

# Honest Preaching

Faithfully Proclaiming the Law for the Sake of the Gospel

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## Introduction

A renewed enthusiasm for a law-gospel paradigm in preaching is rising from some corners of the visible church that might surprise confessional Lutherans. From the midst of what many would call "liberal mainline churches" rises the influential voice of Paul Scott Wilson (author of several popular homiletics books and professor at Emmanuel College of the Toronto School of Theology). His book, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, lays out a plan for preaching that encourages these four "pages" as a basic sermonic structure: trouble in the Bible (law then), trouble in the world (law now), God's action in the Bible (gospel then), and God's action in the world (gospel now).<sup>1</sup> In more "conservative" Evangelical circles where the "relevant" "how to" sermons of some popular mega-church gurus seemed to dominate the field, it is fascinating to note that one of the most popular preaching manuals is Dr. Bryan Chapell's book, *Christ-Centered Preaching*. In that book Dr. Chapell urgently pleads with preachers to move away from "The Deadly Be's" ("be like," "be good," "be disciplined"). He issues a call for preachers to find in every text an aspect of our human fallen condition which enables us to see our desperate need for—and, more importantly, the beauty of—God's redemption in Christ.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most astounding to us is to hear the considerable number of voices from within the theologically liberal Evangelical Lutheran Church in America urging preachers to return to a law-gospel dynamic in preaching (see the Fall 2000 and Winter 2004 issues of *dialog* to see two series of remarkable articles). How ironic it would be if, in the midst of this resurgence of a law-gospel dynamic in preaching, we ourselves would lose our grip on this rich homiletical heritage passed down to us.

## The Problem Defined

There is certainly much for which to be thankful in the faithful preaching we find in our midst. Yet we would have to be blind (and deaf!) not to realize that something so precious as proclaiming the Word is going to be under constant attack and in need of constant vigilance. In particular, there is an area of observable weakness in preaching in our midst that this author has often wrestled with in his own preaching. The preaching of specific law that strikes and kills the sinful nature in us (what we typically call the law as mirror) seems all too often to fade so far into the background that it might as well be totally absent. It is rather humbling that the encouragement that a presiding bishop in the former Lutheran Church in America once wrote to a pastor in his synod ("Don't preach anything controversial") seems to be a memo we have somehow subtly received.<sup>3</sup>

It is obviously a matter of debate about the degree that this is true in our midst, but this author read a recent conference paper delivered in our midst that questioned how appropriate it is to refer to our hearers as "sinners." It has all too often been the observation of this author (in many different congregations) that the hearers went home from church having heard little (if anything) from the pulpit that caused any great discomfort to the sinful nature. In discussing this with our seminary's worship department, no disagreeing voice was raised when it was stated that one significant weakness of preaching in our midst is a lack of specific law aimed accurately to crucify our sinful flesh. Sermons easily become dominated by the law chiefly as a "handy guide to better behavior" rather than as the "hammer that breaks a rock in pieces" (Jeremiah 23:29).<sup>4</sup>

## The Causes of the Problem and Its Devastating Effects

There are many causes that can be listed for what may lead us to allow crucifying law to fade into the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1999) p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2005, second edition) p. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983) p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> This quotation (and all subsequent scriptural quotations in this paper) is taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version* copyright 1978 by the International Bible Society, used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

background of our preaching. Certainly, the whole climate of our culture—with its postmodern moral relativism—makes for a challenging setting in which to confront anyone with issues of right and wrong. If we believe that either we or our people are immune to such influences, we are only fooling ourselves. As Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod professor David Scaer writes:

This free, open, and unrestrained "law-less" ethic is also at work in the church and is barely distinguishable from today's secular ethic. Many pastors live with the frustration that even professing Christians claim freedom in what they will believe and how they will live. Any doctrinal standard is viewed as "law," and requiring submission to it is regarded as "legalism." In a former time, churches set standards of faith and life for members. Now this is often reversed and many churches adjust their standards for faith and life to fit the commonly accepted beliefs and behaviors of their members.<sup>5</sup>

While God has preserved us from publicly adjusting our official doctrine to fit the spirit of the times, are we as successful as we think in fighting that tendency in the pulpit?

Yet the pressures of society are hardly the most compelling pressure that can lead us to tone down or eliminate piercing law from our sermons. Perhaps the most compelling pressure is a distortion of a very good thing—the tender pastoral heart that loves the people God has entrusted to our care. We know the people who populate the pews before us come to church on Sunday from the midst of great challenges facing them at work, at school, and from within their own homes. We may mistakenly conclude that preaching accusing law to those bleeding from the daily wounds of life would be kicking our parishioners when they are down. We know we have the medicine to heal those hurts in Christ, and a pastoral heart that rightly bleeds for God's people leads us to the conclusion that we can simply (almost) immediately cut to the gospel's cure.

"I just preach the pure gospel," a pastor told me. "So many people have been beaten down by guilt, that I just want them to hear about God's love." Actually, a large number of pastors in various locations have told me this in various ways over the last decade. As pastors, we are acutely aware of how our congregational people feel beneath the crushing weight of images of who we ought to be. . . . If we preachers would then pound our pulpits with the Ten Commandments combined with threats of divine wrath, we fear we would exacerbate an already cruel situation. So, we dip our homiletic ladles into the fountain of divine love and serve out a nectar of sweet *agape*, a draught of unconditional divine acceptance and love and care.<sup>6</sup>

Who of us hasn't struggled with the thought that preaching the law as mirror to those already hurting from the wounds of life would be nothing short of sadistic?

Yet our valid empathy for our people can easily lead to an invalid rush to the gospel that ignores a simple fact of human nature. Even in the midst of pain and suffering our sinful hearts can be drawing blasphemously dangerous conclusions that spring from pride and arrogance. We may easily end up offering comfort to hearts that, at that moment, don't so much resemble the humility of the child of God but rather, like Asaph, resemble a "senseless and ignorant...brute beast" (Psalm 73:22).

But there is more at work to deter us from preaching the law as mirror than just the impact of a permissive society and the miscalculation of a loving pastoral heart. Within the heart of the preacher there can at times be a gnawing question of whether preaching law and gospel in every sermon may only be a theological construct we are artificially imposing on a biblical text. We can lose sight that the emphasis of sin and grace, human depravity and divine mercy, is always at the heart and core of what Scripture is teaching us. We can lose sight of the conviction that C. F. W. Walther boldly proclaimed when he stated that "the birth of the Reformer dates from the moment when Luther understood [the distinction between law and gospel]."<sup>7</sup>

If I begin to lose my conviction that preaching the law as mirror really is a primary duty of an evangelical Lutheran minister, "mirror-like" words might still be found scattered in my preaching, but actually

<sup>5</sup> David P. Scaer, "Law in a Lawless World," in *The Law in Holy Scripture* (Saint Louis, Concordia Academic Press, 2004) p. 191.

<sup>6</sup> Ted Peters, "Law-Gospel Dialectic in the Pulpit," *dialog: A Journal of Theology* (Volume 39, Number 3, Fall 2000) p. 178.

<sup>7</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (Saint Louis, Concordia, 1929) p. 63.

preaching the law will quickly become a caricature of itself. We can begin to think we are participating in a tired homiletical magic act of saying a few things we really don't mean (and maybe God doesn't either?) for a few minutes to create some "suspense," only to pull the gospel suddenly out of our theological hat as if to say: "I was only kidding! Here's what God and I really have to say to you today!" Such loss of confidence of the importance of preaching the law as mirror is usually evident when we content ourselves with throwing out a few well-worn "stock phrases" here and there ("Well, we are sinners, after all, but..." "Yes, we all deserve hell, but..."). Long ago mindless parroting of such phrases robbed them of any power to impact hearts—including our own.

There is still one more contributing cause lurking out there. However, speaking as a preacher to preachers, it would be more accurate to point to my own heart and say that this contributing cause lurks "in here." It is that self-centered inclination of our sinful nature to prize the praise of men above the praise of God. To put it simply: we like to be liked.

The man in the pulpit is not immune to the fear of man. He has regularly to speak to people already knocked around by life. He doesn't want to add more hurt. He wants to be liked. It feels good to be told, "You really helped me." His old sinner is a coward, a whiner, a griper, a finger-pointer, a blame-shifter. He is also not free from the desire to escape the cross, and those considerations color his preaching of God's law.<sup>8</sup>

Who of us can claim to be immune from that pressure? In a world where the only dirty words left are "sin" and "guilt," who wants to be known as someone whose "pulpit-mouth" is offensive?

All of these pressures can make us exceedingly timid to be the law's public mouthpiece to crucify the sinful natures in pulpit and pew. But then my words end up betraying the very people I love!

The church's regimen of daily spiritual renewal wouldn't be necessary if you and I were the kind of people God originally had in mind when he formed the first human out of the dust of the ground. But no, we're more like Jesus' first disciples. For us it takes only minutes to drowse, to become spiritually cool, careless, lazy. And laziness in the arena of the God-Satan warfare is a good way to get killed. Unread Bibles can destroy fellowship with God. Ignoring his two messages will ruin your day, your family, your career, your life. Disregarding what the Bible calls "sin" has its own law of gravity that inexorably pulls a person into ruin.<sup>9</sup>

Whenever we become like "mute dogs" (Isaiah 56:10) who refuse to bark when danger approaches, we have forgotten that "sin is not taken into account where there is no law" (Romans 5:13) as we allow far more to be listed among "hidden faults" (Psalm 19:12) than David could ever have imagined. We are in grave danger of singing a lullaby to drowsy consciences that are failing to alert Christians to the grave danger of what is going on within their hearts or creeping out more and more into their lives.

There is a peculiar danger in not knowing that a certain thing is dangerous. We sometimes read of a child who picked up a rattlesnake—intending to play with it—and thus placed himself in danger just because he did not know that this snake was dangerous. So Christians sometimes *play with* the rattlesnake of sin because they forget how dangerous this is. They become careless and indifferent about their soul's salvation, reckless and overconfident of their own strength.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, what we do whenever we grow timid in preaching the law as mirror is to reverse the very problem Luther encountered at the time of the Reformation, with the potential of equally deadly effects.

If preaching is sick today, it is because we do not know how to preach the law. We are lulling people to sleep with the gospel when they should be roused by means of the law. August Tholuck, preacher and theologian in Germany in the last century, said: "If by any chance a peddler of indulgences would appear among us, he would not do a good

<sup>8</sup> John C. Jeske, "Spiritual Renewal as Faithful Application of Law and Gospel in Today's Secular Society" (unpublished essay) p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Jeske, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Siegbert Becker, *The Word Goes On: Sermons by Siegbert W. Becker* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 1992) p. 135.

business; for nobody has a disquieted and alarmed conscience." People are not looking for a gracious God but a good deal, and preachers are helping them.<sup>11</sup>

Or, to quote one of our own theologians:

When we criticize the Roman church for presenting Christ to Luther as an angry judge, we ought to imitate Luther and place an "only" into that sentence. In depicting Christ as an angry judge the Roman church of Luther's day was proclaiming an important truth. Its error lay in not holding forth to terrified sinners the Christ who said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest." We are in danger of committing the same error in reverse, by downgrading the angry Christ for the compassionate Christ. Human reason finds it difficult to see them both together, so we ignore the one and exalt the other.<sup>12</sup>

If we prematurely bandage up spiritual wounds with pious sounding phrases without helping people accurately identify the root causes of those wounds, we are in danger of comforting the very consciences God is seeking to trouble. If in misplaced love we refuse to allow the law to take our people to "the depths," we become a deadly road block in their path to that place from which sinners cry out to their God for his mercy (Psalm 130:1). It is the characteristic of the wicked man, not the righteous, if "in his own eyes... [he] flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin" (Psalm 35:2). We may find ourselves in opposition to the very Spirit of God who is at work to use that law to create the "broken and contrite heart" that God does "not despise" (Psalm 51:17). Remember: contrition is not a feeling that believers can turn on or off at will ("Oh, that's right, I'm supposed to be contrite now!"). Contrition is a work of the Holy Spirit who uses the hammer of the law to create the "broken and contrite" hearts in which God delights. Is such work beneath our sensibilities?

But worst of all, from the perspective of a Christ-centered Lutheran, is that by shortchanging the law we do the greatest harm to the very gospel we thought we were serving! If we mute the law because we think we are performing a gracious and compassionate service to the gospel and God's people, we are in fact unintentionally distorting that saving gospel. Walther says it quite bluntly when he says, "Without the Law the Gospel is not understood."<sup>13</sup> Or listen to these two comments from George Stoeckhardt, Walther's co-worker at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis:

Ever and everywhere the Law must make room and prepare the way for the Gospel. Hence the pastor misses the purpose of his vocation if he passes lightly and quickly over the Law. Thereby he does damage not only to the Law, which certainly is also a word of the living God, but especially the Gospel. The Gospel is suspended in midair, as it were, and does not take hold of a man, does not enter into the heart.<sup>14</sup>

A pastor who preaches only the Gospel bolts and barricades for his hearers the door to the Gospel, to grace and salvation, to faith, and to godliness. A pastor who in his sermons treads all too softly, who deals all too tenderly with his hearers, comforting himself with the thought of having made heaven very attractive to his hearers, of having brought the grace of Christ very close to them, deceives himself with a false comfort. Because he has spared himself and his hearers the bitter things, because he does not care to touch upon the disagreeable matter of sin, he has spoiled their taste for grace, for the sweetness of the Gospel.<sup>15</sup>

If our sinful nature would like to harbor the thought that perhaps this is the outmoded way of thinking of those who didn't have our "advanced" psychological understanding of the human psyche, then listen also to these direct words of a current liberal theologian. "If the gospel is not placed in bold relief against the background of the demonic, sin, wrath and hell, it degenerates into a saccharine-sweet

<sup>11</sup> Braaten, p. 112.

<sup>12</sup> Siegbert Becker, "Observing the Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel in the Preaching and Teaching Ministry" (Unpublished Essay) p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Walther, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> George Stoeckhardt, *Law and Gospel: According to Their Several Effects* (Valparaiso: Valparaiso University Press, 1946) p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Stoeckhardt, p. 35-36.

message of civilizing aphorisms."<sup>16</sup> Have any of our sermons forced upon the gospel this malevolent metamorphosis?

Yet there may be an even worse distortion of the gospel than what was mentioned above—if that is possible. Where the gospel is proclaimed without the law, it can in reality be turned into the exact opposite of what we thought we were preaching. Striving to avoid the accusations of the law, we arrive there by default. Unfortunately for our hearers we are arriving there in the midst of what we thought was nothing but pure gospel!

Attempting to preach the gospel apart from the law ends up actually turning the gospel into law! This is true not only of forgiveness offered apart from an admission of guilt but...also of the central Reformation insight into the heart of the gospel, that we are "justified by faith alone." For if we are justified by faith alone, then all the other places to which we flee for refuge, comfort, and security are exposed as false gods and idols, rivals competing for the reverence and respect due only to the Lord God. Apart from a preached word of law that names our idolatry, God's promise of justification will itself inevitably accuse us. In order for gospel (content) to be heard as gospel (impact), it must follow the preaching of the law.<sup>17</sup>

Refusing to do our "alien work" of preaching the law, we can easily and inadvertently turn our gospel preaching into something alien to its very nature. We have performed a grave disservice to our people if, after we proclaim that God has declared our sins forgiven out of his free and unmerited grace, they are left to ponder: "Forgiven, for what in particular? And is grace really so unmerited?" Unwilling to proclaim the condemning accusations of the law, the very gospel we thought was comforting our hearers can turn on us as we unleash it into the congregation. It easily becomes a proclamation of law that attacks and accuses.

But there is at least one more devastating effect to document. Whenever the law as mirror is dimmed, our theological conscience that pleads with us to let the gospel predominate is also often silenced. Why go on at length and in glorious detail about the wonder of God's redemption and rescue operation if there isn't all that much to be rescued from? By default, law as mirror fades, and gospel as comfort becomes nearly superfluous ("Don't they know that already?"). What then rises to the surface as the chief purpose of preaching is the law in its third use. And, then, what Bryan Chapell calls the "Deadly Be's" of preaching in the "Evangelical" world ("Be like," "Be good," "Be disciplined")<sup>18</sup> become the chief thing in our own preaching. More and more a subtle work-righteousness-by-implication can become the message heard from the pulpit.

Messages that are not Christ-centered (i.e., not redemptively focused) inevitably become human-centered, even though the drift most frequently occurs unintentionally among evangelical preachers. These preachers do not deliberately exclude Christ's ministry from their own, but by consistently preaching messages on the order of "Five Steps to a Better Marriage," "How to Make God Answer Your Prayers," and "Achieving Holiness through the Power of Resolve," they present godliness entirely as a product of human endeavor. Although such preaching is intended for good, its exclusive focus on actuating or accessing divine blessings through human works carries the message, "It is the doing of these things that will get you right with God and/or your neighbor." No message is more damaging to true faith. By making human efforts the measure and the cause of godliness, evangelicals fall victim to the twin assaults of theological legalism and liberalism—which despite their perceived opposition are actually identical in making one's relationship with God dependent on human goodness.<sup>19</sup>

While none of us as "good Lutherans" might ever be quite so crass in our sermon themes or emphases, whenever we allow the third use of the law to dominate in our preaching, we are indeed in danger of just such subtle legalism. What is more, since, as our confessions remind us, the law always accuses (though

<sup>16</sup> Braaten, p. 112.

<sup>17</sup> David Lose, "Words that Do Things," *dialog: A Journal of Theology* (Volume 39, No 3, Fall 2000) p. 196.

<sup>18</sup> Chapell, p. 288f.

<sup>19</sup> Chapell, p. 288-289.

that, indeed, is not all it does), we easily appear to offer our hearers one of two unfortunate choices: either they pharisaically agree that they have been what we are urging them to do or be, or they go home burdened by what they know they haven't done or been. If the third use of the law is the predominant message of the sermon, all that seems to be left for those who honestly took to heart what we said is to promise to us or God that they will do better the next time. We are then in grave danger of having committed the cardinal preaching sin for those who claim the gospel as their greatest homiletical jewel: we have sent our hearers out looking to themselves instead of to Christ. "This is the bottom line of Christ-centered preaching: When a sermon is done, do people look to themselves or to God for their security? Only when they know to look to God alone has a sermon been truly beneficial and biblical."<sup>20</sup>

Of course, we could always try to hide behind the papier-mâché defense that our people are so well versed in the gospel that we can assume that all they need to do is "just add Christ" wherever necessary. Yet that defense is indeed paper-thin. "Why should we assume listeners will understand what we rarely say, what the structure of our communication contradicts, and what their own nature denies?"<sup>21</sup>

If we question how much this troubles us (allowing the law in its third use to predominate in our preaching), perhaps we would do well to ask ourselves this: Why have Rick Warren's books had as much appeal as they have in our midst? For all his books' appearance of relevance and helpfulness for daily life, for all their apparent accuracy at prescribing potentially helpful "lists" from God's law, many of his writings give evidence of a failure to grasp the prime purpose of God's law as well as the corresponding need to allow the gospel to predominate. Even when we try to "baptize" Warren's books by "sprinkling" them with "a splash of gospel," aren't we in danger of compounding this very problem? Any remedy to this problem must be systemic not symptomatic! It is a distortion of law and gospel that all too often refuses to let either carry out its primary purpose. Of course, before we get too worked up, perhaps the poverty of our own sanctification preaching has left an unfortunate void into which such "how to" books are more than willing to rush!

All of this taken together can have the devastating effect of creating in the pulpit an unintentional but devastating dishonesty. As Professor John Jeske was often fond of saying, from the pulpit "never is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all Sunday."<sup>22</sup> Speaking about the wrath of God over sin begins to sound quaint, if not passé. We begin to feel uneasy speaking like Paul who said, "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them" (Ephesians 5:5-7). While it is quite clear that Paul is describing the lifestyle that was perfectly acceptable in the pagan world, it is also equally clear that he has spoken this warning to the Christians in the church in Ephesus. If they falsely believed they could dabble again in such idolatry, they too would fall under the wrath of God.

If we underestimate the ability of the Christian to deceive himself, we would do well to listen to Jesus' powerful words that exposed the pitiful results of such satanically assisted self-deception among the members of the church of Laodicea. "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Revelation 3:17). It is not this author's claim that large portions of our congregations have plunged into that same depth of spiritual self-deception. But if we close our eyes to that threat, it is the pulpit that will be the first to be deceived. It will be the pulpit that will have ceased to speak the whole truth of the danger that lurks within the sinful nature of us all! To say anything less is not honest!

What an odd state of affairs it would be if so much in the world preaches to people God's wrath over sin but our pulpit is silent about it! The created world speaks volumes about the wrath of God over sin—it was subjected to frustration for that very purpose of proclaiming that the perfection of Eden has been lost (Genesis 3:16-19; Romans 8:22). All the disharmony between sinful human beings from corner office to family room (Genesis 3:16) proclaims that our world has gone rebel and sought to steal away from God the honor that is

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<sup>20</sup> Chapell, p. 327.

<sup>21</sup> Chapell, p. 289.

<sup>22</sup> Jeske, p. 9.

his—and that there is no honor among thieves. And this is not being shouted loudspeaker-like only from everything outside of us. The voice of conscience ceaselessly accuses as it whispers about judgment to come (Romans 1:32; 2:14-16).

Yet when it comes to the wrath of God does the pulpit alone go strangely silent? Every other venue of our people's lives will tell them that we are being far less than honest if we do not confirm what every experience in this sinful world is trying to tell us. In fact, we end up in the uncomfortable position—at least by what we don't say—of preaching contrary to God's own preaching of his law in the heavens and the hearts of all people. Are we no longer willing to imitate Paul as he spoke to the Thessalonian Christians, "the Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you" (1 Thessalonians 4:6)? Does the author to the Hebrews seem to be speaking another language than us when he holds before those Jewish Christians that "it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31) and that "our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29)? If the inspired authors are telling the truth, and we refuse to speak that way, who is lying? Whose preaching becomes less than honest?

Please remember: the issue here is not the degree to which the grossest forms of worldly immorality are present in our congregations. Have we forgotten that the besetting sin of so many in Israel was not gross immorality but hidden arrogance? Priding themselves in a lifestyle that was outwardly superior to an immoral world, they refused to submit to God's righteousness and "sought to establish their own" (Romans 10:3). Where were their preachers? Where are ours? Remember: the father in the parable didn't just lose a son when one ran away to a distant country. He was in danger of losing another who never left home!

### **The Solution: Fearless Law Preaching Without Compromising Gospel Predominance**

Honesty. That's all that is called for. But that's everything! The solution begins when we honestly address the reality of the depravity of the natural hearts that we will carry around with us until the day we die!

One does not give cause for despair if one warns sick people of the seriousness of their illness and urges them to see a doctor for a cure. Despair would rather come if one is falsely optimistic and tells them that they don't need a physician while they steadily decline toward death. We see again how remarkably realistic and unsentimental the theologian of the cross is. The theologian of the cross knows that we do the world no good by playing the role of pious and sentimental optimists. One must "say what a thing is." One is given the courage to be honest.<sup>23</sup>

I can join Paul in speaking with absolute honesty the truth that "nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature" (Romans 7:18). I don't have to play deceptive comparison games with sin to "save face" ("Your sins are bad, while mine are relatively harmless."). I can deal with the fact that all sin is mortal by merit (even while I give thanks that in the heart of a repentant believer it is "venial" because of Christ). I can honestly speak about the wrath of God—even if it makes our culture, and me, uncomfortable. "The wrath of God must be taken seriously, if not by the culture, then at least by Christians who understand what is at stake."<sup>24</sup> I don't have to close my eyes to the fact that all of us, including the one standing in the pulpit, brought with us "a pretty vigorous portion of the Old Adam"<sup>25</sup> when we were brought into the kingdom of God by water and the Word (John 3:5). I don't have to pretend that "good Christians" (whatever that is supposed to mean!) don't struggle with the kind of doubt or temptation that any particular text reveals. No one will be surprised that Jesus didn't speak about great faith except in the context of forthright and unfeigned confessions of unworthiness (Matthew 8:5f and 15:21f).

<sup>23</sup> Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997) p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> John Oberdeck, "Speaking to Contemporary American Culture on Sin and the Wrath of God," *Concordia Journal* (Volume 31, Number 4, October 2005) p. 409.

<sup>25</sup> Walther, p. 315.

The addict is not deceived by theological marshmallows but is told the truth so that he might at least learn to confess, to say, "I am an addict," "I am an alcoholic," and never to stop saying it. Theologically, and more universally all must learn to say, "I am a sinner," and likewise never to stop saying it until Christ's return makes it no longer true.<sup>26</sup>

As painful as it is to say that—daily—right there in confession is a release from hypocrisy! All empty boasting and bargaining with God is over. It is release from all fruitless striving that vainly seeks to avoid the simple honesty of the tax collector: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). After all, that is still as honest a personal confession as it was when the Apostle Paul spoke about sinners, and then quickly added, "of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:16). Yes, I know (and so did Paul) that this is not the end of the story. But without that confession, I am living—and preaching—a lie, and I will distort the very gospel I prize into something other than what it is for me—and my people!

But don't avoid the abyss on one side only to fall into the bog on the other! Luther was fond of saying that human nature is like a drunken man on a donkey. He falls off the donkey, picks himself up, gets back on the donkey and, in his drunken stupor, overcorrects. He thereby proceeds to fall off the other side of the donkey! I dare not become so enamored with preaching the law that, after falling off one side of the donkey into antinomianism, I overcorrect and end up in legalism. May we ever be able to speak as Luther did in his commentary on Galatians:

In my heart there reigns, and shall ever reign, this one article, namely, faith in my dear Lord Jesus Christ, which is the sole beginning, middle, and end of all spiritual and godly thoughts which I may have at any time, day or night.<sup>27</sup>

God help us if we are ever tempted to put on our IRS forms "minister of the law" as our occupation!

That is why, even as I am making sure to let God's law be heard by the Christians before me, there are certain things I dare not forget. While the operation of law and gospel is no different whether they are being proclaimed to believer or unbeliever, I cannot forget that the believing subjects to whom I am addressing that law and gospel are different at their core. I must not forget that I am preaching to Christians who possess a new self.

In applying negative examples and precepts we must remember that we are addressing a Christian congregation and not a group of unregenerate heathen. We ask searching questions rather than make charges or blanket accusations with regard to the sins of commission and omission into which Christians may lapse. We are careful in using the pronoun "we," for not all Christians can be included in every specific condemnation; and the preacher himself may not want to make public confession of a particular sin by saying "we." We are all sinners but not all are guilty of the same specific sins.<sup>28</sup>

I dare not speak to them as if I believed they are all nothing but hypocrites or describe them as sinning in such a way that the old self has entirely taken over and the new self has been banished ("You are always doing nothing but lying to your neighbor!"). Yes, the seeds of every temptation and hypocrisy on the pages of Scripture find fertile and welcoming ground in my sinful nature, but by the grace of God there is a new "I" at home in my heart. It is the new self created by the Spirit. All that is true about me by nature is most definitely not true about that which the Spirit has graciously planted in me. While we are *simul justus et peccator*, yet I also cannot forget my status in Christ is child of God, saint, heir, and righteous. All of that—and more—my new self possesses. Yes, the law we preach to the Christian will kill and crucify his old self and, in that sense, lead him to hell. But we are not justified therefore in speaking as if they were already in hell and as good as judged—only to smile a moment later and say, "Never mind!" I cannot forget that as a

<sup>26</sup> Forde, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Walther, p. 408.

<sup>28</sup> Balge, John and Gerlach, Joel, *Preach the Gospel* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 1982) p. 75.



preacher I have an ally within my hearers with whom I am partnering. That new self in my hearers also desires to put their own old self to death and welcomes a rebuke fittingly spoken by a loving friend, even when that friend is standing in the pulpit. The new self within agrees with the psalm writer, "Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it" (Psalm 141:5). C. F. W. Walther caught the spirit of that verse when he wrote:

Anybody may utter a warning or a rebuke to a Christian, and it will be accepted. Occasionally he may resist for a moment and, as Luther puts it, allow the devil to ride him, but unless he is beside himself and for a while does not see that his conduct is unchristian and ungodly, he soon feels a fire burning in him, and it will not take long before he begs God and men for forgiveness.<sup>29</sup>

But remembering that my hearers possess a new self also brings with it another truth I must not fail to proclaim. As new creatures in Christ, we possess in the gospel, ever since our baptism, the same power to live that once raised Christ from the dead (Romans 6)! The gospel has freed us not only from sin's guilt but from sin's power as well. Sin doesn't own us anymore. Christ does! It is proclaiming that truth of our gospel freedom that gives a whole new spirit to our preaching of sanctification. The power of the gospel changes the preaching of sanctification so that even there the heart of our message is a truth to believe, not merely a calling to fulfill.

We are not in the least violating the gospel when we urge and encourage God's freed people to put that power to work in their unique callings from God. In fact, this helps us avoid a strangely Lutheran distortion of passages urging sanctified living. Lutheran homileticians have often correctly warned us not to turn passages that are chiefly appropriation (this believe!) into application (this do!). Yet the opposite danger is one that tends to be found only in Lutheran pulpits. That is the danger of changing a passage of application (with clear "this do" implications for my new self) into passages merely for appropriation.

That can happen, for example, when we take a passage such as Paul's encouragement to Timothy not to be ashamed to testify (2 Timothy 1:8) and use it only to convict and comfort. We seize an encouragement to sanctification, point out where we have failed in the past (perfectly legitimate!), comfort our hearers with the perfect faithfulness of Christ (absolutely vital!), and then stop! After all, as a caricature of our law/gospel dialectic would seem to imply, we've accomplished our purpose, right?

Wrong! We have yet to allow the passage to serve its intended purpose. That text wants us to find in the gospel not only comfort for our sinful fears but the power that is ours in Christ to overcome those fears so that we live and confess—unafraid of what men can do to us! Yes, even in sanctification the basic message is always "This believe!" But in this text there is specific direction for that power that Paul wasn't afraid to mention. Neither should we! This strange and clumsy Lutheran distortion-in-reverse often occurs when we are preaching from the "sanctification half" of Paul's epistles. Right here our beautiful pericope series of lessons betrays us, unless we are careful to observe the context from which that text was "cut around."

But not only do I need to be careful that I do not address God's people as rank unbelievers, or turn application texts into appropriation texts, I must also watch the tone and attitude with which I preach the law as mirror. I dare not preach as if there is some kind of legitimate preacher's *Schadenfreude* that finds fiendish delight in making people squirm in the pew. We must "resist the temptation to speak this truth in ways that cut people off at the knees."<sup>30</sup> It's not that the law I'm speaking isn't going to kill and crucify the old flesh of the hearers. That it will. That is God's intent. But here's the point: this isn't intended to be my delight but my burden. We want this to be not only what we often call God's "alien work," but ours as well. With the apostle Paul we at the same time regret—and yet we don't regret—what must be said (2 Corinthians 7:8). With Paul we learn from the law and gospel applied to our own hearts to empathize with God's people, "Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Corinthians 11:29).

<sup>29</sup> Walther, p. 329.

<sup>30</sup> Janet Strohl, "Law and Gospel in Preaching," *dialog: A Journal of Theology* (Volume 39, Number 3, Fall 2000) p. 167.

And right there is the clue to our greatest defense against a preacher's *Schadenfreude*. The defense against a tone of arrogance and harshness is found in our study when the first sinner the specific law of that text crucifies—and the first saint the specific gospel cheers—is the one who will stand in the pulpit! That will enable me to preach the law as sharply as Jeremiah but with the same spirit as the prophet who wept for his people (Jeremiah 9:1). What a picture of him whose own tears would fall even for the stubborn and rebellious of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41)!

Remember also, the forcefulness of the law does not depend on the finger I point (don't do it!) or whether the loudness of my voice can rival the trumpets of Sinai (you can't!). The power of the law is in its very message and the Spirit who uses that message "to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). I can betray a lack of confidence that the law will work if I feel I must be a bit "ornery" and "get in the face" of my hearers.

By that I may frustrate my partner (the new self of the hearer) as I tempt his/her sinful nature "mentally to imitate seven-year-olds, who cover their ears and cockily proclaim, 'I can't hear you,' when parental commentary on their lack of discipline becomes too threatening."<sup>31</sup> This does not mean we back away in the least from what the law says. It is, however, a commentary on how I will choose to say it. I often try to remind myself, and my homiletics students, that the foolishness of what is preached does not excuse foolish preaching. If I try to force the law to work in the hearts of my hearers by the forcefulness of my presentation, I may often prevent the Spirit from having the opportunity to do so. If the authority and power of the Word is his, don't I need to leave "room" for him to work? Often, it is a matter of just letting what the text or context has to say do the "heavy lifting." Just assist your hearers to understand and come to grips with what it truly says just as we did in our study! Yes, you have authority to preach to your hearers as God's mouthpiece, but don't parade that by refusing to stand by the side of your hearers as with them you are struck again by the Word that cuts and kills. Preaching the law only with "you" is a verbal index finger constantly and arrogantly wagging at my hearers. "Obviously, a preacher who never confronts others speaks without the authority Scripture grants, but a pastor who never identifies with listeners preaches with an arrogance even Jesus did not assume."<sup>32</sup> Ours is a borrowed authority. We cannot forget that.

And the last warring "on the other side," as we prepare to preach the law as mirror without apology, is the one you would expect (finally!) from any Lutheran preacher: do not fail to let the gospel maintain its clear predominance. No Lutheran homiletician strives merely for law and gospel "balance" but for clear law and gospel "distinction." Luther would point out repeatedly in his preaching that it is the devil himself who loves to ride troubled consciences. If we continue to pour out the law when consciences are troubled by the knowledge of their sins, we have switched sides in the battle!<sup>33</sup> The devil is as perfectly willing to drive people to destruction via the route marked "despair" as he is via the one marked "pride." He's not fussy about which road he takes the sinner. He knows they both end in hell.

There's still another reason why the gospel must predominate from our pulpit. We do well to remember that while the law kills (as well as becoming the new self's servant to point direction for new life), yet it has no power in the least to comfort for sin or empower for new life. Hammering with the law has never changed a single sinner for the better. The law's "finest hour" is only to serve as the humble handmaiden for the gospel. Only the gospel with its twin blessings of comfort and power can heal and give life. Both in justification and in sanctification the gospel rules! That truth is what makes these words from Walther's *Law and Gospel* so precious for our preaching. As Walther comments on Paul's statement that it was of "first importance" that he preached Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 15:3), he makes this comment:

Now, do not merely listen to this statement of the apostle, but think of the time when you will be the pastor

<sup>31</sup> Strohl, p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> Chapell, p. 146 (footnote 40).

<sup>33</sup> See in particular Luther's priceless sermon on Luke 18:9-14 as found in *Sermons of Martin Luther, Volume IV*, pages 348-369. After going on at quite some length in crucifying detail about the prayer of the Pharisee and how this strikes at the heart of us all, he then suddenly "turns" to point out how the devil now wants to take that knowledge we just gained and use it against us! Luther's paragraphs on how the gospel had taught the tax collector to combine in faith the concepts "sinner" and "mercy" are exquisite.

of a congregation and make a vow to God that you will adopt the apostle's method, that you will not stand in your pulpits sad-faced, as if you were bidding men to come to a funeral, but like men that go wooing a bride or announcing a wedding. If you do not mingle Law with the Gospel you will always mount your pulpit with joy. People will notice that you are filled with joy because you are bringing the blessed message of joy to your congregation. They will furthermore notice that wonderful things are happening among them. Alas! Many ministers do not meet with these wonderful experiences; their hearers remain sleepy; their misers stay stingy. What is the reason? Not sufficient Gospel has been preached to them.<sup>34</sup>

The reason for all this gospel predominance is obvious to all of us when we recall another basic difference between law and gospel: although at least partially distorted by our sinful nature, the law is seen and heard in the created world around us and understood in our hearts, but "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). That is why "God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:10). That is also why we must let this clearly predominate in our preaching (and teaching, and counseling, etc.). How fitting again is the reminder of Walther, "But in affliction you will realize that the Gospel is a rare guest in men's consciences, while the Law is their daily and familiar companion."<sup>35</sup> No, this doesn't make the law superfluous in our preaching. The heart with which I was born is still "deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9) and loves to distort what nature and conscience—often vainly—are trying to preach to me. But Walther's statement does lead to this conclusion: if the gospel is not the crowning point of my sermon and the most stunning jewel I hold aloft before my people, I will be doing more harm than good. The end result of my sermon is not intended to suspend hearers curiously in some kind of purgatory between hell and heaven—left in doubt as to what their status before God really is! Yes, they will have been struck and killed by the law and taught anew to distrust the heart with which they were born. Yet the goal of the evangelical Lutheran preacher is that his hearers shout this with joyful certainty: "Yes, I have died, but I have also risen, and my life 'is now hidden with Christ in God'" (Colossians 3:3).

### **So...What Does This Mean in the Nuts and Bolts of Preaching?**

I must realize that I have not moved beyond interesting spiritual "trivial pursuit" in my text study until I have found the explicit or implicit way this text cuts and kills me (first!) and my hearers. If you have ever wondered what makes sermon work so hard, it is precisely this: you must be the first one to die in the process. I will have nothing worthwhile to preach until I have identified what our homiletics professors call the "malady" of the text. It is what Dr. Bryan Chapell calls the Fallen Condition Focus (FCF).<sup>36</sup>

As we seek to grasp the malady or FCF of the text, it is absolutely critical that we pierce beyond outward symptoms to the underlying disease we share with those addressed or spoken about in the text. It is far too easy to latch on to a symptom (fear, for example) while neglecting to pierce to the "heart" of the matter (the underlying refusal of my sinful nature to put any trust in God or his promises). Dealing only with symptoms tends merely to "cuff" the old self with the blunt side of the law's blade. Probing to the causes behind those sinful symptoms will be a deadly rapier thrust at his heart. And remember, it is your sinful nature that God is aiming at first. That alone most effectively guards us from preaching the law with the pomposity possible only by those who have yet to remove the beam that is distorting the view through their law and gospel bifocals. While the application of the malady or FCF to our lives may not always be perfectly identical to how it will apply specifically to our hearers, we will clearly be hunting down a beneficial path.

But as you spend this time (it may take hours!) wrestling with a sharp and focused malady that doesn't

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<sup>34</sup> Walther, p. 406.

<sup>35</sup> Walther, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Here is Chapell's definition of the FCF: "The Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God's people to glorify and enjoy him (p. 50).

just "cuff" but "pierces," please do not fail to spend even more time discovering a sharp and clear and focused specific gospel as unique and fitting to that text as the specific law you are about to proclaim.

Too often preachers announce the law in breathtakingly vivid and concrete language only to lapse into pious but vague clichés about the nature or beauty of the gospel. If the gospel is to be heard and believed so that it can create faith—and therefore do its work to our hearers—we need to preach it as fully, concretely, imaginatively, and passionately as we do the law.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, this too, just as with the law, finds its "how?" in the pastor's study. This is not a matter of posting a note in our pulpit that says, "Be Passionate!" This comes as we find that the Word of God that killed us in our study also gives us life! This comes as we see that God's Word inflicts no specific wounds to which it does not also bare specific remedy and perfect healing—both saving love and power beyond our comprehension.

That also provides the clue to what this looks and sounds like in the pulpit. It means when we preach that we do not hide the joy and delight that the gospel brought to our hearts and the confidence it gives. That is true even though this side of heaven our joy and confidence is expressed in the midst of the very fears and doubts that still bring tears to our eyes. It is a caricature of Lutheran preaching to be afraid of genuine emotion that flows from a study of the text. It is the hucksterish manipulation of emotions that Lutherans—and others—decry. If we think emotion is only for revivalist preachers, it would do us good to read more of Luther's sermons. Genuine emotion, the fruit of the law and gospel at work to kill and bring life to him, oozes out of every pore of his sermons.

Even this is part of God's awesome plan of how he uses jars of clay in the pulpit! Could it be that one reason God doesn't use angels as his regular preachers of the gospel is that they, as always perfect creatures, cannot experience the awesome joy of having been "killed to life" by law and gospel? Certainly we aren't "existentialist" theologians. We know the Word remains the powerful truth of God whether I or my hearers "experience" it or not. Yet we also cannot be blind to the fact that what God is doing as we preach that Word is precisely what he did to us when we studied it.<sup>38</sup> Since the word of God is "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12) with the Spirit's power, the Word preached is always an active doing of the Spirit, not a mere recitation of Bible facts. What happens in the pulpit is not some kind of play we put on for the entertainment of the people (first you scowl to scare `em then you smile as you bring it home). Rather we are serving as the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit as through law and gospel he seeks to kill and give life to our hearers just as he used that Word to kill and give life to us as we studied it. If the "how" of our preaching is incongruous to that impact of law and gospel—for example, delivering the message as if we were nothing but a talking head—we forget that God has "put us...on display" (1 Corinthians 4:9) not only in what we are saying but as a living diorama of law and gospel. We are not dispassionate disclaimers of facts that have no relation to us. We are involved in the action. "You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:10-12). We do not stand in our pulpits as unbiased bystanders, but as those who have ourselves been through the death and life of law and gospel in that text, and who, with Paul, are speaking to the children we love of that same message of death and life. "Far from manufacturing or manipulating an experience of the gospel for their congregations, faithful preachers instead re-create their own encounter with God's active word."<sup>39</sup> While

<sup>37</sup> Lose, p. 197.

<sup>38</sup> Is this also why the best canned sermon you gleaned from another pales in comparison even to a mediocre sermon that God produced by putting you through the sweat and toil of its production? Preaching another's sermon is often little more than a third-person report about another's struggle. Our people may not know what's wrong, but they will often sense it. This is also closely related to the problem of warming up your old sermons. The death and life that happened in your study is a distant memory! The "logos" of both the "borrowed" sermon and the "canned" sermon may be accurate—perhaps even exemplary. The "pathos" as well as the "ethos" will typically be sorely lacking.

<sup>39</sup> Lose, p. 198.

Lose's terms reflect his existential theology, yet his preaching point is still accurate. The Spirit is always at work in the present through the Word we proclaim to accomplish the same awesome and wonderful things in the hearts of our hearers that he accomplished in our hearts as we studied the text. In fact, who of us has not learned for the first time—in the pulpit—the true depth of the law and the true height of the gospel of that text we thought we knew so well! Such is the depth of Scripture. Such is the Spirit's power in the law and gospel of that Word!<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion

Please understand that I don't write this essay as someone who has mastered this in the concrete of all his teaching and preaching. It's easy to outline in an essay or to put it on the board in confirmation class. It is a far different thing when we are applying a specific text to a specific group of God's people. My own sermons would betray my own dishonesty to call myself a master of this art. The doctor's cap Luther offered to the master of this art does not fit my head! Perhaps you will have to join me in that confession.

But here is our confidence! This is not a matter of human intelligence or natural skill (even though God can use such gifts). This is an art taught only in the Holy Spirit's school as we study his Word and apply it again and again to ourselves and others in concrete situations. Walther points out in *Law and Gospel* that many a simple country preacher has undoubtedly done a finer job of this than golden-mouthed St. Chrysostom who butchered it badly in so much of his work that has been preserved for us.<sup>41</sup>

You want to preach with all honesty both God's law and gospel in faithfulness to God's intent with his own Word? For that you will have to die again and again! That's the honest truth. But thank God! He has also promised to raise you to life again and again! That's his most astounding truth. That's how he makes us "competent as ministers of a new covenant" (2 Corinthians 3:6). So don't be surprised when it seems that God is smashing you to pieces in the winepress of another text from his Word. In the midst of that crushing death to self, he will raise you to life. And, in the process, he is at work to deliver to his people the fine wine, not of your learning and erudition, but of his law and his gospel faithfully and powerfully proclaimed by a dying and rising witness. That is the beauty of honest preaching!

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<sup>40</sup> This is why, although writing out a sermon is a critical step, preaching what we have committed to memory with a delivery free of our manuscript is even more critical. This is also why preaching is so exhausting—you die and rise all over again as you preach!

<sup>41</sup> Walther, p. 51.

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