

# Treasure in Jars of Clay: The Synergy Between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God's Plan of Salvation

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**1** Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. **2** Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. **3** And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. **4** The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. **5** For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. **6** For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

**7** But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. **8** We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; **9** persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. **10** We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. **11** For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. **12** So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

**13** It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, **14** because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.<sup>1</sup>

There is a reason your life savings are in a federally insured bank and not in a shoebox under your bed. When something is valuable, we protect it. And what could be more valuable than "the word of God... the truth... our gospel"? Nothing. God's Word "gives us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

Therefore, at first glance, it seems odd that God would place this treasure into something not much sturdier than a shoebox – "jars of clay," i.e. the apostles, disciples, you and me. Would it not have been wiser to entrust the Word to the angels? They are stronger, quicker, and braver than we are. And given their holiness and our frequent timidity, it is probably safe to say, they want the job more than we do.

But, upon closer examination, we see there is good reason for God's actions. He placed the treasure of the Gospel within jars of clay – weak, flawed, sinful human beings – "to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." If this treasure were dispensed from

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:1-14

something that was itself strong and powerful, then as enlightenment was received some of the credit might go to the treasure's vessel, rather than to the treasure itself.

The metaphor in this portion of Scripture depicts the relationship between mankind and the Means of Grace in God's plan of salvation. The Gospel is the treasure. It is what has value. It is what has power. Man is but the vessel in which the Gospel is carried. And yet, while St. Paul puts man in his proper place he also makes it clear – *man does have a role* in God's saving work. It is not bare treasure, but treasure *in jars of clay*.

Man's role in God's plan of salvation is not an insignificant one. Indeed, mankind plays so vital a role in God's plan of salvation that Lutheran theologians have referred to man's role as *the ministerial cause of salvation*.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the synergy that exists between God's instrumental cause of salvation (the Gospel) and his ministerial cause of salvation (you and me). First, we will define what we mean when we speak of "the causes of salvation." Secondly, we will look at how the instrumental cause of salvation, the Gospel, works. Thirdly, we will examine how the ministerial cause of salvation utilizes the instrumental cause. (Although all believers, as part of the universal priesthood, have the privilege and responsibility of partaking in Gospel ministry, for the purpose of this paper, we will focus on public ministry and public ministers.) Finally, we will contemplate some practical challenges that arise as we consider the synergy<sup>2</sup> that exists between the instrumental and ministerial causes of salvation.

## Part I: The Causes of Salvation

*If someone were to ask you, "Why are you saved?" how would you answer?*

- I am saved because, before the beginning of time, God chose to save me.
- I am saved because God's own Son, Jesus Christ, redeemed me from my sin by his death upon the cross.
- I am saved because, in his unlimited grace, God moved time and space to bring me to the font. There, the Holy Spirit gave me new birth through water and the Word.
- I am saved because, throughout my life, God has graciously sent believers who lovingly encouraged and corrected me with the Word, so that my faith might be preserved.

You really can't go wrong, can you? All of those answers give credit where credit is due. All four take the focus off the sinner and put it on the actions of our gracious God. Yet, all four are quite different. The first answer takes place outside of time; the second, two millennia ago; the third, likely at the beginning of your life; the fourth, even now as you read the Word of God contained within this paper. Clearly, there are multiple factors at play in God's saving work.

The Lutheran theologians called these factors *causes* of salvation. They emanate from a core, like layers of an onion. The great 17th century Lutheran theologian, Johann Andreas Quenstedt, breaks them down:

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<sup>2</sup> *Synergy* simply means "combined action or functioning."

At the heart of our salvation is the Trinity. He is *the principal cause*. Everything originates with him. Obviously, if there were no God, there would be no grace, no Savior, no Word, Sacraments, ministers, and so on and so forth.

The *impulsive causes* of salvation are those things which moved God to act for our benefit. There are inner impulsive causes: the tender heart and fatherly love of God. There are also outward impulsive causes: both the misery of mankind and the merits of Christ.

The *instrumental cause* of salvation is the Word and Sacrament. These are the tools by which God creates faith and gathers the Church.

The *ministerial cause* of salvation is the ministers God calls. They become God's agents, playing a vital role in his saving work, by utilizing the Word, i.e. the instrumental cause.<sup>3</sup>

*There is synergy, not separation, between causes.*

To delineate between these causes is not to separate them. For example, take the gift of faith. What is the cause of faith? Scripture tells us. The cause of faith is the Spirit. "No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit."<sup>4</sup> However, Scripture also tells us the cause of faith is the Gospel. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."<sup>5</sup> This is not double-speak. Scripture is teaching that while there are multiple causes of salvation, there is synergy between them. Johannes Musaeus explains:

I have... established that the *motivum formale fidei divinae principale* or primary stimulating cause of faith in God is God as the *prima veritas*, the independent, unchangeable truth. The *motivum instrumental* or instrumental stimulating cause is Holy Scripture, as God works the supernatural approval, or faith, in the heart of man, not without and apart from Scripture, but through it. Scripture too works faith, not by itself alone or apart from and without God, but through God's power. Accordingly both the working of God and the working of the Holy Spirit are one inseparable working.<sup>6</sup> (emphasis mine)

Scripture does this frequently, lumping causes together. Consider Titus 3:5. "[God] saved us (principal cause), not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy (impulsive cause). He saved us through the washing of rebirth (instrumental cause) and renewal by the Holy Spirit (principal cause)."

This is even done with the ministerial cause. Take First Corinthians as an example. In chapter 2, St. Paul writes: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."<sup>7</sup> Paul links the principal cause ("the Spirit's power) with the ministerial cause ("my message and my preaching"). He rightly subordinates the ministerial cause to the principal cause, because he knows the power to convert and save are ultimately not his, but God's. Yet, he is fully aware he has an important role to play.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *The Church*, ed. Luther Peillot (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 1999) 10-12.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:3

<sup>5</sup> Romans 10:17

<sup>6</sup> Cited by Adolf Hoenecke in *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics IV* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009) 22.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:4-5

Paul states things more strongly a few chapters later. “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (ἵνα πάντως τινὰς σώζω - Note the first person singular).<sup>8</sup> Based on what he said in chapter 2, you would perhaps expect Paul to say, “I have become all things so that by all possible means, *the Spirit* might save some.” Nope. Obviously, Paul isn’t teaching that he is the principal cause of salvation. He is recognizing that he is the ministerial cause of salvation, and that such a responsibility is not insignificant.

Now that we have defined the causes of salvation, let us turn our attention toward the synergy that exists between the final two: the instrumental cause and the ministerial cause. We begin by looking at how the instrumental cause of salvation works.

## Part II: The Instrumental Cause of Salvation

*The Word works. Hold that truth dear. Guard against the truism.*

I am not sure who said it first. However, I would be willing to bet that every confessional Lutheran pastor has said it at one point in his ministry. The Word works. It is a concise way of summarizing all that we believe when we confess *sola scriptura*. The word is inspired, inerrant, authoritative, sufficient, and effective. But there is a potential danger when we summarize Scriptural truth in pithy phrases. The truth may be obscured as truth warps into truism.

A truism is when an assertion is made which seems true, but it is incomplete. There is no context to determine if the statement is entirely true in any and every circumstance. An example: *Where there’s smoke, there’s fire*<sup>9</sup>. It is likely that if you see smoke you will find a fire as its source. But is it always true? Are there circumstances where there can be smoke, but no fire? Yes. Just as there are circumstances where there is fire without smoke.

The Word works. Is that truth? It depends. What are you trying to do? Do you have a tough stain in your trousers that you are trying to get out? Tide will actually work much better than the Scriptures. Is your car running rough? You need a good mechanic, not the Scripture. That isn’t to say that the Word of God couldn’t help you. In the beginning the Word resounded, and out of nothing sprung forth everything. Just by saying the word, “Lazarus, come out!” Jesus raised the man from the dead.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, if he willed it, God could speak, and the stain in your trousers would disappear. Since the Word is “the power of God”<sup>11</sup> it could do anything God wanted it to do. God could have chosen to inspire Scripture through which automobile health would be achieved, just as it is the power of the Word through which the Real Presence is achieved. But God didn’t choose to do that. Instead, God chooses to limit the effectiveness of the Word to its “proper use.”<sup>12</sup>

Throughout history, people have trusted the power of the Word to no avail. For they were relying on the Word apart from its proper use. In the superstitious days before the Reformation, it was not uncommon that if someone was sick, a Bible would be placed upon his chest. Does the

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:22

<sup>9</sup> The terms cliché and truism are essentially synonymous. The term cliché is used more often when describing literary devices. The term truism is used more often in philosophical discussions.

<sup>10</sup> John 11:43

<sup>11</sup> Romans 1:16

<sup>12</sup> “The powerful Word has no effect apart from its use (extra usum).” Hoenecke 8,9.

Word work in such circumstances? Again, it could, if God so desired. But, in his wisdom, God has decided that the Word shall not work *physically*, i.e. physical contact with the Word provides benefit. The Word doesn't work in such circumstances, because that is not its proper use.

Perhaps you have entered a home with a mezuzah nailed to the doorframe. It contains a tiny scroll on which are printed various Bible passages. It is believed this will bring blessing to the home. Will the Word work in this case? Of course not. Truth has become truism.

The Word is powerful, but it is not effective in cleaning my laundry; powerful, but ineffective in fixing my car; powerful, but has no healing effect upon the sick. (Although, it certainly encourages us to pray for the sick, and then God, either by direct intervention or working through medical means, can provide healing if he so chooses.)

So does the Word work? It depends. Are you relying on it to work according to its proper use? To correctly understand the synergy between the instrumental and ministerial causes of salvation, we need to be clear how the Word works, and for what purpose.

### *The purpose of the Word*

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.<sup>13</sup>

We use this as a *sedes doctrinae* for the efficacy of the Word. "It will accomplish what I desire," God says. Not *can*. Certainly not *might*. It *will*. Every single time the Word of God is shared, it accomplishes God's purpose.

What is the purpose of the Word? It is not God's will that any one should be damned, but that all men should be converted to him and be saved eternally... Therefore God, out of his immense goodness and mercy, has his divine eternal Law and his wonderful plan concerning our redemption, namely, the holy, alone-saving Gospel of his eternal Son, our only Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, publically preached; and by this preaching collects an eternal Church for himself from the human race, and works in the hearts of men true repentance and knowledge of sins, and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. And by this means, and in no other way, namely, through his holy Word, when men hear it preached or read it, and the holy Sacraments when they are used according to his Word, God desires to call men to eternal salvation...<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes, through the Word, the Holy Spirit breaks the stony dead heart of man to pieces, and from the rubble he constructs a new and living heart of faith. Sometimes, through the Word, the Holy Spirit nourishes the fruits of faith in the hearts of a believer, just as the rain causes the earth to "bud and flourish." Still other times, the hearer resists the working of the Word. The Word then hardens the heart, confirming the presence of the sinful nature and spiritual death. This is to God's glory as well. While the testimony of the natural world and the

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<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 55:10,11 – There is a parallelism at the end of verse 11 תִּשְׂבֹּר הַפִּצְתִּי וְהִצְלִיחַ אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְתִּיו. עֲשֵׂה אֵ - "It shall accomplish that which I desire *and* it shall succeed in that for which I sent it." "It shall accomplish" and "It shall succeed" are parallel thoughts. So are "what I desire" and "that for which I sent it." God sent his Word because he had a desire that needed to be satisfied.

<sup>14</sup> *Formula of Concord: Thorough Declaration*, Concordia Triglotta 901.

unbeliever's conscience will leave him "without excuse" on Judgment Day<sup>15</sup>, the rejection of the clear promise of the Word will provide further evidence that the unbeliever's eternal condemnation is just and right.

To understand the instrumental cause of salvation we need to understand its primary purpose. "[God] wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."<sup>16</sup> We see the parallel thoughts in this verse. God wants all men to be saved. How exactly? Salvation requires the truth. The truth is the tool. The truth is the means. The truth is the instrumental cause of salvation. "What is truth?" skeptics would ask, along with Pontius Pilate.<sup>17</sup> Jesus himself answers, "Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth."<sup>18</sup>

*The Word is truth; therefore, it works psychologically.*

Truth. Facts. That is the essence of Scripture. Because the Scripture is a series of facts, Scripture is perceived as are all facts – by the senses. The truth affects our emotions, our will, and our intellect.<sup>19</sup> This becomes abundantly evident when you look at the way Scripture describes what Scripture does.

St. Paul writes, "From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."<sup>20</sup> Paul strings together four words (*πρὸς διδασκαλίαν, πρὸς ἐλεγμὸν, πρὸς ἐπανόρθωσιν, πρὸς παιδείαν*), all of which "[proceed] in a manner appropriate to the intellectual nature of man." For the Word "is mediated intellectually."<sup>21</sup>

Jesus himself taught that when the Word is heard but not understood it does no spiritual good. "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart."<sup>22</sup> Since the Word only has spiritual benefit when it is perceived, St. Peter writes, "We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it..."<sup>23</sup>

The psychological working of the Word is not limited to the intellect. As the Word appeals to the intellect, it affects also the emotions, purifying them. The psalmist declares, "I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path."<sup>24</sup>

Seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian Johann Huelsemann writes:

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<sup>15</sup> Romans 1:20

<sup>16</sup> 1 Timothy 2:4

<sup>17</sup> John 18:38

<sup>18</sup> John 17:17

<sup>19</sup> "In so far as God's Word is indeed word, or speech, its power works psychologically." – Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics 13. The word translated "psychologically" is *moralisch*. *Moralisch* is broader in meaning than *psychologically*. Prof. Daniel Deutschlander says that when *moralisch* is used theologically, it refers to something that appeals to the natural knowledge of God, touching on our emotions, will, and intellect.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Timothy 3:15,16

<sup>21</sup> Hoenecke 13,14.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 13:19

<sup>23</sup> 2 Peter 1:19

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 119:104

The Word of God has this in common with ordinary human words: just as a man's word is an expression or indication of what is in his mind, by means of which he indicates to another man the thoughts of his mind, either to seek those things which he desires or to share those things which he has, so the Word of God is an indication of God's will, by which God makes known to us what he wants us to believe and do.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, in the fact that the Scripture works psychologically, it is no different than all other writings. It proclaims facts and truths. To be of benefit, the truth of Scripture needs to be perceived.

*The Word proclaims impossible truth; therefore, it also works supernaturally.*

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”<sup>26</sup> The Word proclaims truth, and that truth is psychologically perceived. But because the truth which the Word proclaims is often offensive to both our human reason and our sinful nature, it cannot be perceived purely and solely by intellect.

The psychological effective power of speech presupposes that the hearer can fully understand its basis and proofs, pass judgment on their validity, appropriate the presentation, and go along with its suggestions. If this presupposition does not apply, then we cannot speak of a merely psychological working.<sup>27</sup>

For example, if the Word simply taught that there was a man named Jesus born in Bethlehem, my intellect would grasp what you are saying. My reason would weigh historical evidence. That's all that would be needed for me to assent to what the Word said. However, the Word tells me that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, it was to a virgin. The Word tells me that the reason she was pregnant was that the Holy Spirit had caused her to conceive. The Word tells me that the reason this was necessary was because I am totally corrupt and needed the God-man to live and die for me. That is still a psychological appeal. My intellect registers what that means. But my reason does not grasp how that could possibly be truth. Moreover, my sinful nature hates the claim that it is truth!

The Word asks us to believe things that are impossible to comprehend. Indeed, the Word states things which are not only “hard to understand”<sup>28</sup>, but also entirely irrational. The virgin birth is small potatoes in the list of logical absurdities one finds in Scripture. Take the very existence of God.

- There are three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who have distinct consciousnesses and unique personalities.
- All three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are God. They are not part God, nor a third of God. They are each entirely God.
- There is one God.

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<sup>25</sup> *De auxiliis gratie* III, IV. Quoted in Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics IV 14.

<sup>26</sup> Hebrews 11:1

<sup>27</sup> Hoenecke 16,17.

<sup>28</sup> 2 Peter 3:16

- That isn't just "complicated." It's more than "a stretch." It offends our God-given reason. Under the rules of logic, those three statements cannot all be true. Yet they are.
- Incomprehensible truth lies at the heart of the Gospel.
- God cannot die.
- Jesus is true God. He is not partly God, not half-man and half-God. He is entirely God. His two natures – human and divine – are so inseparable that what he does as one, he does as the other.
- Jesus died on a cross.

This is crazy talk! And it's just the start. For the Word does not simply affront our intellect. It brutalizes our will, speaking of self-denial and cross-bearing. It batters us emotionally, telling us that before we had a brain to think a sinful thought or lips to mouth a sinful word, we were under God's wrath simply because of who our parents were.<sup>29</sup>

Yes, the Word works psychologically, touching our intellect, will, and emotions. And on all three fronts it rubs us raw! And so right after Paul explains that the Word is the teaching of the Spirit, he goes on to explain why this must be the case. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."<sup>30</sup>

Hoenecke summarizes:

If Scripture as God's Word... works psychologically so that man understands its arguments, appreciates them, even inclines to them with spirit and will, and submits himself to them, this only happens because the Spirit has a more than merely psychological power, a supernatural power, nothing other than the power of God himself.<sup>31</sup>

Or, in St. Paul's own words, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit..."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the Spirit is the author of Scripture, and not just of the thoughts. The very words of the Word were of the Spirit's choosing. Thus "the Spirit and Word are bound together inseparably and always work together in one inseparable act... The workings of the Spirit are always the workings of Scripture too."<sup>33</sup>

A logical, eloquent argument can persuade me to do many things. But eloquence and wisdom will not lead me to believe in things which offend both my sinful nature and my reason. They cannot create faith – belief in that which cannot be seen or proven or even completely understood. That takes something more – the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit, which fills the Word through and through. To put it another way, the Word alone is what has the supernatural power to raise the spiritually dead and grant both spiritual and eternal life. And so

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<sup>29</sup> Insult my mom? Those are emotionally charged, fighting words!

<sup>30</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:14

<sup>31</sup> Hoenecke 16,17.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1:5

<sup>33</sup> Hoenecke 21.



Jesus said, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”<sup>34</sup>

*An example of the Word working both psychologically and supernaturally*

It sounded like a tornado was blowing over the house, and yet that’s all it was – sound. Nothing was blown over. Candles flickered gently, but were not snuffed. Fire (at least, what looked like fire) appeared above them. It divided, then divided again, until upon each of their heads a flame came to rest. Something... someone... was making his presence known.

They were in awe, but not overly afraid. Isn’t this what he had said? He was going away so that he might send the Counselor. “He will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”<sup>35</sup> The Spirit did indeed teach them things that day! One of them opened his mouth to speak, but what came out was not his native tongue. He was speaking a language he had never heard.

The events of the Day of Pentecost are fascinating for many reasons, not the least of which is this. The Holy Spirit chose to let the Word work psychologically. The Spirit’s miracle could have been that as the apostles preached in Aramaic, people who didn’t understand Aramaic would have heard the apostles, heard what sounded like gibberish, and come to faith anyway. The Spirit could have circumvented the normal rules of human communication, the first of which is that if you don’t understand something, it does you no good. But instead, the Holy Spirit’s miracle was to gift the disciples so that the Word could be perceived in an ordinary, natural way. The Word worked psychologically. And, as it did, it also worked supernaturally. Three-thousand people believed the impossible truth which the apostles proclaimed.

*Where does the psychological end and supernatural begin?*

Jesus said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”<sup>36</sup> I know that as I speak the Word of God the Holy Spirit is at work. How he works... This is beyond me. That doesn’t bother me. It comforts me! Take the example of baptism.

The minister takes the child into his arms, mimicking the actions of Jesus. The child has fewer days outside his mother’s womb than he does fingers and toes. As the pastor speaks, the child hears him. His eyes roll in the direction of the sound. He perhaps grows antsy, as this voice is not one the child recognizes. So he hears words, but what does he understand?

Research shows that babies listen inside the womb. At birth, they can identify certain words, but they do not yet understand them. For example, they might recognize the sound “mommy,” having heard that word spoken even while in the womb. But they do not understand the concept of motherhood. Thus, it would be entirely unrealistic to expect that as that minister says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” the infant intellectually grasps the words. (Think of how long it takes us to teach what “in the name of” means to our seventh and eighth grade confirmation classes!) Do I need to be troubled because I

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<sup>34</sup> John 6:63

<sup>35</sup> John 14:26

<sup>36</sup> John 3:8

cannot grasp how the Word could possibly work psychologically on an infant? Not at all. For I know that the Word doesn't just work psychologically. It also works supernaturally. Water and Word are combined, according to Christ's command, and through the Word the Holy Spirit does what only he can do. Days after the child was born in a natural way, he is reborn in a supernatural one.

Ultimately, it is certainly no more difficult for the Spirit to create faith in the heart of an infant than it is for him to create faith in the heart of an adult.<sup>37</sup> Dead is dead. An adult can hear the baptismal promise. He can perceive it psychologically. Yet, unless the Holy Spirit enlightens him through that same promise, that adult is as helpless as an infant to hear the promise with believing ears. The LORD is speaking about big boys and girls when he says: "To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear. The word of the LORD is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it."<sup>38</sup>

*The instrumental cause, placed within the ministerial cause*

The Word proclaims truth; therefore, it works psychologically. But that truth is impossible for human reason to grasp; therefore, the Word also works supernaturally. God's Word in Scripture and Sacrament is the instrumental cause in God's plan of salvation.

But did God intend for the Word and Sacraments to exist and work on their own? Of course not. We do not practice self-baptism. Why? Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..."<sup>39</sup> We do not self-commune.<sup>40</sup> Why not? When Jesus said, "Do *this* in remembrance of me,"<sup>41</sup> we notice all that was included in "this": elements were set apart, distributed among a group, received.

So it is with the proclamation of the Word. We all have examples of people who came to faith as they studied God's Word on their own. We probably don't have *many* examples of that happening. It is not the normal way for God's saving work to be carried out. The Confessions say as much:

This call of God, which is made through the preaching of the Word (durch die Predigt des Worts), we should not regard as jugglery, but know that thereby God reveals his will, that in

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<sup>37</sup> In an excellent paper on Article XII of the Formula of Concord, Prof. Arnold Koelpin states that precisely because infants lack the ability to perceive the Word psychologically, they are at something of an advantage in their baptism. He writes: "We can attribute certainty, therefore, sooner to infant baptism than to adult baptism. For it rests on Christ's command to bring little children to Him, while adults come by themselves. The embryonic reason in infants does not deceive like the mature reason of adults. Both of them possess faith by the same spiritual hearing. Any view of baptism which overlooks "that faith in God's Word is a much different and deeper thing than that which reason does with God's Word" is, in Luther's words, "pure sophistry." For faith, he asserts, "is God's work alone beyond all reason. It is as near to the child as to the adult, yes, much nearer; and it is as far away from the adult as from the child, yes, much farther." – "The Challenge of Anabaptist Baptism and the Lutheran Confession: Historical background to Formula of Concord XII" (Mequon: WLS Essay File) 12.

<sup>38</sup> Jeremiah 6:10

<sup>39</sup> Matthew 28:19

<sup>40</sup> Whether self-communion in emergency situations is a valid practice has been debated. What has not been debated is that it would be highly abnormal.

<sup>41</sup> Luke 22:19

those whom he thus calls he will work through the Word, that they may be enlightened, converted, and saved. (emphasis mine)<sup>42</sup>

The preaching of the Word. That is the ministerial cause of salvation putting the instrumental cause to work.

### Part III: The Ministerial Cause of Salvation

“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?”<sup>43</sup>

The hoofs of the horse pound along the path at full gallop. The rider wants to move swiftly, for he is a herald, the messenger of the king. A herald never brought his own message. He only spoke the king’s message. Likewise, the hypothetical “someone” of those verses above isn’t carrying a message of his own. He is a herald of the King of kings. He proclaims the King’s message – the Word. The apostle raises a good question. If the herald doesn’t do his job, who will?

The herald did not concern himself with the content of the message. If the king declared that taxes were to be raised, the people would not like it. That was not the concern of the herald. Likewise, as ministers proclaim God’s Word, they do not concern themselves with whether or not people like what is being said. In fact, ministers brace themselves for the fact that many will hate what is being said. But, that is not the minister’s concern. He is just a herald.

The herald did not concern himself with whether or not the people believed the message. The king knows of an impending invasion, and so he sends his herald to each town to warn the people that they might take up arms. If the people do not believe the herald, their destruction is their own fault, not his. The only way the herald would be to blame is if he had not delivered the warning of the King.

If anyone hears the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head. Since he heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning, his blood will be on his own head. If he had taken warning, he would have saved himself. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood.<sup>44</sup>

Let us be clear. Public ministry is *not* the Means of Grace. The Gospel in Word and Sacraments bears that title alone. But ministers are the way for the Means of Grace to be dispensed. We are the heralds carrying the king’s message. It is not our responsibility to make people like the Word. It is not our responsibility to make people believe the Word. (Only the Spirit can do that.) But it is our responsibility to preach the Word.

Because we said the ultimate purpose of the Word is salvation, that responsibility is great. Because we said the way the Word works is psychological, carrying out that responsibility is not easy.

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<sup>42</sup> *Formula of Concord: Thorough Declaration*. Concordia Triglotta 1079.

<sup>43</sup> Romans 10:14,15

<sup>44</sup> Ezekiel 33:4-6

*Since the Word works psychologically, there are qualifications for public ministry*

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and *who correctly handles the word of truth* (ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας).<sup>45</sup>

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men *who will also be qualified to teach others* (οἵτινες ἱκανοὶ ἔσονται καὶ ἑτέρους διδάξαι.)<sup>46</sup>

And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, *able to teach* (διδασκαγικόν), not resentful.<sup>47</sup>

There are many qualifications for ministry listed in these verses. (Many more listed elsewhere.) Ultimately, they all are aimed at setting apart men for proclamation of the Word. There are qualifications aimed at character: "the husband of but one wife... self-controlled... not given to drunkenness."<sup>48</sup> If someone has engaged in a scandalous lifestyle, people might not take him seriously as he shares the Word. He may come across as hypocritical.

There are qualifications that pertain to work ethic. A minister works diligently, precisely because his work is important.

There are also qualifications placed upon public ministry that clearly acknowledge the fact that the Word works psychologically. The psychological working of the Word is where the instrumental and ministerial causes of salvation touch. Ministers take God's Word and share it. They preach it. They teach it. They witness with it. So one of the qualifications for God's ministers is that they be "able to teach."

Does "able to teach" simply mean that we share God's Word accurately, without twisting it or perverting it? Let's carry that to the logical conclusion. If that were all that is required, then Gospel ministry could be reduced to reading of the Word. Do not write a sermon. Why risk that you don't say things as well as the Spirit? Just read enough of God's Word, so that both Law and Gospel are proclaimed. Do not learn God's Great Exchange, which requires interaction with a lost soul. When you are sitting in someone's living room, simply pull out your Bible and read Romans, chapter 3, or perhaps a portion of the Gospels. Do not write any hymns. Just chant the Scriptures.

We reject such suggestions as foolish, for we know the Word works psychologically. And so Philip comes upon the Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch has the Word of God, but it isn't doing him any good. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. 'How can I,' he said, 'unless someone explains it to me?' So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him."<sup>49</sup> The instrumental cause of salvation was in the hands of the eunuch, but he did not understand it. But as the ministerial cause of salvation (Philip) handled the instrumental cause (the book of Isaiah), making it clear to him, the Holy Spirit unleashed his supernatural power, allowing the

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<sup>45</sup> 2 Timothy 2:15

<sup>46</sup> 2 Timothy 2:2

<sup>47</sup> 2 Timothy 2:24

<sup>48</sup> 1 Timothy 3:2,3

<sup>49</sup> Acts 8:30,31

eunuch to believe something that defies reason, that the one who “was led like a sheep to the slaughter”<sup>50</sup> was actually the Almighty Son of God, given into death for his sins.

It is because the Word works psychologically that public ministry is so vital. On more than one occasion, Luther commented that listening to good preaching was more beneficial than simply reading the Bible: “Reading it is not as profitable as hearing it, for the live voice teaches, exhorts, defends, and resists the spirit of error. Satan does not care a hoot for the written Word of God, but he flees at the speaking of the Word.”<sup>51</sup> Scripture teaches the same concept. “The lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge.”<sup>52</sup> Since public ministry is vital, there are qualifications placed upon it. And one of them is “qualified to teach.”

*What constitutes “qualified to teach”?*

In his *Pastoral Theology*, C.F.W. Walther spells out what constitutes being “qualified to teach.” On his list:

“The teaching contain nothing but God’s Word, pure and unalloyed.”<sup>53</sup>

“It correctly applies God’s Word.”<sup>54</sup> Sometimes the word is used to teach. Other times, to rebuke. Sometimes, to comfort. Still other times, to train.

Walther also makes it a “requirement of correct preaching... that it correspond to the special needs of the listeners.”<sup>55</sup> By “special needs” Walther is referring to their level of spiritual maturity. He quotes Luther’s Epistle to the Romans: “Every doctrine has its measure, time, and age... For as strong wine is death to children, it is a refreshment of life to the aged. So one cannot simply present all kinds of doctrine to everyone.”<sup>56</sup>

But pure doctrine, rightly divided... these things are just the tip of the iceberg. Walther lists other “requirements.” He states that proper preaching and teaching must also “be timely,”<sup>57</sup> “well organized” and “not too long.”<sup>58</sup> And his conclusion: “There are many sermons about which one cannot say that they contain false doctrine... but they still lack one of the most important characteristics of a good sermon. They do not reach the heart.”<sup>59</sup>

In calling for the entire counsel of God’s Word to be proclaimed purely, Walther is acknowledging that the Word works supernaturally. In calling for God’s Word to be taught in a way that acknowledges current events, is logical, and fits within a normal attention span, Walther is acknowledging that the Word works psychologically. Walther is talking about preaching, but his “requirements” would apply to any sharing of God’s Word, be it standing in the pulpit of the sanctuary or standing upon the pavement of a neighbor’s front yard.

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<sup>50</sup> Acts 8:32

<sup>51</sup> LW, 18, p. 401

<sup>52</sup> Malachi 2:7

<sup>53</sup> C.F.W. Walther. *Pastoral Theology*. (New Haven: Lutheran News, 1995). 61.

<sup>54</sup> Walther 63.

<sup>55</sup> Walther 76.

<sup>56</sup> Walther 77.

<sup>57</sup> Walther 81.

<sup>58</sup> Walther 83.

<sup>59</sup> Walther 85.

If the Word worked magically – i.e. simply the sound of the words of Scripture brought about spiritual benefit, whether they were understood or not – there would be no need for sermons or hymns or trained public ministers. But the word does not work magically. It works supernaturally. It also works psychologically. Therefore, our standard for faithful proclamation of God’s Word is not simply that we proclaim right doctrine. That is the beginning of faithful proclamation, but far from the end! But because the Word works psychologically, we want to present the Word in a way that is logical and winsome, touching both the head and the heart. Jay Adams summarizes it well:

The transmission of information certainly doesn't need to be dull. Rather, it can be exciting and interesting. Preachers must not become Bible butchers, chopping out great chunks of scriptural meat and throwing it raw and bloody to their congregations as if they were feeding tigers. There is nothing wrong with the meat. There is nothing wrong with the butchering process. But the preachers must also learn to become cooks as well as butchers. They must learn to serve the meat well cooked, warm, well seasoned, garnished, with appetizer and dessert, by candlelight.<sup>60</sup>

### *The example of Scripture*

“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.”<sup>61</sup>

What does Paul mean? Is he saying that when he proclaimed the Word he was intentionally dry and dull so that when people came to faith it would be obvious that it was by the Spirit’s power? Silliness. Paul is simply saying that his confidence was not in his wisdom or his eloquence, but in the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit which would be conveyed through the Word. Paul’s faith was in God’s instrumental cause of salvation (the Word), and not in the ministerial cause of salvation (himself). But you better believe that as Paul conducted ministry, he embraced logic, persuasion, eloquence and every other possible rhetorical device when it came time to preach or witness! He reasons with Greeks. He talks like a rabbi when he’s in the synagogues. He uses straight Aristotelian logic at times, and circular logic other times. He uses humor (even sarcasm). His epistles are masterful – sentence builds upon sentence, paragraph upon paragraph.<sup>62</sup>

Or consider the psalms. They are not just truth. They are art – exquisitely presented truth. How about Isaiah, especially beginning with chapter 40? He appeals to both reason and emotions. He does so in language that is most lyrical. Truth is proclaimed in the highest possible poetry.

Just think of the many different ways Scripture describes the truth of our salvation: justification, redemption, a ransom, reconciliation, atonement, adoption. These all teach the same thing, but using very different pictures. Justification is a forensic term, bringing to mind a

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Franzmann. “Where Are You Going, Preacher?” (Mequon: WLS Essay File, 1977). 8.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:4

<sup>62</sup> These examples are all taken from Book 4 of St. Augustine’s Teaching Christianity. In Books 1 through 3, he explains how to interpret Scripture. Things like: “Let Scripture interpret Scripture.” That isn’t Luther’s. It’s Augustine’s. But then in Book 4, Augustine switches gears. He discusses how to teach Scripture to others. He goes on at great length, parsing up Paul’s writings, pointing out how masterfully Paul uses the rhetorical rules of his day.

courtroom. Redemption is a financial term, bringing to mind a price that is paid to right a wrong. Ransom is a financial term with a slightly different emphasis – a price that is paid to deliver one from danger. Reconciliation has the idea of two enemies making peace. The apostles were not content to talk in cliché. They said the same thing over and over, but they said it in countless different ways. It's not the variety that saves us. But working together, the variety of pictures communicates salvation to us loudly and clearly. We get it. We understand the message – Christ for us. And through that message, the Holy Spirit works supernaturally to create and strengthen faith.

That the truth proclaimed in Scripture is important is self-evident. The way the prophets and apostles write makes it clear that the manner in which we proclaim spiritual truth is important too.

*Poor communication does not make the Word less effective. It does make it less likely to be received.*

Take all the vitamins and nutrients you need to survive. I can give that to you in two possible ways. Your choice: I can pack those nutrients into three large, bitter pills which you take throughout the day...*OR*... I can cook you three delicious, well-balanced meals. Both methods have the same ability to maintain your health. But one method is going to be better received than the other.<sup>63</sup>

Likewise, it is entirely impossible for a mere man to limit the power of God. Therefore, it is equally impossible for a mere man to limit the power of God's Word. However, to the degree that we communicate poorly, we can prevent the Word from being received.

If I preach the Gospel in the same way, week after week, the Gospel retains all of its life-saving ability. If I read my sermon to my people, the Word retains all of its power. Unfortunately, my people don't listen. I have failed to acknowledge there is a psychological working to the Word. Communicate poorly, and people will not listen. "*But they should!*" someone objects. "*The Word is important! The problem is with their lazy sinful nature.*" True. But the problem is also with my lazy sinful nature... or... the problem is my lack of homiletical skill. The first problem can only be addressed with Law and Gospel. The second, only with professional growth.

### *The Minister & the Word*

How important is the ministerial cause of salvation? Some would say it is not that important, because it is the Word, not the man, who creates faith. Certainly true. The parable of the Sower and the Seed drives this home. The seed was the source of life. The seed is what produced fruit, not the man. However, the seed did not sow itself. And in that parable the sower was not meant to represent God nor the angels. He represented disciples. He represented you and me. The point of that parable – our job isn't to produce fruit. Our job isn't to examine soil (hearts). Our job is simply to cast seed. But make no mistake – that is our job.

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<sup>63</sup> This is not my own illustration. It is part of the vast treasury of theological illustrations contained in Professor Daniel Deutschlander's head.

We are very careful that we do not attribute to the minister what is the Word's responsibility. The minister does not convert. The minister doesn't strengthen faith. The minister doesn't grant spiritual life. That is the working of the Word. And so, when discussing such responsibilities, the Word puts man in his proper place. We're just jars of clay carrying treasure.

However, it is equally important that we don't attribute to the Word that which is the minister's responsibility. The Word doesn't carry itself to pagan lands. The Word doesn't preach itself in our churches' pulpits. That is work for the minister to do.

The Word works... at doing its job. But it does not work at doing our job. Thus, the ministerial cause is vital to God's plan of salvation.

#### **Part IV: Challenges that arise as we consider the synergy between the instrumental and ministerial causes of salvation**

The following questions flow from things I have read or heard (or, in many cases, wrestled with myself) in fourteen years of ministry. But they are only one man's observations. So perhaps, my concern is over a challenge that is not widespread or common. However, the observation has been frequent enough for me to raise the question.

*Do we at times downplay the psychological working of the Word to a fault?*

A large church has two pastors. When Pastor A preaches, 50% of the members show up. When Pastor B preaches it drops to 30%. When the pastors notice this, they come up with a solution. They don't follow a regular A-B-A-B schedule. They mix it up! A-B-B-A-B-A-B. Such cunning! You never know who you're going to get! "After all," they reason, "it shouldn't matter. The Word does the work, not the pastor." Has that humility has turned truth into truism?

What is the reason for the difference? Hardness of heart does not explain it, or members would be equally absent for either preacher. Is it that Pastor B preaches only on stewardship, divorce, gender principles, where Pastor A gets all "the good stuff"? Probably not. So there must be another explanation. It can only be one of two things.

First, it could be doctrinal. And the one with the doctrinal problems is probably Pastor A. Maybe his Law doesn't cut, but only nicks you. Maybe he proclaims the cross of Christ, while failing to proclaim there are crosses for Christians too. God-forbid, maybe he occasionally proclaims what itching ears want to hear. And so people come to hear Pastor A, shying away from Pastor B, who is actually saying what they need to hear. That's possible.

But perhaps a more likely explanation is that Pastor A is a better preacher, not in the sense that his doctrine is purer, but in the sense that he communicates better. That matters, because the Word works psychologically. Perhaps Pastor A is easier to follow. Perhaps he does a better job of hitting both the head and the heart. Perhaps Pastor A makes eye contact, whereas Pastor B reads his sermon. Eye contact is not what sustains faith. Only the Word does that. But if you read to me, it makes it easier for my sinful nature to quickly drift. Help me!

This is not a denial that the Word has supernatural power. This is acknowledging that the Word works only according to its God-given purpose – to make that which is dead, alive. The purpose of the Word is not to circumvent the normal rules of human communication, rules God



himself designed.<sup>64</sup> Believing that the Word still somehow works, even when it's not being paid attention to, even when it's not being understood... believing that the Word's power is to transform that which is unintelligible into that which is understood, or that which is boring into that which captivates... this turns truth ("God's Word works.") into truism.

Is this to say Pastor B should never preach? Of course not. He has the call to preach. All that is being said is that a pastor should never use the fact that the Word works supernaturally to neglect the fact that it also works psychologically. And so, we constantly strive to grow as preachers. If there is any place where we need to "save time" during the week, we keep sermon preparation time as sacred and holy and untouchable. We consider homiletical development a never ending task. We humbly open ourselves to critiques from our brothers and our members.<sup>65</sup> We do this not just because God deserves our best, but also because salvation is found only in the Holy Christian Church. And "there is nothing that so attaches people to the church as good preaching".<sup>66</sup> "Attaching people to the church" is not just a stewardship issue. It's a soteriological one.

Do we at times fail to acknowledge that the Word works psychologically? It's not just in the realm of worship/preaching that I ask this question, but outreach too.

I've been privileged to serve on the WELS Board for Home Missions for about four years now. I've been surprised at some of the criticisms levied against missionaries (or mission-minded pastors in established congregations).

*A pastor produces a postcard for Easter, inviting the community to attend. He plans on sending 5,000 of these cards out. He's criticized that the postcard contains service times, directions to church, and the promise of a brunch, but it does not contain a Law-Gospel presentation.*

Is this pastor failing to trust that the Word works? No. But he understands that a theological presentation crammed onto a 5" by 8" postcard will be perceived as being about as legitimate as the long-bearded preacher standing on his soapbox in the center of town. What he sends out isn't intended to be a witness. He sends an invitation with the hopes that it will create an opportunity to witness.

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<sup>64</sup> There is a reason we don't preach in Greek or Hebrew or even German. We know the Word works psychologically, according to the rules of normal human communication. And so, it does no good if it is not understood. But is speaking in a foreign language the only way for communication to break down? Is it possible for me to speak to you in your native tongue, and yet you not understand me, because what I say is rambling? Why would we trust the power of the Word to overcome one breakdown in communication, but not another (speaking in a language that is not understood by the listener)?

<sup>65</sup> Might I be so bold as to suggest that maybe, in multi-pastorate settings, we also let go of the need to split preaching responsibilities right down the middle? In other areas (administration, worship planning, youth ministry) we acknowledge that one pastor may have more gifts, and therefore assign responsibility accordingly. Can't we do the same with preaching, splitting 75/25 rather than 50/50? I have spoken to many pastors who would *embrace* being asked to preach less, precisely because they realize it is not their strength. Yet they feel at home sitting in a prospect's living room and opening up God's Word with them. Praise and thank God for the diversity of gifts in the Body of Christ!

<sup>66</sup> Apology XXIV, Concordia.

*A mission congregation plans to have a community carnival which will help promote their preschool. One member criticizes it as “gimmicky” and pointless.*

This *is* pointless... *if* the church has no plans to share the Gospel with the people who attend. The Church (and therefore our churches) does not exist to entertain the community. The Church does not even exist to offer a safe, nurturing environment for K3 and K4 students to learn. The mission of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel. But... wow!... that is *so much easier* when there is an open door. I have spent my entire ministry in a home mission setting and have knocked on thousands of doors in that time. I have walked through neighborhoods and, house-by-house, asked whomever was home if they had a church; and if not, asked them if I might tell them about mine. It's just awkward from the get-go. I'm a stranger. I've invited myself in. This has put the prospect on guard. I'm now going to press this person on issues that impact their eternity? But come to my congregation's Easter worship... come to our community carnival... Now when I now show up on your doorstep, it's not quite so strange.<sup>67</sup>

It's not so different than Jesus asking the Samaritan woman for a drink at the well. He has *every intention* of sharing the water of life with her, but he *doesn't start* there. “*Will you give me a drink?*”<sup>68</sup> Finding ways to introduce ourselves to people before we share the Word isn't a denial that the Word works supernaturally. It's an acknowledgement that the Word works psychologically. An abrupt message from a total stranger is not going to be as well received as a message from someone with whom we are at least acquainted.

If you downplay the supernatural working of the Word, you will find yourself in a dark place. If confronted with a lack of visible success in your ministry, you will feel burdened. The temptation to downplay the difficult portions of God's Word will arise. The temptation to pull people into your congregation with something other than the Word will loom large. (And you may indeed then “succeed” – at building your congregation, but not the Church.)

However, it is almost as dangerous to downplay the psychological working of the Word. This provides a whole new set of temptations: to excuse lackluster ministry, to dismiss the need to plan ministry and then assess that plan, etc.

May God, in his grace, help us avoid the temptations on both sides.

*Do we at times define faithfulness in Gospel ministry according to what God's Word says about the instrumental cause, instead of what God's Word says about the ministerial cause?*

Imagine if a pastor decided he wasn't going to preach anymore. He was going to do something else – a second Sunday morning Bible study, show a video, etc. I think neither the congregation nor the district presidium would have any problem in declaring that pastor was not

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<sup>67</sup> I have heard the argument made that congregational outreach is unnecessary, and that all we need to do is empower our people to share the Gospel in their daily lives. I do not deny that is an important part of a pastor's job. Ephesians 4:11-13 would say that explicitly. And so, providing ongoing training in personal evangelism and lifestyle witnessing is really a must-do for every pastor. However, how does that then remove all need for congregational outreach? I wonder if Jesus might not say, “You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone” (Luke 11:42). In my experience, the Lord has blessed our outreach to the greatest degree when we combine the two. We produce postcards and invitations to events. We mail them to our community, but we also have members mail (or hand deliver) them to friends, family, neighbors and coworkers.

<sup>68</sup> John 4:7

being faithful to the divine call. We all understand that a pastor could not rightly exercise the option not to preach. And yet, I have spoken to pastors who have never made an evangelism visit in their ministry.<sup>69</sup> They have reasons. *I'm at a large church and have my hands full caring for my members. There's no money for outreach in our budget. We tried outreach years ago, but nothing came of it.*

How is this justified? *Well, our pastor preaches the truth. He feeds us with Christ's body and blood. What more do you want?* (If the congregation doesn't say it, the pastor says it to himself.) That focuses on the instrumental cause of salvation. But is faithfulness to the ministry achieved simply when we don't butcher the instrumental cause of salvation through false doctrine? Or, to achieve faithfulness in the ministry, do we need to look at all that God says about the ministerial cause of salvation?<sup>70</sup> Paul told Timothy that to be faithful to his calling he must "Preach the Word."<sup>71</sup> And then, three verses later: "Do the work of an evangelist."<sup>72</sup>

This applies not just to our pastors, but our congregations. The faithfulness of a congregation can't be limited to the fact that on Sunday morning, God's Word is proclaimed in its truth and purity. For God has called us to do more than just that. Pastor Jonathan Schroeder says it well:

Every WELS congregation has a worship plan to share the Word with the flock, to praise God and to administer the Sacraments. Does every congregation have a similarly regular, consistent and faithful plan to find the lost in their community and share the gospel with them? The goal of outreach is to find the unchurched and share the Word with them. Period. How are we doing at that as a national church body? Think about these numbers for a moment: 51% of our congregations confirmed one adult or less last year. 521 congregations reported zero adult confirmands.

Let's be very clear: numbers can in no way be used to evaluate faithfulness in ministry. God grows the Church when and where he wills. Numbers can, however, help me to ask some questions about my stewardship of the means of grace. Am I taking advantage of the opportunities for gospel outreach that God puts in front of me? Am I seeking the lost in my community and actively engaging them with the gospel? Am I doing all I can as a minister of Christ to be an ambassador to the lost as though God were making his appeal through me?

If the answer is, "Yes!" then take comfort in the fact that the Word is efficacious and the Spirit works when he wills... If the answer rather is, "Well...we try our best."|| Then perhaps we should give our community the benefit of the doubt before consigning them to the fate of apostate Israel. Perhaps we should renew every effort to be the best stewards of the means of grace.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> While I have spoken to pastors who confessed this to me, the implications regarding faithfulness to the call were not always clear in my mind. The first time I saw the connection made was in an excellent paper written by Pastor Charles Westra, Chairman of the WELS Board for Home Missions. It is titled "God's Mission: the Means and the Method" and is a must-read. It can be found on the *Institute of Worship and Outreach* website.

<sup>70</sup> On the South Atlantic District Mission Board, it has been our practice for some time now to specifically define what is expected in the call. The call document itself contains the large *In Nomine Jesu* and then some vague descriptions of what is considered faithful ministry. But in the cover letter, we get specific. It includes ample time for worship and preaching preparation. It also includes spending three nights a week doing outreach.

<sup>71</sup> 2 Timothy 4:2

<sup>72</sup> 2 Timothy 4:5

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Schroeder. "Worship and Outreach: a Lutheran Paradigm" (Mequon: WLS Essay File, 2010). 5,6.

The WELS is an orthodox Lutheran church body. That is a tremendous gift from God. Our orthodoxy does not arise from the fact that our people are more righteous than other church bodies. (There are heterodox church bodies with some really nice people in them.) Our orthodoxy does not depend solely on the fact that our pastors are well trained in the original languages. (There are pastors who know Greek and Hebrew better than the average WELS pastor, and yet their minds still fail to see the treasures contained within the ancient texts.) I will say it again. Our orthodoxy is a tremendous gift from God. Therefore, our faithfulness cannot be measured solely by our orthodoxy, but by how we use it... how we share it. Where we have failed in being orthodox... where we have failed in sharing orthodoxy as best we can... where we have been less than faithful... we claim the righteousness of Christ as our own.

The final question is closely related to the previous one.

*Do we at times use the instrumental cause to provide ourselves with a false sense of security?*

Jesus and his disciples walk north, eventually making their way to Caesarea Philippi. Along the way, Jesus debriefs the disciples, asking them what they have observed during their recent mission trip... asking what the crowds are saying about him.

Eventually, Jesus gets to the real point. “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”<sup>74</sup> Peter speaks for all. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”<sup>75</sup> They had seen Jesus do too much to believe otherwise. More importantly, the Father in heaven had revealed this when he sent the Spirit to enlighten them. The Jewish populace thought Jesus was great. The disciples knew he was divine.

In response to Peter’s profound words, Jesus says something even more profound. “I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”<sup>76</sup> It is the first time in Scripture we hear our Savior use that beautiful word *ἐκκλησία* church, those who are called out of darkness and into Christ’s wonderful light.

Even though Peter’s name means “rock,” the rock Jesus is referring to is *not* Peter. It is Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son. That truth is the bedrock upon which God builds his Church. “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”<sup>77</sup> Since the Church is built upon Christ, nothing can touch it, not even hell itself.

Does that mean that so long as my congregation proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, it will continue to exist? That seems to confuse Church with church. Beautiful Savior in Summerville is not the Church. It contains the Church, because the Word is there.

“[The Christian Church] has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ. Namely, where God’s Word is pure, and the Sacraments are administered in conformity with the same, there certainly is the Church, and there are Christians.”<sup>78</sup>

While members of the Church are within Beautiful Savior, that does not make Beautiful Savior synonymous with the Church. It *contains* the Church. Thus, the promise of Christ – that it

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<sup>74</sup> Matthew 16:15

<sup>75</sup> Matthew 16:16

<sup>76</sup> Matthew 16:18

<sup>77</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:11

<sup>78</sup> *Apology*, Concordia Triglotta 227.

will stand for all time – does not apply to Beautiful Savior itself.<sup>79</sup> Even if my home congregation retains the Word in all its truth and purity, even if we exercise the Sacraments faithfully, that is no guarantee that Beautiful Savior will be around until Jesus comes again.

We all know of missions and established congregations where the pastor and his people proclaimed the Word truthfully, and yet their doors shut. Why? It wasn't heresy. In some cases, it might have been the hardness of heart in the community. It might have been because the congregation was extremely active in proclaiming God's Word, but the love of most in that community had grown cold. And so God allowed the church to go under as an act of judgment, removing the pure Gospel from a community which despised it.

Is that always why missions fail to get off the ground or churches close? If we're honest, in other cases, it's because while the truth of God's Word was in that Church, something else was lacking: the zeal to spread it, the knowledge of how to share it, etc. Perhaps the Word was proclaimed faithfully from the pulpit (worship), but not so faithfully from the pavement (outreach).

I would be foolhardy as a pastor to say, "*Beautiful Savior is going to be fine. We preach the Word truthfully.*" The health of my congregation relies not just on the instrumental cause, but on the ministerial cause as well – the daily work of both the pastor in the pulpit and the priests in the pews. (The same can be said for the health of our synod, by the way.)

And so just as a pastor strives to preach well, so also a congregation or synod strives to conduct ministry well. There are goals set and priorities that are established. Ministry is done, analyzed, tweaked, and then done some more.

This need not be overly complicated. (Sometimes I believe we paint it so.) Ministry is not difficult. However, it's not mindless either. It requires some intentionalization. It requires some planning. Fail to do those things and ministry won't be done well. The congregation may fail, and not because the hearts of the community were so impenetrably hard. Do those things (plan, intentionalize) and the congregation *may still* fail. That's OK. At least it failed after you gave the Word opportunity to work, rather than failing because you didn't.

## In Conclusion

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<sup>79</sup> I think we do this frequently, thinking of our congregations or synod as being entirely synonymous with the Holy Christian Church. It can lead to misapplication. For example, Jesus says, "The harvest is plentiful and the workers are few" (Matthew 9:37). I am certain that around the world, there are not enough called workers to carry out the potential ministry that is before us. Is that always true in the WELS – that the workers are few? It seems that fluctuates. There have been times when the workers are few. Then there have been times when pastoral and teacher candidates have gone unassigned. I am currently trying to wrangle four kids from my congregation into attending Michigan Lutheran Seminary next year or the year after. I am *not* encouraging them because I can *guarantee* that in eight or twelve years from now, "the workers will be few" for our church body. (Although, I understand the large classes of the Baby Boomer generation will be retiring.) I am encouraging them simply because I know the theological training they receive will be beneficial, no matter how they serve God with their lives in the future. Or, take the lament that you sometimes hear, "*Why can't our synod grow like the early church did? They added 3000 in one day! What are we doing wrong?*" I don't know that our church body does everything right, but I certainly know it is unfair to draw parallels between synodical growth and the Day of Pentecost. That was the growth of the Holy Christian Church. I would not be surprised if, world-wide, there are *still* 3,000 added to the number of the Church daily. When we confuse our congregation or synod with the Holy Christian Church, it is going to lead to all sorts of misapplications.

Scripture talks about mankind differently, depending on the task. If it is talking about redemption, mankind is called “dead”<sup>80</sup> and “helpless.”<sup>81</sup> There is no place for man’s efforts at all in the act of redemption.

If Scripture is describing the conversion and sustenance of faith, man’s role is very small. “We have this treasure in jars of clay.” Man simply imparts the Word, and the Spirit does all the work.

But Scripture doesn’t refer to mankind in *just* humble terms. It also calls us ambassadors<sup>82</sup> and witnesses<sup>83</sup> and priests.<sup>84</sup> In God’s plan, our role is perhaps bigger than we realized. We are God’s *ministerial cause* of salvation.

To fulfill our role faithfully, we need to understand and trust the truth – the Word works. The Word works supernaturally to do what only it can – create, sustain, and strengthen faith.

To fulfill our role faithfully, we need to avoid the truisms. The Word does not work magically, circumventing the normal rules of human communication when it is proclaimed... or enabling an institution other than the Church (i.e. a congregation or synod) to endure, simply because the Word is preached within that institution.

When we embrace the truth and avoid the truism, then we’ll work our hardest both individually and collectively to share God’s Word as well as we possibly can, not just because God deserves our best, but because we are the ministerial causes of God’s saving work. That is a substantial privilege... and a substantial responsibility.

God help us. Amen.

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<sup>80</sup> Ephesians 2:1

<sup>81</sup> Matthew 9:36

<sup>82</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20

<sup>83</sup> Acts 1:8

<sup>84</sup> Revelation 1:6

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