

Preach the Word

Vol. 20, No. 5

May/June 2017



To Correctly Handle the Word of Truth *Preach the Clear Word*

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This article is also available at wels.net/blogs/worship-blogs. We welcome your comments or questions.

I was in the largest ballroom I had ever seen. It was in the hotel where a few years earlier, my kids and I had snuck in just to ride the glass elevator to the top floor and look down on that huge inner atrium. But this time the place was full. Literally thousands of scholars packed the ballroom.

Then the keynote speaker began. The man spoke as if he were putting his life on the line. At the very least he was risking his scholarly reputation. He was speaking as the big opening presentation for the plenary session of the AAR/SBL¹ annual meeting held in Atlanta a little over a year ago. It was the IBR² Annual Lecture. He was addressing thousands of people who made their livelihood studying and teaching and writing about the Bible, thousands of people who bought his books.

Here is what was so dangerous. I know I'm over-simplifying it, but it seemed to me that he was proposing that maybe, just maybe, it's time to consider the possibility that perhaps the LORD had something to do with the origin of the Old Testament. Now, he didn't go so far as to say anything about verbal inspiration, but he said it's time to think about at least some influence. Maybe there is some semblance of unity. His point was that with all of the methods of criticism postmodernism had suggested, perhaps Historical Criticism had gone too far in reaction. As he put it, "the postmodern tsunami has so destabilized biblical studies that Historical Criticism has hung around as the accepted standard," to the end that YHWH had become one unknown to us.³ He walked through Psalm 93 and showed that, at the very least, the writer or writers of the Psalm thought that God had something to do with it.



I was sitting in the audience thinking: "I can't believe he thinks that needs to be proven. Isn't that what it says? How on earth could you think anything else when reading it?" During most of his presentation I was saying in my head, "Duh!" And he wasn't going nearly far enough. But then came the questions from the floor, accusing him of basically denying the research that has already been so clearly proven. And I wondered, what's the point of studying Scripture if you really think it has no authority except for the parts to which you choose to give authority?⁴ The confusion and angst caused by such rapping of the text leaves victims. What confidence can someone have of God's promises if you could never be sure which ones he really spoke, if any?

So, as we continue our effort “to correctly handle the word of truth,” this issue we’ll want to avoid causing that damage. We’ll want to be clear about what that Word of Truth is. In other words, we’ll look at the clarity of Scripture. And I may just get up on my soapbox about the word “interpretation.”

As you might guess, this was a key theme discovered in my interview with the *seekers* you’ve heard from in previous issues. These believers who found Lutheran teaching as an answer to prayer were asked what they saw as different. The first answer summed it up pretty well: “It’s wonderful to finally just be coming at it from the basis that the Bible is true.” They spoke about things they had heard and accepted previously just because their pastors had spoken them. Some, they admit, should have been obvious, like: “Just because it is in the Bible doesn’t mean it is true.” But then there were others that didn’t seem quite as brash until you see what was done with them:

- “For the sake of time, let me tell you what I believe this says.”
- “Let me tell you what this says. You might not see it.”
- And then sometimes it was just the little things, like getting used to hearing “The Church of God teaches...” vs. “The Bible teaches...”.

They all agreed about the refreshing shock they received in Bible

“It’s wonderful to finally just be coming at it from the basis that the Bible is true.”



Information Class. At the start of our first lesson, we go through the goals and expectations of the class. The primary goal is to learn in each class what the Bible teaches about each topic. While different people have different views about Scripture, I tell them that we believe the Bible is God’s Word completely, and so our goal is to see what the Bible teaches. Whether you believe it is true or not, that’s between you and the Holy Spirit working in your heart.

Then for the rest of the classes, I keep trying to answer questions with “This is what the Bible says,” and they get used to that. I’m not saying that that’s the only way to present something, but if I could encourage one thing when it comes to how we speak and teach, it would be that. Don’t hide behind WELS. I know it is meant well, but when I hear someone describe the WELS teaching on something, I cringe. I hear over and over in my head the conversation with my seekers about how dangerous that is. Why not just call it the “biblical teaching”? Yes, WELS teaches close communion, but it is because of what God’s Word says, not because President Schroeder said so.

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“This is what the Bible says.”*

Yes, I appreciate all the wonderful blessings God has given our synod in preachers and teachers committed to mining the depths of Scripture and formulating truths built firmly on its truth. I’m not ashamed of WELS. Yet, I have learned how people hear that and have seen the confusion when someone takes confidence in a teaching because it comes from WELS instead of from the Bible. At that point it makes it easy to just brush differing teachings off as a matter of interpretation.⁵

Just to drive home the point that the Word is clear, I do the same thing each time in that first lesson of Bible Information Class. I make sure to go fishing until someone bites and asks a question questioning Scripture. It usually happens when we are learning who God is and I have them read Exodus 34:6-7.⁶ “Wait a second. Is that right? Does that mean he punishes the kids who did nothing wrong?” Or, “But that doesn’t sound fair, punishing children for sins of fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

Then we get a lesson in “interpreting” Scripture. We let God answer the question and turn to Deuteronomy 5 where God restates it and adds “of those who hate me” on the end.⁷ Then I tell them the people of Israel had that same question, and we turn to Ezekiel 18. There they hear God so clearly explain that each individual is responsible in their own personal relationship with God—“the soul that sins is the one that will die.” Sure we get a chance to talk about the responsibility of parents to pass on good things (truth of God’s Word). We talk about the dangers of what our bad examples do to our kids. But the biggest lesson they are taught is that God’s Word is clear even if we don’t see it at first blush.

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We don't have to argue about how different denominations interpret things or resolve to "agree to disagree." We can go instead *ad fontes*—to the source, to Scripture—and look for the answers there. I love how Martin Luther presents it so clearly in his comments on Psalm 37.

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"There is not a plainer book on earth than the Holy Scriptures. It is, in comparison with all other books, what the sun is compared with all other luminaries. The papists are giving us their twaddle about the Scriptures for the sole purpose of leading us away from the Scriptures and raising up themselves as masters over us in order to force us to believe their preaching of dreams. It is an abomination, a disgraceful defamation of Holy Writ and the entire Christian Church, to say that the Holy Scriptures are obscure, that they are not clear enough to be understood by everybody and to enable everybody to teach and prove what he believes."⁸

So simple. And to think the church had almost forgotten. The Word is clear. Preach it! As we celebrate Reformation 500 this year, praise God that he gave us Martin Luther and all the rest. Praise God that he reminded us to correctly handle the word of truth by preaching the clear Word.

Until next time,
Jon

Walther's Law and Gospel

In his classic Law and Gospel, CFW Walther brings home the importance of the confidence we can have in Scripture. This is how he opens his eighth evening lecture:

"If the Holy Scriptures were really so obscure a book that the meaning of all those passages which form the basis of articles of the Christian Creed could not be definitely ascertained, and if, as a result of this, we should have to acknowledge that without some other authority it would be impossible to decide which of two or several interpretations of Scripture-passages is the only correct one, if these conditions, I say, were true, the Scriptures could not be the Word of God. How could a book that leaves us groping in darkness and uncertainty regarding its essential contents serve as a revelation?"



- ¹ American Academy of Religion / Society of Biblical Literature – The AAR is the world's largest association of scholars in the field of religious studies, with over 10,000 members. The SBL boasts 8500 from 80 countries. Each year they host an annual meeting with over 400 meetings/events/presentations for over 10,000 participants. In November of 2015, it was hosted in Atlanta and a member gave me admission to it as my birthday present, knowing I was, as he put it, "a language nerd."
- ² Institute for Biblical Research
- ³ This was his closing slide: "In too much OT study YHWH comes to us as one unknown. Epistemologically, if I am right, this is the wrong way round. We come to him as ones unknown, crawling back from the far country, where we had wasted our substance on riotous but ruinous historicism. But the swinehusks—the 'assured results of modern criticism'—reminded us of that knowledge which arrogance had all but obliterated, and we began the journey home. But when we approach, as we propose to do in this paper, we will find him running to us as one clothed in the garments of the ANE and yet as one well known, whom we had spurned in the name of scholarship or even of faith, but who was still patiently waiting to be sought and found once more. And the ring on our finger and the shoes on our feet assure us that, in celebrating his kingdom and feasting at his table, we shall discover again and again not only who he is but [also] who we ourselves are: as unknown and yet well known, as dying and behold we live." https://prezi.com/j0xj8iw_i4n2/old-testament-origins-and-the-question-of-god
- ⁴ To be fair, there were also Bible-believing scholars in the room. I appreciated one gentlemen on a panel discussing CS Lewis in one of the workshops answering another panelist who wanted to distinguish that the Bible wasn't the Word of God but tells us about the Word, who is Jesus. Very succinctly he said, "Jesus said it is the Word of God. If that's wrong, he is either a lunatic or a liar. And he's not, so you are wrong."

- ⁵ That's when I get on my soapbox talking about how often that word gets used to excuse people saying whatever they want to say regardless of what God's Word says. You're lucky I have a limited word count.
- ⁶ Exodus 34:6-7 – "And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation'" (NIV 1984).

- ⁷ Deuteronomy 5:10 – "I the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me..." (NIV 1984).
- ⁸ Page 59, CFW Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, CPH, 1986.

Preach the Clear Word— an example:

With each issue I am including a snippet of a sermon on an upcoming text that I hope demonstrates some of what we're talking about. As we look forward to the commemoration of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession on June 25th, we have opportunity to celebrate the clarity of God's Word. This is from a sermon on Isaiah 55:10-11, a portion of the First Lesson appointed for that occasion. The theme—if you want to call it that—is, "What Good Are Words?" Part I is "Consider the Source." Here is the first part of Part II: "Consider the Substance." The full text of the sermon can be found at worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-20/.

Consider the Source. And Consider the Substance. Think about *what* he says. In our text he says his Word accomplishes his desires (and you know that his desire is that all be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth) and achieves his purposes. And what is the purpose of his Word? What is this Word all about? John gives the answer in his first letter - **1 John 5:12-13** ¹²**He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.** ¹³**I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.**

What is the substance? Eternal life. Everything in here—from the account of Adam and Eve to John's Revelation—from the history of Israel to the letters to the churches. Every last syllable of this Word is written that you may know that you have eternal life. This is here to give you confidence, which is important because our enemies want anything but that. The devil, the world and our sinful flesh repeat their lies again

and again hoping that you'll forget the source and listen to them. But God's Word keeps going out—and it comes back bearing fruit.

When you can't put out of your mind the hurtful words you spoke in anger, the LORD says that he has long ago put them out of his. When you look at yourself and see the filth and failure, the LORD tells you that he sees you as a beautiful bride, free from spot and blame. When your guilt follows close by your side wherever you go, the LORD has put it in black and white that he has removed that sin as far as the east is from the west.

When you realize the debt your failures owe—you open up His Word and hear him declare it paid. **"It is finished."** **"The blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin."** Sins paid for. That's what God's Word says. So when you consider the source and you come here with all your baggage, you hear God's voice—"I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And the baggage is gone.

And then you step forward and your Savior says, **"Take and eat... Take and drink. This is my blood of the new covenant, given to you for the forgiveness of sins."** And as powerfully as God's Word brought light into being, he brings light and love and hope and confidence into your heart.

What good are words? When they are God's, when you realize the source and hear the substance—they do not return to him empty but accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for which he sent it.