



Keeping Preaching Christocentric

Proclaim Grace! Key Issue #1:

By Richard Gurgel

Early in my ministry I preached a series of sermons on . . . Ecclesiastes. After one of these sermons a retired preacher said to me, "I appreciated your sermon, Sid, but I wonder, could a rabbi have preached your sermon in a synagogue?" The image of a rabbi preaching my sermon in a synagogue etched itself indelibly in my brain. It was a loaded question, of course, but the concern my friend expressed was valid. That concern was whether my sermon was distinctively Christian, whether I had preached Christ. I know that I had failed on that score. ("Preaching Christ from the Old Testament," Sidney Greidanus, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January-March 2004, 3)

Our sermons as acceptable pulpit fare in synagogues? Impossible! Would any WELS pastor argue against Walther's final thesis from *Law and Gospel*: "The Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the Gospel to have a general predominance"? Shouldn't we move on to issues where there's actual growth for WELS pulpits?

That would be dangerous for *at least* four reasons.

First, are we as strong here as we think? "The devil always attacks at the point where we presume ourselves to be the strongest . . . [since] there we may very well prove to be the weakest" ("Preaching as the Word Made Relevant," *Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 6, Issue 1, 16). Is the beating heart of our theology the beating heart of our sermons?

Several brothers beg us to ponder that question. One pastor whose call allows him to be on the receiving end of many sermons noted a 14-week stretch in which he attended 14 different WELS churches. He was stunned by how little gospel he heard. Another reported worshiping in other churches on vacation and too regularly wondering where the gospel was. Another's children asked, "Why didn't that pastor speak any gospel?" Almost without fail those same pastors charitably acknowledged their off days. But even if these examples were merely anecdotal, they strongly encourage us

to ask whether Sunday by Sunday those who hear us meet Jesus. That leads to a second reason why assuming Christocentricity is homiletical folly: we violate every text if we preach it without its relation to Christ. Christocentricity is no Lutheran rubric we force on unwilling texts, pinning them down and compelling them to cry "Christ!" After all, Jesus made the sweeping statement that Scripture testifies about him (John 5:39). On Easter afternoon Jesus had no trouble ranging throughout "Moses and all the prophets" to show doubting disciples the necessity of cross and empty tomb (Luke 24:25-27). Paul reminds us that "no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:20). To preach on any promise of Scripture without finding Christ at its heart distorts that promise. Christ's footsteps are in every text. Our sermons either wisely step in them or foolishly stumble over them.

*He was stunned by
how little gospel he heard.*

For a third reason for Christocentric preaching, ask: What's at stake whether or not my hearers regularly find a rich measure of Christ proclaimed from my pulpit? At stake is their joy of salvation and even salvation itself.

Preaching is lost if preaching has lost its gospel. Without gospel themes we are left with exhortations to commitment, urges to pray and witness, calls to obedience and pleas to love one another and serve the world. What, we could ask, is wrong with all that? Nothing at all, except that these things are not good news and on their own will leave the congregation tired and burdened . . . Preaching without gospel turns everything into a burden and true faith into ashes and is not truly Christian. ("Putting the Gospel Back into Preaching," Chris Voke, *Evangel*, Summer 1999, 40).

Continued on next page

Voke's words deserve to be taken to heart especially as we preach in post-Christian America. The more our culture becomes an amoral wasteland the more any message trumpeting "values" can be confused with Christian preaching. The pull to shift our focus in preaching is strong. Our pastoral hearts bleed for the tangled mess sin weaves in hearers' lives. "Just do *this* instead!" But our good intentions betray us if we unwittingly barter our gospel-centered birthright for a miserable meal of Messiah-less moralisms. If we want our hearers to leave with burning, not burdened, hearts, we do well to ask whether the gospel is the beating heart of our sermons *especially when urging sanctification*.

We unwittingly barter our gospel-centered birthright for a miserable meal of Messiah-less moralisms.

But it is not just our *hearers'* joy of salvation at stake. It's *our own*. That's a fourth reason for Christocentricity. When we aren't scanning each text for how it proclaims the gospel, the fatigue and burden Voke mentioned consume the preacher before the hearer. When we approach every text expecting to be refreshed by the gospel, we are the first to benefit.

And that directly impacts preaching's authenticity so critical in our culture! People's natural cynicism is stoked by a media-saturated culture where everyone is selling them something. Nothing closes ears faster than any hint that we haven't "bought" what we're "selling." "Appropriate expression of passion and enthusiasm is at times lacking," wrote one WELS lay person, echoing the concerns of others.

We know authenticity doesn't come from posting signs on our pulpits saying, "Be authentic!" or "Be enthusiastic!" Authenticity and genuine enthusiasm spring from a preacher who finds signpost after signpost in text after text pointing him to God's merciful heart!

Why Christocentricity as our first key issue? There's no real growth in preaching unless we are growing in proclaiming Christ legitimately from every text. Real development in preaching finds its purpose and delight in service to the gospel.

What Is This Thing Called Christocentricity?

Let's begin with what being Christocentric is *not*. It's not repeating hackneyed gospel mantras reflecting all texts but no texts. The sermon resides among the proper for each Sunday, not the ordinary. An LCMS professor quipped that too often Lutheran preachers add "just enough gospel to save the sermon." Gospel preaching is not adding a dash of Jesus in a vain attempt to make suddenly savory an otherwise all-too-thin sermonic broth. Every text is a farmers' market of fresh delights for those willing to prayerfully and patiently work the textual ground until God provides the harvest! (Caution: running out to that market on Saturday almost inevitably finds it closed!)

But that still hasn't defined what Christocentricity is. It's hard to reduce something vast to a few sentences. Christocentricity is like Joseph's coat—richly-ornamented. Paul, for example, was determined to "know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2), yet he writes "crucified" only *ten* times in *thirteen* epistles!

However, failing to define Christocentricity is homiletical cowardice that provides cover for cheap imitations to masquerade. So here is a definition:

Christ-centered preaching revels in the implicit or explicit comfort and power that come from divine grace. This comforting and empowering grace is found in each text as that text is swept up in the vast story of paradise lost and paradise regained. This divine grace is made possible by, and has its final and all-fulfilling expression in, the life (active obedience), death (passive obedience), and resurrection of Jesus.

Three corollaries explain how this functions in preaching:

- Christocentric preaching wrestles to understand how a more generally stated truth of God's mercy for sinners corresponds to the specific fulfillment of that mercy in the person and work of the Word made flesh. This is the special challenge of Christocentric preaching from Old Testament texts since the final and fullest revelation of God's grace had yet to be fulfilled.
- Christocentric preaching trusts that the gospel is both the power of salvation as well as that which alone works in believers' hearts to will and to act according to his good purpose. Christocentricity is just as important in application texts (this do!) as appropriation texts (this believe!).
- Christocentricity must not be artificially reduced to one set of specific words or images that must appear in every sermon to qualify it as certifiably Christ-centered. The variety of Scriptural pictures for God's gift of rescue in Jesus testifies that we must not reduce Christocentricity to a dull and repetitive caricature of itself. The language and imagery of each text are critical to maintain.

Here are two touchstones others have used. One supervisor urged his vicars to write across the top of sermon notes: "How does this tie into Jesus?"

Bryan Chapell puts it this way:

Faithful expository preaching unfolds every text in the context of its redemptive import. The success of this endeavor can be assessed by a bottom-line question every preacher should ask at the end of each sermon: When my listeners walk out the doors of this sanctuary to perform God's will, with whom do they walk? If they march to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil with only me, myself, and I, then each parades to despair. However, if the sermon has led all

Continued on back page

Two Unintentional Gospel Omissions

I have yet to meet a Lutheran pastor who seeks to obscure his people's view of Christ. Gospel omissions in Lutheran pulpits tend to be of the unintentional variety.

Cause #1: Preaching as Primarily Imparting of Information

Under the influence of rationalism and what is called the Old Homiletic, many pulpits gravitated to a much more cognitive understanding of preaching. Preaching shifted from the category of persuasive speech to informative speech. Persuasive speech shares a threefold purpose with classical rhetoric—to teach, to delight, and to move—appealing to intellect, emotion, and will. Informative speech is often defined by the folksy maxim: “Tell ‘em what you are going to tell ‘em, tell ‘em, and then tell ‘em what you told ‘em!”

When preaching is seen primarily as informative speech, the preacher feels subtle pressure that his sermon must impart new information—the more the better. The related and yet unique venues of classroom and pulpit blur. “Between preaching and teaching there is a difference, though it is true that good preaching is also teaching. The emphasis, nevertheless, is not the same. The word used in the original for *preaching* means *heralding, announcing, proclaiming* . . . *Teaching*, on the other hand, indicates imparting more detailed information regarding the announcement that was made” (*The Gospel of St. Matthew*, Hendriksen, 249).

Paul wasn't anticipating a three-week gap between his exposition of the gospel and his defining of the implications of the gospel in our lives

What happens to the gospel in a more cognitive framework? When viewed from a primarily cognitive vantage point, the gospel seems to be an already known quantity. Unless the sermon is in an evangelistic setting for hearers who don't *know* the cross, the gospel receives only a quick homiletical bow since the assumption is that hearers already *know* it. The sermon hits its stride when expounding details for sanctified living. Subtly, law begins to dominate.

Ignored is that our primary problem in sanctified living is seldom a lack of information. It is the problem of will and power, both of which are supplied by the gospel's transforming power (Philippians 2:13). Our greatest need is not *informing* our minds but *transforming* them (Romans 12:2). Our hearers don't primarily need more room for note taking. They need sermonic space designed for dying and rising. While preaching will always inform to some degree, Lutherans have seen the pulpit as

confronting us with, and comforting and enabling us by, what we already know. In such a preaching dynamic, the gospel more easily finds its rightful place not merely as information, but as the transforming power of the living Vine pulsing through his branches, keeping us vital and fruitful.

Cause #2: Textual Myopia

A second cause of unintentional gospel omissions is misunderstanding what it means to be faithful to our text. It is certainly true that our selected text may not have any explicit gospel whatsoever. For example, encouragement to sanctified living may dominate a hortatory part of an epistle. Many pious biblical truths may be shared, but something has gone wrong when they are preached in isolation from the rest of the letter.



One is unlikely to assert that we are justified by sanctification, but, whether done intentionally or not, that is what happens when we allow the teaching of Christian living, ethical imperatives, and exhortations to holiness to be separated from and to take the place of the clear statement of the gospel. We can preach our hearts out on texts about what we ought to be, what makes a mature church, or what the Holy Spirit wants to do in our lives, but if we do not constantly, in every sermon, show the link between the Spirit's work in us to Christ's work for us, we will distort the message and send people away with a natural theology of salvation by works. Preaching from the epistles demands of the preacher that the message of the document be taken as a whole even if only a selection of texts, or just one verse, is to be expounded. Every sermon should be understandable on its own as a proclamation of Christ. It is no good to say that we dealt with the justification element three weeks ago and now we are following Paul into the imperatives and injunctions for Christian living. Paul wasn't anticipating a three-week gap between his exposition of the gospel and his defining of the implications of the gospel in our lives. Nor was he anticipating that some people would not be present for the reading of the whole epistle and would hear part of its message out of context. (*Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, Graeme Goldsworthy, 237)

Bryan Chapell urges preachers to utilize not only their exegetical magnifying glass but also their fish-eye lens (275) to see how the text relates to its context and discover its place in salvation history. As those who rightly love the biblical languages and the thrill of discovery through careful exegesis, we are, ironically, especially vulnerable to failing to see how the gospel in surrounding context informs and transforms the text. We can't become so enamored with one of God's trees that we fail to see its place in his woods.

Continued from page 2

persons to God's grace, then they may walk into the world with their Savior—and with fresh hope. Whether people depart alone or in the Savior's hand marks the difference between futility and faith, legalism and true obedience, do-goodism and real godliness. (*Christ-Centered Preaching*, 295)



Two Illegal Homiletical Shortcuts to Christocentricity

Unintentional gospel omissions threaten Christocentricity from one side. Waiting to pounce on the other are illegal shortcuts to Christ. While these shortcuts may reveal that a preacher's heart is in the right place, his hermeneutics are disjointed.

The first illegal homiletical shortcut is what Goldsworthy calls "Jesus bits" (xi). Jesus bits are forced *deus ex machina* arrivals of Jesus as he is suddenly lowered, seemingly out of nowhere, into a sermon's flow of thought. This happens especially when we are preaching Old Testament texts which seem to have no explicit connection to redemption. Suddenly, instead of speaking in Moses' words and pictures, we speak as if our text were Volume II of *Christian Dogmatics*. There's no muffling the awkward creaking of the homiletical apparatus as "gospel template #4" is lowered into place. Christ lands awkwardly in the midst of the sermon. Christocentricity appears contrived.

The second illegal homiletical shortcut is resorting to fanciful allegorical interpretations to "find" Jesus in the text. It is again when preaching Old Testament texts that the temptation toward allegorical interpretation is particularly strong. "Misapplication of the Old Testament has had an embarrassing history. One unsatisfying approach lies in using these passages like a sanctified Rorschach test. Interpreters allegorized Old Testament stories to find in them hidden meanings that were not buried in the text, but in their own minds" (*Biblical Preaching*, Robinson, 87-88).

Unlike legitimate exegesis that interprets *texts* in context and sees a prophetic, typological, salvation history, or thematic relationship to Christ, allegory resorts to creating hidden meanings for individual *words*. Left in the dust is the clear meaning of the words in their context. Real lepers healed of a real disease find themselves treated as homiletically unclean as the preacher expounds on "the leprosy of sin." The awed wedding couple at

Can find themselves summarily dismissed from their own wedding feast as it morphs into the Lord's Supper.

Even when the result isn't heresy, grave injury is done to the authority and clarity of the Word. The preacher gives the impression that he must perform hermeneutical sleight of hand to make the Christ-rabbit appear out of the text-hat. Christocentricity seems to spring from the preacher's fertile mind rather than the author's inspired pen. The hearers, proving themselves unwittingly better exegetes than their preacher, are often (wrongly) amazed as they exclaim, "Pastor, I never saw that in this text before!" Such hearers are left to draw the unfortunate conclusion that only those initiated at seminary into these secret rites dare handle the Word. Instead of a clear light shining in a dark place, Scripture becomes a mysterious crystal ball into which only the enlightened dare gaze.



Please share ideas for key issue #3

Use the ideas link at *Grow in Grace* (wlsce.net) to submit resources, ideas, or questions related to key issue #3: *Guarding sufficient time for sermon work in busy schedules*. Of particular interest are resources, tools, and ideas you've found helpful in managing the complexities of a busy parish schedule.

Online Resources for Christocentricity

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

- Two in-depth articles exploring Christocentric preaching
- A review and study guide for Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching*
- Brief reviews of other books treating Christocentricity
- Three sermons (with brief commentary) for individual or group study