeners more specifically upon three broad motivations for their lives of faith.

The first is in 1:13. “Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” The verse is focused on the future with implications for the present. The key verb is the imperative, *elpisate*, hope or set your hope, and the object of hope is “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” That refers to his second coming, not his incarnation, and it promises “grace.” Grace for Peter is not only the saving grace that is distinguished from salvation by works (Eph 2:8–9) but the help that “the God of all grace” gives us pilgrims on our heavenward way. “After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Pt 5:10). Reflecting on our own preaching practice, how often do our listeners leave worship with thoughts on the last day or the day death ushers them into eternity? Certainly after a funeral or late in the church year when the end times appear in the lectionary, but if I’d go back and read my sermons, I expect that’s pretty much where I consigned seeing Jesus, to funerals or the end times. Then it easily becomes preaching law; *dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in favilla* (the day of wrath, that day, will dissolve the world in ashes). Even more telling, how many of our parishioners yearn for the coming revelation of Jesus during

their daily lives? Peter reminded his hearers that the last day is gospel for them and the prospect of seeing Jesus should motivate them—and us in our time—to Christ-centered living in the present. That present living is described by participles, which should not be translated as imperatives. “Set your hope” is the imperative; the participles are consequences of that lively hope. “Preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace . . .” That you and I and our hearers are going to see Jesus is a blessed future reality that motivates us to lively hope and careful conduct here and now. We wouldn’t have that hope without the passion and resurrection of Christ, but in a text like this the dominant gospel proclamation is the grace we await on the last day. While we must be wary of eisegesis, that future orientation can, I believe, be brought into many more texts than merely funeral or end time pericopes.

In anticipation of that day, the second motivator to Christian living is the present impartial judgment of the holy God, 1:14–17.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.

This is predominantly law but has “gospel handles” with both law and gospel focused on the present. *Father* suggests gospel; God is our loving Father and “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3). *Obedient children* is the result of gospel, “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3). However, this “Father . . . judges impartially according to each one’s deeds.” *Judges* is a present active participle, *krinonta*; the all-seeing God judges us here and now. Were it a future participle, “the Father who will judge,” we could easily imagine deferring holiness to later in life, but the participle is present and we’re told to “be holy” here and now, not just do holy things. This present holiness is to live according to the will of God, not the emotions that drive the Gentiles (cf. 4:2). Future judgment is not out of consideration (1:13; 4:5 for example), but Peter focuses especially on the present. Holy being precedes holy doing, quoting Leviticus 19:2 and drawing on the Holiness Code. “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Mt 7:20). And this present judgment is *impartial*, something Peter had learned dramatically at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:34–35) and it is “according to each one’s deeds.” The demand of holiness is not satisfied by our people coming to worship, nor do we satisfy it by being pastors. In my itinerant preaching I have occasionally quizzed people: Does God judge according to our works? Well-conditioned Lutherans shake their heads “no,” but in fact this passage and many others say that we are judged by works. My second quiz question, “Will you be saved by works?” again elicits a no, but in fact we are saved by works, Jesus’s works, not ours.<sup>2</sup> My point is twofold. First, many of our people don’t understand what the shortcut word *faith* really signifies. Second, the present impartial judgment of God should drive us to fear God during our sojourn to heaven because our conduct and being is sinful, but we are awed because God is the Father who gives us our only hope of salvation, Jesus.

Lest we fret that a strong preaching emphasis upon the present and future will lead us to minimize the past, Peter's third motivator, 1:18–21, the longest of the three, grounds all his exhortation in the passion, resurrection, and ascension of our Savior.

Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Pages could be written about these verses but a few remarks will suffice. First, since we minister in an age that doesn't acknowledge or obey absolute truth, an age when most lives are desire-driven, "knowing" (*eidotes*) recalls us to the objective truth revealed in Scripture. This truth, revealed to the prophets of the Old Testament (1:10–12), requires the obedience of faith (cf. "obedience to Jesus Christ" and "having purified your souls by obedience to the truth," 1:2; 22). Just as Peter exhorted his hearers to live lives peculiar to their distinct difference from the surrounding culture, so cohesion and commitment to Christ and his congregation is advanced by drawing distinctions between the way Christ-followers live and the way post-church America lives.

Second, Peter directs his listeners to what Jesus *did*, but he puts it in an eternal perspective. Jesus "was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest" in his incarnation and was raised from the dead and given "glory," his ascension, and reign (cf. 3:22). We do well to preach that, dependent upon a Savior who is "the same yesterday and today and forever," we should live our short lives in the fear of God (Heb 13:8). Indeed, the next major section following 1:13–21 quotes Isaiah and trumpets again the preaching of the word: "All flesh is like grass . . . but the word of the Lord remains forever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pt 1:24–25).

Much more can be written on these precious verses, but I'll close with this. We preach out of ourselves. Sermon outlines and the words we script for delivery come out of who we are, the genetics and teachings and influences and experiences that have shaped us as the individual believers we are in Jesus Christ. We do not go at a text as unbiased observers, as if our studies of the word have lifted us out of our own day and age. Yes, the word gives us a different perspective upon the assumptions of current culture, but we remain part of the present. And we don't preach as an unfeeling proclaimer of the word because this word brings to us also personal salvation; "we also believe and so we also speak" (2 Cor 4:13). The fear and love of God seizes us, and when it does not, that's our sin of compartmentalizing God into the Sunday sanctuary and our service in ministry. We all have a desire to motivate our parishioners to lively participation in the life of the church, and we want to conduct our ministries so that members feel good in a proper way about their church. To do so is not only a matter of "rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tm 2:7) but also of our own integrity as saved sinners who live our lives and conduct our ministries in the fear and love of God. So the Spirit has

planted deep in our being the conviction that church is not a museum and we are not called to be curators of the past. The word that saves is a word to be “living and active” (Heb 4:12) in our proclamation to others: God active—past, present, and future—for the goal of our salvation.

William Barclay told about a man’s experience with a famous preacher.

He told me that he had been a regular army officer, and that on Sunday mornings when he found himself posted anywhere near, he used to slip away to hear this preacher. Once he took his little niece along with him—about ten years of age. When they came out of the church, his first question was: “Well, what did you think of that minister?” “Terrific,” came the surprising answer. “I had two sweeties with me in my pocket, and I clean forgot to eat them!”

That is just about the best compliment I have ever heard to a preacher.

Wherein does this power lie? Someone has said that every preacher must try to give his people . . . something to feel. No great preacher was ever afraid of emotion. He must give the impression that this thing matters intensely, both to him and to his hearers; that it is in literal fact a matter of life and death.

A sermon cannot really be a pleasant and informal chat; it cannot be an innocuous moral essay; still less can it be a formality which has to be gone through. And yet it does sometimes give that impression. Rhadakrishnan, the great Indian thinker, once said of preachers and theologians of the West known to him: “Your theologians seem to me like men talking in their sleep.” On the other hand, we must not forget the witness of one: “I preached what I did feel—what I smartingly did feel.”

The preacher must feel the wonder of the Christian message. Only then can he stab awake the dull and listless hearts of men and women for whom a church service has somehow become a bore rather than a thrill.<sup>3</sup>

When we approach the preaching task out of our ever-increasing devotional awareness of the all-encompassing acts of God for our personal salvation (“what I smartingly did feel”), we might very well see more social cohesion in our congregations as together we follow Jesus in faith and hope, eager to see him on that day, “being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (5:4).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 104–105.

<sup>2</sup> Augsburg Confession V: The Gospel “teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ’s merit, when we so believe” (Kolb-Wengert). Cf. *LSB* 565, “Thy Works, Not Mine, O Christ.”

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, “In the Hand of God,” in *For All the Saints*, vol. II (Delhi, NY: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1995), 250.