

ON NAVIGATING THE NARROW LUTHERAN MIDDLE IN OUR PREACHING  
BETWEEN GOSPEL NEGLIGENCE AND GOSPEL OBSESSION IN REFERENCE TO THE  
TEMPORAL PROMISES OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

BY

TIMOTHY J. MATTHIES II

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

PROF. JAMES P. TIEFEL, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MEQUON, WISCONSIN

MARCH 2015

## Abstract

In our preaching, there lies a narrow middle road between neglecting the gospel of forgiveness for other parts of God's word and obsessing over it to the exclusion of other parts of God's word. Specifically, this paper will focus on the question: where do God's promises of temporal providence fit in relation to the gospel? Through first defining 'gospel' and 'providential promises' and their complementary relationship, this paper lays out a groundwork for a discussion on the practical choices preachers make regarding the emphasis they will give to each over the general flow of their preaching. Both are valuable and both will be needed either more or less depending on the situation of the preacher's hearers. The overriding principle is to evaluate the hearers' needs and preach the text, doing both according to the whole context of Scripture, which includes providential promises but revolves around Christ's forgiveness.

## Introduction

*“The pulpit is the throne for the word of God.” – attributed to Martin Luther*

By God’s mercy, you and I know that the word of God is to be on the throne of our preaching. What God has said, rules. Therefore, we recognize the importance of thinking carefully about what and how we preach, lest we end up proclaiming to the people whom God has placed before us things that are merely human doctrines or emphases. We all know we do not want to be ‘gospel cliché’ preachers or Prosperity Gospel preachers, and yet we have all been tempted in both directions. Even in my short experience with preaching, I know I have.

We also know that the gospel of forgiveness is to have the predominant place in our preaching. Unfortunately, however, that predominant place is often obscured in the preaching of many Christians around us by teachings that insert some works of the law into the gospel. Except for confessional Lutherans and perhaps some conservative Calvinists, there is little concept of the dichotomy between law and gospel out there. Thank the Lord for our heritage that has given us much beneficial insight into the biblical teachings of law and gospel and specifically into their proper distinction in our preaching and teaching!

At the same time, we recognize that human sin and Christ’s forgiveness are not the only two teachings God holds before our eyes in his word. He also gives us much instruction and encouragement for thanking him in our lives of sanctification and many promises about his providence for us. The use of the former in our preaching has received a good deal of attention in our confessional Lutheran circles through the years, but not so much the latter. Very little has been written about preaching God’s providential promises, and even less about doing so in relation to law and gospel.

Perhaps there are several reasons for that. One may be that there is relatively little disagreement about these promises. Everyone likes to use them for people’s comfort, and no one claims that they aren’t important. In the history of the Christian church, not nearly as much doctrinal controversy has swirled around God’s providence as around salvation and sanctification. Instead, they have become so much a part of Christian practical piety that they are rarely spoken of in a theoretical sense. In some congregations, pastors may utilize these promises extensively for individual ministry while not preaching or teaching about them publically much

at all. In others, pastors may save them mostly for the teaching functions of the church: Sunday school, Catechism class, Bible class, etc.

Satan is a sly devil. He knows the parts of our faith where we are not on guard. He loves not only to attack directly the central tenet of our faith, justification, but also to lull us into a false sense of security about the surrounding teachings so that he might better mount his sorties on the center. In every part of our faith, whether central or surrounding, he just as much loves to see a weakness based on an underuse of that part of God's revelation as a weakness based on a false understanding of it. Therefore, even if we were feeling that there is little disagreement about or pressing need to study and preach God's providential promises, let us keep watch and build up our defenses.

At times, we may face a temptation to preach something along the lines of the Prosperity Gospel, or perhaps we are even more tempted to react so strongly against it that we to a large degree omit God's promises to provide. I know I have struggled with both temptations. These extremes fall under the terms 'gospel negligence' and 'gospel obsession', and this paper with stress avoiding both.<sup>1</sup>

Based on what I have heard listening to preaching in our circles, I would say that in general we are not dealing with a critical problem in this area, although there is room for improvement. Rather, this paper is a personal encouragement to myself and to anyone who finds himself having similar questions and struggles to mine. The gist of it is similar to what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10: "we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God... in fact, you do love... we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more." I am thankful for the many times that pastors have comforted my congregations with God's providential promises, but perhaps in general in our fellowship we lean more toward the extreme of gospel obsession than gospel negligence in this area. Both extremes require caution, but my general encouragement in this paper is to remember the great benefit God gives us in these promises and to remember to make use of them appropriately and often in our preaching.

I do not want to give the impression that this issue of using God's providential promises is the most important and pressing one before us. I am not suggesting a paradigm shift. This is

---

<sup>1</sup> Although our focus here is gospel negligence and gospel obsession in relation to God's providential promises, our discussion of this will also have parallels to gospel negligence and gospel obsession in relation to God's instructions for our lives of sanctification.

merely an attempt to sharpen our definitions of what scope of good news we seek to include in our preaching. Providential promises are surrounding teachings. They may not have as big an influence on our task of formulating sermons as other things such as proper exegesis, identifying the malady in the deep of our hearts that the law reveals, resisting cliché or vague gospel, and avoiding the Scylla and Charibdis of antinomianism and legalism in dealing with dual-nature (saint-sinner) creatures. Still, every word of God that he has given to us is useful and beneficial for his people, and so this topic merits consideration also. God grant it that by thinking through this specific aspect, our preaching will be improved just that much, to the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

In order to arrive at a conclusion on the use of providential promises in preaching, it will be necessary to answer several review questions first. We need to address theoretical questions such as: What are the definitions of gospel and providential promises? What relationship is there between them? What is the value and purpose of preaching providential promises? And we need to consider practical questions such as: How often should we preach about these providential promises and under what circumstances? Must every sermon contain the gospel? What is the relationship between the sermon text and the promises that are to be preached? How would this preaching of providential promises look in practice?

Through answering the theoretical questions first and the pastoral questions second, I propose that we will arrive at the following conclusion: Lutheran preachers, in addition to and in a manner complementary to their appropriate zeal for proclaiming forgiveness of sins, will strive take advantage of opportunities to include in their preaching the other supporting, providential promises that God has made, which, while they are not technically the central gospel of our salvation, do very much go hand in hand with and support it.

## Literature Review

First of all, it must be mentioned that I have found no writings that really addressed this topic directly, whether in sources from our own circles or in sources from wider Christendom. Of course, one would not expect to see anything on law and gospel outside of Lutheranism and perhaps some conservative Calvinists. And it is understandable that, even among these groups, little mention is made of the relationship between providential promises and the gospel, since the focus of doctrinal debate has long been on the relationship between sanctification instruction and the gospel. That being said, however, points are still made here and there in homiletics and dogmatics literature that have at least some tangential relationship to our topic.

Francis Pieper in his dogmatics text made a very brief statement which connects trust in God's forgiveness in Christ with trust in other temporal promises of God as the same faith (*eadem fides*).<sup>2</sup> This could support a conclusion that, since trust in these other promises is, by his account, rightly defined as justifying faith, preaching a sermon only on some other promises of God apart from forgiveness in Christ could promote growth in faith. In the same statement, Pieper describes trust in God's promises of temporal gifts as presupposing trust in the promise of forgiveness. I agree that it is the same faith, since faith in said promises is founded on trust in Christ, and will talk more about preaching promises to promote growth in faith later.

Bryan Chapell's preaching textbook, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, has become one of the standards in Evangelical circles and is read, albeit

---

<sup>2</sup> "Trust in God in so far as he promises temporal gifts (e.g. – protection against danger and misfortune) always presupposes trust in God's promise of forgiveness . . . What is more, Scripture designates the faith which trusts in the promise of temporal blessings (Rom 4:17ff) as justifying faith. Accordingly, Luther says: "In this sense the faith in the promise of temporal things which one does not yet see is identical (*eadem fides*) with the faith in justification and remission of sins, by which we conclude and are certain that God is gracious to us and will certainly keep His promise." ([SL] II:2029)" Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics II*, 449-450.

Luther made this comment in his commentary on Genesis 49:18, interpreting 'I wait for your salvation, O LORD' as Jacob saying that the Israelites would meet great dangers in the promised land but also praying that God would help and grant victory to them on account of his promise not to let them be destroyed. Similarly to Pieper, Luther continues by writing "Therefore the words 'I wait for your salvation, O LORD' are words of faith even in these physical matters, which cannot be asked for or expected from God unless we conclude with a sure faith that God cares for us, is favorably disposed, forgives us our sins, and wants to be present in all dangers and necessities, not only those that are spiritual but also those that are physical." (AE, 8:286-7)

On the other hand, Luther would disagree with Pieper that the Romans 4 passage (quoting and referring to Genesis 15 – "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness") is to be interpreted as merely a promise of temporal blessing. Luther in his commentary on Genesis 15 says Abraham's belief in the promise of Isaac was justifying faith only because Abraham was looking at the promise of the Savior who was to be a blessing to all nations and come through his offspring (Genesis 12:2-3). (See Luther's Works, AE, vol 3, *sub loco*)

critically, by Middlers at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. For Chapell, the heart of expository preaching on a certain text is finding the “fallen condition (divine solution) focus”.<sup>3</sup> Since, in his mind, the fallen condition focus (FCF) of a text is not necessarily always a certain specific sin, but could be other things like sickness, sorrow, wishing to be a better spouse, looking forward to Jesus’ return with longing, etc., the divine solution a preacher presents in his sermon will not always be God’s forgiveness in Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, the text’s FCF, by showing a human need, will define what aspect of God’s mercy needs to be preached, even if that does not include any direct preaching of the reason God would have mercy, forgiveness in Christ. “When a text neither plainly predicts nor prepares for the Redeemer’s work, an expositor should simply explain how the text reflects key facets of the redemptive message... aspects of the divine character... that provide the grace of God.”<sup>5</sup> And further,

“Exposition is Christ-centered when it discloses God’s essential nature as our Provider, Deliverer, and Sustainer whether or not Jesus is mentioned by name... Theocentric preaching is Christ-centered because to proclaim God as he has revealed himself is to make known the providing nature and character that are eternally manifested in Christ (Hebrews 13:8)... When we see God at work, Christ’s ministry inevitably comes into view (John 1:1-3; 14:7-10; Col 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-3). A sermon remains expository and Christ-centered not because it leapfrogs to Golgotha but because it locates the intent of a passage within the scope of God’s redemptive work.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Christ-Centered Sermons: Models of Redemptive Preaching, p. xvi

<sup>4</sup> Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon, p. 51-52.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 284. Given that Chapell is a Calvinist, perhaps a caveat is in order here. In spite of his repeated pointing to human shortcomings and God’s mercy, there is a distinct and troubling emphasis on our need in some way to act on the FCF that a text reveals. He says, “We should realize, however, that the Holy Spirit does not introduce an FCF simply to inform us of a problem. Paul told Timothy that God inspires all Scripture to equip us for his work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God expects us to act on the problems his Spirit reveals.” (p. 52) Or later, “[Scripture] tells us how we must seek Christ, who alone is our Savior and source of strength, to be and do what God wants.” (p. 277)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 303-4; This is not to say that Chapell is advocating making every sermon an exposition of grand themes disconnected from the specific events in the text. “We should always observe biblical texts through spectacles containing the lenses of these two questions: How is the Holy Spirit revealing in this text the nature of God that provides redemption? And how is the Holy Spirit revealing in this text the nature of humanity that requires redemption? As long as we use these lenses, we will interpret as Christ did when he showed his disciples how all Scripture spoke of him.

“Asking these two questions (or using these two lenses) maintains faithful exposition and demonstrates that redemptive interpretation does not require the preacher to run from Genesis to Revelation in every sermon to express a text’s redemptive truths. While there is nothing wrong with such macro-interpretations, it is also possible – and often more fruitful – to identify the doctrinal statements or relational interactions in the immediate text that reveal some dimension of God’s grace. The relational interactions in such micro-interpretations can include how God acts toward his people (e.g., providing strength in weakness, pardon in sin, provision in want, faithfulness in response to unfaithfulness) or how an individual representing God provides for others (e.g., David’s care for Mephibosheth,

From this it can be seen that Chapell would consider a sermon only about a providential promise of God, to the exclusion of directly talking about forgiveness of a certain sin, to be perfectly acceptable, as long as this providential promise is the answer to the FCF in the text. In general, I agree with this, although perhaps for different reasons, which will be laid out later.

A recent quote in a publication of our synod's Commission on Worship, Preach the Word, takes a similar tack.

“Get specific and preach the uniqueness of each Bible text. When I hear the phrase “preach specific law,” that does not mean to me that I have to mention hell and eternal death. To me, that is not “specific” but “general.” Specific law addresses the malady of the text that the preacher has uncovered. The phrase “specific gospel” is a tougher matter. The cross is central to our preaching, of course. But “specific gospel” to me is – in addition to the message of the cross – a promise of God that specifically meets the need of the sinner that had been uncovered by the text. “I will never leave you nor forsake you” is specific gospel that counters the sin of not trusting in God’s presence and power. “My God will meet all your needs in Christ” is a specific gospel that counters the lack of trust in God to provide material things. Neither of these phrases mentions the death and resurrection of Christ, but they are gospel promises specific to the text. “He lived in our place; he died for us”, while most certainly true, is general gospel that is really applicable to any text.”<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult to draw conclusions confidently from a single quote, but it seems this author, while perhaps not agreeing that the malady or FCF of a text could be stated without reference to sin, would agree that a promise of God’s providence could serve as the good news in such a sermon, even going so far as to call them ‘gospel’. I understand that the ‘malady’ of a sermon based on a providential promise can and sometimes should be first commandment failure to trust, but I do not think it fits people’s situations to make it the malady all of the time in such texts. Also, I agree that a providential promise could be the good news ‘cure’ in a sermon, but I would not then call it ‘gospel’ in the strict sense, as I will explain in the body of this paper.

In a recent conference paper on specific gospel in sermons, Pastor Guy Marquardt seems to come down more clearly on the other side.<sup>8</sup> Although he quotes favorably Bryan Chapell and the above statement from Preach the Word,<sup>9</sup> his main thrust is to warn against gospel negligence

---

Solomon’s wisdom recorded for others less wise).” Christ-Centered Sermons: Models of Redemptive Preaching, p. xvi)

<sup>7</sup> Unattributed, Preach the Word, vol 17, no 2 (Nov / Dec 2013), p. 2

<sup>8</sup> Marquardt, Guy. “Christus Pro Nobis”. Unpublished Essay. Presented at the WELS California Pastoral Conference, January 2014.

<sup>9</sup> He mistakenly attributes this quotation, from a professor at Martin Luther College, to Professor Richard Gurgel of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.



that comes from omitting the message of Christ's forgiveness entirely or from getting stuck in stock phrases that do not show what was at stake or what he gained for us all. He specifically cautions only against making the focus of our sermons the giving of suggestions for Christian living. Yet by extension, his argument seems to be that every sermon should have as a main focus the forgiveness Christ won on the cross, even in texts that speak primarily to providential promises. At the same time, he says that even the reformers found pulpit time for much more than just the doctrine of justification, so not every sermon has to spend most of its emphasis on that, while still needing to include it.

To my knowledge, the first-year homiletics textbook at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, *Preach the Gospel*, written by two former homiletics professors there, Richard Balge and Joel Gerlach, was the originator of the use of the term "specific gospel" in our circles. Its coiners insist that "Every sermon will contain specific gospel; that is, it will clearly present the way of salvation for the benefit of anyone who does not yet know and confess Christ as Savior and Lord."<sup>10</sup> And later, "Preaching the whole counsel of God also demands that every sermon contain 'specific gospel.' Specific gospel means reference to the saving work of Christ and to faith in him as Savior."<sup>11</sup> In between these two statements, however, Balge and Gerlach provide for a certain type of sermon where the emphasis could be elsewhere, although assumedly the saving work of Christ would still have to be referenced: sermons of hope. They connect 2 Timothy 3:16 with Romans 15:4 to say that encouraging hope is the fifth purpose of Scripture, alongside of teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.<sup>12</sup> They also urge preachers to understand that hope is not just hope for the afterlife, but hope in this life.<sup>13</sup> It would

---

<sup>10</sup> Balge and Gerlach, *Preach the Gospel*, p. 4. They immediately follow that statement with: "But the predominant purpose will always be to edify Christians who do make that confession."

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 11

<sup>12</sup> In this, they follow Schuetze and Habeck's earlier use of the 5 points in *The Shepherd under Christ*, p. 145-7. Schuetze and Habeck note, "Seldom will a pastor's use of the word be restricted to one or the other of the above mentioned categories. He will be alert to the need which confronts him in each new situation and seek to supply that need. Nevertheless, it is well to refer to the fivefold use of the word to indicate how varied and rich ministering to individuals can be." (p. 145)

<sup>13</sup> Balge and Gerlach, 8-9. "Some sermons offer *parakhsis* as their primary emphasis. Such sermons produce the quality of Christian patience. They train God's people to live confidently in the expectation of the return of their Lord. They prepare Christians not just for real catastrophes of the moment, but in anticipation of those that lie in the future. They equip the saints to handle the unknown. They provide comfort and hope. Student sermons sometimes offer *parakhsis* with a peculiar eschatological twist. They attempt to comfort Christians with the thought that if things are going badly in this life, all they need is patience; heaven will be better. That kind of preaching may obscure the fact that God intends the whole of a Christian's new life to be a blessed one, lived in close and constant communion with God, blessed by his touch, and rewarding even when trials and troubles are many. In other words,

seem, then, that Balge and Gerlach would say that every sermon must contain a specific preaching of the forgiveness of sins, but that not every sermon will have that as its good news theme where most of the sermon's time and emphasis is spent. The hope Christians have in the here-and-now and in the hereafter both deserve regular treatment, in addition to the comfort Christ's forgiveness brings.

The categories of gospel obsession and gospel negligence that have been mentioned in the introduction and literature review thus far are derived from the categories "law and gospel obsession" and "law and gospel negligence", the brainchildren of David Schmitt.<sup>14</sup> They are helpful in that they point out that there lies a danger on both sides of the issue. Schmitt believes that current Lutheran scholarship has addressed well the problem of law and gospel negligence, but that this emphasis may have led to more law and gospel obsession.<sup>15</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I have taken the liberty of renaming the categories 'gospel obsession' and 'gospel negligence', since possible situations exist where there is an obsession with the gospel while there is a negligence of a certain use of the law, or where there is an obsession with a certain use of the law while there is negligence of the gospel.

One of the things Schmitt warns against with "law and gospel obsession" is the phenomenon of law-then-gospel parts, which not only might import a dogmatic construct onto a text, but also imports a form or organization based on that obsession – first part law, second part gospel.<sup>16</sup> To use his metaphor, evangelical proclamation is only one part of the tapestry of a sermon, to be woven together with the other strands of textual exposition, theological confession and hearer interpretation.<sup>17</sup> "At certain times with certain texts and certain people, certain threads tend to predominate. As one thread rises to prominence, say in the structure of a sermon, the others do not disappear; they are simply less apparent, less apt to be noticed."<sup>18</sup> With all these

---

'hope' preaching should have a here-and-now thrust as well as an eschatological one. Faith, hope and love. 'The greatest of these is love.' But hope is not far behind. Give it the regular treatment it deserves."

<sup>14</sup> See his influential essay, "Law and Gospel in Sermon and Service." In *Liturgical Preaching*, eds. Grime and Nadasdy, pp. 25-49.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 36

<sup>16</sup> Cf. his essay "Freedom of Form: Law/Gospel and Sermon Structure in Contemporary Lutheran Proclamation", in *Concordia Journal* 25, no. 1 (January 1, 1999):42-55.

<sup>17</sup> See "The Tapestry of Preaching", in *Concordia Journal* 37, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 107-129. Note also his definition of preaching on p. 108: "Preaching is authoritative public discourse, based on a text of Scripture, centered in the death and resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of sins, for the benefit of the hearers in faith and life."

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 108. Does his choice of words here ("certain threads tend to predominate") tip his hand as to what he would say to Walther's insistence that the gospel (which fits under Schmitt's thread of 'evangelical proclamation') must predominate in every sermon? Are they using the word 'predominate' in two different senses – one in the sense that

things taken together, Schmitt seems to assert that every sermon will have some evangelical proclamation in it, even if it is not the predominant thread (at least as far as the amount of space it takes up in the structure is concerned). One wonders, however, where God's providential promises fit among these four strands in his mind. A chart provided at the end of the article in which he lays out his tapestry metaphor mentions "preaching the whole counsel of God" as one of the functions of the strand called theological confession.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps, then, this is the strand he would include them under, in which case I would say that the title of that category could use a little more clarity, especially considering the fact that "providing a framework for Christian living" is also listed under that strand. In my mind, this lumps together two separate things.

Daniel Deutschlander comes at the topic from a different direction, not written specifically in reference to preaching, but rather in reference to the whole Christian life. He uses the overarching metaphor of the narrow Lutheran middle road to encourage us to stay on the middle ground between the ditches of doubt and presumption, and between an exclusive emphasis on either providence or prayer.<sup>20</sup> It doesn't seem a stretch to apply what he says about the whole Christian life to preaching, however. If in fact these warnings and promises of Christ are so important, it would follow that we ought to preach on them. Brought low from presumption by their guilt and the difficulties of their lives and driven nearly mad by their fallen reason, Christians need good news in their doubts. When added on top of God's forgiving grace in Christ, God's dual promises of providence and prayer are of great comfort and help.<sup>21</sup> Christians who endure suffering and the cross in this life, which is all Christians, desperately need these promises to be preached to them for the strengthening of their faith through the word of their God. What exactly their relationship is with strengthening faith will be discussed later.

While these sources, some more tangentially related and some more directly, may be helpful in our discussion to some extent, there remain large gaps in the literature about the place

---

it takes the majority of emphasis and the other in the sense that it is the guiding principle and doctrine which all the statements in the sermon must finally revolve around, even if that guiding principle and doctrine isn't explicitly mentioned? Also, is his claim that some threads in a sermon may be less apparent to be taken to say that 'evangelical proclamation' must still always be in a sermon even if it does not 'predominate'?

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 127; The need to use a different noun to distinguish it from 'evangelical proclamation' is understandable, but using the term 'confession' leaves a little to be desired, since our job as preachers is not just to tell the gathering what the Bible teaches, but rather to proclaim those truths into people's hearts.

<sup>20</sup> See *The Narrow Lutheran Middle: Following the Scriptural Road*, chapters 2 and 4

<sup>21</sup> It's interesting that he separates providence and prayer. I would have included God's promise to answer prayer in a way that is good for us in the category of providence along with many other providential promises. The point is well taken, however, that you don't want to neglect one or the other.

and function of God's providential promises in preaching. Authors often were not thinking of this question in their writings on law and gospel, faith, and preaching, and so their definitions can seem confusing, as if they support both sides of the issue. May God grant that the following discussion will help strengthen those definitions, so that more practical benefit for the faith of God's people may be drawn from the preaching of his servants.

## The Theoretical Questions

*What is the definition of “gospel”?*

In extrabiblical literature, the Greek verb εὐαγγελίζωμαι just means to bring or announce good news. There is no standard connection between that good news and some grand religious plan. In the New Testament, εὐαγγελίζωμαι almost always refers to the message of salvation through Christ’s substitutionary merits. In Luke 1:19, however, the holy writer uses it to announce a message which is not, strictly speaking, the message of salvation, namely that Zechariah would have a son who would turn people back to God. Revelation 10:7 also uses this verb to announce that God would defeat evil and his mystery would be accomplished without delay.<sup>22</sup>

On the basis of the extrabiblical usage and the above-mentioned pair of passages, it might be tempting just to define loosely the term ‘gospel’ as good news. That way, we could include as much as we needed into the term. Our dogmatic heritage, however, has been more careful to distinguish systematically between two distinct senses on the basis of Scripture’s complete use.<sup>23</sup> It has outlined a narrow and a wide sense. Now we have a chance to observe how, all doctrine being practical, that doctrinal distinction is practical.

In the narrow sense, the gospel is the message about our forgiveness in Jesus our righteousness. Our confessions state:

“We believe, teach, and confess that the gospel is not a preaching of repentance or reproof, but properly nothing else than a preaching of consolation, and a joyful message which does not reprove or terrify, but comforts consciences against the terrors of the law, points alone to the merit of Christ, and raises them up again by the lovely preaching of the grace and favor of God, obtained through Christ’s merit.”<sup>24</sup>

And if it should be doubted, since the confessors were writing in opposition to those who insist law messages are part of the gospel, that the term gospel in the narrow sense does not exclude other good blessings God sends to people, the sainted Irwin Habeck replies: “We see at once that the gospel tells us what God has done for us. But not in general, as, for example, that he makes

---

<sup>22</sup> See BDAG p. 402 and Louw-Nida p. 412-3.

<sup>23</sup> Here we note that Paul chose the noun εὐαγγέλιόν in Romans 2:16 to describe his whole message, including God’s judgment of sinners. The lexicons do not categorize this verse under this sense.

<sup>24</sup> Formula of Concord, Ep. Art. V, p 802, par. 7,10,11

his sun to shine on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. No, it tells us the best news of all, that God sent his Son to be our Savior, that Jesus died to save us from our sins and from damnation.”<sup>25</sup>

Let us note, also, that the terms “[law and] gospel negligence / obsession” that we employed above are based on the narrow definition of the word ‘gospel’. They imply that God’s providential promises are not included in the term gospel in its narrow sense, and that it is only the forgiveness of sins through Christ that is being neglected or obsessed over. If it were not, then it would make no sense for David Schmitt to say that “law and gospel obsession leads preachers to fail to preach the completeness of theological truth”<sup>26</sup> or that “on account of law and gospel obsession, even though they are present in the lectionary, the teachings of divine providence, election, natural revelation, and the incarnation are rarely heard; theological confession of the whole counsel of God is undeveloped.”<sup>27</sup>

In the wide sense, however, the gospel is defined as the entire message of God to us, the full counsel of God. On account of the fact that justification by grace through faith is the main teaching of the full counsel of God, this wide sense is then still rightly called ‘gospel’. Our confessions also mention this definition, because it accords with the Scriptures themselves:

“But since the term *gospel* is not used in one and the same sense in the Holy Scriptures (on account of which this dissension originally arose), we believe, teach, and confess that if by the term gospel is understood the entire doctrine of Christ which he proposed in his ministry, as also did his apostles (in which sense it is employed, Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21), it is correctly said and written that the gospel is a preaching of repentance and of the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> “Law and Gospel and the Proper Distinction in their Use in the Life of the Church” p. 2. It could be argued based on this quote alone that Habeck here is not excluding other pieces of good news that God proclaims to believers, but I am convinced from the context that his point is to separate out justification as the gospel in the narrow sense.

<sup>26</sup> “Law and Gospel in Sermon and Service”, 42

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 43

<sup>28</sup> Formula of Concord, Ep., Art. V, p 802, 6; Also see Formula of Concord, TD, Art. V, p 952, 3-6. Although one might contend that the biblical citations noted in this quote may not clearly establish a wider sense of the word gospel, the wider sense is still correctly described in accordance with the wider usage of the Greek verb *εὐαγγελίζωμαι* described above and in accordance with the rest of the teaching of Scripture. Adolf Hoenecke, however, gives somewhat of a minority report on the senses of the word ‘gospel’: “The gospel in the narrowest sense is the message that in Christ, the Son of God who became man, we have the Redeemer from sin. In other words, it is the preaching of the forgiveness of sins in the Redeemer who has appeared. . . . In the wider sense, the gospel is the preaching of free forgiveness, without express reference to the *already* incarnate Redeemer. . . . Used in a still wider sense, the word appears in Mark 1:14 and 16:15, as embracing the preaching of both the law and the gospel in the narrower sense.” (Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, vol. IV, p 39)

Although this statement focuses on the place of the law and does not mention providential promises, the fact that it refers to “the entire doctrine of Christ” makes it clear that providential promises must fit under this sense as long as you do not include them in the narrow sense.

As a side note, let us take a moment here to consider whether preaching the gospel in the narrow sense requires us to always mention the death and resurrection of Jesus. Pastor Marquardt claims it does.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, preaching circles have seen an upsurge in interest in metaphors over the last quarter century. This interest led to Lutherans considering their take on the metaphors in Scripture, and especially making more conscious use of the justification metaphors in Scripture.<sup>30</sup> Some have referenced the phrase in 1 Peter 4:10, “as faithful stewards of the variegated (ποικίλης) grace of God,” as support that the Scriptures themselves recognize the wide variety of metaphor God employed throughout to communicate his one forgiving grace in many ways. This is an exegetical question, but the point that Scripture is full of metaphors is self-evident.

The Scriptures themselves often preach the narrow-sense gospel through justification metaphors, even if in the context they may never mention the death and resurrection of Jesus. Is it going too far, then, to think of ourselves preaching in such a way? The gospel gem has many metaphorical facets, and each adds to the brilliance and beauty, but it is still the same gem. Recognizing this can improve the variety and sharpness with which we present the one message of forgiveness to people.

*What is the definition of ‘providential promises?’*

After a section of marveling at God’s promise to forgive us sinners for the sake of Christ his Son, Daniel Deutschlander remarks, “And it still doesn’t stop. The promises of God’s abiding love are not limited to his sacrifice for our sins. They are not meant only for our spiritual life or

---

<sup>29</sup> Marquardt, *Christus Pro Nobis*, 3: “Notice how impossible it is to describe the good news without talking specifically about Jesus Christ, his life, death, and resurrection.” Perhaps I am taking his words too literally? Does he instead mean to say that some kind of message must be communicated that includes a point of reference to justification? He continues by saying, “See how even when these men purposefully tried to give a succinct definition of the Gospel, there was relatively little overlap of words between them. The Gospel is rich in metaphor and meaning.”

<sup>30</sup> See J.A.O. Preus’ *Just Words*. Preus lists the following justification metaphors: birth, life, salvation, light, bread and water, ransom, redemption, property, forgiveness / remission, justification, intercession, adoption, inheritance, reconciliation, peace, forgiveness, marriage, expiation / priestly mediation, sacrificial lamb, hallowing / cleansing, salvation, liberation, and victory.

intended to come into effect only in the hour of death when we depart this world for life eternal in heaven. Those promises of God's love in Christ cover every moment of our lives."<sup>31</sup> He also reminds us that we do well to remember the uniqueness of this to Christianity:

“Of the many truths in God's Word that make Christianity unique among all the religions of the world, surely this is one of the most beautiful and delightful for the soul to ponder: Our God is a God of promises! Search and see if you can find a man-made religion where the promises are as sweeping and comforting as the promises made by the one true God in his word. Just a sampler of his promises will leave us with eyes popping out and mouths hanging open.”<sup>32</sup>

A man-made religion inevitably underestimates God. It inevitably brings God down to humans' level to some extent. But just like the incarnation, perfect life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of Jesus, his providential promises also demonstrate God's transcendence. He is completely other than all we could have imagined. Such power! Such care! Such grace!

Perhaps the best way to identify the providential promises is by process of elimination. Whatever promises in Scripture do not belong to the gospel in the narrow sense can be called God's providential promises. They have to do with his continuing, temporal providence rather than his already finished justification. This could include things both in the material and spiritual realms, in both the First Article and the Third Article, although that is not to say that the First Article is all about material things or the Third Article all about spiritual things. God guides, guards, and provides for his people in every aspect of their beings.

Providential promises would then include things like God's promises to provide food and clothing, to answer prayer, to send his angels to guard us, to dwell in every Christian in the mystic union, to not let us be tempted more than we can bear, to plan and guide our lives for our good, to preserve his people in faith, etc.<sup>33</sup> These things are not the means God uses to bring about and preserve our subjective justification, but they are intimately related with it in our temporal lives. Once Jesus comes again in glory to take us to be by his side, we will no longer have any use for these promises. But until he does, God provides.

---

<sup>31</sup> The Narrow Lutheran Middle, p. 19

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 15-16

<sup>33</sup> In our circles we have often referred to the warning against falling away and the promise of preservation as an example of a law and gospel distinction. We also sometimes, as we are reading through books of the Bible, speak of a number of these blessings as gospel, e.g. – our seminary Jeremiah Isagogics notes. According to my definition, however, we are speaking improperly when we do so. More properly, we could refer to them as 'grace' or 'mercy'.



These are promises in content, not necessarily in tense. That is to say, not all promises have a grammatical structure of God saying “I will do such and such.” Rather, promises are promises because of an absolute content. For example, the statement in Romans 8, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” does not contain any future tense verb. What it contains is absolute content: “all things... for the good.” Therefore, we consider it a promise.

Because the providential promises are grounded in Christ, they are fundamentally different from the ‘rewards’ of other religions, which are grounded in law-based give-and-take. You could call them free promises or gracious promises. They are mercies that are not only undeserved but also the opposite of what their recipients have earned.

In addition to how Prosperity Gospel preachers make promises that the Bible doesn’t make, they also preach promises that are in fact contained in Scripture, but do so while not properly distinguishing between law and gospel. In the final analysis, they make prosperity in general and any blessing in specific a product of following the law. The only way to explain someone not getting what these preachers say they could get is that they haven’t done enough or prayed enough or believed enough to get that grace, which is then no longer grace. Although God’s providential promises are not gospel in the narrow sense, what C.F.W. Walther says in Thesis IX of his famous lectures on law and gospel rings true here also: “law and gospel are not rightly divided when people who have been struck down and terrified by the law are directed... to their own prayers and wrestling with God in order that they may win their way into a state of grace.”<sup>34</sup>

On the contrary, each and every Christian needs to hear that God’s providential promises are all made in the context of Paul’s statement that God works all things for their good, which includes and prioritizes their spiritual good. Then they will have the confidence that even when material prosperity or spiritual ease eludes them, they do not need to scurry about building up their own worthiness. God is still keeping his promises to them by directing them to seek first his kingdom and righteousness in the one thing needful. Leaving the rest up to God, they can confidently go about their lives of service and proclamation of the gospel (in the wider sense) to others.

---

<sup>34</sup> *Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible*, p. 143

Finally, just as there are many justification metaphors, Scripture also puts forth many providential promise metaphors: God is our fortress, the LORD is our shepherd, etc. Some providential promises, then, are like their own gemstones with multiple facets of one basic meaning; e.g. – the promise to defend us from evil that is greater than we can stand and thus preserve us in faith can be illustrated with either the fortress or the shepherd metaphor. Sometimes the Bible even uses metaphors that serve a dual purpose between justification metaphor and providential promise metaphor, such as the shepherd, mediator, and victory metaphors.

*What is the relationship between the gospel in the narrow sense and providential promises?*

In many Lutheran treatments of law and gospel in preaching, the point is made that these are the two main teachings of the Bible, and then a somewhat bombastic claim is made that they are the only two. August Pieper wrote, “These are really the only two doctrines in the revealed word. They are the only things we have to preach for salvation and for sanctification. Everything else in Scripture is decoration, linguistic form, a means for understanding and proclaiming them.”<sup>35</sup> This leads to the question: then where do providential promises fit in? Surely they are not just decoration or linguistic form, and I would be flabbergasted if anyone ever thought they should be stuck in the law category. That just leaves the gospel category. You have to admit that providential promises have a lot of similarities to the gospel. They bring great comfort, are the cure to a complementary malady, drive away doubt, are revealed only by the Spirit through God’s word (1 Corinthians 2:6-10), are only to be preached to the penitent and never to the presumptuous, etc. As was just mentioned, as well, some of the metaphors that are used of the gospel are also used of the providential promises.

Is there, however, an equality of power and purpose between the gospel in the narrow sense and the providential promises? In other words, are these temporal promises gospel, strictly speaking? As we learn in dogmatics class, the gospel / the means of grace not only proclaims forgiveness, but conveys it, creating and sustaining saving faith. If the providential promises are properly to be called gospel, it must be demonstrated that they also convey forgiveness and create and sustain saving faith.

---

<sup>35</sup> “The Right Division of Law and Gospel in Its Application for Pure Teaching and Spiritual Life”, p. 2

What then does Scripture say about how faith is created? In Romans 1:16-17, Paul says “the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes... for in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.” The gospel is powerful and reveals a righteousness from God. In 1 Corinthians 1:17-18, Paul clues us in on the fact that it is the message of Christ’s cross that is the power of the gospel: “[Christ sent me] to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 makes it clear that the message we are centrally ambassadors of is the non-imputation of our sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, reconciling us with God. This all fits in with Romans 10:17, whether literally as the Greek “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing comes in the circumstance of the spoken message (διὰ ῥήματος) about Christ (Χριστοῦ, objective genitive)” or paraphrased “So faith comes when people hear the Good News, and people hear the Good News when someone tells them about Christ.”<sup>36</sup> Second Thessalonians 2:13-14 also states that it is through the gospel that God called us to the sanctifying work of the Spirit and belief in the truth, and thus to salvation.

Can providential promises create this faith? The above *sedes* about the gospel creating faith make no mention of other promises with this power. Moreover, just thinking about the situation from the viewpoint of systematic theology, it is pretty absurd to suggest that a person who does not know Jesus would be brought to saving faith in his forgiveness by hearing a providential promise. If I meet an unbeliever on the street and tell him that God will work everything out for his good, will that bring him to faith? And that is not even to mention the fact that providential promises are made only to believers<sup>37</sup> and that a person who does not believe in Christ has no reason to have confidence that God would give them anything for free.

Thus, it is clear that providential promises are not able to create faith. They do not promise – and therefore cannot convey – forgiveness. It follows that they, in and of themselves and separated from the message of Christ’s forgiveness, have no power to sustain or strengthen

---

<sup>36</sup> The literal-as-the-Greek rendering and paraphrase are borrowed from Professor Paul Zell of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in his Winterim class, “The Preacher Looks at Romans 9-16.”

<sup>37</sup> God’s providence is certainly active for unbelievers, also. Paul says in Acts 17:25 “[God] gives everyone life and breath and everything else” and Jesus in Matthew 5:45 “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” However, even though God often does provide for specific unbelievers and in general provides for all mankind in his grace and desire to save them, he has made no promise to provide ‘all these things’ for those who do not by faith ‘seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.’ (Matthew 6:33)

faith. Their relationship with the gospel in the narrow sense, then, is not one of identicalness or of equality in power and purpose. They are not, strictly speaking, gospel.

They are, however, powerful, since they are still part of God's word that "will not return to [him] empty, but will accomplish what [he] desires and achieve the purpose for which [he] sent it. (Isaiah 55:11) They are very much based on the narrow-sense gospel. "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are all "Yes" in Christ." (2 Corinthians 1:20a) And it is only through faith in Jesus that we can believe these free promises he makes to his people. "And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God." (2 Corinthians 2:20b) Without the narrow-sense gospel, our heavenly Father would not make any providential promises to us, and we would never believe him even if he made them. But he has, in fact, made them, and we do, in fact, believe them through the divine power his Spirit in the word. Praise him from whom all blessings flow!

*What is the value and purpose of preaching God's providential promises?*

It is a given for Bible-believing Christians that God's providential promises have value for us and others. Otherwise, why would he reveal them to us, and why would Paul say "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) right after he has said "I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you"? (Acts 20:20) The very fact that they are part of the word of God is enough for us.<sup>38</sup> And the very fact that God reveals his word for our benefit and that he has told us to preach his word is enough for us. Preaching these promises has value because they are God's doctrine and all doctrine is practical.

Furthermore, there is great purpose in preaching these promises, because we believe and confess that all Scripture is connected to Christ our substitute as the center. Jesus was not exaggerating when he said "these are the Scriptures that testify about me." (John 5:39) They are all gospel in the wide sense. Jesus himself preached many of these promises. Time after time in the gospels he demonstrates care for people's need of his providence, even though his greatest concern is their eternity with him in heaven.<sup>39</sup> If he didn't think these promises were connected

---

<sup>38</sup> And if in practice we omit parts of God's word from our preaching, could that not be tantamount to saying that it is not inspired of God?

<sup>39</sup> Note the related account of Jesus' providential activities and then his main reason for coming in Mark 1:29-39.

to and supportive of his goal to save sinners' souls, he would not have wasted his time preaching them. In some way, then, they support faith in Christ crucified. But how do they do that?

Through providential promises, Christians get a fuller picture of God and his merciful and loving nature. God makes them to all his believing people without cost, and so they add further testimony to his unconditional grace. They also help make clear that God cares about our whole lives and our whole persons, not just about our soul and our afterlife. He is involved in our existence now and did not just create us, justify us, and then leave us to fend for ourselves until he comes again. Arguing from the lesser to the greater, they further highlight the fact that, since God has divine power to deal with these huge problems in our lives and world, he also has divine power to deal with our greatest problem, sin.

On top of all this, God's providential promises take us into the theology of the cross. As we hear them and think about how the results show up in our lives, they don't seem to match up. There is a certain antirationality to a promise of God's providence in this broken world.<sup>40</sup> And yet, through just such a promise, even as our experiences seem not to line up with what God said should happen and we feel the painful cross of our sinful nature's rejection of what it cannot see, he leads us to go back to Jesus' cross. There the wisdom of God comes into plain view. There we see the most important part of his will for us – our soul's salvation. And so God works powerfully in us to accept willingly that bloodstained proof of his ability and desire to keep his other promises.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the value of God's providential promises for supporting faith in Christ crucified will be brought out more if we also include a negative way of speaking. The price of neglecting the providential promises God himself made is that it will be harder for people to believe that God is good to them. They will be missing out on some of facts God wants them to hear and take to heart about his love. The narrow-sense gospel gem, as many-faceted as it is, will shine less

---

<sup>40</sup> The term 'antirationality' in this context is borrowed from Siegbert Becker's *The Foolishness of God*. Deutschlander comments in *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*: "Fallen reason quickly forgets God's powerful promises when it sees the mountains shake. Reason grabs hold of what it sees at the moment and leaves behind God's word and all the proofs of God's faithfulness that we have experienced in the past. It focuses on the trouble of the moment, not on the face of Jesus in his faithful word and sacraments." (p. 21-22)

<sup>41</sup> See Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, chapters 1 and 2. Note well that the theology of cross is no reason to neglect the preaching of the providential promises, as if, since they are not the central proof and message of the cross, they can only lead to doubt and have no power. Instead, they work hand in hand with it. It is not by mistake that Deutschlander wrote both this book and the above-mentioned chapters on God's providential promises in *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*.

brilliantly if not surrounded by and set in the center of the providential promise gems. It would get looked over as a ho-hum single stone that's way too unbelievably exaggerated for its simple metal prong setting. All by itself, some will say, it sure doesn't look like it means business.

This is not to say that the providential promises add power to the central gospel. Nor is it to say that they are all about fixing people's sufferings or meeting all their psychological needs. We often have heard proponents of the Social Gospel claim that people can't focus on spiritual things unless their worldly needs are met first. We do not swallow that argument hook, line, and sinker, although we do see the value of letting our lights shine and helping people in their needs. Similarly, it is certainly a practical benefit for Christ's people whom he has already brought to faith that his providential promises help them not to worry so much about temporal things. Now they can focus more fully and freely on God's promises about eternity. In this world that is groaning because of sin, Christ's believing people genuinely need all the comfort God sees fit to give them, so they can keep their eyes on the prize. Let us then preach the wide-sense gospel in its full sweetness.

We may think that, with only one main sermon opportunity a week, we should devote as much time as possible to the narrow-sense gospel and leave the providential promises for Bible class or personal devotions. But consider the fact that the majority of church attendees do not participate in any Bible classes, nor do they have personal devotions. Even if most members in the place God has put us attended our elementary or high schools, we should no more assume that they will hold on to the providential promises without reminders than we would that they will hold on to the gospel of forgiveness without it being continually proclaimed to them. If we do not take responsibility for teaching our people these truths – and we have the best practical opportunity for doing that in the pulpit – they will either not learn them at all or learn about them from someone else. That someone else, if a Christian, may not explain them entirely in accordance with Scripture or, if an unbeliever, may just relate them in order to militate against them and cause doubt.

On the other hand, although providential promises need to be preached and are intended to support faith in Christ crucified, let us not conclude that doubt in those promises will necessarily indicate a loss of faith in Christ. Deutschlander encourages us:

“We should not fail to note that not every instance of doubt in some specific promise of God is the same as the damning unbelief that rejects Jesus as Savior. The examples of the

disciples in Mark 4 and of Peter in Matthew 14 are cases in point. The disciples and Peter in these instances still knew that Jesus was their God and the Savior promised throughout the Old Testament. The doubt that Jesus variously rebukes as ‘little faith’ and ‘no faith’ was not with reference to the promise of salvation but to other specific promises that Jesus made to the disciples: the promise, as we already noted, that they would be fishers of men, and the promise implied when Jesus told Peter to come to him on the waves.

“It is certainly likely that we too at times fall into the ditch of doubt without in every instance rejecting Jesus as our God and only Savior. When we, like the disciples, are overwhelmed by the sorrow and the troubles of the moment, we may take our eyes off of his promises to us, just as they did. We may not see how his promise to be with us always in grace and love applies to the pain of the moment. We may cry out in the dark night of the soul: ‘Oh, my God and Savior, where are you? Why do you not hear my cries and rescue me?’

“Such anguish, yes such doubt may not yet be gross unbelief. But if it is not cured and corrected by Jesus’ call to us in his Word, it may ultimately lead to that unbelief which rejects the Savior and his work for our salvation. The slope of the ditch of doubt is steep and perilous indeed. If we continue to slide down that slope, we may finally lose sight of Jesus altogether.”<sup>42</sup>

It is true that a consistent doubt in God’s providential promises can lead to a loss of faith in Christ’s salvation. After all, if you can’t trust God about one of his promises, how can you trust him about any of them? Yet, we fool ourselves if we imagine that, in order to keep people from falling away from Jesus on account of doubt in his providential promises, we just will not preach those promises so much, so that they have fewer occasions for doubt. Such a naive decision would not have the desired effect. People can have plenty of doubt about God’s love in their daily lives even if they aren’t completely clear about or currently cognizant of the specific promises. Rather, we need to remember that, being the word of God, which is a means of grace of the Holy Spirit himself, these promises have the power to overcome people’s doubts. This is true because they cause people to turn back to their Savior’s cross for the ultimate testimony of his love and truthfulness.

Deutschlander continues,

“[This] is the very essence of faith, whether the saving faith that embraces Christ alone as Savior or the faith that trusts him in every time of trial: Faith focuses on Christ and all his promises. Faith in Christ as Savior casts aside the doubt and despair created when I look at my sins and hear the damning voice of both the law and conscience; it focuses on Christ’s cross and his promise of forgiveness. Faith in days of trouble casts aside what is

---

<sup>42</sup> Narrow Lutheran Middle, p. 25

seen and fixes its attention on the promises of Christ to be with us in every trouble and to rule all things ultimately for our good here and hereafter. Do we see that always or at once? No; but so great is the power of Christ in his promises that he overcomes what is seen with what is unseen – the trouble of the moment with his sure and certain promise for the present and the future. The narrow middle road remains a focus on Jesus and a focus on his promises that refuses what seems to be true at the moment in favor of what always is true in Christ and in his Word.”<sup>43</sup>

God grant us and to the brothers and sisters to whom we preach just such a focused faith!

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 27



## The Practical Questions

*How often should we preach about these providential promises and under what circumstances?*

The question of how much time to spend preaching the providential promises vis-a-vis the narrow-sense gospel is not a zero-sum question of either-or. It is both-and. God gives his people truths for their comfort from the First, Second, and Third Articles. Some texts may have only Second Article truths and others none, at least not directly. The thing to avoid is letting either justification or providence take over to the detriment of the other in the general week to week flow of our preaching. Otherwise, we will fall either into gospel negligence or gospel obsession. Those are not what we see Jesus or the rest of Scripture do. For example, Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2 said that he resolved to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified, and yet he also spoke of many other promises of God's providence throughout his letters. He sees them as directly connected to and based on the central gospel of Christ crucified.

How do we know if we are straying towards the ditch of gospel negligence? This temptation, in regard to providential promises, is to make encouraging God's people that everything will be "ok" in their lives on this earth generally predominant in the flow of our preaching. God certainly promises to cause everything to work for the benefit of his people, but if that is the only focus, the definition of "ok" can easily change from having what God knows is good to having what I think is good. The latter definition dispenses with the theology of the cross and forgets the inherent anti-rationality of the teaching of God's providence in this broken world. Christians will struggle with these promises and their weak faith in them. We must plan for that and be ready to give assurance of their forgiveness and God's love for them in Christ.

Nor should it ever be that we predominantly preach God's providential promises because we are seeking to avoid preaching first-use and second-use law. Beware the way our culture is loathe to talk about sin! Professor Gurgel cautions,

"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?”).”<sup>44</sup>

Consistently excluding the law and its threats from texts that have it is conduct unbecoming of a minister of the gospel in the wide sense. Without that, in fact, we would be preaching a less loving God with less valuable forgiveness and thus less valuable providence.

We also fall into temptation if, although preaching the providential promises in proper balance with the narrow-sense gospel as far as a general percentage of our preaching, we never connect those promises back to their source and foundation. More from Professor Gurgel: “To preach on any promise of Scripture without finding Christ at its heart distorts that promise. Christ’s footsteps are in every text. Our sermons either wisely step in them or foolishly stumble over them.”<sup>45</sup> We will take up the issue of whether every sermon about promises in Scripture must trace the footsteps back to Christ later, but in our preaching of providential promises in general, we must not omit this crucial point. Otherwise, we leave people with no reason to trust the promises we preach to them.

How do we know if we are straying toward the ditch of gospel obsession? This may be the one of these two temptations that we struggle with more often. This temptation faces us when we are so concerned with telling people the central gospel that we consistently pass lightly over God’s providential promises in our preaching. If, besides some time on the historical background and sanctification, the rest our preaching content is all geared to telling people God has justified them (which he truly has!), we are obsessing over the gospel to the point that we are neglecting other good news God holds out for his people’s comfort.<sup>46</sup> Let’s not leave God hanging like that. Some symptoms our preaching might display if we are suffering from gospel obsession include making the gospel of forgiveness the main theme of a sermon even if that providential text does not mention it and consistently skipping over the implications of providential promises in texts that have them.

---

<sup>44</sup> Gurgel, “Honest Preaching: Faithfully Proclaiming the Law for the sake of the Gospel”, p. 5

<sup>45</sup> Gurgel, “Keeping Preaching Christocentric.” Preach the Word, vol 14, no 2. Nov / Dec 2010

<sup>46</sup> Professor Gurgel writes in his doctoral dissertation: “What is also often missing in our definition of proclaiming the gospel is recognizing the full impact of what Paul said in Romans 8:32. If God ‘along with him graciously gives us all things’ then we have not forsaken gospel preaching when faithful to a particular text our chief focus is on the first article gifts that are ours solely because of God’s grace to us in Jesus.” (p. 129)

David Schmitt helps us think about this from the viewpoint of person in the pew: “theological confession and evangelical proclamation should be in a complementary relationship... a parishioner doesn’t dislike evangelical proclamation, he just wonders if there is more.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, he offers that there may at times be a more negative reaction, especially if the preacher is not preaching different facets of the narrow-sense gospel gem: “law and gospel are reduced to a stereotype / habit, so people tune out because it’s the same thing they’ve heard every time.”<sup>48</sup> People may begin to think that the gospel is just an intellectual concept far removed from them that doesn’t have any bearing on how God treats them in their daily lives, that this the message of heaven isn’t pairing well with the fear and worry they experience here.

As we struggle to hold up both sides of Paul’s preaching paradox – preaching “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) and preaching “nothing... except Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2) – we may sometimes wrestle with our own consciences. “Within the heart of the preacher there can be at times 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.”<sup>49</sup> Yet, if we remember why gospel negligence and obsession in regard to providential promises happen – because the gospel and the promises are set in opposition rather than being seen as complementary – our heart’s load will be lightened.

The devil enjoys playing ‘divide and conquer’, but Christ teaches us in his word that he has connected all his teachings to be mutually beneficial. What he does not want to see is an overemphasis on one to the detriment of the other. Nor does he want to see overcorrection for our own or others’ misplaced emphases. *Abusus non tollit usum*. Just like the Reformed and their preconceived overemphasis on sanctification demonstrate “a different spirit” from the narrow Lutheran middle, we will be cognizant of our own thinking lest we also fall into a preconceived notion apart from Scripture and so into a different spirit.

In the end, the frequency and amount of preaching God’s providential promises and his gospel of forgiveness are a matter about which he has not given us specific commands. This is an adiaphoron. Thus, in order to know how far is too far, we need to approach it in accordance with the principles of adiaphora. Those whose conscience allows them to realize it is an adiaphoron

---

<sup>47</sup> Schmitt, “Law and Gospel in Sermon and Service”, p. 44

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 34

<sup>49</sup> Gurgel, “Honest Preaching: Faithfully Proclaiming the Law for the sake of the Gospel”, p. 2

are to accept those who are struggling with that idea, not quarreling with or treating with contempt those whose faith hasn't yet allowed them to do that. (Romans 14:1, 2, 10) A "strong" preacher will not put a stumbling block or obstacle in front of others, but rather will "make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification" with other preachers. (Romans 14:13, 19)

As the preacher deals with this "middle thing" in his place with those people, he will remember Paul's caution: "not everything is beneficial... not everything is constructive... no one should seek their own good, but the good of others." (1 Corinthians 10:23-24) A very important part of the consideration of what balance he will strike in the complementary relationship between providential promises and gospel in his preaching is the benefit of the people. Think about your people's stations in life according to the table of duties, and know the stresses in their vocations. Talk with them and get to know their personal lives, their hurts and failures. Then it will be easier through your preaching to help carry their burdens (Galatians 6:2).<sup>50</sup>

And do this knowing the great responsibility you have, both to these people and to the word of God. Walther writes, "People can be deprived of their souls' salvation by a single false comfort or a single false rebuke administered to them. [And this is] all the more [true because of] the fact that we are all by nature more attracted to the glaring and glittering light of human reason than to God's truth."<sup>51</sup> God's comforts are full and great and don't need false ones added on to them. Nor ought we to rebuke Christians who are legitimately seeking God's full array of comforts.

This is an issue for every Christian every day, but it is an even greater issue for the pastor, because he has been called as God's representative to preach. He preaches to himself first and also to the flock that Christ has entrusted to his care, as well as leading those outside the fold. His choices and attitudes have an effect not only on himself but also on the eternal welfare of many others. Through his faithfulness, he cannot improve the power of the word, but through his

---

<sup>50</sup> We need to be prepared for this, also, that helping others carry their burdens means we will feel some of the burden. Yet God will still bless us through this. Schuetze and Habeck, in their pastoral theology book, *The Shepherd under Christ*, have this to say: "The use of the word for comfort had been called the most difficult but also the most beautiful facet of the pastor's care for the individual. It is difficult, for his own heart will be torn by grief when he sees people whom he loves ravaged by pain, approaching death, or crushed by some grief or calamity. He will feel the need for being comforted himself and wonder whether he is adequate for performing the duty of love which is set before him. But when he sees the power of the word to help people to smile in spite of their pain, to die triumphantly, or to submit to the Lord's chastisements patiently, he will thank the Lord that he has been entrusted with the ministry of comfort." (p. 147)

<sup>51</sup> (sic); Walther, p. 24

unfaithfulness, he can hinder it. So, as 2 Timothy 3:15 instructs, you will want to “do your best to present yourself... as one who correctly handles the word of truth.” The fact that St. Paul uses the term ‘do your best’ already shows that this is a high and difficult art, but one that is well worth the effort.<sup>52</sup>

Let us put in the effort to watch ourselves lest we stray towards gospel negligence or gospel obsession. And then let us put in the effort to know our people and ponder what aspect of God’s mercy they need to hear in a specific situation. Some lectionary texts include both the gospel and a providential promise, and we may have to choose, with our people in mind, which one we will emphasize more on a given day. This can only make our sermons more winsome and help our people see God’s grace for them personally.

Furthermore, just as different gospel metaphors may be more or less suited for certain cultures (although they all touch on basic needs), there may be some of God’s providential promises (which also touch on basic needs) that are more easily relatable and clearer in one time and place than another. Of course, in a sermon, we are talking to a number of different people, not just one or two, so we will not be able to tailor our messages as exactly, but there is still some tailoring that can be done.

For example, in a bare-bones mission setting, unless you were trying to engage in apologetics, you would not preach much at all about the providential promises, since God has made them only to believers, or about his instructions for sanctified lives of thanks. Instead you would focus mostly on the narrow-sense gospel. In a congregation that is relatively new to the faith but stable in their lives, you may include some providential promises while also giving a healthy diet of narrow-sense gospel and sanctification. In a more established congregation where most members are firm in their faith in the Savior, you may preach providential promises more often to give them confidence in the face of persecution and disappointment.<sup>53</sup>

Even single books of the Bible that were written to a single audience do not use just one kind of justification metaphor or providential promise. They employed a variety. We will too. There is no single method for successfully conveying the gospel in each place. Each culture,

---

<sup>52</sup> Note that, when Walther says the proper distinction between law and gospel is a high and difficult art and is only taught by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience, he is not saying that distinguishing between the doctrines is hard. Manifestly not! Rather, the difficulty lies in knowing who needs to hear which. In the same way, it is not difficult to distinguish between the gospel and providential promises, but we need the Holy Spirit to teach us through experience when our people need more of an emphasis on one of these.

<sup>53</sup> And when we think about our audience’s situation, let us not forget shut-ins who will see videos of our sermons, or those who will see our services on TV or online. Consider their maladies and fears, too.

each subculture, and even each person will need to hear it in multiple ways. And the same goes for the providential promises as we proclaim them and preserve the balance between them and the gospel in the general flow of our preaching.

*Must every sermon contain the gospel?*

For some reason, it seems every new student of preaching in our circles is given the impression that every sermon must contain second-use law and the narrow-sense gospel. Is it any wonder then, that we hear so many law-then-gospel two-part sermons? Some would even say that this narrow-sense gospel needs to mention Jesus' death in our place for our sins. Balge and Gerlach, in their beginner preaching textbook, state that "Every sermon will contain specific gospel; that is, it will clearly present the way of salvation for the benefit of anyone who does not yet know and confess Christ as Savior and Lord."<sup>54</sup> And later, "Preaching the whole counsel of God also demands that every sermon contain 'specific gospel.' Specific gospel means reference to the saving work of Christ and to faith in him as Savior. It is possible to preach a sermon that is predominantly gospel without spelling out explicitly the answer to the question, 'What must I do to be saved?'"<sup>55</sup>

They seem here to be following the way C.F.W. Walther spoke in his famous Friday evening lectures on the proper distinction between law and gospel. In the 25<sup>th</sup> thesis itself, he urges his students to let the gospel "predominate in your teaching", but right away in the first paragraph following the thesis, Walther speaks of "law predominating in a sermon" versus "gospel predominating in a sermon."<sup>56</sup> From this it is clear that Walther was saying that each sermon should include the narrow-sense gospel.

He later envisions a situation where some poor soul comes to church for the first and last time because of the lack of gospel predominating in the sermon.<sup>57</sup> It implies requiring a pretty serious doctrinal conclusion: if there is any possibility of a new person (or even a hypocrite?) coming to your place of worship to hear that particular sermon, you had better include the narrow gospel. If you don't and they hear some word of law, they could be turned off, never

---

<sup>54</sup> Balge and Gerlach, *Preach the Gospel*, p. 4. They immediately follow that statement with: "But the predominant purpose will always be to edify Christians who do make that confession."

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 11

<sup>56</sup> Walther, p. 455

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 462

come again, and be lost forever. I have been told that Walther's sermons often had a section that was intended for unbelievers and hypocrites but may or may not have been addressed to them. Perhaps it was easy for the believers sitting there to think Walther was talking to them when he brandished the threats of the law against the godless.

Balge and Gerlach back off of this to a certain extent: "Though unbelievers and hypocrites may be present in a worship service, yet a sermon presupposes that those who hear it are already the people of God. Its primary purpose therefore is pastoral. It seeks to edify. It does not address people as though they are godless unbelievers. As sinners with an Old Adam, yes; but as sinners controlled by their Old Adam, no!"<sup>58</sup> The inevitable conclusion of that train of thought, however, is that the possibility of just one new person coming to hear a sermon was going to turn every sermon into an evangelism sermon to some extent. This could be carried even further on something of an absurd slippery slope to say that every hymn or devotion must include the gospel for the sake of an unbeliever who might be hearing it for the first and last time.<sup>59</sup>

One thing to remember, however, was the context in which Walther was speaking. He was not typing up a carefully prepared document for publication, but was giving a Friday evening lecture to his own students. He may have been laying it on pretty heavy for the sake of calling those students away from the preaching content of the Reformed. Walther himself may have been very comfortable with the concept that the gospel needs to predominate over the course of successive preaching situations at a church and in a preacher's pastoral ministrations and not in every sermon if said sermons were not directly preaching the law against sin.

What, then, about the hypocrite or the newly arrived unbeliever? What if they come to hear a sermon of yours that does not contain the narrow-sense gospel? What if you only preach to a malady of uncertainty and pain in Christian's lives and then provide a providential promise God makes to them? Have you doomed these unbelievers? Perhaps it is helpful to think about this as a testimony, even to unbelievers, of God's kindness. It would be a kind of pre-evangelism,

---

<sup>58</sup> Preach the Gospel, p. 4

<sup>59</sup> I remember a conversation in college with a classmate who questioned whether we could use hymns that don't have the narrow-sense gospel in them. I could only say, "If it is in the Bible, like in Psalms, why not?"

just like letting our light shine through our actions is.<sup>60</sup> Would we object to people just letting their light shine or just engaging in apologetic conversations with their neighbors on the grounds that they are depriving them of the chance to hear the one message needful? Would we think they have blood on their hands?

In most cases, wouldn't we see it as good and, on account of people's sinful natures, necessary preparation for the person to be attracted to and understand the gospel message? Note well that we are not talking about Walther's situation of hammering away at people's sins with the law and then leaving them without forgiveness, although highlighting the maladies of our broken lives may well prick some consciences as they think about why our lives are filled with so much suffering. Rather, on a very basic level, the central gospel cannot be attractive or understood without at least some life-witness from Christians and some familiarity on the part of the unbeliever with the Scriptures. Even sermons that focus solely on providential promises can provide some of this.

This isn't necessarily to advocate for excluding the narrow-sense gospel from sermons regularly. Most providential promise focused sermons will still probably mention the certain fact of Christ's death and resurrection for our sins as the basis for Christians' confidence in those promises. The question must be asked: why wouldn't you mention forgiveness for Christ's sake in a sermon?" Perhaps there is a good reason. The text may not mention it, or the main point Christian people may need to hear at that time and place could be some providential promise so that they are assured God loves them and cares about them and so do not lose their faith in Christ. Again, the pastor must know his people's situation. At any rate, I am convinced that, even if we do not preach the gospel in a sermon, every text still has grace in it, whether explicitly or implicitly. I would do a disservice to my people if that grace does not predominate each and every sermon, even if the gospel may not.

*What is the relationship between the sermon text and the promises that are to be preached?*

---

<sup>60</sup> This is true even though it would often be an apologetic of the cross, since there is contradictory evidence in the seeming failures of providence in Christian's lives. See Luke Thompson's Senior Thesis: "An Apologetic of the Cross as a Lutheran Approach to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Apologetics Centered on the Hiddenness of God", pp. 22-36. Thompson does not speak directly of how providential promises play into the theology of the cross, but it fits his framework.



Neglecting the text tends to make the applications in the sermon generic and predictable, while preaching text-based sermons has the potential for great variety. It is safe to say that in our circles, most people expect textual preaching. There is a kind of implicit agreement there – the pastor will preach based on the meaning of a particular portion of the Bible, and the main point of all of this is for the souls who hear it to receive comfort and encouragement from God. Thus, it is incumbent on the preacher to find what comfort and encouragement the text itself presents.

A crucial part of this is identifying the function of the text in its context. Is the text trying to terrify sinners? To assure sinners of forgiveness? To lead them to praise God? To comfort them in temporal trouble? To encourage them towards thankful, sanctified living? Here is where gospel obsession or negligence can come into play. Schmitt warns, “law-gospel obsession can lead to the error of misinterpreting the function of the text.”<sup>61</sup>

Although it is certainly true that you can infer something about sin or God’s grace from a passage whose function is to assure with a providential promise, if the sermon only speaks of sin and God’s forgiveness, have we overlooked part of the message the Holy Spirit is sending? And although it is certainly true that you can find mentions of providential promises in sections whose main function is to condemn sin and offer forgiveness, if the sermon treats those promises as if they are the theme, have we obscured to a certain degree the message of the Holy Spirit? It must be a both-and situation. Why not preach both in accordance with their function in the text? Schmitt continues, “we must keep both the Christo-centric principle of interpretation and the principle of textual integrity.”<sup>62</sup>

Textual integrity does not preclude noting teachings from elsewhere in Scripture that correspond to that particular text’s main function. In fact, it may encourage it. Without those corresponding teachings, the sermon sometimes may not be able to match the sermon text’s function. For texts that are completely narrow-sense gospel or completely providential promises, you basically have to bring in corresponding maladies – whether sin or brokenness in this world – to give people the background on why these pieces of good news are so good. Perhaps, however, there could be a situation when the pastor knows they are obvious to his people and so does not need to mention them so specifically. For purely second-use law texts, you have to bring in the narrow-sense gospel to lift souls from despair, since that is clearly the reason they

---

<sup>61</sup> Law and Gospel in Sermon and Service, p. 39. We might add negligence here, as well.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 40

are included in Scripture – to drive people to that gospel. In texts that are purely third-use law, it is also wise to bring in the gospel as a reminder of the motivation the people have to do these things, since that is clearly what the Scriptures are assuming. This is also so because, even when preached as third-use law, people can still easily think of it as second-use law. The main function of each of these sermons, however, should remain with function of the text.

If your people would be better served at this specific time by another function, pick a different text. Doing so need not trouble us, since the lectionary is just a guide. E. H. Wendland writes in the introduction to his volume of sermon texts: “The pericopic series are helpful tools to be used rather than a burden to be borne. That is, we use them in freedom because they provide a nutritious and varied diet of food from God’s word. Yet we are not bound to them. We will surely depart from them when a special occasion or the needs of the congregation call for something more specific.”<sup>63</sup>

Depending on the text, some messages about providential promises may correspond more to a malady of how worry and doubt are sins against the first commandment. Other times, the text may point more to a malady of alarm at the difficulties of life and honest questions to God of ‘how long?’ or ‘what for?’ Make sure the cure matches the malady.<sup>64</sup> If the malady is sin against the first commandment, the forgiving gospel must be applied; if not, perhaps a reminder of the providential promise will be sufficient as a cure. To figure out where the text is coming from as far as the malady is concerned, it may often be necessary to draw from the context, whether immediate or wider, including the theme of the book, etc.

The lectionary generally gives us chances to preach on many different facets of God’s narrow-sense gospel gem over the course of a year, and in addition to that, many of God’s surrounding temporal promise gems. Although it is a little bit of an overstatement, we can preach on the whole counsel of God every year.<sup>65</sup> The lectionary can help us avoid riding “hobby horses”

---

<sup>63</sup> E.H. Wendland, *Sermon Texts*, p. 2

<sup>64</sup> And make sure the maladies of the reality of our human condition are preached as well, lest anyone be left to stray into the ditch of presumption, thinking that God’s providential promises mean they will not have trouble and pain in this world. God’s word tells Christians to expect suffering: Psalm 90:10, John 15:18-16:9, Acts 14:22, Romans 8:20-21, 1 Peter 4:12. At times we will also be careful to say that some suffering also comes as a result of our own sins and is God’s good discipline for us.

<sup>65</sup> Schmitt, *Tapestry*, 114: “We want our sermons throughout the year to teach the whole Christian faith.” See also Deutschlander’s preface to the Year B Non-Festival Half Planning Christian Worship II document. Such thoughts are a little bit of an overstatement not only on account of the fact that the gospels take 3 years to cover and only one

that are to our personal liking, and it generally provides variety from week to week, as well as presenting opportunities to cover the deep and necessary doctrinal truths that people in the pews need to know about their Savior and his promises. The Pentecost season especially covers a number of themes, so look to preach providential promises more often during that time, although they show up also in the festival half of the church year.

This attending to and carefully selecting texts is one of the top ways for a preacher to make sure his people are hearing the themes they need most at that time, whether the narrow gospel or providential promises based on it, whether sanctification instruction or a retelling of the blessings of the past. Let us give it its due – for the sake of our people and in faithfulness to our over-shepherd in heaven.

*How would this preaching of providential promises look in practice?*

Lectionary texts present us with a number of different scenarios. One example of a text where the gospel is the main emphasis but there is still a providential promise that needs to be preached because it supports the gospel is John 10:22-32 (Easter 4, Year C). Jesus' claim that he is the Messiah of God is backed up by his promise that "no one can snatch them out of [his] hand." On the other hand, an example of a text where a providential promise is the main thrust but the gospel is mentioned is Romans 8:28-30 (Epiphany 5, Year B). The fact that God called, sanctified, justified, and glorified his people through Jesus' substitution backs up and lends credence to his promise that he will work all things for the good of those who love him.

One example of a text where the providential promise is the only thrust of the text is Matthew 6:24-34 (Epiphany 8, Year A). Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about food or clothing. He runs them through how he provides food even for the birds of the air and 'clothing' even for the flowers of the field, so his disciples can just seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and know all those things would be given to them as well. An example of a text where a providential event in history is the only thrust of the text, but that provides opportunity to remind people of a providential promise is John 6:1-15 (Pentecost 10, Year B). Jesus feeds the five thousand and so strengthens his disciples then and us now in trust.

---

reading can serve as the sermon text each time, but also because some specific providential promises are omitted from the general lectionary, e.g. – the ministry of angels.

As an example of leaving the general, three-lesson lectionary to preach on a providential promise that is otherwise uncovered, consider these two psalms that highlight the ministry of angels who protect God's people. Psalm 34 (listed on Pentecost 14, Year A) speaks of the angel of the LORD encamping around those who fear him. Psalm 91 (listed on Lent 1, Year C; also a part of the Compline liturgy) says God will command his angels to guard his people in all their ways. In general, the book of Psalms offers many opportunities for preaching on God's providential promises when the situation in your congregation calls for it.

## Conclusion

God's Scriptures sing in harmony. The central gospel is the melody line, and is it ever beautiful. It stands alone as what communicates and conveys forgiveness. Yet the harmonic lines of providential promises, sanctification, and God's works in history all enhance its beauty, showing us even more of the power and love of our God. Therefore, the providential promises cannot be neglected because of an overbearing obsession with the narrow-sense gospel. By giving providential promises more of a place in our preaching, according to the needs of our listeners, we will be acknowledging them as God's good and gracious word to us. I pray consideration of these points will lead to a strengthened faith in many hearers as they realize more fully the power and love of God, as well as the fact that the final foundation for faith is found in Christ.

This paper has come up short in the area of providing support from experienced homileticians on the practical conclusions that were drawn. The opinions expressed are my own, and that is admittedly drawing from a very shallow pool. This paper has also left a few unanswered questions. For example, *how well does the lectionary provide for the preaching of providential promises? Is there a practical need for more emphasis on preaching these promises in our circles? How much did the ancient fathers or Luther or Walther include them?* I leave this wider-scope research for others.

The middle question would take a good bit of discernment. Perhaps there could be a few ways of doing this. One would be to examine a representative sample of sermons available on our churches' websites. Texts could be chosen that offer opportunity for a variety different emphases either exclusively or partially between narrow-sense gospel and providential promises. Then data could be compiled on the extent to which our sermons tended to reflect that. A similar process could also be carried out with the Sermon Studies books or with a representative sample of the devotional material we produce. God grant that such a study, even if it is just one individual pastor evaluating his own preaching, may bear much fruit.

*"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" -Romans 8:32*

S.D.G.

## Works Cited

- Balge, Richard and Gerlach, Joel. Preach the Gospel: a Textbook for Homiletics. Northwestern Publishing House. 1982.
- Chapell, Bryan. Christ-centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Baker Academic. Grand Rapids, MI. 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Christ-centered Sermons: Models of Redemptive Preaching. Baker Academic. Grand Rapids, MI. 2013.
- Deutschlander, Daniel. The Narrow Lutheran Middle: Following the Scriptural Road. Northwestern Publishing House. 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours. Northwestern Publishing House. 2008.
- Gurgel, Richard. "Honest Preaching: Faithfully Proclaiming the Law for the Sake of the Gospel." WLQ 104:2, Spring 2007 <http://wlsessays.net/files/GurgelHonest.pdf>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Keeping Preaching Christocentric" Preach the Word. Vol. 14. No. 2. November / December 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Unending Pursuit of Growth in Gospel Preaching: A Comprehensive Plan for Continuing Education in Preaching for Pastors of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Ph.D. dissertation. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. 2010.
- Habeck, I. "Law and Gospel and the Proper Distinction in Their Use in the Life of the Church." WLQ 69 :174. <http://wlsessays.net/files/HabeckDistinction.pdf>
- Hoenecke, Adolf. Trans. Joel Fredrich, Paul Prange, and Bill Tackmier. Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, Vol. IV. Northwestern Publishing House. Milwaukee, WI. 1999.
- Koelpin, Paul, ed. "The Preparation Process – Part II." Preach the Word. Vol. 17. No. 2. November / December 2013.
- Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert, ed. The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran church. Fortress Press, Minneapolis. 2000.

Luther, Martin. Lectures on Genesis. Volumes 3 and 8 of Luther's Works, an American Edition. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO. 1966.

Marquardt, Guy. "Christus pro Nobis: Preaching Specific Gospel." Delivered at California Pastors Conference, St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Citrus Heights, CA. January 2014.

Pieper, August. Trans. Dennis Rardin: "The Right Division of Law and Gospel in Its Application for Pure Teaching and Spiritual Life." <http://wlsessays.net/files/PieperDistinction.pdf>.

Pieper, Francis. Christian Dogmatics. Volume II. Concordia Publishing House. St. Louis, MO. 1951.

Preus, Jacob A.O. Just Words: Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel. Concordia Publishing House. St. Louis, MO. 2000.

Schmitt, David R. "Freedom of Form : Law/Gospel and Sermon Structure in Contemporary Lutheran Proclamation." *Concordia Journal* 25, no. 1 (January 1, 1999): 42-55. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 3, 2014).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Law and Gospel in Sermon and Service." In Grime and Nadasdy, eds. Liturgical Preaching. Concordia Publishing House. St. Louis, MO. 2001.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The tapestry of preaching." *Concordia Journal* 37, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 107-129. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 3, 2014).

Schuetze, Armin W. and Habeck, Irwin, J. The Shepherd under Christ: A Textbook for Pastoral Theology, Second Edition. Northwestern Publishing House. 1981. (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1974)

Thompson, Luke. "An Apologetic of the Cross as a Lutheran Approach to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Apologetics Centered on the Hiddenness of God." Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Senior Thesis. 2013. [http://www.wls.wels.net/sites/default/files/Thompson\\_0.pdf](http://www.wls.wels.net/sites/default/files/Thompson_0.pdf)

Walther, C.F.W. Christian C. Tiews, trans. Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible: A Reader's Edition. Concordia Publishing House. St. Louis, MO. 2010.

Wendland, E.H., ed. Sermon Texts. Northwestern Publishing House. 1984.