

## ARTICLES

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# Lutheran Preaching: Proclamation, Not Communication

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There's much that has been written, much that has been said, concerning Lutheran preaching. This latest entry is offered in the conviction that our Synod in particular, and Lutheranism in general, is in deep trouble in the area of preaching. That conviction, heightened as it is by the notion that, sooner or later, I must turn over all of my parishioners and all of my loved ones to one of these preachers, has driven me for some time to investigate what is happening in Lutheran pulpits, and what ought to be happening. It is some material from this investigation which I would offer here.

Having said this, I want to be understood as offering the reader a perspective, even an attitude, about Lutheran preaching. I can do no more than offer. I have no mechanism by which to compel. In fact, Luther captures my own attitude and purpose in his sermon on the man born blind in John 9, preached on the Wednesday after Laetare, March 17, 1518:

You will know, dear friends of Christ, that I do not understand much about preaching and therefore I shall preach a foolish sermon; for I am a fool and I thank God for it. Therefore, I must also have foolish pupils; anybody who doesn't want to be a fool can close his ears. This Gospel compels me to take this attitude; for you have heard in this Gospel that Christ is dealing only with the blind. And Christ also concludes that all who see are blind and all the wise and prudent are fools. These are his words. If I were to say it, I would be

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reviled as a new prophet. But Christ will not lie. For we are all blind and our light and our illumination come solely from Christ, our good and faithful God.<sup>1</sup>

## The Content of Lutheran Preaching

Lutheran preaching is an activity which is not done in a vacuum. Rather, it happens within contexts, several contexts. As an activity of language, Lutheran preaching lives within the linguistic context, and faces the demands of the grammar found there. As an activity in the church, Lutheran preaching lives within the context of the liturgy, with the implications which are found there. And as an activity of the proclamation of the Word of God, Lutheran preaching lives within the context of Lutheran theology. These contexts jointly form the “environment” in which the activity of Lutheran preaching occurs. Let us consider each context in turn.

### *The Linguistic Context of Lutheran Preaching*

It would seem that little need be said about the linguistic context of Lutheran preaching other than some comment about the necessity of clear and distinct sounds of reasonably clear and distinct sentences. But such simplicity alludes the task at hand. First, the linguistic world is not monolithic. There is a considerable difference, for example, between the written word and the spoken word.

The first words in the world were spoken words: And God said, “Let there be...” The first words of developing societies are spoken words. The first words of your own infant development were spoken words. There’s something rather basic about the spoken word. Concerning it, Richard Lischer writes:

The living voice with its capacity for variation of pitch, rate, and force, makes possible a level of clarity unknown to written forms of communication. Reading and television make us spectators from the outside, but sound is the key to interiority. The class may scrutinize me, the new professor, as long as it wishes, but nothing of who I am is revealed until I open my mouth and speak. What is more revealing than language?...

At a more profound level, speech creates the kind of communication that not only conveys information, but evokes response.<sup>2</sup>

There is the spoken word, and it is closely wedded to the Word of God. But, as I just indicated, Richard Lischer *writes*: there also is the written word! We hear the spoken Word of God. We read the written Word of God. The written word and the spoken word have different dynamics. They are, in a sense, different languages, having different impacts on us. It is characteristic of the written word to move us to thinking and contemplation. The written word can do this because of its properties; the written word "stands still," as it were, and allows all but the most clumsy of readers to pick up right where they left off to do some thinking. It is characteristic of the spoken word to move us to perceptions and intentions. Obviously, these characteristics do overlap. The spoken word can invite contemplation, but, by virtue of its properties, when it does so, it leaves the hearer behind. The spoken word does not stand still. With it one stops to think at one's own peril, condemned to have to "catch up" for each bit of thinking one pauses to do. And when, by virtue of its properties, the written word moves one to action, this action leaves the written word behind, lying where last put.

Preaching is the spoken word, with the benefits and pitfalls that its properties provide. But that is not the end of the story. Lutheran preaching is never to be just merely any exercise in the spoken word. Lutheran preaching is normed by the Scriptures, as we will discuss below. But this observation also has meaning here, for the Bible is the written Word, with all of the properties of the written word. And yet, again, this is not the whole story, for this written word is written, primarily, for a special fate: These written words are to be spoken and heard! Birger Gerhardsson states, "the greater part of the ancient literature is intended for the ears as much, if not more than, the eyes. Words were meant to sound; authors wrote works which were meant to be read aloud."<sup>3</sup> Clearly, this observation is true of the Scriptures by virtue of how we find the sacred texts being handled in the narrative of Scripture, and by explicit instructions for the reading of the texts, as well.

The fact that the written word is written to be spoken is even more warrant for expecting the sermon as spoken word, based on the written word, to provide that which is characteristic of the spoken word, namely, to shape vision and perception, and to build intentions within the hearer. The sermon is wellsuited for proclamation of both guilt and forgiveness. Sermons are ready vehicles for admonition and exhortation. Below, we shall touch upon both the benefits and the pitfalls of these properties of the spoken word as they relate to Lutheran preaching. But suffice it to be said at this point that

Lutheran preaching needs consciously to be conducted with a view to the properties of an oral linguistic activity.

### *The Liturgical Context of Lutheran Preaching*

Many years ago, in the age of black and white television, there existed a western gunslinging hero named Paladin, whose calling card stated: "Have Gun, Will Travel." True though it was for the fictitious hero, such is not the nature of the Lutheran Preacher; for us it is not a case of "Have Sermon, Will Travel." Lutheran preaching usually occurs in a liturgical context within a congregational setting, undergirded by Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession: "Of ecclesiastical order we teach that no one should publicly teach or preach in the church, or administer the Sacraments without a regular call." Here we commit ourselves to limit Lutheran preaching to those possessed with the regular call of the congregation. Where this setting is lacking, such as at convocations and conventions, we usually throw vestments and stoles around the preacher to visually suggest the normal situation out of which this special incident flows. So, this activity of Lutheran preaching is contextually shaped by liturgy and congregational life.

To say that Lutheran preaching is shaped by the context of liturgy is not intended to invite the label of "sacerdotalist," although in these grey and latter days of epitaphs such as "romanist," "chauvinist," and "neo-donatist," I gladly settle for "sacerdotalist." Nevertheless, even for the nonsacerdotalists among us, it is clear that Lutheran preaching occurs in the context of worship, and for most of us we would even settle for the fact that the sermon is seen as existing in the context of the historic worship of the church.<sup>4</sup> Things inappropriate to a general worship context do not happen regularly in a sermon without dire consequences. You can get away with the dress of an angel once, or the prop of a telephone in the pulpit, or even a chart or graph; but not every Sunday. The environment of the church at worship precludes that type of preaching as steady fare.

Moreover, given the emphasis in the historic "mass form" (as the Commission on Worship now calls it), Lutheran preaching will be formed by the expectation of providing food for the faithful. The liturgy places the sermon within the "Office of the Word of God," to which the congregation listens for the "voice of Christ." Lutheran preaching is that expression of the Word of God in which the faithful wait to hear the perspective of the Law and the Gospel drawn from the written Word that it may speak to them. The Lutheran sermon is not Bible Study, nor is it a lesson in the history of the church, though the

faithful undoubtedly would benefit also from these. Lutheran preaching is a proclamation of the Word, more kerygmatic than didactic in flavor,<sup>5</sup> so that the Gospel is given general predominance in the sermon, as Dr. Walther properly admonishes. As we publicly confess, "the chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel."<sup>6</sup>

We cannot leave the congregational setting without noting a disturbing trend which distorts the proper influence of this context for preaching. Ripping the doctrine of the royal priesthood of believers out of its Waltherian, to say nothing of its Biblical, settings, and supplementing it with the latest in the assured results of sociological research, voices now instruct the Lutheran pastor on both what, and how, he ought to preach. Given that Lutheran preaching is done in a congregational and liturgical setting, it is true that there is a sense in which the Lutheran sermon also is the voice of the faithful. But it is not the voice of the faithful expressing itself in surveys or opinion polls on what people want to hear. All proper deference to the voice of the faithful in Lutheran preaching must be couched in the paradigm captured by the now famous paraphrase of the now famous G. K. Chesterton quotation: "The Church is the one true democracy in that it is the only organization which does not disenfranchise its members simply because they happen to be dead." Lutheran preaching is the confessing voice of the faithful in this fullness of that voice, the fullness of which we speak in the liturgy with the words, "therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven." Indeed, one of the many blessings of the liturgy, a benefit noted by the Confessions,<sup>7</sup> is that here we are reminded of this larger voice and chorus of which we are a part; here we are reminded that we are always the youngest members of God's family and still only the newest, and least informed, kids on the ecclesiastical block.

### *The Theological Context of Lutheran Preaching*

Theology in a Lutheran setting norms the preaching that is done in that context. Not only are we bound to say from the Lutheran pulpit, as it were, "Thus says the Lord," rather than "it seems to me," but we are also bound not simply to have our own opinions about what it actually is that the Lord thusly says. Rather, we are bound to proclaim that exposition of the Word of God which is exhibited and expressed in the Lutheran Confessions. Lutheran preaching is an activity which is normed by the context of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

This we all well know. But, the implication of this knowledge often is missed. Since Lutheran preaching is confessionally normed, it

follows that Lutheran preaching is theology. It cannot be confessionally normed and be anything else, such as sociology, group counseling, pastoral advice, etc. Lutheran preaching is theology, and, equally, theology in a Lutheran context IS preaching. Lutherans, at least those whose sermons fit within this theological context, are doing theology. That is a contextual part of the nature of our task as preachers. This theology is “evangelical” theology (in the Lutheran, not contemporary Protestant, meaning of the term); this theology is orthodox (in the Lutheran, not Eastern, meaning of the term); and this theology is catholic (in the historic, not Roman, meaning of the term).

Again, all of this might seem self-evident, but that self-evidence is challenged today by a host of competitive thoughts about the activity of preaching. We are told that sermons should meet the felt needs of the hearers. We are encouraged to “be uplifting” in our presentations. But these demands often conflict with the text, with the theology of the cross under which we live, and with the true need, often unfelt before the sermon begins, for contrition, repentance, and for utter trust of Christ. Sermons which are doing evangelical, orthodox, catholic theology are not, at the same time, going to major in topics such as: “How to Be Happy at Your Job.” To be sure, a Scriptural text may relate to the doctrine of Christian vocation, and such a doctrine does bring forth the fruits of faith in the context of vocation, but Lutheran preaching will not constitute a recipe of a methodological, and therefore man-oriented, nature, such as the plethora of “How To” sermons entails. Man-centeredness is just not compatible with Lutheran theology, either for the preacher or for the hearer. Luther notes,

...it is not within man's doing or ability to be or to make a pastor, and that it is also not man's doing to be a Christian and to hear the Word or a sermon gladly, but that this is a divine matter and nothing but a heavenly gift and present, without and beyond, yes, against, nature, which God alone effects in us, without any help or ideas of ours.<sup>8</sup>

Lutheran preaching just is not there to be attractive to the community, nor to be a barometer of what has been registered as the felt needs of the people. Again, the reason is simple: Such characteristics are not confessional characteristics, because they do not flow out of confessional understandings, and therefore they cannot identify truly Lutheran preaching.

Thus, Lutheran preaching is an activity shaped by its contextual environments of linguistic, liturgical, and theological concerns.

Lutheran preaching is the spoken word in which the faithful are fed with the actual voice of God; it is a confessional theology of the Word of God which applies Law and Gospel in the context of the liturgical life of the church. What such an activity, shaped by its linguistic, liturgical, and theological environment, is to accomplish is the subject of the next part of this essay.

## The Assignment or Roles of Lutheran Preaching

What is Lutheran preaching to accomplish? Here, I believe, we consider the issue which contributes most to the current state of affairs in the homiletical life of our Synod, and of the Lutheran Church in general. We have already touched upon some of the more pernicious, albeit persistent demands being made upon preachers in our churches, such as the demands for relevancy, measured in "felt needs." To this could be added: the demands for entertaining content, requirement of dynamic delivery, and the need to promote programs from the pulpit, to mention but a few. In this second part of the essay, we consider the appropriate assignments or roles of Lutheran preaching.

### *Communication or Proclamation?*

Leading the list of demands being made on Lutheran preaching, with a popularity due in no small measure to its seemingly eminent reasonableness is the emphasis on "good communication." Constantly the preacher hears the admonition, "we must *communicate* with the people."

Now, if by "communication" one is referring to what technically could be called "micro-communication," in which one stresses certain skills such as enunciation, pronunciation, voice usage, public speaking techniques, and manners, then the recommendation may well be worthwhile. Also, no one can deny the benefit of using the same language as one's hearers.

But such is not the scope of the demand that Lutheran preaching major in communication. The accusation behind this current demand is that much Lutheran preaching "fails to communicate." The articulated reason for this summary judgment against the Lutheran pulpit is that, to communicate, one must establish a contact with the hearers. Typical Lutheran preaching, we are told, fails to establish this contact because this preaching does not deliver what the person in the pew *wants to hear*. Thus, it does not "communicate," and must be changed.

At the very outset of this paper, I put the charge that Lutheran preaching is in deep, deep trouble. I am not prepared to withdraw that charge at this time, but the nature of my position is much different than that of this charge now under consideration. If we are ever to understand what is in need of correction in the Lutheran pulpit, we must first reverse the judgment against Lutheran preaching contained in the call for "communication" from the pulpit.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Lutheran preaching needs to deliver something for the sake of the hearers, but not that which is measured by the current advocates of "communication." The hearers need not the sound of culture, but the sound of Christ; not the discussion of the people's felt needs, but the inward stimulation of the depth of sinners' true needs; not a popular, persuasive voice, but an uncompromising prophetic voice; not the current intent of the modern mind, but the original intent of the text. In short, what Lutheran preaching needs to deliver is not "communication" but rather "proclamation."

What precisely is the difference between "communication" and "proclamation"? Both activities deal with people; both involve a connection between speaker and hearer; both put forth a message; yet the differences between the two activities are great. Both communication and proclamation involve motivation, but the process employed is quite different between the two.

Communication works within what might be called a "synergistic" framework. Communication requires the cooperation of the hearer; without that cooperation there is no communication. Communication appeals to reflective reason for consent. Thus, to strive for communication is to set up a dualism which enfranchises the hearer with epistemological power. The hearer becomes part of the litigation of which communication is the result. (The hearer becomes "Judge Wapner" in the communication model.) The hearer is empowered to say, "What I know and see to be true, this I affirm; what I do not know or see to be true, this I deny." Obviously, a hearer always has that "move," if you will, but in the framework of the communication model, where the hearer's verdict is "this I deny," communication has failed.<sup>10</sup>

Proclamation works within what might be called a "monergistic" framework. Proclamation requires the presence (obviously), but not necessarily the cooperation of the hearer; even without that cooperation proclamation occurs (assuming that the Gospel has been voiced). Proclamation does not appeal to reflective reason for consent. Proclamation is revelation, and as von Löwenich aptly notes, "revelation addresses itself to faith, not to sight, not to reflective reason."<sup>11</sup> Because proclamation does not appeal to reflective reason, it does not operate on the dualistic level, and it does not empower the



hearer to become the final arbiter of the communication of truth. The hearer yet may say, "this I deny." But proclamation still has occurred, where the Word of the Gospel has been proclaimed, and there, as we publicly confess, "the Holy Spirit is given who works faith where and when it pleases God."<sup>12</sup>

The work of communication is to engender *motivation*, whereas the work of proclamation is to engender *identification*. The communication model encourages one to *consent*; the proclamation model encourages one to *ponder*. The communication model brings the hearer to *learn*; the proclamation model brings the hearer to *unlearn*. Thus, the communication model is working well when the hearer is given to *memorize* what is said; the proclamation model is working well when the hearer is given to *realize* what is said. The communication model desires to move the hearer to act; the proclamation model desires to move the hearer to *see*, and to *be*. The communication model in preaching delivers a narrative text so that the hearer *studies* the actions in the text; the proclamation model in preaching delivers the same text so that the hearer *becomes identified* with the actions in the text.

Aiden Kavanaugh catches this distinction in his comparison of pictures and icons. "Pictures," he notes, "are about meaning. Icons are about being."<sup>13</sup> In this sense, preaching is more iconic than pictorial in its impact. Preaching, as is true of the liturgy in which it occurs, is more about *being* than about *meaning*. Being is received, whereas *meaning* is jointly developed by assertion of the speaker and the consent of the hearer. The communication model *shares meaning* (in the full sense of the popular buzz-word, "share"); the proclamation model *bestows being*.

The call for Lutheran preaching to buy into the communication solution is predicated on a real problem in the Lutheran pulpit. Over the years, a very familiar pattern has evidenced itself in Lutheran preaching. The pattern can be found in the history of the Lutheran Reformation, where Luther's theological method of coherence, interface, and correlation was superseded by the general approach of Post-Reformation orthodoxy which reverted to the scholastic theological method of correspondence, particularity, and causation.<sup>14</sup> In the preaching history of the Missouri Synod, it is easy to discern a similar shift in sermons from proclamation to information. This shift came quite early, and we have inherited a church body, where both pastors and laity have grown to expect of preaching this information model.

The information model viewed the sermon as an exercise in presenting propositions to learners. Bred as it was in Lutheran

orthodoxy on the objectivity of God's grace, the information model extended such objectivity to every matter of information, so much so that it carried within it the dangerous seeds of a biblicistic rationalism. Insufficient though such a model is, from the perspective of the sermon as a means of grace, it yet was accepted for many years because of a general respect for the office of the preacher, and a general recognition of the objective nature of Christian faith, both of which brought large-scale consent to what was preached. The problem arose, as history again has taught us with regard to pietism, that this propositional, informational mode of communicating the faith bred a reaction in the form of a relational mode of communicating the faith, which is precisely what lies behind the communication model in the area of preaching. This relational approach elevates the subjective over the objective, the personal over the propositional, to the joy of an amazing collection of Protestant evangelicals, charismatics, contemporary Roman Catholics, and liberal ecumenists. The collection is not so amazing when one grasps the implications of the communication model.

The communication model is now offered as a better way to deliver information and move hearers to action, especially in light of this new age in the life of the pastoral office within our Synod, the age in which the pastor is forced to say, along with the now defunct Frank Borman, "we have to earn our wings every day." The communication model in fact is a concession to this minimalistic point of view concerning the pastoral office, as it legitimizes the synergistic process of "sharing" truth.

But this is the wrong solution for Lutheran preaching. Proclamation, not communication, is the solution to the crisis in our pulpits. Proclamation delivers a different package than either the propositional approach of the information model or the relational approach of the communication model. The proclamation model is perspectival in nature, delivering God's perspective of revelation.

Let it be noted here that these terms, propositional, relational, and perspectival, are all familiar in the theory of knowledge, epistemology. And within epistemology, perspectivalism is roundly condemned for asserting that truth is relative.<sup>15</sup> But when I am using the term perspectival in this present context of the proclamation, it is not an epistemological issue, but something even more radical, namely, an ontological issue. It is *being itself* which is perspectival, and that perspective is not at all relative, but absolute, based on God's revelation of things, proclaimed to faith in the Gospel.

The proclamation model thus embraces both the objectivity of the grace and work of God, and the subjectivity of our identification of our

need as sinners and our benefits in Christ. The proclamation model speaks propositional truth without rationalism, and it speaks to people in relationship in Christ without pietism. After all, in the church of Christ, all relationships are propositionally bound, and all propositions are relationally bound; it is proclamation which embraces all in all.

The content of proclamation in Lutheran preaching is the identification of who you are. Proclamation is the identification of the hearer as sinner, to the core, by virtue of the sinful nature. Proclamation is the identification of the hearer as saint, through and through, by virtue of the righteousness of Christ. This proclamation involves the application of the actual text to the actual hearer, by means of the actual hermeneutical keystone of the justification of the sinner before God through Christ, bestowed upon the actual hearer through the actual application of Law and Gospel. In this way, the preacher delivers that which he has received, namely, the means of grace through which God both mortifies and vivifies, as the hearer is slain by the Law and resurrected by the Gospel. All of this status and activity, in short all of this being, is unseen to the eye, and independent of the cooperation of the hearer. All of this being is seen by the perspective of faith in the very proclamation which delivers it. That is the nature of proclamation. It is proclamation, not communication, nor more information, which our people need to hear and our preachers need to preach.

### *The Role of Lutheran Proclamation*

Ulrich Asendorf identifies a threefold role of Luther as preacher, which also serves as a structure for our work in proclamation: a) to bring the Biblical Gospel to the people; b) to bring the people into the one historic church; and c) to confront error which threatens the people of God.<sup>16</sup> We consider each of these aspects of proclamation in turn.

Clearly the purpose of proclamation of the Word of God, to any Lutheran at least, is to bestow Christ and His benefits upon the hearers, which is to bring "the Holy Spirit into their hearts to rule, comfort and quicken them, and to defend them against the devil and the power of sin."<sup>17</sup> Sermons proclaim, they bestow, they deliver, they judge, they kill, they revive, they forgive sins, they sustain, and all of this by bringing the hearers under the Word of God.

All of this sounds fine, and I think that it is meet, right, and proper. However, the culture, the world, and our own sinful flesh unite to demand something else out of the sermon. A sermon to many is a behavioristic message. It is a spiritual locker room address, in which a spiritual coach, gets a spiritual team ready to "go out there and win

one for Jesus!" Moreover, a sermon to many is downright moralistic, laying down the "do's" and "don't's." In fact, one standard dictionary definition of a sermon is a moralistic harangue, usually unappreciated by the hearer. This characterization of the sermon, together with the view of religion both outside and within the church, and supported by that drive within us which Lutherans call the "*opinio legis*," the propensity to legalism, all combine to provide a constant temptation to the preacher to use the sermon for moralization.

But the sermon is not for moralization, at least as far as Lutheran preaching is concerned. Chemnitz observed why this is so:

If it is established that the proper teaching of the Gospel is not only a matter of faith in the gracious promise for the sake of Christ, but also deals with renewal or good works, then it immediately follows that good works have entered into the matter of justification as a partial cause....<sup>18</sup>

Lutheran Gospel proclamation is not for moralization, but then what is it for? Not for moralization, but for justification.

By means of proclamation Lutheran preaching justifies! The act of justification is historically grounded in the cross and resurrection of Christ, propositionally articulated in the inspired text, and relationally connected to the faithful in Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This same act of justification is delivered to the hearer in the proclamation of the Gospel. It happens in proclamation. The perspective of the justified is altered, reinforced, and sustained in the proclamation. That is what sermons "do," as they bring the people of God under the Biblical Word of God. It is a very important and necessary role for the spiritual welfare of the faithful, and hence it was the role which Martin Luther undertook when he entered the pulpit to preach.

Secondly, Luther used proclamation to bring people into the historic church. This clearly is a perspectival function. For Martin Luther it was not enough for people to hear the Word of God. They must see that this is no new phenomenon; this is not some radical departure from the historic church. Rather, the people must see, must perceive, that they are hearing what has been the one true truth, the one orthodox and historic faith, the one holy, catholic, and apostolic faith. In short, they need to perceive themselves as members of this one historic body of Christ, as participants in the human chain which God has linked together from the cross, through the ages, to this very moment late in time. Thus, the people will be better prepared to handle rival theologies and messages, and can employ not just the words and counsel of Pastor Luther, but of the church fathers as well.

Today, our people are in desperate need of this vision of our place in the historic evangelical catholic church. They are the contemporary people without a country, without a culture, as their country and their cultures evidence the ever-widening chasm between familial and social roots on the one side, and the eternal family and city of God on the other. The phenomenon of proclamation shapes this perspective of belonging to the historic church.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in their book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, have presented a sociological analysis of what happens to a people in a culture, indeed of how a culture is communicated to the new generation.<sup>19</sup> Strong parallels exist between the cultural objects of their work and the phenomenon of the historic church as a culture. Berger and Luckmann argue that a culture is maintained and transmitted on three levels of experience. First there is the field of shared language, and as people are brought into the culture, they begin to absorb it to the degree that they are absorbed into the field of language (both thought and spoken language). Secondly, there is the field of affirmations of reality, in which the truths by which the culture lives are continually affirmed and declared. Thirdly, there is the field of specialized knowledge, in which contact with those who are experts in knowledge can explain the reasons for the affirmations of reality, and thus reinforce and deepen the cultural experience.

It seems clear that the reality of the Christian faith and the community of this faith is transmitted by these same dynamics. The level of shared language is *leitourgia*, the corporate liturgical life of the church. Here, the new in faith are introduced not so much to the instruction of the church, as much as they are introduced to the sacramental language and actions in the life of the church. Even as little children learn family ways by such an association, so the neophyte, of any age, learns this evangelical, catholic culture by the association of shared language and life of the church. The second field is that of *kerygma*, the proclamation of the Word of God in the constant reaffirmation of the truth of our life in Christ, which is nothing other than the Gospel in all its articles. This is preaching! The third field is that of *didache*, the normative teaching and instruction concerning the Biblical facts which undergird and reinforce the Gospel proclamation. This is catechesis! In such a scheme, the role of the preacher includes that of continually drawing people into this perspective of the historic church through the proclamation of the Gospel. Luther found it essential to do this from the pulpit. We would be correct in so finding it essential today.

Luther's third concern in preaching was to confront error, especially that error which is most likely to threaten the people, namely, error from within the walls of the church. Today, we are urged to think that the great errors which confront our people are behavioral: ethical and moral challenges from the communities in which we live. Indeed, those dangers are there. But the truly great errors are those which hide within the church of Christ, errors which twist and distort her being, her life, her ministry, her tasks. These errors—dare we call them heresies?—pose a far more dangerous threat to our people than legalized gambling, or x-rated movies in hotel chains (both of which I oppose, by the way). The great need which we have in the face of such errors within the church is to be grasped by the vision of the reality of the one, holy, catholic church in history. For here we understand that the church always faces such errors. If we think they do not exist today, such a judgment testifies to our blindness, not to conditions within the church.

Notice how Luther handles this aspect of his role as preacher. He identifies errors for their dangerous threat. He labels error and errorist. He does so for the sake of the Gospel. His purpose is not character assassination or guilt by association. Rather, he says to his hearers:

You, too, are wrong!  
You don't oppose this stuff!  
You believe this stuff!  
Therefore, you dishonor Christ!

From this perspective Luther turns again the hearts of his hearers to the Gospel.

Ours is a day of very severe and very deceptive dangers within the church! Here, too, the proclamation of the Word of God through the textual application of Law and Gospel is the assignment for Lutheran preaching. It is an assignment that is often neglected, or when undertaken, often distorted into mere words of judgment about the other guy, or those other people. Such preaching is not Luther's confrontation of error. Rather, such preaching simply reverts to the old information model, made more interesting by the way in which we preachers can violate the Eighth Commandment while informing the flock.

So then, the assignment of Lutheran preaching is that which Luther himself undertook, to bring the people under the Word of God; to bring the people into the historic church; and to confront the error which threatens them, especially from within the church. This

assignment can be fulfilled when we again take seriously that Lutheran preaching is not a matter of information, and certainly not at home with the implications of communication, but rather that it is proclamation, by which God shapes in our hearers an identification and a sense of being, through the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## The Practice of Proclamation

It is often my experience as I listen to others develop a theological basis for some aspect of life in the church that, when the basis is finished, I am still left with some questions about what it will look like, as it all works out in real life. With that frustration in mind, I should like to touch on some observations concerning the practice of Lutheran proclamation. These observations are of two kinds. The first are “strategic observation” in that they deal in the area of methods. The second are more particular, specific issues in preaching, which I call “tactical observations.”

### *Strategic Observations Concerning the Handling of Gospel in the Sermon*

First, I should like to address the question of Law and Gospel within the sermon itself. We all know the phrase “Law and Gospel” so well that it has become a Lutheran “mantra,” our own little “holy sounds.” Sometimes we think that we have conveyed Law and Gospel, or the Law or the Gospel, simply because we loaded up our sermon with these words. Well, we haven’t. I think we would all benefit—I know I do each time I challenge my own work—by playing “search and destroy” with a sermon, searching out each Lutheran buzzword, and deleting it, replacing it with something else. I mean words such as Law, Gospel, faith, believe, etc. I’m not speaking about theological concepts as such; sometimes you can translate them, and sometimes you just have to use them and carefully define them. I’m speaking about these words which do NOT bring about the reality of which they speak simply by being spoken. Try “search and destroy” on your sermon manuscript, and see what happens when you can’t use the word Gospel, and instead you must just preach Gospel, rather than preach about Gospel. The same challenge awaits the word “Law,” and the word “faith.” Instead of speaking the word “Law,” preach it so that it does its work! Instead of talking about “faith,” rework that sermon so that through your proclamation you are preaching faith into your hearers.

But this then brings us to another strategic problem regarding Law and Gospel. How do we so preach Law and preach Gospel? One complaint I get from one of those particular blessed laypersons given us by God to keep us humble is this: "Pastor, I think that you're preaching too much Gospel! What this congregation needs is more Law!" What's going on here?

First, they like to hear the other guy getting what he should get out of the Law, especially if the preacher's application of Law was such that the first people weren't confronted by it. Moreover, it is a testimony that our congregations have come to love the Law, not in the way of which the Psalmist speaks, but in a certain sort of perverted sense! One can grow to love guilt! There is a certain comfort in it! This is the sort of perverse love which also infects teenagers, and sadly, others, who tell themselves how everyone hates them and how they hate themselves! What they mean is not, "I hate myself," but "I hate what is happening to this one I love, me!" There is a comfort in this, as long as what you hate is not too hateworthy. Likewise, our people can come to find a weird sense of comfort in hearing the Law which condemns them, so long as it doesn't become too condemnatory, as long as it does not get down to "terrors of conscience."

This, I believe, is precisely the problem with our preaching of the Gospel! The problem often isn't with the Gospel at all, but with the Law!<sup>20</sup> Peaceful coexistence with the Law as it speaks to me, leads to boredom with the Gospel. When you next hear someone say to you, "Yes, pastor, I believe the Gospel, when are you going to give us something else?," you better ask yourself how you're going about the application, not of the Gospel, but of the Law! The Law, as Dr. Walther rightly reminds us, needs to be so proclaimed as to cause a certain identification within us which he terms this way: the "terror of the conscience."<sup>21</sup> That's what preaching the Law is to accomplish! But how many are willing to do so? For many, such Law is too unseemly, and so we settle for "you and me" phrases, combined with what I call the "shotgun" approach to the Law, in which the preacher loads up the sermon with a shotgun shell full of example sins, hoping that at least one example will hit each hearer. Meanwhile, the real culprit which needs identification with you and your hearers, namely, the sinful nature, escapes unnoticed, only to tell you that you're bored with the same old Gospel. But note this: once you identify yourself as the damnable sinner that you are, you outward Christian, you, so as to sense the terrors of the conscience because you've been "found out" on the inside, you'll love the simplest Gospel—you'd die for it! Let the preacher try that on his hearers, and watch their response to the Gospel! This is the hard, rewarding work of Lutheran proclamation.



But let the Law do its work, and let the Gospel follow; then we face another strategic question—what should come next? A popular answer, offered by some of the really big names in LCMS history, is that you go back to the Law! “Sanctification,” some call it! “Evangelical admonition,” others say! Still others refer to “Gospel imperatives,” and yet more point to the “Third Use of the Law.” And all of the above are ready to label as “antinomian” those of us who say “no!” to these answers, however worded. Be assured that I believe in the third use of the Law, precisely and especially in the sense that it is discussed in FC VI, namely, that the third use is one of the ways in which God uses the Law:

Then he employs the law to instruct the regenerate out of it and to show and indicate to them in the Ten Commandments what the acceptable will of God is and in what good works, which God has prepared beforehand, they should walk. He also admonishes them to do these, and when because of the flesh they are lazy, negligent, and recalcitrant, the Holy Spirit reproves them through the law. In this way the Holy Spirit simultaneously performs both offices, “he kills and brings to life, he brings down to Sheol, and raises up.” But to reprove is the real function of the law.<sup>22</sup>

Two things need to be noted, as we discern what should come after the Gospel. First, what many people want, and what many pastors deliver, is NOT the third use of the Law, which is purely informative in nature, indicative and not imperative. Rather, many people want and many pastors deliver the *first use of the Law*! What they desire is the law which modifies behavior, by curbing the continuance of anything that does not comport to what ought to be in the lives of Christians. That is the first use, not the third!<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, whatever else the Law is doing, it is always accusing! *Lex semper accusat!* This is because, as the Formula says while discussing the third use, “to reprove is the real function of the law.” Now, if proclamation is what Lutheran preaching is about, and if identification of my new being as a child of God is what the Gospel gives me, and if “good works are bound to flow from faith,” as our confessions assert, why would we want to put our hearers back under accusation and the terrors of conscience once again at the end of the sermon?

Instead, let me propose that Lutheran preachers consider “Gospel application.” Gospel application is where one goes beyond the statement of Gospel facts, such as “Jesus died for you,” or “in Holy

Baptism, people are reborn into the kingdom of grace.” Gospel application occurs when, on the basis of the Gospel facts, the preacher *actually forgives sins*, when he actually declares, “you are God’s child!” “You are forgiven!” “No one will pluck you out of My hand!” Such Gospel application is simply relieving reflective reasoning of a necessary role in proclamation.<sup>24</sup> We ought not to leave the hearer to draw the immediate application from the general principle. Instead, make Gospel application the summation of your sermon.<sup>25</sup>

### *Tactical Observations Concerning the Handling of Gospel in the Sermon*

Two tactical observations demand attention in the context of this article. The first concerns the famous “attention span” question. We are told that the average attention span today is only twelve minutes, since it once was longer, so therefore, your sermon should be shorter. This is ridiculous on several counts. First, no one is average. No matter what the average attention span may be these days the preacher will lose everyone’s attention at some point in every sermon, simply by virtue of unavoidable distractions. Moreover, since the spoken word of the Gospel does engender contemplation, and since the preacher *wants* his preaching to engender contemplation, he will cause the attention span to be broken simply by the process of proclamation. I consider it to be a good indication when a member says, “Pastor, thank you; your sermon interrupted my thinking at least five times!” So work toward clear Law, clear Gospel, and fret not about the average attention span of people today.

Lastly, I should like to set forth a challenge about the textual methodology in Lutheran proclamation. The typical assumption about the relationship between the text and the hearer is such that the preacher must take the text and translate it into the twentieth-century mind-set. But to do so is to engage, however innocently, in the practice of allegory. That is precisely what allegory does, to translate the text into another context.

But if not that, if not allegory, what ought we to do? We need to translate the twentieth-century mind-set into the first century, or the Old Testament text. Lutheran preachers should so preach that the hearer gain an identification of himself or herself with the mind-set of the text, walking with Abraham and Isaac, listening to Jesus with Mary, supporting the collection to the Christians in Jerusalem, etc. Therein, in identification, is the key by which the Scripture is brought to life in the proclamation of the Lutheran preacher.

I close this essay in the manner in which I introduced it, with a quote from Luther, specifically from his very last sermon (February 15, 1546, three days before he died). In it we see Luther, the preacher, at work in proclamation, bringing his hearers under the Gospel, connecting them with the whole church, and defending them from error. Thus does this citation evidence the manner of preaching advocated by this essay. In it, also, we hear the clarion call to faithful attention to the objective means of grace in the face of the world's temptations to find religious meaning and excitement elsewhere, even as shall be demanded of those who follow after Luther, the preacher. Granting that such faithfulness is often wearisome and seemingly unrewarded, Luther directs our attention to the inviting voice of our Lord:

This we Christians should learn and acknowledge, even though the world does not want to do it, and we should be grateful to God that He has so richly blessed us and granted that we ourselves are able to hear Him, just as Christ Himself here gives joyful thanks to His heavenly Father. In times past we would have run to the ends of the world if we had known of a place where we could have heard God speak. But now that we hear this every day in sermons, indeed, now that all books are full of it, we do not see this happening. You hear at home in your house, father and mother and children sing and speak of it. The preacher speaks of it in the parish church. You ought to lift up your hands and rejoice that we have been given the honor of hearing God speaking to us through His Word.

"Oh," people say, "what is that? After all, there is preaching every day, often many times every day, so that we soon grow weary of it. What do we get out of it?" All right, go ahead, dear brother, if you don't want God to speak to you every day at home in your house and in your parish church, then be wise and look for something else: in Trier is our Lord God's coat, in Aachen are Joseph's pants and our blessed Lady's chemise. Go there and squander your money, buy indulgence and the pope's second-hand junk; these are valuable things!

But aren't we stupid and crazy; yes, blinded and possessed by the devil? There sits the decoy duck in Rome with his bag of tricks, luring to himself the whole world with its money and goods, and all the while anybody can go to baptism, to the sacrament, and the pulpit! How highly honored and richly blessed we are to know that God speaks with us and feeds us

with His Word, gives us His baptism, the keys, etc. But these barbarous, godless people say: "What, baptism, sacrament, God's Word? Joseph's pants, that's what does it!" But we should listen to God's Word, which tells us that He is our schoolmaster, and have nothing to do with Joseph's pants.

Christ says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden" (Matthew 11:28), and it is as though He were saying, "Just stick to Me, hold on to My Word, and let everything else go. If you are burned and beheaded for it, then have patience; I will make it so sweet for you that you easily would be able to bear it. If things go badly, I will give you the courage even to laugh about it; and if even though you walk on fiery coals, the torment shall nevertheless not be so severe and the devil shall nevertheless not be so bad, and you will rather feel that you are walking on roses for I give the Spirit, so that the burden, which for the world would be unbearable, becomes for you a light burden. For when you suffer for My sake, it is My yoke and My burden, which I lay upon you in grace, that you may know that this your suffering is well pleasing to God and to Me and that I myself am helping you to carry it and give you power and strength to do so. Let misfortune, sin, death, and whatever the devil and the world loads upon you assail and assault you. If only you remain confident and undismayed, waiting upon the Lord in faith, you have already won, you have already escaped death and far surpassed the devil and the world."

Lo, this means that the wise of this world are rejected, that we may learn not to think ourselves wise and to put away from our eyes all great personages, indeed to shut our eyes altogether, and cling only to Christ's Word and come to Him, as He so lovingly invites us to do, and say, "Thou alone art my beloved Lord and Master, I am Thy disciple."

This and much more might be said concerning this Gospel, but I am too weak and we shall let it go at that.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Luther's Works, Am. ed., vol. 51, pp. 35-36.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe, *Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaleinsis*, XXVII (Uppsala, Sweden: Gleerup, 1961), p. 163; cited in Lischer, p. 68.



<sup>4</sup>Horace Hummel underscores the uniqueness of Lutheranism over against fundamentalism on the basis of this very contextual issue; cf. "Lutheranism and the Inerrancy of Scripture," *Concordia Journal* 14 (April 1988): 107.

<sup>5</sup>Recently an adult convert said to me, "Pastor, I'm almost embarrassed to say this, but I think that I get more out of your Adult Bible Classes than I do out of the Sunday services." My response was this: "That's the way it should be! We want to learn, and to learn we *study*. That's true in all of life. As children, when we want to learn we ask, we study. That gives us knowledge. But far more is being absorbed by us from the context in which we are living, chiefly our family life, than we ever consciously recognize. Study teaches us knowledge; our family cultivates life within us. Sunday School teaches us Christian knowledge; the liturgy cultivates spiritual life within us." She later happily reported that she was finding my answer to be both true and helpful in seeing personal benefits from liturgy as well as Sunday School lesson.

<sup>6</sup>AC XV, 42.

<sup>7</sup>Ap XV; XXIV; XXVI; Ap XV.

<sup>8</sup>Luther's Works, Am. ed., vol. 28, p. 89.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., "Audience contact begins with an attitude toward communication, and communication can become more infectious when leaders focus on getting a response from several audiences at the same time" (David Luecke, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance: Facing America's Mission Challenge* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1988], p. 107).

<sup>10</sup>This synergistic implication is clearly intended and unavoidable in the current context of debate over the proper direction of Lutheran preaching; it is possible to use the term "communication" so as to avoid this synergistic implication, as for example Richard Klann does when he uses "communication" in a way which is synonymous with "proclamation" in this present article: "If the Gospel can be effectively resisted and rejected, how can we speak of the effective communication of the Gospel? According to the Scriptures, we can make a serious and simple response: God the Spirit, whom Christ continually sends for that purpose, authenticates the Gospel when men communicate it in its purity. His power is never diminished by the unbelief of those who have rejected His invitation to be His very own"; in, "On Writing Dogmatic Theology," *Concordia Journal* 13 (April 1987): 148.

<sup>11</sup>Walther von Löwenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), pp. 37-38.

<sup>12</sup>AC V, 2.

<sup>13</sup>Aiden Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup>Among others, this thesis is found in Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers nach seinem Predigten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; 1988), pp. 13-24.

<sup>15</sup>For introductory purposes, cf. Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), or Terrence Penelhum, *Problems of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972); for a more serious challenge to the assumptions of this from the viewpoint of foundationalism, cf. John L. Pollock, *Knowledge and Justification* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

<sup>16</sup>Asendorf, pp. 15-17.

<sup>17</sup>AC III, 5.

<sup>18</sup>Chemnitz, *Loci Theologica* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1985), p. 24.

<sup>19</sup>Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1967).

<sup>20</sup>This is the point of J. A. O. Preus, when he states: "the Reformation not only rediscovered the Gospel but also the Law of God," in "Chemnitz on Law and Gospel," *Concordia Journal* 15 (October 1989): 413.

<sup>21</sup>And Walther takes his cue directly from the Confessions; cf. AC XII 3, 6; Ap IV 20, 38, 142, 149, 270-271; XII 32, 64; XXIV 73.

<sup>22</sup>FC VI, 12-14.

<sup>23</sup>Further evidence that we are dealing here with the first use, rather than the third, is seen in the "pseudo-gospel of gratitude" which is so popular in the church: "For all Jesus has done for you, you should be grateful." Such is the root content of much so-called "evangelical admonition." It is no different from what the pagan mother will say

to a young child who arrives at home with a candy bar given her by the neighbor: "Did you say, 'Thank you?'" Clearly, this is a "first use" exercise.

<sup>24</sup>Recall, an appeal to reflective reasoning establishes the dualism which turns proclamation into communication, and truth into a two-way enterprise.

<sup>25</sup>Of some comfort to those who would be confessional Lutheran preachers is that it is our heritage constantly and continually to be charged with an incomplete message without more being preached concerning good works. A sample of this charge, couched in an extensive survey of its recurring nature can be found in the recent work of the Reformed theologian, Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), especially pp. 298-394.

<sup>26</sup>Luther's Works, Am. ed., vol. 51, pp. 390-392.