

To Correctly Handle the Word of Truth *Preach Specific Law as Law*

By Jonathan Scharf

You are preachers. So let me ask you: What's the worst reaction to a sermon you've experienced? Is it the councilman standing in the back where you can see the steam rising off his bald head as you approach afterward? Or maybe it was when he just left the building altogether? Or was it worse when you saw the woman breaking down in tears over on the side? Or when the prospect was offended by what you said? While I get it, none of those are fun—I'd throw another option into the mix...the yawn.

Jesus himself called the members of the church at Laodicea on the carpet for that one: "These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So because you are luke-warm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."¹

I wish you were either one or the other. Can you relate? God's Word produces a reaction. We know that. We can hum some choir piece that will instantly put the words of Isaiah 55 swirling in our heads. "As the snow falls from heaven...this is my Word."² We know his Word produces a reaction, "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."³ So when you see the yawn, when you sense apathy, aaarrrrghhh.⁴ What did I do to prevent the Word from being heard? Why aren't you people listening to me?!

That's a good question. In our most recent circuit meeting, we had a roundtable discussion on a couple of the topics I'll be tackling in this volume of PTW. I asked the men gathered around the table what sermons have been most powerful for them as listeners, the most impactful. Then I asked them why. What made them connect to you?

Across the board, the first thing they all mentioned was what I had come up with as my own answer for the question: Specific law. I'll let their words speak:

- "The more stinging the law, the more specific, the more my attention is focused. In fact, if the law isn't specific, sadly, you probably don't have my attention."
- "When the preacher finds the way to cut through the idea that 'that's for those people, not me.'"
- "When there is a clear malady I can relate to."
- "If I don't hear that specific law that pushes me into the corner and tells me this is what you've done—I feel that they haven't put the time in ...to preach my soul into the depths of hell so you could bring me up again. You didn't put the time in to let Jesus shine in this sermon. That's why I came to be fed."

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And then they came right back around to talking about how we have to hold ourselves to that same standard too. The old question was revisited: "What's the difference between a good sermon and a great sermon?" The answer: "About 5 hours."

I think we can all agree with the goal we talked about in the last issue of this newsletter. Our goal in every sermon is "That they would see Jesus."⁵ And as Lutherans, I think we can also agree with the truth that this happens when we first realize our need for him. Helping people see Jesus happens when we come to grips with our own need to see him. As God so often demonstrates

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in his Word, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”⁶ “It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick.”⁷ We’re talking about the God who, as Mary said, “brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.”⁸

Walther hit that with his sixth thesis: “In the second place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is not preached in its full sternness and the Gospel not in its full sweetness.”⁹ Your goal is to let them see Jesus, and that happens when the law does its work first, not a general statement that “sin is bad,” but the reality of what it does.

The law is not gospel. It is not a solution, something that makes your life better if you just do it right. The damage of that kind of preaching came to life for me in my discussion with my panel of former seekers that I introduced in the last issue. I’ll let them make this point:

- “I now understand why we are to be ‘convicted of our sins,’ not as reason to get me to do something like come to the altar call, where I’d find no relief.”
- “I was afraid of hell. I was afraid of God, so I would do what they told me to do. Even communion was used as a weapon, ‘You’d better be good so you don’t eat and drink damnation.’”
- “I have never felt pressured to perform here, but most of my life I had felt pressured. Looking back, it felt a little like a time-share presentation, like they were trying to pressure me into doing something. I remember one sermon on the cost benefit analysis of tithing. And I listened to that and thanked the preacher for it! But here the emphasis isn’t on what you need to do today as much as just teaching how to apply the Word and live it daily.”
- “I don’t look at the law anymore and wait for God to pat me on the back or the preacher to point out what good I did, or someone else did. That’s not what it is for.”

The job we have is not to brush over the law with soft broad strokes but to pierce the heart.

No, the law is preparatory. And that doesn’t soften it. You know that. By God’s grace you’ve experienced that. The gospel is the sweetest and predominates when I’ve first been stung by the law, stung deeply and specifically. The job we have is not to brush over the law with soft broad strokes but to pierce the heart. Sometimes I find that hard to do. It’s not that there’s a text that doesn’t point out my failures or my inherent weakness and ineptitude. I haven’t found that yet. It’s hard to do when I start to fear that my hearers may take it too personally, when I fear some of the reactions I mentioned in the first paragraph.

I remember early on in my ministry writing and re-writing a specific law paragraph in a sermon because it hit too close to home. It was one of those texts that so directly addressed something going on in the congregation. And I didn’t want to make people mad. I didn’t want them to think I had gone and found that text just because I wanted to yell at them about this.

But then I realized: this is God’s Word, and his law is specific. I just had to realize that God’s Word would work like he promised. That kind of specific law either produces anger or tears or both.

Permit a few more insights from my panel of seekers discussing the joy of hearing law and gospel properly divided (or at least hearing someone trying for it). You’ll notice they started talking about the liturgy as well as the preaching, another place they had come to appreciate the clear proclamation of law and its gospel answer so consistently:

- “I’m so grateful that I can sit in church and admit that I am a sinner. It’s so different from what I used to do, pretending holiness—constantly afraid that someone would see through the front I was putting on.”
- “A good service is not works, but worship.”
- “Even without raising hands (this is from a former Pentecostal) God is there, in the emphasis of the service, in his Word. God is there.”
- And then my favorite: “Like you always say, it’s ‘because he loves us’. God’s not waiting to smack you upside the head. He stings us with his law because he loves us.”

Sounds great, doesn’t it? But how do we get there? I can’t pretend that I’ve got all the answers for that. The comments my panel made about the preaching here probably make it sound better than it is. Please understand, it just makes clear how bad their previous experiences were that my attempts at properly dividing law and gospel were so astounding in comparison. But in an effort to help us all together strive for clear law preaching to





prepare hearts for the gospel, consider a checklist. This is based on one that Pastor Daron Lindemann shared with me that he uses as he prepares his sermons.¹⁰ The goal is to ensure that our sermons preach law messages that are specific, not generic, explicit, not vague. This was developed due to the realization that it is too easy to slip to the latter, even for us WELS preachers.

- Explicit law and gospel are first and foremost textual. They are not clichés and platitudes. They seek to proclaim the beautiful, scriptural, true commands or promises that are first and foremost found in the text and supported grammatically.
- Explicit law and gospel reflect not just the grammar, but the color, flavor, and tone of the text. Inspirational? Hard-hitting? Narrative? Meditational? Go there.
- Explicit law doesn't make generalizations ("we all do this") or ask questions like "Have you cheated on your taxes?" which statistically allow some people to say that they have not sinned in this way and thus promotes Pharisaism. Explicit law is not afraid to use the second person instead of the first person when preaching the law.
- Explicit law does not let anyone escape because it funnels to the first commandment and the heart.
- Explicit law uses the third use of the law in its applications and is careful, again, to remain faithful to the text.
- Explicit law doesn't feel the need to preach the entire story of the fall and all its consequences in every sermon. It dives deep and enters the narrow rather than wading in the familiar, safe

shallows. We have an entire church year and lectionary. Let's use each Sunday for what it's worth.

- Explicit law is not merely saying "you're going to hell for doing that." Hell is not the *primary* punishment for sin. The punishment for sin is a broken relationship with God, which is manifested eternally in hell.
- Explicit law and gospel often, but not always, cause a listener to say, "I felt like you were talking to me."
- Explicit law and gospel often, but not always, develop a sermon theme or at least main points where a listener can look at the theme or main points and say, "Based on that, I think _____ is the sermon text." And they'd be right.
- Explicit law and gospel are specific and focused, rather than general and broad. They would find it difficult to be used in another sermon.
- Explicit law is not afraid to use the third use of the law and doesn't overreact to the Evangelicals. It gives the Christian a hook from the text for living the gospel.

Using this checklist may not guarantee you that you never see the yawn. But it is my prayer that they encourage you to preach the stinging law that God's Word presents, that you might see yourselves as "wretched, poor, blind and naked," so that you may buy from him "gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see." Then, to him who overcomes he gives the right to sit with him on his throne just as he overcame and sat down with the Father on his throne.

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."¹¹

Walther's Law & Gospel

"However, let the Law once force its way into a person's heart, and that heart will strain with all its force against God. The person will become furious at God for asking such impossible things of him" (14).

Four Branches

As you constantly hone your preaching craft, take advantage of the new resource put out by the Seminary's "Grow in Grace." Beginning September, 2016, the "Four Branches" monthly newsletter has been emailed to all pastors in our ministerium. Each issue features articles on Biblical, Historical, Systematic, and Practical Theology. You can access the previous issues and articles at wls.wels.net/grow-in-grace/the-four-branches-review.



Law as law—an example:

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 ahead to Ash Wednesday, a day when specific and explicit law should not be hard to preach. This is a sermon on Genesis 3:19¹² with the theme: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. In this section of the sermon, the law focuses more on the condition and result of sin than the activity of it.

God had said to the serpent, **"You will crawl on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life,"** and then he tells Adam— "You, man, are dust" and humanity has been running from him who holds the power of death ever since, as he slithers along ready to consume us. And we just are not fast enough.

Adam knew this death, the death of his perfect trust in God, comfort with God, the death of his perfect relationship with his wife. He would hold death in his arms as his son died at the hand of his brother. Driven from the garden, he would no longer be able to eat from the tree of life and live forever.

And we are right there too, aren't we? We recall what sin has done to our lives, where the thorns and thistles bring sweat to our brows, where chaos and confusion reign in our world, where our bodies slowly die through sickness and disease, aging and pain. Sin has driven us from relationships and good habits, driven us to drink or to lie or to look for value or pleasure in the wrong places. Sin has driven us from loving, trusting connections, and not just with others, but with our eternal God. Sin has driven us from the tree of life in the middle of that Garden. Driven from the Garden, but like Adam, not driven to despair.

How do I know? Look at the very next verse of Genesis 3. Right after God told Adam, **"You are dust, and to dust you will return,"** Moses records what happened next. Verse 20: **"Adam named his wife Eve."** Life. That's what her name means. Life. God had just told Adam—Remember death. And he names her "Life."

The full sermon is at worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-20.

- ¹ Revelation 3:14-16
- ² "This is My Word," Pepper Choplin
- ³ 1 Corinthians 1:23
- ⁴ I think that's how you spell frustration, right?
- ⁵ Thesis XXV, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. "In the twenty-first place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the Gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching."
- ⁶ Luke 5:4
- ⁷ Matthew 9:12
- ⁸ Luke 1:52
- ⁹ *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*.
- ¹⁰ Give Pastor Lindemann credit for anything useful here. I'll take the blame for the rest as I modified it a bit.
- ¹¹ From Jesus' letter to the angel of the church in Laodicea, Revelation 3:14-22.
- ¹² Many thanks to Pastor Michael Kober for his conference sermon on this text that gave food for thought as I prepared this sermon.

June 2017 Worship Conferences

Here's a sampling of the 60 presentations available in Kenosha, WI and Irvine, CA. The first two are directly related to preaching.

- *21st Century Preaching to Millennials and Other Generations Too*
James Hein
- *Communicating Christ in the 21st Century*
Mark Paustian
- *Different Styles of Psalmody for the New Hymnal*
Dan Witte and Grace Hennig
- *Strategic Planning and Worship Enrichment*
Joel Gawrisch
- *Striving for Balance in Worship*
Jon Micheel
- *Worship and Outreach at Mount Horeb, WI*
Jonathan Bauer
- *Worship and Outreach at Sharpsburg, GA*
Jonathan Schroeder

Details are at wels.net/national-worship-conference.