

## MARTIN LUTHER--GOD'S VOICE

*Ita Iohannes nulla re se utilem esse dicit nisi voce, totumque quo vivat et agat vocem esse. O utinam ii qui Iohannis officio succedunt, et ipsi tam assidui essent in tractando verbo dei, ut mererentur non aliud nomen nisi vocis, sicut hic Iohannes. WA 7:525*

So John declares that he is useful in no other respect than with his voice. And that the whole thing which gives him life and motivates him is to be a voice. Oh that those who follow in John's office would themselves also be so fully engaged in handling the Word of God that they would deserve no other name than that of being a voice, just as John does here!

### **Introduction: The Preacher's Identity**

Preaching: it's what we do. And if Luther is right, it's what we are. The activity is so bound up in what a pastor does that it has become an alternate title for the office. We've all been addressed some time or other with the familiar phrase, "Hey, preacher!" It's even entered into our folklore as a light-hearted joke, "Hey preacher! Boy, I wish I had your job! Must be nice to work only one day a week."

This fact comes as no surprise. After all, preaching is something that a pastor engages in as many as 70 times a year. And is it significant that the New Testament refers rather sparsely to the office of the ministry as one of pastoring? The usual terms involve--like the *vox clamans in deserto*--some type of oral declaration: speak, utter, preach, herald, announce, appeal, teach, proclaim the good news, etc. It is inherent in the whole idea of the evangel. As Schaller says someplace, "Unpreached gospel is an *Unding!*"

What's more, preaching reveals to us something important about our God. Our "God [is] a speaking God,"<sup>1</sup> a God who wishes to engage us in conversation. By so doing, he means to create a people of his very own.

The Reformation transformed the landscape of medieval Europe, so much so that Catholics have debated with Lutherans over whether what Luther started was more of a revolution than a reformation. This transformation penetrated all aspects of life. Recently, for

---

<sup>1</sup> John F. Brug, "Luther's Doctrine of the Word: The Incarnate Word in the Written Word," *Logia* 22:1 (2013): 42.

example, interest has revived in the incredible impact Luther made on the print industry with his astonishing output of written works.<sup>2</sup> No less transformative was the impact Luther had upon worship. In the medieval church, preaching played second fiddle to the performance of the mystery of the sacramental sacrifice. It was enough if people observed the priest doing his work on their behalf. When Luther emphasized preaching as "the most important part of divine service,"<sup>3</sup> he changed the church from being primarily an eye house to a "mouth house" (*Mundhaus*).<sup>4</sup> As he put it:

The kingdom of Christ is founded on the Word, which cannot be perceived and comprehended except with these two organs, ears and tongue.... These two organs alone make a difference between Christians and non-Christians: a Christian speaks and hears in a different manner and has a tongue that praises God's grace and preaches Christ.<sup>5</sup>

"Luther and the Scriptures" is our assigned topic--a horizonless ocean. In order to reduce it to a more manageable scope, I have decided to focus on Luther and preaching, not only because of the present-day relevance of the subject, but because so many aspects of Luther's theology of the Word find their center here. In pulpit and classroom<sup>6</sup> we hear him affirm his absolute faithfulness to the inspired, inerrant Scriptures. We observe at first hand his commitment to good hermeneutics and clear communication. In his preparation for preaching,

---

<sup>2</sup> See Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe--and Started the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns*, edited by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 68. (hereafter cited as *LW*)

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Vol. 10/1.2* (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883), 1–5. (hereafter cited as *WA*)

<sup>5</sup> *WA* 57:512.

<sup>6</sup> Some may suggest that texts from Luther's university lectures do not really belong in a study of his preaching. But his lectures were far from being exercises in a sterile and abstract form of scholarship. To him, they were occasions to proclaim and apply the Word to his students' lives and, as such, fit very nicely within the scope of our study. For more on this subject, see Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983), 38–39. "To be honest, one would have to say almost everything Luther did was preaching.... His lectures were never technical or objective.... Always he aimed at the heart as well as the mind of a student.... [Whether it was a lecture, sermon, or commentary] they were all proclamation." The same thing might be said of every class at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. We do more than simply teach academic areas in a theological curriculum. We confess the truth for its proclamation to the church.

we take note of how he applied to himself his devotional watchwords *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*.<sup>7</sup> Finally, we will be unable to miss seeing the theology of the cross, standing at the center of it all.

As we explore the theme "Martin Luther--God's Voice," my prayer is that you will be renewed--as I was--in the sense that something majestic, creative, powerful, and miraculous is taking place every time we have the privilege of talking to God's people, and that you--just like John the Baptist and Luther--merit the name "voice"--God's voice, no less.

### **Luther Regarded Preaching as God Speaking (*Deus loquens*)**

From the beginning of Christ's ministry, his authority to speak and act as he did came under challenge. After all, he taught as "one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law" (Matt 7:29 NIV). For those who follow Jesus, this issue never really goes away. "By what authority are you doing these things,' they ask, 'And who gave you this authority?'" (Matt 21:23). Luther had to deal with it, too. His voice had shocked the ears of both pope and emperor. Humanists like Erasmus tried to get him to tone it down, to be less assertive. Erasmus preferred the broad consensus built up over the centuries, the incremental development of doctrine as represented by the magisterium, to the bold declarations of a lone monk. Luther himself was not immune to the bite of these attacks on his certitude. He would speak about how the Devil tempted him with the question, "Are you alone right?"<sup>8</sup>

But all that did not deter brother Martin from plainly making this claim about evangelical proclamation, "The mouth of Paul, the apostles, and the preachers is called the mouth of God.... The Word is the mouth of God."<sup>9</sup> This is no isolated saying, an incautious one-off. Consider these remarks from his sermon on John 4:

Would to God 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. As a matter of fact, it is not an angel or a hundred thousand angels but the Divine Majesty Himself that is preaching there. To be sure, I do not hear this with my ears or see it with my eyes; all I hear is the voice of the preacher, or of my brother or father, and I behold only a man

---

<sup>7</sup> Prayer, meditation on God's Word, God's testing of the believer.

<sup>8</sup> LW 24:379.

<sup>9</sup> WA 34/2:405.19–25.

before me. But I view the picture correctly if I add that the voice and words of father or pastor are not his own words and doctrine but those of our Lord and God.<sup>10</sup>

He was fully aware of how incredible this claim seems:

[People] refuse to regard the oral Word and the ministry as a treasure costlier and better than heaven and earth. People generally think: "If I had an opportunity to hear God speak in person, I would run my feet bloody." This is why people in times past flocked to the Oak, to Aachen, and to the Grym Valley. Because the people believed that Mary would help them in these places, they all hurried there. If someone at that time had announced: "I know of a place in the world where God speaks and anyone can hear God there"; if I had gone there and seen and heard a poor pastor baptizing and preaching, and if I had been assured: "This is the place; here God is speaking through the voice of the preacher who brings God's Word"—I would have said: "Well, I have been duped! I see only a pastor." We should like to have God speak to us in His majesty. But I advise you not to run hither and yon for this. I suppose we could learn how people would run if God addressed them in His majesty. This is what happened on Mt. Sinai, where only the angels spoke and yet the mountain was wrapped in smoke and quaked. *But you now have the Word of God in church, in books, in your home; and this is God's Word as surely as if God Himself were speaking to you.*<sup>11</sup>

This challenges me as a pastor to answer a vital question: just what do I think I'm doing when I'm in the pulpit? Aristotle claimed that the "proofs" of rhetoric were three: "logos," "pathos," and "ethos." Logos is the appeal to reason and logic. Pathos works the crowd's emotions. Ethos focuses the audience's attention to the speaker: how credible is his character? With what authority does he come? In the Age of "Whatever," the claim to speak with God's

---

<sup>10</sup> LW 22:526.

<sup>11</sup> LW 22:526–527, emphasis mine. Note that he does not, as some scholars claim, separate the proclaimed truth of God's Word from the Word written (and read) in Scripture ('in books'). While Luther often emphasized the power of the oral word of preaching, he could say the same things about the written text of Scripture, as we see here. Even more, the oral word of preaching had to conform to and be based on the written text of Scripture. For more on this important point, see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 77, 88, and Brug, *Incarnate Word*, 43ff. Those who try to separate the oral Word of preaching from the inspired, inerrant text of the Scriptures will find no support in Luther.

Note, too, that, while Luther gives honor due to the public ministers of the Word, he by no means sees their preaching as having an authority superior to that of fathers in the home who instruct their children, or to that of a brother comforting another with the words of forgiveness. As Robert Kolb puts it, "The call granted (pastors) no exclusive franchise on the distribution of the forgiveness of sins." *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 133.

own authority may seem particularly arrogant and obnoxious.<sup>12</sup> But what do I lose if I sacrifice to the spirit of the age the claim of coming with God's authority?

Consider what others have said, "If the people come with a notion that they are going to hear an expert say something about religion or the Bible, something they can accept or reject, then the purpose of preaching is lost."<sup>13</sup> The alarm over the loss of true preaching is being sounded not only by Lutherans, but also by the Reformed:

The essence of preaching is not a preacher's ruminations upon a text of Scripture. Neither does it consist of human reflections about God and the human struggle. It cannot be defined in terms of personal religious insight and intuition so that the preacher can offer some kind of contemporary message he thinks will help people.... Rather, as Meuser states summing up Luther's view: "Christian preaching--when it is faithful to the word of God in the Scriptures ... is God speaking.... It is God's very own audible address to all who hear it."<sup>14</sup>

Isn't this exactly what Jesus commands his disciples to believe? "Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16).

True, it is an incredible claim. True, it is a position out of step with our age (was it ever really any different?). But if I am to be a fool, let me be a fool who puts full faith in what Jesus says even if a chorus of angels from heaven would unite with all the wise folk on earth to call it ridiculous. I'd still rather keep company with Luther as he clings to the Word.

If we understand that, through us, God is speaking, we will fully grasp what Luther means when he calls preaching dangerous.<sup>15</sup> For one thing, preaching is an act of spiritual

---

<sup>12</sup> To some extent, this reaction may be well-earned, if the preacher "preaches at" the people rather than proclaiming, as one sinner to another, the same law that convicts us all, and the one saving grace that consoles us all. A preacher who doesn't listen to and know the hurts, the longings, the problems of his people, a pastor who doesn't share the burdens they carry, or a man who speaks as one who lifts himself on high to lecture to the little ones below--such a man can hardly be said to be echoing the accents of the Word become flesh. Obviously, Luther is not advocating that preachers become scolds. But if we abdicate our calling as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, we simply lurch from one disaster to the next.

<sup>13</sup> Henry S. Wilson, "Luther on Preaching as God Speaking," *Lutheran Quarterly* 19:1 (2005): 63.

<sup>14</sup> J. Mark Beach, "The Real Presence of Christ in the Preaching of the Gospel: Luther and Calvin on the Nature of Preaching," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 84.

<sup>15</sup> Well before Tripp, Luther often used the term.

combat in which we engage the powers, principalities, and forces of evil in the heavenly realms.<sup>16</sup> Preachers can expect to take casualties in the heat of that battle. There is also danger for the people we preach to, since the issues we deal with are matters of life and death. When the Word of Christ is preached, "God has spoken and one answers yes or no. There is no other alternative."<sup>17</sup>

But more than this, a consciousness of being servants of Christ should fill us with both joy and holy fear. Whose heart is so dead that it cannot thrill with Jesus and the Seventy to see Satan fall like lightning from heaven? This is not a matter of personal pride (though preachers are far from being immune to the sin of finding their joy in the praise of others). This is a holy boast in the Lord, remembering constantly that we are also men who must give an account. Those who presume to speak a word in the name of God will be judged for every idle word they speak:

The greatest evil on earth is a false preacher. He is the worst man on earth. No thief, murderer or scoundrel on earth can be compared to him. They are not as wicked as a preacher who dominates people in God's name ... and leads them into the abyss of hell through [his] false preaching.<sup>18</sup>

Who, then, is equal to such a task? Only the person who depends on the grace and power of the one who sent him to speak!

#### Discussion Questions

1. A/D Preaching with authority is out of joint with a culture in which all hierarchies have been flattened, and which prefers guides to sages.
2. A/D It is possible for a person--while remaining fully aware of his role as God's voice--to speak more as a friend to friends, recognizing that the bombastic pulpit-pounder of the past arouses irritation more than attentiveness.

### **Luther Was Committed to Preaching the Biblical Text**

<sup>16</sup> Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 69.

<sup>17</sup> Meuser, 26.

<sup>18</sup> As qtd. in Meuser, 44. According to Meuser, the citation is from WA 47:454.

Because of the great emphasis on the oral word as being God's voice, one might well ask: was Luther somehow claiming the gift of verbal inspiration for evangelical preachers? Did he put preaching and Scripture on the same plane? Did he even, as some have suggested,<sup>19</sup> privilege the so-called *viva vox evangelii* as being superior to the static, book-bound text? Far from it. John Brug says, "For Luther ... the preached word can claim to be the word of God only insofar as it faithfully proclaims the word as written and recorded for us in the Bible."<sup>20</sup>

As Luther put it:

If a thought comes to you, no matter if it seems so beautiful and holy that you imagine it to be downright angelic, then take a good look at it, compare it with God's word and see if it is grounded in Scripture, and whether God has commanded or said or ordered it or not.<sup>21</sup>

Luther said this, of course, because he was convinced that the authority of the biblical text should govern all that was spoken or taught in the church. "Whoever wants to hear God should read the Holy Scripture."<sup>22</sup> Here good Lutheran hermeneutics and good Lutheran homiletics meet. A faithful preacher hews to the line of Scripture. "If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God" (1 Pet 4:11).

A careful study of the text, and the certainty that one has positioned himself as a servant of the text leads to the right kind of confidence in the pulpit. "The pastor must be sure that God speaks through his mouth. Otherwise it is time for him to be quiet."<sup>23</sup> In fact, in one of his more heroic statements on the subject, Luther declares:

The preacher must not ... ask for forgiveness of sins when he is finished preaching .... Rather with Jeremiah he must say and boast, "Lord, you know that what has come out of my mouth is right and pleasing to you." With St. Paul and all the apostles say defiantly, "Here God speaks." ... Here it is not necessary, not even good, to ask for the forgiveness of sins as if one had taught wrongly. For it is God's word and not mine which God neither can nor should forgive me, but he should confirm praise and crown it and say "You have taught rightly for I have spoken through you and the word is mine." Whoever cannot

---

<sup>19</sup> Such as Jaroslav Pelikan, in *Luther the Expositor* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959).

<sup>20</sup> Brug, "Luther's Doctrine of the Word," 44.

<sup>21</sup> WA 33:275.

<sup>22</sup> WA 54:263.

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Meuser, 12.

... speak like that about his sermon should leave preaching alone for he surely denies and blasphemes God.<sup>24</sup>

Luther does not mean here that he always felt he had done full justice to the text before him. In another place he says, "I have often preached so poorly that I have disgraced myself and said to myself: 'Shame on you! What kind of sermon was that?'"<sup>25</sup> What he does intend to say is that a preacher who has been faithful to his text need not apologize when he is done. This does not make us lords and masters of God's flock. We believe in only one Lord, Jesus Christ.

"[Preachers] are servants of the word and his hearers, for Jesus' sake. Such preachers of Christ not only know their subservient place in the scheme of things, but are content with it."<sup>26</sup>

This commitment to the biblical text caused a change in the whole manner of preaching in the churches of the Reformation. In his classic study, Fred Meuser writes:

Before Luther's time there was preaching in abundance. But most sermons were rather highly structured addresses that developed some subject chosen by the preacher: a theological question, particular virtue or sin, a problem of the Christian life.... Preachers marshaled philosophical arguments to prove their case, citing the fathers as authorities, with points and sub-points.<sup>27</sup>

Meuser goes on to associate Luther with the advent of a completely new form of preaching: the expository sermon (*die schriftauslegende Predigt*). Since this is the heart of the matter, I will quote him at length:

Listeners are to hear God speaking in his saving power and presence in the sermon. The aim of the sermon is therefore to help hearers understand the *text*, not just a religious truth. Its goal is that God may speak a gracious word through a text so that the people may be given faith or be strengthened in faith by the Holy Spirit. Its method is to take a given segment of Scripture, find the key thought within it, and make that unmistakably clear. The text is to control the sermon. When the sermon is over, the people are to remember the text in its primary message much more than the sermon. The sermon is to

---

<sup>24</sup> WA 51:517.

<sup>25</sup> As quoted in Meuser, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Meuser, 16–17.

<sup>27</sup> Meuser, 47.



follow the flow of the text, the language of the dynamic of the text, and not impose its own direction or dynamic from without.<sup>28</sup>

This commitment to three key rules of preaching (1. PREACH; 2. THE; 3. TEXT) is vital if we wish to retain the power of Reformation preaching among us today. On the other hand, if we sometimes detect a lack of power in some of our preaching, its cause may be traceable in part to a failure to keep the implied promise that every pastor makes to his audience when he stands before them.

Here is that promise made explicit, "There is a Scriptural text here on the basis of which I am going to proclaim the Word of God to you." The preacher should step in front of his people with a clear passion and earnest desire to think and speak God's thoughts after him, and in such a way that people see and experience the connection between what he is saying and what the text has said. His thoughts, images, and--for those preachers who can manage it--even his style should be redolent with the texture of the words on which he has lavished his study and prayer this past week. I want to hear a man on fire with his text, one who has been so totally absorbed in it that he cannot wait to share with me, the poor sinner in the pew, not his own precious thoughts, but the plain and precious promises of God.

#### Discussion Questions

1. The length of sermons in Lutheran churches has been declining. It was, on average, 25 minutes when I was young. Now I have heard of sermons averaging from 10 to 15 minutes. In your opinion, what are the constraints imposed by these time limitations on expository preaching? What impact do they have?
2. A/D There is no need to refer again to the text in the pulpit if it has already been read from the lectern.

#### **Luther Expected Not Only to Inform, but to Transform by God's Power**

We have discussed the proclaimer as one who comes with authority as God's voice. For this claim to be genuine, it necessitates preaching on the basis of the text of Scripture. In this section, we will focus on Luther's emphasis on the *power* of God's Word. That power is centered in the

---

<sup>28</sup> Meuser, 46.

message about Christ, of course, and in preaching law and gospel. We will focus on that truth in the following section. Here we want to explore Luther's unique emphasis on the nature of God's Word as such to transform, shape, and change reality.

In this emphasis, Luther was simply taking God at his Word. From the "Let there be's" spoken at the dawn of time, to the "Take heart, your sins are forgiven" once declared to a paralyzed man, believers have known that God's Word does more than *describe* the way things are. It *makes* them the way they are. God's promise through Isaiah connects the mighty creative Word (that still causes the earth to bud and flourish) with his saving Word to his people, "It will not return to me empty" (Isa 55:11). On more than one occasion,<sup>29</sup> Paul connects the creation account with the narrative of our redemption. The most significant passage, perhaps, is Paul's retelling of the Abraham story in Romans 4, where he depicts Abraham caught between human hopes and the unquenchable hope of the gospel. As he struggles in the space between death and life, Abraham exercises the logic of faith, "He believed [in] the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not" (Rom 4:17).

In the light of Scripture's testimony, Luther would say:

A person's word is a little sound that disappears into the air and quickly vanishes. God's Word is greater than heaven and earth, even death and hell, for it is the power of God and remains forever. If it is God's Word, a person should hold it fast and believe that God himself is talking to us.<sup>30</sup>

Or listen to the following passage and notice Luther's emphasis on the power of God's Word to create a new reality:

For when Scripture says that God speaks, it understands a word related to a real thing or action, not just a sound, as ours is. For God does not have a mouth or a tongue, since He is a Spirit, though Scripture speaks of the mouth and tongue of God: "He spoke, and it came to be" (Ps. 33:9). And when He speaks, the mountains tremble, kingdoms are scattered, then indeed the whole earth is moved. That is a language different from ours. When the sun rises, when the sun sets, God speaks. When the fruits grow in size, when

---

<sup>29</sup> Besides Romans 4, see also 2 Corinthians 4:6.

<sup>30</sup> WA TR 1:69-70, §148, as translated and quoted in Robert Kolb *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 47.

human beings are born, God speaks. Accordingly the words of God are not empty air, but things very great and wonderful, which we see with our eyes and feel with our hands.<sup>31</sup>

It is this same creative power Luther sees at work in the oral word of preaching:

*Verbum vocale. Infinita et ineffabilis verbi Dei maiestas est, pro qua nunquam satis gratias agere Deo possumus. Nam ratio humana sic cogitat: Ei, wenn ich den Herrn, schopffer himels und der erden, horen solte, ich wolte an der welt ende lauffen! Audi, frater: Deus, creator coeli et terrae, tecum loquitur per praedicatores suos.... Illa Dei verba non sunt Platonis, Aristotelis, sed Deus ipse loquitur.*

The Word is to be spoken. Infinite and indescribable is the greatness of God's Word--for which we cannot sufficiently thank Him! Now human reason thinks, "Why, if I could hear the LORD, the Creator of heaven and earth, I would run to the ends of the earth!" Listen, brother, God, the Maker of heaven and earth speaks with you through his preachers. Those words of God are not Plato's, nor Aristotle's, but God himself is speaking.<sup>32</sup>

God's voice is transformative. He speaks and things that never were come into existence while things that do exist are radically remade. Kingdoms fall. Battle bows are broken. Peace descends upon an unruly humankind. This is the expectation with which Luther stood up to preach.<sup>33</sup> When God renames a thing in his Word, we are not dealing in metaphors. We are confronted with the new creation. Darkness becomes light. Death becomes sleep. Deserts bloom with life. The crooked becomes straight. The ungodly are justified. Weakness becomes a space for the power of sufficient grace. All these gifts are granted through the power of the one who promises.<sup>34</sup> When someone is in Christ, he has been given new creation eyes so as to see things this way (2 Cor 5:16-21).

---

<sup>31</sup> LW 12:32.

<sup>32</sup> WA TR 4:531, §4812.

<sup>33</sup> **"Christ Himself is present when I preach.** Not only am I aware that it is His Word that I proclaim, that this Word is true ... but I also know that He Himself will enforce this Word. I know that the Word will be followed by the fist, that what I preach will happen, and that you will perish. For Christ is present and makes my words come true. **Action follows upon the words. Things happen as God threatens.**" LW: 23:387.

<sup>34</sup> As Luther said, "The chief topic of all the Holy Scripture is to know and comprehend God as the one who promises" LW 8:201. I have no doubt that this would have formed part of his answer to those who today speak of justification by faith as a "legal fiction." Even if it were not true before God declared it, God's declaration would make it true.

The creative and transformative power of God's Word also has a direct application to one's understanding of what's going on when he interprets the text. Modern and post-modern literary theorists locate meaning in the activity of the reader. They speak of a "fusion of horizons" between text and interpreter. They revel in the shock value of saying things like, "Apart from the reader, the text lies dead." It's hard to imagine Luther ever saying something like this. Certainly, he recognized the importance of the reader's activity. We think of his "burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his letter to the Romans" or how he "badgered St. Paul" and "meditated night and day"<sup>35</sup>--these are not the words of a man who believes God grants understanding in some magical fashion.

But ultimately, as Robert Kolb says, a lively "seeking to understand" the Scripture eventually must become an activity that "makes the reader passive."<sup>36</sup> Kolb then quotes this insight from Gerhard Ebeling:

In its deepest sense, the word "understanding" means not only an intellectual grasp of the text, but also a coming to be grasped by it; it means that the comprehending proceeds from the Scripture and not from the expositor; it means that understanding is something passive and that all activity lies in the text; it means that the text turns into the subject and the understanding reader into the object, a captive of the text. This is probably more impressive in Luther than in virtually any other Christian exegete. Thus he writes: "The excellence of scripture is this, that it is not transformed into him who studies it, but that it transforms its lover into itself and its virtues.... Because you will not change me into you..., but you will be transformed in me. Nor will I be named by you, but you will be named by me."<sup>37</sup>

For the interpreter and preacher, the work of the transforming Word begins with him.

I confess scratching my head in the past whenever we came to the fourth verse of "Preach You the Word:"

Though some [seed] be snatched and some be scorched  
And some be scorched and matted flat,  
The sower sows; his heart cries out,  
"Oh, what of that, and what of that?"

---

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works." <https://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/preflat-eng.txt>.

<sup>36</sup> Kolb, *Enduring Word of God*, 49.

<sup>37</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, "The Beginnings of Luther's Hermeneutics," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7:2 (1993): 130. Note how Luther switches into dialogue form, where the Scriptures engage the reader in a 'you' ... 'I' exchange.

"What of that? And what of that?' What's he getting at?" I wondered. But the more I thought about it, the more I began to realize that Martin Franzmann was simply emphasizing the same confidence Luther expressed in the transformative power of God's Word. The sower's job is to sow the seed, not to accomplish whatever the sower might wish to achieve. With godly resignation, he can put that matter into God's hands, knowing that God will accomplish what *he* pleases *ubi et quando visum est eo*. The Word does things, even when it seems to be doing nothing.

We are just flesh and blood--or better yet, clay pots. Which means we have our own conflicted feelings about preaching. Especially in my younger years I would get hung up on what I *felt* about what I was saying. Did it come from the gut or was it just mouth music from my head? What a blind alley that was! I don't mean preachers shouldn't care about authenticity or (worse yet) strive for a persona of dispassion in the pulpit. But in my case, I got so addicted to the pursuit of personal authenticity that I would be filled with anxiety in trying to unscrew the inscrutable, "Do I really feel this? Is this from my innermost heart?" Thoughts like these lead to writer's cramp and lockjaw. Luther came to break the spell that held me in the Devil's trap. God's Word is true "*wann Ich fühl es, oder fühl es nicht.*" The power is in the Word, not in my sincerity. What a liberating thought! Rather than focus on how I feel, Luther teaches me to keep the focus on what God says, so that I dedicate myself to declare his thoughts after him.

On the other hand, this is also a stinging rebuke to my own jaded attitude when I get up to preach sometimes. God help me, but there have been those occasions when the act seemed almost perfunctory. "I've said these things so many times, and things go on as before."<sup>38</sup> Discouragement leads to cynicism. No doubt we've all either experienced it ourselves or witnessed it when it seemed as if a brother was just going through the motions. He stood up not really believing that his words would make a difference. "Here we go again," he says, because it's Sunday and the bells are ringing. Luther's testimony reminds us that God's Word cannot help but make a difference. It is living and active. It kills and makes alive. It creates and annihilates. It tears down and builds up. God has put into our mouths the Word that transforms the world. When you stand up to preach, expect to change the way things are!

---

<sup>38</sup> Luther had his moments of discouragement, too. In 1530, he simply quit preaching at Wittenberg for over six months. See Meuser, 28.

### Discussion Questions

1. "The Word did it all! Philip and me just sat around drinking Wittenberg beer!" How do you interpret this (somewhat altered) Luther-an statement?
2. "We believe in the invisible, but not the inaudible" (*LW* 11:485). What does this saying of Luther suggest about God's presence among his people?
3. A/D Lutherans generally come to church expecting to encounter God.

### Luther's Preaching Was Christocentric

#### A Key Hermeneutical Insight

Up to this point, we have been speaking of matters that are not exclusive to Lutherans. Luther's basic insights were also taken up by the Reformed.<sup>39</sup> In what follows, we will see what truly sets Lutheran preaching apart. Christocentricity heads that list. "*Nihil nisi Christus praedicatur--* nothing but Christ is to be preached."<sup>40</sup> Now some might argue that the resurgence of Calvinism in America has also led to a rediscovery of the importance of preaching Christ in Reformed churches. This is true enough and we thank God for it. But as we pick up a Keller, a Sproul, or a Piper to read, we should not forget that they simply do not operate with the same law/gospel dynamic that so informed Luther's approach to preaching Christ. There is truly something unique about the Christocentricity of Lutheran proclamation.

Its importance for biblical interpretation can scarcely be overestimated. "*Qui non intelligit res, non potest ex verbis sensum elicere--*if you don't know what a book is about, you can't make sense of the words."<sup>41</sup> Now there are many other ways to 'get at' the meaning of Scripture. Maybe someone takes it as a guide for a year of 'living biblically.' Or (what is perhaps a less radical approach) sees Scripture as a set of practical principles to make us healthy, wealthy, and wise. Others may say that the sovereignty of God is the principal matter and so

---

<sup>39</sup> For the sake of clarity, I am speaking of those visible churches who consider themselves more or less direct heirs of Calvin. I am not using the term as a general reference to any evangelical or Protestant church.

<sup>40</sup> As quoted by Meuser, 16.

<sup>41</sup> As quoted in Franzmann, "Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics."  
<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=308>.

read the Bible as a connected narrative in which the sovereign God establishes his almighty rule once again over a rebellious creation. The easiest thing is to find what you're looking for. The hardest thing is to see what is there. Jesus said simply, "The Scriptures testify about me" (John 5:39). Luther believed him. "Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?"<sup>42</sup>

To drive this point home, he once declared in a sermon on Christmas Eve:

The [swaddling] cloths are nothing but Holy Scripture, in which Christian truth lies wrapped up. Here one finds faith described. For the entire Old Testament contains nothing but Christ as he is preached in the gospel. Therefore we see how the apostles adduce testimony from the Bible and how in this manner they prove everything that is to be preached and to be believed concerning Christ. Thus Paul says in Romans 3[:21] that faith in Christ, by means of which we are justified, is manifested through the law and the prophets; and Christ himself, after his resurrection, opens unto them the Scriptures and shows how they talk of him. Likewise on Mount Tabor, Matthew 16[17:3], when he was transfigured, there stood two men, Moses and Elijah, with him (i.e., the law and the prophets) as his two witnesses, his sign, pointing to him.<sup>43</sup>

What a difference your starting point makes in how you read! For Luther, the Holy Scriptures found their center in the way God came down for us in Jesus. This changes a rulebook, or an account before which we must simply bow our heads before God's majesty, into a plain and urgent love story about the seeking God.<sup>44</sup>

#### Rightly Understood Only Under a Law/Gospel Axis

For Luther, Scripture's Christocentricity could not be understood apart from God's two words, "If you divide all Scripture, it contains two topics, promises and threats, or blessings and

---

<sup>42</sup> LW 33:28.

<sup>43</sup> LW 52:21.

<sup>44</sup> In an evocative metaphor, Martin Franzmann calls the *radical gospel* (as he terms it) the "cantus firmus" (a melody that forms the basis and center of a polyphonic composition) of the Scriptures. In Thesis V of his "Seven Theses" he declares that this gospel is the melodic theme "to which all the prodigal variety of the Scriptural voices stand in contrapuntal relationship," 6. In the following pages of the same work, he sketches out how this theme unifies the whole without destroying the variety of the many different accents and voices found in the Scriptures.

punishments:<sup>45</sup> In his comments on Deuteronomy 18:15, Luther interprets the meaning of Moses' words, "The Lord will send you a prophet like me":

Moses is a minister of the Law, sin, and death; for he teaches and stresses works, and through the rays of the Law he makes everyone guilty of death and subject to punishment for sin. He demands, but he does not give what he demands.... Therefore it is necessary that [The Prophet to come] be a teacher of life, grace, and righteousness, just as Moses is a teacher of sin, wrath, and death. But both teachings must be heard ... through the Law all must be humbled, and through the Gospel all must be exalted.... In this passage we have those two ministries of the Word which are necessary for the salvation of the human race: the ministry of the Law and the ministry of the Gospel, one for death and the other for life. They are indeed alike if you are looking at their authority, but most unlike if you are thinking about their fruit. The ministry of Moses is temporary, finally to be ended by the coming of the ministry of Christ, as he says here, "Heed Him." But the ministry of Christ will be ended by nothing else, since it brings eternal righteousness and "puts an end to sin."... This Prophet can be none other than Christ Himself.<sup>46</sup>

All this Luther had simply learned from Paul. Moses was a preacher of the kind of righteousness that convicts, condemns, and kills. Yet Moses also testifies clearly to the righteousness of faith, won by Christ (Rom 3:20–22). Notice that the righteousness of the New Testament does not supersede the righteousness Moses mandates in the law, not in the sense that the sound of its demand should be silenced. "Both teachings must be heard!"

But the evangelical preacher does not kill with the law in order to kill, but to make alive.

The law humbles the sinner in order to raise him up with Christ:

Although the Law kills ... God still uses this effect of the Law, this death, for a good use, namely, for life. When God saw that the most widespread pestilence in the whole world, that is, hypocrisy and confidence in one's own saintliness, could not be restrained and crushed in any other way, He decided to kill it by means of the Law. This was not to be permanent; but it had as its purpose that when this pestilence was killed, man would be raised up again and would hear this voice beyond the Law: "Do not fear. I did not give the Law and kill you through it with the intent that you should remain in death, but that you should fear Me and live." A presumption of good works and of righteousness leaves no room for the fear of God.... Where there is no fear of God, there cannot be a thirst for grace and life.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> LW 3:225.

<sup>46</sup> LW 9:178.

<sup>47</sup> LW 26:335–336.



### A Practical Insight for Preaching

There have been other attempts to find the center of Luther's hermeneutical thought. For example, some scholars have proposed his gradual turning away from the allegorical method to an emphasis on the literary/historical meaning of the text.<sup>48</sup> As vital as that insight was, one would have to agree with Christopher Ocker who insists upon the law/gospel distinction as the key that opened up the text for preaching. He calls it "a literary method for handling the narrative construction of the Bible as a whole."<sup>49</sup> This enabled Luther to understand biblical narratives as a firm basis for law/gospel proclamation. Instead of seeing law and gospel as "two stages in salvation history," Luther recognized them as "two words from God that continually address human beings in their daily lives."<sup>50</sup>

Here we see the practical bent of Luther's theology. He was not the sort of man who enjoyed playing with ideas for the sake of "pure scholarship" or simply for the sake of novelty. This distinction is something Scripture had taught him "only in the school of the Holy Spirit and of genuine Christian experience."<sup>51</sup> It was the peaceable fruit of his own long struggle for certainty regarding his standing before a righteous God. Luther was not primarily interested in a theoretical definition [of the relationship between law and gospel], but a very pastoral one, namely, where is your trust?... Where is the focus of your life?"<sup>52</sup> These questions served as a method for discovering the central message of any text. They also served to help him deliver a pointed message to his audience. In this, he never tired of pointing out to those he was training:

Preachers must pay attention to their hearers and determine which of two kinds they are: God's stories of his wrath against sin are for the obstinate, and the sweet words of comfort are for the fearful.... Then it is the task of the Holy Spirit through the Word and

---

<sup>48</sup> For more on Luther's "turn" away from allegorizing, see my article, "Is Allegorizing a Legitimate Manner of Biblical Interpretation?" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 103:3 (2006): 163–94.

<sup>49</sup> As quoted in Kolb, *Enduring*, 119.

<sup>50</sup> Kolb, *Enduring*, 119–120.

<sup>51</sup> "Walther's Law and Gospel, Lecture Seven."  
<http://lutherantheology.com/uploads/works/walther/LG/lecture-07.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Meuser, 22–23.

confession to direct the heart so that the fearful receive consolation, and those who are recalcitrant are terrified and converted by the voice of the law, lest they perish.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly:

[The gospel] has no other object than the preaching and offering of divine mercy throughout the world, a mercy that only the afflicted and those tormented by the fear of death receive with joy and gratitude, because in them the law has already fulfilled its office and brought the knowledge of sin. Those, however, who have not yet experienced the office of the law, and neither recognize sin nor feel death, have no use for the mercy promised by that word.<sup>54</sup>

These are, of course, distinctions easy to make in the mind; much harder to make in life.

### Preaching Evangelical Encouragement

Preachers looking for help in "finding Christ in the Old Testament" might also appreciate an assist here from Brother Martin. Luther finds Christ in the various forms of direct and typological prophecy, as we would expect. We do, too. We will speak more of this when we discuss the "for you" nature of Luther's preaching. But here we must say a little more about the other ways Luther found Christ there. We must admit, in the early Luther especially (before he grew in his appreciation of the literary/historical nature of the text), Christ often appears in the Reformer's treatments of the text in ways we would consider allegorizing. This approach we would not advocate, even though it is increasingly popular and defended among Lutherans today. Its key deficiency is that it fails to adequately treat the biblical histories as history. It also fails to see that the historical meaning *is* the spiritual meaning. Allegorizing can easily turn Scripture into a wax nose, one that can be shaped and twisted so that anything can mean anything. The problem with this, of course, is that--taken to its ultimate conclusion--Scripture then finally means nothing, nothing certain that is. The creativity of the interpreter is exalted over the plain meaning of the text.

Yet as already mentioned, the law/gospel distinction helps us immensely in understanding Luther's treatment of the great narratives of Scripture. Here again he demonstrates

---

<sup>53</sup> LW 3:241.

<sup>54</sup> LW 33:142.

his debt to St. Paul (see, e.g. Rom 4, 1 Cor 10, and Gal 3). There is of course the grand sweep of God at work in the history of the world, from its creation and fall, to the culmination of all his ancient people's hopes and prayers in the coming of the Christ, to his coming again and the inauguration of the new creation. This narrative arc served as the basic law/gospel framework for every individual account, much as we regard it today in our reading of the Old Testament as salvation history.<sup>55</sup>

Besides this, and in addition to promise, prophecy, and type, Luther saw the Old Testament as the history of the people of God. Their struggles are our struggles. Their triumphs of grace are no different than ours. Heinrich Bornkamm speaks of Luther's response to the Old Testament world as "immediate, direct, and personal":

Luther was very much at home there because it was a peasant world with many characteristics which he knew full well.... The Old Testament offered to Luther a mirror of life.... Here he nourished his hunger for religion in relation to human experience.<sup>56</sup>

In retelling the stories of Abraham, Hagar, Rebekah, Jacob, David, and Jonah, Luther was able to engage with the text in a way that it came alive to his listeners. For Luther, the "great ugly ditch" between us and the ancients did not exist.<sup>57</sup>

With Bornkamm, we can certainly agree that the similarity of Luther's world to the world of the Scriptures was helpful in Luther's being able to contextualize the message for his listeners.<sup>58</sup> Even more helpful was the law/gospel distinction, however. Luther knew from Scripture and from hard experience that our battle against the powers and principalities is not merely an external one, but extends to the flesh/spirit struggle inside our own hearts. The depiction of the "*simul iustus et peccator*" state of the Christian in Romans 7 provided Luther with a biblical warrant for "filling in the narrative gaps" (as modern literary critics put it) in the

<sup>55</sup> For more on this, see Kolb, *Enduring*, 106ff.

<sup>56</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 11.

<sup>57</sup> Gotthold Lessing's phrase. He was a German philosopher of the Enlightenment who used it to portray (what seems to moderns to be) the unbridgeable chasm between truths based upon historical accounts and the truth based upon natural reason. Literary critics commonly use it to talk about (what seems to them to be) the impossible distance between contemporary life and the world described by ancient texts.

<sup>58</sup> In much the same way as observing village life in rural Africa is helpful to missionaries in giving them insights into text.

historical accounts of the Old Testament saints. Among the many texts that could be cited, consider these from Luther's interpretation of Genesis 22:

This is the meaning of the words “Abraham rose early in the morning.” He did not argue about the outcome, but these were his thoughts: “I am sure that something better will happen than I am now seeing—not through my strength or that of my people but through the power of the command of God. Therefore I shall obey the Lord, who is giving me the command and is calling me.”<sup>59</sup>

And when Isaac asks his father where the sacrificial offering might be, Luther comments:

At this point there is surely profound emotion, and there is powerful pathos. Moses did not want to pass this over. Isaac, the victim, addresses his father and stirs up his natural love, as though he were saying: “You are my father.” And the father says in turn: “You are my son.” These words penetrated into and upset the heart of the father. For the son says: “Behold, the wood; but where is the lamb?” It is evident that he is solicitous about the glory of God, for he knows that his father is about to offer a burnt offering at which he himself wants to be the onlooker. Therefore he gives him a reminder lest perchance he forget the sacrifice because of the very great intentness and devotion of his heart. “Where is the lamb,” he says, “for the burnt offering?” Then his father should have answered him: “You will be the lamb.” But he does not say this. Then he adds: “God will provide it”; and in this statement he at the same time included God’s command.<sup>60</sup>

Luther then generalizes the law/gospel significance of the account for his audience:

But it is far more astonishing that Abraham and Isaac were convinced that this entire action was sport and not death. Anyone readily believes that for God indeed death is sport; but if I am to maintain the same conviction for myself and in the case of my body—that death is not death—no physician, no philosopher, and no lawyer will ever convince me of this. For who ... can reconcile these statements: Death is not death; it is life? Moses himself asserts the opposite. For if you listen to the Law, it will tell you: In the midst of life we are in death, according to that ancient and pious hymn in the church. But this has reference to the Law alone. The Gospel, however, and faith invert this hymn and sing thus: “In the midst of death we are in life. Thee we praise as our Redeemer. Thou hast raised us from death and hast saved us.” For the Gospel teaches that in death itself there is life, something which is unknown to and impossible for the Law and reason.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> *LW* 4:107.

<sup>60</sup> *LW* 4:111–112.

<sup>61</sup> *LW* 4:116.

Compare this kind of preaching with the incessant deriving of "principles" for godly living so prevalent among evangelicals. On the one hand, you have an informational approach, a kind of "news you can use" that tickles the itching ears of pragmatic Americans. On the other, we hear proclamation that embraces the heart. We hear what Abraham is thinking as he rises up early, hoping against hope. We feel the wrenching pain in the core of Abraham's being as Isaac, the innocent, asks the question, "Where is the lamb?" We are drawn into the story, engaged in everyman's struggle with the hard, cold fact of our own mortality, facing it down, and saying, "Death is not death, but life." Luther certainly knew how to preach sanctification. The lie that Lutheranism is a "theology without a piety" has surely been put to rest with the recent rediscovery of the doctrine of vocation! So, too, here. Far more than preaching sanctification in terms of *what to do*, Luther tells us *how to be* as we sinner saints walk the stony path through sufferings to glory. Christian sanctification is, first and foremost, a constant grasping of "life in death" by faith. Such is the power of the law/gospel dialectic.

#### Measuring Gospel Predominance

Kolb declares, "Luther refused to give his students ironclad rules for distinguishing law and gospel. 'It cannot be comprehended in one certain rule. Christ himself applied it as the occasion dictated. Therefore, as the topic or the text stands, one should use law and gospel and must have both,' for the art of properly applying them depends not only on reading the text, but on reading the hearer."<sup>62</sup> Yet even when he is dealing with an obstinate sinner and threatening God's wrath, the law/gospel preacher knows that God kills not in order to kill, but to make alive. The Lord does not want the death of the sinner. This is what the preacher must bear in mind.

I believe that this is essentially what Walther means when he talks about 'gospel predominance' in preaching. Gospel predominance in a sermon is not a matter of percentages of content, but an overall focus on raising the sinner to life. The need for this resurrection never ends. Unlike evangelicals who assume that, once converted, people chiefly need scriptural instruction and principles to apply in life, the Lutheran proclaimer understands that, even when

---

<sup>62</sup> Kolb, *Enduring*, 122.

he is preaching to a room full of believers, he is dealing with people who are daily engaged in the cosmic struggle against Sin, Death, and the Devil.

Permit me one more comment before I leave this section. Two veteran preachers have pointed out to me how Lutherans, too, can force texts into pre-formed templates, thinking that such templates will result in a more genuinely Lutheran sermon. One example of this might be a wooden and artificial approach to quantifying gospel predominance in one's sermons. Another might be the liturgical template of forcing each reading to fit into a common theme for the Sunday, and then preaching on that theme whether or not it truly is the central point of the text before you. Now don't get me wrong: there is often a wonderful synergy among all three appointed readings. Yet not always. And more than a few times, one gets the impression that, for the sake of a liturgical nicety, the preacher sacrificed one of the most basic homiletical rules ("preach the text"). I would advocate sacrificing the liturgical nicety.

Finally, even biblical hermeneutical axioms can be used to artificially force a text into a distorted shape. I remember my experiences as a young preacher, how the law/gospel distinction would set me on a desperate hunt for law/gospel pellets in each new pericope. In my relentless quest for them, I would sometimes overlook the text's plain meaning. "There's gotta be gospel in here somewhere! There's just gotta!" No, Paul: sometimes, there really isn't!<sup>63</sup> The gospel still must be preached, but as a cure for the disease the text spends its whole space exposing. Christocentricity is another truth that is often abused. Some multiply 'types' without end, seeing the face of Jesus mirrored in every smooth stone David picked up to slay Goliath. Others shout "Eureka! I have found the Holy Supper!" every time the text mentions a meal.

Preach the text. Don't force the text to say what it doesn't.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. Comment to a neighbor on the importance of the *res/verba* distinction for understanding the Scriptures--["You need to know the subject matter (*res*) before you can make sense of the words (*verba*)."] Is it a strict line from one to the other, or is it more of a circle?
2. A/D Christocentricity and the law/gospel distinction form the Lutheran theological template, set forth in our confessional writings, by which we have agreed to interpret the Scriptures.

---

<sup>63</sup> Many of Jesus' parables, including the Good Samaritan, lack a lick of gospel.

3. Besides the law/gospel distinction, are there any other indispensable Lutheran presuppositions for biblical interpretation you can think of?
4. React to the way Luther 'unpacks' scriptural narrative above.
5. Do you agree with the definition given above for "gospel predominance"? Are there any things you would add to it? Any other ways of taking its measure?
6. A/D If a text is all law, the faithful preacher will preach all law.
7. A/D So long as there is plenty of clear gospel in a sermon, there is gospel predominance.

### **There Was a Powerful "For You" Quality to Luther's Preaching**

The unconditional gospel of universal justification is at the heart and core of Lutheran identity. It is the article on which the Church stands or falls. At the same time, although it is a statement of objective reality, it was never intended to be proclaimed in a dryly dispassionate way, as one might talk about the weather. "Religion is in the pronouns,"<sup>64</sup> Luther once remarked. By this he meant that the gospel's intrinsic nature is that it be proclaimed as a gift, as a promise, and as an offer made "to you."<sup>65</sup>

In this he simply reflects the preaching of Peter on Pentecost ("The promise is for you and for your children"--Acts 2:39), the appeal of Paul, Christ's ambassador ("Be reconciled to God"--2 Cor 5:20), and the declaration of Jesus himself ("Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven-

---

<sup>64</sup> I have never been able to track the location of this quote down, though I have often heard it cited by others. The only citation Google could offer was from an old "International Sunday-School" manual, written by Geo. F. Pentecost (sic), improbably titled, *Israel's Apostasy and Studies from the Gospel of St. John* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1891), 238. There Dr. Pentecost ascribes it to Luther, but alas, without attribution.

<sup>65</sup> To understand the connection between forgiveness as an objective fact, and offering forgiveness through proclamation, we note Luther's distinction between forgiveness "won" and forgiveness "offered" and "distributed": "We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. For inasmuch as he had determined once to achieve it, it made no difference to him whether he distributed it before or after, through his Word.... If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there.... But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross." *LW* 40:214.

-Matt 9:2). Listen to how he explicates the gospel message of the angel to the shepherds at the Nativity:

[The angel] does not simply say: "Christ is born," but: "*for you* is he born." Again, he does not say: "I announce a joy," but: "*to you* do I announce a great joy." Again, this joy will not remain in Christ, but is for all people.<sup>66</sup>

Consider how Luther contrasts this kind of preaching with a Gradgrindian<sup>67</sup> recitation of the objective facts--whether of the events of Christ's life or of God's great glory--with no care or concern about "planting them home":

Pay attention to how the Spirit speaks these things.... For he expresses not just the content but also puts it to us. For many preach Christ, but in such a way that they do not understand or articulate the use and benefit [of the message].... For it is not a Christian sermon if you preach only of the events in Christ's life, nor is it if you preach the glory of God...[rather it is a Christian sermon] if you teach the story of Christ in such a way that makes it useful for us believers for our righteousness and salvation, so ... we may know that all things in Christ are ours.<sup>68</sup>

Quite simply, without the "for you" quality, a Christian sermon ceases to be Christian.

This comes into sharp focus when preaching the gospels. I have had the privilege of training pastors in the art of preaching in the United States, Zambia, and Cameroon. In every setting, one common issue needed to be overcome. How do you preach the stories of Christ as he walks the roads of Galilee saying, doing, and enduring many things? The default position of most novice and not-so-novice preachers seems to be to draw moral lessons from the text.

Brother Martin provides useful correction here, helping us distinguish between preaching Christ as example and Christ "for us":

Be sure ... that you do not make Christ into a Moses, as if Christ did nothing more than teach and provide examples as the other saints do, as if the gospel were simply a textbook of teachings or laws.... You should grasp Christ, his words, works, and sufferings, in a twofold manner. First as an example that is presented to you, which you should follow and imitate. As St. Peter says in 1 Peter 4 ... [*But*] *this is the smallest part of the gospel,*

---

<sup>66</sup> LW 52:15.

<sup>67</sup> From a character in Dicken's *Hard Times*, "Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them."

<sup>68</sup> As quoted in Kolb, *Enduring*, 91. Note also in this and in the following passage, the Lutheran practice of "preaching the active righteousness of Christ" is also given due emphasis.



*on the basis of which it cannot yet even be called gospel [emphasis mine].... On this level Christ is of no more help to you than some other saint. His life remains his own and does not as yet contribute anything to you.... You must grasp Christ at a much higher level.... The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift [emphasis mine], as a present that God has given you and that is your own. This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and suffering, belongs to you.<sup>69</sup>*

In reaching out to grasp this truth, we don't want to fall out of the saddle on the other side, either. It is not wrong to preach Christ as example. What would you do with the encouragements to godly living found in 1 Peter, if that were so? But to preach Christ as example misses the joy that can only come with grasping him by faith as the one who came "for me!" Allow me one more quotation to drive this home. In a powerful passage from his commentary on the *Magnificat*, Luther writes:

Now, these great works of God will neither terrify nor comfort anyone unless he believes that God has not only the power and the knowledge but also the willingness and hearty desire to do such great things. In fact, it is not even enough to believe that He is willing to do them for others but not for you.... You must rather ... firmly believe that He will do great things also to you.... Such a faith has life and being; it pervades and changes the whole man.<sup>70</sup>

This is another reason why it is such a great tragedy when we lose a sense of the gospel as promise, and of the preacher as God's voice, making the offer 'for you.' Preaching can then so easily devolve into a discussion *about* God rather than the place where we meet him. Preaching becomes a speculative art or (even worse) mere entertainment. In an insightful comment, Gustav Wingren declares:

The Lutheran assertion that ... preaching ... is God's own speech to men is very difficult to maintain in practice. Instead it is very easy to slip into the idea that preaching is only speech *about* God, so that he becomes the far-off deistic God who is remote from the preached word and is only spoken about as we speak about someone who is absent.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> LW 35:119.

<sup>70</sup> LW 21:306.

<sup>71</sup> As quoted in Wilson, "Luther on Preaching," 65.

It's bad enough that scientific rationalism has so banished God from the world that men no longer grope for him in Creation (Acts 17:27). How much worse when preachers turn the ultimate Subject into an object for dissection, while God himself remains lost behind a billion stars. It's as if the Word had never become flesh.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. A/D There is little danger in our circles of losing the gospel as a promise "for you."
2. Comment on the relationship between universal justification and proclaiming the offer as something "for you." In what ways are they related? How will the loss of one inevitably lead to the loss of the other?

#### **There Was a Powerful "Yes ... But" Quality to Luther's Preaching**

Here Luther's well-known "Theology of the Cross" intersects with his theology of proclamation. It's an understanding he learned from many places in Scripture. Again, for me the most compelling passage is to study Romans 4 (clearly influential on Luther's thought), where Paul illustrates how faith "worked" in the life of Father Abraham. There we see the conflict between mere human hopes, based upon what we see and experience with our senses, and godly hope, based upon God's Word of promise alone. There we see Father Abraham facing facts, yet being given the heart to believe that life will arise from just that place where no life exists, even more: where Death, the great negation of life, holds sway. Yet he believes, because God has spoken!

"We preach Christ, and him as the crucified!" says Paul, inviting us to find God in a place where, logically, he cannot be. So God reveals himself under the form of opposites (*sub contrario*). He kills to make alive. He triumphs through shame. He empowers through weakness. He hides himself under the human voice of preaching to reveal himself to men.

Exploring this "contrast between appearance and reality"<sup>72</sup> offers a tremendous opportunity to the proclaimer. On the one hand, we don't have to sugarcoat the hard reality of human existence. "A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."<sup>73</sup> We don't, for

---

<sup>72</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 31.

<sup>73</sup> LW 31:40 (Thesis 21).

example, have to play games of 'let's pretend' with the power of sin. With the scalpel of God's Word, we can expose it in all of its loathsome reality. We can acknowledge that God justly condemns us not only for what we do, but also for what we are. That man is at his worst when he claims to be his best, because right there the worst of all works--human pride--infects his religiosity. We can face the facts of death, human disaster, and all the immense suffering of the human race without flinching, without trying to cover it over with platitudes or plastic smiles. We can weep with those who weep, mourn with those who mourn, and say, "Yes, it really does seem sometimes as if God is gone, and is not coming back."

*Yes ... but:* the Word we preach "gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that never were" (Rom 4:17). That is to say, the Word does not simply describe other possibilities, it creates them. The Word also gives us new eyes to see, and to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 4, 5).<sup>74</sup> Far from being chirpy Pollyannas, Christians are the most realistic people on earth. We can frankly face the darkness within, yet say, "Jesus, I'll be your sin; but you'll be my righteousness. I'll be your death; but you'll be my life." We can also gaze with unblinking eyes at the horror of a world gone wrong, at our sufferings in life, and yet affirm that the grace of God in Christ Jesus is greater than all the horror and the suffering, and in fact *uses* the horror and the suffering to work good for his own.

The writings of Luther are replete with this kind of language. We will have to content ourselves with just a few examples. Regarding looking at the horror and pain of the world as we--even as Christians--experience it, consider the following:

Now what is true of grace is also true of God's faithfulness or truth. Outwardly His grace seems to be nothing but wrath, so deeply is it buried.... Our own feeling about it is not different. Peter says truthfully (2 Peter 1:19) that the Word is like a lamp shining in a dark place. Most certainly it is a dark place! God's faithfulness and truth always must first become a great lie before it becomes truth. The world calls this truth heresy. And we, too, are constantly tempted to believe that God would abandon us and not keep His Word; and in our hearts He begins to become a liar. In short, God cannot be God unless He first becomes a devil. We cannot go to heaven unless we first go to hell. We cannot become God's children until we first become children of the devil. All that God speaks and does the devil has to speak and do first. And our flesh agrees. Therefore it is actually the Spirit who enlightens and teaches us in the Word to believe differently. By the same token the lies of this world cannot become lies without first having become truth. The

---

<sup>74</sup> Faith in Christ is the conversion of one's core worldview, as Paul says (2 Cor 5:16-17).

godless do not go to hell without first having gone to heaven. They do not become the devil's children until they have first been the children of God.<sup>75</sup>

"God cannot be God unless he first becomes a devil"--I have never read anything like this in Keller! In the same passage, he describes the "small band" of the Church in anything but triumphalistic tones by saying, "It does not move in manifest joy before the world. Anxiety is its abode."<sup>76</sup> Don't you just have to stand in awe before his comforting ability to "call a thing what it is"? The Church on earth is not a band of happy warriors, always waving palm branches and clothed in white! The saints struggle, they toil, they grow faint.

*Yes...but*--now look at the other side of the scales, comparing them with our "present sufferings":

He who is in the kingdom of grace is of a different heart, regardless of what sins he feels, what sins the devil invents, whether the devil undoes his good works, or God's judgment frightens or threatens him. This heart will still declare that these are certainly terrible, dark clouds; but God's grace prevails and rules over us. The heaven of grace is mightier than the clouds of sin. The heaven of grace remains forever; the clouds of sin dissolve. For this verse does not deny—no, it affirms—that believers are well aware of God's judgment, of sin, death, and the devil, and are even terrified by them. But it also says that they have courage, and that grace is above all and retains the upper hand and dominion, so that they can sing: "Praise be to God that His grace prevails over us and is mightier than our sins."<sup>77</sup>

Even now, armed with God's Word of grace, we shake our fists at the Devil and sing our victory song. Even now, as Luther says, we live "under a heaven of grace. It is far, far more immense and beautiful than this visible heaven; and it is eternal, certain, and indestructible as well.... The heaven of grace prevails and rules; in the end [Sin, Death, and the Devil] must remain below and surrender."<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> LW 14:31. Note, this is not the "early" Luther, but the seasoned warrior of the Cross, Luther at Coburg in 1530! By his dramatic use of paradox, he is, of course, driving home the point that, to unbelievers, lies *appear* to be truth, and salvation *seems* all but guaranteed.

<sup>76</sup> LW 14:58.

<sup>77</sup> LW 14:28.

<sup>78</sup> LW 14:27.

But for now, the struggle of sinner/saints goes on. A key part of that struggle is to continually "call things what they are," yet right into the teeth of every menace, hurl the gospel Word:

It is an art to forget self. We must keep learning this lesson as long as we live, even as all the saints before us, with us, and after us must do. Just as we still feel sin, we must also feel death. Just as we must fight to rid ourselves of sin by clinging to God's right hand as His Word offers it to us, so we must also battle with death and death's prince or chief, the devil, until we are free.<sup>79</sup>

And so God teaches us in the school of experience to embrace the cross:

Whoever can learn, let him learn. Let everyone become a falcon and soar above distress. Let everyone know most assuredly and not doubt that God does not send him this distress to destroy him.... He wants to drive him to pray, to implore, to fight, to exercise his faith, to learn another aspect of God's person than before, to accustom himself to do battle even with the devil and with sin, and by the grace of God to be victorious. Without this experience we could never learn the meaning of faith, the Word, Spirit, grace, sin, death, or the devil. Were there only peace and no trials, we would never learn to know God Himself. In short, we could never be or remain true Christians. Trouble and distress constrain us and keep us within Christendom. Crosses and troubles, therefore, are as necessary for us as life itself, and much more necessary and useful than all the possessions and honor in the world.<sup>80</sup>

"Let everyone become a falcon and soar above the distress." I cannot tell you how often these precious words have given me comfort in my own struggles of faith. In the middle of whatever darkness I found myself in--and even though at times I felt nothing but the darkness--I would hear this Word and realize that there was another reality that was far higher, and truer, and more genuine and lasting than anything I saw or felt. It was far more eternal and real than the heavens above my head and more solid and lasting than the earth beneath my feet. These all would pass away, but this Word would not pass away. In my experience, I've found that it is pretty easy to state that Jesus died for the sins of all and even, in a general way, to say he died for me. The real struggle, however, is to believe that he died for just that sin, carried just that sorrow, won the victory over just that battle, that is now troubling me. I am deeply grateful to Brother Martin for preaching grace into my heart in that hard space, and for teaching me (though

---

<sup>79</sup> LW 14:85.

<sup>80</sup> LW 14:60.

I'm still a kindergartener in this school) the sacred art of forgetting myself and soaring, like a falcon, in Christ--high above every distress.

Before we leave the discussion of Luther's theology of preaching and move on to more mundane matters of style and rhetoric, I just have one more thought to share. It is a companion dictum to the "first three rules" mentioned earlier:<sup>81</sup> Read Luther, read Luther, read Luther. I appreciate the fact that pastor-scholars are reading widely and deeply nowadays, because they truly care about good preaching. But you will find in Luther things you will never find in a Yancey, a Sproul, a Keller, or a Piper. You can read all those men with profit; I do not mean to suggest otherwise. But it would be a shame to give up our birthright. Read Luther.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. A/D Since feelings and subjectivity can be so dangerous, the preacher is wise to steer clear of them in the pulpit.
2. While granting that "Sin, Death, and the Devil" will always be our enemies, what are some other dispiriting realities we need to face in our contemporary culture, for which the gospel's "yes ... but" is really the only cure? What troubles modern/postmodern man?

#### **Luther's Style and Method of Preaching**

Up to this point we have studied what might be termed Luther's "theology of preaching." Theology, of course, puts us in the realm of the non-negotiables. Once we move on to style and methods, we are in a different arena. Here we engage in conversation with Luther as a man of experience and listen to his seasoned advice. He makes no law, but we would be wise to consider his words. At the risk of oversimplification, I am going to summarize Luther's approach to preaching under three headings: 1) he aimed at head and heart; 2) he prized clarity and simplicity; and 3) he preached in a way that was relevant to his listeners.

---

<sup>81</sup> 1. PREACH; 2. THE; 3. TEXT

### Head and Heart

Luther's preaching has often been described as a "rhetoric of the heart."<sup>82</sup> "Heart" in this case refers both to where the language is *sourced* (out of the overflow of the heart, his mouth spoke) and where it is *aimed* (from faith to faith). In using this word, Pietsch also points out a need to exercise care in understanding. We associate "heart" almost exclusively with the emotions. For Luther (following the terminology of Scripture), the human heart embraced the intellect, the emotions, and the will.<sup>83</sup>

This understanding already suggests a possible take-away for us. It is impossible for anyone to read Luther and *not* come away with a sense that both his mind and his emotions were profoundly engaged in what he was saying. It may be a debatable point, but I believe that one of the problems with Lutheran theologizing since Luther is that mind and emotions have been disengaged at times from each other, even divorced. If Orthodoxy was guilty of over-intellectualizing the faith, Pietism did not help by over-emotionalizing it. Similarly, postmodernists reacted to austere modernists (and their claims of possessing a universal objectivity) with a universalizing subjectivity. And so it goes. We would be fooling ourselves if we think that our own preaching style is somehow unaffected by such cultural currents. Which simply leads me to say: it's time to marry mind and emotions again.

Now for a preacher to preach from the heart to the heart, the text has to impress itself (obviously) first upon his own heart. And what better way to go about this than to follow Luther's encouragement to pray, meditate, and embrace the cross? Experience drives me to seek answers from the Word. As I reflect on the Word (and my own inability to believe it or to obey it), I am driven to my knees in heartfelt prayer. God answers my prayers through the Word and in my experience. So a theologian is made, one who embraces the cross. And a preacher is born, one who aims at the heart of his hearers. On this point, Luther calls us all to repentance by saying:

Some pastors and preachers are lazy and no good. They do not pray; they do not study; they do not read; they do not search the Scriptures.... The call is: watch, study, attend to reading.... You cannot read too much in Scripture, what you read you cannot read too

---

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Pietsch, "Luther's 'Rhetoric of the Heart' for Lutheran Preaching," *Lutheran Forum* 47:3 (2013): 38.

<sup>83</sup> Pietsch, "Rhetoric," 38.

carefully, what you read carefully you cannot understand too well, what you understand well you cannot teach too well, what you teach well you cannot live too well.... Therefore dear pastors and preachers, pray, read, study, be diligent.... This evil shameful time is no season for being lazy, for sleeping, and snoring.<sup>84</sup>

### Clarity and Simplicity

In 1518, Luther restored a study of rhetoric to the curriculum in Wittenberg. He kept a copy of Quintilian on his bedside table. Quotations from Cicero, Horace, and Vergil are sprinkled throughout his writings. He advocated and praised the use of both rhetoric and dialectic (logic) in the analysis of biblical texts. His work as a translator demonstrates how alive he was to the rhythms of oral speech, and how urgently he struggled to make Hebrew prophets (nightingales, he called them) 'sing' in German. Clearly he was a man that was deeply affected by and aware of the beauty of the Scriptures.

But in his pulpit manner he did not strive for complexity. He had little interest in soaring to the heights of rhetorical expression. Instead he prized clarity, simplicity, and directness. A remark from one of his recorded "Table Talks" should suffice to make that point:

Rector Bernard von Dölen, minister in Herzberg, complained bitterly about his arrogant auditors who despised the reading of the catechism. Dr. Martin [Luther] was greatly disturbed and fell silent. Then he said, "Cursed be every preacher who aims at lofty topics in the church, looking for his own glory and selfishly desiring to please one individual or another. When I preach here I adapt myself to the circumstances of the common people. I don't look at the doctors and masters, of whom scarcely forty are present, but at the hundred or the thousand young people and children. It's to them that I preach, to them that I devote myself, for they, too, need to understand. If the others don't want to listen they can leave. Therefore, my dear Bernard, take pains to be simple and direct; don't consider those who claim to be learned but be a preacher to unschooled youth and sucklings."<sup>85</sup>

I don't know where he found the quote, but I remember a standard joke between Missionary Kirby Spevacek and my father. Kirby would often try to get under Ernie's skin by reminding him that Luther once said, "When I preach, I don't try to be all flowery and ornamented like

---

<sup>84</sup> As quoted in Meuser, 40–41.

<sup>85</sup> *LW* 54:235–236.



Pomeranus or Cordatus. No, when I preach, I am so simple that even the *Wends* can understand."

Now this emphasis on the simplicity of Luther's rhetoric can be overdone. I remember reading somewhere that St. Augustine, too, emphasized simplicity and humility as the essence of a Christian rhetoric. The biographer dryly commented that it was perhaps necessary to bear in mind that Augustine did so as a master of rhetoric himself and as the heir of many centuries of thought and practice on the subject.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps the same thing might be said of Luther. If we study the "simplicity" of Luther's preaching, we see tremendous art.

First of all, he was a master of the oral art of storytelling,<sup>87</sup> as we have seen. Kolb comments:

His retelling of biblical stories drew [his hearers] into the text and thrust the text into their own experience. With word pictures he sketched the biblical characters so that what they said made sense and took on significance in the lives of his hearers.<sup>88</sup>

When he did so, he kept his eye on the *Sinnmitte*, the key point. "In my sermons, I bury myself to take just one passage and there I stay so the hearers may be able to say, "That was the sermon."<sup>89</sup> Unity and coherence of thought are hallmarks of any effective communication.

But this by no means exhausts the wealth of his rhetorical skills. In practice, we also note that Luther's preaching was filled with proverbs, earthy pictures from earthly life, and wordplays. Besides all this, "He loved to set things in opposition to each other. He loved to employ tensions: law/gospel; conflict: sin/grace, God/Satan; paradox: free will/bound will; and above all, dialog, at which he was a master."<sup>90</sup> Close attention to any one of these points could easily become a paper in itself. In any case, overemphasizing Luther's simplicity would lead to ignoring the way he *achieved* that simplicity and made it work for him in communication.

---

<sup>86</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 268.

<sup>87</sup> Kolb's *Luther and the Stories of God* is a valuable resource here.

<sup>88</sup> Kolb, *Enduring*, 101.

<sup>89</sup> Meuser, 47; for more see 47–53.

<sup>90</sup> Meuser, 47; for more see 47–53.

I applaud the fact that preachers and Bible students are becoming more aware of the different genres of Scripture--song and story, parable and apocalypse. I myself have written a couple of things about the rhetoric of Paul's letters. I am entranced by the power and the excellence of Jesus' parables. As we study these things, and as the beauty of the text more and more impresses itself upon us, we too will reflect that beauty, not only in what we say but in how we say it. At the same time, the brilliant light of the "beauty of holiness" should not blind us to the even greater light of the content itself. Our supreme goal must always be Paul's, "*By setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God*" (2 Cor 4:2).

### Relevance

Am I getting myself into trouble here? Is this a bridge too far? Should a preacher seek to be relevant? Why worry about it? Why not just preach the Word, kick back, and drink some "good old Wittenberg beer"? I get it. These are all excellent cautions and warnings for us not to trip over our own big feet in trying to be Pastor Trendy of the "Church of What's Happenin' Now" (boy, do I date myself with that language!). So let me explain what I mean by 'relevance.' I don't mean trying to tickle itching ears.

But there can be no question that what Luther said was relevant to his age. His writings would not have sold in such massive quantities, students would not have flocked to him from all over Europe, Wittenbergers would not have crowded around to hear him preach were he not speaking the Word in a way that hit them where they lived. The Bible came alive in his preaching, first (as we have seen) because it intersected with his own heart and experience. For him, the road between Wittenberg and Jerusalem was a brief stroll. That could not fail to impress itself upon his listeners. Then, he was relevant because he spoke simply and clearly. Remember how he would hit the streets to get just the right German words for his epoch-making translation. Anyone who reads most university theologians today will be impressed by their scholarship and learning. You read Luther, and you are bowled over by the power of what he has to say. And it's no great chore to understand him. His contemporaries might have disagreed with him. But they couldn't fail to grasp his point.

Relevance, as I observe it in Luther, is a matter of talking about real struggles in realistic ways--essential to his theology of the cross. He was not preaching to a church filled with plaster saints, but real live sinners. He was engaged with issues of his day: with Church and State, with vocation and self-chosen worship, with men and nations. Again, anyone who has read Luther even a little is aware that he had a few things to say about the pope and the Turk. Luther did not speak to the pilgrim church as if Christian refugees passed through this world protected by an ecclesiastical safety zone. There was a war going on against the Lord and people, and Luther had no hesitation in describing it.

Of course, the Word works. But God doesn't choose heavenly beings to communicate it to other heavenly beings. He chooses clay pots like us to speak to other clay pots. So, yes, it is appropriate to talk about relevance. Especially on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It's vital to know what was happening there and then. But only so as to apply it to the here and now.

We too must learn, as Luther urges us to *das Volk aufs Maul schauen* (look at people in their mouth), to communicate the gospel in word, voice, and song in *their* language, not ours. Just as all Christians are theologians, we are all called, both individually and corporately, to be "translators" of God's Word.<sup>91</sup>

What are the indulgences of our day? What are our idols? Where and how does our innate and sinful self-will show itself? Are people still trying to merit heaven by good works like a medieval Catholic? No doubt, all worldly religions are forms of work-righteousness, but where are the connections--and the differences--between then and now?<sup>92</sup> It will do us little good to fight Luther's battles, or to readjudicate the disputes that exercised men's minds *then* if we don't contend with the angels and principalities that hold them captive *now*. What difference does it make where Luther stood, if people don't know today where they stand?

---

<sup>91</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, "Beyond Law and Gospel?: Reflections on Speaking the Word in a (Post)Modern World," *Concordia Journal* 43:1-2 (2017): 34.

<sup>92</sup> In this connection, Seifrid also warns us against reducing the law to some "mere abstract formula." "Beyond," 40. In the article, he offers some helpful suggestions for contextualizing law and gospel "for now," although one would not agree with everything he says.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What is the difference between preaching the gospel in a relevant way and changing the truth of the Word to conform with the pathologies and remedies as defined by each age and area?
2. In your opinion, what are some of the dangerous idols of thought and/or besetting sins of our age, and how does law and gospel apply to them?

### Conclusion

Well, perhaps I have wearied you. I know I have wearied myself, especially at the end there. A whole lot of sound and fury signifying ...? Let my conclusion to the style and method of Luther serve as a conclusion to this paper. Whether it comes in the quiet whisper of the inductive preacher or with the thunder of rhetorical pyrotechnics, the important thing to remember is that the preacher is God's voice. He speaks for God, not for himself. He proclaims God's wrath on human sin, not his own personal pet peeves. He revels in God's gospel promise "for you, for you, for you"--that contains within it the joyful counterpoint "for me, for me, for me." He gets down with us into the dark valley of human sin and suffering, saying, "Yes, but, look up at God's bright heaven of grace, and go soaring as a falcon over the present distress." The church has seen—and survived—many forms of preaching through the centuries. But one thing it cannot survive is the loss of preachers preaching as God's voice and congregations listening to him with God-given ears. In that sense, the church will always be a mouth house. And the most characteristic quality about a Christian will be a listening ear.

Paul O. Wendland  
October 2, 2017

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bornkamm, Heinrich. *Luther and the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969.  
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/version/25173484>.
- Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. Berkeley: University of California, 1969.
- Brug, John F. "Luther's Doctrine of the Word: The Incarnate Word in the Written Word." *Logia* 22:1 (2013): 41–52.
- Forde, Gerhard O. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997.
- Kolb, Robert. *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.
- . *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.
- Luther, Martin. *Enarrationes Epistolarum et Evangeliorum, quas Postillas vocant. VVittenbergae* [i.e. Wittenberg: Apud Iohannem Grunenbergium, 1521].
- . "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works."  
<https://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/preflat-eng.txt>.
- Meuser, Fred W. *Luther the Preacher*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983.
- Ngien, Dennis. "Theology of Preaching in Martin Luther." *Themelios* 28:2 (2003): 28–48.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan. *Luther the Expositor*. Saint Louis Concordia, 1959.
- Pettegree, Andrew. *Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe--and Started the Protestant Reformation*. New York: Penguin Books, 2015.
- Pietsch, Stephen. "Luther's 'Rhetoric of the Heart' for Lutheran Preaching." *Lutheran Forum* 47:3 (2013): 36–41.
- Seifrid, Mark A. "Beyond Law and Gospel?: Reflections on Speaking the Word in a (Post)Modern World." *Concordia Journal* 43:1–2 (2017): 29–42.

Sutton, A Trevor. "Christ Coming to Us: Luther's Rhetoric of Location." *Concordia Journal* 40:4 (2014): 285–91.

Toso, Perry. "Luther's Theology of the Cross in Preaching and as Spiritual Warfare." *Logia* 9:3 (2000): 17–27.

Vajta, Vilmos. *Luther on Worship: An Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958.

Wilson, Henry S. "Luther on Preaching as God Speaking." *Lutheran Quarterly* 19:1 (2005): 63–76.

# MARTIN LUTHER–GOD'S VOICE

## A REACTION

We live in a world of constant noise and distraction in which we are bombarded by sound bites, tweets, video clips, text messages and popup notifications. Some have estimated that the average American consumes over 34 gigabytes of content and 100,000 words of information (over 1/5 of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*) each day.<sup>1</sup> It's hard to concentrate or remember anything, nevertheless take time to meditate on the most important things. Even The-Most-Important-Thing can easily get drowned out by all the ambient noise. In addition, we are told that in our post-factual, post-truth, post-everything world, it's all about the medium and not the message. It doesn't matter what you say, just *how* you say it. Since it is assumed that words are incapable of carrying meaning, we are told that it's all about image, impression, and style – the optics<sup>2</sup>. No wonder many have been left feeling like their only choice is to cry out with the '90's grunge anthem, "Here we are now, entertain us."<sup>3</sup>

Professor Wendland's essay is a powerful reminder that Lutheran preachers can speak with confidence into this noise. Not because of our own eloquence or charisma, but because of the power behind the Word we speak. When a preacher's message is faithful to the truth of Holy Scripture...it is God himself speaking (*deus loquens*). This refrain drives the essay as Wendland focuses our attention on some of the key principles beneath Luther's preaching and teaching. The essay was well written, engaging, and clear, so instead of summarizing, I'd like to simply highlight some key points.

First of all, I appreciated how the essay stressed the importance and value of preaching and the preaching office itself, not because I have low self-esteem, which I might, but because, as the essayist mentioned, these things are constantly being attacked by the world around us and by doubts from within. "You are speaking for God? You've been preaching for how many years and what has it accomplished? All that *you* do is talk? Who made *you* the expert on all things Christian?" Whether we see it or not, as Wendland assures us, when we preach, we preach with a borrowed authority given to us by the God who called us to speak – we are his mouthpieces and our churches are his mouth house (p.2). However, instead of filling us with pride or an inflated sense of self-importance, such "a consciousness of being servants of Christ should fill us with both joy and holy fear" (p.6).

This is why Lutheran preachers must be committed to preaching the biblical text. The online satirical blog, Babylon Bee, recently ran the headline: "Man Who Gives Motivational Speech Each Sunday Still Referring to Self as Pastor." The sarcasm makes a powerful point that Luther well understood. If a preacher is speaking for God, then he must 1. PREACH; 2. THE; 3. TEXT (p.9). When he does so, a preacher can be confident not only of his authority, but also of the power behind the message. When God speaks, things happen. In beautiful words drenched with biblical imagery, Wendland writes, "Kingdoms fall. Battle bows are broken. Peace descends upon an unruly humankind. This is the expectation with which Luther stood up to preach. When God renames a thing in his Word, we are not dealing in metaphors. We are confronted with the new creation. Darkness becomes light. Death

---

<sup>1</sup> Bilton, N. (2009, Dec. 9). The American Diet: 34 Gigabytes a Day [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/12/09/the-american-diet-34-gigabytes-a-day/>

<sup>2</sup> I hadn't even heard this word used this way before 2017! Now it seems like I hear it every other day.

<sup>3</sup> Cobain, K (1991). Smells like Teen Spirit [Recorded by Nirvana]. On *Nevermind* [CD]. DGC Records: Santa Monica, CA.

becomes sleep. Deserts bloom with life. The crooked becomes straight. The ungodly are justified. Weakness becomes a space for the power of sufficient grace” (p.12).

Secondly, I appreciated how Wendland showed the inseparable connection between Luther’s understanding of preaching and his hermeneutic. For Luther, the “process of interpretation” begins with God and his powerful Word. Instead of interpreting the text, Luther let the text interpret him<sup>4</sup> and was confident that it would do the same to his listeners. Preaching was not just sharing information, but “doing the text”<sup>5</sup> to those who had gathered to listen. This insight is not only incredibly helpful for preaching; it also lays the groundwork for a biblical hermeneutic that can help us resist the deconstructive notion that every text, including Scripture, is nothing more than an endless potentiality of interpretations.

Wendland shows that this “hermeneutic” is not just ivory tower theory to be discussed by a bunch of guys wearing monocles and sipping single malt Scotch. It’s downright practical: “For the interpreter and preacher, the work of the transforming Word begins with him” (p.14). The word of Scripture is not a dead letter trapped in time waiting to be interpreted by its readers. Instead it is a living and active thing ready to unleash its Spirit-borne power on the hearts of all who will listen. On a deeper interpretive level, this understanding assures us that reading Scripture with a Christocentric (law/gospel) approach is not just a reading strategy imposed upon the text by Martin Luther and his followers; rather it is born in the text itself as it has its way with real life sinner/saints (the “for you” thrust).

This understanding makes Lutheran preaching unique. The law/gospel dialectic keeps Christ as the Savior of sinners at the center. However, I found it interesting, as Wendland points out, that Luther refused to give strict criteria *for exactly* what law/gospel preaching looked like. He was reluctant to produce a book of rigid rules to follow or formulas to apply. So how do we evaluate whether our own preaching or that of our brothers<sup>6</sup> has Gospel predominance? Wendland suggests that it “is not a matter of percentages of content, but an overall focus on raising the sinner to life” (p.24). Maybe we can ask, is there a telic note (Christ crucified for you) behind all the minor telic notes that lurks beneath the surface of my sermon and drives sinners to the cross? This might seem a bit vague, but perhaps it *has* to be.

Everyone is looking for authenticity in their pastors. Wendland’s section on the “yes...but” quality of Lutheran preaching reminds us that as theologians of the cross who acknowledge the “yes...but” (p.27) of reality, we are the most authentic preachers on the block. It’s been said, “you have to live the blues to sing the blues.” In a similar way, it takes suffering to write a sermon and one has to live under the cross to preach the cross. Lutheran proclaimers can preach personally as those who live with their hearers in the most authentic way imaginable, as fellow cross-bearers stumbling home to receive their crowns.

The essay closes by examining Luther’s method and style of preaching as he strived to touch the head and the heart, to preach with clarity and simplicity, and to be relevant. This is where the rubber really hits the road for preachers. Luther lived in a world that couldn’t be more different from ours<sup>7</sup>. He

---

<sup>4</sup> I recently heard Dr. James Nestingen talk about how Luther literally became possessed by the text as he wrote his Genesis commentary. He said, “The subject object distance has disappeared and Luther is Jacob, and he is singing Jacob’s song.” “Episode 81: Old Man Luther”. *Thinking Fellows*. Podcast audio, August 11, 2017. <https://www.thinkingfellows.com/blog/2017/8/11/episode-81-old-man-luther>

<sup>5</sup> This is a Gerhard Forde phrase. I’m not sure whether it is original to him.

<sup>6</sup> I’m referring to when we are asked to do so in our circuits and conferences.

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps one of the only things the same is the high level of biblical illiteracy in both cultures.



preached in a place where most people considered themselves Christian and respected what the preacher had to say. The most recent statistics report that fewer than 10% of the people in my community are regular churchgoers. I've heard some say that the sermon was the highlight and main event of the week (perhaps also the main source of "entertainment") for those living in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Germany. Today people listen to TED talks, watch mini-documentaries on Facebook, and listen to other popular preachers. Preachers are often seen as one voice among the many. In Luther's day people believed that demons, witches, and elves spoiled the milk, and the pastor was the most well-educated person in town. It's a different world. So what does Lutheran preaching look like in 2017? What are the things that can change and what are the things that cannot?

This all relates to relevance. We might not like the word "relevant", but Wendland helps us out: "Relevance, as I observe it in Luther, is a matter of talking about real struggles in realistic ways--essential to his theology of the cross" (p.38). As theologians of the cross, who call things what they are, we should also have the franchise on "relevant" preaching. Wendland primes the pump for questions that need to be asked: "What are the indulgences of our day? What are our idols?..." (p.36). We could add to the list many more: Has our audience become more like the Athenians than those who attended synagogue each week? What is the role of apologetics<sup>8</sup> in preaching? Is it a worthwhile goal to meet people where they are at and affirm certain 'universal truths' before preaching the Truth? How do we preach to people who really have no concept of sin, guilt, and shame? What sermon styles, structures, or methods communicate best in the age of everything now? Is there a place for indirect communication<sup>9</sup> in law/gospel application? For example, does the law always need to be explicitly spelled out, or is it sometimes more effective to sneak up from behind like Nathan with his parable of the pet lamb?

Perhaps it seems like this leaves us with more questions than answers. But let's remember that the essayist's goal wasn't to answer all our questions. No, his goal was much better, as he stated it at the beginning of this essay: "my prayer is that you will be renewed--as I was--in the sense that something majestic, creative, powerful, and miraculous is taking place every time we have the privilege of talking to God's people, and that you--just like John the Baptist and Luther--merit no other name than that of 'voice'--God's voice, no less" (p.3). I believe that this prayer has been answered for me and many others through this essay.

October 2, 2017

Justin Cloute

---

<sup>8</sup> In a very general sense, I simply see apologetics as meeting people where they are at rationally, emotionally, psychologically, etc. and responding in love to their needs.

<sup>9</sup> For a wonderfully readable and academic examination of indirect communication in the OT see Mark Paustian's dissertation: *The Beauty with the Veil: Validating the Strategies of Kierkegaardian Indirect Communication Through a Close Christological Reading of the Hebrew Old Testament*