

Stuttering kings; imperfect pastors

The King's Speech and the Office of the Preacher

by Mathew Block

It won four Oscars including Best Motion Picture of the Year, but *The King's Speech* offers Christians more than just an evening's entertainment according to one pastor. For Rev. Ted Giese of Mount Olive Lutheran Church (Regina), the film's central themes of communication offer striking parallels to the Office of the Preacher.

As the second son of King George V, Prince Albert never expects to ascend to the throne – nor, indeed, does he desire to. As he suffers from a debilitating speech impediment, Albert is happy to leave kingship to his older brother Edward VIII. But when Edward abdicates, Albert has no choice but to become King George VI. And his difficulties with speaking publicly only grow as war with Germany looms.

Pastors can relate to George VI's fear of public speaking, according to Rev. Ted Giese. "You come to realize how generally terrifying the task of preaching is," he says. "You're dealing with the Word of God, and you're trying to get that message across to the people.

You don't want to be the barrier to that happening." In attempting to proclaim the Good News of Christ, pastors often find themselves to be the greatest impediment to successful communication—much as King George VI struggles to speak publicly in the film.

"The first couple of times you preach," Rev. Giese notes, "it's an even more difficult task." He recalls one of the first sermons he ever gave. The congregation rose to hear the sermon text, but after reading it he neglected to ask them to be seated. They continued to stand as he launched into the sermon. Only when people slowly began sitting—one by one—did he realize they were still standing. "It was a collectively embarrassing situation," he admits, "yet it also illustrated the deep respect they have for the Word of God and for the task of preaching."

Pastors might occasionally mislead their congregations, but congregation's actions can also affect their pastors – something true of any speaker-hearer relationship. At the beginning of *The King's Speech*, for example, George VI delivers a particularly painful speech. His stammer unsettles his audience and, in turn, their concerned expressions cause him to become increasingly less articulate.

"As a person in the pew, you don't experience this," Rev. Giese explains. "You see the preacher. You don't see

the faces of the people looking at the preacher. But the preacher looks out and sees everyone there." If he spots disinterest and confusion, it can discourage him. But, viewed positively, the congregation's reaction can tell him when he needs to adapt what he is saying to get the message across.



Colin Firth as King George VI in *The King's Speech*

In the film, King George VI is assisted in overcoming his stammer by speech therapist Lionel Logue. He helps George realize he "has a voice" by practicing such speaking exercises as tongue twisters, singing what he cannot say, and various other techniques. By the film's close, King George VI is able, with difficulty, to give an inspiring worldwide radio address as WWII begins.

Unlike in the film, solutions to a pastor's communication difficulties do not come primarily through speaking exercises (though they cannot hurt). Instead, relief comes by remembering that God speaks through the pastor not because he is worthy but because

God is merciful. "The Holy Spirit is the one who gets the message across to the people, not the pastor," Rev. Giese concludes. "Whatever personal fears or idiosyncrasies a pastor might have, the successful communication of the Gospel depends in the end not on him, but upon God."

Martin Luther explains it best: "If we hold the Word of God in high regard, then we would be glad to go to church, to listen to the sermon and to pay attention. But if you look more at the pastor than at God; if you do not see God's person but merely gape to see whether the pastor is learned and skilled, whether the pastor has good diction, then you do not have eyes to see the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb... A poor speaker may speak the Word of God just as well as he who is endowed with eloquence."

God speaks to us through pastors. "Would to God," Luther writes, "that we could gradually train our hearts to believe that the preacher's words are God's Word and that the man addressing us is a scholar and a king." For it truly is *the* "King's speech" a pastor is trying to communicate. And we, clergy and lay people alike, must listen attentively to hear what He says.

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