

# Preach the Word

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A new volume welcomes a new writer. Pastor Jonathan Scharf is husband to Janette, father to Andrew, Abi, Hannah, and Malachi, and pastor for the saints at Abiding Grace in Covington, GA. He serves as Circuit Pastor of the Peachtree Circuit, Chairman of the Cottonbelt Conference's Program Committee, Chairman of the South Atlantic District's Commission on Evangelism, a member of the Scripture Committee (lectionary) for the new hymnal project, and an advisor for the Synod's Commission on Congregational Counseling. He has been privileged to preach for the last 13 years for many new Christians at a growing mission congregation in an area where Lutheran preaching is rare.

## To Correctly Handle the Word of Truth *Proclaim the Truth as Truth*

By Jonathan Scharf

It made me physically sick. Now, I like to think I have an exceptionally strong stomach. I'm the kind of guy who is a big believer in the "5-second rule" no matter the setting. I have little regard for expiration dates on food. But this physically turned my stomach. Thinking of the thousands, maybe even millions of people who were being fed rancid "meat," it made me sick. It gave me a new appreciation for the preaching *your* listeners get to hear but saddened me to think how rare that is. It also motivated me to do whatever I could so that we don't lose the gift of the *meat* of gospel preaching.

The context? I was attending the annual Institute for Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso University<sup>1</sup> as a representative of the Scripture Committee of our new hymnal project. The Institute is "an ecumenical conference on liturgical renewal for the church today," but a majority of the preachers and presenters were from the ELCA. The whole purpose of the Institute that year was to explore the lectionary and its formation. Scholars from around the world were sharing and learning. I picked up quite a bit on the history of the lectionary. The campus was beautiful, the chapel stunning, the people friendly, the music powerful and the liturgy so familiar, but the preaching...made me sick. And there was much preaching at a conference designed to demonstrate what they were teaching about liturgy and lectionary.

The liturgy clearly proclaimed law and gospel, sin and grace, as it does no matter no matter who is handling it. The problem came when preachers expounded texts. I heard a sermon that seemed

*Articles in this series are also available at [blogs.wels.net/worship](http://blogs.wels.net/worship) and we welcome your comments or questions.*

to be on the importance of recycling. Another seemed to be on the importance of reading. But the one that brought tears to my eyes as I recalled it later and prayed for the people who are being fed *that* was one whose text was the latter part of John 20. The sermon even quoted the Gospel account of Jesus' crucifixion. I certainly expected to hear the gospel expounded; I figured there was no way to preach on this without telling me that Jesus died to pay for my sins and rose to guarantee me heaven.

Sadly, I was wrong. The message preached on Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection was that we have this story so that we can make sense of the suffering in our lives and the senseless things that happen, so that we can handle the junk and grief of this world, knowing that it will somehow be okay. The message was not that there is divine sense in that "senseless" death, that Jesus

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is God's Son who took our place on the cross. The message was that you can always say, "at least I don't have it that bad" when we think of Christ's suffering.

And what made it worse was the refrain "as the story goes" any time historical fact of scripture was mentioned. It was as if the preacher wanted to leave open the possibility that this is all nothing more than a story. He called it a powerful story, but he saw the power in how it can help us cope rather than in what was accomplished. His exact words were "the death and weakness of Christ are more for us to relate to rather than to redeem."<sup>2</sup>

Had I not heard it, I would assume that this description is exaggeration. But, sad to say, I did hear it. I was there. It was that bad. And the rest of the conference verified it as respected leaders spoke of the veracity of Scripture as something up for debate. One presenter pondered which parts of the Bible people should know and what they should believe: "Should we study Deuteronomic theology where God punishes bad guys and blesses good guys? Should we talk about the contradictions? Or the things we don't agree with anymore?"<sup>3</sup>

In my notes I wrote: "I can't believe she's saying this out loud." She seemed to mock the thought that you'll be saved if you accept this story as a historically accurate description of our sin's payment, implying, "We're so past that."

But I'm not. I pray we never get past that. That's why, when I was asked to write this volume of *Preach the Word*, I chose this topic. It's not that I think I can offer anything new or exciting to the conversation. But if as is often said, "We are always, ever, only one generation away from losing the gospel" from a "famine of hearing the Word of the LORD,"<sup>4</sup> then I want to do what is in my power to help encourage you in the other direction.

*"Ever only one generation away from losing the gospel."*

I pray that this series will do what Paul encouraged his fellow preacher in 2 Timothy 2:14-15: "Keep reminding them of these things.... Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." The things he wanted them reminded of include "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead....this is my gospel."<sup>5</sup>

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Since I'm not going for anything new here, I decided to re-read a classic: Walther's *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*.

I also checked the seminary essay file.<sup>6</sup> When I re-read Walther, I was struck by the regular repetition of the simple truths of God's plan, even in the preface and introduction by the translator. Here's an example:

The sinner's rescue from his wretched condition by God's gospel plan consists in this, that the sinner is told not only that God loves him spite of his sin, but that He so loves the sinner, who is by nature a child of wrath, as to sacrifice His own Son for him and to send the Holy Spirit into his heart to produce in him repentance over his sins and faith in the divine forgiveness of his sins.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the preface something bowled me over. It was signed "W.H.T. Dau. Valparaiso University, Thanksgiving Day, 1928."

"Ever only one generation away from losing the gospel." The man who preserved for us one of the seminal pieces of literature for our gospel preaching did so while president at Valparaiso University. That same campus, 85 short years later, offered advice to preachers not to mention Mother's Day on Mother's Day for fear of alienating all the lesbians in the room who may not think that the only thing to do in life is to be a mother.<sup>8</sup>

There's just something different there. Paul's words in Galatians<sup>9</sup> ring in my ears: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all."

How did it happen? I am convinced that it sprang from a desire to reach people for Christ. But then method was placed above message. Instead of trusting the faithful message, the focus was placed on the people they were trying to reach. One session at the Valparaiso conference described new lectionaries, including things like the so very green "Season of Creation" so that we can try to connect with environmental crises.<sup>10</sup> While we are free to choose



## Looking forward to an upcoming meal

*With each issue I'll try to include a snippet of a sermon on an upcoming text that clearly, simply, and textually declares law and gospel. In this issue let's look forward to Reformation. This is from a sermon on Romans 3:19-28 with the theme: Keeping it Real.*

So God's law says—"shut your mouth for a second—realize you sin and what that means. You owe God—that's it—nothing short of hell. As much as you protest what you deserve, you do deserve it."

I know our society doesn't help us there, telling us we all deserve great things, everybody deserves a trophy. Whether it's the people receiving the handouts thinking they deserve to be taken care of by the government or those who aren't receiving handouts that are upset because those who are have such an "easy life" while "I work so hard." Paul says just be quiet. Look at the mirror of the law—you are not righteous—you deserve nothing. Period.

"But wait a second pastor. I do this and that. I work hard. I deserve..." NO—God says: **"No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law."** Be real and realize what God's Word says about our lives—it's SIN. Look at any human in the spotlight of the law and you see SIN—disgusting SIN. In the rapist...SIN. In the mass murderer...SIN. In the adulterer...SIN. In the boss ...SIN. In the hard working employee...SIN. In the overburdened mom...SIN. In the philanthropist...SIN. In the theater shooter and in the volunteer worker...SIN. In this preacher...SIN. And in every person sitting in the congregation...SIN.

So tell your pride to stop it. Tell your hurt and offended ego to just be quiet. That's what the law does. It tells you to stop making excuses. It shows you all your righteousness is worthless. So be real. Realize you're sunk. Are you listening,

or did you tune me out a few minutes ago because you didn't like what you were hearing? Either way—listen now—you need to hear what comes next. You need to **"Keep it real!"**

This is verse 21. **"But..."** Ahh what a glorious word! BUT. Paul just beat us up and shut us down. He just put us in our place of fear and wrath and condemnation. But then he says **"BUT."** For us who had no solution—because no one can be righteous, no matter how many laws they keep—for us condemned because we've messed up and we know it—if we're real with ourselves—to us he says **"BUT"**.

**But now a righteousness from God, apart from law** (not based on our keeping the law, a righteousness that doesn't depend on how good we've been, that righteousness...) **has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.** (This righteousness is what God's Word always has been and always will be about. It's not a bunch of rules for us to keep to get right with God; it's the story of how God has made us right with God.) Verse 22: **This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.** (All of us are sinners. And hear what he just said: all of us are justified—declared not guilty).<sup>25</sup> **God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.**

Do you see who Jesus is? He is not the one sent to show us how to live a good life. He is not the one who came to expand our minds. God presented him as a sacrifice—nothing less—the actual sacrifice that actually pays for our failures of the law. His perfect life and his innocent death atone us. They make us "at one" with God. Really!

which sections of Scripture to read in worship, the discussion of new lectionaries seemed to neglect key truths that must be proclaimed and to focus instead on what groups of people might want to hear.

In an essay for a 2002 Minnesota District Pastor's Conference, Thomas Trapp took up this topic, reminding us that content is key to preaching.

"Unless spiritual knowledge and the Spirit himself speak through the preachers... the final result will be that everyone preaches his own whims, and instead of the gospel and its exposition, we shall again have sermons on blue ducks" [Martin Luther]. More and more people in our culture are sick of "blue duck" sermons. Many are looking for solid, absolute truth. By God's grace, we have it and are called to preach it.

We do not preach it, of course, because it may be popular; we preach it because it is God's Word, popular or not."<sup>11</sup>

That was driven home to me again at the opening worship for our 2016 WELS International Youth Rally.<sup>12</sup> Even though he was speaking to 2,500 youth and their leaders, the preacher didn't feel a need to talk about the fact that children are the future. He didn't need to tout the power of positive thinking or squeeze in our responsibility to the earth. In clear and simple language, the preacher never hesitated to restate the simple truths of Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Those young people received a solid meal of soul-nourishing meat.

The previous volume of *Preach the Word* studied the topic of reaching Millennials with our preaching. We were constantly encouraged to proclaim law and gospel, sin and grace. In our

efforts to reach people who may think differently, praise God that we need not wonder about the message that will reach them.

*“Never once were we encouraged to do anything but proclaim law and gospel, sin and grace.”*

Volume 20 of *Preach the Word* will remind us again of the only effective tool—God’s powerful Word with its two teachings, law and gospel. We’ll hear from some interviews of Christians who have been searching for preaching of the truth and hear their stories of how rare it is, encouraging us to keep up this law and gospel stuff. And we’ll have some examples of preaching the simple truth in timely ways. I pray that God bless us through our journey together this year.



## Flashback to Volume 5.1 from 2001, by John Koelpin

The Scriptures offer the preacher an alternative to the influential style. In his Word, God describes preaching as “proclamation.” The word is κηρύσσω in the New Testament. Thayer, in his *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, defines κηρύσσω in this way, “to proclaim after the manner of a herald; always with a suggestion of formality, gravity, and an authority which must be listened to and obeyed.” The herald wasn’t in the business of making a pitch to his audience. He didn’t offer up his message for argument or persuasion....

Proclamation is the style God has handed to us. Preachers, then, are not salesmen for the latest “get to heaven quick” scheme, but heralds of the truths which God has laid down in his Word. These truths, whether law or gospel, take hold in the heart of the hearer by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by the power of the presentation.

- <sup>1</sup> April 28-30, 2014
- <sup>2</sup> From notes on the opening sermon
- <sup>3</sup> From notes on the presentation “Mystery Manifest; Christ in the Lectionary”
- <sup>4</sup> Amos 8:11-12
- <sup>5</sup> 2 Timothy 2:8
- <sup>6</sup> [wls.wels.net/essay](http://wls.wels.net/essay). Both of these are time well spent and great ways to reinforce commitment to correctly handle the word of truth.
- <sup>7</sup> Preface and Introduction, p. XX
- <sup>8</sup> From notes on the presentation “Preaching the Imagery of Liturgical Time”: “Preachers use stories and images not to stuff their hearer’s heads with facts, slogans, and memorized verses, but to surround the assembly with mysteries that give faith—all to be dissected and put back together in new forms to fit with our lives.”
- <sup>9</sup> Galatians 1:6-7a
- <sup>10</sup> “Josiah, the Lectionary, and the Dangers of Forgetting Our Story”
- <sup>11</sup> *Preaching God’s Word to the 21st Century Worshiper*, p. 9; WLS essay file.
- <sup>12</sup> June 28-July 1, 2016 in Fort Collins, CO. The preacher was John Boggs.