

# MARTIN LUTHER–GOD'S VOICE

## A REACTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Justin Cloute

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

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