

## A Lutheran Perspective of Craig Groeschel:

What's Missing in Groeschel's Sermons? – A brief review of Craig Groeschel

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Preaching is the one area of the ministry that WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) pastors receive plenty of training. Each of the three years on campus a WELS seminary student completes two sermons to preach to his classmates. During his third year of training, a vicar preaches about fifteen times. So, by the time a seminary graduate receives his first assignment into parish ministry, he's had about twenty sermons critiqued by professors, classmates, and his supervising pastor.

At times WELS preachers are criticized for the predictability of their sermons. In other words, you know what you'll be hearing in the sermon: law and gospel, sin and grace. Even well-meaning Lutheran laypeople may say, "It just always seems like we hear the same thing." Whether they realize it or not, many people who make this criticism are looking for less gospel and more law, less justification and more sanctification, less "Christ for us" and more "Christ in us."

It's taken me twenty years in the full-time ministry to appreciate it, but I'm glad that my sermons speak of the same things week after week. I won't apologize for following the pericope series that takes my congregation through the life of Christ each year. After all, pointing to Christ is what I am supposed to do as herald of the gospel. Christ for us is at the center of Scripture. So, he and his work ought to be at the center of my sermons. You should expect that in a sermon preached by a WELS trained pastor.

But, I wondered, what about Craig Groeschel, whose sermons are being consulted by an increasing number of WELS pastors? So I signed up at his website, [www.lifechurch.tv](http://www.lifechurch.tv), and began reading his sermons. I didn't think it'd be fair to review only one sermon. I decided to read the five sermons that make up the sermon series entitled, "The Sickness Within."

By the way, Mr. Groeschel and his associates are very gifted at giving themes to sermon series and providing interesting weekly parts to the series. "The Sickness Within" dealt with these five sicknesses: anger, envy, pride, issues of control, and bitterness. It's obvious that Groeschel follows the church growth belief that what draws people to worship are the needs they feel must be addressed in their lives.

Good Lutheran preaching addresses sin in a person's life. Each week Lutheran preachers help their listeners stare into the mirror of God's law and be convicted by what they see there. Averaging nine pages and 30-minutes of preaching each, Groeschel and his two associates in the five sermons of "The Sickness Within" focus much on how sin is a part of our daily lives. There was a plethora of daily examples to support each sin that was being exposed. Scripture was used to justify most examples. Anyone listening would certainly walk away from worship knowing that he or she is infected by the sickness within.

Yet, the one thing missing the most in all the sermons was Jesus. A good Lutheran preacher would never allow a sermon to end without a clear statement of how we have a Savior from sin who's already acted on our behalf to save us. Stressing justification (what Christ has done for us) allows sanctification (what we do out of love for Christ) to follow naturally. By not stressing the gospel, Groeschel and others like him are depriving people of exactly what they need to live their lives in Christ.

A WELS layperson told me recently about a pastor who makes use of Groeschel sermons often. On one Sunday the law had been preached long and hard. The gospel, it was said, would be shared the following Sunday. When this man and his family were leaving worship, they encountered a woman in tears in the church lobby. When asked what was wrong, she explained that she felt so guilty of her sin and hoped that God could forgive her. My friend said to me, "I just couldn't help but think, 'if the gospel had been preached today, she'd know that God forgives her through Christ.'"

Jesus was mentioned in passing in each of the first four sermons. Only in the final sermon of the series did the preacher mention – in a few words – that Jesus died to forgive us. Otherwise, Jesus wasn't made to be the

Savior from sin. He was made the Savior for a better life. Sanctification overshadowed Justification.

That's what happens when you try to meet the felt needs of people. You'll end up talking a lot about earth and not much about heaven. By the way, heaven was never mentioned once in five sermons. Also missing from all the sermons was any mention of Christ's resurrection, which is truly the power for Christian living. As you might expect, the sacraments had no mention, either.

A long-time friend of mine called me the other day. He's a former WELS pastor who visits his home congregation in the Fox Valley whenever he visits his mother. His home congregation is one that has used Groeschel materials in the past. Speaking of the worship in his home church he said, "It doesn't seem like we're worshipping, it really seems like I'm being entertained."

That surely is one thing that this Groeschel sermon series had in abundance, entertaining stories. Laughter was a big part of the sermon presentation. I get it. These preachers are down to earth. They're regular guys. They're funny. Who wouldn't want to come to worship?

That's what the church growth camp wants confessional Lutheran pastors and congregations to bite on. They want us to believe that what draws people are the funny stories, the relaxing atmosphere, and the answers to everyday questions. Yet, as Bill Hybels at Willow Creek has already admitted, these things may bring people in but they won't keep the people there. Fortunately, confessional Lutheran churches have known for years what keeps people in the pews. Preaching the whole counsel of God. Highlighting Jesus in our ministry. Craig Groeschel hasn't figured that out. WELS pastors are wise to follow in the steps of their homiletics professors and not Craig Groeschel when preparing their sermons.

Here's what I mean. Since several of my members are residents at a local Methodist-owned nursing facility, I take our church organist along one Sunday every two months to conduct worship. Sunday was my day. I preached the same sermon there that I preached in the morning. On

my way out I heard a gentleman say to his daughter, "You can always count on those WELS preachers."

I smiled and walked to the car happy. Not because I may have received a back-handed compliment, but because our WELS preaching is really what God's people need. It centers on Christ. You won't find that in a Craig Groeschel sermon.