

PREACH

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CONNECTING TO THE WORD AND CONNECTING TO PEOPLE

Preaching for the Christmas season is right around the corner. What a glorious opportunity awaits us as we connect our people to the Word of God and to the important doctrine of Christ's Incarnation.

Have you read the little book of Christmas sermons by Dr. James Boice, *The Christ of Christmas*? It is well worth the purchase just to read the first sermon "The Christmas Story According to Jesus."

Thank you to Pastor Mark Cordes for another article on "Faithful Exegesis and Good Sermon Work" and to Professor Dan Leyrer for his second article on "Full Strength Law and Gospel Preaching."

The editor reflects on another sermon that had a lasting effect on his ministry. A 1973 sermon by Pastor George Boldt illustrates the necessity of well-balanced law and gospel preaching in every sermon.

Suggestions for future articles and comments can be sent to <scdegner@aol.com>



FULL STRENGTH LAW AND GOSPEL PREACHING—PART TWO

THE PASTOR PREACHES FULL STRENGTH LAW



I can remember Professor Richard Balge reminding us in church history class that no heretic ever started a letter as follows: "Dear Mom, next week I plan on spawning a heresy." His point was clear, even to us students who didn't always appreciate church history as we should have. Veering from the plain truth of God's Word is not always an intentional thing.

No WELS pastor intends to misuse God's law or gospel in one of his sermons. We study our texts and conceive our outlines and write our sentences and preach our words with the conviction that God speaks through his Word in law and gospel. On this we agree. We also agree that the primary function of the law is to show us our sin, and that of the gospel is to show us our Savior. None of us preachers tries to change those functions with our preaching. We do not intend to stand law and gospel on their heads.

Perhaps it's what we don't intend that should concern us. Please permit this article and the one in the next issue to be friendly warnings about the ruts we can fall into unintentionally. Next time we'll look at unintentional misuses of the gospel that can creep into our preaching. This time we'll discuss unintentional misuses of the law. All of it is intended to help us preach "full strength" law and gospel, that is, to preach every sermon as if it is our last chance to be God's mouthpieces, speaking his great teachings directly to our hearers' hearts, yes, speaking not so much *about* God but *for* God.

Anyone who claims to speak for the Lord, who intends to be God's voice to rain down judgment upon sin, better know what sins God is condemning in the portion of his Word that serves as the sermon text. Full strength law preaching is, therefore, both *textual* and *specific*. Textual law preaching springs from a sermon study that determines what sins the holy God was addressing in his original hearers. Was it the idolatry of wayward Israel? The lovelessness of the Pharisees? The lax practice of the Corinthians? Determining what the Lord was condemning in *them* helps the preacher speak directly to what offends the Lord in *us*.

Discovering the original law context in his text leads the preacher to name specific sins

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SERMONS THAT HELPED ME

It was titled *A Joint Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and Federation for Authentic Lutheranism*

Reformation Rally. On November 4, 1973, WELS members from Southern California gathered at St. Paul's First Lutheran in North Hollywood to celebrate the Lutheran Reformation with members of the newly formed Federation of Authentic Lutherans. The preacher chosen for this milestone celebration was Pastor George Boldt, second vice-president of WELS. The text was 2 Peter 3:17,18 with the theme, "Glorify God for the Blessings of the Reformation."

What I remember from that sermon was the forceful proclamation of law and gospel that filled me with a greater peace and joy in my salvation. That sermon has always been a touchstone for me, reaffirming the importance of proclaiming law and gospel clearly in every sermon.

"Why do WELS pastors always drag law and gospel into their preaching?" That was a question I once heard in a Bible class from someone who was somewhat critical of our pastors for the way they preach law and gospel.

Criticism? What a compliment! Perhaps the same person would have criticized Pastor George Boldt for "dragging in law and gospel" on that late afternoon in early November, as his powerful voice competed with an occasional jet leaving the nearby Burbank Airport.

What part of that somewhat polemical sermon hit home? What created such joy and peace, and yes, if we dare say it, even led us to be "strangely warmed" as John Wesley was "strangely warmed" when he happened to hear the reading of Martin Luther's introduction to Romans at Aldersgate?

I was able to obtain a copy of the sermon preached that night. His voice spoke these convicting and convincing words: "We, by

the grace of God, enjoy the most wonderful position in the world. We are members of God's Kingdom. We know that we are by nature sinful and unclean and deserve nothing from God but his wrath, but by the grace of God alone we have been brought to see Jesus as our one and only Savior, and have been made partakers of the wonderful gifts which He won for us on the cross, namely forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. We have been made members of the Kingdom of God and have been privileged to serve him with our lives. We can now look to eternity with joy in our hearts, knowing that we shall spend it with the Lord in the eternal mansions of heaven. How wonderful if we could go on our way with joy unmolested."

**The law and gospel
were always there.**

That message of law and gospel was simple and plain. Yet, it was delivered with fervor and conviction, almost as if the preacher were proclaiming it for the first time in his life.

Dear reader of *Preach the Word*, you know to what I am referring. You have been there. You have heard similar sermons with simple messages delivered with passion and conviction. And you have prayed for similar conviction and sincerity every time you ascend the pulpit.

I interviewed two WELS pastors who spent their vicar year training under George Boldt. Dennis Kleist of Morton Grove, Illinois, said his mentor was "blunt about the influence in society" and warned often about the current trend in churches to soften the law and leave people without a need for Christ. At the same time, Dennis said he was "cheerful in the proclamation of the gospel" and often said that Christians should be the happiest people on earth because of Christ and the

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CAN YOU USE THIS?

Denali

Standing at just the right place on a clear day in Anchorage, Alaska, you can look northward and see the tallest mountain in North America. Nearly 150 miles away this tremendous piece of rock stands more than 20,000 feet above sea level. The Indians called it Denali, the Great One. Later settlers named it Mt. McKinley.

From Anchorage it does not appear to be so very far away, but such a distance can be deceptive. There are smaller mountains and a vast tundra plain that separate Anchorage and McKinley. It seems you are much closer than you really are. But even across such a distance, Denali, the Great One, stands tall like a prophetic statement of God's grandeur and power.

Standing at just the right place on a clear day in Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah could see for miles and years. In the distance he saw the Great One of Israel, and this vision was expressed in the form of a sign, as he told King Ahaz: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel."

The Word Made Flesh

"Thus the most important treasure and the strongest consolation that we Christians have is this: that the Word, the true and natural Son of God, became man, with flesh and blood like that of any other human; that he became incarnate for our sakes in order that we might enter into great glory, that our flesh and blood, skin and hair, hands and feet, stomach and back might reside in heaven as God does, and in order that we might boldly defy the devil and whatever else assails us. We are convinced that all our members belong in heaven as heirs of heaven's realm."
(from Martin Luther's sermon on John 1:14)

FAITHFUL EXEGESIS AND GOOD SERMON WORK—PART TWO

Good exegesis helps us pay closer attention to what God is actually saying, so that we do not just talk about the gospel; we proclaim the gospel.

“Exegesis,” the word-for-word study of the Bible in its original languages includes etymology, the history of words and their development. But “good exegesis” mostly requires us to discover the meaning of each word in its context. Devotional Bible reading for quantity gives the big-picture broad context. Then we can zero in on the narrow usage of each word in its own setting. “Good exegesis” is the common sense approach of historic Lutheran theology which simply lets Scripture interpret Scripture.

Dr. Martin Luther liked to compare good exegesis to turning over every leaf of a tree to examine it: “The Holy Scriptures are a vast and mighty forest,” he said, “but there is no single tree in it that I have not shaken with my own hand.”

Some have questioned Luther's exegetical methods especially in his early allegorizing years. Others find it fashionable to brush aside Luther's later discoveries as too dogmatical and not enough exegetical. Doubtless some criticism is just. But then again, devotional reading in Luther's *Postil* has not only enriched the gospel-proclaiming content of my sermons, it has also shed some light on the Reformer's exegetical skill in a positively humbling way.

For example, Luther notes that Jesus' first sermon after Easter is in John 20:17 when Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, “Go instead to my *brothers* and tell them...” What startled me was that Luther points to this as the very first time Jesus uses this common New Testament word *adelphoi* to refer to His disciples. Think about this as you read the quote below. Luther is confident enough to say that nowhere previously in the gospels, and only

here near the end of John's Gospel, does Jesus use *adelphoi* for his disciples. First of all, how carefully would Luther have to read and remember to know that? Better yet, enjoy the comforting lesson Luther draws from this simple observation:

[Jesus spoke] in words very brief, but exceedingly kind and tender, . . . first of all to his beloved Mary Magdalene, and through her also to his disciples after their deep woe, grief and sorrow, caused by his departure and death, that he might comfort and gladden them by his resurrection. . . Never had he spoken in this manner to his apostles before. For at the celebration of the Lord's Supper, he indeed calls them his “dear children” and his “friends” John 13:33; 15:14, but now he employs the most affectionate and glorious name possible and calls them his “brethren.” . . . And, indeed, this is said in a manner that is lovely and sweet beyond all measure, so that whoever desires to believe has reason enough to believe, all his life and as long as the world endures, that these things are true indeed; even as the dear apostles themselves had found in them encouragement enough, and more than enough, to believe. . .

Inquiring minds want to know: Was Luther correct? *Adelfos* is used at least eighty-two times in the four Gospels. But it is a fact that Jesus' sermon in John 20 to Mary Magdalene is the first time Jesus refers to the Twelve as “**my brothers**”? Luther noticed this in his careful exegesis, but this poor preacher had to use a computer.

Luther's humbling example ought also encourage us, especially the brothers who “never liked languages.” Exegesis requires knowing the vocabulary, plus grammar and syntax, to explain word

usage. And some who struggled in class may feel at a loss to resurrect it. But, is something missing from our study? Is the problem at least in part what our dear Brother said through his apostle: “**You do not have, because you do not ask God**” (James 4:2)? Jesus commands and promises, “Ask and it will be given to you” (Matthew 7:7).

Jesus gives many encouraging promises for “good exegesis”: “**But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you**” (John 14:26). In the battle for souls, if the pastor could prayerfully study only one Hebrew or Greek word a week, his sermons would be more powerful and his hearers far richer than with none. Remember the observant Luther pounding down on Satan: “One little word can fell him” (CW 200:3).

No doubt we pastors should be better listeners. But to whom? Shall we settle for commentaries when God the Holy Spirit has inspired His own vivid pictures in Hebrew and Greek words that soothe and sanctify the soul? The WELS brothers whom I appreciate most are the ones whose faithful exegesis overflows in telling me, “Jesus died for you. Don't feel bad about that anymore.” I rejoice to listen to them, because they have found the Holy Spirit's own words in the gold mine of God's grace where we comfort ourselves in order to comfort others.

Mark Cordes

in his preaching. While including ourselves in the mirror of God's law, we may point our hearers to the clear images of sin in their everyday lives rather than hint at fuzzy areas that have little to do with their personal weaknesses. Specific law preaching addresses and condemns sins that are common to us—lack of kindness, treating people according to our moods, disrespect, pride—those shadow lands of the heart that need to be exposed.

As specific as full strength law preaching is, we unintentionally hinder it when we are not *explicit*. Explicit law preaching pulls no punches as to how God owns us and has the right to demand whatever he wants; how he doesn't need our help; how he is unyielding in his punishment upon sin. Nor are we entitled to sugarcoat how we put God on hold while we have a love affair with ourselves; how we insist on playing God every time we sin; how we are criminals in his courtroom. Those are the facts of Scripture about sinning against a holy God. The preacher takes no joy in announcing these facts; it pains him to do so, especially as he includes himself in these explicit violations. But we must let the law condemn. As Luther said: "When the Lord wants to make us happy, he first of all makes us sad. When he wants to give us life, he lets us die." Explicit law preaching not only tells us we are spiritually dead apart from Christ, it takes us into the morgue and pulls out the corpse.

One of the most common ways we shy away from explicit law preaching is to preach *about* the law rather than to preach *law*. The difference between the two is subtle. Consider the following section from a sermon:

"The law of God says we are born in sin. God's Word tells us we deserve nothing but eternal punishment. When we hear and read that in the Bible, it makes us feel rotten. And that's the way we should feel."

What have I done in regard to the law with these words? I have preached about it. I have led a study of its effect. But I did not preach the law directly and thereby turn it loose to have its effect. Did you notice how my language ("says ... tells ... hear and read ... should feel") became a layer between God and his people, thus cushioning the blow of the law? Rather than analyzing God's law and telling us how we should feel, full strength law preaching proclaims God's judgment on sin. There are plenty of times to talk about the law—a Bible class and homiletics classroom come to mind. The sermon, however, is a time to speak the law. Preaching law is divine declaration, not dogmatic dissertation.

When we soften our law preaching by failing to be textual or specific or explicit, the tragic result is the way the gospel suffers. This happens when we replace the clear gospel message of forgiveness with a "this is how you can do better" message of law. Those pious examples of Christian living, however, have no power to produce Christian living. When we go right from law as mirror to law as guide in our sermons, and skip the gospel in between, we misuse the law. We have, as Luther once remarked, used the law to show the way without giving people the legs to get there. God help us to be full strength law preachers, to recognize with every sermon we write that the law cannot be reconciled with the gospel *except at the cross*.

Daniel Leyrer

gospel. Paul Janke of Modesto, California said of Pastor Boldt, "he preached with simplicity," and "the law and gospel were always there." With a wry chuckle Paul said, "He demanded that his vicars not take their manuscript into the pulpit with them so they would know what they were going to say and the simple message would come through clearly."

What if a sermon is weak in proclaiming law and gospel? This could easily happen on Reformation Sunday when polemical preaching could ascend to a higher position than full strength law and gospel preaching. You have heard powerful sermons on Reformation Sunday that may have moved you, but the proclamation of law and gospel did not dominate the sermon. If careful examination of the sermon shows the message of law and gospel is not coming through clearly, then it's time to look back into the text and ask, where can I bring in the message and where can it be stated clearly, forcefully, and simply for all to hear and be drawn closer to Christ.

George Boldt's sermon on 2 Peter 3:17,18 was a strong message, warning us to be on guard against losing the blessings of the Lutheran Reformation. The actual amount of time spent in the sermon proclaiming the simple gospel message was brief, yet it seemed to dominate the entire message that was proclaimed. The blessing lingers to this day.

Steven Degner

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the Word

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