**Theology is for Proclamation: Preaching law and the Gospel**

**I. In the beginning...** I addressed a primary matter for Lutherans. The matter of confession. That is, to be a confessing Lutheran means that one is making a public witness to the world of the one, holy Catholic Church's proclamation and faith. Just as Paul said: "*For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The Scripture says, 'no one who believes in him will be put to shame."* [Isaiah 28:16; Romans 10:10]

1. Our confessions are not canon law. The goal of a confession is to be confessed. That is, to free you to give the free word of God in Christ, *gratis,* as a promise without any strings attached.

2. Such confession comes, "*in these last days of this transitory world: God has time and space we know not of, and gives this as a new creation and new time—by your preaching through the office of the ministry."* So, what time is it when you come to preach?

a) God's final judgment and so Day of Wrath has already come, and you were found guilty of killing God. You can't go back and undo that. It is historical.

b) But then God ups and does a new thing apart from the law. Who would have thought it! A new history!

3. We call this time of preaching, *"mercy time,"* where you stand guilty and yet are declared just in such a way to actually make you right. In relation to God in the new kingdom you are just, not in yourself but in relation to Christ who gives all.

4. God does this, elects sinners to eternal life through you in the preaching office.

a) That is, we leave *"if... then,"* conditional speaking and move to *"because... therefore"* speech that is categorical: *"On account of Christ your sins are forgiven."*

**II. The brightest light...** we have from the Confessions for doing this is the distinction of law and the Gospel. *"The distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light. It serves to divide God's Word properly and to explain correctly and make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles. Therefore, we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings together and make the gospel into a law. For this obscures the merit of Christ and robs troubled consciences of the comfort that they otherwise*

*have in the holy gospel when it is preached clearly and purely. With the help of this distinction these consciences can sustain themselves in their greatest spiritual struggles against the terror of the law."* (FC V. 581.1)

A. This comes especially from Luther's re-discovery of Paul's distinction in 2 Cor. 3 that, *"the letter kills and the Spirit gives life,"* is a literal truth! God actually does this. He kills and raises the dead to new life.

B. Typically the church has fouled this up. Every text was understood to be time-bound and must have a relevant meaning released for people who come afterward.

1. Once it was allegory. Every text tells a story of the past, but hidden in its words is a lesson for you, usually tropological, this is what God wants you to do.

2. Now it is, *"meant/means."* Once it meant this, but times have changed, and now it means that.

C. Instead we confess that God creates a new kingdom by the preached word.

1. Gerhard Forde called this, *"doing the text"* to hearers, whose wills are bound against hearing, rather than turning hearers into moral agents.

*"Law and Gospel are rightly divided in preaching when the sermon is not primarily didactic, but rather something that claims the listener on God's behalf... Christ is really present in preaching! Hence, preachers need to be bold enough to give Christ to their hearers. Preachers are tempted to give the text a moral - translating it into our terms or allegorizing it in order to offer us something to do. We miss Luther's insight that it is the Scripture that interprets us. Preachers need to read the pericopes so as to allow themselves to be exegeted by them and then preach in a fashion that allows the text to do its deed to the hearers."*(Gerhard O. Forde, The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament)

2. This means the direction of action is key, from God to us is key. Here I recall my Doktor-Vater, Jim Nestingen's, four rules of (preaching) grammar:

a) When Christ is preached he is the subject of every verb.
b) The hearer is the direct object, *"for you."*
c) The promise (what Christ is doing for us) is identified and given unconditionally.
d) And the Gospel is present tense. *"here and now,"* not, *"one day, perhaps our prince will come."*

3. The great fly in the ointment for preachers is the danger preachers see in freedom. This comes because preachers think they are speaking to free wills rather than bound wills.

a) First fear in their parishioners... what if they actually began to act freely, might I then either loose control or they would use it as an excuse to do nothing? Then nothing would improve and I will live my whole life in a leper colony!

b) Then fear in themselves... what if what I am saying actually works? What if the Holy Spirit does what he is promised to do? Kill and make alive. Then I too would come under the Spirit's operation, suffer and die, even for my very preaching of this word?

D. What do scared preachers do? Put the breaks on and make everything first a gift, then a carefully managed demand, i.e., *"If Jesus did this for you the least you can do is..."*

E. Practically speaking, ask, *"What happened when God's word went out in this text?"*

1. That means first that you have no other responsibility in your sermon than to deal with God's own word in Scripture. Your illustrations are manure in comparison. Manure can help, but it isn't the plant! God's own words are the things.

2. Look for what happened in the text that caused God's words to be left, resisted, contorted, unbelieved [the fight against the words by bound wills] [I find it helpful to take a text and anticipate your own fear by turning everything into a legal requirement first]

3. Then locate what God did with such sinners, i.e., locate the judgment (working of the law) and/or promise.

4. Then, prepare to make this a present event. Give it *"for you,"* don't just talk about it.

**III. Examples**

A. Start at ground zero: *"Take and eat, this is my body, given for you,"*

1. Resistance: *"Take and eat,"* but what if I don't, or won't? And, *"This is my body,"* but what if that offends me and I find it bizarre?

2. Promise: But here we preach to such questioners by identifying the promise and to

whom the promise is made. It says here the, *"given for you"* is given precisely to betrayers, you have just qualified.

B. Baptism: "*He that believes and is baptized shall be saved."*

1. You could preach this as an ordering of things you must do to win the benefit. *"He that believes and (is) (gets himself) baptized shall be saved."* Here is what to do if you want to be saved. Then grace becomes whittling this *to do* down to the tiniest little shave of wood.

2. But what if the text is a promise? *"He that believes and is baptized shall be saved."* (Mark 16:16) (The old man hangs on *"believes, and..."* and the new man hangs on, *"will be...")* The promise will not fail! Why not? Because of Christ, not because of your power!

3. Nicodemus in the night comes to Jesus and Jesus says, *"No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."* (John 3:5) Nicodemus, *"Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"* (v.4) Then what does Jesus give him? These words of promise: *"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* (v. 17).

C. Now I also have to pimp for Moses. Try making a pure promise out of this: *"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."* (Romans 2:24)

1. What once was degrading to bodies is not any more, because God changed his mind! How do we know this? Because we who are stubborn have changed our mind, and that must be from God!

2. But if it is preached as law, what do you do? You lay out the words and apply them as the text does. Who is *"them"*? God gave *them* up? No Jews vs. Gentiles, not males vs. females, not even the speaker vs. hearers, but ALL.

D. Jonah, receiving God's word.

1. Resistance:

2. Promise:

E. Story of Jacob, Hosea 12: *"In the womb he grabbed his brother by the heel, and in his*

*manhood, he strove with God* (Gen 25:26; Hos. 12:3) … *He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with him* (Gen. 32:34; Hos. 12:4) … *So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God."* (Hos. 12:6)

1. Lesson? Don't grab, especially when you bring Jesus into it, it seems to make him stronger, instead look at how Jesus didn't grab.

a) Problem 1: Even in the story, Jacob grabbed, and it was he whom God spoke to.

b) Problem 2: The law of not grabbing doesn't make us better, in fact it makes us worse.

2. Solution: *"Wait for a word," "but wait a minute, I've got one."* Jesus says, *"Grab me here!"*

F. *"The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."* (Matt 13:44) Here we have a text about somebody stumbling upon the greatest thing, beyond all imagining, and his joy. Now lets see if you can turn this into a legal text alone. That is, put *"meaning"* into this text.

1. Resistance: If you plow your field faithfully, you too may find a treasure (alhough the man didn't plan to find buried treasure). Serendipity. Or maybe you could focus on the *"sells all."* If you want a treasure, you have to give up all. Refuse materialism and worldly goods (although finding a treasure in the field is material and worldly goods, why didn't Jesus say, he was out plowing and he had a vision of the forms this treasure would take once he'd spent it, or a spiritual experience that he was more than just a hired plower, and maybe his consciousness was raised, that if he joined with other hired farmers they could charge a higher wage and quite working *"for the man"* by staging a worldwide revolution of the proletariate?

2. But this doesn't work with the text, because he already found the treasure. His action comes from joy at receiving a pure gift that is *"stumbled onto,"* that is found.

G. Now on Stewardship Sunday, this goes out the window, right? Because the only way to get money is by shame and exhortation. I like to take 2 Cor. 8 here: *"We want you to know, brethren, about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part ... I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine..."* So Paul concludes, *"... I give my advice: it is best for you now to complete what a year ago you began [that is, taking up a collection for the Jerusalem church]..."* There is Paul's stewardship drive, now you make a law of it.

1. I like the ladder approach. Try to be positive: *"Give so that we can move the mission forward!"* When that doesn't work try theological exhortation: *"Look at what Christ did for you , you ought to be able to do a little bit back."* Whiney: *"Come on, help the poor, as God wants equality and justice for all!"* Demonstrative: *"Give, you lazy bastards, or go to hell!"*

2. Gospel: [Paul says clearly, the giving is not a command, and the example of a poorer church pouring out over the earth in a flood is not a shame, it is a proof to you of your own love as genuine (though obviously deeply hidden!) That is, your love is genuine, but you always doubt it!] You know how you constantly worry that now the Gospel has arrived and you have received pure grace (gift) from Christ, that you'll just be lazy bastards?

Remember how you keep ripping away at the Gospel because you fear its consequences? Well, that isn't what is happening up in Macedonia and it is the same God with the same grace and the same faith alone that saves. Why then would it be best for them to make the gift? The quickest way to take away your fears about the Gospel is to be fearless.

3. Do you dare? Are you that free? Is it really, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 9:1ff, superfluous to write about this offering, that means it is literally un-necessary (according to law), but *"more than necessary,"* according to Gospel? That is, that love comes out in flood from faith's own joy.

**IV. Here we come back to the matter of our subscription to the Confessions**... Do you dare? Are you that free? Can you let go an unconditional word of God in Christ and watch God work the end of the law in us, while in Christ he makes all-in-all so that we have no other God than this man, Jesus, and no other freedom than a death like his and a resurrection like his? I double dare you to go out in to the world and confess like that, and watch the Holy Spirit elect sinners through you in ways you thought were impossible, for what is impossible for you is quite possible for the God who gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall be saved.