

Author: Paul F. Bosch [ [pbosch@golden.net](mailto:pbosch@golden.net) ]

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## NOUNS AND VERBS

I'm standing in the aisle of one of those gigantic "big box" supermarkets, fingering a glass jar from a shelf. The label says "Sandwich Slices". I admire the alliteration, but I'm stumped as to what's inside the jar. I can see it's green, and sure enough, they appear to be slices of something. I guess it's pickles, which is what I'm looking for. But nowhere on the label does the noun "pickles" appear. Desperate now, I search for the list of ingredients. Yes, here they are, in print so tiny it causes me to squint. And sure enough, there's the word "cucumbers". I guess I've got what I'm looking for. Pickles...

Now I'm in the cosmetics aisle. I pick up a slim plastic bottle labeled "Shower Gel". Is it soap? Detergent? Shampoo? Sounds like something you spread on your breakfast toast...

Such are the distractions and confusions in the uses of language in modern life. And such are the ruminations of my psyche in my seventy-seventh year as I try to cope.

Item: Some months ago I was invited "to preside at the Opening Worship" of a national pastor's conference. I was somewhat dismayed to discover that what I was being asked to lead was not Eucharist — Holy Communion — but rather Morning Prayer. The verb used in my invitation had misled me. As I was taught, now fifty-four years ago in Seminary, the verb "preside" was what you did at *Eucharist*. The verb for leading Morning Prayer was not "preside". It was "*lead*".

Call me old-fashioned. Call me out of touch. Call me an antiquarian. But this is how I learned it, way back then:

! You *preside* at Holy Communion.

In our tradition, it's usually an ordained person who does the presiding...

! You *lead* Morning and Evening Prayer.

These offices (note the noun) can be led by laity as well as by clergy. Maybe even laity *in preference to* clergy. When as clergy I lead Morning Prayer, I wear only alb. No stole. I'm simply — proudly! — laity at such moments, a member of the *laos*, the People of God.

! You *officiate* at weddings and funerals.

Unless of course there's to be a celebration of Holy Communion at either of these rites, in which case I suppose you could say you're both officiating and presiding.

I still find those verbs useful. Is there a movement among liturgists today to simplify, to do away with those distinctions?

I want to go on record — I have gone on record! — as supporting the attempts I discern in the framers of our New Book (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*) to simplify and to make our liturgical terminologies more accessible to worshippers. See my series of “Nifty...” essays above. Good old Anglo-Saxon instead of Latinate terms, that kind of thing.

Nevertheless, I think we've lost some precision if we flatten every verb into the one: “preside”. Am I hopelessly antiquarian in this?

For the record, I don't miss “Septuagesima” one bit. Hey, I don't even miss “introit” or “gradual”. For the record, I'm sixty-four about substituting “Prayer of the Day” for the old noun “Collect”. That traditional designation does say something about a classic literary form that “Prayer of the Day” simply doesn't quite provide. But I can live with it.

Truth to tell, I'm more than a little nostalgic about those grand old Latin terms for the Sundays before and after Easter: “Laetare” and “Jubilate” and others. Those majestic Latin nouns had a noble history. But I can live without them, even as I shed my tears privately. Even as I admit it's pure nostalgia for me to mourn their passing.

And I suppose there are some arcane terms and distinctions we could rightly expect — demand?— the ordained clergy to know that we wouldn't necessarily require of the person in the pew. You could argue that it's part of the clergy's training to learn some stuff the laity don't normally need to know. Part of your tool box as a professional. And if you're clergy, you don't need to flaunt your learning. Most of the time.

While we're at it, prepositions too. Those Sundays before Easter: They're Sundays *in* Lent, but not *of* Lent. (Every Sunday is a festival, even Sundays in Lent.) So they're *in* but not *of*. Not even Roman Catholics make that useful distinction the way Lutherans do. For Rome, they're all Sundays of Lent. Pity.

So. Call me antiquarian, but I'll still make those distinctions in speaking of presiding and leading and officiating. And I'll give you permission to hate me for it.

On a related note: You've heard of the sports figure who wanted to enliven his conversation with a Biblical metaphor? He spoke of Moses, who "came down th' mountain wit' the two tabloids".

The *Toronto Sun* and the *National Enquirer*, most likely.

