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**LAW/GOSPEL-ORIENTED PREACHING
IN MARTIN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF PREACHING**

A Thesis presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Practical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology.

by
Chul Hwan Kim
May 1996

Approved by



Advisor

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Chapter I

Introduction: Luther as a Public Preacher

Although Martin Luther (November 10, 1483 - February 18, 1546) was a professor and a prodigious writer, he was first and foremost a preacher. E. C. Dargan in *History of Preaching* considered Luther's preaching to be "the best and principal work of his variously busy life."¹ He also asserted, "Luther stands in the first rank as one of the greatest preachers of all time."²

Luther's preaching ministry began officially in May 1512, at a chapter meeting of the Augustinian order in Cologne when he was made sub-prior of the Wittenberg monastery.³ From that time onward he preached an average of four sermons per week. In *Table Talk* Luther said, "Often I preached four sermons on one day. During the whole of one Lent I preached two sermons and gave one lecture every day."⁴

Although it has been estimated that Luther delivered at least 4,000 sermons, only 2,300 of his sermons remain. Despite criticism that Luther was prejudiced in

¹ Donald K. McKim, "What can we learn from Luther the preacher: the Reformer cared passionately about the proclamation of the Gospel," *Christianity Today*, 27 (November 1983): 42.

² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*. 55 vols., gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg /Fortress Press, 1958, 51:XI [Hereafter this edition will be cited as LW followed by the volume number and the page reference]

⁴ LW 54:282.

favor of the Pauline Epistles, he preached on Romans only in thirty of the 2,300 sermons. Luther preached more than 1,000 sermons on the synoptic Gospels and hundreds more on the Gospel according to John, his favorite. In fact, he preached on John chapters 16-20 for almost a year in 1528-29. He spent nearly a year and a half on John chapters 6-8 in 1531-32.⁵

Most years Luther preached over 100 times. The slower years were 1522 with 46 sermons and 1540 with 43.⁶ In 1528, he preached almost 200 times, and we have 121 times in 1529. However, from January to April, 1530, he only preached three times at Wittenberg, and from April to September of the same year that he was at Coburg, he did little preaching while there.

The Wittenberg schedule included worship at five o'clock on Sunday with a sermon on the Epistle, again at ten o'clock with a sermon on the Gospel, and again in the afternoon with a sermon on the Old Testament, or the Catechism. On Mondays and Tuesdays the sermon was on the Catechism, Wednesdays on Matthew, Thursdays and Fridays on Apostolic Letters, and Saturday afternoons on John.⁷ Roland Bainton says that Luther took the nine o'clock preaching hour which was on the Gospel.⁸

We would not have as many sermons as we do from Luther if it had been a matter left to him alone. From 1522 on, a group of shorthand writers preserved 92 percent of the extant sermons. This group consisted primarily of Stephan Roth, George Rörer, and Caspar Cruciger.⁹

⁵ Fred, W. Meuser, Luther the Preacher, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), pp. 18-9.

⁶ Ibid., p. 38.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 37-8.

⁸ Roland H. Bainton, "Luther: Pastor, Consoler, Preacher," Encounters with Luther: Lectures, Discussions and Sermons at the Martin Luther Colloquia, vol. 1, ed. Eric W. Gritsch, (Gettysburg, PA: Lutheran Theological Seminary, Institute for Luther Studies, 1980), p. 171.

But Luther's concept of preaching is very broad. In a very real sense, everything that Luther wrote could be called preaching. In fact Luther called many of his treatises "sermons."¹⁰ Thus his treatises on Trading and Usury, the Ban, the Estate of marriage, and War against the Turk are given the term "sermon." The whole of the Large Catechism is sermonic, based on his actual preaching. The Smalcald Articles, the great confession concerning the holy sacrament, and above all the treatise on "*The Freedom of a Christian*" are all powerful sermons, and in this sense all his commentaries and lectures are basically preaching.¹¹ These facts show that Luther's preaching went beyond the pulpit. When he taught, he preached, and when he preached, he taught. One of Luther's greatest contributions was in preaching.¹² The pulpit was made central in church by him.

In Luther's day little preaching was done by the local priests. The preaching was largely done by several orders of monks (Augustinian, Dominican, Franciscan, Benedictine) for the purpose of getting support for crusades or for selling indulgences.¹³ The sermons were primarily ethical in content. They dealt with scholastic intricacies and details. Often sermons dealt with irrelevant questions such as whether cut-off hair and finger nails would also be resurrected. Church authorities were quoted for every point. The emphasis was upon good works with asceticism as the moral ideal.

⁹ Skevington A. Wood, "Luther as a Preacher." The Evangelical Quarterly, 21 (January 1949): 114.

¹⁰ The Latin term, *sermo*, signifies more than the English word "sermon", and yet its sermonic character is unmistakable. Luther's Latin word for our "sermon" was not *sermo* but *praedicatio* (Predigt), that is, close to "public proclamation."

¹¹ LW 51:XIII.

¹² John, R. Brokhoff, Luther Lives: Preaching Resources On the 500th Anniversary of Martin Luther's Birth, (Lima, OH: The C.S.S. Publishing Company, 1983), p. 26.

¹³ Ibid.

The year 1521 marks a change in Luther's preaching.¹⁴ The first sermons of Luther corresponded to the sermons preached at that time, sermons that today we would call topical or thematic.¹⁵ Before this time he was still under the influence of his scholastic training and the homiletics of his time. The sermons of the first decade of his preaching indicated that he strove to give them the scholastic structure typical of the thematic sermon. A study of these early sermons show that what distinguishes him from other scholastic preachers is that he (a) put more emphasis upon logic than learned prolixity, (b) preferred the Bible as his authority, adding at most a reference to one of the church fathers or a hymn, and (c) definitely tended toward more simplicity of form.¹⁶

After 1521 Luther developed a completely new way of preaching: die schriftauslegende Predigt. *Schriftauslegung* is usually translated as "expository." *Auslegen* literally means "to lay out," to exhibit or display, to make something evident or plain. Luther had long since come to the conviction that such a laying out of the plain central message of Scripture was a priority in the needed correction of the church's teaching and life. From the start of his preaching ministry he gave much greater place to Scripture than almost any of his contemporaries. After 1521 this switch was complete and permanent. Listeners were to hear God speaking in His saving power and presence in sermons. The aim of the sermon is therefore to help hearers understand the text, not just a religious truth.¹⁷

The goal of his expository preaching is that God may speak a gracious word

¹⁴ LW 51:XVI.

¹⁵ Brokhoff, Luther Lives, p. 26.

¹⁶ LW 51:XVII.

¹⁷ Meuser, Luther The Preacher, p. 46.

through a text so that people may be given faith or be strengthened in faith by the Holy Spirit. Its method is to take a given segment of Scripture, find the key thought within it, and make that unmistakably clear. The text is to control the sermon. When the sermon was over, Luther tried to see to it that the people were to remember the text and its primary message much more than the sermon.¹⁸ For Luther, God's Word, as it is found in the Scripture, came alive in preaching. The aim of this living message is human salvation.¹⁹

Luther's method has often been called "homiletic," but that is inaccurate. A homily usually moves verse by verse, without tying the whole together. Luther insisted on finding the *Sinnmitte*, the heart of the text. That heart, that *Kern* or kernel is to save the preacher from getting lost in details. Luther said: "In my sermons I bury myself to take just one passage and there I stay so the hearers may be able to say 'That was the sermon.'"²⁰

As we shall see, Luther's preaching has a tendency to be biblical and expository, not thematic or topical. Instead of a theme the basis is a text of considerable length. The aim of the sermon is to help his hearers to understand this text thoroughly. Thus Luther's preaching has the strong point more of a textual sermon than a topical one. The goal of his preaching was always that God Himself may speak His Word to the congregation through the sermon.²¹ Luther, with St. Paul, strongly held to the notion that faith is an "acoustical affair."²² Because faith

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁹ H. S. Wilson, The Speaking God: Luther's Theology of Preaching, (India, Madras: The Tranquebra Printing and Publishing House, 1982), p. xii.

²⁰ Meuser, p. 47. Cf. Cited in Martin Doerne, "Luther und die Predigt." Luther: Mitteilungen der Luthergesellschaft. 22 (1940), p. 40.

²¹ LW 51: XVIII.

comes by hearing, justification by faith and preaching are related, even dependent on each other in Luther's theology.

Since human words alone cannot communicate the mystery of God, God Himself needs to be heard. God makes Himself heard through the preached Word. To communicate His living and personal Word, God has called preachers throughout the history of Christianity. So, preaching, more than anything else, is *Deus loquens*, God Himself speaking, but through the preacher.²³

What can today's preacher learn from Luther? Some are quick to think that our situation and context are drastically different from Luther's. But there are vital lessons Luther can offer for preachers today. He is a model who can still instruct preachers of the word who care as passionately as Luther did about the proclamation of Gospel.

The Goal of this thesis is to study Luther's theology of preaching. As we have already seen above, the first chapter outlines the world of Luther's preaching. The second chapter explores Luther's preaching, focusing on his specific concern for preaching. In it, we can see that Luther regards preaching as the oral Word of God. Luther believes God is speaking when the preacher preaches. This chapter will show us that Luther's understanding of preaching is concentrated upon the Lord, Christ who is the content of Gospel.

The third chapter studies Luther's understanding of Law and Gospel. Without knowing Luther's understanding of Law and Gospel it is impossible to approach Luther's preaching. Luther's preaching is built upon the proper distinction between Law and Gospel.

²² Wilson, *The Speaking God*, p. xii.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

The fourth chapter is to aim at the real application of Luther's preaching. In other words, this chapter investigates how Luther's general understanding of preaching and Law and Gospel make up his preaching and applies it to his real preaching. For this study, it is impossible to handle all of Luther's sermons which have been handed down, at least 2,300. So this study will be limited within Luther's Works, volume 51 and 52 which include about fifty sermons and Luther's Works (Korean Edition),²⁴ volume 10 which preserves 38 sermons and 51 postils. And also it will be added several sermons of Luther excerpted from Sermons of Martin Luther (8 volumes).²⁵ Especially, in this chapter this study will suggest important sequences which are found in Luther's preaching. And we can see some main themes which are repeatedly dealt with in his sermons: such as Jesus Christ, righteousness, the grace of God, faith, love, good works, humility, and prayer.

The fifth chapter as a conclusion shows us the highlighted themes of Luther's preaching and seeks for the significance of Luther's preaching today. And this study is concluded by showing Luther's compassion toward preaching in order that today's preacher might follow the example of Luther until God calls him to the eternal home.

²⁴ Martin Luther, Luther's Works. 12 vols. (Korean Edition, General Editor: Won Yong, Ji, (Seoul Korea: Concordia Press, 1987).

²⁵ Martin Luther, Sermons of Martin Luther, 8 volumes, edited and translated by John Nicholas Lenker, (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Baker Book House, 1909).

Chapter II

Martin Luther's Preaching

What is Preaching

The Word of God

Luther's theology of preaching was based upon his theology of the Word. Luther's entire adult life was spent in the service of the Word of God -- lecturing, preaching, writing, translating, defending, and asserting the proper place of the Word in the Christian church. Therefore, the best way of explaining Luther's theology is as the "theology of the Word of God."¹ Luther was heard as one who lived by the Word of God and for the Word of God.² In the second sermon at Wittenberg, March 10, 1522, Monday after Invocavit, Luther summed up what he had been doing through his entire life in the following words:

I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. . . . The Word did everything. Had I desired to foment trouble, I could have brought great bloodshed upon Germany; . . . I did nothing; I let the Word do its work. . . . When we spread the Word alone and let it alone do the work, that distresses Satan. For it is almighty and takes captive the hearts, and when the hearts are captured the work will fall of itself.³

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther's Works: Luther the Expositor. Companion Volume, (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 48.

² Ibid.

³ Martin Luther, Luther's Works. 55 vols., gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg /Fortress Press, 1958), 51: 77-78. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as LW followed by the volume number and the page reference].

Even though Luther had many uses for the term “word,” he does not indicate that there are numerous “words” of God. All these “words” are just particular forms and have their basis in the one Divine eternal Word of God, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God. Luther said: “We have nothing from God except the pure Word, namely, that the Lord Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father and is the Judge of the living and the dead.”⁴ Therefore, whatever form one uses, one cannot speak of the Word of God apart from Jesus Christ.⁵

Luther fully agreed with John 1:1, which says that Christ, the Word, was God and was with God the Father from the beginning. In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Word and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Galatians 4:4). The origin of the Word is in God Himself: “. . . from all eternity [God] has a Word, a speech, a thought, or a conversation with Himself in His divine heart, unknown to angels and men.”⁶ Because the Word is the revelation of God, understanding the Word is beyond human reason. Luther said:

For none of this has its source in the reason: that there was a Word in God before the world’s creation, and that this Word was God; . . . this same Word, the Only-begotten of the Father, . . . became flesh; and that no one else, had ever seen or known God, because the Word, who is God’s only-begotten Son, rested in the bosom of the Father and revealed Him to us.⁷

Thus God took the initiative and He sent His Word to come and dwell among us before we could know anything about Him and His plan for human salvation. For Luther, the Word is Christ, the Saviour who was promised and prefigured in the Old

⁴ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke; kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 58 vols. (Weimar: Herman Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1895), 43:393. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as WA followed by the volume number and the page reference]. Cf., LW 4:357.

⁵ H. S. Wilson, *The Speaking God: Luther’s Theology of Preaching*, (India, Madras: The Tranquebra Printing and Publishing House, 1982), p. 2.

⁶ WA 46:544; LW 22:9.

⁷ WA 46:543; LW 22:8.

Testament and who was made incarnate for our salvation in the New Testament, the Christ who was crucified for our sins and who brought forgiveness of sins, the Christ who is our righteousness. The human mind will never be able to master this doctrine; “. . . faith alone can appropriate it.”⁸

Luther’s favorite term to explain the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness brought by Christ was “Gospel.” Without any hesitation he called the Gospel the Word of God. In his 1520 treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther remarked,

You may ask, “What then is the Word of God, and how shall it be used, since there are so many words of God?” I answer: The Apostle explains this in Romans 1. The Word is the gospel of God concerning His Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God.⁹

When the preached Word, through which God speaks, is neglected and the Bible (the written Word which bears witness to Christ and what He has done for the human race) is not taught and interpreted properly, how can the church claim that God is still properly worshipped in the church? This was Luther’s struggle.¹⁰ For him, the Church needs both the oral (preaching) and the written word (Bible) in order to know what God has done through Christ for the salvation of the world. Secondly, the oral and the written Word are the means chosen and appointed by God to communicate with the human race until the end of the world.¹¹ Therefore, Luther said:

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ LW 31:346.

¹⁰ Wilson, *The Speaking God*, p. 7.

¹¹ Ibid. According to Brokoff, Luther understands that the Word comes to us in three modes: oral, visual, and written. The visual Word is the Sacraments, the written word is the Scriptures, and the oral word is the preaching. See, John, R. Brokhoff, *Luther Lives: Preaching Resources On the 500th Anniversary of Martin Luther’s Birth*, (Lima, OH: The C.S.S. Publishing Company, 1983), p. 27.

Although God is everywhere, in all creatures, and I could find Him in stone, fire, water, or rope. . . . He does not wish me to search for Him there - without the Word. . . . He is everywhere, but he does not want me to search for him everywhere. But where He has given the Word, there reach for Him. Otherwise you will not grasp Him but you are tempting God and practicing idolatry. Therefore He has given us a certain manner in which one should seek and find Him, namely, the Word.¹²

Luther maintained that preaching is the Word of God. Therefore, preaching is of utmost importance because of the importance of what is preached – the Word of God. It is extremely important, because the Word means salvation. In preaching, it is God Himself who speaks.¹³ Luther said in two funeral sermons preached on August 18, 1532, “the greatest divine service is the preaching of the Word of God, and not only the greatest divine service, but also the best we can have in every situation.”¹⁴

In his last sermon in 1546 at Eisleben, Luther preached, “You ought to lift up your hand and rejoice that we have been given the honor of hearing God speaking to us through His Word.”¹⁵ When Luther discussed the Word of God, it meant mainly the oral Word and the preached Word.¹⁶ He viewed and understood the Word of God not as static but as an active, dynamic, and creative power. In the Word of God, it is God who is speaking, God who is acting, and God who is creating.¹⁷

“Through the Word of God,” said Luther, “human beings alone can know and apprehend God.”¹⁸ He repeatedly emphasized that the Divine Majesty speaks to

¹² WA 19:492.

¹³ John, R. Brokoff, Luther Lives, p. 27.

¹⁴ LW 51:232.

¹⁵ LW 51:390.

¹⁶ Reinhold Seeberg Textbook of the History of Doctrines, translated by Charles E. Hay, 2 vols., (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1952), 2: 283. Seeberg said that “The Word of God is for Luther primarily the oral proclamation, since through this God operates upon the heart.”

¹⁷ Wilson, The Speaking God, p. 9.

¹⁸ WA 42:61, LW 1:81.

human beings alone among all creatures of this world.¹⁹ Because human beings are not created for this physical life alone but for eternal life just as God, He wants people to busy themselves with His Word and His worship and to be in communion with Him.²⁰

For Luther it is by preaching the Word of God that the children of God can be fed. Without preaching the Word of God there is nothing to feed them. Luther pointed out the fact that preaching the Word of God is the only way to feed His sheep in the following explanation:

The Lord said three times to St. Peter, "*Peter, amas me? etc., pasce oves meas*" "Peter, feed, feed, feed my sheep." What is the meaning of *pascere*? It means to feed. How should one feed the sheep? Only by preaching the word of God, only by preaching faith.²¹

The message that the preacher brings, however, is not his own, but he speaks as a herald for someone else, that is, for God. Luther says, "Preachers should be angels, that is, God's messengers."²² This means that the message that the preacher delivers is the very message of the One who sent him to speak, in effect His very voice. Therefore, Luther's assertion is that the preacher must only speak God's Word or not speak at all: "So the pastor must be sure that God speaks through his mouth. Otherwise it is time for him to be quiet."²³

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ LW 51:64. Luther explained in the sermon preached at Erfurt of the Journey to Worms on April 7, 1521, the text on John 20:19-20.

²² Edwald M. Plass, What Luther Says (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1124:3591. Cf. WA 47:454.

²³ Fred Meuser, Luther the Preacher. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), p. 12.

The Oral Word of God

Luther held that preaching is the oral Word of God. The Word comes to us in three modes: oral, visual, and written.²⁴ The Sacraments are the visual Word, the written word is the Scriptures, and the oral word is the preaching. Among these three, the original and most important is the oral Word. The written Word is the dead letter. The visible Word without preaching is sterile. It is the oral Word that makes the Word a living Word of life and spirit.²⁵

The Word of God in the church usually took the form of the oral Word, the Word of preaching. Throughout his career Luther emphasized the centrality of this oral Word in the life and work of the church. The apostles were not called to write but to preach. Luther said: “The church is not a pen house but a mouth house.”²⁶ Again he asserted: “The Gospel should not be written but screamed.”²⁷ Luther believed that the Gospel is something to be said out loud. If anyone is interested in having fellowship with God, the only way to begin it is with the Word of God. This Word of God comes to human beings in the spoken form because here on earth God cannot be seen but only heard.²⁸

In the preaching of the Word, listeners are confronted with Christ, and through the Spirit, identified with the Word, faith is given. Thus the preaching of the Gospel is God’s way of saving sinners. Commenting on Malachi 2:7, that is, “The lips of a priest guard knowledge,” Luther claimed:

²⁴ Brokhoff, *Luther Lives*, p. 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁶ *LW Companion Volume*, p. 63.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

²⁸ WA 3:124; LW 10:120.

. . . . This is a passage against those who hold the spoken Word in contempt. The lips are the public reservoirs of the church. In them alone is kept the Word of God. You see, unless the Word is preached publicly, it slips away. The more it is preached, the more firmly it is retained. Reading it is not as profitable as hearing it, for the live voice teaches, exhorts, defends, and resists the spirit of error. Satan does not care a hoot for the written Word of God, but he flees at the speaking of the Word.²⁹

Luther warned preachers not to cease in preaching the Gospel: “Where the oral proclamation of the Gospel ceases, the people will revert to heathenism in a year’s time.”³⁰

Luther said to others about the office of preaching: “When the preacher speaks, God speaks!”³¹ Who would dare equate the word of a sinner-preacher, always deficient in insight and partly blind to God’s revelation, with the very Word of God? The spoken Word may indeed be “the word of a human being, but it has been instituted by the divine authority for salvation.”³² He stated that when a preacher steps down from the pulpit, he should be able to say: “With St. Paul and all apostles and prophets, . . . ‘Here God speaks.’ God himself has said it. And I repeat it, . . . whoever cannot boast like that about his sermon should leave preaching alone, for he surely denies and blasphemes God.”³³

According to Luther, there is “no difference” . . . between the word of man and the Word of God when preached by a human being; for the voice is the same, the sound and the pronunciation are the same, whether you utter divine or human words.³⁴

²⁹ LW 18:401.

³⁰ Meuser, Luther the Preacher, p. 41.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³² LW 3:273.

³³ WA 51:517.

So one should not expect to hear God's Word in a strange and foreign tongue. Unlike an Aristotelian or a philosophical god, "our God," Luther said, "is He whom the Holy Scriptures show, because he. . . . speaks with us" in human language.³⁵ God must be apprehended as He reveals Himself in human speech.

Luther believed that preaching is the certain presence of the Word of God in the mouth of the preacher. Much is made of the doctrine of the real presence in Luther's sacramental theology. Luther also had another "real presence" -- the real presence of Christ in proclamation. When the proclamation about Christ is the biblical message of God's judgment and grace, not only is the preacher's word God's Word, but also when the preacher speaks, God is really present and speaking.³⁶ On this point Luther insisted that the preacher must be sure that God proclaims through his mouth.

For Luther, preaching was not a preacher's ideas stimulated by the prod of a text. It was not human reflections about God and life. It was not searching around in one's personal religious insights for some kind of contemporary message that one thinks people need. Christian preaching -- when it is faithful to the Word of God in the Scriptures about our need and God's response to it -- is God's speaking.³⁷

God's Activity

Because it is God's Word that is proclaimed, God works through it to accom-

³⁴ WA 43:236; LW 4:140. "In the prophets the term 'voice' applies without exception to the 'voice of the Lord,' so that we must accept every word which is spoken as if the Lord Himself were speaking, no matter by whom it is spoken, and we must believe it, yield to it, and humbly subject our reason to it" (WA 56:253; LW 25:239-40).

³⁵ WA 43:240; LW 4:145.

³⁶ Meuser, Luther the Preacher, p. 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

plish His will. Unlike others who send messages, God accompanies His message, and by the working of the Holy Spirit, accomplishes His purpose for that message. This means that the primary agent in preaching is not the preacher, but God who works through the preacher and the preached Word. Luther says:

“Our sufficiency is from God” [II Cor. 3:5]. What Paul means is that whatever good we do by preaching is done by God; when we preach it is God’s work if it has power and accomplishes something among men. . . . It’s not my mind, my wisdom, my ability. . . . If my ministry is profitable, I ascribe it to God. If it produces fruit, I do not glory in myself; this is not my work, but the mercy of God, who has used me as his instrument.³⁸

Luther’s emphasis is on God’s activity in preaching. It is God who is really doing the speaking: “Do you consider it slight enrichment to have assurance of the fact that God himself is speaking to you and, by means of the office of the ministry, is effective in you, teaching, admonishing, comforting, sustaining you?”³⁹ Because preaching is primarily God’s activity, Luther can clarify the preacher’s role in this way: “Let our responsibility be merely to speak in accordance with the Word; let it be God’s responsibility to grant the success and the increase. . . .”⁴⁰

A Means of Grace

For Luther, preaching was a means of grace. As we saw above, Luther asserted the doctrine of the real presence not only in his sacramental theology, but also in his preaching theology -- the real presence of Christ in proclamation. Quite clearly, he saw God speaking in the preached Word. In *The Sermon on the Easter Gospel*, Luther said, “. . . . I hear the sermon, . . . but who is speaking? The pastor? By

³⁸ LW 51:224 - 225

³⁹ John Lenker, ed., *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 8:295. [Hereafter cited as Lenker followed by volume number and page reference].

⁴⁰ WA 5:258.

no means! You do not hear the pastor. Of Course, the voice is his, but the words he employs are really spoken by my God.”⁴¹

For Luther, the fact that God speaks in preaching means that the power of the Word and the grace of God comes through it, regardless of the human inadequacies of the preacher. Luther saw preaching as a means of grace that God uses to give the Holy Spirit to those who hear the Gospel.⁴² “If you want to obtain the grace,” Luther says in 1519, “take care that you listen attentively to the Word of God or recall it with diligence. The Word only, I say, is the vehicle of the grace of God”⁴³

Who is the Preacher

God’s Instrument (The Office of Ministry)

Luther stresses that the authority of the preacher goes no farther than the Word of God he proclaims. Because preaching is God’s Word and His activity, it is also His decision who is to speak for Him. This pertains to the call to the office of preaching. Luther speaks of the office, his call to it, the difficulty of it, and its importance. He recalls for us his initial reluctance:

I feared the pulpit, . . . yet I had to do it; I was forced to preach. . . . I advanced more than 15 arguments to Dr. Staupitz; with them I declined my call. But they did me no good. When I finally said: Dr. Staupitz, you are taking my life, . . . I shall not live three months; he replied: In God’s name! Our Lord had many things to do; He is in need of wise people in heaven too.⁴⁴

⁴¹ WA 47:229. “Dan ich hore wohl die predigt, aber wer dedet? Der Pfarherr? Nicht also, du horest nicht den Pfarherr. Die stimme ist wohl sein, aber das wortt, das ehr fhuret nicht oder redet, das redet mein Gott.”

See, LW 22:528

⁴² Donald McKim, “What can we learn from Luther the Preacher: the Reformer cared passionately about the proclamation of the Gospel,” *Christianity Today*, 27 (November 1983), p. 42.

⁴³ Cited in Regin Prenter, *Luther on Word and Sacrament*, More about Luther, Martin Luther Lectures, 2:65. See WA , ii, 509, 13.

This reluctance to preach, however, did not go away: “The office of preaching is an arduous office I have often said that, if I could come down with good conscience, I would rather be stretched upon a wheel or carry stones than preach one sermon.”⁴⁵ But despite the reluctance to preach, Luther preached because of the importance of the preaching office of God’s Word.

Although he was continually reluctant to preach, he knew the tremendous importance of preaching the Word, and for that reason he would not give up his office as preacher. However, that importance was not for his own sake, but for the sake of God’s people. For Luther, because the preachers thoroughly belong to God and they are entirely His instruments, they must preach only God’s message, not their own. Luther says that “if he [a preacher] has no sure call and does not rightly teach the Scripture, he may talk as he will but there is nothing behind it.”⁴⁶ Luther evaluates the position of the office of preaching as the highest office in the following words:

Whoever has the office of preaching imposed on him has the highest office in Christendom imposed on him. Afterward he may also baptize, celebrate mass, and exercise all pastoral care; or if he does not wish to do so, he may confine himself to preaching and leave baptizing and other lower offices to others -- as Christ and all the apostles did, Acts 4 [6:4]. Thus it becomes evident that our present-day bishops are spiritual idols and not bishops. For they leave the highest office of the Word, which should be their own, in hands of the very lowest [orders], namely, chaplains, monks, and mendicants.⁴⁷

And Luther says again, “The office of preaching is second to none in Christendom, because through it the Word of God is proclaimed, which is effective to the salvation of all who believe it.”⁴⁸ And we can hear Luther’s strong assertion that “If

⁴⁴ Plass, What Luther Says, 1131:3615.

⁴⁵ LW 51:222.

⁴⁶ LW 51:224.

⁴⁷ LW 39:314.

⁴⁸ Lenker, Sermons of Martin Luther, 3:373.

I could today become king or emperor, I would not give up my office as preacher.”⁴⁹

The strong stress on the office of preaching comes from Luther’s concern to restore preaching to its proper usage in the service of worship. If preaching is an important function of the church, it should also be an important office. Preaching, however, was considered to be the least important function of a Roman Catholic priest in Luther’s day.⁵⁰ To Luther, this was contrary to the Scripture and early church practice.

Was the cause of this negligence of preaching, the Roman Catholic Church’s understanding that the priestly office was derived from the church’s hierarchy, and that the priestly office was primarily instituted to mediate God’s grace through the celebration of the sacrifice of the mass? When Luther severely criticized the priestly office, Luther recognized that the Roman Church was ignorant of the office of preaching. According to him, preaching and priesthood cannot be separated.⁵¹

As Luther asserts the importance of the office of preaching, he attempts to redefine the term “priest” from the evangelical point of view. Added to all of this was Luther’s commitment to the Scriptural concept of the priesthood of all believers which

⁴⁹ Meuser, Luther the Preacher, p. 39.

⁵⁰ The Council of Florence(1439) defined the commission at the ordination of the priest solely in terms of offering the Eucharistic sacrifice. The priest was given the chalice with wine and the paten with bread and was commissioned, “*Accipe postestatem offerendi sacrificium in Ecclesia pro vivis et mortuis, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.*” (See, Adolphus Schonmetzer, S. J., ed., “Bull of Union with the Armenians,” “No. 1326 in Denzinger’s Enchiridion Symbolorum Definition et Declarationum, (Barcinone: Herder, 1967), p. 336).

In Luther’s day, “The Roman Catholic priest is primarily an officiant of the sacrifice of the mass; the sacraments are his real task. This includes the hearing of confession and pronouncement of absolution.” See, Lennart Pinomaa, Faith Victorious: An Introduction to Luther’s theology, tr., Walter J. Kukkonen, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 123.

⁵¹ WA 6:565-66; LW 36:113-4. Luther said, “See how far the glory of the church has departed! The whole earth is filled with priests, bishops, cardinals, and clergy; yet not one of them preaches so far as his official duty is concerned, unless he is called to do so by a different call over and above his sacramental ordination. Everyone thinks he is doing full justice to his ordination by numbing the vain repetitions of his prescribed prayers and by celebrating masses.”

forced him to define the office of preaching and Christian ministry in general with reference to “call” or “vocation.”⁵² The Christian community as a whole, as a priesthood of believers, is called to the vocation of witnessing to the Gospel.

With the new insight of the priesthood of all believers, Luther had difficulty in accepting a distinction between clergy and laity which prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church. Luther said:

Indeed all Christians are priests, and all priests are Christians. Worthy of anathema is any assertion that a priest is anything else than a Christian. For such an assertion has no support in the Word of God and is based only on human opinions. . . . any one of which is ineffectual to establish an article of faith. . . .⁵³

At the same time, Luther recognized the call of each individual for particular offices. Preaching is one of the offices. But for him preaching is the very important office in the Church.

The Necessity of Being a Preacher

Preachers are distinguished by their call, and for their call they must be prepared to become good and faithful preachers. Luther thought there were very few good preachers in his time: “The reason why the world is so utterly perverted and in error is that for a long time there have been no genuine preachers. There are perhaps three thousand priests. Among whom one cannot find four good ones -- God have mercy on us in this crying shame!”⁵⁴

Luther preached with his lamentation in *Two Sermons at Weimar*: “Oh, we have had blind preachers for a long time: they have been totally blind themselves and

⁵² Wilson, *The Speaking God*, p. 96.

⁵³ WA 12:178.

⁵⁴ LW 51:63-64.

leaders of the blind, as the Gospel says: they have left the Gospel and followed their own ideas and preferred the work of men to the work of God (Mark 7:8-9).”⁵⁵

Luther recognized how bad a bad sermon is. Luther says that “if the preacher’s living is bad, then it is bad for him; but if his preaching is bad, then it is bad for all. Therefore, there is no more terrible plague, calamity, and misfortune on earth than a preacher who does not preach the Word of God. Unfortunately, the world is now full of such preachers.”⁵⁶ Luther says again that “a bad preacher does more harm with one sermon than a good preacher does good with ten sermons.”⁵⁷ Thus, for Luther, as he says:

The greatest evil on earth is a false preacher. He is the worst man on earth. No thief, murderer or scoundrel on earth can be compared to him. They are not as wicked as a preacher who dominates people in God’s name, . . . and leads them into the abyss of hell through his false preaching.⁵⁸

Luther lamented bitterly that some pastors and preachers do not pray, study, read, or search scripture. Luther was blunt when he wrote in *The Introduction to John Spangenberg’s Postil* in 1542: “Some pastors and preachers are lazy and no good. They do not pray; they do not study; they do not read; they do not search the Scripture, as if there were no need to read the Bible for this purpose.”⁵⁹ To this Luther says, “The call is: watch, study, attend to reading. In truth you cannot read too much in Scripture, read it too carefully, understand it too well, teach it too well, or live it too well.”⁶⁰ More specifically for the preacher’s studying, Luther says, “One cannot

⁵⁵ LW 51:107.

⁵⁶ WA 10, I, 1, 85.

⁵⁷ WA 32:196.

⁵⁸ Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, p. 44.

⁵⁹ WA 53:218.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

preach the Word of God if one does not master the languages. History illumines God's work and God's word, but the languages are the scabbards in which the sword of the Spirit is sheathed."⁶¹ He warned that preaching without knowledge of the language is flat and tame, and people soon tired.

Luther, therefore, admonished that preachers must be instructed beyond bare catechesis in order to defend the Church with a sermon.⁶² Besides this specific preparation, preachers should also have specific qualifications to be able to preach well.

Fred Meuser sums up the portrayals of the good preacher describing in the following ten points from Luther's Works, especially *The Table Talks*.

- | | |
|----------|---|
| First, | he should be able to teach in a right and orderly way. |
| Second, | he should have a good head. |
| Third, | he should be able to speak well |
| Fourth, | he should have a good voice. |
| Fifth, | he should have a good memory. |
| Sixth, | he should know when to stop. |
| Seventh, | he should be sure of his material and diligent. |
| Eighth, | he should stake body and life, good and honor on it. |
| Ninth, | he should suffer himself to be vexed and flayed by every body. |
| Tenth, | he should be ready to accept patiently the fact that nothing is seen more quickly in preachers than their faults. ⁶³ |

It sounds like the kind of list Luther may have spun off the top of his head.

Of course, somebody wrote it down and it quickly became canonized as Luther's Ten Commandments for preachers, whether he was that serious about it or not. Another list has three others heading his Decalog: "Stand up, Speak up, and Shut

⁶¹ Cited from Peter Meinhold, "Luther und die Predigt," in *Das Wort und die Wörter: Festschrift Gerhard Friedrich zum 65. Geburtstag*, herausgeben von Horst Balz und Siegfried Schulz, (Stuttgart Berlin Köhlh Mainz: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1973), p. 124. See, WA 15:38.

⁶² LW 51:181-2.

⁶³ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luther Werke, Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1921), 2: 2580. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as TR followed by the volume number and the entry number]. See Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, p. 40.

up.”⁶⁴ but this takes time. To a young preacher Luther said, “Peter and Paul would scold him because he wanted right off to be as accomplished as they,” and he then reminded the young preacher that “crawling comes before walking.”⁶⁵ We should keep in mind that the preachers also are very weak human beings and are nothing more than the instruments for God’s activity. Luther explained that the reason God chose weak humans, as opposed to superhuman beings such as angels, was to show His power for His ministry.⁶⁶

The Confidence of The Preacher

Luther again and again spoke of the difficulty of the office. He said that “as soon as one becomes a preacher he is despised.”⁶⁷ Even as an old and experienced preacher, Luther was always fearful before he preached. If it were not for constraint of obedience to the call of the God-ordained preaching office, he said, he would never have walked up the steps of a pulpit. He never became over-confident about the preaching task. He never could understand anyone who said: “I really like to preach.” Luther told himself that the listeners were just blocks of wood to which he spoke the Word of God.⁶⁸

Meuser suggests that Luther sometimes became “totally discouraged, despite what he told others.” He shows that Luther told the Wittenberg congregation that he

⁶⁴ TR 4:5171. “*Praedicator ascendat, operiat os, et destinat.* James Mackimmon notes, “The saying is more expressive in German - Steig flug auf, tu’s maul auf, hör bald auf.” Luther and the Reformation, (New York: Russell and russell, 1930), IV, 313, n. 45.

⁶⁵ Meuser, Luther the Preacher, p. 58.

⁶⁶ WA 25:255.

⁶⁷ WA 37:612.

⁶⁸ Meuser, Luther the Preacher, p. 52.

would stop preaching unless there was more fruit of the Gospel among them. Then he provides this quote from Luther: “I am sorry I ever freed you from the tyrants and papists. You, ungrateful beasts, are not worthy of the Gospel. If you do not improve, I will stop preaching rather than cast pearls before swine.”⁶⁹

This was not the fear of the young priest at the altar immobilized by the thought of a sinner holding the holy God in his hands, but rather the holy awe of being allowed to speak for the gracious God, to have God on his tongue by being faithful to the Word, coupled with the profound desire to do it well, to the glory of God and to the benefit of the hearers. It was the fear of faith, the kind with which every explanation of the Commandments begins: “We should fear and love God so that we . . .”

Explaining the mission of preacher as the proclaimer and defender of true doctrine, said C. F. W. Walther, who entirely agreed with Luther’s opinion about the difficulty of preaching, “Among the many difficult tasks of a servant of Jesus Christ the hardest one is that he must not only proclaim the pure doctrine of the Gospel of Christ but also discuss and refute teachings that oppose the Gospel.”⁷⁰ When he did this, Walther experienced the truth of the old maxim: “Truth begets hatred.”⁷¹ He emphasized: “If the preacher wants to be a faithful servant of Christ, he cannot accomplish the true doctrine without warfare against false doctrine, false gospel, and false faith.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 28-9.

⁷⁰ C. F. W. Walther, Law and Gospel. translated by Herbert J.A. Bouman. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), p. 134.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 134 - 35. As an example of the difficulty of preacher, Walther presented the controversy between Athanasius and Arian on the person of Christ, namely, *homoousios* (same essence) & *homo-i-ousios* (of like essence).

⁷² Ibid., p. 135.

Nevertheless, Luther encouraged preachers, while aware of many difficult factors and personal shortcomings, to say, “here God speaks, God himself has said it, I was an apostle of Jesus Christ in this sermon.”⁷³ God is the only source of the confidence of the preaching and the preacher. Contemporary preachers could well recover this confidence in God’s use of preaching. It need not lead to idolatry, pernicious pride that glorifies the person of the preacher at the expense of the marvels of the message. A pastor’s confidence can often be renewed if he preaches believing that God can and will use His stammering words to convey Himself.

Luther set the preaching of the apostles and the preaching of his day on the same level. The preachers of later generations simply continue until the last day what the apostles began. It is still true for today. Our preaching is just as much a fulfillment of the Markan command to preach [Mark 16:15] as was that of the apostles. There is no longer any real difference between our preaching and that of the apostles, as if God were more present then or as if apostolic preaching had a different kind of authority. If the Gospel is the same, then it is the same Word of God. The same God speaks with the same power in all preaching.⁷⁴ As Luther said:

A preacher must not pray the Lord’s Prayer to ask for forgiveness of sins when he has finished preaching (not if he is a true preacher). Rather with Jeremiah he must say and boast, “Lord you know that what has come out of my mouth is right and pleasing to you. . . .” Here it is not necessary, not even good, to ask for forgiveness of sin, as if one had taught wrongly. For it is God’s Word and not mine which God neither can nor should forgive me, but he should confirm, praise and crown it and say, “You have taught rightly, for I have spoken through you.”⁷⁵

In his *Table Talk*, Luther explained the reason why a preacher should have confidence in his preaching:

⁷³ McKim, *What can we learn from Luther the Preacher,?* p. 42.

⁷⁴ Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, p. 14.

⁷⁵ WA 51:517.

When You are to preach, speak with God and say, ‘Dear Lord, God, I wish to preach in thine honor. I wish to speak about thee, to glorify thee, and to praise thy name. Although I can not do this well of myself, I pray that thou mayest make it good.’ When you preach, do not look at Philip or Pomeranus, or me or any other learned man, but think of yourself as the most learned man when you are speaking from the pulpit. I have never been troubled by my inability to preach well, but I have often been alarmed and frightened to think that I was obliged to speak thus in God’s presence about his might majesty and divine nature. So be of good courage and pray.⁷⁶

Such a conviction can help us to see the sermon as an event, a ‘happening’ between God and people where something of tremendous significance can occur. Lives can be changed, perspectives can be altered, new visions of God’s call and work can break in, and people can be healed by the grace of God. To see preaching in this light will push forward preachers. It will beckon them to do their best in their preparation and proclamation. It will renew their hope in the tasks before them. To see preaching as a means of God’s grace as Luther did, can revolutionize ministries.

A Model of Christ-Humble

Since Jesus Christ is the center of Christian proclamation, Luther concluded that both preacher and preaching should be modeled after Christ. In the incarnation the Son of God humbled Himself. So, said Luther, as a preacher one should be humble and see one’s own self along with the congregation as a sinner for whom Christ died. Luther said in the sermon John 9:1-38 on March 17, 1518:

You well know, dear friends of Christ, that I do not understand much about preaching and therefore I shall preach a foolish sermon; for I am a fool and I thank God for it. Therefore I must also have foolish pupils; anybody who doesn’t want to be a fool can close his ears.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ LW 54:157 - 58

⁷⁷ LW 51:35.

The preacher should be humble, because the preaching is not ultimately man's work but the mercy of God. For Luther, preachers have only "the *jus verbi* [right to speak] but not the *executio* [power to accomplish]." ⁷⁸ Therefore they should give free course to the Word and not add their own works to it. They should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure. Luther said:

Whatever good we do in preaching is done by God; when we preach, it is God's work if it has power and accomplishes something among men. . . . "If my ministry is profitable, I ascribe it to God. If it produces fruit, I do not glory in myself; this is not my work, but the mercy of God, who has used me as his instrument."⁷⁹

Luther also said of his own preaching that he could not boast in it, but that if any good came of it he ascribed it to God. Luther's conclusion to this becomes evident in his sacristy prayers -- since it is not up to us but up to God:

Pray! When you are to preach in order to speak with God. And say, "Dear Lord God, I wish to preach in Thine honor. I wish to speak about Thee, glorify Thee, praise Thy name. Although I cannot do this well of myself, I pray that Thou mayest make it good."⁸⁰

What Does The Preacher Preach

The Scriptures as the Word of God for Preaching

One characteristic of Luther's preaching was biblical. "*Sola Scriptura*" was an important principle of the Reformation from the inception of the movement.⁸¹ He was an expository preacher. He always used a text which was announced at the beginning

⁷⁸ LW 51:76. "Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, 1522"

⁷⁹ LW 51:224 - 225.

⁸⁰ Brokhoff, Luther Lives, p. 31.

⁸¹ Wilson, The Speaking God, p. 14.

of the sermon. For Luther, Scripture is the source and norm for proclamation. The power and effectiveness of his preaching were in the Scriptures.

It is said that Luther used to read the entire Bible carefully twice a year. Luther said, "For some years now, . . . I have read through the Bible twice every year. If you picture the Bible to be a mighty tree and every word a little branch, I have shaken every one of these branches because I wanted to know what it was and what it meant. . . ."82

In Luther's view, it is in the Scripture where the Word of God is found, for the Bible is the recorded Word of God. The Bible is indispensable for preaching the Word, because it sustains oral proclamation and preserves the preaching of the Word from error.⁸³ Luther strongly believed that there is no error in Scripture, nor can there be, because Scripture is the product of the Holy Spirit. Luther made his view of the Holy Spirit's role very clear, when he had been writing the commentary on the book of Genesis.

In his *Genesis Commentary*, Luther wrote, "One must always keep in view what I emphasize so often, namely, that the Holy Spirit is the Author of this book."⁸⁴ For him, the Scriptures are the infallible Word of God, and therefore they are to be completely accepted and fully trusted in all they declare.

Without the Bible, the account of the prophets and the apostles, the Gospel fades away, thereby opening the way for subjective spiritual speculations. The problem with the enthusiasts was that they ignored the apostolic witness and emphasized direct revelation from above, thereby misrepresenting Christianity and

⁸² LW 54:165.

⁸³ Brokhoff, *Luther Lives*, p. 27.

⁸⁴ LW 5:352.

leading others into the wrong faith. Luther, however, discovered the gracious God and the true meaning of the righteousness of God through the Bible.⁸⁵ It is through the Bible that one learns and confronts the incarnate Christ -- God's only way of dealing with human beings. Luther reprimanded the enthusiasts who said insultingly that the printed Word is a dead thing. The Doctor contended in his exposition of 1 John 5:13 on November 6, 1517:

John says: "I write to you"; for Scripture should serve the purpose of a letter, should be a means and a vehicle through which to come to faith and life eternal. For thus John speaks in the last chapter of his Gospel: "These are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, you might have life through His name" (John 20:31). Therefore we should know that the witness of God does not come to us except through the spoken or written Word.⁸⁶

Luther's high view of the authority of Scripture as the Word of God was a part of overall reverence for the Word of God in whatever form it is given to men. Luther wrote: ". . . Without the Word no obedience pleases God."⁸⁷ He continually claims:

Let us remember, however, that in this entire account one should pay special attention to the Word and command of God, which glorifies all the works of believers and makes them grand, no matter how small they are. Similarly, the works done without a command, even though they are most saintly in outward appearance, are nothing but filth, . . .⁸⁸

According to Meuser, 1521 was a turning point for Luther's sermons in that they became "expository," that is, they were from then on a "making plain" of a Scripture text.⁸⁹ Later Luther said that the preaching of the Apostles was simply

⁸⁵ Wilson, p. 15.

⁸⁶ WA 20:789.

⁸⁷ LW 4:123.

⁸⁸ LW 4:103.

⁸⁹ Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, p. 46. Before Luther, there were the Medieval four-fold methods of biblical interpretation which elaborated the *sensushistoricus* (or literal sense), the *sensusallegoricus* (or mystical sense), the *sensustropologicus* (or moral sense), and *sensusanagogicus* (or eschatological sense). But Luther preferred to start with the literal meaning of the Scriptural text

setting forth of Scripture and building on it, and that this is what our preaching should be.⁹⁰ Thus he concludes that those who do not speak the true Word of God do not lay the right foundation for faith.⁹¹ Therefore, since Luther has seen Scripture as the Word of God, Scripture is his foundation for preaching.

Luther also insists that Scripture is the only place where the preacher is to go for the basis of his sermons. For Luther, Scripture is the word of God and therefore preaching is expounding Scripture. Luther preached that “Christ has two witnesses to his birth and his ream. The one is Scripture, the word comprehended in the letters of the alphabet. The other is the voice or the words proclaimed by mouth.”⁹² Keeping the view that preaching should be the setting forth Scripture and the building on it, Luther admonished to preachers that “ought to extract the living Word from Scripture and unceasingly inculcate it into the people,”⁹³

This does not mean that only the Bible is the Word of God. For Luther, the Word of God is a much broader concept than just the Bible. It is the whole activity of God in the redemption of humanity.⁹⁴ Luther included the Bible as a written Word and

without depending on the prearranged four-fold systematic method. As Jaroslav Pelikan stated, “His exegesis sought to derive the teachings of the Scriptures from the particular statements of the Scriptures rather than from the *a priori* principles of a theological system.” (See, Pelikan, p. 141). For Luther, the literal meaning of the Scripture did not merely mean *sensushistoricus*. His interpretation of the Scripture must not only lead one to Christ of history but also to Christ the Saviour. The literal and spiritual meanings are properly held together only when the text is interpreted in the light of Christ as the living Lord and the master of the Scripture. His interpretation of the Scripture, like its content, must be Christocentric. Luther’s two most important thoughts on the Bible are *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone is the sole authority in the church, and *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, Scripture is its own interpreter. (See, WA 7:97).

⁹⁰ LW 52:205-206.

⁹¹ Lenker, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 3:377.

⁹² LW 52:205.

⁹³ LW 52:205-6.

⁹⁴ Wilson, *The Speaking God*, p. 25.

preaching as an oral Word into the category of the Word of God. Luther does not mean by 'verbum' simply the Holy Scripture but God's own life-giving Word. For Luther, God is a God who speaks to men. God's word is never an abstract communication of truth offered in timeless intellectual terms; it is a Word which has its impact upon man in his historical, concrete existence. The Word of God is not a word about something divine; it is a Word from God Himself.

It is clearly apparent from such passages that the Reformation view is no dead literal belief, nor rigid biblicism. The Word of God is no mere repetition of biblical sentences, no restatement (respristination) of ecclesiastical formations of doctrine, but a vital Word on human tongues. Christianity is not a "religion of a book."⁹⁵ The congregation is not "a reading circle,"⁹⁶ but a living historical entity, a people, which was created in the covenant of baptism by God's living Word, which is preserved by spoken word of preaching and by the proclamation of the death of the Lord until He comes again in the Lord's Supper. Christianity is a living community preserved by the continuous hearing of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Once Luther had arrived at such an understanding of the Scripture, the Bible became the source of preaching to him without any mediation by the pope and scholastic commentaries.⁹⁷ The early Luther consulted books about the Bible, but later he put them aside and began to wrestle with the Bible itself. Luther said, "It's better to see with one's own eyes than with another's. On this account, . . . I would wish that all my books were buried. Otherwise everybody will imitate me."⁹⁸ Here is

⁹⁵ K. E. Skydsgaard, "Tradition and God's Word," *Studia Theologia*, 19 (1965):222.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Wilson, *The Speaking God*, p. 26.

a supreme example of how Luther wanted the Bible to play an important role in the preacher's life.

Christ as the Heart of the Preaching

“Nihil nisi Christus praedicatur”

‘ Nothing except Christ is preached! ’⁹⁹

This is the overwhelming subject of Martin Luther's preaching. To proclaim Christ has to do with the center and content of the preached message. Luther insisted that “nothing except Christ is to be preached”-- Christ as Savior, God's great gift, the One in whom God shows his own face, in whom God has spoken a clear, definitive, once-for-all word to the world.

This view is expressed in his sermon on the Palm Sunday in 1521 about Matt. 21:1ff, “. . . a preacher in the Christian churches should be judged by this -- that he preaches Christ alone, so that the people may know in what they may trust and on what to base their conscience.”¹⁰⁰ In his *Easter Sermon* a week later, Luther said,

The priests have no other office than to preach the clear sun, Christ. Therefore, preaching is a dangerous thing. Let the preachers take care that they preach thus or let them be silent. A bad preacher is more dangerous than a thousand Turks. Whoever does not preach about God's kingdom has not been sent by Christ. Now to preach God's kingdom is nothing else than to preach the gospel which teaches faith in Christ -- through which alone God dwells in us.”¹⁰¹

Preaching is the proclamation of God's Word, but with a specific focus on God's saving activity in Christ. Luther says that “The Holy Spirit wants to preach

⁹⁸ LW 54:361.

⁹⁹ Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁰¹ WA , 10, III, 361.

only Jesus Christ; the poor Holy Spirit doesn't know anything else."¹⁰² Luther shows us that his sermon is Christocentric. Luther believes that "Where the devil does not find Christ he has already won the game."¹⁰³ Luther says,

It is not enough . . . to preach the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts. . . . Rather ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, what benefit it is to us to accept him.¹⁰⁴

In 1515-1516, in his lectures on Romans, Luther said, ". . . the entire Scripture deals only with Christ everywhere. . . ." and ". . . all Scripture finds its meaning in Christ . . ."¹⁰⁵ He also said in 1517, in his commentary on Psalm 143 in *the Seven Penitential Psalms*:

Whenever I found less in the Scriptures than Christ, I was never satisfied; but whenever I found more than Christ, I never became poorer. Therefore it seems to me to be true that God the Holy Spirit does not . . . want to know anything besides Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁶

In Luther's view, all of Scripture is a witness to Christ. For Luther, "the gospel teaches nothing but Christ, and therefore Scripture contains nothing but Christ. . . and to possess Scripture without knowing Christ, is to have no Scripture, . . ."¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, some passages of Scripture are more clear and more direct in their witness to Christ than others. In his *Preface to the New Testament*, first written

¹⁰² Meuser, p. 17. Cf. Cited in Martin Doerne, "Luther und die Predigt," *Luther: Mitteilungen der Luthergesellschaft*, 22 (1940): 39.

¹⁰³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, edited by John Nicholas Lenker, 31 vols, (Minneapolis, Minn: Lutheran in all Lands Co., 1906), 12: 54.

¹⁰⁴ LW 31:357.

¹⁰⁵ LW 25:405.

¹⁰⁶ LW 14:204.

¹⁰⁷ LW 52:207.

in 1522, and then later revised in 1534, and 1546, Luther appraised the following evaluation of several New Testament books based upon their greater or lesser clarity in presenting Christ:

You can . . . judge all the books and decide among them which are the best. John's Gospel and St. Paul's epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's first epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books. They ought . . . to be the foremost books, and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most, and by daily reading to make them as much his own as his daily bread. For in them . . . you do find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. This is the real nature of the gospel."¹⁰⁸

Here we see that Luther valued most highly those books of the New Testament which most clearly presented Christ as the only Savior from sin.

Luther continually says in regard to the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed in *Ten Sermons on the Catechism*: "The whole gospel is contained in this article, for the gospel is nothing else but the preaching of Christ."¹⁰⁹ Thus Luther says that only Christ is laid in the manger as food for our souls, and that he who goes to listen to a sermon, goes to the manger, "but the sermons must deal with Christ."¹¹⁰ When Christ is preached as good news, as the prophets and apostles present Him, then "When the preacher speaks, God speaks,"¹¹¹ and the Holy Spirit produces faith, love, and a joyful new life. Preaching Christ Jesus as the Lord means knowing oneself as a servant of the Word and its hearers, for Jesus' sake.

Preaching, for Luther, was the spoken Word of God. Through preaching, Jesus Christ presents salvation to the human race. Luther stressed the fact that Christ

¹⁰⁸ LW 35:361-362.

¹⁰⁹ LW 51:165.

¹¹⁰ LW 52:22.

¹¹¹ Cited in Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, p. 11.

is the true object of our proclamation.¹¹² In brief Luther says to preach one thing: the wisdom of the cross. That is, nothing but Christ is to be preached.¹¹³

The Law and Gospel as a Principle of Preaching

The proclamation of the Gospel as forgiveness is in direct continuity with the Reformation heritage with its central doctrine of “justification by grace for Christ’s sake through faith.” To all who struggle with a burden of guilt impossible either to carry or to lay down, there comes the announcement that God in Christ has taken the burden upon Himself. We no longer need to exhaust ourselves in the futile effort to justify our own lives. Indeed, it is a sign of unbelief to do so, for God has promised to take that hopeless task off our hands and into his own.

This is the message Luther preached nearly every time he entered the pulpit. His sermons are endless variations on a single theme, transposed in key according to the text of the season, and the theme is the Gospel. The Gospel is God revealing Himself as merciful Father rather than angry Judge. The Gospel is God declaring sinners righteous, releasing us from our bondage to the Law into “the glorious liberty of the children”, raising us who were “dead in trespasses and sins” into newness of life.¹¹⁴ Its true note sounds in a verse from Matthew, which Luther loved to quote: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).”¹¹⁵

¹¹² McKim, *What can We learn from Luther the Preacher?* p. 44.

¹¹³ Brokhoff, *Luther Lives*, p. 30.

¹¹⁴ Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr., *Preaching Law and Gospel*, (New Jersey: Sigler Press Ramsey, 1991), p. 36.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

At the center of this Gospel stands the man Jesus Christ. We need not “clamber into heaven” to find a gracious God, for in this man God has condescended to us. The lowly form of the Incarnation is designed especially for our comfort. But this Word of the Gospel means nothing to us so long as we hear it as if at a distance. We must listen to it as though it were addressed to each of us personally.

Luther stresses this in his exposition of Galatians 2:20: “And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” “Who is this ‘me’?” Luther asks, and he replies, “It is I.”¹¹⁶ It is one thing to believe that Christ gave Himself for Peter, Paul, and the saints. It is quite another matter -- but the crucial matter -- to believe that Christ gave Himself for me.

A good sermon always should be able to present the promise against the peril. This is consistent with Luther’s insistence that we preach God’s strange Word, the Law, only to prepare people to hear his proper Word, the Gospel. Luther warns in *The Freedom of a Christian* in 1520 that preachers who are so occupied with the Law that they neglect the Gospel are guilty of “wounding and not binding up, smiting and not healing, killing and not making alive, leading down into hell and not bringing back again, humbling and not exalting.”¹¹⁷

Faith as a Goal of Preaching

Luther says that Christ is to be received first as gift, in order to exercise faith; and then as example, to exercise works. He says that “preaching the Gospel is nothing else than being brought to Christ -- when Christ is yours as gift, then you after His

¹¹⁶ LW 26:176.

¹¹⁷ LW 31:364.

example are gift to the neighbor.”¹¹⁸ Thus, for Luther, the first goal of preaching for the hearer is faith, Christ as gift; and the second goal of it is life or works, Christ as example.

In preaching for the goal of faith, Luther preaches Christ as gift. But Luther knows that Christ is foolishness to the world; thus he says, “If we can so preach that the gospel is rejected, then things will be going as they should.”¹¹⁹ Luther expects mixed results and thus concludes: “. . . so whomever the gospel hits, it hits, and whomever it saves, it saves, and we must act according to it and nothing else.”¹²⁰

Regardless of the results we are to continue in preaching. Luther says that the office of preaching exists to rebuke wrong in all classes of people, regardless of station.¹²¹ But more importantly the rebuking is to lead to confession and repentance, that the preacher might preach so that the hearers are sure of God’s favor and forgiveness.¹²² In brief, Luther says, “This preaching should induce sinners to grieve over their sins and should kindle within them a longing for the treasure.” By “this treasure” Luther refers to the forgiveness of sins as received in the mass, as he points out earlier in this work.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Richard Lischer, Theories of preaching, (Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1987), pp. 97-8.

¹¹⁹ LW 51:113.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ WA 52:189.

¹²² WA 47:307.

¹²³ LW 44:57.

What Happens in the Preaching

Preaching as the Event in which God reveals Himself.

In his sermons, Luther always preached that God has revealed himself in the promises of the Gospel found in Jesus Christ. Luther said in the sermon on John 6:47, "If you can humble yourself, adhere to the Word with your heart, and hold to Christ's humanity, then the divinity will indeed become manifest."¹²⁴ In the preaching event, the triune God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- is really present and active. Luther said again, "Then the Father, the Holy Spirit and the entire Godhead will draw you and hold you when you hold to the Word with your heart."¹²⁵

For Luther, the center and content of the message is Christ. He says that the Gospel is discourse about Christ, and thus preaching is "Gospel," that is, "a good, comforting message." Donald McKim sums up Luther's preaching in the following words: "The evangelical thrust of Luther's preaching is seen in his focus on Christ and his Work on the cross as well as in his insistence that the Gospel demand personal decision. In the preaching, one is confronted with the living Jesus Christ who calls for faith in him."¹²⁶

Preaching as the Apocalyptic Event.

Luther did not preach as if he were in the classroom, but as if he were in a battle-ground! According to Meuser's assertion, Luther's sermon was a battle for the souls of the people.¹²⁷ In Luther's view, the sermon was an apocalyptic event that set

¹²⁴ LW 23:102.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ McKim, *What can we learn from Luther the Preacher?* p. 44.

¹²⁷ Meuser, Luther the Preacher, p. 25.

a person's life in motion -- either in the direction of heaven or hell. The very form of Luther's sermons indicate this fact, "When I make a sermon, I make an antithesis."¹²⁸ Luther said two sides confront each other. God and Satan struggle while the victory of Christ is being proclaimed. Luther stressed the antithesis between the God whom humans seek to know through human reason and speculation and the God who reveals Himself in his Word, specifically in the Son of God, the man Jesus.

In Luther's view, the preaching is the most dangerous task in the world because "where Christ appears, there the devil starts to speak."¹²⁹ The sermon -- and the congregation that hears it -- is a battlefield in the eschatological struggle between Christ and the adversary. The sermon's aim is to make Christians of the hearers through the Word of God and thus hurl the power and victory of Christ against the power of evil. Luther says that "the Word and its proclamation are the weapons by which God subdues His enemies and frees [people] from bondage."¹³⁰

When the Word about Christ is preached, God has spoken and the hearer answers "yes" or "no." There is no other alternative. If we remain neutral, we have turned our backs on God; the devil has won at least that skirmish. The sermon is a battleground on which God and Satan contend for the hearts of the people.

Preaching as the Event of the Holy Spirit

Luther said that the preaching of the gospel is a means and a way and, as it were, a pipe through which the Holy Spirit flows and comes into our hearts. The Word proclaimed is the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. Commenting on Malachi 2:7,

¹²⁸ McKim, *What can we learn from Luther the Preacher?* p. 44.

¹²⁹ WA 25:263.

¹³⁰ WA 30:621.

Luther said: "The lips of a priest guard knowledge and the word is the channel through which the Holy Spirit is given."¹³¹

Therefore preachers should pray for help of the Holy Spirit before they preach the Word of God.¹³² When true preaching takes place, the main actor is -- not the preacher, nor the congregation but -- the Holy Spirit.¹³³ In Luther's theology of preaching, the Word must be heard first, and then it will be followed by the creative work of the Holy Spirit in the heart.¹³⁴ Just before entering the pulpit, the preacher kneels to pray. What is he doing in his prayer? He is offering, and asking. He is offering to God the work that he has done on his sermon during the week, the fruit of his toil, the labor of mind and heart. He is conscious that in itself it is a poor thing, indeed, apart from God's action, a useless thing. But he offers it. And he is asking that the Holy Spirit will do his creative work, will take, bless, and break the word, will confute, convict and convince, will illuminate the mind, touch the conscience, scatter darkness, bring light.

Here is a prayer that Luther prayed before he went to the pulpit:

O Lord,
 Jesus Christ,
 the Son of the living God,
 thou shepherd and bishop of our souls,
 send thy Holy Spirit that he may work with me,
 yea, that he may work in me to will and to do through thy divine
 strength according to thy good pleasure.
 Amen.¹³⁵

¹³¹ LW 18:401.

¹³² In this context, it is profitable that we should keep in mind Coggan's understanding, namely, there is an unseen Listener, God. The main auditor is always God Himself. See, D. Coggan, Preaching: The Sacrament of the Word, (New York:Crossroad, 1988), p.81.

¹³³ Coggan said, "Without the Holy Spirit and His creative and recreative activity there can be words, there can be essays, there can be the 'reading of a paper,' but there can be no preaching." See, *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹³⁴ Wilson, The Speaking God, p. 41.

In another prayer that Luther often used before mounting the pulpit, we can see how Luther was dependent upon God's power, the Spirit to glorify Him through his preaching. Luther prayed:

Dear Lord God,
I want to preach so that you are glorified.
I want to speak of you, praise you, praise your name.
Although I probably cannot make it turn out well, won't you make it turn out well?¹³⁶

In thus offering and asking, he is conscious of the fact he is a fellow worker with God. God the Spirit and he the preacher are going into action together.

Studying Luther's sermons, Martin E. Marty summarized Luther's understanding of the Holy Spirit.¹³⁷ He said that "the flesh is the whole man with body and soul, reason and will, and he who has fleshly perception, disposition, desire, and will is not born of the Spirit. For the soul is deeply submerged in the flesh, without the miraculous gift of the Spirit, all that is of man remains flesh."¹³⁸

Luther pointed out that sin is involved in flesh. Therefore the faith created by the proper work of the Holy Spirit of God stands in complete opposition to all that man as flesh stands for. Then all is new: new birth, new nature, new creation, new essence, new being, new achievement, and new possibilities. Man remains man, but the new gift from above makes him new and different. This new essence (*Wesen*), which

¹³⁵ John W. Doberstein, Ministers' Prayerbook: An Order of Prayers and Readings (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 130.

¹³⁶ Emanuel Hirsch, "Luthers Predigtweise," Luther: Mitteilungen der Luthergesellschaft, (1954) 25: 20. Luther said, "Lieber Herr Gott, ich will dir zu Ehren predigen, ich will von dir reden, dich loben, deinen Namen preisen. Ob ich's wohl nicht gut machen kann, mach du es gut."

¹³⁷ Martin E. Marty, Preaching on the Holy Spirit: A study of Luther's Sermons on the Evangelical Pericop, Concordia Theological Monthly, 26 (1955): 423-41.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

makes the Christian himself “spiritual,” means that now what man does under this is to God’s own glory.¹³⁹

The Holy Spirit supplies what is beyond ‘nature’ and ‘flesh’ in the origin of Christ’s human existence. In his *Sermon on the Annunciation*, March 25, 1525, based on Luke 1:26-38, Luther uses the festival to enforce the significance of Christ’s conception by the Holy Spirit. Luther agrees with Bernard that there are three miracles on this subject: (1) God was made man, (2) His mother was a virgin, and (3) a human is able to believe this. But Luther insists that without the gift of the Holy Spirit, all things are impossible. Thus the Holy Spirit creates the faith beyond nature and flesh.¹⁴⁰

The Holy Spirit does not work independently of the Word.¹⁴¹ When Luther preached a sermon which contain references to the Holy Spirit, he consistently maintained that the internal witness of the Spirit in the heart of man is dependent on the external witness of the Word. This Word may be preached, read, written, or present in the visible Sacraments. Its content, opposed to legal righteousness, centers in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and is thus the mark of His church. The Holy Spirit follows the Word, testifying to man’s own spirit, providing all that man by nature cannot possess. In his writing *The Magnificat*, 1521, Luther said that “No one can correctly understand God or His Word unless he has received such understanding immediately from the Holy Spirit . . . outside of which nothing is learned but empty words and prattle.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 426.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 432.

¹⁴¹ McKim, *What can we learn from Luther the Preacher?* p. 45.

¹⁴² WA 7:546; LW 21:299.

According to Luther, Scripture and proclamation were the external Word and remained as the external Word until the Holy Spirit made them the internal Word in each hearer's heart. Thus the Word of God becomes a personal, redemptive Word to each individual only through the preached Word of the minister, as well as the internal operation of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴³ Therefore, the Word must be heard first, and only then will it be followed by the creative work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. The Holy Spirit makes the proclaimed message personal, as does the preacher of the Word. The Spirit creates a new life and new hope in Christians. So the Holy Spirit is the personal messenger from God who brings God properly to the human race through the Word of God.

Being very suspicious of the Enthusiasts and the Sectarians, who claimed that they had a direct inner revelation from the Spirit, Luther pointed out an order in the relation between the Word and Spirit, that is, the Word comes first and this is followed by the operation of the Holy Spirit in the heart.¹⁴⁴ In his *Smalcald Articles*, Luther explained this as follows:

In these matters, which concern the external spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts – that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure. Münzer did this, and many still do it in our day who wish to distinguish sharply between the letter and the spirit without knowing what they say or teach.¹⁴⁵

The preached Word which comes through the human voice reaches only the ears. For it to penetrate the heart of the hearers, and be rightly grasped by the mind,

¹⁴³ Wilson, *The Speaking God*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁴⁵ Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) p. 312. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as BC followed by the page number].

the Holy Spirit must carry on His work. It is the Holy Spirit who makes the Word alive in the heart and helps people to recognize the Word they hear as really the voice of God. Luther said, "So faith, [which is], the work of the Holy Spirit, fashions a different mind and attitude, and makes an altogether new human being . . . for it changes the heart and mind."¹⁴⁶ And so this faith which the Holy Spirit creates enables the union of Christ and the believer.¹⁴⁷

Luther's contribution to the theology of preaching lies in his firm belief and teaching that God speaks to us through both the external ministry of the Word and the internal ministry of the Spirit. By teaching the order of the Word and the Spirit, Luther did not undermine the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Rather Luther emphasized the role of enlightenment in the Spirit. God must speak and the Spirit must enlighten. In Luther's words, "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith."¹⁴⁸

Thus, the ability to know God and what He has done for us comes not from inner reason but from the Spirit of God who enlightens human minds through the

¹⁴⁶ WA 42:452; LW 2:267.

¹⁴⁷ WA 7: 54-55; LW 31:351-52. "The . . . incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh (Eph. 5:31-32). And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage, . . . are but poor examples of this one true marriage -- it follows that everything they have . . . hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers? . . . By the wedding ring of faith he shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride's."

¹⁴⁸ BC p. 345.

Word. This simple truth that God deals with the human race through the Word and the Spirit, should be accepted without doubt. It is very useful to memorize the definition of the Holy Spirit in the Small Catechism: "The Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts . . . , just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."¹⁴⁹

How Does the Preacher Preach.

Two styles of preaching: Teaching and Exhorting

Luther speaks of the two characteristic styles of preaching in another way -- "teaching and exhortation." If the reality of God speaking through the preacher and the call to preach Christ alone were not enough to make preaching a wondrous, dangerous, and passionate affair, Luther found another aspect worth noting. Often he said that a sermon is comprised of teaching and exhortation (*Lehre and Ermahnung*). "So St. Paul divides the office . . ." Teaching lays out for the people what is true; exhortation encourages them to believe it and live it. "Both parts are necessary for the preacher, which is why St. Paul also practiced both."¹⁵⁰

Eduard R. Riegert says, "Luther's concept of preaching as teaching and exhortation arises out of his passionate concern for poor souls who are caught and entangled in the subtle systems of the medieval church."¹⁵¹ He then says that the teaching is so they recognize their captivity and the true and free righteousness of

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ The 1522 sermon is on Romans 13:11-14, WA, I, 2:1-2.

¹⁵¹ Eduard Richard Riegert, *To Impart to Everyone a Little of What God Has Given Me: An Aspect of Luther as preacher*, in Consensus: A Canadian Lutheran Journal of Theology. 10 (April, 1984): 3.

Christ; and the exhortation is so they are encouraged to move from that captivity to freedom in Christ.¹⁵² Luther's concept of preaching as teaching and exhortation has been found in Luther's preaching. We can call this sermon catechetical. In his day the Church was teaching non-biblical doctrines and the common people were almost totally ignorant of the Bible's teaching. As a result, Luther felt it necessary to deal with the teachings of the Scriptures. Since he was primarily interested in the faith rather than in the morals of the church, Luther saturated his sermon with doctrine.

As for the exhortation, Riegert says that this aspect comes as a surprise to many, that is, that would appear in Luther, because it seems to contradict all the foregoing talk of justification through faith and not works. Thus Riegert calls exhortation the "nemesis of the preacher," but he assures the reader that it is a consistent aspect of Luther's preaching. He quotes Luther as saying, "A preacher should be both dialectician and rhetorician; that is, he must be able to teach and to exhort."¹⁵³

And how does this exhortation appear in Luther's preaching? Here follows an example. Ulrich Asendorf says in his article "Luther's Sermon's in Advent as a Summary" that Luther's allegorical treatment of Matthew 21:1-11, entitled *Entry into Jerusalem* in 1521, is that the King (Christ) rides his donkey (the Church) into Jerusalem (heaven), and this entrance of the Lord includes the internal transformation of the faithful.¹⁵⁴ Thus Asendorf says, "Luther exalts justification, but he never forgets the fruits of faith."¹⁵⁵ Asendorf's conclusion is this: "Luther's Advent

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Riegert, *To Impart to Everyone a Little of What God Has Given Me: An Aspect of Luther as preacher*, p. 4.

¹⁵⁴ Ulrich Asendorf, "Die bedeutung der Predigt fur Luthers Theologie" In *Luther als Prediger*, (Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 1986), p. 89.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

sermons thus display the grand and consistent pattern of his theology, in that the unity of faith and love correspond to the unity of Law and Gospel. Each calls for the other.”¹⁵⁶

Luther says, “It is as impossible to separate works from faith as it is to separate heat and light from fire.”¹⁵⁷ Thus he says, “Love is, as it were, a touchstone, whereby we discover whether faith be true or false.”¹⁵⁸ Luther then explains this by saying that faith is to be preached and then love, which flows from faith. Luther also says:

You see, then, that the Word is the cause, foundation, ground, foundation, and spring of love from the heart and of all good works, if they are to please God, for they cannot do so unless the heart first be pure. . . . That is why he causes his Word to be preached, in order that we conform ourselves to it in all our life and action.¹⁵⁹

In Luther’s *Final Sermon at Wittenberg* he preached on Romans 12:3. For this sermon, the first part explains Paul’s custom of teaching the chief articles of faith and then teaching the fruits of faith. Luther then says, comparing to Paul’s practice, “As you have often heard and still hear every day, namely, that there are two points to be taught and preached, . . . and second, that the fruits and good works are rightly taught.”¹⁶⁰ Here, in one of his last sermons, Luther holds to the double goal of preaching: teaching faith and exhorting to good works.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁵⁷ Skevington A. Wood, “Luther as Preacher,” in *Evangelical Quarterly*. 21 (1949): 119.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁵⁹ LW 51: 272.

¹⁶⁰ LW 51: 372.

Simple and Clear

Luther's preaching was simple and clear. For Luther, the plain sermons are the best. A preacher must keep his audience in mind as he thinks about communications and images. Luther's sermons are to speak to the hearts of the listeners "as simply and as childishly and popularly and as commonly" as possible.¹⁶¹ In his *Table Talk*, Luther says:

He's the best preacher who can teach in a plain, childlike, popular, and simple way. I prefer to preach in an easy and comprehensible fashion, but when it comes to academic disputations, watch me in the university: there I will make it sharp enough for anybody and will reply, no matter how complicated he wants to be."¹⁶²

There are three elements in preaching -- the Word of God, preacher, and hearer. Luther regards the hearer as a very important element. But he likes to preach to the common people rather than to a noble man or scholar. He almost never used a Latin word from the pulpit, and he never used preaching to show off his amazing knowledge of Greek or Hebrew. We, as preachers, should keep in mind how much Luther has a fervent passion to make his sermon clear, simple, and easy. Luther said: "The common people might sometimes prick up their ears to hear clever stories, but the common people sleep and cough when the Article of Justification is preached."¹⁶³

Luther treated his text with his hearers' interests at heart. According to Luther, preachers should think hearers common people. The following remarks of Luther summarize his insistence that preaching be understood:

Cursed be every preacher who aims at lofty topics in the church, looking for his

¹⁶¹ Paul S. Wilson, *A Concise History of Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 88.

¹⁶² LW 54:384.

¹⁶³ Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke*, herausgeben von J. G. Walch, 23 vols. (St. Louis; Concordia Publishing House, 1881), 22: 640. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as St. L followed by the volume number and the page reference].

own glory and selfishly desiring to please one individual or another. When I preach here, I adapt myself to the circumstances of the common people. I do not look at the doctors and masters, of whom scarcely forty are present, but at the hundred or thousand young people and children. It's to them that I preach, to them that I devote myself, for they too need to understand. If the others do not want to listen, they can leave . . . ¹⁶⁴

We should preach in public for the sake of plain people. Christ could have taught in a profound way. But he wished to deliver His message with the utmost simplicity in order that common people might understand.

For Luther the simplicity in the Gospels was the standard he would apply to all preaching. Christ himself is the great example in the way he tailored everything to his audience. Because the hearers knew about sheep and shepherds, wolves, vineyards, fig trees, reeds, fields, and plowing, the Lord spoke about them. This was more than just tactic for Luther. The incarnation itself is to shape preaching. Just as the Son of God humbled himself, became one of us, and lived the life we live, so preachers, though they speak from high above the people, should be one of them and speak as one of them. And because sermons are childlike, their very form is to show that the wonderful reality of God, to whom we are to bow in faith, is in fact very simple.

Luther was always amazed at how simple and in parables Christ dealt with the most profound things. His preaching became more and more simple toward the end of his life, concentrating ever more on the heart of the faith and expressed in ever more childlike ways.

Dialogical Style

Often Luther used direct address and dialogue with the congregation. Luther explained his method in his *Table Talk* : "I take pains to treat a verse, to stick to it and

¹⁶⁴ LW 54:235 - 236.

so to instruct people that they can say, ‘that was what the sermon was about.’”¹⁶⁵ In this remark, we can see how diligently Luther wanted to make his sermon understandable to people.

We can often find antithesis, or dialectic in his sermons. Luther said, “*Wenn ich eine Predigt tue, so mache ich eine antithesis.*”¹⁶⁶ Luther loved to employ tensions: Law/Gospel; conflict: sin/grace, God/Satan; paradox: free will/bound will; and above all, dialog, at which he was a master. Dialog is part of a very high proportion of his sermons. There is conversation between Luther and his hearers, between God and humanity, God and Adam, Jesus and the disciples, God and Satan, Luther and Satan, sin and righteousness, life and death, and heaven and hell. In almost every sermon two sides confront each other.

The following sermon is a good example of dialogue. This sermon, entitled *On the Sum of Christian Life*, was preached in 1532 to German royalty who had just introduced the Reformation to their territories:

For the Scriptures teach me that God established two seats for men, a judgment seat for those who are still secure and proud and will neither acknowledge nor confess their sin, and a mercy seat for those whose conscience is poor and needy, who feel and confess their sin, dread his judgment, and yearn for his grace. . . . Consequently we must now learn to distinguish sharply between the two parts which are called the Law and Gospel, which is something that we are always teaching . . .”¹⁶⁷

That was an expression of his insight that the sermon is part of the battle still going on between God and evil for the universe. And a battle always has two sides. For Luther, the sermon is not just instruction, but conflict -- of truth with error, God with Satan. There is the deepest kind of conflict within the reconciliation which God

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁶⁶ Hirsch, *Luthers Predigtweise*, p. 22. “When I preach a sermon, I make an antithesis.”

¹⁶⁷ LW 51:278 - 81.

achieves through the Gospel. It is a part of life that will not end this side of the grave. It made Luther's sermons vibrant, powerful, in touch with life as the hearer lives it.

Time

Luther was asked, "Reverend Father, teach me in brief how to preach." Luther responded, "First, you must learn to go up to the pulpit. Second, you must learn that you shall stay there for a time. Third, you must learn to get down again." At first Cordatus was angry with the answer, but upon reflection he realized that Luther was saying: First a preacher must have a call to go up to the pulpit. Second, he must stay there to give pure doctrine. Third, he should not preach longer than an hour.¹⁶⁸ Considering the fact that the parishioners during the Reformation era were used to listening to sermons that could last for well over an hour, Luther was asking the preachers to keep the sermon short for the hearers.

Picture Language

It is well known that Luther spoke and wrote colorfully. This was his style. Luther was convinced of the importance of consciously making preaching graphic and concrete. In commenting on the Apostle Paul's use of picture language in Galatians, Luther said, "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."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ LW 54:393.

¹⁶⁹ McKim, *What can we learn from Luther the Preacher?* p. 45.

Luther's sermons are full of examples of his picturesque preaching language. For example, "If salvation could be attained only by working hard, then surely horses and asses would be in heaven. Just going to church will not insure heaven: dogs wander into church and go out again just the same as they came in -- dogs."¹⁷⁰ Listen to one more illustration:

It is very necessary. . . that you make a big distinction between outward reception and inner and spiritual reception. Bodily and outward reception is that in which a man receives with his mouth the body of Christ and his blood, and doubtless any man can receive the sacrament in this way, without faith and love. But this does not make a man a Christian, for if it did, even a mouse would be a Christian, for it, too, can eat the bread and perchance even drink out of the cup. . . . There must be faith to make the reception worthy and acceptable before God, otherwise it is nothing but sham and a mere external show.¹⁷¹

Luther was distressed by the people who are not moved to hold God's Word in honor and esteem and gladly hear and learn it. He shouted out toward them, "Anybody who despises it, let him go on despising it and remain the pot-bellied sow that he is until the day when God will slaughter him and prepare a roast for the devil in the eternal fires of hell."¹⁷²

Thus the reason why Luther uses the picture language in his preaching is that his words and illustrations aim at the common people. Therefore he never hesitated to borrow the words and illustrations of the common people into his sermon.

Pictures from nature were among his favorites: "You would hang your head if you would look at a bird. . . [singing] as its matins the *Te Deum Laudamus*."¹⁷³ He compared the Christian church to a beehive, with God as a queen bee who has neither stinger nor wrath. Because we are always so concerned about earthly things -- food,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁷¹ LW 51:92.

¹⁷² LW 51:264.

¹⁷³ Meuser, Luther the Preacher, p. 54.

dress, shelter -- "we stick our snouts into the soup."¹⁷⁴ When describing the model preacher, Luther was much more apt to point to the example of Christ than to his own sermons. For example, Luther said, "When Christ preached He proceeded quickly to a parable and spoke about sheep, shepherds, wolves, vineyards, fig trees, seeds, fields, plowing. The poor lay people were able to comprehend these things."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ LW 54:160.

Chapter III

Law and Gospel as Understood by Luther

In his 1535 lecture on Galatians, Luther said, “Therefore whoever knows well how to distinguish Gospel from Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian.”¹ He continued, “The knowledge of this topic, the distinction between Law and Gospel, is necessary to the highest degree; for it contains a summary of all Christian doctrine.”² And Luther admonished, “Therefore let everyone learn diligently how to distinguish the Law from the Gospel, not only in words but in feeling and in experience; that is, let him distinguish well between these two in his heart and in his conscience.”³

Emphasizing that distinguishing between Law and Gospel is the highest art in Christendom [*die höchste Kunst in der Christenheit*], Luther urged that it was one that every person who values the name Christian ought to recognize, know, and possess.⁴ When dealing with laws, however, it is necessary to distinguish them one from another

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg /Fortress Press, 1958), 26: 115. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as LW followed by the volume number and the page reference].

² LW 26:117.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Martin Luther, “D. Martin Luthers Predigt vom Unterschied zwischen dem Gesetz und Evangelio über Gal. 3:23-24,” *Luthers Werke*, herausgeben von J. G. Walch, 23 vols. (St. Louis; Concordia Publishing House, 1881), 9:798. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as St. L followed by the volume number and the page reference].

Luther mentioned same thought again, p. 801: “Darum sage ich abermal, daß es eine sehr hohe Kunst ist, das Gesetz und Evangelium recht von einander zu scheiden, weil es auch in den Geboten (die doch alle unter dem Einen Wort Gesetz begriffen werden) vomnöthen ist zu thun, und eines von dem andern abzuschneiden, wo man nicht will, daß alles durch einander, ja, über und über gehen soll, weil es noch Fehl und Mangel hat, da alles recht und wohl unterschieden wird.”

and to pay proper attention to the persons to whom the law is directed. It is most important to make a distinction between the Law and Gospel. Luther says, “*Darum, welcher diese Kunst, das Gesetz von Evangelio zu scheiden, wohl kann, den setze oben-an, und heiße ihn einen Doctor der heiligen Schrift.*”⁵

The Terms “Law” and “Gospel”

The Term “Law”⁶

The Formula of Concord states, “The Law is properly a divine doctrine (*eine göttliche Lehre- doctrina divina*) in which the righteous, immutable will of God is revealed; what is to be the quality of man in his nature, thoughts, words, and works, in order that he may be pleasing and acceptable to God; and it threatens its transgressors with God’s wrath and temporal and eternal punishments.”⁷ More succinctly in the

⁵ Ibid., p. 802. (translation) - “[Therefore whoever knows well this art of dividing the Law from the Gospel should be given a place at the front of the room and be called a doctor of Holy Scripture].” But Luther explained that it is impossible to make this distinction without the Holy Spirit.

⁶ In the first stage of his life, Luther thought that the term “Gospel” included the Law broadly. Dividing the office of the Gospel into the proper office and alien office in the sermon on St. Thomas’ Day, December 21, 1516, Luther showed that he used the term “alien office of the Gospel” or “strange work of the Gospel” as a same meaning word with the Law. Luther said in LW 51:20:

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. . . But such a message may appear to be the worst kind of a message, and therefore one might much rather call it a *Cacangelium*, that is, bad news, sad news.

⁷ Triglot Concordia, the Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), Sol. Decl., V, 17. pp. 956-7. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as Triglot followed by the page reference].

[Latin version] “*quod lex proprie sit doctrina divina, in qua iustissima et immutabilis Dei voluntas revelatur, qualem oportet esse hominem, in sua natura, cogitationibus, verbis, factis, ut deo probari et acceptus esse possit. Simul autem transgressoribus Dei iram et temporalia atque aeterna supplicia lex denuntiat.*”

[German version] “dass das Gesetz eigentlich sei eine göttliche Lehre, darin der gerechte, unwandelbare Wille Gottes geoffenbart[wird], wie der Mensch in seiner Natur, Gedanken, Worten und Werken geschaffen[beschaffen] sein sollte, dass er Gott gefällig und angenehm sei, und draut den über- tretern desselben Gottes Zorn, zeitlich und ewige Strafen.”

Epitome we read that the Law is properly a divine doctrine which teaches what is right and pleasing to God and reprove everything that is sin and contrary to God's will.⁸

Similarly, Francis Pieper says that the Law, in the proper sense, is the Word of God in which God demands that men conform to the standard of His commandments in their nature and in their thoughts, words, and acts, and pronounces his curse on those who fail to comply.⁹

The term "Law" is used in its proper, that is, primary sense in Scripture when it refers not to acts of faith, but rather when it demands perfect observance on the part of man (Galatians 3:12), pronounces the curse on all transgressors (Galatians 3:10), stops the mouth of all the world (Romans 3:19), and therefore transmits the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).¹⁰

The Term "Gospel"

On the other hand, we can also read the definition of the Gospel in the Formula of Concord: "The Gospel is properly such a doctrine as teaches what man, who has not observed the law and therefore is condemned by it, is to believe, namely, that Christ has expiated and made satisfaction for all sins, and has obtained and acquired for him, without any merit of his, . . . forgiveness of sins, righteousness that avails before God, and eternal life."¹¹ Luther says that "the Gospel is such a

⁸ Triglot, p. 801, v. 2.

⁹ F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (St. Louis; Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 3: 222.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Triglot, pp. 800 - 2, v. 2. [Latin] "*Evangelion vero proprie doctrinam esse censemus, quae doceat, quid homo credere debeat, qui legi Dei non satisfecit et idcirco per eandem damnatur, videlicet quod illum credere oporteat, Iesum Christum omnia peccata expiasse atque pro iis satisfecisse et remissionem peccatorum, iustitiam coram Deo consistentem et vitam aeternam, nullo interveniente*

doctrine or Word of God as does not demand our works nor enjoin us to do something, but bids us simply to receive the offered grace of the remission of sins and eternal salvation and accept it as a present.”¹²

The Gospel contains God’s promise in Christ. It proclaims that all the Law’s demands have been met in Jesus Christ, that is, it preaches the forgiveness of sins. Adopting Paul’s characterization of the Gospel as “promise,” Luther gave a clear definition of the Gospel: “The Gospel is the preaching of forgiveness of sins through the name of Jesus Christ.”¹³ Luther also said:

*Evangelium propria definitione est promissio de Christo, quae liberat a terroribus legis, a peccato et morte, adfert gratiam, remissionem peccatorum, iustitiam et vitam aeternam.*¹⁴

Pieper recapitulated the term Gospel as “The Gospel in the proper sense is the Word of God in which God makes no moral demands whatever on men, hence reproves no transgressions, but, on the contrary, promises His grace for the sake of Christ’s vicarious satisfaction to such as have not kept the divine Law.”¹⁵ The term “Gospel” is used in its proper sense in Scripture when it refers to what does not call for works, but for faith (Romans 1:16-17); hence it does not condemn sinners, but

peccatoris illius merito, impetrasse. [German] “Das Evangelium aber sei eigentlich eine solche Lehre, die da lehrt, was der Mensch glauben soll, der das Gesetz nicht gehalten [hat] und durch das selbe verdammt [wird], nämlich dass Christus alle Sünden gebusst und bezahlt und ihm ohne alle sein Verdienst erlangt und erworben habe Vergebung der Sünden, Gerchtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt, und das ewige Leben.”

¹² St.L. 9:803.

¹³ LW 27:184.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 58 vols. (Weimarer Ausgabe), Band, Einleitung von G. Hoffman, (Weimar: Herman Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1895), 39, I, 387. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as WA followed by the volume number and the page reference].

“The proper definition of the Gospel is that it is the promise of Christ, which frees us from the Law, sin, and death, and brings grace, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life.”

¹⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:222.

assures them of grace (Acts 20:24), peace (Romans 10:15; Ephesians 6:15), and salvation (Ephesians 1:13).¹⁶

The Gospel, a kind of sunlight, comes from heaven and is given to men's conscience. It does not come from earthly things. It is like rain that the earth itself does not produce, and is not able to acquire it by its own strength.¹⁷ Paul said, "My Gospel is not according to man, nor did I receive it from man; I received it by a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11). The Gospel came from outside, it is not from men's works, worship, power, or the Law. Paul elevated the Gospel above the Law, above circumcision, above the apostles, even above an angel from heaven (Galatians 1:8).¹⁸

Luther discovered that the doctrine of the Gospel is nothing else than the revelation of the Son of God; through Him God pronounced forgiveness of sins. The person and the work of Christ were hidden in heaven until "the time had fully come" (Galatians 4:4). The forgiveness of sins, which is the heart of the Gospel, did not come from man, nor from the earth, but from God, from heaven, as the good news, life and salvation. Christ was not only a man but also was true God at the same time. And through this God-man, we are given the message of the forgiveness of sins.¹⁹

The Distinction between Law and Gospel.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ LW 26:14.

¹⁸ LW 26:6.

¹⁹ LW 26:62. Cf. H. Sasse, Here We Stand, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938), p. 111.

According to Martin Luther, the Word of God comes to men in the twofold form of Law and Gospel.²⁰ It is a very important aspect of Luther's view that all of God's Word consists of either Law or Gospel, and that for a correct understanding of any passage, Law and Gospel within that passage must be distinguished properly. In his Genesis Commentary, Luther wrote, "If you divide all Scripture, it contains two topics: promises and threats or benefits and punishments."²¹ Luther wrote in his 1535 Lectures on Galatians:

The knowledge of this topic, the distinction between Law and Gospel, is necessary to the highest degree; for it contains a summary of all Christian doctrine. Therefore let everyone learn diligently how to distinguish the Law from the Gospel, not only in words but in feeling and in experience²²

In Luther's view, then, distinguishing between Law and Gospel is the foremost task of Biblical interpretation.

We must therefore observe this distinction with particular diligence lest we confuse the two doctrines and change the Gospel into Law. To know how to distinguish properly between Law and Gospel, we should know first of all what is common to both Law and Gospel. First, both Law and Gospel are the Word of God: the Law (or the Ten Commandments) and the Gospel.²³ Both were given by God: the

²⁰ Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, translated by Robert C. Schultz, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 251.

²¹ LW 3:225. Cf. Walther, Law and Gospel, translated Herbert J. A. Bouman, (St. Louis; Concordia Publishing House, 1973), p. 14. Walther says "The doctrinal content of all Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testament, consists of two diametrically opposite teachings, namely, the Law and the Gospel."

²² LW 26:117.

²³ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, 3:224. We can find same passage in St. L. 9:798: "Beides ist wohl Gottes Wort, das Gesetz oder die zehn Gebote, und Evangelium."

But Luther insisted that they are not the same kind of doctrine [aber nicht einerlei Lehre]. (Because) . . . Denn das Gesetz hat sein Ziel, wie weit es gehen, und was es ausrichten soll, nämlich bis auf Christum, die Unbußfertigen schrecken mit Gottes Zorn und Ungnade. Desgleichen hat das Evangelium auch sein sonderlich Amt und Werk, Vergebung der Sünden den betrübten Gewissen zu predigen.

Gospel originally in Paradise, the Law on Mt. Sinai.²⁴ Although both Law and Gospel are the Word of God, Luther, nevertheless, warned us that the Word of God is not all of the same kind; it is of diverse kinds.²⁵ The commandments “Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart,” and, “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” as well as the curse, “Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the Book of the Law to do them” -- these words of the Law are as much God’s Word and Will as the Word of the Gospel with which Paul and Silas saved the jailer at Philippi from despair: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house.”²⁶

Furthermore, both Law and Gospel apply to all men. As the Word of the Law, “Ye shall be holy, for I am holy,” imposes a duty on the king and the beggar, the cultured man and the barbarian; so, too, there is not a man in all the world for whom the Word of the Gospel, releasing all men from guilt and damnation, is not intended.²⁷

Finally, both Law and Gospel are to be taught side by side in the church and by the church up to the Last Day.²⁸ The necessity of preaching the Law must be

Then Luther strongly stressed that the doctrine of Law and Gospel was not to be falsified by mingling these two into one, or by mistaking the one for the other. Luther says, “Mögen darum diese beiden ohne Verfälschung der Lehre nicht in einander gemengt, noch eines für das andere genommen werden.”

See St. L. 9: 800.

²⁴ St. L. 9:798: “Dieses anfänglich im Paradies, jenes auf dem Berg Sinai, von Gott gegeben.”

²⁵ St. L. 9:801: “Ja, Gottes Wort ist nicht einerlei, sondern unterschieden. Das Gesetz ist ein ander Wort denn das Evangelium; so sind die Gesetz oder Gebote auch nicht einerlei.”

²⁶ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:224.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 224-5. Thus Paul in his Epistle to the Romans thoroughly teaches both side by side, first the Law (ch. 1:18 - 3:20), and then the Gospel (ch. 3:21 - 5:21). The Formula of Concord comments: “From the beginning of the world these two proclamations [kinds of doctrine] have been ever and ever inculcated alongside of each other in the Church of God, with a proper distinction” (Trigl. 959, Sol. Decl., V, 23).

maintained against Antinomianism, which at the time of the Reformation sought to invade the Lutheran Church through Agricola and his followers. Antinomianism is basically the theory that the knowledge of sin must be taught not from the Law, but from the Gospel, and that accordingly the Law does not belong in the Church, but “in the courthouse,” in the sphere of the State.²⁹

Of course, Luther was not an antinomian. He did not see the Law as abolished, but he divided Gospel from Law by limiting them to where they belong.³⁰ The chief thing to notice is that Law has a different function from that of the Gospel. Paul speaks of two ministries, “the ministry of the letter and of the Spirit, of Law and of grace, of death and of life.”³¹ Luther gave the following definitions of Law and Gospel:

Law commands and exhorts concerning us, what we should do. Gospel, however, does not preach what we should do or not do. It demands nothing from us, but rather turns things around and says, “See, dear man, this is what God has done for you. For you He put His Son into flesh. He allowed Him to be killed for your sake and thus saved you from sin, death, the devil, and hell. Believe this and receive it and you will be saved.”³²

The Law is that part of God’s Word which gives commands to man and threatens him with judgment. The Gospel is that part of God’s Word which consoles the sinner by offering him freely the grace of God. The Law accuses secure sinners, so that they are empty and ready to receive the Gospel through which God forgives,

²⁹ Ibid., p. 225. Agricola and his followers declared: “Repentance is to be taught not from the Decalog or from any Law of Moses, but by means of the Gospel from the wounding of the Son of God. . . . Those who teach that first the Law and then the Gospel must be preached pervert the words of Christ. . . . The Gospel teaches the wrath of God from heaven and at the same time the righteousness of God. . . . The Law does not deserve to be called God’s Word. . . . The Decalog belongs in the courthouse, not in the pulpit. . . .”

³⁰ LW 26:147.

³¹ Ibid.

³² WA 16:366-367.

comforts, illumines, and saves them in Christ.³³

We can see again Luther's clear definition of the Law in his preaching on "The distinction between Law and Gospel" that "the Law means nothing else than God's Word and command, in which He directs us what to do and what not to do, and demands from us our obedience of work."³⁴ The Law tells every human being what God has laid upon him and requires of him in keeping with his nature and assigned office. The Law, in name and in fact, is that which presses us to our work.

Luther also gives the definition of the Gospel in the following words:

On the other hand, the Gospel or the faith is a doctrine or Word of God that does not require our works. It does not command us to do anything. On the contrary, it bids us merely to accept the offered grace of forgiveness of sins and eternal life and to let it be given to us. It means that we do nothing; only receive, and allow ourselves to be given that which has been granted to us and handed to us in the Word. . . .³⁵

As a monk, Luther was given the Law. He was told what he must do. The Law accused him and killed him (spiritually) because of his inability to keep it. Luther was terrified by the Law, which showed him God's wrath; he was knocked down to the ground with the fear of God. Truly, the Law was the agent of sin, and of the wrath of God. The law made him a sinner, killed him, terrified him, condemned him, troubled him, and drove him to despair. Luther proclaimed in the sermon on the Gospel for New Year's Day, Luke 2:21: "The law only points out this sin and teaches one to recognize it; but the Law does not help against sin. It only impedes the hand

³³ LW 26:313. Cf. FC Part I, v, 7.

³⁴ St. L. 9:802. "Durchs Gesetz soll anders nichts verstanden werden denn Gottes Wort und Gebot, darin er uns gebeut, was wir thun und lassen sollen, und unsern Gehorsam order Werk von uns fordert."

³⁵ Ibid. p. 803. "Dagegen das Evangelium oder der Glaube ist solch Lehre oder Wort Gottes, das nicht unsere Werke fordert, noch gebeut uns, etwas zu thun, sondern heißt uns die angebotene Gnade von Vergebung der Sünden und ewiger Seligkeit schlecht annehmen und uns schenken lassen. Da thun wir ja nichts, sondern empfaen nur und lassen uns geben, was uns durchs Wort geschenkt und dargeboten wird, daß Gott verheißt und dir sagen läßt"

and the members, but it cannot impede the person and nature from being sinful.”³⁶
 For Luther it is “only the grace of God, which makes nature pure and new, can sweep it out.”³⁷

By doing these things, the Law empties a man so that he might be filled only with Christ and cling to Him who alone frees the sinner’s heart and makes him alive by forgiving his sins, comforting the soul, quenching the thirsty. The Law tells us what to do and not to do for man’s salvation, but the Gospel tells us what Christ has done for this same salvation.³⁸

The Law is God’s speaking to sinful man. Not for the righteous, but for sinners was the Law given (1 Timothy 1:9). The Law is God’s revelation to man, disclosing the truth about man’s sinful nature.³⁹ Since the Fall, man is unable to know himself with respect to sin and the effect of sin in his life. He fails in his attempts to comprehend man’s darker side without the illumination from God’s revelation in the Law. Where there is no Law, there is no knowledge of transgression (Romans 4:15; 5:13). The Law teaches that the evil and lust in man’s heart are disobedience and transgression and sin against God (Romans 3:20). In the Law, God is a God of justice, holiness and wrath.⁴⁰

The Law, however, is not God’s farewell sermon. There is God’s other sermon. The Gospel is God’s second sermon. In the Gospel, God is the God of

³⁶ LW 52:152.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ LW 26:148. Cf. A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), p. 42.

³⁹ Richard H. Warneck, *Law and Gospel Preaching*, Concordia Journal, 16 (April 1990), p. 100.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

love, and grace. The Law commands and makes upon us many demands. The Gospel gives and invites the sinner to believe in Christ, through the faith created by the very promises of God made to him through Christ.⁴¹ The Word from God which forgives, heals, restores is the preaching of Jesus Christ, the Gospel.⁴²

In other words, the Law is the custodian (Galatians 3:24), but Christ is the Master. The Law has things to do insofar as the eschaton has not come; Christ is not yet ruling. Both of them are necessary, but each of them must be kept within its limits. Between the two, there is no middle ground. The Gospel applies to the new man, and the Law applies to the old man, who is born of flesh and blood.⁴³ As Luther said, "So let the sun and the immense light of Gospel and of grace shine in the day, and let the lamp of the Law shine in the night."⁴⁴ Luther says that "The ass (flesh, old man) remains in the valley (this world); but the conscience ascends the mountain (heaven) with Isaac, knowing absolutely nothing about the Law or its works but looking only to the forgiveness of sins and the pure righteousness offered and given in Christ."⁴⁵

Luther distinguished the places where the Law and the Gospel are working. According to Luther, the Law should remain outside heaven, because Christ has set us free. This is not a political freedom, and this is not a freedom of the flesh. Christ set us free for a theological or spiritual freedom, that is, to make our conscience free and joyful, unafraid of the wrath to come (Matthew 3:7).

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 101.

⁴² Ibid., p. 102.

⁴³ The term and applicability of the third use of the Law will be discussed later. Here "the Law" is used in its proper or primary sense.

⁴⁴ LW 26:116.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

“ The freedom of Gospel should remain outside the earth, that is, outside the body and its members.”⁴⁶ On the other hand, the conscience should know nothing about the Law and sin, but should know only about Christ who set us free. When grace and freedom come to earth, that is into the body, we must say, “You have no business here among the dirt and filth of this physical life, you belong to heaven.”⁴⁷

The only reason why we still need the Law is that we still have the old man. In the kingdom of Christ, there is no place for the Law to stand. It is because of this that Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

We, however, must be alert to misconceptions of the distinction of Law and Gospel. Walther, in the beginning of his lecture, *Gesetz und Evangelium*, declares that “The first and foremost teaching is the doctrine of justification. And a close second is the right way to distinguish Law and Gospel.”⁴⁸ He points out five improper distinctions between Law and Gospel. Law and Gospel must not be differentiated in such a manner that it is thought:

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ LW 26:116.

⁴⁸ C. F. W. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, translated Bouman, Herbert J.A., (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), p. 13.

Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther was born to Pastor Gottlob Heinrich Walther as the fourth son and the eighth child in a large family of 12 children at Langenchursdorf, Saxony, Germany, on Oct. 25, 1811. After immigration to the United States, he founded The Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod, and had worked hard to build that church only on the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions. He had served as a preacher, as a leader of the church, and as a professor until he was called by God on May 7, 1887.

Cf. J. W. Behnken, “Forward,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*. 32 (October 1961): 581-2. To study the biography of C. F. W. Walther further, see, Lewis W. Spitz, Sr., *The Life of Dr. C. F. W. Walther*. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1961).

Walther devoted two series of Friday evening lectures before the St. Louis seminary student body to this topic. In 1878 he presented 10 lectures on 13 theses; in 1884-85 he treated 25 theses in 39 lectures. The latter series is the final and definitive statement of Walther’s position and the lectures were published in this book.

1) that the Gospel were a divine teaching but the Law of human origin, the product of human reason. No, both of them are entirely the Word of living God Himself.

2) that the Gospel is necessary but not the Law. No, both are equally necessary. Apart from the Law we do not understand the Gospel, and apart from the Gospel the Law is of no use to us.

3) that the Law is the teaching of the Old Testament and the Gospel that of the New Testament. No, the Gospel can be also in the Old Testament and the Law in the New Testament.

4) that the Gospel were given for salvation and the Law for damnation; each having its own final goal. No, the ultimate goal of both is man's salvation, except that since the fall the Law cannot bring us to salvation; it only prepares us for the Gospel.

5) that these doctrines contradict each other. No, there are no contradictions in the Scriptures. These doctrines are merely different and yet in complete harmony. In fact, whoever no longer makes use of the one or the other is no longer a true Christian.⁴⁹

The Right Method of Distinguishing Between Law and Gospel

We have seen the essence of Luther's understanding of the distinction between Law and Gospel. The Law is that part of God's Word which gives commands to man and threatens him with judgment. The Gospel is that part of God's Word which consoles the sinner by offering him freely the grace of God in Christ. Luther says about the words of John 7:37:

These two points must be made: The Law creates a thirst and leads us to hell; the Gospel, however, satisfies the thirst and leads to heaven. The Law states what we must do, but that we have fallen short of doing it, no matter how holy we may be. Thus the Law produces uncertainty in me and arouses this thirst.⁵⁰

Now we should learn how Law and Gospel are distinguished. In this case we

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁰ LW 23:270.

can be taught it by Walther. In his lectures on *Law and Gospel*, Walther provided six points as good methods by which we can distinguish well between Law and Gospel.

Law and Gospel differ regarding the way revealed to Mankind

Law and Gospel are different in the way they were revealed to mankind. The Law was written in man's heart at his creation, while the Gospel contains the proclamation and revelation of nothing but free acts of God's grace in Christ. To be sure, because of the Fall the Law written in the heart has become greatly blurred; yet it has not been entirely erased. Because of the fact that the Law was written in the heart, the conscience of the most ungodly person can tell him, "this is true," when the Law is proclaimed to him.

But when such an ungodly person hears the Gospel, his conscience cannot tell him, "this is true." Why is this? Because the Law is written in the heart, while the Gospel is proclaimed in Christ. All religions know something of the Law to some extent.

The Apostle Paul testifies that also the blind heathen have the moral Law in their heart and conscience, even without a supernatural revelation (Romans 2:14-15). Walther said that "The Ten Commandments were given to restore the faded writing in the heart [Romans 16:25-26]."⁵¹ In Romans 16:25-26, it is stated clearly that since the beginning of the world the Gospel could not be discovered. It has become known only because the Holy Spirit gave it by inspiration to holy men of God. Nowhere in all of creation is there anything about the Gospel except in the Christian religion.

⁵¹ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 15.

Law and Gospel differ regarding Content

Law and Gospel differ in their content. It is a crystal clear distinction between Law and Gospel which Walther makes when he says that Law tells us what we must do, while Gospel speaks only of what God does [for us].⁵² The Law talks of our works, while the Gospel proclaims the great works of God for us. The Law demands something be done. The Gospel, on the other hand, demands nothing at all. The Law does not rest on faith, for ‘He who does them shall live by them’ [Galatians 3:12]. The Law knows nothing of forgiveness or of grace.

The Law only orders and demands. But the Gospel only offers; it wants to take nothing, it wants only to give. Accordingly John, the apostle, says “The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The Gospel contains nothing but grace and truth. The Gospel delivers sinners from the accusation and condemnation under the Law. The Law presses us to do what we are supposed to do; it demands that we do our duty towards God and our neighbor. In the Gospel, on the other hand, we are summoned to receive a gift of alms, to a rich distribution of charity; we are to receive and accept God’s favor [*Gottes Huld*] and eternal salvation [*ewige Seligkeit*].⁵³

Law and Gospel differ regarding Promises

Law and Gospel differ in their promises. The Law promises something just as great as the Gospel promises—eternal life and salvation. But here the great difference becomes manifest: the Law promises everything under certain conditions, on the

⁵² Ibid., p. 16.

⁵³ St. L. 9:803.

condition that we keep it perfectly. Therefore, the greater the promise, the more tragic it is. The Law offers us food but keeps it out of our reach. To be sure, it says to us, “I will quench the thirst of your soul and satisfy your hunger,” but it is unable to do so, for it always says, “If you do what I tell you, you will have it.”⁵⁴

The Gospel, however, promises us God’s grace and salvation without any conditions at all. It is a promise of free grace. It makes no demands; it just says, “Take it, and it is yours.” But it is not conditional but purely a kind invitation. How different it is with the lovely, sweet, consoling Gospel!

God says: “You shall therefore keep My statutes and My ordinances, by doing which a man shall live” [Leviticus 18:5]. Hence none can be saved by the Law except he who keeps it. As for us this condition attached to the Law plunges us into despair.

Jesus, however, instructs His disciples, “Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved” [Mark 16:15-16]. No condition is attached to the Gospel; it is a promise of grace. Walther said, “If we were to ask the Lord Christ, ‘what must I do to be saved?’ He would answer, No works! I have done everything.”⁵⁵

The Law gives us nothing except threat; it only demands and takes from us. The Gospel, on the other hand, bids us come to God’s gift and present, to His help and His salvation. Luther taught us that the only thing we need is the beggar’s bag and that we hold it out and let the gifts be given us.⁵⁶ So now there is this pair, giving and taking [*geben und nehmen*]. Luther introduced an illustration to explain the distinction between Law and Gospel:

⁵⁴ Walther, Law and Gospel, p. 16. Cf. Leviticus 18:5 and Luke 10:28.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁶ St. L. 9:803: “*Das Evangelium beut uns an Gottes Gabe und Geschenk, Hilfe oder Heil, heißt uns nur den Sack herhalten und uns lassen geben.*”

When something is given to me as a gift, I do nothing towards it. I accept it, and receive it, and let it be given to me. Conversely, when I carry out in my calling what I have been commanded to do - for example, counsel and help my neighbor - I am not receiving anything, but am giving something to another, whom I serve.⁵⁷

In this way the Law and the Gospel are distinguished in their essential character: the one promises [*verheißt*], the other commands [*gebaut*]. The Gospel gives and that means that we receive.

Law and Gospel Differ Regarding Threats

Law and Gospel differ regarding threats. The Gospel has no threats at all, only words of consolation. Where you find a threat in Scripture, you can be sure that it is Law.⁵⁸ While the Law knows nothing but threats against sin, the Gospel removes from the believer the desire to sin. The Law lays a curse on all who do not keep it perfectly (Deuteronomy 27:26). Therefore the Law is “the hammer of death, the thunder of hell, and the lightning of divine wrath,” that can crush the rebellious, stubborn, self-righteous, swollen heart to the point of despair and threat.⁵⁹ In fact, man is ordered by the Law to curse himself. Only one surrounded by the darkness of hell believes that he can cope with the Law.

The Gospel acts quite differently. Paul shows that even the foremost sinner receives no threat but only the sweetest promise (1 Timothy 1:15). In his address to the assembly in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4: 16-21) the Lord defines the content of His teaching, that is, the Gospel, as if to say, “I did not come to impose a new Law,

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Walther, Law and Gospel, p. 17.

⁵⁹ LW 26:310.

but to proclaim the Gospel.”⁶⁰ His preaching of the Gospel is pure consolation and salvation for sinner.

At this moment, we need to keep in mind what Luther says about the distinction of Law and Gospel:

Unless the Gospel is clearly distinguished from the Law, Christian doctrine cannot be kept sound. But when this distinction is recognized, the true meaning of justification is recognized. Then it is easy to distinguish faith from works, and Christ from Moses, as well as from the magistrate and all civil laws. For everything apart from Christ is a ministry of death for the punishment of the wicked.⁶¹

Like Paul (2 Corinthians 3:6), Luther also places Law and Gospel in opposition to each other and describes the Law as the ministry of the death [*ministerium mortis*], as we see above, and the Gospel as the ministry of the Spirit [*ministerium Spiritus*].⁶² The Law leads into death; the Gospel proclaims eternal life by the power of Christ’s redemption. The Law places a man under the wrath of God; the Gospel brings grace.⁶³ Therefore, Luther said: “*Sic verum et proprium officium legis est accusare et occidere, Evangelii vivificare.*”⁶⁴

Law and Gospel differ regarding Effects

Walther asserted a threefold effect of both the Law and the Gospel.⁶⁵ First, the Law tells us what we must do but gives us no power to do it. On the contrary, it

⁶⁰ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 17.

⁶¹ LW 26:313. Cf. see, Eugene F. Klug., *Luther on Law, Gospel, and the Third Use of the Law*, *The Springfielder*, 38 (September 1974): 158.

⁶² WA 39, I:447.

⁶³ LW 32:230.

⁶⁴ WA 39, I:363. “The true and proper function of the Law is to accuse and to kill; but the function of the Gospel is to make alive (or, bring life).”

⁶⁵ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, pp. 18-19.

has the effect of increasing our aversion to doing it. Once the Law penetrates the heart, the heart rebels against God and rages against Him who demands of us the impossible.

Secondly, the Law uncovers a person's sins but offers him no way out and thus plunges him to despair [Romans 7:7]. It uncovers sin but gives us no comfort or hope of keeping it. Apart from the Law sin goes in and out, and the person is not even conscious of sinning. Without knowing the Law a human being is quite unaware of the sin that dwells within him.

Thirdly, the Law indeed produces contrition, fear of hell, of death, and of God's wrath, but it has not one drop of comfort for the sinner. When the Law strikes him like lightning, he discovers what a great sinner he is, what dreadful, godless thoughts he harbors. The penalties and curse of the divine Law will be felt by him in hell; for the Law must be fulfilled, and it must keep its divine authority.

The effects of the Gospel are totally different.⁶⁶ First of all, the Gospel calls for faith but grants and bestows the very faith it demands. When we preach: "believe in the Lord, Jesus Christ!" God gives people faith through our preaching. We preach faith, and whoever does not willfully resist receives faith. It is, of course, not the mere sound of the words but the content that achieves this result.

The second effect of the Gospel is that it does not punish the sinners at all, but removes all terror, all fears, all anxiety, and fills the sinner with peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Walther presented the parable of the prodigal son to explain this second effect of the Gospel. He said:

When the prodigal son returns home, the father does not in a single word refer to the son's dreadful and disgraceful conduct; he says nothing, nothing about that, but simply embraces and kisses the prodigal and prepares a splendid banquet for him.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

This is a glorious parable, showing us what the Gospel accomplishes. It removes all alarm and fills us with a blessed, heavenly peace.

Third, the Gospel demands nothing good of man whatever, no good heart, no good will, no improvement, no piety, no love, either to God or to man. The Gospel issues no commands, but it transforms man, implants love in his heart, and equips him for all good works. It demands nothing but gives everything.

Law and Gospel differ regarding the persons to whom the one
or the other is to be proclaimed

Both the persons and the purposes are entirely different. The Law must be preached to secure sinners and the Gospel to terrified sinners. The Law must indeed be preached in all its severity, but the hearer must be able to note, "That is for the good of the person who is still secure in his sins."⁶⁸ As long as a person is comfortable with his sins and is unwilling to give them up, only the Law that curses and condemns him must be preached to him. But as soon as he is terrified, the Gospel must come at once, for then he is no longer a secure sinner.

The Gospel, however, must be preached in such a way that the people can notice, "That applies only to those who have been struck by the Law and need comfort."⁶⁹ Walther emphasizes strongly that the teaching of the Gospel -- that man is righteous before God and will be saved by the pure, unadulterated grace of God through the merit of Jesus Christ -- is the most important teaching of all, the heart and

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

kernel of Christian doctrine. Where this teaching is not proclaimed there is no Christ, no Gospel, no salvation.⁷⁰

The Functions of the Law

Man has known God's Law since his creation. God's finger has written it into the heart of every man through creation, that is, "by nature." Luther teaches this, agreeing with and referring to what Paul says in Romans 2:14. Even if God had never given the written Law through Moses, the human spirit still would know naturally that he should worship God and love his neighbor.⁷¹ In the lectures on Romans, Luther says that "there is thus a single law, effective in all ages and known to all men because it is written in everyone's heart. From the beginning to the end no one can excuse himself, for the Spirit never stops speaking this law in the hearts of all men."⁷² The Law in this sense confronted man before the fall. It will also remain valid in the world to come; it will be completely fulfilled in the world to come just as it was already fulfilled before the fall into sin.⁷³ Luther called this law "the eternal will of God [*aeterna voluntas Dei*]."⁷⁴

But this light which dwells in and illumines everyone's reason has, since the fall, been darkened by man's sinful desires. Therefore God was compelled to give a written Law to the people of Israel through Moses in order to remind men of the natural

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

⁷¹ WA 39, I:374. "*Nam si Deus nunquam tulisset legem per Mosen, tamen mens humana naturaliter habet hanc notitiam, Deum esse colendum, proximum diligendum.*"

⁷² LW 27:355.

⁷³ WA 39, I:413.

⁷⁴ WA 39, I:455.

Law in their hearts. Therefore, Moses is not the author of the Decalog. Properly understood, he only interprets and clarifies the natural laws written in men's hearts.⁷⁵ Christ, too, only interprets the Law. He, also, is not a lawgiver, but only wants to make clear to us what the Law written in our hearts, or respectively, the Decalog, really demands.⁷⁶

God's eternal will for men has now become "Law" in its specific sense for the sinner. Luther explains the meaning of this in his doctrine of the "office [*Amt, Officium*]," "function [*Grauch, usus*]," or "meaning [*Sinn, sensus*]" of the law.⁷⁷

The Law has, broadly, a twofold function.⁷⁸ One function is the "civil [*Usus Politicus*]" and the other the "theological [*Usus Theologicus*]," a "spiritual," or "holy" meaning and function. But the latter can be further divided into two functions. One is called the "second" use of the Law which serves as a mirror, the other the "third" use of it which serves as a guide. The "civil" function of the Law is called the "first" use of the Law.⁷⁹

The First Use of the Law: "a curb"

⁷⁵ WA 39, I:454. "*Ita Moses fuit tantum quasi interpres et illustrator legum scriptum in mentibus omnium hominum, ubicunque terrarum sub sole sint.*"

⁷⁶ WA 39, I:387. "*Christus non est legislator*"

⁷⁷ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 253.

⁷⁸ LW 26:274.

⁷⁹ Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord*, (Philadelphia:Fortress Press, 1959) p. 565. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as BC (Book of Concord) followed by the page number].

Solid Declaration, Article VI, shows us clearly the threefold use of the Law: that the Law of God serves (1) not only to maintain external discipline and decency against dissolute and disobedient people, and (2) to bring people to knowledge of their sin through the Law, but (3) those who have been born anew through the Holy Spirit, who have been converted to the Lord and from the veil of Moses has been taken away, learn from the Law to live and walk in the Law.

The function of the first use of the Law [*Usus Politicus*] is to maintain external discipline.⁸⁰ It is often compared to a curb. A curb is placed alongside a road in order to hinder cars, bicycles, and so forth, from coming onto the walking pavement and harming people. Similarly, the Law serves as a curb in society hindering people from harming each other recklessly. The Law cannot make people do good, but it can deter people from doing evil.

This function for the Law operates in every society. It is a universal fact that certain central areas of social life are regulated by law throughout the world. Sex, marriage, government, justice, property, and so forth, all are too essential to social stability to leave unregulated. We know all too well what fallen man does in these areas when not controlled by the rule of law.

This controlling function in society is God's good will. He has given people a conscience (Romans 2:14-15), a government (1 Peter 2:13-14), a religion to be a "custodian" to keep us "under restraint until faith should be revealed" (Galatians 3:23-24).

The Second Use of the Law: as "Mirror"

The second use of the Law [*Usus elenchthicus*] is that which accuses us. The Law shows us how we have failed to be what we ought. We already know we stand accused by our own conscience, by our own expectations, by our own failings. The second use of the Law is to help people face up to the grim realities of life.

⁸⁰ I am indebted to the teaching of Won Yong, Ji about the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. The term "curb" can be found in the preaching "The Law and Its Works. Faith, Unity in Christ." on New Year's Day (Gal. 3:23-29), ". . . His heart is filled with hatred toward the tutor who curbs his will." Cited in Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, edited by Lenker, 8 vols. (Michigan; Baker Book House, 1909), 6: 270.

This second use of the Law is called a “mirror.”⁸¹ The Law shows us as we really are. It shows us what we are called to be. In the reflection we see how deeply we have failed and how bitterly we have rebelled. In the Law we see ourselves as we really are, not as we think we are. We see ourselves as God sees us. We come to know our heart as God knows it and judges it (Rev. 2:23). Our mouth is stopped, and we know there is no hope for ourselves -- except for the undeserved grace of God in the Gospel.

The Law points out our selfish motivations, our pride, our unbelief. It demands that we be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matt. 5:48). However, because the Law is not a comfort but a burden which we cannot accomplish, we come to utter despair; the conscience has been hit, so that it will feel sin, is held fast in the grip of death, is burdened down by war, plague, poverty, disgrace, and similar disasters.⁸² At that time, the Law infallibly announces: you belong to death; you are damned; it terrifies a person with the fear of death and hell.

To this moment belongs what Luther says, “It is high time to know how to divide the Law and Gospel from one another.”⁸³ Without the knowledge of how to divide Law and Gospel, Luther said, “. . . we can neither fight off the Law, nor take hold of grace, when the heart now comes to this fork in the road between the Law and Gospel, and sees grace here and guilt there, promise here and command there, giving here and demanding there.”⁸⁴ Once a Christian, however, gets to know the way of

⁸¹ LW 27:34. Cf. Following paragraph help us to understand the term “mirror.” Luther said, “Scripture presents Christ in two ways. First, as a gift. . . . Secondly presents Him as an example for us to imitate, . . . so that I may have a mirror in which to contemplate how much I am still lacking, lest I become smug.” See BC 564.4. “For the Law is a mirror in which the will of God and what is pleasing to him is correctly portrayed.”

⁸² Hoefler, Gospel Preaching, p. 51.

⁸³ St. L. 9:804.

dividing these two words, he comes to realize that the second use of the Law actually helps to lead him to Christ from damnation and darkness.

The aim of the preaching of the Law is “that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Rom 3:19).⁸⁵ We must face the reality of our rebellion against God’s purposes. We must confess that we have refused to entrust our life to His covenant promise. We have refused to seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and to be confident that all we need will be added unto us (Matthew 6:33).

The Third Use of the Law: as “Guide”

The third use of the Law [*Usus Didacticus* or *Usus Paedagogicus*] is as a guide.⁸⁶ According to Formula of Concord, Article VI, it says, “The law has been

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 805. When Christian faces the Law, Luther admonished him like this “*Du (Gesetz) forderst wohl viel, und steckst in schwere Verdammniß die, so nicht geben können; aber weißt du auch, wie weit dein Regiment gehen soll? hast du vergessen, daß es eine bestimmte Zeit hat, wie St. Paulus sagt: Wenn der Glaube kommt, soll es aufhören, nicht weiter sondern, schrecken, noch verdmnen.*”

⁸⁵ Hoefler, *Gospel Preaching*, p. 51.

⁸⁶ In the matters of third use of the Law, there is still a controversy among scholars whether the law is intended to be of service to Christians after their regeneration, in particular, whether the regenerate still need the Law with respect to their new obedience. The reason why this debate occurred was due to the fact that Luther never spoke directly of three uses of the Law. This has led to the conclusion on the part of some scholars that the third use of the Law is not a part of Luther’s theology. For example, Ebeling, Bornkamm, and Elert belong to that group. In particular, Ebeling insists that the Law exists only in its twofold sense, *duplex usus legis*, and also claims that Luther never taught the *usus triplex legis*. (Gerhard Ebeling, “Zur Lehre vom triplex in der reformatorischen Theologie,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung*. 75 (April/ Mai 1950), p. 236.

Cf. See, Armin S. Schuetze, “*On the Third Use of the Law, Luther’s Position in the Antinomian Debate*,” *No Other Gospel*, ed., Koelpin, Arnold J., (Milwaukee; Northwestern Publishing House, 1980), p. 207.

The writer of this study stands in opposition to those who say that Luther never mentioned the term the third use of the Law. Standing firmly on the confessional Lutheran theology, Eugene Klug supports Luther’s position. In Klug’s opinion, Luther’s position does not stand or fall with the term. To Luther it was not the term, but the thing termed which was the essence and the fulcrum of the argument. Klug also claims that the third use of the Law, as expressed in Formula of Concord Article VI, is to be found through all of Luther’s writings, early and later in his life. See for the further study, Eugene F. Klug, “Luther on Law, Gospel, and the Third Use of the Law,” *The Springfielder*, 38 (September 1974): 155 - 69.

given to men for three reasons: (1) to maintain external discipline against unruly and disobedient men, (2) to lead men to a knowledge of their sin, and (3) after they are reborn and although the flesh still inheres in them, to give them on that account a definite rule according to which they should pattern and regulate their entire life.”⁸⁷

This article means that Christians should be guided to wholesome behavior by the Law after rebirth. They should be guided by conscience, government regulation, social customs, the advice of elders, and the example of great people. The Ten Commandments as well as Jesus’ new commandment of love are also guides by which Christians should live.⁸⁸

The Law says that it is God’s will and command that Christians should walk in the new life, but it does not give the power and ability to begin it or to do it. “It is the Holy Spirit, who is not given and received through the law but through the preaching of the Gospel (Gal. 3:2, 14), who renews the heart.”⁸⁹ The Holy Spirit “employs the law to instruct the regenerate out of it and to show and indicate to them in the Ten Commandments what the acceptable will of God is (Romans 12:2) and in what good works, which God has prepared beforehand, they should walk (Eph. 2:10). He also admonishes them to do these, and when because of the flesh they are lazy, negligent, and recalcitrant, the Holy Spirit reproves them through the law.”⁹⁰

In spite of this, it does not really lie within the province of this study to try to probe further the controversy. This writer’s concern is not to determine whether Luther used the exact terminology that was later used in the Formula of Concord. Rather this study tries to see whether the position on the third use of the Law confessed in Luther’s writings represents essentially Luther’s view as found in his sermons.

⁸⁷ BC 479-480.

⁸⁸ Hoefler, *Gospel Preaching*, p. 52.

⁸⁹ BC p. 565.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 566.

The Law is the only source from which a Christian can learn what good works are, even as Christ Himself pointed to the Law when He answered the question which works are commanded by God and are therefore God-pleasing (Matthew 15:1-6; 19:16; 22:35-40).⁹¹ But the Law cannot produce such good works which are commanded by God and are good in His sight. A Christian knows and bears in mind that only the Gospel can create in man the will and strength to do good works.⁹²

This third use of the Law is needed by believers, in order that they may not hit upon a holiness and devotion of their own, and under the pretext of the Spirit of God's Word and command.⁹³ This doctrine of the Law, in and with the exercise of the good works of believers, is necessary for the reason that otherwise man can easily imagine that his work and life are entirely pure and perfect.⁹⁴ So far as they have been born anew according to the inner man, they do what is pleasing to God, not by coercion of the Law, but by the renewing of the Holy Ghost, voluntarily and spontaneously from their hearts (*ex animo prompte et sponte*); however, they maintain nevertheless a constant struggle against the old Adam.⁹⁵

The Functions of Gospel

Scripture warns us that the commingling of the Law and the Gospel has fatal results. It definitely tells the sinner who is seeking remission of his sins and eternal

⁹¹ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, I, 76.

⁹² Ibid., p. 79.

⁹³ Trigl., p. 969.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid. “. . . weil sie auch nicht aus Zwang des Gesetzes, sondern aus Verneuerung des Heiligen Geistes, von Herzen, willig und ungezwungen tun, was Gott gefällig ist, soviel sie nach dem innerlichen Menschen neugeboren sind; gleichwohl aber führen sie einen stetigen Kampf wieder den alten Adam.”

salvation that he can obtain this in no other way than by completely eliminating the Law from his consideration and placing himself under the Gospel.⁹⁶

This is God's method of forgiving sins and bestowing salvation: "without the Law," χωρὶς νόμου (Romans 3:21); "by faith . . . without the deeds of the Law," πίστει . . . χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου (Romans 3:28); "by faith in Jesus Christ," διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, (Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:22); "through faith," διὰ πίστεως (Ephesians 2:8); "through the Gospel," διὰ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου (1 Corinthians 4:15).⁹⁷

All who refuse to eliminate the Law in the matter of obtaining grace and salvation remain under the curse of the Law, since the Law pronounces the curse on everyone who has not continued in all things which are written in the book of the Law to do them (Galatians 3:10). Pieper says, ". . . there is only one way to be and remain a Christian: Man must silence his conscience against the accusations of the Law with the Gospel, which assures him of the forgiveness of sins without the Law."⁹⁸

The center and content of the Gospel is this, that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, ". . . bore the curse of the Law and expiated and paid for all sins, that through him alone we re-enter the good graces of God, obtain forgiveness of sins through faith, are freed from death and all the punishment of sin and are saved eternally."⁹⁹ ". . . For everything which comforts and which offers the mercy and grace of God to transgressors of the law, strictly speaking, is called the Gospel, a good and joyful message that God wills not to punish sins but to forgive them for Christ's

⁹⁶ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, I, 78.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ BC 561.

sake.”¹⁰⁰

Luther confessed that outside Christ, there is no forgiveness of sins, justification, life, or salvation. Men are justified solely through faith in Christ.¹⁰¹ Therefore, the Gospel is nothing else than the good news about Christ’s vicarious satisfaction for sinful men. Christ suffered and died for the sins of the whole world. And God declares the sinners righteous for the sake of Christ, as they are brought to faith in him.¹⁰²

What are the functions of the Gospel? We may see three functions of the Gospel, broadly speaking.

To Recreate.

While the first function of the Law as “a curb” is to prevent the spread of evil, the reply of the Gospel to this fact is to recreate us in the image of Christ Jesus. This new life of repentance is both initiated and effected by the power of the Gospel. The Gospel is not only good news; it is a good power. It is the “power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16).¹⁰³ This salvation is not only from the eternal effects of sin (death and condemnation) but also from the present power of sin.

The “old man” had fallen into corruption. In Christ the “new man” has come. He has brought the new age of the Spirit, in which grace and righteousness will “reign in life” (Romans 5:17, Isaiah 11:1-5). Once we come under the power of the Gospel, the love of Christ enters our hearts and controls us; we are “a new creation” (1 Corin

¹⁰⁰ BC 561-2.

¹⁰¹ LW 26:183.

¹⁰² LW 26:353.

¹⁰³ Hoefler, Gospel Preaching, p. 56.

thians 5:14-17).

Paul said, “The Gospel is the power of God,” which Luther interpreted to mean that the Gospel is the power of the Spirit or the riches, ornaments, and every good of this Spirit, and all these come as gifts from God.¹⁰⁴ This is the answer to the question as to how Paul could continue his mission work among the heathen lands, where false apostles and sects were endlessly arising. “. . . . He knew that the Gospel he preached was “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.”¹⁰⁵

The power in the Gospel, which destroys death, removes the curse, grants the complete and justifying righteousness, brings life, and creates faith in man’s heart, is not from man. It did not come from human works, such as praying, fasting, visiting holy places, saying the rosary, buying indulgences, or performing Masses. What the Gospel is, is alien to a sinner; it comes only as a gift from Christ. Luther said:

With gratitude and with a sure confidence, therefore, let us accept this doctrine, so sweet and so filled with comfort, which teaches that Christ became a curse for us, that is, a sinner worthy of the wrath of God; that He clothed Himself in our person, laid our sins upon His own shoulders, and said: “I have committed the sins that all men have committed.”¹⁰⁶

The Christian experiences a new power at work in His life. Externally it may not yet be evident, but internally the presence of Christ is at work which “purifies (the Christian) as He is pure” (1 John 3:2-3). The fight with the “old man” goes on, but the new spirit in his heart will not allow the Christian to sin in peace. “For God’s nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God” (1 John 3:9).

¹⁰⁴ LW 26:425.

¹⁰⁵ LW 26:426.

¹⁰⁶ LW 26:283-4.

God's goal for man in the Gospel is to go to the root of the problem of sin. The goal of Gospel-proclamation is not a mere change in beliefs or habits, but a profound change of heart. If the heart is changed, one will not only avoid evil deeds but one will see opportunities for good deeds.

In the first function of the Law the only hope is to stop the spread of evil.¹⁰⁷ In the first, recreative, function of the Gospel we gain the hope of transforming mankind. Through the Gospel a new heart and a new spirit are created in the repentant heart (cf. Psalms 51:10). The power of the Holy Spirit at work through the Gospel proclamation gives us hope and confidence. The spiritual growth may be slow and stumbling at times, but we are confident that some seeds will always fall on fertile ground and produce a "hundred fold" (Matthew 13:23).

To Comfort

The second function of the Law is to serve as a mirror, reflecting the reality of our rebellion against God.¹⁰⁸ We are condemned. Our mouth is stopped. We know we stand accursed by our own actions and attitudes. The reply of the Gospel to this function of the Law is the assurance of God's forgiving love. God's righteousness justifies us. He accepts us in spite of our sin. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Luther explained the reason why we should hold to the Gospel, when the Law accuses us and attacks our heart:

Therefore when the Law terrifies you, sin accuses you, and your conscience is crushed, you must say: "There is a time to die and a time to live (Eccl. 3:2). There is a time to hear the Law and a time to despise the Law. There is a time to hear the Gospel and a time to know nothing about the Gospel. Let the Law go

¹⁰⁷ Hoefler, *Gospel Preaching*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

away now, and let the Gospel come; for this is the time to hear the Gospel, not the Law. But you have nothing good; in fact, you have sinned gravely. Granted. Nevertheless, I have the forgiveness of sins through Christ, on whose account all my sins are forgiven.¹⁰⁹

We proclaim the fact of God's condemnation of our sinfulness. At the same time we proclaim the fact of God's forgiveness. The second function of the Gospel is to comfort us. We proclaim the Law to bring people to repentance. We reply with the Good News: "Your sins are forgiven . . . go in peace" (Luke 7:48-50). "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (John 8:11). "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Psalms 103:12).

The Gospel is the medicine for helpless wounds (Jer. 30:13), or "the Word of the Lord" for lifeless dry bones (Ezek. 37:4). It is so sweet and so filled with comfort! Regarding this comfort, Luther stated, "Thus the sun (Gospel) of comfort, previously enveloped by black clouds, rises above the clouds and with its most welcome light shines on their frightened hearts."¹¹⁰

The main point of the comfort is that although the enemy fights with cunning and treacheries, the Seed (Jesus Christ) has come and crushed the head of the serpent. This first comfort was preserved carefully by our first parents, and their descendants. And through the hope based on this promise our descendants also will rise up to eternal life on the Last Day.

It was a rich promise, and one of eternal glory, because it promised the Seed who would crush the serpent's head without human merit or work. Therefore the Gospel of Christ is the real comfort to the Christian, because it had no condition attached to it such as "If you sacrifice," or "If you are good, and so forth."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ LW 26:117.

¹¹⁰ LW 1:190.

¹¹¹ LW 1:305.

This Gospel offers comfort, saying:

*Siehe da,
Christus ist dein Schatz, dein Geschenk,
dein heiland, Hülfe und Trost!*¹¹²

To Free

The Third function of the Gospel takes us to the final step of transformation. In the third function of the Law we needed a guide to know what is right and what is wrong. In the new covenant, however, God has promised to “put my law within them . . . and they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Jeremiah 31:33-34). With this new age the Spirit has come upon “all flesh,” young and old, rich and poor (Acts 2:17-18). The old bondage to sin has been broken, and we, “having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:18).

Luther, with all the means and power he has, declares this promise of the Word of God to be unconditional, an utterly free gift.¹¹³ This was the Gospel that delivered from the darkness of the Law. This Gospel gave freedom and confidence to all believers, not from some human slavery or tyrannical authority but from the eternal wrath of God. Luther said:

This is where our freedom comes to a halt; it goes no further. For Christ has set us free, not for a political freedom or a freedom of the flesh but for a theological or spiritual freedom, that is, to make our conscience free and joyful, unafraid of the wrath to come. . . . This is . . . most genuine freedom; it is immeasurable.”¹¹⁴

The Gospel says that “Christ did not come into the world to break the bruised reed or to quench the dimly burning wick (Is. 42:3) but to announce the Gospel to the

¹¹² St. L. 9:804. “Look, Christ is your Treasure; your Gift; your Savior, Help, and Comfort!”

¹¹³ LW 27:3.

¹¹⁴ LW 27:4.

poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, and to proclaim liberty to the captives(Is. 61:1).¹¹⁵ This new freedom from the power of sin and from the attitude of the Law is the special characteristic of the new life in the Spirit. No longer does the Christian expect any reward, any recognition, any gratitude, any social approval for his good deeds. His left hand need not know what his right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3). He now fulfills the righteousness of God happily, spontaneously, fully.¹¹⁶

Luther often spoke of this new freedom under the Gospel. He said the Christian does “everything from a free and merry spirit.” He was often challenged as to why a Christian should do good works if his sins are freely forgiven and if his salvation is assured by God’s grace. He would simply ask in return why an apple tree gives apples. It is simply the nature of an apple tree to give apples; and so is it the new nature of the Christian to do good works. “The children of God do good with a free will, seeking no reward, but the glory of God only; ready to do good even if (which is impossible) there were neither a Kingdom nor a hell.”¹¹⁷

This new, spontaneous, generous will to do good is the goal of our Gospel preaching. We offer no motivation or reward for good works. We only preach the power of the Gospel, the radical call of Christ, and expect people to respond under the Holy Spirit. Jesus never offered His disciples anything in this world but trouble and difficulty in following Him. The only peace they would have is the “peace which surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7).

Here we needed to be reminded of Luther’s declaration concerning the freedom in his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*:: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord

¹¹⁵ LW 26:315.

¹¹⁶ Hoefler, *Gospel Preaching*, p. 57.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”¹¹⁸ This freedom belongs to the spiritual nature of man, which refers to his soul, the new inner man. No external things, which are of the bodily, freshly, carnal, and outward old man, have any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom. “None of these things touch either the freedom or the servitude of the soul.”¹¹⁹

On this point, Luther says, “One thing and only one thing is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ.”¹²⁰ The Word of God is everything for a believer’s soul. “If it has the Word of God, it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and every incalculable blessing. . . . There is no more terrible disaster than the famine of hearing this Word.”¹²¹ In this respect Christians are not under the Law but under grace because their persons have been freed from the curse and condemnation of the Law through faith in Christ.¹²²

Then why follow Him? Why be a Christian? Why do good works? Why sacrifice all for the sake of others? The Christian who has responded to the Gospel preaching can only answer: “I guess I have no rationale, no human reason. Just the love of Christ constrains me.”¹²³

¹¹⁸ LW 31:344-5.

¹¹⁹ LW 345.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ LW 31:346.

¹²² BC 567. “*hac ratione pii non sunt sub lege, sed sub gratia, propterea quod ipsa persona piorum a maledictione et damnatione legis per fidem in Christum sit liberata.*”

¹²³ Hoefer, Gospel Preaching, p. 58.

The Inter-Relationship of Law and Gospel

As we see above, the function of the Law and Gospel can only be properly understood in dynamic reaction to each other. Both express the one good will of God for our benefit. It is the power of sin which has perverted God's gift of the Law into a tool by which we seek to justify ourselves and avoid full commitment to God's purposes (Romans 7:7-13).

The good purposes of the Law can only be fulfilled once the power of sin is broken. This victorious power is given by the Holy Spirit in the Gospel (Romans 8:1-4). The Law is like the railway track showing us the way to go, but we need the diesel power of the Gospel to go the way we should.

As the Righteousness of God

The relationship between the Law and the Gospel can be seen under the category of the "righteousness of God." Martin Luther had once understood the righteousness of God only as a fearful and condemning quality of God.¹²⁴ Unless we can live up to His righteousness, we must be condemned. The insight which set the entire Reformation into motion was that God's righteousness is not a static quality of "what He expects of us" but a dynamic quality of "what He does for us" (Romans 1:16-17).

This re-discovery of the dynamic, redemptive righteousness of God was a recovery of the Old Testament understanding. In the Old Testament already God was understood as the righteous One who makes things righteous. He cannot condone

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 53.

unrighteousness, so He works to establish righteousness. Thus there is salvation in Him alone (Isaiah 59:16-21; Psalms 72; Exodus 15). The Old Testament laws meant to make righteous in the fullest sense. They are to protect and deliver the oppressed from bondage.¹²⁵

We of the New Testament covenant have this same good news to proclaim. The righteousness of God is the distinctive quality. That God is a personal being who judges in righteousness and works for righteousness is the unique news of Law and Gospel. Even though both the Law and Gospel have an aspect of God's righteousness, in his 1535 lectures on Galatians, Luther separates the righteousness of the Gospel from the righteousness of the Law carefully and accurately. According to Luther's view, the righteousness of the Law is active in its essential features, while the righteousness of the Gospel is passive, that is, only being given to faith. Luther says:

But this most excellent righteousness, the righteousness of faith, which . . . imputes to us through Christ without works, is neither political nor ceremonial, nor legal nor work-righteousness but is quite the opposite; it is a merely passive righteousness, while all the others, . . . are active.¹²⁶

This Christian righteousness, as Luther also calls passive righteousness, is there for faith's acceptance, for imputation to our account before God in heaven, because Christ nailed our transgressions against the Law of God to the cross. Towards, or for, this righteousness we contribute "nothing at all," say Luther, for Christ "has been made for us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption."¹²⁷ In the context of the righteousness, the Law demands perfect righteousness

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

¹²⁶ LW 26:4 - 5.

¹²⁷ Eugene F. Klug., *Luther on Law, Gospel, and the Third Use of the Law*. p. 155. Klug insisted that "There could be no compromise between active righteousness, which is by the Law, and passive righteousness, which is by faith through the Gospel." Klug explained continually that the

of everyone, but the Gospel is to give the righteousness demanded by the Law to those who do not have it by grace, as a gift.¹²⁸

In this matter of the righteousness of men before God, the Law makes them look at themselves, but the Gospel leads them to look at Christ. Therefore, in the struggle of conscience or in the agony of death, the Christian should take hold of nothing except Christ alone by faith, and he must say that he believes in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who suffered, was crucified, and died for him. In His wounds and death, he sees his sin atoned for and in His resurrection he sees victory over sin, death, and the devil; he also sees his righteousness and life. The Christian neither hears nor sees anything but Him.¹²⁹ The Law is always to serve the Gospel.

As God's Two Hands in Battle

A common Reformation way of portraying Law and Gospel is as the two arms (or two regiments) of God in battle against the forces of Satan.¹³⁰ With His left hand of the Law, God hinders Satan from effecting complete chaos in creation. Whether it be the natural law or the moral law or the governmental law, it keeps order and allows

passive righteousness is connected to the theology of the cross, *theologia crucis*, on the other hand the active righteousness is connected to the theology of glory, *theologia gloriae*. "A theologian of glory," Luther stated at Heidelberg (1518) in Thesis 21, "calls the bad good and the good bad," in other words, maximizes works and minimizes God's free gift in Christ.

Walther insisted that the Law has no place in the doctrine of justification, that is, passive righteousness, citing John Gerhard's saying, "Justification comes from the Gospel, in which the righteousness which counts before God is revealed apart from the Law, Rom. 3:21, because the Gospel is 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,' Rom. 1:16." See, Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 30.

¹²⁸ St. L. 9:806: "*Das Gesetz, das vollkommene Gerechtigkeit von jedermann fordere; das Evangelium, das die von Gesetz erforderte Gerechtigkeit denen, so die nicht haben, . . . aus Gnaden schenke.*"

¹²⁹ LW 26:357. Cf. Triglot, p. 351.

¹³⁰ Hoefler, *Gospel Preaching*, p. 55.

peace and happiness to prosper. It is God's good will for our good (cf. Romans 13:4).

The Gospel is the right hand of God in the battle against evil and for righteousness. Through the Gospel, God changes people into His whole-hearted partners in the battle. While the Law accuses us of sin and drives us to threats, death, and despair, God brings us comfort and freedom, using the Gospel as His right hand. When the Law attacks us for failing to do what we are supposed to do, Luther admonishes us that we should hold God's right hand, the promise of the Gospel. After confessing in the face of the Law that it is all true and we are condemned, Luther taught us what we should resist it with firm faith, not conceding to it but saying:

According to the Law, which reckons up my guilt, I am indeed a poor, condemned sinner. But I appeal from the Law to the Gospel. Because God has given another word that is higher than the Law. That word is the Gospel, which gives me as a free gift, God's grace, the forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and life. The Gospel gives me pardon and absolution from your terrors and damnation; it assures me that all guilt has been paid for by the Son of God, Jesus Christ himself.¹³¹

This is why it is so necessary that we know how to handle and steer both law and gospel properly, and watch carefully that they do not become mixed with each other, and then hold to the Gospel strongly as God's right hand. This is the power which we are privileged to proclaim -- the Gospel, God's grace and free gift.

As the "delight" of Hearts Filled with Gospel

God's commandment can be a source of joy to the receptive heart. Jesus' call was a judgment and an accusation for those who refused to accept it. But for those

¹³¹ St. L. 9:806: *"Nach dem Gesetz, welches mir meine Schuld rechnet, bin ich wohl ein armer, verdammter Sünder, aber ich appellire vom Gesetz zum Evangelio, denn Gott hat über das Gesetz noch ein ander Wort gegeben, heißt das Evangelium, welches uns seine Gnade, Vergebung der Sünden, ewige Gerechtigkeit und Leben schenkt, dazu frei und los spricht von deinem Schrecken und Verdammniß, und tröstet mich, alle Schuld sei bezahlt durch den Sohn Gottes, Jesum Christum selbst."*

who accepted His command through the Holy Spirit to follow Him, the call was the beginning of all joy and purpose in life. The Law of God is a “delight” to those who want to know and serve Him (Psalms 119).¹³²

Everything depends on the context and attitude with which the Law is spoken and received. When one feels a deep uneasiness and guilt, it can be a great relief to know the basic cause. The Law’s diagnosis can be like the doctor’s diagnosis for the receptive heart. It can be a liberating moment in which the past uncertainty is put behind and a new start for the future is sought.¹³³

The call and command of God can be a liberating and enriching moment for those who filled with the Gospel in their hearts. The call or command given in love is itself a Gospel event. The Law and the Gospel are God’s good gifts, serving a common purpose of preparing God’s people for His work in the world. Of course, though the Law never reaches salvation except in Christ, the meaning of the Gospel would be lost without the Law.

The Law serves to make men empty for the Gospel. We cannot proclaim the forgiveness of sins apart from the Law, which reveals sin and accuses the conscience. As the Gospel is needed absolutely for our salvation, so is the Law needed to unmask sins, condemn men, and drive us to seek help from Christ.¹³⁴ We, however, should know that God has not given only the Law, but also a far higher Word, the blessed Gospel, when we find ourselves under attack, with the Law threatening to damn us.

As a conclusion of this chapter, let us listen to Luther. He asked: “If the two of them, the Law and the Gospel, now come into confrontation, and the Law finds me,

¹³² Hoefler, Gospel Preaching, p. 54.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

¹³⁴ Cited in B. Haegglund, History of Theology, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 223 - 4.

a sinner, and accuses and condemns me, while the Gospel says (Matthew 9:2), be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven; you shall be saved: . . . which one should I follow?" Citing the teaching of St. Paul, Luther answers: "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian."¹³⁵

So this is where the Law stops, for it shall and must be that the lesser word yields and gives way to the Gospel. Both are the Word of God: the Law and the Gospel. But they are not both alike. One is lower, the other higher. One is weaker, the other stronger. One is less, the other greater. When they now wrestle with one another, Luther urged us to cry out that:

*So folge ich dem Evangelio und sage:
Ade, Gesetz!
Es ist besser, das Gesetz nicht wissen,
denn das Evangeium verlassen.*¹³⁶

¹³⁵ St.L. 9:808.

¹³⁶ St. L. 9:808 - 9. trans. - I follow the Gospel and say good-bye to the Law. It is better not to know the Law, than to lose the Gospel. Luther admonished on the same page that when the Law tries to press you to desert Christ and His gift and His Gospel, you should say, "Dear Law, If I have failed to do your works, you do them. I am not going to allow myself to be tortured to death on your account and be taken captive and held under you, and thereby forget the Gospel. Whether I have sinned, done wrong, or not done wrong, I leave that for you, Law, to worry about."

*Trolle du dich,
und laß mir mein Herz zufrieden,
ich will dich darin nicht wissen.*

Be gone with you and leave my heart in peace;
in this matter I do not know you. Cited in St. L. 9:809.

Chapter IV

An Application of Law/Gospel-oriented Preaching in Luther's Sermons

This chapter will deal with the practice of Luther's preaching. In previous chapters, we studied Luther's theology of preaching, focusing on his theory and his understanding of Law and Gospel so that we might build up to the system of his preaching. Now, we need to study the practice of Luther's theology of preaching. How did Luther apply his theology of preaching in his sermons? What is the main theme of his preaching? How did Luther construct his sermons? Lastly we have to investigate his proper sequence for his preaching.

Before we begin to show these things, we must find a specific term to describe Luther's sermons, in order to distinguish his sermons from others, after discussing with representative scholars of Martin Luther.¹ Therefore we chose the term "Law/Gospel-oriented preaching" as the best way to express the world of Luther's preaching. Luther emphasized not only the function of Law but also the function of

¹ In English, we can find mixed usages of the words Law, Gospel, the Law, and the Gospel. After discussing this problem with William J. Schmelder who is a professor of historical theology and Won Yong Ji who is a professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, we concluded the following:

The term "the Law" means the Laws that appeared throughout the whole Bible.

The term "the Gospel" means the title of a book, such as the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, and John, and so forth.

The term "Law" means the specific function of Law expressed with the words the first, second, and third use of Law.

The term "Gospel" means the specific event of Jesus' act for our salvation. This term is Luther's favorite term to explain the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness brought by Christ.

From this discussion we arrived at the conclusion to use the term "Law/Gospel-oriented preaching" as the best word to be able to represent the world of Martin Luther's preaching.

Gospel in his preaching simultaneously. To preach Gospel, Luther never discarded Law. Rather Luther preached Law very strongly to bring the sinners to the Lord Jesus. Luther believed Law brings to awareness the basic needs which the Gospel alone can answer.²

Luther declared that “preaching is an event of the living Word of God in the one Divine eternal Word of God, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God.”³ Therefore, whatever form one uses, one cannot speak of the Word of God apart from Jesus Christ.⁴ To proclaim Christ who is center and content of the message means, “nothing except Christ is to be preached.”⁵ This explanation of Luther’s preaching is the basis of the reason why I chose the term “Law/Gospel-oriented preaching” in order to differentiate Luther’s preaching from others.

The Proper Sequence of Law/Gospel-Oriented Preaching

First of all, to preach Law/Gospel-oriented sermons effectively and rightly, the proper sequence between Law and Gospel is the most important factor to Luther. Luther states: “Everything that preaches about our sin and the wrath of God, no matter

² Herbert E. Hoefler, Gospel Preaching, (India, Madras: The Tranquebra and Publishing House, 1981), p. 117.

³ Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke; kritische Gesamtausgabe, 58 vols. (Weimarer Ausgabe), Band, Einleitung von G. Hoffman, (Weimar: Herman Bohlaus Nachfoger, 1895), 43: 393. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as WA followed by the volume number and the page reference]

Martin Luther, Luther’s Works. 55 vols., gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg /Fortress Press, 1958, 4: 357. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as LW followed by the volume number and the page reference]. Luther said that “we have nothing from God except the pure Word, namely, that the Lord Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father and is the Judge of the living and the dead.”

⁴ H. S. Wilson, The Speaking God: Luther’s Theology of Preaching, (India, Madras; The Tranquebra Printing and Publishing House, 1982), p. 2.

⁵ Fred W. Meuser, Luther the Preacher. (Minneapolis: Augusburg Publishing House, 1983), p. 16.

how or when it happens, is the proclamation of the Law. On the other hand, the Gospel is a proclamation that shows and gives nothing but grace and forgiveness in Christ.”⁶ Therefore, for Luther, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is the best and most important consideration for preaching.

However, for Luther the proper sequence of Law and Gospel is another important element to make Law/Gospel-oriented preaching effective. Luther’s *Sermon on the Sum of the Christian Life* (1532) shows us a prototype of the proper sequence for Law/Gospel-oriented preaching. In it, Luther preached Law before Gospel:

We must now learn to distinguish between the two parts which are called the Law and the gospel. . . . The law brings us before the judgment seat, for it demands that we must be good and love out of a pure heart and a good conscience. . . . The law keeps harrying you and accusing you through your own conscience, which testifies against you, and absolutely demanding the judgment upon you.⁷

Then Luther comforts the hearer by proclaiming Gospel following the preaching of Law, that is, “Then you must simply despair and there is no help or counsel for you unless you know that you can flee from the judgment seat to the mercy seat.”⁸ Luther admonishes the preachers after they preached Law to teach that one should know and look upon Gospel, the Lord, “Christ as the one who sits there as the advocate of the poor, terrified conscience.”⁹ The preacher should let them believe in Christ, “. . . not as a judge who is angry and ready to punish, but as a gracious, kindly, comforting mediator between their fearful conscience and God.”¹⁰ In order to make Law/Gospel-oriented preaching effective and powerful, the preacher must not only distinguish

⁶ Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord*, (Philadelphia:Fortress Press, 1959) p. 560. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as BC followed by the page number].

⁷ LW 51:279.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 279 - 80.

¹⁰ Ibid., 280.

between Law and Gospel but also is able to set up the proper sequence of Law and Gospel in Luther's theology of preaching.

In the case of the proper sequence of Law/Gospel-oriented preaching C. F. W. Walther, who absolutely followed the same way of theology as Luther, was one of the scholars who acquired the thorough knowledge of the proper sequence of Law and Gospel for preaching. "Whenever a preacher preaches," warned Walther, "the preacher first must proclaim the Law in a way that pierces the hearer's heart, and then he must preach the Gospel secondly."¹¹

In St. Peter's sermon we can see a good example of the proper sequence of Law and Gospel. At Pentecost Peter first condemned his hearers as murderers of Christ. Then when they were afraid and asked: "What shall we do?" Peter said: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."¹² Thus he preached Gospel and assured them that they too could have forgiveness of all their sins, even the most horrible. Everywhere the apostles preached repentance first and then faith; for they knew their hearers were mostly secure sinners who had not yet recognized their misery.

We believe that Walther has provided us with very important principles for the proper sequence of Law/Gospel-oriented preaching. Walther confessed that he learned how to distinguish properly the order between Law and Gospel from Luther. Walther said, "Luther often used such examples. Let me do what he did, for whatever good I have to offer I learned from him."¹³ Walther insisted on the importance of the proper sequence of Law/Gospel-oriented preaching in the following words:

¹¹ C. F. W. Walther, Law and Gospel. translated by Herbert J.A. Bouman. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), p. 71.

¹² See, Acts 2:38.

When we preach, we must first preach our hearers into hell before we can preach them into heaven. First we must put our hearers to death by the Law, and only then can they be brought to life through the Gospel. First we must make them realize that they are sick unto death, and then we must heal them with evangelical comfort. First, we must expose their own righteousness through the Law and show what a filthy garment it is, and then they must be clothed with the righteousness of Christ through the Gospel.¹⁴

Being helped by Walther's understanding of proper sequences for Law/Gospel-oriented preaching, this study tries to establish some practical principles of proper sequence in order to make Law/Gospel-oriented preaching effective, proving some examples which Luther already set up in his preaching.

Law Should Be Preached before Gospel.

Luther preached Law first and then Gospel. We can hardly find an exception of it from his sermons. *On the Sermon of the Gospel for New Year's Day* Luther preached emphatically that "God first of all gives the law, whereby man finds out about this sin and thirsts for grace: thereafter He gives the gospel and saves him."¹⁵ Walther also warned preachers of the danger which can come when the preacher changes the order of Law and Gospel. He continually said that the failure to observe this proper order can do great damage in the heart and understanding of the hearers. Walther pointed out:

False approach is possible, when Gospel is preached before Law. Every pupil of the catechism knows very well that the Law comes first, and then the Gospel. However, it can happen all too easily, and we can point to entire church bodies that fell prey to this error.¹⁶

¹³ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁵ LW 52:152.

¹⁶ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 59.

As we have seen before this chapter, there were the Antinomians under the leadership of Agricola.¹⁷ They would have liked having nothing to do with the Law at all. Their basic principle was: “First Gospel must be proclaimed, first the suffering and bleeding of Christ must be preached.”¹⁸ That was completely wrong. Their hearers were never made to realize man’s deep sinful corruption; they never understood that they were God’s enemies worthy of being cast into hell.¹⁹

As an illustration, we also recall the rich young man who came to Christ and asked how he might obtain eternal life. He was so thoroughly blinded that he did not recognize his sinful corruption at all; “he went away sorrowful” (Matthew 19:16-22). Christ could not yet offer this young man the Gospel, for He first had to convince him of his inability to keep the Law.²⁰

We can see clearly the sequence of Law first and Gospel second in Luther’s preaching of *The Sixth Sermon at Wittenberg*, 1522. The theme of this preaching is about Holy Communion. Luther preached:

This is what Christ did when he was about to institute the blessed sacrament. First he terrified his disciples and shook their hearts by saying that he was going to leave them [Matt. 26:2], which was exceedingly painful to them; and then he went on to say, “One of you will betray me” [Matt. 26:21]. Do you think that did not cut them to the heart? Of course they accepted that saying with all fear and they sat there as though they had all been traitors to God. And after he had made them all tremble with fear and sorrow, only then did he institute the blessed sacrament as a comfort and consoled them again. For this bread is a comfort for the sorrowing, a healing for the sick, a life for the dying, a food for all the hungry, and a rich treasure for all the poor and needy.²¹

¹⁷ See, chapter III, footnote # 29. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 225.

¹⁸ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 60.

¹⁹ See, Mark 1:15, Acts 20:21, and Luke 24:47 might be good demonstration.

²⁰ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 19.

²¹ LW 51:94-95.

The following sermon is one of the best examples for proper sequence. This sermon titled *On the Sum of Christian life* (1532) was preached, keeping the sequence of Law and Gospel:

For the Scriptures teach me that God established two seats for men, a judgment seat for those who are still secure and proud and will neither acknowledge nor confess their sin, and a mercy seat for those whose conscience is poor and needy, who feel and confess their sin, dread his judgment, and yearn for his grace.²²

After pointing out that Law does not have power to get rid of our sin, then Luther preached Gospel that one should look upon Christ who is sitting in the mercy seat as a the advocate of the poor, terrified conscience. Luther put the order of Law and Gospel this way:

If the law is to obtain, I cannot bargain with thee, but must straightway appeal from thy judgment seat to thy mercy seat. Before the judgment seat of the world I am content to be dealt with according to the law; there I will answer and do what I ought. But before thee I would appeal to no law, but rather flee to the Cross and plead for grace and accept it as I am able.²³

Law should be preached so that the hearer may realize that when he comes before God and the judgment seat he is condemned and lost. And then Gospel should follow after Law so that the hearer may look upon Christ who is sitting on the mercy seat and believe that those who cling to him cannot be condemned or convicted.

However, the preacher must be alerted that Law/Gospel-oriented preaching is not just using the word "Gospel." This preaching is the content of Gospel which we are to proclaim, not just its name or its words. It depends on how well Gospel words are related to the real life of the people. An abstract Gospel is no Gospel at all. The words or sayings in Law/Gospel-oriented preaching must be related directly to the real needs of people in order for them to become Gospel to them.

²² LW 51:278-281.

²³ Ibid., 277-278.

Justification Should Be Preached before Sanctification

The proper order is inverted when sanctification of life is preached before justification, which consists of the forgiveness of sins. When Christ's righteousness becomes my righteousness, then I am justified.²⁴ In *The Sermons at Leipzig and Erfurt*, 1521, Luther preached:

Therefore, I say again: Alien works, these make us good! Our Lord Christ says: I am your justification. I have destroyed the sins you have upon you. Therefore only believe in me; believe that I am he who has done this; then you will be justified. For it is written, *Justitia est fides*,²⁵ righteousness is identical with faith and comes through faith.²⁶

Mingling justification and sanctification is one of the worst errors. In that case the sermon is a complete failure, no matter how eloquently it is delivered. Only a strict distinction between justification and sanctification can make it clear to a poor sinner and give him certainty that God is gracious to him, and equip him with strength for new life. Walther asserted that true sanctification follows justification; true justification follows repentance.²⁷

Contrition Should Be Preached before Faith

In *The First Sermon at Wittenberg*, 1522, Luther showed us a good example of the sequence of contrition and faith. For Luther contrition must be preached prior to

²⁴ Psalm 30:4, Psalm 119:32, 1 Cor. 1:30, John 15:5, and Acts 15:9 are some passages which clearly show that the proper order is first justification and then sanctification.

²⁵ Righteousness is faith. Cf. Romans 4:5. See LW 51:63.

²⁶ LW 51:63.

²⁷ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 61.

faith. He preached, “In the first place, we must preach that we are the children of wrath, and all our works, intentions, and thoughts are nothing at all.”²⁸ And then he proclaimed faith as the way of rescuing from sins: “Secondly that God sent us his only begotten Son that we may believe in him and that whoever trusts in him shall be free from sin and a child of God.”²⁹

This sequence of contrition and faith is very important to build Law/ Gospel-oriented preaching. The proper order is inverted when faith is preached first and then contrition, as the Antinomians did. They insist: “Faith must come first, and then you are able to repent of your sins.”³⁰ Walther rebuked them as foolish. He asked, “How can faith come into a heart not yet crushed? How can one who loathes the food hunger and thirst?”³¹ Walther denied strongly that fact: “No, if you want to believe in Christ, you must first become sick; for Christ is a physician only for the sick.”³² First we were a poor, lost sinner; for Christ came to seek and to save the lost. First we were a lost sheep. And then we can be found by Christ, the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep.

When the Jews asked Peter and the other apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter answered, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins” [Acts 2:38]. Consequently, repentance comes first, then faith. “Repentance to God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” [Acts 20:21] clearly establishes the proper order and refutes all who invert it.

²⁸ LW 51:70.

²⁹ LW 51:71. Cf. John 1:12.

³⁰ See, chapter III, footnote # 29. Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, p. 225.

³¹ Walther, Law and Gospel, p. 60.

³² *Ibid.*

Let us look at another good example of the proper sequence from Luther's preaching. In *The Sermon at Erfurt on the Journey to Worms*, 1521, Luther preached that Jesus saved us, after pointing out first that we have inherited sin from Adam.

Therefore you should note well the words which Paul writes to the Romans [Rom. 5:12-21]. Our sins have their source in Adam, and because Adam ate the apple, we have inherited sin from him. But Christ has shattered death for our sake, in order that we might be saved by his works, which are alien to us, and not by our works.³³

In *The Eighth Sermon at Wittenberg*, 1522, Luther preached on private confession. He did not preach absolution first. He preached that we need confession of sin first. And then he preached, "We must have many absolutions, so that we may strengthen our timid consciences and despairing hearts against the devil and against God."³⁴

Law/Gospel-oriented preaching, however, is not just urging more faith. Often we give the impression in our preaching that if people just had more faith their problems would be solved. The frequent sentence is "Have faith in God; He will save you." Once again, such proclamation can be very true and appropriate. Yet, very often it is a proclamation of Law, not Gospel. If they have faith, God will help. If not, God will not help. If they are not helped, it is because they do not have faith. In this case faith becomes a good work by which we please God and gain blessing. We should keep in mind that we are not saved by faith, but through faith. We are saved only by God's grace. Faith is the attitude of absolute trust through which we receive God's saving grace in our life.

Grace Should Be Preached before Good Works

³³ LW 51:62.

³⁴ LW 51:99.

It is wrong to preach good works first and then grace. All these points are related; one is as false as the other. Note Ephesians 2:8-10. It is a golden passage for the proper sequence of Law/Gospel-oriented preaching. St. Paul does not say, “We must do good works, and then God will be gracious to us,” but the very opposite: “By grace you have been saved through faith.”³⁵ And he continued “by grace you have been created for good works.”³⁶ It means clearly that first we receive grace, and then God has made us a new creature; then we do good works and can no longer remain under the dominion of sin.

Luther’s Sermon of *The Gospel for New Year’s Day* shows us a very good example of this sequence between grace and good works. In it Luther emphasized that good works are to be the fruits of the nature of our being, not vice versa. He preached:

God does not condemn or redeem a person for the sake of the works, but the works for the sake of the person. Therefore our deficiency does not lie in our works but in our nature. Our person, nature, and entire existence are corrupted through Adam’s fall. Therefore not a single work can be good in us, until our nature and personal being are changed and renewed. The tree is not good; therefore the fruits are evil.³⁷

Luther had always been disgusted by the people who believe that good works can save a human being. Luther preached in *The Sermon at Erfurt*, 1521, “It is the greatest evil in the world to lead the people to believe that outward works can save or make a man good.”³⁸ This is the reason why Luther appealed strongly to Christians to hold to the Lord Christ through faith.

³⁵ Τῇ γὰρ χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι δια πίστεως

³⁶ “*Gratia enim estis salvati per fidem; et hoc non ex vobis Dei donum est: non ex operibus, ut ne quis gloriatur. Ipsius enim sumus factura, creati in Christo Iesu in opera bona, quae praeparavit Deus, ut in illis ambulemus*” (cited from Vulgate Version).

³⁷ LW 52:151.

³⁸ LW 51:63.

Luther says against the papists and anti-sacramentalists that the controversy is this: we preach the Spirit and the New Testament, they preach the letter and the Old Testament:

. . . we preach something better: the Spirit and the New Testament, which is that Jesus Christ has come for your sake and taken your sins upon himself. There you hear, not what you should do, but what God is doing through Christ, which means, of course, that he works faith and bestows the Holy Spirit.³⁹

By contrast, Luther says that the Roman Church preaches only penitence, but we must preach both repentance and grace. We must preach Law so men repent, and grace and the promise of forgiveness to arouse faith. Otherwise all teaching on repentance is in vain.⁴⁰ Luther says that they preach the letter which is law without grace; but we preach the Spirit, which is grace without law, for the Spirit gives everything the law demands.⁴¹ In *The Sermon on the Good Shepherd*, Luther says that the Law is the doorman who reveals our helplessness and opens us up to the Shepherd, whose voice is the Gospel which feeds us.⁴²

When we emphasize only good works without the grace of God, preaching stands opposite to Law/Gospel-oriented preaching. Such preaching is apt to happen in the sentence “If . . . then . . .” It is not Law/Gospel-oriented preaching when the preacher says “If . . . then . . .” One of the most dangerous structures in our preaching is the “If . . . then . . .” sentence. Luther’s *Sermon on Matthew 7:12* shows us a good example of the structure “If . . . then . . .”

If merely refraining from doing harm were sufficient for salvation, then much

³⁹ LW 51:225-7.

⁴⁰ LW 31:363-4.

⁴¹ LW 39:189.

⁴² Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, edited and translated by John Nicolas Lenker, 8 volumes (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Baker Book House, 1909), 3:397. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as Lenker followed by the volume number and the page reference].

wood in the forest and many stones in the depths of the ocean would be saved, for they obviously do no harm or evil to anyone. But this is not true. Thus the one who merely does no harm would be like wood and stones, and this is not sufficient for salvation.⁴³

Thus the preacher must beware of subtle work-righteousness in his preaching when he uses such sentences. In each of these statements God's action is made dependent on man's action. The implication is that God cannot save unless man takes the adequate, required first step. Man's salvation thus becomes dependent on man. We may say "When you believe in God, then you become His child." But we dare not say, "If you believe in God, then you become His child." The essence of Law/Gospel-oriented preaching is that our salvation is dependent wholly on God's prior grace.

Law/Gospel-oriented preaching is not reminding people of their Christian duties. People do not become Christian by performing certain prescribed duties and customs. We do not bring people into the Gospel by urging them to come to church, to give generously, to avoid bad habits, to do evangelism, to serve their neighbor. Performing such duties is not a requirement for the Gospel but a product of Gospel and a response to the grace of God.

Titus 2:11-12 shows that grace must be preached first, and then it trains.⁴⁴ This is the divine pedagogy inherent in grace. As soon as a person accepts the grace which God has brought from heaven, it begins its training function, teaching people to do good works and lead honorable lives. The Epistle to the Romans, which contains the whole of Christian doctrine, presents us with a good example of the proper sequence of Law and Gospel. Chapters 1-3 are an incisive proclamation of the Law; Chapters 4 and 5, the doctrine of justification; and from Chapter 6 on, sanctification.

⁴³ LW 51:7.

⁴⁴ "*Apparuit enim gratia Dei salutaris omnibus hominibus erudiens nos, ut abnegantes impietatem et saecularia desideria sobrie et iuste et pie vivamus in hoc saeculo*" (cited from Vulgate Version).

There you have a good model of the correct sequence: First, Law, God's wrath and threats; then the Gospel, God's promises and consolations; and then instructions on what we are to do, now that we have become new people. As often as the prophets preached for the purpose of converting someone, they began with the Law. When its punishment had its effect, they comforted the sinner. As soon as the hearers were struck with fear, the apostles did nothing but absolve them. They pleaded with them, they exhorted them by the mercies of God.

Main Themes of Luther's Preaching

Jesus Christ

The name and person of Jesus Christ is the most important theme for Luther's preaching, the so-called Law/Gospel-oriented preaching. In a very real sense Luther's theology of preaching must be based on Christology. The Reformer made Christ the Redeemer the center of his preaching just as he found Him to be the center of Scripture. Luther confessed, "I see nothing in Scripture except Christ crucified."⁴⁵

As this study mentioned in chapter two,⁴⁶ Luther proclaimed continually "*Nihil nisi Christus praedicatur* (Nothing except Christ is preached)!" through his whole preaching.⁴⁷ This is the overwhelming subject of Martin Luther's preaching. Christ is center and content of the message. Luther meant, "nothing except Christ is to be preached"- Christ as Savior, God's great gift, the One in whom God shows his own face, in whom God has spoken a clear, definitive, once-for-all word to the world.

In Luther's introductory remark of *The Sermon on The Raising of Lazarus* ,

⁴⁵ WA 4:153.

⁴⁶ See Chapter II, pp. 32-5.

⁴⁷ Meuser, Luther the Preacher, p. 16.

1518, Luther said, “God comes to us only in Christ, who alone is the Father’s ‘epistle, book, and image’ and who alone is ‘the door, anchor, and path’ to Him.”⁴⁸ For Luther there is no way to God except Jesus Christ. Luther rejected the works which we think we can perform and thus find the way to God. Luther preached:

There is no shorter way to the Father except that we love Christ, hope and trust in him, boldly look to him for everything good, learn to know and praise him.⁴⁹

Do not flutter around with your thoughts, do not climb up to God by another way than through Jesus Christ. For Christ is the Bridge and the Way, and you should say: I will teach no Christian anything higher and further than the Lord Christ, for I am not to construct a way of my own to God by my thoughts.⁵⁰

The preacher, however, should be careful not to make Jesus’ teaching the Law. Law/Gospel-oriented preaching does not mean to hold up the example and teaching of Jesus. In many sermons the example and teachings of Jesus are referred to frequently. But the example and teaching of Jesus are apt to be Law, not Gospel. They show us God’s will. They demonstrate what God expects of each of us. They show us how we have failed. Jesus’ example and teachings accuse us. When the preacher says, “Love as Jesus taught; sacrifice as Jesus sacrificed; help the down-trodden as Jesus did,” we all stand condemned. Law tells us what we should do. Law is “just and good,” but it is powerless to save us (Romans 7:12, 3:30).

We know we are called to follow Jesus’ example and teachings, but we are powerless to do so. Luther said, “Do not make Christ a sort of Lawgiver. This is not His proper office. Rather look upon and accept Him as Mediator and Savior, who came to fulfill the Law, not to put it out of existence.”⁵¹ Luther clearly realized that Jesus’ examples and teachings totally differ from the examples and teachings of the

⁴⁸ LW 51:44.

⁴⁹ LW 51:46.

⁵⁰ WA 33:157.

saints. Luther said:

The sufferings of the saints are examples, but the suffering of Christ is something else. Therefore the Passion of Christ should be separated very far from the suffering of all others. It is more severe, but the specific difference is this: All the saints have served God by their suffering and have set a good example by it, but not one of them shed a drop of blood or sweat for us. This only Christ did. Therefore His Passion is not merely an example, as is that of the saints; but it is a treasure and the price paid for our redemption.⁵²

Law/Gospel-oriented preaching depends thoroughly on the Gospel which tells us how we can see Jesus' example and teaching. The Gospel for our life and ministry is the same as it was for Jesus' life and ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has appointed me to preach . . . to set at liberty . . . to give . . . to proclaim" (Luke 4:18-19). The good news for our hearers is that the same Spirit which filled and empowered Jesus is here for us now. Jesus' example directs us beyond itself to His presence today for us in the Spirit.

One more thing the preacher keeps in mind is the fact that Law/Gospel-oriented preaching is not just proclaiming what God has already done. Usually we hear Gospel proclaimed only as a past act of God. Of course, Gospel is a proclamation of what God has done in the life of His people to save and guide them. Law/Gospel-oriented preaching is a proclamation of what God did in the Exodus, through the prophets, in Jesus' life, at the crucifixion, at the resurrection, and at Pentecost.

Law/Gospel-oriented preaching is to remind people of what God did in the past. The past must become relevant to the present for it to become Law/Gospel-oriented preaching. The contemporary significance of what God has done in the past is its effect and meaning for the present. For example, Jesus' resurrection becomes Gospel for us when we find in it the assurance of our own resurrection. Law/Gospel-oriented

⁵¹ WA 39 I, 535.

⁵² WA 45:60.

preaching is primarily a proclamation about what God is doing and will do for His people today. The power of God's saving acts in the past is to invade our lives of the present. His power of the past is His power of today.

Of course, the sacrificial death of our Lord is the central act and fact of Law/Gospel-oriented preaching. However, in effective Law/Gospel-oriented preaching the redemptive act of God must not be limited only to the sacrificial death of our Lord. The redemptive effect of the crucifixion takes place through the total event of Incarnation, Resurrection, and Pentecost. The Incarnation identifies God eternally with man's fallen nature, bearing the burden of man's sin and the struggle against Satan even to the cross. The Resurrection publicly announces and demonstrates the eternal victory won by Christ on the cross. Luther said, "The Resurrection of Christ is so certain; for it is the very foundation of our faith and hope."⁵³ Pentecost brings that victory over sin, death, and the devil into our personal lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. Incarnation - Crucifixion - Resurrection - Pentecost is the one, total, saving Event of history. Salvation can be proclaimed only in terms of the whole event, not any one part.

Righteousness

The term "righteousness" is the other main theme of Luther's preaching. In order to be saved and justified by God we must be righteous before God. But the question of how we can be righteous had bothered young Luther bitterly before he came to understand the real meaning of the "Righteousness of God." Luther confessed in the following words:

⁵³ WA 12:268.

But . . . the one expression in chapter one (v. 17) concerning the “righteousness of God” blocked the way for me. For I hated the expression “righteousness of God,” since I had been instructed by the usage and custom of all teachers to understand it according to scholastic philosophy as the “formal or active righteousness” in which God proves Himself righteous by punishing sinners and the unjust . . .⁵⁴

Luther continued:

Finally, after days and nights of wrestling with the difficulty, God had mercy on me, and then I was able to note the connection of the words “the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel” and “the just shall live by faith.” Then I began to understand that the “righteousness of God” is that through which the righteous lives by the gift of God, that is, through faith, and that the meaning is this: The Gospel reveals the righteousness of God in a passive sense that righteousness through which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: “The just shall live by faith.” Then I felt as if I had been completely reborn and had entered Paradise through widely opened doors. As intensely as I had formerly hated the expression “righteousness of God” I now loved and praised it as the sweetest of concepts; and so this passage of Paul actually was the portal of Paradise to me.⁵⁵

Luther summed up the nature of Christian righteousness as follows, “God alone justifies us solely by His grace through Christ.”⁵⁶ Luther goes on to show what this means for the way faith is to be spoken of as only God’s gift and work.

These two things make Christian righteousness perfect: The first is faith in the heart, which is a divinely granted gift and which formally believes in Christ; the second is that God reckons this imperfect faith as perfect righteousness for the sake of Christ, His son, who suffered for the sins of the world and in whom I begin to believe.⁵⁷

Later theologians called this “a forensic act of God,” declaring the sinner righteous. Justification is always God’s act, not man’s act. It is foreign, that is, another’s righteousness, and is given with the words of the Gospel and the Means of Grace. Therefore, in this doctrine of righteousness, it is always the imputation of a

⁵⁴ WA 54:185.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ LW 26:99.

⁵⁷ LW 26:231.

foreign righteousness, that is Christ's. It is the "first" or "alien" righteousness which is bestowed upon sinners completely and at once. It means that the guilt of sin is blotted out through the forgiveness of sins.⁵⁸

After Luther once found that "Christian righteousness is not a righteousness that is within us but a foreign righteousness that is entirely outside us, namely, Christ Himself is our essential Righteousness and complete Satisfaction,"⁵⁹ this doctrine came to the center of his preaching. In *The Sermon on Sunday after Christmas, Gal. 4:1-7*, Luther preached:

Just as faith is proclaimed without merit or work on your part, it is also bestowed regardless of your works, without any of your merits. It is given of pure grace. Note, faith justifies the individual; faith is justification. Because of faith God remits all sins. Then nothing else is necessary to justification but to hear and believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour.⁶⁰

Grace

For Luther justification is not a work of the natural man; it is a work of grace. Therefore it is natural that the term "grace" takes the important place in his preaching. Luther's greatest concern was to find a gracious God. Luther gave the definition of grace like following:

Grace consists in this, that God is merciful to us, shows Himself gracious for the sake of the Lord Christ, forgives all sins, and will not impute them unto us for eternal death. This is grace: the forgiveness of sins for the sake of the Lord Christ,

⁵⁸ LW 26:229. Cf. U. Saarnivaara, *Luther Discovers the Gospel*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), p. 97. E. Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, translated by Paul P. Koehnke (Philadelphia: Frotss Press, 1961), p. 92.

⁵⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther Werke: Tischreden*, 6 vols, (Weimar:Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1921), 6: entry number 6602. "Christliche Gerechtigkeit ist nicht eine solche Gerechtigkeit, die in uns ist und klebet, wie sonst eine *Qualitas* und Tugend, das ist, das man bei uns sindet oder das wir führen; sondern ist eine fremde Gerechtigkeit gar außer uns, nemlich Christus selber ist unsere *formalis Iustitia*, vollkommene Gerechtigkeit und das ganze Wesen."

⁶⁰ Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 8 volumes, edited and translated by John Nicholas Lenker, (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Baker Book House, 1909). 6:227.

the covering up of all sins.⁶¹

Luther pointed out that there is no way to escape the restlessness of our souls that comes from drudge and sweat in our own wisdom and righteousness except knowing the grace of and mercy of God. In *The Sermon on St. Matthew's Day*, Matt. 11:25-30, 1517, Luther preached: "But one cannot escape the restlessness of their souls except through knowing the Father and the Son, that is, through knowing the grace and mercy of God which is freely given to us in Christ and the merits of Christ which are imputed to us."⁶² Luther also preached in a sermon he delivered in 1522 on Matt. 11:2-10 that the Son of God came to preach the good news of grace in and through Himself. Luther proclaimed, "These promises of grace are all based on Christ from the beginning of the world, so that God promises this grace to no one in any other way than in Christ and through Christ."⁶³

The Reformer remarked in his exposition of Psalms 130:4 that the only way we become children of God is through grace. He said, "We who through our works are unprofitable servants are made children of God through the grace which God shows us in Christ."⁶⁴ For Luther "grace can never forsake one who despairs of himself."⁶⁵ We can hear the same preaching in *The Sermon at Leipzig and Erfurt*, 1519: "It is not possible that God will deny His grace to a man who thus sincerely acknowledges his inability and utterly despairs of himself."⁶⁶

⁶¹ WA 46:658.

⁶² LW 51:29.

⁶³ WA 10 I, 2.

⁶⁴ WA 40 III, 358.

⁶⁵ LW 51:43.

⁶⁶ LW 51:58.

Faith

Luther has been called the “apostle of faith.”⁶⁷ For Luther faith is the only way to reach the righteousness of God. Pointing out that there are two things in the Christian life which must be distinguished, that is, the “must” and “free,” Luther asserted that faith belongs to the “must.” In *The First Sermon among Eight Sermons at Wittenberg*, 1522, Luther preached:

Take note of these two things, “must” and “free.” The “must” is that which necessity requires, and which must ever be unyielding; as, for instance, the faith, which I shall never permit any one to take away from me, but must always keep in my heart and freely confess before every one. But “free” is that in which I have choice, and may use or not, yet in such a way that it profit my brother and not me. Now do not make a “must” out of what is “free”.⁶⁸

In *The Sixth Sermon among Eight Sermons at Wittenberg* Luther introduced the content of faith in the following words: “Faith . . . is a firm trust that Christ, the Son of God, stands in our place and has taken all our sins upon his shoulders and that he is the eternal satisfaction for our sin and reconciles us with God the Father.”⁶⁹ In other words, Christ is the content of our faith.

Luther distinguished clearly between two kinds of faith. First, faith may mean simply the acceptance of what is said about God as “an item of knowledge.” But this is not true faith. The true believer puts his trust in God and acts on his conviction that what has been promised by God in his Word is altogether sure.⁷⁰ “Only a faith that ventures everything in life and in death on what is said[in Scripture] of God makes a

⁶⁷ Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*. - An Anthology. Edited Edward M. Plass, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. 1959), p. 465.

⁶⁸ LW 51:74.

⁶⁹ LW 51:92.

⁷⁰ LW 43:24.

person a Christian and obtains all he desires from God. No corrupt or hypocritical heart can have such a faith; this is a living faith as the First Commandment demands: I am your God; you shall have no other gods.”⁷¹ This kind of faith alone is the true faith, and it “is given only by God himself.”⁷² The paradoxical nature of faith is thus set forth. It is a divine gift.

Faith is the only way to give glory to God. In the Commentary on Galatians 3:6, Luther said:

Faith gives the glory to God. Nothing greater can be given Him. But giving the glory to God means to believe Him, to consider Him truthful, wise, just, merciful, omnipotent, in short, to acknowledge Him to be the Author and Giver of everything good. Reason does not do this. But faith does.⁷³

Love

The term “love” is big concern in Luther’s preaching. In his preaching love always goes together with faith. In *The First Sermon among Eight Sermons at Wittenberg*, 1522, Luther said, “We must also have love and through love we must do to one another as God has done to us through faith. For without love faith is nothing.”⁷⁴ Luther continued to preach in the following way:

Dear friends, the kingdom of God . . . does not consist in talk or words, . . .but in activity, in deeds, in works and exercises. God does not want hearers and repeaters of words, . . .but followers and doers, and this occurs in faith through love. For a faith without love is not enough rather it is not faith at all, but a counterfeit of faith, just as a face seen in a mirror is not a real face, but merely the reflection of a face. [1 Cor. 13:12].⁷⁵

⁷¹ LW 24:25.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ WA 40, I, 360.

⁷⁴ LW 51:71.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

In Luther's preaching "faith" and "love" are two pillars that make up his sermon. The relation between faith and love can be described as the relation between a needle and a thread. They are indispensable adjuncts. In his *Second Sermon among Eight Sermons at Wittenberg*, Luther preached, "You heard the chief characteristics of a Christian man, that his whole life and being is faith and love. Faith is directed toward God, love toward man and one's neighbor."⁷⁶

Concerning the sequence of faith and love, faith must be preached first; for we must receive before we can give. In his exposition of 1 Peter 2:11, Luther pointed out that Peter observes this order like this:

This is the proper way to preach. First one must emphasize what faith does and what its power and nature are, namely, that it gives us everything necessary to holiness and salvation, that we can do nothing except by faith and that through it we have all that God has And then as long as we live in this world, we should act in our neighbor's behalf and should give ourselves to him as God has given Himself to us. Thus faith saves us; but love moves us to give ourselves to our neighbor, since our needs have been met. This means that faith receives from God and that love gives to our neighbors.⁷⁷

The Second Christmas Sermon which deals with the text of Titus 3:4-8 can be regarded as the best sermon that explains well the relation between faith and love. According to it, these two pillars embrace all Christian doctrine and life. Luther preached:

This epistle again teaches us two things: believing and loving -- receiving favors from God and granting favors to our neighbors. The entire Scriptures enforce these two precepts, and the practice of one requires the practice of the other. He who does not firmly believe in God's grace assuredly will not extend kindness to his neighbor, but will be tardy and indifferent in aiding him. In proportion to the strength of his faith will be his willingness and industry in helping his neighbor. Thus faith incites love, and love increases faith.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ LW 51:75.

⁷⁷ WA 12:321.

⁷⁸ Lenker, 6:145.

Good Works

Luther regarded good works as fruits of justification which cannot take part in salvation. Luther said, "Therefore, mark me well: this is the reason why salvation does not lie in our own works, no matter what they are; it cannot and will not be effected without faith."⁷⁹ Indeed none of our works have any power whatsoever. In order to understand Luther's conception of good works, we must know that it is one thing to handle the subject of good works and another that of justification; just as the nature or personality of an individual is one thing and his actions or works another. Justification has reference to the person and not to the works. It is the former, not the latter, which is justified and saved, or is sentenced and punished. These two continually strive against each other. Luther said in the *Sermon on Sunday after Christmas*, "God respects the individual, man the works. God rewards the works for the sake of the doer, man would have the doer crowned because of his works."⁸⁰

Even though it is clear that no one is justified by works, Luther admonished good works to all Christians, demanding that one distinguish between two kinds of good works. Some precede justification and others follow it. Those that precede are worthless even though they seem to be good; those that follow are really good.⁸¹ Luther insisted saying, "Therein God regards all man's works, which are done previous to his justification, as evil and ineffectual; He requires justification and goodness on the part of the individual first."⁸² It is Luther's conclusion that all people

⁷⁹ LW 51:62.

⁸⁰ Lenker, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 6:226.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁸² *Ibid.*

in the state of nature and of the first birth are unjust and evil. Therefore faith should exist before works.

However, the Christian, who became a new creature by the grace of God through faith in Christ, is supposed to do good works intrinsically. Whatever he does he performs wholly as good works, and all his works are good. For Luther works are just fruits and signs of faith. In his *Exposition of Matt. 6:14-15*, 1532, Luther explained at greater length about the relation of faith to works:

This is how we distinguish works as outward righteousness from faith as inward righteousness, but in such a way that the inward has precedence as the stem and root from which the good works must grow as fruit. Outward righteousness, however, is the witness of inward righteousness. Whoever lacks the inward righteousness does not do any of the outward works. On the other hand, where the outward signs and proofs are lacking, I cannot be sure of the inward, but I am deceiving both myself and others. But if I look and find myself gladly forgiving my neighbor, then I can draw this conclusion and say: I am not doing this work naturally, but by the grace of God I feel different from the way I used to be.⁸³

Good works must be practiced for others not for oneself. The Law requires that we love God with all our powers and our neighbor as ourselves. It is true that the Law requires that we love God and our neighbor, so it is certainly true that a person is not rightly fasting, praying, crying to God, and doing other things, if he does not first love God and his neighbor. Therefore it is true that “if the works are not done out of love, then they are absolutely nothing; then there is nothing good in this love.”⁸⁴

Humility

The one theme that we cannot ignore from Luther’s preaching is humility. It rings through his whole preaching. For Luther the Lord Christ is the prototype of humility. Luther said in *The Sermon on the Man Born Blind*, 1518, that “We see in all

⁸³ WA 32:423.

⁸⁴ LW 51:105.

the words and works of Christ nothing but pure humility.”⁸⁵ And then Luther preached strongly:

Your attitude should be like the humility of Christ, who did not exalt himself in the form of God, even though he could be equal with the Father, but emptied himself and utterly lowered himself, and took on the form of a servant, and was found in every degree and way a man and like a man, like him even in that he died for the sake of obedience to his Father.⁸⁶

Luther’s Sermon on *The Tenth Sunday after Trinity*, 1515, which breathes the spirit of Luther’s “theology of the cross”, is a good sermon to help our understanding of pure humility.⁸⁷ In this sermon Luther gave the definition of humility and pride in following words: “it is the true nature of humility to retire far off from God and from all that is God’s. On the other hand, it is the true nature of pride to approach as close as possible to God and all that is God’s.”⁸⁸ True humility happens when we acknowledge God. Luther continually explained the meaning of humility and pride in the same sermon:

Acknowledging God results in drawing away in fear and reverence, and this is humility, in which a man recognizes his own nothingness and leaves all good to God, not daring to claim anything for himself. Not acknowledging God results in drawing away from God in contempt and security, and this is pride.⁸⁹

For Luther the spirit of humility comes from the recognition that God is all and we are nothing. Humility is regarded as one of the cardinal virtues of a Christian in his preaching. In order to emphasize humility, Luther loves to cite some passages from the Scripture: “He mocks proud mockers, but gives grace to the humble” [Prov. 3:34],

⁸⁵ LW 51:37.

⁸⁶ LW 51:37-8.

⁸⁷ LW 51:14-7. Through the introductory of the sermon we can hear a significant epigram proclaimed by Luther: *Unum praedica, sapientiam crucis!* - Preach one thing, the wisdom of cross!

⁸⁸ LW 51:14.

⁸⁹ LW 51:15.

“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” [Jas. 4:6], “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” [I Pet. 5:5], and so forth.⁹⁰

Luther regarded genuine humility as a gift of God. It means that genuine humility is the fruit of true faith. Just as faith always goes with love, so humility can always be seen wherever there is faith. Therefore natural man is utterly incapable of it. In commenting on John 17:17, Luther shows us the attribute of genuine humility:

Note that genuine humility is bound to follow where faith is real. Upon humility follows real patience and love toward our neighbor, so that we despise no one, gladly serve everybody and do good to him, bear whatever happens to us, are not angry and do not avenge ourselves when men show ingratitude, unfaithfulness, spite, mockery, and disgrace. In a word, a truly humble man turns into the sort of person who is false to no one but has an honest, pure, and sincere heart, approved by faith and without hypocrisy before God. For he does not seek his own interests by his works and life; his eyes are not fixed on anything that is his. He is content with Christ and His blessings: these fully satisfy his requirements. He does all his works for nothing, merely to serve others. This must surely be very choice person before both God and men.⁹¹

Therefore Luther admonished whoever wants to live a godly life with the rule of the Apostle [Romans 12:16]: “Associate with the lowly,” namely, the humble life.

Luther preached:

No matter how humiliating and difficult it may be for the rich man to put himself on the same level with any beggar who comes along, for the virgin to identify herself with a harlot, the chaste woman with an adulteress, the wise man with a fool, the strong man with a weakling, the living person with a dead one, the beautiful with an ugly one, the superior with an inferior one.⁹²

Prayer

We can find many places through his preaching where Luther strongly urges

⁹⁰ LW 51:43

⁹¹ WA 28:166.

⁹² LW 51:14-5.

people to pray. According to Luther, prayer is the life of the believer as a response to God's Word. Luther enlarges on the prayer to God in Psalm 119 in these words:

You have promised Christ and His grace. Therefore I indeed come early before the grace is given and set forth, but no matter how unworthy I am, You are truthful, who made the promise. Nor do I come early and cry because You are my debtor, or because I have earned or am worthy of so great a reward. . . , But because I hoped in Your words.⁹³

“All teachers of the Scriptures”, says Luther in *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), “conclude that prayer is nothing else than the lifting up of heart or mind to God.”⁹⁴ Citing the words of Jesus, “the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force”(Matt. 11:12), Luther refers to the power of prayer, “for prayer in my opinion is a constant violent action of the spirit as it is lifted up to God, as a ship is driven upward against the power of the storm.”⁹⁵ Luther believes that there is “no other work that requires more labor and effort and therefore is more efficacious and fruitful than prayer.”⁹⁶

Therefore Luther admonishes us to pray diligently. “If we would sincerely pray the Lord's Prayer and ask for our daily bread, God would surely hear us and send us fine, capable, and learned spiritual leaders.”⁹⁷ God comes to us in our need, only through his Word. In our prayers we express our trust in him and our dependence on him on the basis of this person-to-person relationship which by his free initiative and the mighty creative power of his Word of love he has established for us and in us.⁹⁸

⁹³ Cited in Martin E. Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer*. (Northwestern Publishing House: Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1985), p. 4. See, LW 11:511

⁹⁴ LW 42:25.

⁹⁵ LW 25:460.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ LW 42:55.

⁹⁸ Cited in Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer*. p.12.

Faith is always the correlative of the Word of God. The Word is proclaimed to awaken faith, and prayer is the activity of faith. Prayer is acceptable only when it breathes a firm confidence and trust that it will be heard (no matter how small and unworthy it may be in itself) because of the reliable pledge and promise of God. From this it is apparent how faith and prayer are intimately bound together. Prayer always proceeds on the basis of faith in God's Word of promise. Luther could make the observation that "praying is a rare work, which no one does pray but Christians."⁹⁹

Whenever faith is lacking, prayer becomes a sham and pretense, "mere jabbering and babbling," and not the experience of the heart. God is not concerned about the number of our prayers nor with their length, but about their genuineness, as long as they proceed from the heart in faith.¹⁰⁰ In his exposition of Psalm 90 Luther calls upon his hearers to be guided by Moses, who, "in true faith of the heart, prays and says: 'Thou art our Dwelling Place.'" Such a prayer cannot be spoken from the heart "without faith and without the gift of the Holy Spirit" because faith is essential in true prayer.¹⁰¹

Thus faith and prayer cannot be separated. Faith, based on the Word of God, is a confident trust in God's grace, goodness and forgiveness, and issues in prayers that are heard by God at all times and in all places. "If we conclude our prayer with the word 'Amen' spoken with confidence and strong faith, it is surely sealed and heard."¹⁰² The lack of faith coupled with a false reliance on what such persons have and do by themselves makes their prayers meaningless and empty verbiage.

⁹⁹ LW 21:138.

¹⁰⁰ Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer*, p. 15.

¹⁰¹ LW 13:87-88.

¹⁰² LW 42:76.

Luther identifies God's command and promise as the foundation and starting point for all our prayers. Luther connected the command of prayer with the Second Commandment, "To pray, as the Second Commandment teaches, is to call upon God in every need."¹⁰³ Why does God command us to pray? First, according to Luther's theology of prayer, prayer is not our choice. To think that prayer is a matter of personal choice is an obstacle to prayer. Second, prayer originates and rests in God's initiative. We never take the initiative in approaching God. Prayer is an echo of God's prior speaking to us in grace.¹⁰⁴ Third, God dislikes the excuse that we are not worthy to pray.

There are sensitive consciences who, struck down by the Law, lament that they are too unimportant for God to take notice. Prayer, however, has value and worth not because we pray or are worthy, but because God has commanded it. Prayer entails an "ought."¹⁰⁵ Fourth, prayer in the hands of a Christian becomes a weapon to defend himself against Satan. In *The Sermon on St. Matthias' Day* Luther preached that "Prayer will be needed, . . . that you may have strong courage and a brave heart to withstand the devil."¹⁰⁶ Luther admonished all Christians:

This we must know, that all our safety and protection consist in prayer alone. We are far too weak to cope with the devil and all his might and his forces arrayed against us, trying to trample us under foot. Therefore we must carefully select the weapons with which Christians ought to arm themselves in order to stand against the devil.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ BC p. 421.

¹⁰⁴ Friedemann Hebart, "The Role of the Lord's Prayer in Luther's Theology of Prayer." Lutheran Theological Journal. 18 (May 1983): 7.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.6.

¹⁰⁶ LW 51:128.

¹⁰⁷ BC, p. 424.

The promise of God makes prayer efficacious and meaningful. Never dare we base any of our prayers on our own worthiness or virtue. According to Luther, the possibilities that we can obtain anything from God is depend upon “solely reason of the boundless mercy of God, . . . so that we might know how much more he provides for us and how he is more willing to give than we to take or to seek.”¹⁰⁸ At the same time we dare not doubt the validity of the promise. Our faith must be firm in order that the promise might find fulfillment in our lives. In the exposition of Genesis 49:13, Luther insisted that “you will never call upon God the Father, the Creator, who makes you, feeds you with bread, and frees you from all evils, unless you believe and are certain that you have Him well-disposed toward you.”¹⁰⁹ Such a person “destroys his own prayer and labors in vain.”¹¹⁰ In his exposition of John 16:23, Luther asserts:

The words ‘in my name’ is the most important. It is the foundation on which prayer must rest. These words give to prayer the good quality and the dignity that make it acceptable to God. They also free us from all severe trials and from useless worries regarding our worthiness, worries that hinder our praying and frighten us more than anything else. From these words we gather that we should not be concerned or worried about our own worthiness but should forget about both worthiness and unworthiness and base our prayer on Christ and pray in His name.¹¹¹

God hears our prayer not in our name but Jesus’ name. Only Jesus’ name gives to prayer the good quality and the dignity that is acceptable to God. Christ wants us to pray in His name. Luther reminds us of Jesus’ saying with his interpretation:

My dear friend, it does not matter in what condition you are. If you cannot pray on your own authority and in your name -- as indeed you should not -- then please pray in my name. If you are not worthy and holy enough, let Me be holy and worthy enough for you.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ LW 42:87.

¹⁰⁹ LW 8:275.

¹¹⁰ LW 42:88.

¹¹¹ LW 24:398.

Therefore we can say there is only one prayer which God hears, namely, Jesus' prayer. God never hears our prayer. God hears Jesus' prayer. Only when our prayers are put into Jesus' one, God hears our prayer, not because of our name but because of Jesus' holy name. How precious Jesus' name is!

We can see that Luther was in no sense indulging in hyperbole when he spoke of the incalculable power of prayer. By faith he himself had experienced its marvelous might and beneficial blessing. In the light of God's revealed Word, the Bible, Luther therefore assigned to prayer the high priority and profound significance it has in Christ's church on earth, summing it all up in these weighty words:

Now it is necessary above all to know for certain that we have the Word. For this is the foundation and basis of our assurance that we are hearers and that God is speaking with us. Concerning this no one should be in doubt; for he who does not know it, or doubts, will surely mumble prayers with the vain repetition customary among hypocrites. But he is unable to pray.

But where this foundation, which is the Word of God, has been laid, there prayer is the ultimate help. No, it is not help; it is our power and victory in every trial."¹¹³

¹¹² LW 24:393.

¹¹³ LW 7:369.

Chapter V

Conclusion: On the Value of Luther's Theology of Preaching for Today

The Urgent Demands of Preaching

Paul Scherer has noted the importance of preaching for Christianity as follows:

"Hinduism lives by ritual and social organization, Buddhism by meditation, Confucianism by code of manners; but Christianity lives by the foolishness of preaching."¹

P. T. Forsyth has said that "with its preaching Christianity stands or falls."² Luther's statement is much more radical. He asserted that the world would have perished without the Church and the preaching of the Gospel. Luther substantiated this by referring to the situation in his own country, Germany:

Whatever good Germany has is not the result of her own power, virtue, or wisdom, but has been received from those rejected, despised, and accursed people who are called Christian. . . . We, who teach the Word purely with great zeal and diligence, and seek nothing else than the welfare of Germany, are bearing the bitterest hatred and envy of all classes.³

In that sense, we can say along with Luther, that without the Church and the Gospel the world is on the road to destruction. In his Lectures on Genesis, Luther

¹ Paul Scherer, For We Have This Treasure, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), p. 18.

² P. T. Forsyth, Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind, (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1953), p. 1.

³ Martin Luther, Luther's Works, 55 vols., gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis:Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg /Fortress Press, 1958), 7:62-63. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as LW followed by the volume number and the page reference].

summed it up: "Thus God is with us today, for we have the Word and the Sacraments. He speaks and works through us; He frees many from death and eternal damnation. We [Christians] are the saviors of the world."⁴

In Luther's theology of preaching we can see four reasons why it is necessary to hear the preached Word. First of all the preached Word is the good news to every soul in the bondage of sin and death. Through Jesus Christ God has fulfilled the promise of human salvation. That Gospel must spread through the world. Especially, Law/Gospel-oriented preaching should be continually heard so that people may not become arrogant and think that they can earn their salvation through their good works. Therefore the Word of God must be preached and heard to become fully effective.⁵

Secondly, preaching is necessary to be heard so that people may stop speculating about God and His way of dealing with the human race. No human being is able to know what God has done for salvation through Christ, unless it is revealed through the oral proclamation. Luther said:

For what Christ has said about heaven and the life to come is grasped only by hearing, since it transcends not only all understanding, be it ever so deep, but also all capability of desiring, be it ever so extensive, . . . so the Gospel is received in no other way than by hearing. And for this reason the apostles are called witnesses of Christ.⁶

Luther's point here is clear: preaching makes what God has done for salvation come alive for the hearer. For Luther preaching has a very important role to play in the redemption of the human race. Luther said:

Actually, redemption has been fore-ordained and fulfilled in its own time, but without the Word it would remain in darkness. Human reason cannot say that a

⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

⁵ Heiko A. Oberman, "The Preaching of the Word in the Reformation," Harvard Divinity Bulletin, 25 (October 1960): 7-18.

⁶ LW 29:145.

man who dies is God, is the Redeemer of the world from its sins and who gives eternal life. To be sure God sees this, but not we. Therefore we must have the testimony of the Word to announce this to us.⁷

Thirdly, based on “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” [Romans 10:17], Luther firmly held to the Pauline teaching that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. Since Luther believed that “faith is an acoustical affair,” preaching is the primary duty of the church. In his Lectures on Hebrews (1517 -18), Luther clearly expressed his understanding of faith as an acoustical affair:

God no longer requires the feet or the hands or any other member; He requires only the ears For if you ask a Christian what the work is by which he becomes worthy of the name “Christian,” he will be able to give absolutely no other answer than that it is the hearing of the Word of God, that is, faith. Therefore the ears alone are the organs of a Christian man, for he is justified and declared to be a Christian, not because of the works of any members but because of faith.⁸

In this belief of Luther, any lack of Law/Gospel-oriented preaching jeopardizes the Protestant principle of justification by faith, because preaching is the primary mode by which faith is created. That is why the Reformer strongly upheld preaching; so also the Protestant churches through the centuries have stood on the same foundation.

Fourthly, the necessity of preaching is also associated with Luther’s understanding of a Christian as *simul justus et peccator*. By hearing the Word preached people do not retain automatically it in their hearts forever. Christians, as long as they live on earth, continue to be sinners. They “fall back into love of things and are polluted.”⁹ That means they fall away from the grace of God.¹⁰ They can be cleansed

⁷ LW 28:268-69.

⁸ LW 29:224.

⁹ LW 29:154.

¹⁰ Ibid.

once again from this pollution only when they return to the Word. That is why the Word must be preached and heard continually. Luther said:

For one falls away from the living God when one falls away from His Word, which is alive and gives life to all things, yes, is God Himself, . . . therefore there is only one thing left for us: we must exhort ourselves with all zeal and, so to speak, stir up poor sluggish spirit by means of the Word of God, by meditating on it, reading it, and continually listening to it, as the apostle admonishes here.¹¹

As *simul justus et peccator* a Christian is constantly subjected to a spiritual struggle or *Anfechtung*. Everytime the Word is preached and accepted by Christians, it is a great defeat for Satan, but Satan will never submit easily. That means more trials and temptation for believers. The *Anfechtung* Luther experienced is the very same existential experience of many Christians. The only consolation and shelter in this constant spiritual struggle is the Word.

The four points discussed above, regarding the urgent demands of preaching, show that the aim of preaching is to announce God's decision regarding human salvation, telling human beings what God has freely done through His Son Jesus Christ.¹² The Christian preaching which began with Christ will one day come to an end with Christ's second coming. But until that time, the preaching ministry is an indisputable responsibility of the church.

Preaching of Christocentricity

Law/Gospel-oriented preaching which points to Christ is the most important and characteristic aspect in Luther's theology of preaching. For Luther the central theme of the New Testament is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Since

¹¹ Ibid., p. 153.

¹² Michel Philbert, *Christ's Preaching -- And Ours*, translated by David Lewis (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 13.

Luther was a scriptural theologian, the theme that “*Nihil nisi Christus praedicatur* (Nothing except Christ is preached!)” dominated his theology of preaching.¹³

To Luther, Jesus Christ himself is the content of preaching. Therefore, preaching is distinct from any other form of public speech primarily because of its content. Luther believed that Jesus Christ is present in the preached Word. Making Christ the center of preaching and preaching the center of worship are Luther’s most lasting contribution to the theology of preaching.¹⁴ Luther said:

. . . and cause it to be proclaimed that in doing this one gives to him his greatest and highest service [Gottesdienst], . . . He has especially exalted and extolled this service, both of those who hear and those who preach his Word, . . . preaching means serving God, and that all who are assembled together are

¹³ Fred Meuser, Luther the Preacher. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), p. 16.

¹⁴ H. S. Wilson, The Speaking God: Luther’s Theology of Preaching, (India; The Tranquebra Printing and Publishing House, 1982), p. 119.

Schmelder believes that it is time for us to consider the term “liturgical preaching”, because the preaching and the sacrament are delivered in worship. Without worship both of them never happen. Therefore Schmelder’s opinion which the preaching should be considered in context of liturgy and should become a liturgical preaching is a very important view. According to Schmelder, the definition of liturgical preaching is that preaching which grows out of the liturgy, receives its shape from the liturgy, and derives its agenda from the liturgy. Following these is the summary of liturgical preaching by Schmelder.

- 1) . . . Liturgical preaching knows that worship is first of all *Gottesdienst*, subjective genitive, Divine Service, God serving us in Word and Sacrament.
- 2) . . . Liturgical preaching belongs to the church and is done by those whom God has called through the church to be His pastors. Liturgical preaching is the church’s preaching.
- 3) . . . Liturgical preaching is preaching for the church, that is, it assumes and is rooted in the fact and power of Holy Baptism, and it reaches toward and anticipates the giving and receiving of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist.
- 4) . . . Liturgical preaching is built on the principle of *lex orandi lex credendi*, the law of prayer is the law of belief. . . . Liturgical preaching proclaims what we believe.
- 5) . . . Liturgical preaching does not grow out of the culture but out of the tradition of the church.
- 6) . . . Liturgical preaching recognizes and uses the Scripture as it is used in the church’s worship. How the Scripture is used and by whom such use is determined is absolutely necessary for an understanding of liturgical preaching. . . . Liturgical preaching is the disciplined use of the church’s lectionary precisely because it is Christocentric, focusing on the Incarnation and Resurrection, drawing people into the Eucharist, that the baptized people of God may proclaim the Lord’s death until he come.
- 7) . . . Liturgical preaching delivers us from the tyranny of the here and now. . . . Liturgical preaching proclaims in season out of season, in good times and in bad, under tyranny or democracy, in war or in peace, the unsearchable riches of Christ’s grace, with the rhythm of the calendar rehearsing the whole counsel of God.

See for further study, Schmelder, William J., Liturgical Preaching, Concordia Journal, vol.16, April 1990. pp.121 - 136

assembled in real and high service of God.”¹⁵

For Luther, preaching was an exposition of the Word of God and not a mere oratorical performance.¹⁶ Bard Thompson has suggested that if God’s Word is personal, “It cannot be left on a pedestal to operate *Ex opera operato*. Luther’s interest in communication resides here. To him, communication is part of the personal nature of God’s Word and indeed part of the graciousness of God’s grace.”¹⁷ For Luther, preaching found its significance in our union with Christ and participation of his righteousness. When preaching becomes an end in itself it is nothing more than rhetoric or moral teaching about good works. But when it aims a leading people to Christ and union with him, it continues to be a great jewel of Christianity.¹⁸

Preaching of Distinction between Law and Gospel

We find the greatest value of Luther’s theology of preaching in the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Law/Gospel-oriented preaching is just a way to present Christ to hearers. When the people are led to confront the cross, the distinction between Law and Gospel truly comes alive. However, preaching is not merely instruction about Law and Gospel. Its aim is to present Christ as the Savior, One who has fulfilled the demand of the law on the cross and is willing to share his righteousness with everyone who puts trust in Him.

Luther believed that preaching points to the cross of Christ. It is on the cross more than anywhere else that the wrath and love of God are clearly expressed. It is on

¹⁵ LW 51:260 - 61.

¹⁶ Edwin Charles Dargn, A History of Preaching, 2 vols. (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1905), 1:372.

¹⁷ Bard Thompson, Liturgies of the Western Church, (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 77.

¹⁸ Wilson, The Speaking God, p. 121.

the cross that gravity of sin and the graciousness of God are at once manifested. Rupp explains what happened on the cross as follows:

Here on the cross God's Wrath is united with His Love. In the conception of God there is no room for dualism, but Love overcomes Wrath. God Himself prepares the atonement for sinners. God Himself is the subject of the suffering of the cross. Deeper than this, human thought cannot penetrate. . . .¹⁹

There is no other way one find acceptance in the presence of God than by being clothed with the "alien righteousness" received from Christ. When preaching conveys Christ in this way, it makes Christ contemporary to the listener and as such becomes a meaningful vehicle of God's salvation in the world. Thus Law/Gospel-oriented preaching is a witnesses to Law and Gospel, it witnesses to the cross, and finally it witnesses to Christ who has been crucified.

Thus an understanding of preaching, which proclaims Christ alone, led Luther to his view that Christ is the center of the whole Scripture. Christ, the *Logos*, is the true revelation of God. As Christ is the revelation, the center and heart of the Bible, He should be the sole content of the Bible and preaching. That is why Luther could say very clearly, ". . . the Scripture contains nothing else than Christ . . . and to have the Scripture without recognizing Christ means to have no Scripture. . ." ²⁰ We should noted that the Christocentric interpretation of Luther meant "gospel-centered interpretation, understood in terms of Gospel of justification by faith alone."²¹

In the practice of Law/Gospel-oriented preaching, however, we should not ignore the importance of the sequence of Law and Gospel. When we keep the right

¹⁹ Gordon Rupp, The Righteousness of God, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), p. 157.

²⁰ Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe, 58 vols. (Weimarer Ausgabe), Band, Einleitung von G. Hoffman, (Weimar: Herman Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1895), Vol. 10, I, p. 1. [Hereafter this edition will be cited as WA(Weimar Ausgabe) followed by the volume number and the page reference]

²¹ Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, tr. by Robert C. Schultz, (Fortress Press Philadelphia:1966), p. 79.

order of Law and Gospel, the distinction between Law and Gospel will shine in our preaching. It would be nothing, unless we could strenuously and continuously stick to the proper sequence of Law and Gospel in our preaching as much as Luther did, no matter how we have made some great deal of effort to distinguish between Law and Gospel.

Preaching as God's speaking

Luther's greatest service to preaching is the recovery of the biblical understanding of preaching, namely, as God speaking (*Deus loquens*).²² Preaching is not mere human talk but it is God Himself speaking to individuals through preachers.

Luther said:

The Word of God is meant to be spoken. The majesty of the Word of God is infinite and unspeakable, for which we cannot give enough thanks to God. . . . Hear, brother: God, the creator of heaven and earth, speaks with you through His preachers; . . . Those words of God are not of Plato or Aristotle but God Himself is speaking.²³

Chester Pennington pointed out that many clergy seriously doubt the importance of preaching.²⁴ One of the problems they face is a "professional identity crisis."²⁵ "Nowadays many clergy wonder who they are and what they are supposed to be doing."²⁶ When a preacher loses confidence in his preaching, it will certainly be reflected in his sermons. Instead of God's authoritative yet loving Word the preacher will communicate doubt and lead people into confusion.

²² Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

²³ WA TR 4, 531, no. 4812. "Verbum vocale, Infinita et ineffabilis verbi Dei maiestas est, pro qua numquam satis gratias agere Deo possumus. . . Audi, frater: Deus, creator coeli et terrae, tecum loquitur per praedicaiores suos. . . Illa Dei verba non sunt Platonis, Aristotelis, sed Deus ipse loquitur."

²⁴ Chester Pennington, God has a communication Problem, (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1976), p. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

It is very important that the preacher be certain about what he is called to do. Luther has pointed out that the “call” to the office of preaching, which comes from God Himself through the people, is of great assistance to the preacher. Luther said that when he was confronted with the problem of uncertainty and crisis, his comfort came from his divine-human calling to the office of preaching.

God has opened my mouth and bidden me speak, and he supports me mightily. . . Therefore, I will speak and . . . not keep silent as long as I live, until Christ’s righteousness goes forth as brightness, and saving grace be lighted as a lamp . . . For no matter what I may be personally, still I can boast before God with a good conscience that in this matter I am not seeking my own advantage. . .²⁷

One could not comfort a minister more profoundly even today, than by pointing to the call which ultimately comes from God. When one ignores this call and becomes self-reliant, he surely must suffer identity crises.

It is most important that both the preacher and the congregation should be aware that, in His work of communicating with people, God uses human beings as fellow-workers. God has sought the cooperation of human beings in carrying on His work of salvation which He has completed through His son, Jesus Christ.²⁸ By cooperation we do not mean that people contribute something toward their own salvation.²⁹ Rather, we mean that God has chosen to use people for the task of spreading the Gospel to the whole world. The preacher is God’s agent who brings His message to the people.

That is why Luther in his Sermon on the Gospel of St. John (August 28, 1540) said, “To be sure, I do hear the sermon; however, I won’t ask: “Who is speaking?” The pastor? By no means! You do not hear the pastor. Of course, the voice is his, but the words he employs are really spoken by my God.”³⁰ While it is

²⁷ LW 45:347-48.

²⁸ Gustaf Wingren, The Christian Calling: Luther on Vocation, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen, (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), p. 123.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

true that Luther considered preaching as the minister's activity, it is also true, that it is God's activity.

The greatness of preaching lies in the fact that it is God Himself who is active in preaching and speaks to the people through the preached Word. God is active in preaching only when the preacher remains completely obedient to the Word and seeks nothing but for the people to hear the Word of God. Then only the faithful hearers will be able to say, "Pay attention, we are hearing God's speech."

For right preachers should diligently and faithfully teach only the Word of God and seek only his honor and praise. Likewise, the hearers should say: I do not believe in my pastor, but he tells me of another Lord, whose name is Christ; him he shows to me; I will listen to him, in so far as he leads me to the true Teacher and Master, God's Son. . . .Then things would be right in the church and it will be well governed, and there would be harmony all around.³¹

God's activity and speaking belong together and they cannot be separated from each other. In the beginning God spoke; this act resulted in the creation of the world. In Jesus Christ God spoke again and acted for our salvation. Thereafter, as well as now, God speaks through the preachers. That is how He is active in each in each individual's life. When God speaks through human beings, it does not reduce the significance of his message or Word. In fact it is the proper way by which one can hear God.

Human beings cannot hear God directly as He is in His majesty. When God spoke directly from Mount Sinai through angels, the mountain was wrapped in smoke and it quaked.³² However, God is gracious enough to continue to communicate on the human level, through human beings and through human words. Any person who does not care to hear God in this way, will bring about his own destruction. On the other hand, every believing person will be saved through his message.

³⁰ LW 22:528.

³¹ LW 51:388.

³² LW 22:527.

Asking us to keep in mind of which preaching ought to be in pure love, Luther said, “All right preaching starts from there and remains there.”³³ This love toward preaching could make Luther stand at the Diet of Worms and lift up the light of Reformation, declaring firmly in the following words:

*Ich kan nicht anders, hie stehe ich,
Got helff mir, Amen.*³⁴

This “standing” continued until three days before his death (Feb. 18, 1546). Luther preached his last sermon at Eisleben where he was born. It is clear from the length of this sermon that Luther stood over one hour in the pulpit. It ends with this, “This and much more might be said concerning this Gospel, but I am too weak and we shall let it go at that.”³⁵ Indeed, Luther had continued to preach the Gospel until he could no longer stand. Who can read the sentence “I am too weak. . . .” without touching or trembling?

Luther’s most important conviction about his preaching was that “I did nothing, the Word did everything. . . . I let the Word do its work.”³⁶ This is a most urgent lesson for preachers today. Luther’s insight challenges today’s preachers to care intensely about the proclamation of the Gospel. They will take their task seriously if they believe God is speaking through them. They will see that their preaching is theologically grounded in the Gospel. And they will center our proclamation on Jesus Christ who lives among us and calls us to continue to lead lives of faith.

Let the Word of God alone do its work!

³³ LW 51:266.

³⁴ Cite in De Lamar Jensen, Confrontation at Worms : Martin Luther and the Diet of Worms. (Brigham Young University Press, 1975), p. 56.

³⁵ LW 51:392.

³⁶ LW 51:77-78.

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