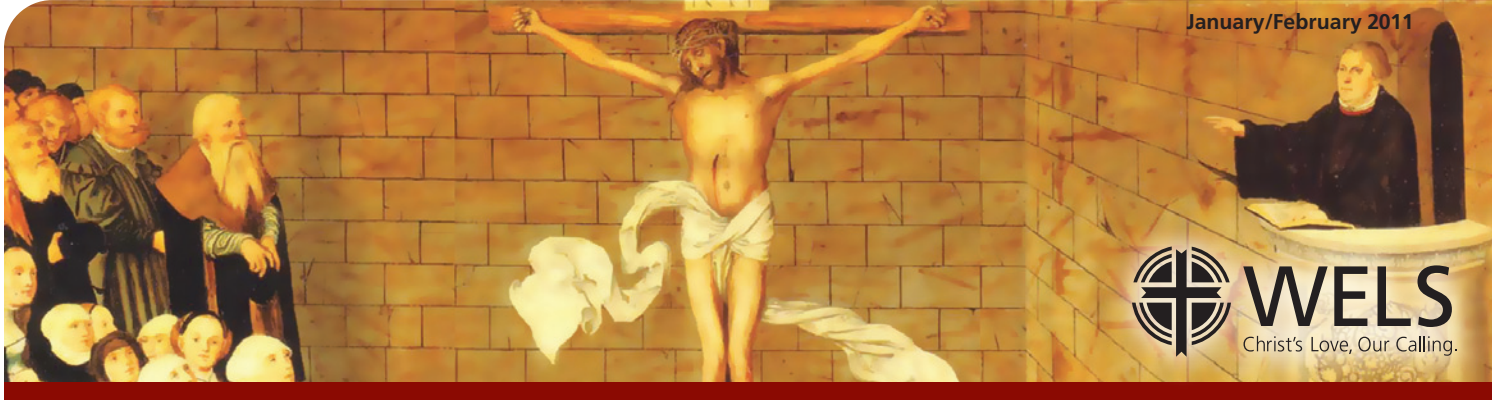


Preach the Word

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Freshness and Variety in Proclaiming Law and Gospel

Proclaim Grace! Key Issue #2:

By Richard Gurgel

In the 1980s, Penn State asked accountants what they perceived as their greatest professional growth need. Being brought up to speed on new tax law ranked #1.

But when these accountants were observed in real-life client dialog, their greatest need was far more basic. Many were weak in interviewing. They failed to elicit accurate information from clients. If they misdiagnosed clients' financial situations, they could render meaningless any new information about tax law.

Researchers observed this pattern across professions: "Participants most often believed that their greatest needs were for new knowledge or for refresher courses on aspects of their field with which they seldom worked. But the assessment exercises showed that some of the greatest discrepancies between current and desirable proficiencies were related to functions they performed regularly" (*Assessing Needs in Continuing Education*, 14).

Is there a more "regularly performed function" in preaching than proclaiming law and gospel? Is anything more critical for us to do well? If accountants who fail to accurately diagnose financial situations place clients into serious jeopardy, how much more do preachers who fail to accurately probe hearers' real spiritual situations place them into spiritual peril. More is at stake than a painful IRS audit!

How well do we believe we're doing on this "regularly performed function"? In a survey, 39 WELS pastors rated themselves from 1-5 (weak to strong) on preaching tasks. Of seven tasks, survey respondents gave themselves the highest marks for applying specific gospel relevantly and third highest for applying specific law relevantly. Only two respondents marked either a 1 or 2 for applying law or gospel! In interviews the first question was: "What are the strengths of WELS preaching?" Almost without fail interviewees listed law/gospel distinctions.

Unexpected? Hardly! For a Lutheran pastor to admit, "I'm really weak in applying law and gospel" is akin to penning one's resignation letter—only worse.

But there *is* something worse: struggling with that challenge and not knowing it!

A closer analysis of survey and interviews suggests that we aren't dealing with the same degree of underlying cluelessness as in the Penn State study. Survey and interviews *do* reveal need for growth in this "regularly performed function," but they also reveal strong awareness of that need. When interviews turned to weaknesses in WELS preaching, pastors frequently admitted struggling with predictable patterns. When survey respondents evaluated twelve possible preaching courses, far outranking all others was freshness and variety in law and gospel. When survey respondents listed one area of preaching growth for which they pray, one spoke for many: "Fresh ways of proclaiming both law and gospel—speaking in relevant language as opposed to theological jargon."

Any preacher worth his stole fears morphing into a 21st century reincarnation of what August Pieper described in 1918: "We are to a great extent ourselves guilty that our people don't come to church with pure desire and love—through the tediousness of our sermons. It is not always a boredom with God's Word, but often an entirely natural boredom with our commonplace, tired, and stale boomings from the pulpit. Sunday after Sunday, year in, year out, our hearers have to always hear the same trite phrases from us, which they've already heard a thousand times" ("The Despising of Grace Is the Death of the Church," *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Volume II, 300).

Thank God his Scripture still winsomely beckons to us all! There his Spirit still longs to breathe fresh and vital energy into us and through us into our hearers. He still specializes in making dry bones live!

Four Critical Elements to Renewing Law/Gospel Freshness and Variety

#1: Identify Your Place in the Parable of the Prodigal Preacher!

A Scylla and Charybdis threaten Lutheran preachers as they approach employing proper law/gospel distinctions. In *Liturgical Preaching* David Schmitt identifies them as “law and gospel negligence” and “law and gospel obsession.” I’ve captained no shortage of sermonic shipwrecks scuttled on the rocks or sucked into the vortex of these twin dangers.

What is “law and gospel negligence”? It’s when we include specific law (mirror/curb) and gospel portions as if performing unpleasant obeisance to Luther and Walther (or Balge and Gerlach). A sense of fulfilling a Lutheran rubric compels us to toss in required words (“sin” “hell” “cross” “justified”), but our hearts aren’t in it. We trudge through those sections on a forced march, longing to run free in greener textual pastures.

Then there’s “law and gospel obsession.” It’s the overzealous championing of law and gospel preaching that morphs law and gospel from essential sermonic content into predictable sermonic form. We make our hearers feel bad . . . we make them feel good . . . we say “Amen.” We are so fixated on proclaiming law and gospel that we aren’t really paying attention to the context or intent of the text. We search the text for a word that can be summoned for duty to call hearers to repentance. Then we find a word we can turn into a path to Jesus, and presto!—a sermon is born. One pastor described it this way:

[A weakness is] an over-emphasis on law and gospel in the sense that sometimes the sermons I hear—it doesn’t matter what the text is—it just becomes part one, law, part two, Jesus has taken our sins away. . . . It can be almost any kind of text even if it is sanctification or a Bible story, or anything, it just kind of comes out, “OK, here’s the law, and here’s the gospel,” even if we had to kind of drag it in. And then “Amen.”

Negligence and obsession [about law and gospel] are twin sons of the same mother.

Negligence and obsession are twin sons of the same mother. Both approach texts as if law/gospel is a template to be imposed. Both operate with a debilitating caricature of what law and gospel preaching really is. Law and gospel negligence does it apologetically—all the while promising self and hearers that really

good stuff will come once obligations are fulfilled. Law and gospel obsession does it with gusto—treating texts like cadavers that must submit unquestioningly to our clumsy dissection.

One is the younger son, longing for a better preaching country than these law/gospel straitjackets in his fathers’ house. The other is the older son, slaving away dutifully, convinced the fathers are impressed.

But there is another way! Law and gospel distinctions aren’t something we force onto unwilling texts. The Holy Spirit knows a thing or two about good theology—and good homiletics! True law/gospel preaching flows not from stilted templating but from tenacious studying of texts in context.

#2: ¿Hablas Textual?

Professor Duetschlander urges *marrying* the text. Charles Spurgeon told budding homileticians to be so full of their text that if he cut them they would bleed “biblene.”

Preaching is always “intensely personal” in this way: every hammer blow from your mouth has first bruised your soul.

What if we perceived every text as its own *language*? What if in each sermon we restricted ourselves to that text’s language—images, figures of speech—to accomplish the sermon’s *telos*?

Why emphasize this? For Confessional Lutherans another language easily runs roughshod over the text’s language. It’s the theological Muttersprache whose ABC’s we imbibed in catechism and whose intricacies we rehearsed in systematics. This language doesn’t focus on the unique, concrete images of individual texts. It melds the language of many texts into a single new language.

Long live this language! With Luther we know to lose propositions is to lose Christianity. But if our sermons get tongue-tied in this language we lose Christians—at least their ears.

We aren’t preaching when we indulge long excursions into theological language. Preaching speaks the unique accents and vibrant rhythms of each text’s native language! Preaching dreads turning every text into theological Unicode. Merely restating propositions isn’t preaching’s main goal. Preaching shows me propositions dressed for work and speaking the concrete *koine* of law and gospel specifics that impact daily lives and eternity.

What does this mean? It means we preach less justification! No. Not less preaching the *doctrine* of justification, but less mindless mouthing of *metaphorical justification language*.

As Preus points out in *Just Words* (22-24), we use *justification* in two ways. In ecclesiastical language *justification* is used broadly for the *doctrine* by which the church stands or falls. But in Scripture, *justification* is used narrowly as one *metaphor* for that broader concept. Jesus certainly teaches the *doctrine* of justification

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frequently, but Jesus uses only *once* in its full theological meaning the verb behind the justification metaphor (δικαιῶ)!

Our tendency in preaching justification *doctrine* is to default to the justification *metaphor* no matter what unique metaphors the text employs. This leads to a caricature that demands the forensic justification metaphor to qualify a sermon as having preached the gospel. Under such strictures, one interviewee quipped, "Jesus would have flunked homiletics." Gospel preaching easily degenerates into "The Gospel According to Platitude" (*Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*, 18).

So, if your text speaks in reconciliation terminology, your sermon inhabits that world of hostility and peace. If your text paints in hues of light and darkness, your sermon canvass does the same. If your pericope groans under slavery and exults in freedom, lash yourself to that mast! The Spirit is handing you sermon language in every text. Master *that* language!

#3: Proclaim Law/Gospel—Don't Merely Speak About Them!

What does this often repeated encouragement mean?

On the law side it means remembering hearers aren't led to repentance by being told that repentance is important (leaving the impression they must get busy conjuring up contrite feelings in their hearts). "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!" (Matthew 3:2) is an abstract of John's sermon, not full text. Repentance happens as the Spirit wields the hammer that breaks rock in pieces. If you are preaching, my brother, God has placed his hammer into your hands. Wield it! Don't merely tell me to repent. Put me to death! Don't tell me that a particular sin is evil. Show me its ugliness! Don't merely tell me an action is wicked. Exhume the satanic lie's stinking corpse buried beneath!

Root out of your sermon empty rhetoric that talks about many things but doesn't actually proclaim anything!

On the gospel side it means you have *not* shown me the beauty, power, and wonder of the gospel merely by saying the gospel is beautiful, powerful, and wonderful. Parade before my eyes in vivid textual language images of Christ's beauty and power and wonder.

Here's another way to picture the difference. We tend to say what we want our hearers to *think*. Instead we need to paint before their senses the concrete images by which the Spirit creates such thoughts. When we gush about the gospel's beauty, beautiful textual pictures are playing in our minds. Words about "beauty" are a byproduct of seeing beauty! Too often we dish out byproduct and wonder why hearers aren't shouting "Alleluia!" with us! The text's pictures are reduced to a supporting role in our sermons, pushed out of the lead by gushing jargon *about* what only we saw!

So, root out of your sermon empty rhetoric that talks *about* many things but doesn't actually *proclaim* anything! Conduct a ruthless jargon-search-and-destroy-mission through your manuscript!

Try "search and destroy" on your sermon manuscript, and see what happens when you can't use the word Gospel, and instead you must just preach Gospel, rather than preach about Gospel. The same challenge awaits the word "Law," and the word "faith." Instead of speaking the word "Law," preach it so that it does its work! Instead of talking about "faith" rework that sermon so that through your proclamation you are preaching faith into your hearers ("Lutheran Preaching: Proclamation not Communication," *Concordia Journal*, 18:1, 20).

But none of these encouragements will matter unless we include:

#4: Be the First to Die and Rise



"Effective law preaching is always intensely personal" (*Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*, 6). The same could be said for gospel preaching. There is nowhere to hide in the pulpit. Preaching is always self-revelatory. No, not in the crass sense of pulpit as personal confessional (though outlawing first person singular preaching is biblically indefensible).

No, not in the arrogant sense of making ourselves the hero of illustrations (almost without fail a horrid idea). But preaching is always "intensely personal" in this way: every hammer blow from your mouth has first bruised your soul. It is always "intensely personal" because the cup of salvation is a common cup, and you drank first!

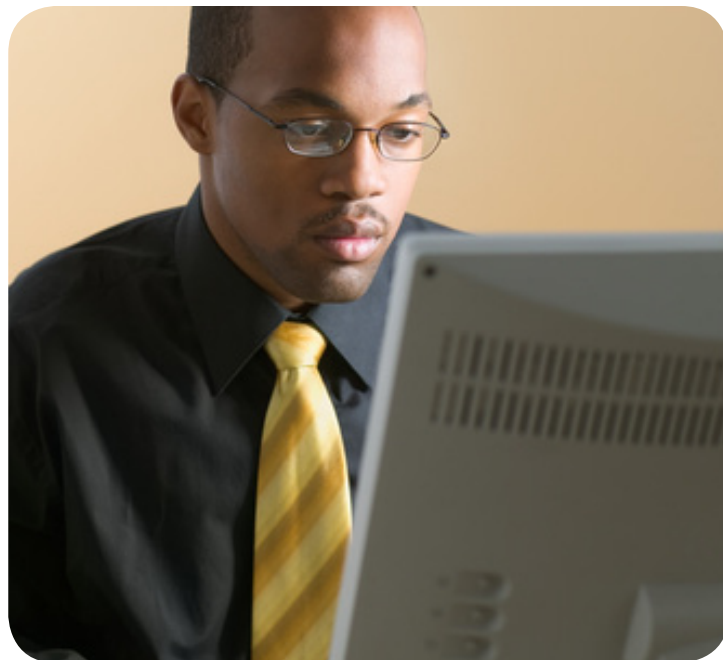
Listen as a pastor reminds us that preaching is hard work because God is killing and raising us to life as we prepare—only to die and rise all over again as we preach! This pastor was answering what is the most important thing for which he prayed for his preaching and preaching in the WELS.

Law/gospel that is real and engaging, that really cuts, that really celebrates, that I see the gospel applying to just that which I struggle with. That is my goal in all my preaching. Preaching has always been a struggle for me. It's always been a struggle because I work out problems, and it's always what I am struggling with that will engage me the most in a text. I try to listen carefully to what God is saying, as being the answer to that problem. So that's how I tend to approach the homiletical task.

What I guess sometimes disappoints me, is when I don't hear that kind of engagement with the man that I'm listening to. I can usually hear when it's there and when it isn't. You just have a sense, "Here's a guy that has walked with this text. It's been on his heart." Or "Here's a guy who has some nice things to say, but it's just... ."

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That kind of engagement with the text where a person takes off his shoes and says, “I’m on holy ground here, and I expect to have an encounter with God. And when I get into the pulpit I expect that whatever encounter I’ve had with God this past week as I’ve meditated on this text I am going to be sharing that with you today. And what a thrill it is to be able to be here with you today, to be able to share that.” It’s that kind of thing that I would like to see most.



Please share ideas for key issue #4

Use the ideas link at *Grow in Grace* (wlsce.net) to submit resources, ideas, or questions related to key issue #4: *Making the most of time in the Word*.

Online Resources for Freshness and Variety in Law and Gospel

On WLS’s preaching web site (*Proclaim Grace!*—preaching.wlsce.net) are these resources for study by individuals, study groups, or circuits:

- Four articles exploring specifics of law/gospel preaching
- A review and study guide for J. A. O. Preus’ *Just Words: Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel*
- Brief reviews of three books:
 - o *Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible* (a fresh “reader’s edition” of Walther’s classic)

- o *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today* by John T. Pless
- o *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* by Timothy Keller

- Sample sermons—one in audio—with commentary

Freshness and Variety in Law and Gospel Workshop/Course

This project’s ultimate goal is to offer in-depth courses or workshops on-campus, off-campus, and online for each key issue (or set of issues). The first such course will be unveiled at summer quarter 2011. You can enroll now (online) for *Freshness and Variety in Law and Gospel*. An abbreviated version of this course will be available at the national worship conference, July 19-22, 2011. The course is also available for off-campus presentations either as a briefer pastors’ institute or as a full for-credit course. An online course will follow in 2012.