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Themes in Current Homiletical Theory

Law-Gospel Model Revisited

By Jacob Haag

Law-gospel distinctions are widely recognized as a hallmark of Lutheranism. In its American confessional form, C. F. W. Walther has profoundly shaped this model through his lectures to seminary students in the nineteenth century. They remain widely read today, and in many ways Walther’s approach has influenced the approach of many Lutheran preachers today. Walther strongly emphasizes the law’s condemning role that exposes sin, leads people to despair of their self-righteousness, and leads them to see their need for Christ. He strongly emphasizes the gospel’s comforting role that announces the forgiveness of sins, proclaims Christ’s righteousness, and leads them to their Savior. This classic Lutheran law-gospel approach is summed up as follows:

Accordingly, we may not preach the Gospel, but must preach the Law to secure sinners. We must preach them into hell before we can preach them into heaven. By our preaching our hearers must be brought to the point of death before they can be restored to life by the Gospel. They must be made to realize that they are sick unto death before they can be restored to health by the Gospel. First their own righteousness must be laid bare to them, so that they may see of what filthy rags it consists, and then, by the preaching of the Gospel, they are to be robed in the garment of the righteousness of Christ. . . . They must first be reduced to nothing by the Law in order that they may be made to be something, to the praise of the glory of God, by the Gospel.¹

This is the Lutheran model: first the law, then the gospel. Preach the law to expose sin. Preach the gospel to announce forgiveness. But that begs the question: for what goal?

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Law-gospel preaching has been so engrained in Lutheranism that often many do not even stop to ask that question. We expect the preacher to proclaim law and gospel because that is what we are accustomed to. And it is little wonder why so many Lutheran sermons, regardless of the unique text itself, are two-part sermons, where the first part exposes sin and the second part announces forgiveness. Preachers first ask the question of specific law, “How have my people sinned against this text?” Then they ask the question of specific gospel, “How can I announce forgiveness to my people?” This, then, is what application is. After all, Walther said that since the fall into sin, the law “has but a single function, viz., to lead men to the knowledge of their sin,” before he famously said, “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.”² But that begs the question: then what?

The Need for a Lutheran Philosophy of Preaching

This is what a philosophy of preaching answers. A philosophy speaks to “why we do what we do the way we do it.” In advanced studies of any discipline (especially at the doctoral level), students need to wrestle with their discipline’s philosophy. For example, there are philosophies of worship, education, and ministry, all of which explain why we take the approach we do and

what we want our approach to accomplish. Lutherans have done a good job in articulating a philosophy of worship.³ I have found Lutherans have not done as good a job in articulating a philosophy of preaching. Certainly, we speak of the importance of law-gospel preaching within the liturgy. But many recent homiletical texts outside of Lutheran circles have chapters or sections on an explicit philosophy of preaching.⁴ Some entire books are devoted to a philosophy or theology of preaching.⁵ When I surveyed the Lutheran scene, there seemed to be little explicit treatment on a philosophy/theology of preaching in books, though there have been some advancements in journal articles.⁶

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Now imagine what happens when we have no explicit philosophy of preaching—in other words, when we have not explicitly stated why we preach law and gospel and what we intend law and gospel to accomplish. Preaching becomes notoriously subjective and based on assumptions, both on the part of the preacher and the hearer. One preacher feels it is his duty to simply identify the specific sin and specific gospel; another preacher feels it is his duty to also identify ways the people can apply this text in their lives. One hearer leaves comforted that her sins are forgiven; another hearer leaves clueless on what to do on Monday morning. If a philosophy of preaching is at best assumed and at worst forgotten, it is little wonder that someone tells a pastor his sermon was great, while another tells him it was boring.

In current homiletical theory, it is incumbent on Lutheran homileticians to get up to speed on what is a distinctively Lutheran philosophy of preaching. Therefore, to make the implicit explicit, my philosophy of Lutheran homiletics is this: *God's called representative heralds God's message of law and gospel that is specific to the exposition of the text, the lives of the hearers, and the*



place in the church year, in order to indict them of their idolatrous sin, comfort them with Christ's unconditional forgiveness, and urge them to live the Christian life more fully under the cross. Let's break this down.

We are preaching to people, not merely presenting doctrine.

First, the emphasis begins with God. The message is his inspired Word, and he is the one who calls preachers through the church to herald that faithfully, so that preachers can honestly say they are "Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Cor 5:20, NIV). Next, law-gospel specificity is hierarchical: first the text, then the hearers, finally the church year. Law-gospel cannot simply be this oversimplified construct that mechanistically follows Walther by rearranging or re-emphasizing the text,⁷ no matter how convenient that may be for Lutheran preachers. Law-gospel proclamation needs to originate from a careful exegesis of the text, and the contours of that specific text need to be reflected in the contours of that specific sermon. Law-gospel proclamation also needs to be specific to the lives of the hearers, since we are preaching to people, not merely presenting doctrine. Law-gospel proclamation finally considers its place in the church year. Lutherans have often used the church year beneficially, but they cannot simply preach the lectionary for the sake of the lectionary.⁸

The key is that this philosophy of preaching includes three purposes or end goals. Law-gospel preaching is not only about indicting the hearers of their sin and comforting them with Christ's forgiveness. Law-gospel preaching also needs to explore ramifications for living the Christian life more fully under the cross.

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Objections to a Wholistic Lutheran Philosophy of Preaching

I call this philosophy of preaching wholistic because it emphasizes wholistic application that includes sanctification. The stereotype that Lutheran preaching points out sin, announces forgiveness, and then quickly says "Amen!" is a stereotype, but all stereotypes come from somewhere. I am not contending every Lutheran sermon falls into this category, but I am contending that it is a danger for those of us whom Walther has influenced. Law-gospel preaching has a purpose, and the end goal is not merely to announce sin and grace for the sake of doing so.

One objection to this is that the law as mirror is primary. So the Lutheran thinking goes that when Paul says, "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way

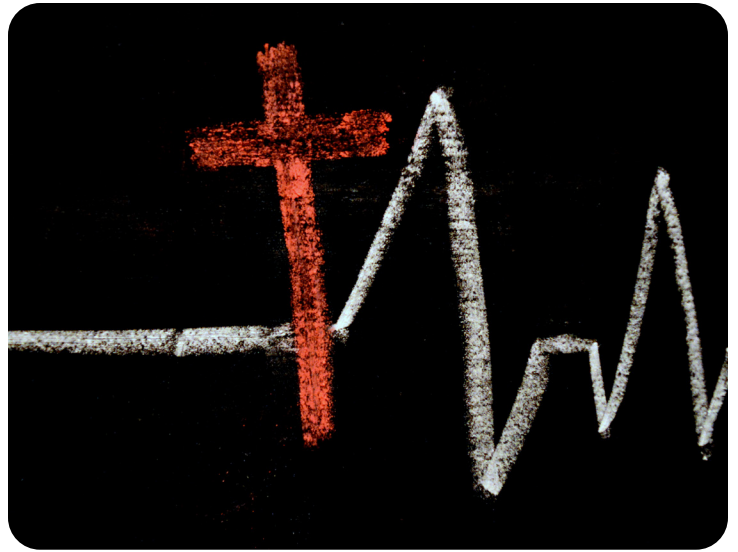
Paul's solution was not to simply give up preaching sanctification but to motivate through the gospel, clear up confusions, and then fearlessly preach sanctification.

of love" (Eph 5:1-2), the primary application ought to be that the hearers have *not* followed God's example, have *not* lived as God's dearly loved children, and have *not* walked in the way of love. They are forgiven of this, sure, but they leave church with little guidance or inspiration to actually do something. But consider authorial intent. One would wonder why Paul continues by motivating with the gospel, "just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God," when really he is trying to expose sin by the law. One would wonder why he addresses his audience in such benevolent terms, "dearly loved children," when he has already demonstrated how to address his audience in the scathing terms of the law (2:1-3). Those factors show that preachers ought to preach the law in this text the way it was intended, as a guide to sanctified living. What Walther has emphasized, therefore, is not wrong, but it is often incomplete and misleading.⁹

If epistles were meant to be read aloud to congregations, they essentially functioned sermonically.

A related objection is that even if the law is preached as a guide, the law will still accuse the hearers of sin, and so it is impossible to preach sanctification, strictly speaking.¹⁰ So the Lutheran thinking goes that when a preacher encourages people to live according to Ephesians 5:1-2, some will still think of how they have not. Now all communication can be misunderstood. Above I focused on how the misunderstanding happens at the preacher's level; here the misunderstanding happens at the congregation's level. But they are related. If the preacher is preaching in line with authorial intent—addressing them as redeemed children of God, benevolently motivating them with the gospel, speaking to their new man as their true identity who wants to do God's will—that can help the congregation too. But what if they still feel accused, even after that? Presumably this happened with Paul himself, and we can learn from how he preached sanctification. His solution was not to simply give up preaching sanctification, lest people misunderstand. His solution was to motivate through the gospel, clear up confusions as they arise, and then fearlessly preach sanctification regularly and explicitly. So the solution is more evangelical encouragement, not less.

A final objection is that sanctification preaching could go against textual emphasis. Some texts emphasize appropriation—truths to believe, not actions to do. So the Lutheran thinking goes that, in order to be faithful to the text, the preacher should stick with



law-gospel preaching that exposes sin and announces forgiveness, and leave it at that. On days like Christmas and Easter, do not the texts simply announce God's saving acts, and preachers should not feel compelled to urge people to be like the shepherds or the women and spread the gospel? There are always dangers of forced applications, but the inconsistency of this approach is that we do not follow it when preaching on texts that are all law. To be faithful to the text, does this mean we do not consider the gospel? No, we find the gospel in the broader context. This should also hold true with sanctification, and this is confirmed by examining NT epistolary rhetoric. If epistles were meant to be *read aloud* to congregations (Col 4:16, 1 Thess 5:27), they essentially functioned sermonically, and we can learn from how NT authors shaped their messages theologically. Romans is a clear example of law-gospel preaching that indicts sin and announces forgiveness. But why did Paul structure Romans the way he did? He did not stop at chapter 11 for a reason. He continued on to the paraenetic chapters 12–14 because law-gospel proclamation was not meant simply for the Romans to believe something. That was a necessary foundation, but what Paul was really after was for the Romans to do something. Paul does not assume the Romans will automatically put law-gospel proclamation into practice, simply if they hear and believe it. Nor should we. We need to encourage our hearers to see how it will actually impact their actions. The basics of NT epistolary rhetoric is that the indicative is the foundation and empowerment for the imperative. If we are to model that in our preaching, we will always lead our congregations to see how God's acts for us are the foundation and empowerment for our acts for God. Here is a selection from my Christmas Eve sermon on Luke 2 from 2021:

God has sent a Savior into our world, a Savior for you and for me, to give us peace. And that vertical peace between

The indicative is the foundation and empowerment for the imperative.

God and us now inspires horizontal peace between us and others. If the epic cosmic conflict between God and us is now pacified, then suddenly all the conflicts between us and others seem rather small. Now this church can be a place where people don't constantly fight about masks and COVID. Now this church can be a place where life-long white Christians welcome people of different races, cultures, and backgrounds to sit next to them. Now this church can be a place where all of us first listen to each other before trying to express our opinions. That's how the surprising peace with God gives us surprising peace with others.

Lutheran preaching cannot simply be reduced down *in toto* to the law-gospel model; it is much more than that.¹¹ In current homiletical scholarship, Lutheranism is not exactly known for its robust sanctification preaching. That need not be the case. By no means does the law-gospel model need to be rejected. It needs to be divested of its oversimplistic caricatures, embraced for all its beautiful richness, and preached with all its compelling appeal, so that God's people are indicted of their idolatrous sin, comforted with Christ's unconditional forgiveness, and urged to live their Christian lives more fully under the cross. All three purposes are vital.

Indicative-Imperative Structure

The indicative-imperative structure is a common way of analyzing epistles. Simply put, they declare, "Here's who you are in Christ." Then they encourage, "Act according to who you are in Christ." "Therefore" ties the two together. The indicative and imperative do not merge together, as if sanctification causes justification, but they are inseparably connected. If it's a text that's imperatives, preachers need to root the imperative to the corresponding indicative. If it's a text that's indicatives, preachers need to show how the indicative will naturally flow to the corresponding imperative.

¹ C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (CPH, 1986), 118.

² Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 236, 403.

³ See Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, tr. M. H. Bertram (CPH, 1968); Timothy Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 2nd ed. (CPH, 2009).

⁴ See Part 3, "A Theology of Christ-Centered Messages" in Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), and chap. 3, "Paul's Theology of Preaching" in Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

⁵ See A. Duane Litfin, *Paul's Theology of Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); Jonathan I. Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 42 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017).

⁶ See Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, *Preach the Gospel* (NPH, 1982); Paul Grime and Dean Nadasdy, eds., *Liturgical Preaching* (CPH, 2001); Mark W. Birkholz, Jacob Corzine, and Jonathan Mumme, eds., *Feasting in a Famine of the Word* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016); Edward Grimenstein, *A Lutheran Primer for Preaching* (CPH, 2015); Richard Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (CPH, 1959). The first half of Grimenstein's book is an exception, but it is not very comprehensive, and there is little to no treatment of sanctification preaching within a law-gospel model. The closest I could find to a Lutheran philosophy of preaching is David Schmitt, "The Tapestry of Preaching," *Concordia Journal* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011), 107–129. See also Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*, rev. ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001); Richard Lischer, "Cross and Craft: Two Elements of a Lutheran Homiletic," *Concordia Journal*

25, no. 1 (January 1999), 4–13; Richard Warneck, "Notes on Preaching Sanctification," *Concordia Journal* 25, no. 1 (January 1999), 56–64. Regardless, there is a great need for a current, comprehensive confessional Lutheran homiletical textbook.

⁷ For example, gospel application must always follow law application, or a sermon's last sentence must always declare the gospel and not exhort sanctification.

⁸ In current homiletics, much of the criticism against lectionary preaching (especially by those who favor *lectio continua*) is that lectionary preaching is atomistic in that the church year determines the meaning and focus of the text, not the text itself. Before we rush to defend lectionary preaching, we need to admit this can be a danger.

⁹ See footnote 2 above. Walther does say the law as mirror is the *only* (not merely primary) function after the fall, which implies that preaching should only use the law in that sense. Even the traditional view is prone to misunderstanding, because "primary" is not explicitly defined. It is primary in a logical sense within the order of salvation, such that sins need to be revealed if gospel proclamation is to mean anything at all. If primary is meant in terms of rank, it is unfortunate (and not surprising) that preaching on the third use of the law is denigrated or neglected in Lutheranism. See footnote 10.]

¹⁰ Certain voices, particularly in the LCMS, have minimized or essentially denied the third use of the law as a function unto itself. They emphasize *lex semper accusat* to mean the law only accuses. Preaching the third use then becomes the other uses applied to Christians, or preaching sanctification simply becomes a return to justification and confession/absolution. See Timothy J. Wengert, *A Formula for Parish Practice*, *Lutheran Quarterly Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 98; Louis A. Smith, "A Third Use Is the First and Second Use," *Lutheran Forum* 37, no. 3 (2003): 65–67; Walter Bartling's position in Scott R. Murray, *Law, Life, and the Living God* (CPH, 2002), 109–11.

¹¹ Thanks to Tim Bourman for this insight.

