

CHRIST, THE PREACHER

Tracing Our Preaching Roots to Jesus

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Introduction

Looking at your personal preaching roots, you will find many different homiletics professors along the way. For years it was your home pastor whose voice you can still hear. Through years of chapel you heard many different preachers, each with a unique style. You have read many sermons, including those of Luther. Then there are your seminary homiletics professors and your supervising pastor who helped you cut your teeth on those early text studies, outlines, and manuscripts. As self-appointed adjunct members of the faculty, your classmates were right there as well, sometimes too eager to critique, sometimes a bit hesitant because they were up next.

As we trace our common roots as Lutheran preachers, some would think it natural to first look back to the man whose name we bear. If we did, however, we would quickly hear Luther crying, “*Ad fontes!*” as he points us to Scripture and the Man whose name we bear through baptism. “*Ad fontes!*” We make it our cry as well. Looking to Scripture, we see Jesus, our best and truest homiletics professor. For our preaching, like our status before God, is rooted in him.

In our time together we will consider Christ, the Preacher.¹ Such a study both comforts and encourages a preacher. Along the way Luther himself will join us², chiefly through quotations from a series of sermons on John 14:1-10.³ Luther consider these some of his best and

¹ As we consider Christ, the Preacher, we remember that Scripture’s definition of “to preach” is much broader than our narrowly defined delivery of a 15 minute, written out, and memorized sermon within a worship service. The verb κηρύσσω is often translated “to preach.” Its noun is κήρυξ, a herald. Behind both the noun and the verb lies the idea that the messenger does not represent himself but someone else; the message is important, formal, and authoritative because of the one from whom it comes not because of the messenger. (For a full discussion: TDNT, Kittel vol. III: 683-714) Other times you’ll find the verb “preach” in the English when the Greek has the verb εὐαγγελίζω “to evangelize, to preach the gospel.” Here again the all-important “good news” content is part of the verb itself and receives the emphasis. With both κηρύσσω and εὐαγγελίζω the emphasis is on *what* is preached or proclaimed instead of how or by whom. “Proclaim” is a fitting translation and is growing in favor. (Both the latest versions of the NIV and HCSB have the translation “proclaim” in places where traditionally we might have seen “preach.”) This move would seem good for a couple of reasons: First, in our culture many hear “preach” and do immediately think of the narrow meaning, “to preach a sermon in a worship service”. Second, due to a lot of law-oriented preaching, our culture has attached a negative connotation to the word “preach,” e.g., “Do not preach at me!” “Do not be so preachy.” ***Of course, even if the venue or format of the proclamation differed from what we call a sermon, the lessons learned from Christ’s public proclamation impact how we publically proclaim his message in a sermon.***

² All Martin Luther citations, unless otherwise noted, are from Luther’s Works. American Edition. 56 vols. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86.

³ Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 14-16, 1537,” LW AE 24:1-73

personal favorites.⁴ In these John 14 sermon selections of Luther (printed in italics for easy identification) we see themes that are common to his overall preaching, themes that show he also traced his preaching roots to the Preacher.

Christ, the Preacher

Pre-Incarnate Preview

When it came to you and me, no one knew for sure what kind of preachers we would be. Knowing us in our childhood, many would have concluded the worst.⁵ Only a mother's heart would blindly venture, "Oh, he'll be wonderful!"

Not so the case with the Jesus. A study of Jesus as preacher begins not in the Gospels, but long before his incarnation. Its roots go deep into the Old Testament. In eternity a Father's heart knew and in the Old Testament he promised that Jesus' preaching would be wonderful.⁶

In prophecy we do not receive much indication of the style of Christ's proclamation.⁷ Rather, when it speaks of the royal Prophet's words, it dwells on the substance of the message which is given by the Father.⁸ What would be the content of the Messiah's preaching? The Old

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, "Introduction to Volume 24" Luther's Works AE 24:ix,x

⁵ Psalm 27:5 comes to mind.

⁶ In Deuteronomy 18:15-18 Moses points to Christ's preaching ministry. His words foreshadow the Father's Transfiguration endorsement of the preacher from Nazareth: "Listen to him!"

⁷ Song of Songs does show a passionate eloquence and beauty which we definitely can see in how the Bridegroom speaks to his bride on the pages of the Gospels. In Isaiah 42:2 the Father gives us a glimpse of Christ's overall gentle approach: "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets." Even here we would note that any beauty or nobility of style flows out of the substance of the message. The content is always foremost with the style serving it, something good for all preachers to remember: When choosing the style of presentation always ask if it reflects the nobility and beauty of the message.

⁸ No surprise, the same is true of the only other preacher foretold in Scripture, the Messiah's forerunner. [Although doubtful according to a proper translation, some church fathers such as Hippolytus, Tertullian and Jerome would suggest there is a prophecy regarding St. Paul in Jacob's blessing of Benjamin in Ge 49:27.] In Isaiah 40:3 John is simply described as a voice, a description he gladly embraces (Jn 1:23). Nothing is said about the quality or eloquence of that voice. None of that matters. The focus is not on how the voice sounds but on what it says. [Some may see a bit of John's style described in Mal 4:5.] Yes, even in prophecy regarding John and Christ, the Holy Spirit is laying out for us a preaching pattern of substance over style.

Testament tells us in at least three ways: by his essence, by his office, and by giving us his “hometown” sermon text.

The Essence of the Preacher

The Old Testament promised that the Messiah would be true LORD, the Son of God come into the flesh. Who is the LORD in his essence?

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."⁹

When Moses asked to see the LORD, he did. But with what did Moses truly see who God is? With his eyes or his ears? With his eyes Moses only gets half the story, and not the part God wants to emphasize.

With his eyes he sees what he already knew by conscience: God is holy. I am not. The sight brings fear; the message is law.¹⁰ There were things about God’s nature that could only be revealed to sinful man through proclamation. *“If you want to encounter God, you must first see Him under the mask, in the Word.”*¹¹

So, the LORD leads off his proclamation of his name with these attributes that are unknown to sinful man and lets those attributes dominate the proclamation of his name. As he proclaims, the LORD makes it clear that his gracious attributes are also expressed in gracious action toward sinners.

⁹ Although to the best of my study it is not found as such in any lectionary, this section would be a very fitting text for Transfiguration. You have the cloud. You have the Father speaking. The predominate message of his gracious attributes are revealed in his Son to whom the Father points at the Transfiguration: “This is my Son... Listen to him!” Also, following the Transfiguration Jesus will begin heading to the cross. Why? Because the LORD forgives “wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.”

¹⁰ Such was also the experience of Isaiah: "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5).

¹¹ Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 14-16, 1537,” AE 24:68

What the LORD proclaimed to Moses in private, God desired to proclaim to all. Therefore, he sent his Son to proclaim his name, i.e. who he is and what he has done for us.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (He 1:1-3a).

Jesus is the divine Logos through whom the Father has made himself known as compassionate, gracious, loving, and forgiving.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth...From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known (Jn 1:14, 17-18).

In these sections from John and Hebrews we note well the connection God makes between his essence, the incarnation, the gospel, and proclamation. The proclamation of law and gospel are simply a proclamation of who God is in his essence and in his actions toward sinners. Already in the Old Testament, before the incarnation, by virtue of *who* Jesus would be, we know the content of his preaching would be law and gospel with the gospel predominating.

This intimate and inseparable connection between God's essence, Christ's person, and gospel proclamation was a foundation of the Lutheran Reformation and gave every reason to preach. It was also a favorite theme in Luther's preaching:

*One must teach and believe: "I must and will hear or see no work, no worship of God, no spirituality, no holy life other than that of this Man Christ, or that which He transmitted to the apostles, and the apostles in turn, transmitted to preachers. When I hear these, I hear Christ Himself; and when I hear Christ, I hear the Father." Thus all must be woven together and interrelated. And if the relationship is right, all must follow in a straight line. It is like tracing and following a river or a brook to its source, the spring. I drink the water from the pipes. It comes from the brooklet; and this, in the end flows from the spring.*¹²

¹² Martin Luther, LW AE 24:70

The Prophetic Office

The prophets were vivid prefigures of The Prophet. Their office was not only a foreshadowing, it was a pre-incarnate extension of the Messiah's *Predigtamt*. As such their message was his, his message theirs.¹³

When we look at the content of the Old Testament prophets, we see law and gospel with the overall purpose to proclaim the good news of the coming Savior. Jesus makes this point when he says, "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (Jn 5:39). Peter says, "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Ac 10:43). In Isaiah, where one can argue the Old Testament office of prophet reaches its highest height, we read of this most glorious function of the prophets: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes (Is 52:7, 8).

In reality the message of Christ's prophetic office never changes in content, but only in time as it relates to the plan of salvation. Isaiah prophesies, "The virgin will be with child." John says, "Look, the Lamb of God!" Jesus says, "I who speak to you am he." Peter and the other apostles declare, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Luther preached, "*All our teaching and faith must revolve about Christ and be centered in this one Person.*"¹⁴ Occupying that same prophetic office, you and I rejoice to declare, "Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!"

¹³ How intimately connected was Christ to the office and message of his prophets? How active was the pre-incarnate Prophet in the work of the prophetic office? To be sure those prophets spoke his very words through the intimate miracle of inspiration. But, the connection may be even more personal. From the time of Abraham until Zachariah we read the phrase "the word of the LORD came to _____." No doubt this phrase speaks of direct revelation from God to an individual and assures us that the prophet's message was indeed the Son of God's message. Often we view this phrase as a personification of the process of revelation. Is it perhaps more? Could it be "The word of the LORD came" is not a personification of a process but a statement telling us that the Second Person of the Trinity, the pre-incarnate Word, personally came and brought his proclamation to the prophet? Perhaps there's no answer to the question. Whatever the method of delivery, divine revelation assures us the Old Testament prophets spoke the very words of the Prophet who was to come.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, LW AE 24:32 Luther makes these comments when talking about the theme of John's Gospel.

The Reformation grabbed onto this biblical truth. Luther preached: “*In this way all sermons delivered in Christendom must proceed from this one Christ...The office I fill is not mine; it is the Lord’s office.*”¹⁵ Luther so embraced the truth that he was speaking for Christ that he often broke into the first person when preaching the gospel.¹⁶ It brings a very personal and pastoral¹⁷ tone to Luther’s preaching.

*Whatever help and consolation you seek and look for from God, expect it also from Me. I will surely not disappoint you, just as God Himself will not fail you. If I have aided you hitherto and supplied all your wants, if I have shown Myself with words and deeds as One in whom you find comfort and on whom you can boldly rely, if I have never left you in the lurch before – I will not do so in the future either.*¹⁸

Knowing that the preacher spoke for God, the Reformation elevated the importance of the sermon: “*It is all from God, who condescends to enter the mouth of each Christian¹⁹ or each preacher and says, ‘If you want to see me or My work, look to Christ; if you want to hear Me, hear this Word.’*”²⁰

Yes, glorious honor, glorious grace! God has called you and me into the same office as Moses, Elijah, Peter, Paul, etc., the same office as Christ! And, no matter where you find yourself in history, Christ’s prophetic office proclaims Christ. Therefore, already in the Old Testament prophets we get a preview of Christ’s preaching.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, LW AE 24:66

¹⁶ This was not Luther preaching what we might call a “First Person” Sermon which is crafted and designed to have the preacher speak for the biblical figure in the first person singular. Rather, for Luther who rarely had more than an outline for his sermon, his use of the first person was unrehearsed and a very natural way for him to speak on behalf of Christ right to the heart.

¹⁷ Luther’s pastoral concern in preaching is also seen in that he *often* takes his hearers to their deathbed. While preaching on Jn 14:5, 6 he preached, “*When the hour comes in which our deeds and works must cease...do not cast about for any way that bears the human label or the mark of our own good works or holy life. No, bury all this with an Our Father, and recite over it: ‘Forgive us our trespasses.’ Hold solely to Him who says: ‘I am the Way.’ Make sure then that these words are firmly imbedded in your consciousness, so deeply that you can feel Christ’s presence and He can say to you as He does to Thomas here: ‘Why are you seeing and looking for other ways? Look to Me and reject all other thoughts regarding ways to heaven. You may expunge these completely from your heart and think of nothing but these words of Mine: ‘I am the Way.’ See to it that you tread on Me, that is, cling to Me with strong faith and with all confidence of the heart. I will be the Bridge to carry you across.*” LW AE 24:42

¹⁸ Martin Luther, LW AE 24:18

¹⁹ In this quote Luther does not only elevate the *Predigtamt* as a function of Christ’s prophetic office but also elevates the universal priesthood of all believers as a function of that office: “God...descends to enter the mouth of each Christian...”

²⁰ Martin Luther, LW AE 24:66

Isaiah 61

Isaiah 61 is a gem of God's grace. Compelled by his compassion and not confined by his creation called time, the Messiah actually gave the very words of his sermon at Nazareth over seven centuries before the words came from his lips. Not in the New Testament Gospels, but here in Isaiah's Old Testament Gospel we receive Christ's own and most complete summary of his preaching. Not only is it a summary, but it also serves as an encouraging example for preachers in the New Testament church.

The substance is rich. It is comforting. It overflows with sweet gospel. In fact, it is all gospel, brought to us in a style that is stunning!

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor. (Isaiah 61:1-2a)²¹

"The Spirit of the Lord Yaweh is on me for Yaweh has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." Amazing! In one sentence the Messiah summarizes the whole content and purpose of his preaching. By no coincidence, he also summarizes the whole content and purpose of Holy Scripture. Like his Word, the Word has been given to reveal who God is and what he has done to save us.

The Messiah begins by revealing to us that God is personal, *Yaweh*. He is not an energy or a life-force. He is an individual with essence, attributes, and a name, *Yaweh*.²² Specifically, the Messiah reveals God as three separate and distinct individuals, yet one God (*The Spirit of the Lord Yaweh. . . Yaweh has anointed me*).

With these words the Messiah immediately takes us to his baptism, an event that marked the beginning of his public ministry. We might think of it as a sort of ordination for Jesus as he

²¹ For our study today we concentrate on the portion of Isaiah 61 that Christ read as part of his hometown sermon.

²² All of which Exodus 34 tells us is to be proclaimed.

was anointed publically into his office. At our ordinations in sermon and song, readings and rites, it is proclaimed to the pastor elect and the people what this new pastor will preach. It was no different at this Jordan River commissioning. Christ's baptism revealed and proclaimed the one true triune God and Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. Who God is and what he has done for us in Christ, this is the purpose of Scripture, the purpose of Christ's proclamation, and our proclamation.

The Messiah goes on to tell us something else we could not know by nature, something totally unexpected: He has come to proclaim good news.²³ Such good news is unexpected by sinners because by nature law is all we know. Law is our basic operating system; without law natural man does not think or feel or move. The law is our constant companion, clubbing away at the conscience.²⁴

Knowing only law, we would expect that when God comes he would come to judge, avenge, and destroy.²⁵ Wondrous surprise! God breaks into time and becomes one of his creatures not to tell us something we already know by nature. Into this world's otherwise unending cycle of despair and death, the Messiah comes with something other-worldly, something we would never know or experience apart from his proclamation.

As the Messiah brings this good news announcement, he uses **בָּשֵׂר**, a verb that denotes good news traveling from a place where the news is known to where it is not,²⁶ especially news

²³ His good news is not a fluff piece meant to bring a momentary "Awwwh isn't that nice" after the evening news' first 15 minutes of murders and the like. For fallen mankind, lost in sin and despair, facing physical and eternal death, the Messiah comes to proclaim truly good news, news that truly makes all the difference.

²⁴ It's with us sunup to sundown, working fear and worry. The law's demands and fears are heard in the buzz of the alarm: "Get up. Get going. Go to work. Or, you'll be late, be embarrassed, lose your job, your livelihood, your house, your wife, your reputation, etc." Night's pillow promises no rest either. Slumber's dreams are still awash in worry: worry over things done or undone, worry over words said or unsaid, worry over what has been, worry about what will be. Even as we rest, there is no rest. The cycle continues unbroken, day and night, season to season, from tender youth to a ripe old age.

²⁵ That's what Luther originally thought, and we know the despair to which it drove him. Yes, we know that despair from the biographies of Luther and from our own autobiographies.

²⁶ The opening verse of Luther's Christmas hymn sings into one's mind a fitting description of **בָּשֵׂר**: "From heaven above to earth I come to bear good news to every home; Glad tidings of great joy I bring, whereof I now will say and sing."

of victory from the battlefield. The Messiah brings this good news to the poor or humble (אָנֶפֶט), who have been forced into that humble, cowering state by someone or thing.²⁷

So, the Messiah comes proclaiming good news which he portrays in the most comforting of pictures:²⁸ We have been pressed down by our sins. In fear we cower. Cowering is how we spend our days; it's who we have become. But then there breaks good news, news we never would have heard if the King had not dispatched his Messenger. This Messenger has seen the heat of battle. He saw the victory banner unfurled.²⁹ He comes to tell us: The King has won the victory! Sin has been paid for! Death has been swallowed up in victory! Our days of cowering are over; his victory is ours!

While his first utterance would have been enough, far more than we deserve, the Messiah continues to paint pictures of this gracious rescue. There's nothing redundant in this repetition. Even in poetic parallelism, each brushstroke brings a new shade of grace to the canvass of the soul.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.

This good news heals a broken heart. No matter if it has been broken by self, others, or life in general, the heart finds peace in the Messiah's good news.³⁰ To those who have been led off by sin, taken captive by it, left in the darkness of despair in this life with no hope for anything better in the life to come, the Messiah comes with a message of freedom, a ransom paid for release, the doors to heaven flung wide open. His message announces...his presence assures...the LORD's acceptance and favor, an eternal Year of Jubilee!³¹

²⁷ Luther chose to translate *den Elenden*, "the miserable, the wretched." In Luke 4 the Holy Spirit moves Luke to choose *πτωχός* to bring אָנֶפֶט into the Greek. Thayer defines *πτωχός* as "to be thoroughly frightened, to cower down or hide oneself for fear." Through usage *πτωχός* came to be used of a destitute beggar who cowers in fear as he begs and was at the mercy of all.

²⁸ This picture the Messiah gives of himself is exactly the one he ascribes to his gospel servants in Isaiah 52:7, 8.

²⁹ Of course, Christ is both the victorious King and Messenger.

³⁰ St. Augustine of Hippo's: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

³¹ "Year of the LORD", especially in parallelism with "to proclaim liberty" is a reference to the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25. Cf. Lev 25:10.

Why are we poor, brokenhearted, etc.? The blame is ours; we know it. Yet the Messiah says nothing of it;³² his own summary of his preaching contains no law, only gospel. For as necessary as the law is, to the Messiah it is so foreign a work (*opus alienum, das fremde Werk*) that he does not include it in his own summary of his preaching. He does not come to condemn; his lips speak grace. “*Here and elsewhere I learn that all His words are intended to comfort me; yes, that all He says, does, and thinks is nothing but friendly and consoling words and works.*”³³

We would be well-served to read Christ’s words in Isaiah 61 before every sermon preparation.³⁴ The predominance of the gospel in our sermons is rooted in what the Messiah himself does right here. For here the Messiah shows us what our preparation and preaching is to be. Like our Messiah, we do not come to announce law based tips for better living. We come to announce something other-worldly, something that cannot be known or experienced apart from God’s proclamation. To proclaim this gospel is our sole reason for entering the pulpit. A mere passing mention of this gospel was not enough for the Preacher; it is not enough for any preacher. Like Jesus, the Lutheran preacher gives the gospel. Then he gives it again, and again, and again. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us!” (1 Jn 3:1) Lutheran preaching lavishes people with God’s love in Christ!

Lavishing God’s people with gospel does not mean repetition of dry formulas. Rather, it does what the Messiah did in Isaiah 61. Like Jesus, the preacher explores different aspects of God’s grace in Christ. He speaks to the head and heart with pictures, each capturing a different nuance of grace. Like Jesus, these pictures are drawn from Scripture (e.g, the Year of Jubilee) and life’s experiences (e.g., war). Like Jesus, the preacher speaks to what is both totally common and infinitely personal, the broken heart.³⁵

The Lutheran preacher, rooted in Christ and his Word, finds these nuances and pictures in the text. As he does, he acknowledges a debt of gratitude to the Lutheran reformers. Their *ad*

³² There is no law in these verses nor in the verses that follow; it is all gospel.

³³ Martin Luther, LW AE 24:13

³⁴ Given the word pictures the Messiah uses in the opening verses of Isaiah 61, it also becomes a helpful reference when reading the first four Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-6).

³⁵ In many ways preaching is a very public counseling. The preacher speaks for the Holy Spirit, the true Counselor. Those in the pews have come for counseling. Each counselee either comes broken hearted with a problem he knows all too well, or he comes to the “counseling session” not aware of his problem which must first be uncovered. In this public counseling session the Counselor then brings the message of Christ to personally bind up the individual’s heart. Viewing preaching in this way reminds us that preaching is both very public and very personal.

fontes emphasis gave birth to textual preaching based upon careful study in the original languages.

Today's Lutheran preacher echoes that same *ad fontes* cry. Knowing each word of a text was chosen by the Spirit moves us to ask questions of the text: Why did God choose this word and not that? What picture is there in this vocable? ³⁶ Does the word order shed any light on emphasis? What about the plan of salvation is revealed in this verb tense?

The exegetical preacher doesn't find redundancy in Scripture. In parallel accounts he finds the Spirit emphasizing different aspects of God's grace to the sinner. New vocables bring new pictures of God's love and mercy. Because God's ways are not ours, the gospel he finds is always surprising. Ever the sinner himself, surprising gospel gives amazing grace and excites the preacher to proclaim the same to others. Such *ad fontes* preaching proclaims fresh law and gospel with the gospel predominating in an anything but trivial way.

Christ Prepared Himself to Preach

When a man enters the pulpit for the first time, a thousand moments have brought him to that moment. God who knit him together in the womb is also the Potter who has shaped him into a unique jar of clay, a vessel that holds the gospel treasure before a specific group of God's people. His baptism, a mother's sweetly sung "Jesus Loves Me," the year his father was unemployed, memory work recited to a teacher, his home pastor's preaching, his grandmother's death, a professor's instruction, that summer job, all have been harmoniously orchestrated by the Holy Spirit in preparation for this symphony of praise. How long does it take to write a sermon? Years.

Marvel again that Jesus did not consider such preparation beneath him. Rather, like us, his preaching was rooted in preparation.

³⁶ Care should also be exercised that etymological study not take us so far from the normal usage of the word that we blur the meaning of the word in its linguistic setting and the historical context of the passage.

Prepared by Study of the Word

The Holy Spirit has not chosen to reveal much detail about Jesus' life prior to his public ministry. Instead, he has given us snapshots. One glimpse we treasure is the twelve year old Jesus in the temple (Lk 2:41-50). Here we read, "Every year his parents went to Jerusalem." It shows us a family devoted to the Word. We read again, "They found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." Here we see a twelve year old (a 7th grader) who is totally engaged, hanging on every word of God and has been for days. Still further we read, "Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers." We see the kind of young man whose grasp of the Word and hunger for that Word would have had us wanting to recruit him for ministry.

It begs the question: How could God prepare himself to preach? Yes, and how could God forsake himself on the cross? At the very heart of our proclamation there is mystery, things that can only be known by divine revelation, things that still can only be apprehended by faith and not comprehended by the mind.

When our God took the form of a servant, he humbled himself to take on our life and the burden of our sins. As part of his state of humiliation he chose not to make full use of that which was rightly his, namely, every one of his attributes as God. He maintained full possession, but chose not to exercise those attributes fully. He shielded his glory, which often included silencing his omniscience.³⁷ All this he did "*for us and for our salvation!*" Silencing his omniscience, the Son went through the very human process of preparing himself to preach.

As we dig a little deeper, we marvel all the more. We dust off our studies of the personal union of the two natures in Christ (hypostatic union). We view the multifaceted beauty of our Savior, the God-Man. We consider again the truths of Scripture that we have come to call the Communication of Attributes. Specifically, we gaze upon the *Genus Maiestaticum*. As we do, we realize the boy Jesus did not *need* to prepare himself to preach through a study of the Scriptures, *not even according to his human nature*. For in the Person of Christ the Divine Nature

³⁷ Contrast Christ words in Mt 24:36 and Ac 2:6, 7. In Matthew 24 during his state of humiliation he says that not even the Son knows when the end will come. In Ac 2, now in his state of exaltation, he does not say he doesn't know when he will return, rather he says that it is not for his disciples to know. In his state of humiliation he chose not to know; in his state of exaltation, as the God-Man, he is no longer shielding his omniscience.

communicates all of its attributes to the human nature (with the exception of eternity), so that what can be said of the Divine Nature can be said of the human nature in the Person of Christ.

From the point of conception, the Divine Nature communicated its attribute of omniscience to Christ's human nature. The boy Jesus knew every "jot and tittle" of the Old Testament prior to any study. Prior to their revelation, the boy Jesus even knew every "iota" of St. Matthew's Gospel through St. John's Revelation! The boy Jesus, the teen Jesus, the twenty-something Jesus, did not *need* to study the Scriptures in order to prepare himself to one day preach. Yet, he *chose* to do so.

As part of his active obedience, Christ willingly and gladly heard and learned the Word of his Father for each sinner who in his own way has disregarded, neglected, or ignored the study of God's Word. This gospel, however, is all the more specific and sweet for the preacher. It is sweeter because for us the law is sharper and cuts deeper. As preachers our heads hang in shame. Poor preparation of the past haunts us to this day: "If only I would have been more faithful in my studies back in school..." In the present we let too many things crowd in and choke out time in God's Word. Many a preacher has entered both pulpit and classroom with the thought, "If only I had prepared better..." The law, also the preacher's constant companion, nags, taunts, and condemns.

But, look to the Prophet! In Jesus' preparation there was never a "if only." He purposefully and perfectly prepared...*for us*. In his preparation and preaching he presented himself to the heavenly Father as a workman approved with no reason to be ashamed. Through baptism, you, who occupy Christ's preaching office, are robed in his white alb. Clothed in him, you stand before God as a workman approved. In loving response, you do your best to show yourselves as the workman the gospel declares you to be (1 Ti 2:15). Like Christ, our preparation to preach is rooted in thorough and continuing study of God's Word.

Prepared by Thirty Years

Another aspect of Christ's preparation to preach was just the fact that he did not begin his public ministry until he was around thirty.³⁸ Here we would simply note that God considered the passing of time to be important. Yes, in the culture of the day few would have taken Jesus seriously until the age of thirty. Still, nothing, including time, is wasted by God. During those thirty years Christ grew up in a family, watched and was part of the interaction of a husband and wife and siblings, experienced the death of loved ones, and everything else about life "under the sun." As a man, he experienced people with their different situations and sin, personalities and problems. Marvel again that Christ did not do this out of some kind of need for information. This is the life he chose to mold himself as a preacher, again choosing our very human path toward preaching.

It's not uncommon that a preacher-in-the-making grow impatient. The college and then seminary preparation can seem long. TCW trips, early field training, and the like serve the preparation process but can also frustrate the ministerial student as he desires all the more "to be out there."

Here Christ's preparation is instructive. The Son of God in the flesh chose not to preach until he was thirty. In light of that, it doesn't seem too much for us to wait until our mid-twenties. Part of our Reformation heritage is that our preachers receive a thorough and lengthy classical training based upon the German *Gymnasium* with its heavy emphasis on the biblical languages. Part of the scriptural roots of our preaching is that we do not lay hands on anyone too quickly. We recognize that God is not wasting time. Inside and outside of the classroom he is giving lessons and preparation for the pulpit. Part of that backstory is always *Anfechtung*.

³⁸ Luke 3:23 Again, we are told little about these years. We are told that they were perfect years (He 4:15), years that well pleased his Father (Mt 3:17). Luke, having talked with Mary and guided by the Holy Spirit summarizes the ages of twelve to thirty simply by saying that Jesus "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Lk 2:52).

Prepared by Anfechtung

We can rightly mark Christ's baptism as the beginning of his preaching ministry. Yet, we know Christ did not immediately preach. After his baptism, before he preaches a word, we read, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan" (Mk1:12). What comes before preaching? *Anfechtung*. *Tentatio*. Trial. Temptation. It's part of what makes a preacher a preacher.

The water is barely dry from the baptism and the father of lies is attacking everything the heavenly Father had declared in that baptism. The temptations are real. Christ inserts himself into the preacher's struggle against Satan *for us and for our salvation*. Behind each temptation of this Preacher, the devil has special temptations for any preacher. Each is a denial of God's gracious essence and the gospel's declaration "You are my child." Each is also an attack designed to topple the preacher in order to harm the flock.³⁹

"But for us fights the valiant one whom God himself elected!"⁴⁰ Taking the preacher's place, Jesus took the preacher's tool of the trade. With that Word, and with only this Word, he perfectly warded off the temptations that plague a preacher... *for us and for our salvation*.

In this battle Christ also chose to experience and endure a preacher's *Anfechtung*. He emerged from this epic battle triumphant, having only conquered by the Word. "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (He 5:8). He learned what every preacher

³⁹ Satan tempts Jesus saying, "If you are the Son of God tells these stones to become bread." The preacher knows such a temptation: "You are suffering; does this really come from a loving and gracious God? Your life looks anything but glorious. Is this really the life of a son of God, a preacher? Has the gospel really declared you to be God's son? You are hurting. Your family struggles; use your power and position to satisfy yourself."

From the high point of the temple Satan says to Christ, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." This temptation sounds all too familiar to a preacher: "Again, doubt what God's gospel declares you to be. Doubt the gospel you are to declare to others. Instead, be bold; expect greater things. Do not worry about *everything* God has said. Let a more pleasing principle from God's Word trump one that seems so difficult to live, one nobody wants to hear preached. At God's house use what will make a splash, producing visible results. Then you'll have a following."

From a mountain top the devil says to Jesus, "All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me." Ah, the full frontal attack against the preacher: "Forsake the cross. Forsake the Word. Compromise in your calling. Compromise with the Word. Give in. Do it, just this once (and then again and again.) You'll be a more popular preacher and the good things in life will come your way."

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress", v2 tr. Composite *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, 200.

must learn: absolute reliance upon the Father's Word. Now he was ready to preach. To be sure, more *Anfechtung* would come,⁴¹ but each time it would be met with obedient proclamation of his Father's Word.

If *Anfechtung* marks the life of a believer, it abounds in the life of a preacher. God allows *tentatio* to shape his servants. *Oratio, meditatio, and tentatio* (prayer, meditation, trial) make a theologian⁴² and a preacher.⁴³

The preaching that gave birth to the Reformation was born of *Anfechtung*. Reformation events took place on German soil, but the Reformation was born in a German soul.⁴⁴ From childhood this soul had known nothing but fear, especially fear of God. This soul had been on a lifelong, exasperating search for purpose and meaning, but mostly comfort:

*I myself was a monk for twenty years. I tortured myself with prayers, fastings, vigils, and freezing; the frost alone might have killed me. It caused me pain such as I will never inflict on myself again, even if I could. What else did I seek by doing this but God, who was supposed to note my strict observance of the monastic order and my austere life?*⁴⁵

Then the Comforter reached deep down into the troubled soul of this preacher. He brought comfort in only one way, by Christ, by his Word. Luther preached,

God designated a special place for Himself where He wants to be found, and identified Himself with a definite Person...this Person is none other than Christ Himself...Thus God is to be found nowhere but in this Person...Thus no one dare adopt another person

⁴¹ But before he can deliver a single sermon, what follows this wilderness victory? More hurt. More reason to be discouraged: "When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee (Mt 4:12). More temptation: "See what faithfulness to the Word got John? Remember what awaits you a few years down the road." From start to finish, there will be *tentatio* for this Preacher. The devil had only left until another "opportune time" arose. The religious leaders (those who occupy the preaching office!) who should have welcomed him most will criticize his preaching. They won't like to whom he preaches. They won't like how he preaches. They'll hate him and his message. Following his Bread of Life sermon, people who flocked to him will turn away from his preaching. Looking for ease in this life, the Bread of Life will be too hard to swallow. His own homiletics students will miss so much of what he says. They will tempt him with the devil's same "all this will be yours" as they advocate a different message, a theology of earthly glory instead of the cross. They will deny him. One will betray him. With nothing but heartache ahead, what would the Preacher do? Preach. "From that time on Jesus began to preach" (Mt 4:17).

⁴² For Luther's comments on *oratio, meditatio, tentatio* cf. "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings, 1539" LW AE 34:279-288.

⁴³ Theology, ever a *habitus practicus*, is not merely for study but for proclamation.

⁴⁴ We have observed this well especially in the training of our youngest children. We begin teaching them about the Reformation by teaching them about a little boy and then young man who was deeply troubled and could find no peace.

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, LW AE 24:23

*or another means to apprehend God than this one Christ...For God has portrayed Himself definitely and clearly enough in the Word.*⁴⁶

If you haven't read a lot of Luther's sermons for a while, it is worth your while. No, you won't always find model structure to emulate. Preaching daily, often several different sermons on the same day, meant preaching from an outline rather than a written manuscript. Therefore he can wander and repeat himself a bit. And, even though his polemical rhetoric may have been suitable, even necessary, for his time and circumstances, today's preacher would want to carefully weigh the pros and cons before even an occasional polemic from the pulpit.⁴⁷

Still, reading Luther's sermons is time well spent. Even early in the Reformation there's such grasp of law and gospel that is still so refreshing today. His grasp of life "under the sun" is timeless.⁴⁸ His illustrations make things clear. Even when time and culture have separated us a bit from his pictures, we hear a pastor's heart trying to make deep spiritual truths more obtainable to a farmer, a mother, a child. He encourages us to do the same.⁴⁹

But, what really gets me is Luther's passion. It has been five hundred years since those sermons were delivered. Even as we read them we're several steps away from their author; most of them were transcribed by someone else and most often we're reading them through a translator with all that is lost along the way. But still, there's a passion that just grabs you.

Luther's sermons have a passion for Christ, for his Word, and for people. His passion flows from a backstory filled with *Anfechtung*. When he preaches, "It is a heavy burden when a

⁴⁶ Martin Luther, LW AE 24:23

⁴⁷ As we try to understand Luther's circumstances, we can understand better why there is so much venom toward the priesthood and papacy. First, Luther had trusted them and they had hurt him deeply, covering up God's gospel message and keeping Luther in despair. They had been agents of Luther's personal *Anfechtung*. Next, they were publically attacking Luther and more importantly the proclamation of the true gospel. Such public attack required a public response. Finally, Luther's concern was pastoral. They were agents of Satan's lies and still very dangerous to the people, who were constantly being enticed back to Rome through its grandeur, claims of Christian legacy, and the accusations that the Lutherans taught something new, something he had created. Luther needed to point out the dangers of Rome in much the same way we need to point out the dangers of American greed, hedonism, and the destructive messages that fill the airwaves and internet.

⁴⁸ e.g. "Usually we hang the petty thieves; the big ones, however, go walking around in the highest esteem." "Sermon on Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Commandments, 1528" LW AE 51:156

⁴⁹ "The common people are captivated more readily by comparisons and examples than by difficult and subtle disputations. They would rather see a well-drawn picture than a well-written book." "What Luther Says," Plass, 1959 para 3605.

man is weighed down by sins,”⁵⁰ we hear a man who is not just making a doctrinal statement. He is laying his heart out before all. This man, whom God made so exceptional, speaks in plain words concerning each heart’s common and yet personal struggle. His sermons do not read like doctrinal dissertations.⁵¹ They show a pastor’s heart for people who are going through the same struggles of the soul. He seeks to comfort them with the only comfort he himself had found, Jesus through his Word (2 Co 1:3-6). “*We must nestle and cuddle on the lap of Christ, like dear children on their mother’s lap or in her arms, and close our eyes and ears to everything but Him and His words.*”⁵² Today we read Luther’s sermons, and, putting aside any critique, we say, “I want to preach like Luther.”

Luther, picking up a favorite and pastoral preaching theme, the Theology of the Cross,⁵³ reminds you and me that we have *Anfechtung*-filled backstories as well.

*Every Christian, when baptized and dedicated to Christ, may and must accept and expect encounters with terror and anxiety, which will make his heart afraid and dejected, whether these feelings arise from one or from many enemies or adversaries. For a Christian has an exceedingly large number of enemies if he wants to remain loyal to his Lord. The world and the devil daily lie in wait to deprive him of life and limb. Furthermore, his own flesh, reason, and conscience plague him constantly. As a result, his heart trembles with fear.*⁵⁴

These crosses drive us to embrace Christ’s cross all the more. These trials are part of our preparation, part of who we are. They enter the pulpit with us. Coupled with the gospel’s relief, they bring real passion and pastor’s heart to our preaching.

How often should any portion of those backstories be told from the pulpit? Not often. Perhaps never.⁵⁵ A preacher points to Christ’s wounds in the pulpit, not his own. Neither does a

⁵⁰ Martin Luther, “Sermon on St. Matthias’ Day, 1525 Matthew 11:25-30” LW AE51:130

⁵¹ This is despite the fact that sometimes Luther’s sermons have been edited into a commentary, e.g. John 14-16.

⁵² Martin Luther, LW AE 24:64

⁵³ Luther’s pastoral heart can be seen as he preached the Theology of the Cross to prepare a Christian for his deathbed struggle: “*I will not even mention the inner plagues and torments that the devil continually inflicts especially on the noblest Christian in the hour of death and at other times as well, with his darts and the terror of hell, which make them feel as though they were in the jaws of death or in the abyss of hell.*” LW AE 24:49

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, LW AE 24:11

⁵⁵ God chose to use Paul’s backstory as a powerful tool in preaching, so we see that it can be done well and for a God-pleasing purpose. As we have Paul’s example and have no desire to be legalistic, we do not want to say that a preacher should never “tell his story” as part of proclamation. Still, it is also good for us to balance this out by remembering: Paul’s story, circumstance and call (an immediate call as apostle) are rather unique. Without that immediate call from Christ such a backstory might have disqualified him from the ministry. Surely as a persecutor of the church he didn’t have a good reputation with those inside the church. Also caution and balance is in place for

preacher want to say anything that may have people questioning his qualifications to serve. Most of all, an ambassador of Christ represents his King, not himself; he wants the sermon to be all about Jesus and his people.

While we can see the Apostle Paul and even Luther at times using their backstories in proclamation, it is interesting to note Christ's own humility when preaching. Our Savior has the most incredible backstory, but we do not hear him preach about it. As the Messiah, by necessity his preaching would point to himself. Still, when he points to himself we often find him humbly hiding behind pictures. In direct statements of his mission and death, we find him preferring to speak in the third person rather than the first person, e.g., "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk 19:10).⁵⁶ In his proclamation Christ did not consider his equality with the Father something to be flaunted (Php 2:6, 7). Again, it is interesting, and perhaps instructive.

Still, your sermon has a backstory. You can't escape it. Although not directly stated, your sermons reveal your struggles. The burden of the moment, the hurt that just won't go away, they are with you as you study the text. Like Jacob, you have wrestled with God; like Israel, you emerge defeated and victorious at the same time. In the text you have again found peace in Christ, and Christ alone. Like Luther, the burden of your struggle and Christ's comfort brings forth confident, passionate expression in the pulpit. Each week you learn anew the preacher's paradox: This sermon isn't about me at all; this sermon is all about me. For never is a preacher's soul more naked nor his "self" more concealed than when in the pulpit.

Christ's Preaching

Christ's Motivation to Preach

The Holy Spirit gives us Christ's motivation to preach; it is rooted in a deep love for sinners: "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds,

another reason: We may glean something from Paul's descriptive example, but definitely need to follow that which is prescriptive and keeps Christ at the center of our proclamation: "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Co 1:23). "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (1 Co 4:5).

⁵⁶ Cf. also Mk 9:31,10:33,10:45, 14:21

he had *compassion* on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:35, 36).

During his ministry Christ looked out upon many crowds filled with diverse people. In these crowds were the devout, the curious, the cynical, and the outright hostile. Still, Christ’s attitude toward each individual was the same, *compassion*. This uniquely divine compassion was not just a deep love for sinners but a compassion which had to be acted upon.⁵⁷ This is the compassion that drove Christ to the cross. It also drove him to preach. Oh, how he longed to gather them by his preaching! Oh, that they would listen! (Mt 23:37, Lk 13:34)

In that same moment of compassion Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Mt 9:37). In compassion, the Lord of the harvest, would send forth men filled with his compassion. In 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 the Apostle Paul summarizes a preacher’s motivation, a compassion which is both Christ-compelled and Christ-like.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

In addition to Isaiah 61, add 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 to your preaching preparation. Here the Holy Spirit will focus you for your proclamation: Christ crucified for all! Here he reminds you who you are as a preacher: an ambassador of the King entrusted with his message of victory for his people. With these words Christ again motivates you to do your best for him (He died for

⁵⁷ The Greek verb *σπλαγγνίζομαι* pictures an inner turning of the stomach with compassion. It is not merely a passing thought but a deep inner moving. It describes a feeling that is not merely had, but one that is so powerful that it must be acted upon.

you!) and for his people (He died for them!). In these words you will not find a hint of the sermon as a weekly chore. Instead, each week it is an urgent honor; each time a joyous privilege. He has committed to *you* this message of reconciliation.⁵⁸

Christ's View of His Preaching

Observe a Roman Catholic Mass; listen to what they call a homily. You'll know what overall value they place on preaching. Little. The reasons are legion.⁵⁹ Not the least among them is the very nature of their sacramental system with its tightly controlled and conditionally

⁵⁸ 2 Co 5:14-21 is rich in motivation for the preacher: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died" (2 Co 5:14) Ah, the preacher's confidence of his own forgiveness! Christ died for all! This is also the confidence that the message is for all. Both are the driving force to preach this forgiveness!

"And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Co 5:15). More confidence: This message of Christ bring souls to life. Made alive himself, the preacher lives to serve his crucified and risen Lord! More confidence: Christ is alive! He has conquered the grave!

"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer" (2 Co 5:16). The preacher looks beyond what the world sees. The world may see people who have made a mess of their lives and have no one else to blame but themselves. But the preacher sees the crowd assembled before the pulpit as blood-bought souls, people loved by Jesus. Although human eyes see the people in the pew as having far too many needs and the church having far too little resources to meet those needs, the preacher sees people who only need one thing, Jesus. Like his Savior, this compassion cannot merely be had; it has to be acted upon. He must preach Christ.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Co 5:17) More motivation: You are a new creation! The people in the pews are not the great unwashed, they are washed and new creations through baptism into Christ. The preacher addresses the people in the pews as the new creations that they are: "Beloved in the Lord...children of God...brothers and sisters in Christ!"

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Co 5:18, 19a). What a message! When we weren't even ready to meet God half way or even any part of the way, he did everything necessary for us to be reunited with him! In Christ he cancelled our debt! What a motivation!

"And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Co 5:19b, 20a). What an honor! What a privilege! Totally underserved! The King sends me with his appeal to the heart!

"We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Co 5:20b). This message has urgency. It motivates me to proclaim it today.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Co 5:21). Again, what a message! What love...God took on himself the very thing that his holiness abhors, sin! He destroyed it in himself on the cross *for us and for our salvation!* In Christ God has given us his own righteousness, robed us in at our baptisms, robes us in it through faith. And this message is for everyone! God's compassion for him and for all is the preacher's motivation.

⁵⁹ Yes, legion, both because they are many and of the devil.

dispensed grace, a grace that is no grace at all. Public proclamation doesn't fit such a theology; it is almost unnecessary.

In direct contrast, Christ put the highest importance on his preaching. When John is wasting away in prison, Jesus cites his gospel preaching as the key comfort for John and the key identifier that he is the Messiah: "The good news is preached to the poor" (Mt 11:5, Lk 7:22). Most interestingly, Jesus summarizes his ministry saying, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent (Lk 5:43) . . . that is why I have come" (Mk 1:38).⁶⁰

At first glance such a statement is surprising; we might have expected Jesus to summarize his purpose as, "I came to die." To be sure Christ's "I came to preach"⁶¹ does not minimize his redemptive work as Priest and King. Jesus' royal redemptive battle over sin, death, and the devil *for us* and his priestly sacrifice of himself *for us* are essential. But that's just the point. This essential redemptive work of Christ becomes ours through the essential proclamation of the gospel. They are ever connected, for the gospel is the message of Christ's redemptive work. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Ro 10:17).

As we read one of his best known "sermons," we listen as Jesus elevates both his redemptive work and the proclamation of that work (Jn 10:1-18).⁶² He says, "I am the good shepherd" and in words we know well, he paints a picture of his threefold office as Prophet, Priest, and King. The King so cares for and loves his flock that he lays down his life *for the sheep*.⁶³ By his Father's command, he will serve as High Priest and sacrifice himself to please and appease his Father *for the sheep* . . . only to take his life up again! With beauty Christ shows us how his prophetic office puts his redemptive work on display, proclaiming his death as payment and his resurrection as proof.

⁶⁰ Mark tells us this was Jesus' mission. From Luke we see this as the Father's purpose. Given both statements, the Holy Spirit reveals to us the one undivided will of the Father and the Son as well as the active obedience in which Christ willingly made the Father's mission his very own.

⁶¹ Neither does the Father's "Listen to him!"

⁶² The second sermon in this series, John 10:22-30, will be delivered at a later time.

⁶³ Although the picture of kingship in "shepherd" may not be immediately seen by us, it was immediately understood by those who first heard this sermon.

While we vividly remember the sacrificial pictures Jesus gives us in this sermon, both the occasion and the body of the sermon actually highlight his work as the Prophet. The occasion of the Good Shepherd sermon was a Sabbath when Jesus had healed a man born blind. The Pharisees had just thrown this healed man out of the synagogue (John 9:1-34). In contrast to the Good Shepherd, they are the “the hired hands” who “care nothing for the sheep.” As he preaches Jesus makes it clear that his sheep listen to his voice,⁶⁴ a voice that proclaims the Son’s own sacrifice, a voice that is in stark contrast to the voices of the false teaching Pharisees. For although by Call those Pharisees occupied the same prophetic office as Jesus,⁶⁵ they devoured sheep by proclaiming their own sacrifices for God rather than Christ’s sacrifice for the sheep.

That the prophetic office is the thrust of the sermon is also seen from its opening section. He directs all true preachers to only approach his sheep through him, the Gate: “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.” No matter how good their intentions might be, Jesus’ words are sharp for those who approach the sheep “in some other way;” “Amen, amen” such a man is “a thief and a robber.” To approach the sheep with any message other than Christ, the Gate, marks a preacher as a spiritual assailant who leads sheep to their death.

In this sermon Jesus tells us how important true preaching is: Without it people are robbed of his redemptive work. Next to this rebuke is an undeserved honor and beautiful encouragement for true gospel preachers: “The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice” (Jn 10:2-4).

Amazing! He who is both Shepherd and Gate here bestows upon you and me his own title “shepherd.” Not deserving such an honor, with true humility we listen to what Jesus says here to his under-shepherds: we are only to approach the sheep through him, the Gate. When we approach God’s people with the message of Christ whose sacrifice has opened heaven’s gate, the Holy Spirit has them hear past our speech patterns and vocal idiosyncrasies. They do not hear us; they hear the familiar and comforting voice of Jesus!

⁶⁴ In the next Good Shepherd sermon, Jn 10:22-30, Jesus says very directly, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me.”

⁶⁵ Jesus makes this point in Mt 23:2.

Wherever you hear the Gospel properly taught...there you may say without hesitation: "Today I beheld God's Word and work. Yes, I saw and heard God Himself preaching...To be sure, the tongue, the voice, the hands, etc., are those of a human being; but the Word and the ministry are really those of the Divine Majesty himself. Hence it must be viewed and believed as though God's own voice were resounding from heaven."⁶⁶

Christ's sheep hear his voice through our preaching. Therefore, like our Savior, confessional Lutheran pastors place the highest value on preaching. According to the Divine Call, we can say with Christ, "This is why I was sent." Such value is first seen in the time we spend in exegetical and homiletical training. Most weeks in the parish the sermon is considered by preacher and parishioner alike the chief work of the pastor. Although many lay people have never heard the quote, they still know, "There is nothing that so attaches people to the church as good preaching."⁶⁷ The weekly sermon is where the pastor best feeds the majority of the flock in any given week; it is where Christ himself feeds his flock! Along with the absolution and Lord's Supper it is a highpoint in the *Gottesdienst*, as God serves his people with forgiveness in Christ.⁶⁸

The Lutheran Reformation was born of preaching and also placed an extremely high value on it. In the Word the reformers read of forgiveness completely paid for in Christ and freely given by the gospel in Word and Sacrament. The victory won, all that remained was to proclaim it.

In his book, *Lutheran Theology*, Steven D. Paulson makes the point that to understand Lutheranism at all, one must understand the centrality of preaching in both the Reformation and Lutheran Church. Paulson writes:

Lutheranism...began as a preaching movement...(Luther) administered forgiveness of sins to actual sinners by preaching it openly...He then urged the keys to the kingdom to be used liberally throughout the land by preachers in their own places of calling, dispensing a promise from Christ to a sinner that provided the absolute assurance of faith. Preaching was the "means" of the Reformation cause, and could be started immediately, with great freeing effect, anywhere a preacher dared. Overnight a priest could become a Lutheran preacher, and a congregation become a new, evangelical church wherever this

⁶⁶ Martin Luther, LW AE 24:67

⁶⁷ AC:XXIV:50

⁶⁸ These are high points specifically because they are gospel proclamation, moments in which Christ himself is feeding his flock with his forgiveness.

freedom was exercised...It centered preaching on two words that were normally controlled by a sacramental system with law at its heart: `Te absolvo' (I Forgive You)... On the face of it, Luther's proposal was not of "reform" nor was it modest, though it was excruciatingly simple: it was to replace the papacy with a sermon: "Christ's merit is not acquired through our work of pennies, but through faith by grace, without any money and merit – *not by the authority of the pope, but rather by preaching a sermon, that is, God's Word.*"⁶⁹

The Theme and Content of Christ's Preaching

The rich gospel content of Christ's preaching was already evident in his pre-incarnate preview. It also began to shine through as we saw how essential Christ considered his proclamation precisely because it was his saving gospel. In addition to those, we now consider the content of Christ's preaching on the basis of his overall theme. For after the temptation we read, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Mt 4:17).⁷⁰

"Repent!" – The Preaching of Law and Gospel

Christ opened his preaching ministry by saying, "Repent." It is the same gospel cry of John at the dawn of the New Testament era and from Peter at the birth of the New Testament church. No coincidence, it is the same fervent cry that gave birth to the Reformation: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."⁷¹

"Repent." Our English ears and the *opinion legis* grab onto that word and hear things Christ never intended: "Oh, here's something for me to do, a way to gain God's favor because I, at the very least, made some move toward him." As sons of Adam awash in our culture, there's

⁶⁹ Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (Bloombury, 2011), 5-8

⁷⁰ St. Mark, known for his conservation of words, actually gives us more this time. As he gives us an overall theme for Christ's preaching, his words highlight the gospel predominance: "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming *the good news of God*. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe *the good news!*' (Mk 1:14, 15) And in case we fail to see gospel predominance in these words introducing Christ's preaching ministry, the Holy Spirit gives us a similar summary later in Christ's ministry: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching *the good news* of the kingdom"(cf. Mt 9:35, Lk 8:1).

⁷¹ Martin Luther, 95 Theses:1

always the danger of taking Christ's beautiful message of a kingdom freely won and freely given and turning it into yet another opportunity for false security or despair under the law. If this is what 21st century Lutheran preachers first hear, we know that Christ's message of "repent" will require a bit more explanation for our hearers.

The Greek *μετανοέω* indicates an inner change, a change that Scripture tells us can only be worked by the Spirit, an inner change that is reflected in outward actions albeit imperfectly. It is a change in attitude toward self and toward God, the sinner despairing of himself to embrace Christ as everything. Repentance is letting go of sin and clinging to Jesus. The Spirit works this change by law and by gospel. In our Reformation roots we read:

Now, repentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terrors. Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruits of repentance.⁷²

"Terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin" is the work of the law. Faith in Christ, forgiveness, comfort and deliverance from terror, those are "born of the Gospel." Jesus preached this repentance; Jesus preached law and gospel.

God's law holds us accountable, silencing the sinner's pathetic pleas of self-righteousness. It works fear. It arouses a need which has been buried within a hard heart. It prepares for the total relief of the gospel. This primary use of the law since The Fall is the primary use of the law seen throughout Christ's preaching. Yes, the law as guide is there as well, for wherever the law is preached to the Christian this dual purpose is seen. First as a mirror to show us our sins and need for a Savior, then as a guide showing us how to live for him who lived and died for us.⁷³ Still, in Christ's preaching the law as mirror dominates, because our greatest need is not a sanctified life. Our greatest need is Jesus. Where Christ gently rules the heart by his gospel, "good works are bound to follow."

⁷² AC XII:1-7

⁷³ The same law also serves as a curb for the unbelieving world, but the gospel preacher's goal is not to clean up society. If we might think of it in a picture from Lk 15, the gospel preacher's goal is not to use law to help the prodigal clean up and make a better pigpen. The goal is to get that prodigal back into the arms of his Father by preaching law as mirror and sweet, sweet gospel which reunites the sinner with God.

In Luke 15 when preaching to a mixed audience, some in despair and others in false security, Jesus begins by assuming the law has done its work.⁷⁴ He simply speaks of the reality of being lost (a lost sheep, a lost coin) without stating the specific reason we are lost. In this same sermon Jesus gets more direct with the law to show a person can either be lost to self-indulgence and gratification, or lost to his own self-righteousness. But, even when preaching this law, what was his goal? To preach gospel, to reveal the Father's desire for the lost: "Rejoice with me! I have found my sheep. . .my coin. . .my son!"

In what has been called the Sermon on the Mount, Christ preaches much law.⁷⁵ In one part of his sermon, he takes up the Fifth and Sixth Commandments. He knew how the religious leaders and their own hearts had reduced these commandments to mere outward acts that somehow could be obeyed to earn God's favor.⁷⁶ So, Christ dusts off the law mirror and holds it before the soul. He says, "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. . .But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:22, 28).

Through this "re-sharpening" of the law Jesus takes up his malady which he had given earlier in the sermon: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter heaven" (Mt 5:20). In one sentence the law condemns the best and the brightest, the most decent and supposedly deserving. The law is presented to bring despair of self and a desire for rescue. This malady was presented to serve the gospel telic note: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but *to fulfill them*" (Mt 5:17). By the law Christ wanted the crowd to come to the same conclusion that his disciples would later offer on a different occasion: "Who then can be saved?" Then, he could bring the gospel: "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are

⁷⁴ We saw the same in Isaiah 61.

⁷⁵ Matthew 5 begins: "Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them." The primary target audience seems to have been Jesus disciples, people who had already heard the gospel and followed him. For them the law would have served its double purpose of crushing the old Adam and then guiding the new man made alive by the gospel. For those who were not Jesus' disciples, the law would have served its primary purpose and preparation for the gospel.

⁷⁶ This was also the state of affairs at the dawn of the Reformation and is the circumstance even in the vast majority of visible Christianity today where the law is not preached to bring death but offered as a means to give life.

possible with God."⁷⁷ His goal was repentance: Contrition worked by law and faith born of the gospel, the sinner turning from himself to Christ.

If hearing Jesus proclaim sharp law is difficult, then Matthew 23 is excruciating. There Jesus repeatedly says, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees!” It is the preaching equivalent to Christ’s cleansing of the temple or cursing of the fig tree. It is just not the way we picture our gentle Lord.⁷⁸ It is foreign; it is the strange work of Christ.

Luther often preached about this strange work of God, the preaching of the law for the destruction of the sinner.⁷⁹ We find it already in a very early sermon of the Reformation. In fact, this sermon predates the Ninety Five Theses by ten months. The terms are not as neatly defined as we might like or as they will be in the future.⁸⁰ Still, the distinction of law and gospel has emerged as Luther speaks of the strange work of God and the preacher.

For just as the work of God is twofold, namely, proper and alien, so also the office of the gospel is twofold. The proper office of the gospel is to proclaim the work of God, i.e. grace, through which the Father of mercies freely gives to all men peace, righteousness and truth, mitigating all his wrath. Therefore it is called good, delightful, sweet, friendly gospel, and he who hears it finds it impossible not to rejoice. But this happens whenever the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to grieving consciences... But the strange work of the gospel is to prepare a people perfect for the Lord, that is, to make manifest sins and pronounce guilty those who were righteous in their own eyes by declaring that all men are sinners and devoid of the grace by God.⁸¹

This is the foreign work of Christ that takes us back a bit in Matthew 23. He gives the sharpest law to those who sat in Moses’ seat.⁸² Those who have called him demon possessed he now calls sons of the Serpent: “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being

⁷⁷ In Mark’s account of Jesus talking with the rich man (Mk 10:17-31), just before Jesus gives the man sharp, penetrating law, it says, “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (Mk 10:21). In deep love Christ will say to us what it pains him to say, what is foreign to his lips, so he can say his heart’s desire, the gospel, which saves us.

⁷⁸ As creatures of our culture, when we hear the word “Lord” or “Master,” we first hear a law emphasis. In Luther’s preaching there is a deliberate gospel emphasis with “Lord” and “Master”. Jesus’s lordship is good and beneficial. Therefore, we often find Luther uses gospel descriptors like kind, gentle, and friendly with “Lord” and “Master.”

⁷⁹ On this proper distinction of law and gospel and a thorough application of it to the Christian’s heart cf. Luther’s sermon on John 14:1, LW AE 24:14-16.

⁸⁰ Here it is a bit confusing when Luther uses the term “gospel” in a broad sense referring to the Word with both its law and gospel.

⁸¹ Martin Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day, Psalm 19:1, December 21, 1516” LW AE 51:20

⁸² Also a strong warning/rebuke to all who sit in Moses’ modern day seat.

condemned to hell?” Why so harsh? It is Christ’s one last effort prior to his passion to show their desperate need and give himself as their one way to escape hell.⁸³ But what would he do to them when they rejected him this time? “Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers.” What love! He will bring the gospel yet again through his servants! Would they listen? “Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town” (Mt 23:33, 34). Nevertheless, in love he will send those gospel preachers. And then at the conclusion of this fiercest preaching of the law Jesus again shows his entire gospel purpose. He reveals a heart broken by their rejection but still beating for their rescue:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Mt 23:37-39).

In the preaching of Christ, the Apostles, and Luther, we do not see what so many offer or say they desire in a sermon today. Theirs is not a spiritual pep talk. We find no ten step programs or interesting insights for godly living. Their law insights only kill all the more. Where there is death, Christ is given for life. His good news revives; the gospel insights given comfort all the more.

With Jesus we see neither the revival’s anxious bench nor today’s comfy couch, both aimed at using law to revive. The anxious bench looks for fear to bring forth some new internal and then external commitment. Today’s comfy couch entertains and intrigues with insights for life designed to move the sinner to “give Jesus another look.” From Jesus we hear, “Repent,” the law working death and the gospel giving life.

What did the Preacher do when the results were not what he desired? He mourned, but he did not change the content of his message. He continued preaching law and gospel, trusting the

⁸³ Earlier in his ministry at a much more intimate setting Christ preached the same sharp law to Pharisees and teachers of the law (Lk 11:37-53). On that occasion Christ’s goal was the same, law as mirror to open their eyes to the need for him, their Savior. Their reaction on that occasion: “When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say” (Lk 11:53).

Holy Spirit to do his work through his appointed means. Jesus' trust in the means of grace we see as we consider that he preached, "The kingdom of heaven is near!"

"The Kingdom of Heaven" – Emphasis on Means of Grace

"The kingdom of heaven is near." The Holy Spirit tells us that this was not only a summary of Christ's preaching but also of John's: "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Mt 3:1-2). It is also the theme with which Christ first sent out his disciples to preach: "Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near'" (Mt 10:6).

Do any of us feel up to giving a concise definition of "the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus speaks of it so often, always shedding light on different nuances and exploring different aspects of this kingdom. He tells us it is near and that it has come (Mt 12:28). He declares that one can enter or not enter into it (Mt 19:24, Mt 21:31). He says that it is working among us, around us (Lk 17:21). In his paper entitled "The Kingdom of God" Prof. John Schaller wrote:

This study does not presume to be exhaustive...Even though the presentation is somewhat limited, however, certain important thoughts come to the fore, namely, (1) that the "kingdom of God" in its proper sense does not designate merely a condition or state of being, but an uninterrupted activity, a continuous rule and working of God; (2) that in its presentation of this rule of God the Bible mentions his general world-rule only incidentally, and strictly speaking refers to his rule through the gospel; (3) that the "kingdom of God" in a derived sense designates a place to which people come, or a possession which they can acquire; and (4) that the "kingdom of God" in this sense never designates something material or external, but always points to those gifts which are made available to us through the gospel.⁸⁴

For our study today we simply summarize by saying that the kingdom of heaven is God's ruling activity in the heart through the gospel, the means of grace. We note Christ's means of grace emphasis as we look at a day in the life of the Preacher.

⁸⁴ John Schaller, "The Kingdom of God." p2

Matthew 12 & 13

For Jesus the day began with some personal ministry to a man whose demon possession had left him blind and unable to speak. His complete healing of the man left the people pondering whether he was the Son of David, the Messiah. On the other hand, it left the Pharisees calling Jesus an agent of Satan. Jesus used the opportunity to proclaim the kingdom of God.

To these unbelieving leaders Jesus says, “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” His point? Resisting Christ’s gospel message means resisting the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is at work through the gospel. This point Jesus turns into an exclamation point when shortly he says, “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.”

Christ emphasis on gospel proclamation continued as he spoke of Jonah, a preacher of gospel-empowered repentance. He told them that a greater preacher of repentance was now preaching to them. He reminded them how the Queen of Sheba had travel hundreds of miles to hear Solomon’s wisdom, a wisdom revealed from heaven concerning a Savior who would come from Israel. Now that Wisdom from heaven was speaking gospel wisdom to them.

Then his mother and brothers showed up. They wanted to speak to him, but he was busy; he was preaching. Pointing to his disciples, people who had embraced his gospel,⁸⁵ he said, “Here are my mother and brothers,” children of the heavenly Father, members of the kingdom of heaven.

Then “that same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables.” From that boat, the Preacher proclaimed the kingdom of God, God’s rule in the heart through the gospel. To emphasize that this kingdom comes through gospel proclamation, twice that day he cried out, “He who has ears, let him hear!” He compared this word, this gospel, to seed: Seed that is sown and grows. Seed that can be snatched, choked off, or burned up. Seed that produces a rich harvest or can have weeds mixed in with it. He says this seed grows silently and unseen, yet is also produces amazing growth. This gospel’s activity he proclaimed as a good leaven, a priceless treasure or precious pearl to be

⁸⁵ Jesus points to their obedience of God’s will as evidence of faith.

sought out above all things, a net that in this world visibly catches even unbelievers but still only gives the eternal kingdom to believers. He declared this kingdom an instruction that reveals new marvels of God's grace while still refreshing with gospel truths learned long ago. From this one day in the life of the Preacher we see that his proclamation placed a heavy emphasis on the gospel as the means of grace, and he himself trusted the Spirit to do his work through that gospel.

Christ Bound His Preaching to the Scriptures

Another amazing aspect of Christ's preaching is how often we find him using and referencing the Old Testament Scriptures. Obviously, he needed no text to preach God's Word. Every word that came from his mouth was the very word of God. Every word in the Old Testament was already his own. Still, we hear Christ say, "It stands written"⁸⁶ and then quote the Old Testament as the authority behind what he is preaching. Then there are many other times when Christ doesn't specifically reference an individual Old Testament text, but he is obviously using pictures from the Old Testament in his preaching.⁸⁷ And, even when he does not quote the Old Testament he says, "These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me" (Jn 14:24).

After his resurrection we listen as Jesus continually ties himself and his disciples to his Word. In his road to Emmaus sermon, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). He withheld visible recognition of himself that they might hang their faith on the Word and not on sight. Later that evening Christ preached again. Although he had the ultimate object lesson in his nail-torn hands and spear-pierced side, he could not wait to get to the Word.

"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk 24:44-47).

⁸⁶ Γέγραπται, a perfect passive, emphasizes what has been written still stands and will stand.

⁸⁷ e.g., in Jn 10 Jesus doesn't reference an Old Testament text but his law against the false shepherds of his day finds its Old Testament corollary in Eze 34 as much as his gospel there connects to Ps 23.

Soon Christ would remove his visible presence. His Word would continue to be their connection to him. So, the resurrected Christ deliberately tied them to his Word.

What reverence Jesus shows for his Word! What a comfort for us!⁸⁸ What a strong example and encouragement for his preachers! Our Lutheran bias toward textual preaching is rooted in reverence for Christ and his Word. He's tied us to that Word; we desire to deliberately tie ourselves and our hearers to the same. Yes, we would readily concede that we could deliver a Word of God message without ever referencing a specific text.⁸⁹ Still, that a message is God's message is made all the more clear to the listener when a section of God's Word is read, expounded, appropriated, and applied. Textual preaching helps us fulfill this injunction: "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Pe 4:11). And again, when we preach textually we are following our Savior's own example. For if the perfect Word incarnate considered it worthwhile to do textual preaching, what does that say to imperfect preachers like you and me?

The Apostles

No surprise we see the same content and emphases in the preaching of the apostles. For Christ had told his apostles, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." He made his preaching theme theirs.

Consider Peter. On Pentecost, although filled with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit has him tie himself and his message to the Scriptures (Joel 2, Ps 16, Ps 110). He does textual, exegetical preaching:

David said about him... "nor will you let your Holy One see decay"... Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see

⁸⁸ Such reverence for God's Word's by Christ is also part of his active obedience *for us*.

⁸⁹ Among other examples we might think of a Christian proclaiming Christ in a conversation with a friend or neighbor.

decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact (Ac 2:25a, 27b, 29-32).

Peter proclaims gospel truth: who Jesus is and what he has done by his death and resurrection.

Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs...This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross...But God raised him from the dead... .Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Ac 2:22a-24a, 36).

Peter preaches sharp, specific law: "You...put him to death by nailing him to the cross... God has made this Jesus, *whom you crucified*, both Lord and Christ" (Ac 2:36). When the law has done its work, when they are cut to the heart, then it is time for the law to leave. Like his Savior he cries, "Repent!"⁹⁰ In the same breath, he points them to the means of grace as the instrument which works repentance, connects to Christ, gives the Holy Spirit and forgiveness: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Ac 2:38). He goes on to preach unconditional and unlimited gospel: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Ac 2:39). Peter the preacher, compelled by Christ's compassion, reveals his pastor's heart, "With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!'" (Ac 2:40). Having preached law and gospel, the results were in the Spirit's hands. Some rejected. Some were saved: "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Ac 2:40).

Or, consider an apostolic sermon in Athens. With Christ-like compassion⁹¹ Paul "reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace

⁹⁰ After the law has done its work, then Peter says, "Repent," showing that repentance is primarily a work of the gospel.

⁹¹ When Paul comes into Athens, we read, "he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Ac 17:16). According to the law such a sight would have had a devout Jewish man wanting to leave that city and have nothing to do with its unclean inhabitants. Instead, in this chief of sinners there was aroused Christ-like compassion for the lost; the Athenians were truly helpless and harassed. They were people who needed their Good Shepherd.

day by day with those who happened to be there” (Ac 17:17). Some have taken “he reasoned” and said that Paul was using philosophical arguments to convince rather than God’s Word. But a careful examination of Paul’s “reasoning” shows that he was actually tying his message to the Old Testament Scriptures, “explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead (Ac16:2).⁹² It isn’t a different approach. Like Christ, Paul was tying his message to the Old Testament Scriptures, employing Christ’s chief hermeneutical principle: “These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (Jn 5:39). Reason’s use was that of servant not master; Christ and his Word reigned supreme.

The proclamation that began in Athens’ synagogue spilled over into the marketplace. What Paul preach in the marketplace the Greek philosophers labeled “foreign” and “strange” (Ac 17:18, 19). “They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (Ac 17:19). As much as those philosophers missed, this much they got: Paul was preaching gospel and this gospel is strange and foreign to man. This again reminds us: The gospel which is God’s proper teaching is foreign and strange to man; it comes from a “foreign” land, heaven. It must be proclaimed if man is to know it and remain in it. On the other hand, the law which is the “strange” teaching to God is something that “makes sense” and seems quite proper for fallen mankind living in a fallen world. Oh, how far we are by nature from God! Oh, how much we need Christ! What encouragement to preach gospel, lots of Christ *for us!*

The philosophers’ natural curiosity (Ac 17:21) provided Paul an opportunity to preach in the Areopagus. Here Paul’s sermon was a bit different than it would have been in the synagogue. For no matter how smart those philosophers thought they were, they didn’t know the Old Testament Scriptures. So Paul began with the natural knowledge of God (creation, the law

⁹² “He reasoned” is a translation of *διελέγετο* which could be translated “he dialogued, conversed, reasoned, talked, preached.” At its basic root the verb means “to go back and forth” or to have a back and forth conversation. It would not have been a one-sided conversation as we view a sermon today but an exchange in which questions were asked and points were made. It would have been more like a Bible Information Class. The same verb is used earlier in Ac 17 to describe Paul’s conversation in the synagogue with the Jews in Thessalonica. There we are told the additional information that “on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. `This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ’” (Ac 16:2, 3). This sort of scriptural proclamation of Christ is what is also meant when we read of Paul in Athens, “he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks” (Ac 17:17).

written on the heart), even as expressed in some of their poetic writings. Then he moved onto God's revelation.⁹³

The starting point may have differed, but the preacher's call, content, malady, and telic note remained unchanged. Paul revealed who the one true God is: "What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands" (Ac 17:23, 24). He revealed who Jesus was: "the man God has appointed... God has given proof of this by raising him from the dead" (Ac 17:31, 32). He preached law, condemning their idolatry. He preached the gospel of repentance for forgiveness and a "not guilty" verdict in Christ: "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed" (Ac 17:30, 31).

Paul's sermon at Athens is sometimes pointed to as an example of how an alternative preaching style may be necessary given a more worldly or less biblically literate audience. That a different style might be employed given the background of the audience is true enough.⁹⁴ Still "where they're at" is where we're all at: dead in our sin, by nature objects of wrath. "Where they're at" requires law and gospel. A style approach may change, but the content approach never changes for an under-shepherd; we approach these sheep through the Gate which is Christ. If anything Paul's preaching in Athens reminds us that no matter what the occasion or audience or style, clear law and gospel are what people truly need.

Conclusion

What is it that we aim for and consider solid Lutheran preaching?

Viewing himself as God's ambassador, the Lutheran preacher aims for textual preaching that deliberately and purposely binds him and his hearers to the Word, for it is the LORD's

⁹³ Assuming little or no knowledge of the Scriptures (revealed knowledge of God) is the same thing we do in the proclamation we call a Bible Information Class.

⁹⁴ Different sermon styles also serve those who have had a right Scriptural background, provided they are still clear law and overflowing gospel simply presented in a different style.

revelation of who he is and what he has done for us in Christ. We consider preaching genuinely Lutheran when it is law and gospel in substance, the law working death, the gospel giving life, the gospel empowering the new life, and the law guiding that life. We insist on preaching that is truly evangelical, i.e. gospel-centered. A smattering of Jesus here and there is not enough for us. We make our overriding theme “*Christ for us!*” To lavish people with Christ’s love and forgiveness is the reason we open our mouths.

Filled with Christ-like compassion and molded by the Potter, each Lutheran preacher opens his mouth in a unique way. Yet, he takes everything, including his style, and makes it captive to Christ. His style serves, never sacrifices, the preaching of clear law and gospel; his sermon lets Christ shine forth as Savior (2 Co 4:5-7). As he points to Christ, he points God’s people to their baptism, the Word, and Christ’s Supper for he knows the gospel is the Spirit’s chosen means for bringing Jesus to the soul. As he preaches, he also trusts the Spirit to work through his gospel proclamation.

Are these just the preaching quirks of one corner of Christianity, rooted in some sentimental paradigm or peculiar denominational preference? No, like the Lutheran reformers before us we cry, “*Ad fontes!*” and trace our preaching roots back to Scripture. Our themes, content, and emphases we trace back to Christ himself. Our Savior is the Preacher and our best homiletics professor.

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