

PREACH

the Word

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CONNECTING TO THE WORD AND CONNECTING TO PEOPLE

Michael Horton begins his new book, *A Better Way*, with the following quote from the mid-twentieth century mystery novelist Dorothy Sayers: "Official Christianity of late years has been having what is known as 'a bad press.' We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—'dull dogma' as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama."

Horton goes on to say: "God has given us the greatest show on earth, a drama full of intrigue that is not only interesting but actually brings us up onto the stage, writing us into the script as actors in the ongoing production. It gives us a role that contrasts sharply with those one-dimensional characters and shallow story lines of this present age."

The words of Paul capture the joy of being part of this divine drama: "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Thanks again to Pastor Mark Cordes for another article on "Faithful Exegesis and Good Sermon Work" and to Professor Dan Leyrer for his third and final article on "Full Strength Law and Gospel Preaching."

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

FULL STRENGTH LAW AND GOSPEL PREACHING—PART THREE

THE PASTOR PREACHES FULL STRENGTH GOSPEL



One of my favorite lessons on preaching comes from the story of the minister who was scheduled to conduct worship at the state penitentiary. The day before the service he walked around the chapel with the warden to "get the lay of the land." As he viewed the seating arrangements, he noticed that one of the chairs was draped in black

cloth. The preacher asked the warden about the chair. "The man who sits in that chair tomorrow morning will be executed tomorrow night," the warden explained. "His chair is draped for death. Your sermon will be the last one he hears."

That story reminds me that every time I mount the pulpit I may very well be preaching to someone sitting in a pew draped for death. My pulpit might be draped for death for that matter. The point is we never know. We preachers never know if this is the last sermon a parishioner will hear or the last one we'll have a chance to preach. Seen from that perspective, preaching a sermon is urgent business.

If you knew it was the last sermon for somebody, what approach would you take? It would be a good time to remember one of our titles: minister *of the gospel*. Given one last chance to preach a sermon, we would present the gospel as clearly and personally as we knew how. This is full strength gospel preaching—speaking not so much about Jesus' word of forgiveness but becoming Jesus' voice to speak that word of forgiveness. Permit, dear brother, a few reminders about preaching the glorious gospel.

Am I preaching the gospel when I don't let it dominate my message?

I suppose. But Walther's final thesis on the topic tells us that's a misuse of the gospel in its finest form. Letting the gospel dominate, to me, means two things. First, I have to watch my tendency to go right from law as mirror to law as guide. It's not preaching gospel to show people their sins and then simply to show them how to do better. Full forgiveness (the gospel!) is the engine to get us to the place where we can do better. Second, I have to

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SERMONS THAT HELPED ME

As I reflect on sermons that have helped me in my preaching, the name of Walter A. Maier comes to mind. My first exposure to his preaching came while perusing the carefully published books of his sermons available in the seminary library. I copied several of those out-of-print books, and later copied more. His sermons have helped me flesh out my sermons, especially festival messages of Easter and Christmas.

One sermon in particular comes to mind. It was an Easter message, "The Resurrection Reality." This sermon can still be heard on the Internet in the Lutheran Hour archives. He cajoled his audience by preaching rapid fire and with passion. He proclaimed Christ clearly, expounded the text carefully and divided law and gospel correctly.

I have turned to WAM for help when the message I was preparing lacked passion and fire. Such passion and zeal are evident in "The Resurrection Reality" that was preached to a world-wide audience on Easter 1937. Imagine yourself gathering around the radio with your family and listening intently to the following introduction.:

On this glorious Easter Day, as we stand in spirit before the Savior's open grave, let us ask ourselves frankly, "What is it that magnetizes the faith of Christian hearts all over the world and draws them to the open sepulcher?"

History knows far more pretentious burial places than Joseph's grave, where the lifeless body of the Savior was laid to repose. ... Mohammedans heckle Christian missionaries with the challenge, "We have the tomb of our great prophet Mohammed here in Medina while you Christians have nothing."

Yet at Easter we have everything! While all other tombs are evidences of death and decay, Christ's tomb alone is the evidence of life.



Those first sermons from the Lutheran Hour stated the text clearly, and then preached from the text. The text for "The Resurrection Reality" was from 1 Corinthians 6: "God hath both raised up the Lord and will also raise up us by his own power." Maier opened up the meaning of this text of Scripture by announcing that the fact of the resurrection is recorded in six different and independent accounts (the Gospels, Acts, and 1 Corinthians). Like an attorney pleading his case in court he persuasively appealed to his radio audience by asking the question, "What was it that took the first company of the disciples, cowering as they did behind locked doors, and transformed them into a band of confident champions of their crucified Lord?"

Maier did not speak in vague generalities about Christ. He preached Christ, and he preached his resurrection. He ended the exposition on the fact of Jesus' resurrection with an appeal to keep the resurrection at the heart of our Christian faith:

Let us all try, with the Spirit's help, to engrave this Easter truth "He lives" in our hearts; for if we remove the resurrection reality from the Christian faith, we have less hope than the heathen, while with the blessing of Easter faith we have the living Christ: his sustaining companionship, his guiding help, his burden-sharing presence, his never-failing leadership, his divine counsel, and above all this, his eternal salvation, his everlasting atonement, his never-ending redemption.

I have also used Maier's sermons to help me preach law and gospel with full strength and conviction. Again from "The Resurrection Reality" we hear the radio preacher calling out to his unworthy audience to find comfort in the gospel.

We must cling to this doctrine of our resurrection even though its promises seem far too merciful and abundant for sin-bound lives. ... And when we take God at His promises and penitently trust in the love of our Savior, all the sin and

selfishness that would tear us away from God vanishes; and unworthy, unholy, unhappy as we may be, we are blessed by the promise that "we shall see him as he is."

Walter A. Maier excelled at using illustrations for sermons. Arrows of doctrine with well-trimmed feathers of illustration flew straight to the heart. He closed "The Resurrection Reality" with this now familiar illustration.

When the armies of Napoleon swept over Europe, one of his generals made a surprise attack on the little town of Feldkirch on the Austrian border. It was Easter. As the formidable French army maneuvered on the heights above Feldkirch, the council of its citizens was hastily summoned to deliberate upon the alternative of surrender or defense.

It was in this assembly that the venerable dean of the church arose to declare: "This is Easter Day! We have been counting on our own strength, and that will fail. This is the day of our Lord's resurrection. Let us ring the bells and have services as usual and leave the matter in God's hands. We know only our weakness and not the power of God."

His counsel was accepted, and in a moment or two the church-belfry chimed the joyous bells announcing the Savior's resurrection. The enemy, hearing the sudden peal, concluded that the Austrian army had arrived during the night, broke up camp, and before the Easter-bells had ceased the danger had been lifted.

Maier closed his ringing endorsement of the resurrection with the words: "Let the joy of Easter ring in your heart and all the doubt and sorrow and gloom and despondency that surround you, ready to despoil your life and crush your hopes forever, will similarly vanish."

Steven Degner

Again from "The Resurrection Reality" we hear the radio preacher calling out to his unworthy audience to find comfort in the gospel.

FAITHFUL EXEGESIS AND GOOD SERMON WORK- PART THREE

Faithful exegesis is a safeguard against false doctrine or self-delusional hypocrisy. As the Apostle Paul put it: “I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Faithful exegesis is what Gottfried Hermann called, “unprejudiced exegesis¹.” It is the kind of practical approach that often eludes pastors and theologians tending to complicate things. This practical and faithful approach flourished in the WELS in the first decades of the 20th century and received the name “The Wauwatosa Theology.” “The Wauwatosa Theology” took doctrinal questions like “election” and “church and ministry” first to the Bible, instead of digging out the dogmaticians and adding a few Bible passages later.

Faithful and “unprejudiced” exegesis always asks, “What does God say about this?”

“By the grace God has given me,” Paul writes, “I laid a foundation as an expert builder (σοφος αρχιτεκτων) and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. . . . The Day will bring. . . to light. . . [and] . . . test (δοκιμασει) the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

Brothers of Jesus, good, faithful exegesis builds for eternity on Christ-crucified. It ultimately is the only way we can be (δοκιμος) approved of God.

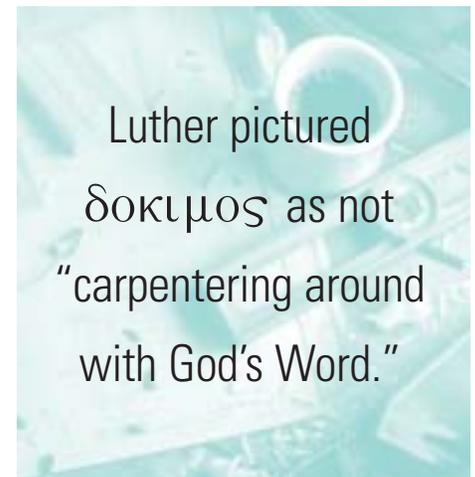
Money changers in ancient Greece were δοκιμος if they did not shave off the edges of coins. To Paul δοκιμος-pastors are those who do not “shave off” the difficult truths of God’s Word, but teach law and gospel, sin and grace, clearly

with the “full weight” of God’s truth. In doctrinal controversies and heresies it becomes clear who “has God’s approval” (δοκιμος) (1 Corinthians 11:19) by who speaks according to God’s Word versus who speaks according to his own opinions. (Cf. Matthew 7:15)

Luther pictured δοκιμος as not “carpentering around with God’s Word.” The chisel and the saw are not for the faithful preacher’s exegetical toolbox. Rather we pray constantly for the Holy Spirit to work the Word deep into us—cutting, shaving, sanding, and even grinding—wherever necessary to create the Christ-like shape of “one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Rather than pray, “Lord, help me master this sermon,” ask, “Lord, let your Word master me.”

In this faithful exegesis we are never alone. Recall Christ’s tender, loving letters “to the angels of the seven churches,” i.e., to the pastors (Revelation 1:20). Tearing down pastoral pride and building faith in him-crucified, the Risen One helps us examine our ministries confidently held in His nail-pierced hands. In painful honesty with my loving Lord, my sins and weaknesses as a preacher can come to light. If I have focused on programs and policies to the neglect of good exegesis, I need my Savior’s warnings about hot-wired Sardinian death (Revelation 3:1f) lest the congregation I serve look alive to everyone else except the Lord of the Church.

Or if I pat my pharisaical back in judgment of active churches to somehow sanctify my lukewarm Laodicean lethargy, I need to hear



“the faithful and true witness” saying to me:

“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me 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. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent” (Revelation 3:14-19).

How blessed I am to be preaching especially during seasons of repentance when God’s powerful grace comes concentrated in the Holy Spirit’s words for drowning, then invigorating me. Kneeling at the manger on the way to the cross, God kindly equips me for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16f).

Mark Cordes

¹ “Wauwatosa Theology” - Gottfried Hermann, WLQ, Vol. 96, No.2, Spring 1999, p. 114.

remember to let God's word of grace be the final word. To leave sins unforgiven, to expose the sin and hide the Substitute is a terrible short-shrifting of the gospel.

Am I preaching the gospel when I make it conditional? Not really. It's the law that's conditional, not the gospel. Yet, I am tempted to turn the gospel into a law by giving the impression that Christ's work is complete only if you believe it. That turns God's gift of faith into a meritorious work and that's no gospel. An offshoot of this develops when I preach fruits of faith in a way that forces people to conclude that they can't be Christians unless they bring forth *those particular fruits*. It's good to be specific when preaching fruits of faith. It's good to name specific virtues that the gospel will produce in our lives. But I can't condition Christ's victory over sin upon my victories over sin. Romans 7 teaches me to avoid that pit. Better to proclaim the gospel and punctuate it with a "Believe it!" than to dilute it with a "...if you believe it."

Am I preaching the gospel when I point to the cross as evidence of our sinfulness? No. That's using Christ's cross to preach the law. I'm not saying it's illegitimate to make this connection. Our sins put Jesus on the cross. Peter used the cross in this way in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:23,36). The Formula of Concord recognizes the same use of the crucifixion in preaching (Article V). But the confessors were quick to add that preaching law by means of the cross is "the *alienum opus Christi* by which he arrives at his proper office...the preaching of the gospel." Our sins put Jesus on the cross, yes. But his loving desire to forgive our sins kept him on the cross. Full strength gospel preaching remembers the primary message of the cross.

Can I preach the gospel without a smile on my face? Certainly. After all, the gospel is an urgent, serious message. But it is also joyful. Oh, is it joyful! To tell someone that Jesus Christ has paid for their sins and brings them to heaven is to announce a miraculous, surprising solution to their biggest problem. To quote the hymn writer: "I scarce can take it in" (CW 256:3). The gospel is exhilarating and breathtaking. Why not let the congregation see how it moves me by the look on my face? Why not let the joyful expectation it produces show in an expectant look in my eyes?

God bless you, brother, as you relate the greatest story ever told. May we ministers of the gospel preach the good news full strength. Jesus has called us to speak for him. Our hearers may never have the chance to hear it again. We may never have the chance to preach it again. It's a responsibility, to be sure. But what a marvelous privilege! We shall do it "with the strength God provides" (1 Peter 4:11).

Daniel Leyrer

GOSPEL LAW

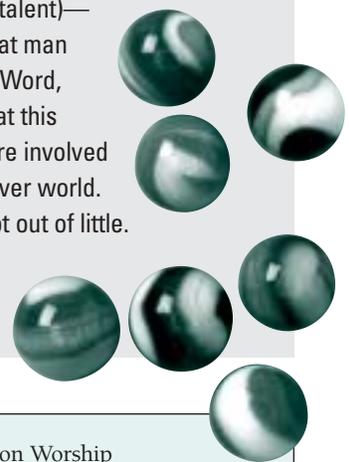
CAN YOU USE THIS?

The Lord Uses Little Things

Theologian Dr. Howard Hendrix tells the story of the visit of Walt, only a sixth-grade-educated man, who was trying to start a Sunday School class for his new church located in north Philadelphia.

Walt came to Hendrix's community, found little Howard and said "Son, how would you like to go to Sunday School?" Howard was not at all interested in anything with "school" attached to it so Walt said, "How about a game of marbles?" He played little Howard and beat him every time. Hendrix says he lost his marbles early in life. But this little boy would now follow Walt anywhere. Walt picked up 13 kids to start his class. Nine were from broken homes.

But listen to this—11 of the 13 kids, including Howard Hendrix, are now in full-time Christian ministry. God took a little—a little man in terms of importance, hardly any formal education, a little talent (and probably if you were to ask Walt he would say that he had no talent)—but because that man believed God's Word, eleven people at this very moment are involved in ministry all over world. God makes a lot out of little.



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