

Just Words: Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel

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In writing this book, the author has done the church a significant service. In it he urges us to grasp more fully the richness and variety of the ways that Scripture proclaims the good news of Jesus. “The purpose of this book is to hold before God’s people the fullness of the biblical witness to the Gospel so the Scriptures may truly be found and source not only to faith and life, but also of the language to glorify Christ and to serve His people.” (11).

This book was not written only for pastors. Yet pastors who stand regularly in the pulpit to proclaim the gospel probably have the most to profit from it.

The book is broken down into three major sections. The first section delves into the wisdom of God in communicating the gospel to us in such a rich array of metaphors. The second section divides up many of the gospel metaphors of Scripture under six headings: creation, commerce, legal, personal, sacrificial, and deliverance metaphors. Each of those six parts is further divided up into chapters that identify very specific metaphors within each of the six broader categories. As Preus himself admits (37), his listing is not exhaustive, but he does a good job of opening the eyes of the reader to Scripture’s multi-colored gospel imagery. The book’s final section gives specific encouragement for how capturing more of the gospel metaphors can benefit preaching, evangelism, and even dialogue within the larger visible church.

Here is a quick summary of the most helpful insights of the book:

- In chapter 1 Preus skillfully makes use of the analogy of the two natures in Christ (fully God, fully man) to illustrate that God gives his gospel revelation to us in a way that makes it both a fully divine and fully human word. While some have abused such a distinction to speak against the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, Preus appears to be using that terminology in no other way than what our own systematic theology notes mean when they speak of the supernatural and psychological way the Word works. Preus warns that to “to deny [the divine] nature of the Gospel would be to make it into merely a flat and powerless human word, incapable of doing the divine work of snatching sinners from certain destruction and transferring them into the kingdom of heaven” (20). But, typically, the danger for Confessional Lutherans lies in the other direction. So Preus also warns that “to deny [the human] nature of the Gospel is to rob it of something essential, something necessary for it to be Gospel. To deny this nature of the Gospel would be to make it into an a-historical, a-textual word that is incapable of conveying the divinely powerful Word of God in terms and categories humans can understand” (20).
- Perhaps the most helpful insight in the book resides near the end of chapter 1. There Preus reminds us of something which should be obvious to every Lutheran preacher, but at times eludes us in how we go about our preaching work. Preus reminds us that we use the term justification in two different ways. In Scripture, justification is one particular metaphor among many for proclaiming the truth of what Christ has accomplished for us. In ecclesiastical usage, justification is used more broadly as a term that stands for all the many ways the gospel of forgiveness is proclaimed. For example, when we speak of the difference between justification and

- sanctification, we are not talking about specific biblical metaphors, but two distinct doctrines that are taught by multiple metaphors. The challenge comes when we think that preaching justification (in the broader sense as doctrine) only is occurring when we are using the justification metaphor. Especially since the Lutheran Confessions, and many of our theological writings, draw heavily upon this justification metaphor, it can be easy for the Lutheran preacher almost without thinking to “default” to this one metaphor when proclaiming the gospel no matter what specific metaphors his text may actually use. The result becomes a stilted caricature of what it means to preach the gospel as we reduce the rich variety of gospel words by indulging in a unique form of gospel reductionism.
- In chapter 26 (“God’s Mission in Words”) Preus eloquently notes how the rich variety of gospel metaphors serves the universal mission Christ has entrusted to his church. While some of the gospel metaphors may be easier to proclaim in some cultures than others, the sheer number of the different images the Spirit has used to proclaim the gospel gives us multiple ways to seek to communicate with people from every culture. This reviewer would only add that the different people sitting before any pastor on any given Sunday also benefit from hearing a wide variety of gospel metaphors. With each metaphor the Spirit provides preachers and hearers with another angle on the beauty of the diamond of the gospel.

As much as this reviewer enjoyed the basic concept of the book and many of its specific insights, there was much that also left him uncomfortable.

- There were a few times where Preus claimed specific distinctions between different metaphors that just don’t seem to stand up to a closer scrutiny of the Greek and Hebrew words behind each metaphor. Perhaps the most evident example of this would be in chapters 16 and 17 when he seeks to draw a distinction between reconciliation and peace. While he notes (146) how close in meaning the two sets of terms are, he makes the claim that the reconciliation metaphor has more to do with separation while the peace metaphor has more to do with friction. However, it is the opinion of this reviewer that both separation and friction can be found in the etymology and usage of the Greek and Hebrew words behind both metaphors. If a distinction is to be attempted at all, reconciliation stresses our change of status before God as God declared natural born enemies to be friends in his Son. Peace, on the other hand, points to the harmonious completeness and fullness of the relationship that follows because of that restored status. Another way to say this is that reconciliation is the cause and peace the effect. Notice, for example, the way peace and reconciliation play off each other in Ephesians 2:14-18. There peace – between God and us and also between human beings – is the result of the reconciling work of God.
- There are some large sections of chapter 20 (“Expiation/Priestly Mediation”) where Preus’ line of argument is troubling. In that chapter Preus wisely opens the challenging discussion about speaking of God’s wrath over sin in a tolerant postmodern age. But on page 272 he confuses the related biblical concepts of punishment and chastisement as well as making the unqualified claim that “God’s anger is for the good of people.” Both points confuse law and gospel. For a fuller discussion of this challenge, please see the complete study guide for Preus’ book also available on this web site.
- This review is convinced that at least three times biblical anthropopathic language (describing God with human emotions/actions) is pressed beyond the biblical point. On page 143, Preus’ last endnote opens the door to take God’s “grief” over sin well beyond the point of comparison. Preus then steps through that same door on page 170 where in a similar context he speaks of our sins bringing about hurt in God (which then, at least in part, he believes explains God’s anger over our sin). Similarly, in chapter 18 (“Forgiveness”) the biblical concept of God’s “forgetting” was pressed in a way that can easily lead to troubling sensitive consciences. Making “forgiving” and “forgetting” two separate actions every easily confuses the biblical point. A fuller discussion of this point is in the study guide.
- In chapter 5, as the author dealt with the metaphor of salvation, it seemed to this reader that Preus far too quickly moved past the concern for our physical needs that Jesus demonstrated in his miracles. While Preus is certainly accurate in stating that every miracle of Jesus was also a “sign” that pointed to something greater, Preus’ rapid retreat from dealing seriously with Jesus’ concern

for physical needs seemed to be indulging in a bit of the “spiritualizing” about which he later (215) very briefly warns. In particular, the last endnote of chapter five (61), which deals with the healing of the ten lepers, seems to lean in that direction.

- The author, in an endnote on page 143, makes a curious observation about “objective justification.” He says that “it would be preferable to refer to this comforting teaching as ‘universal or cosmic reconciliation’ to better reflect the actual language of the Bible.” While “universal reconciliation” would be a fine title for this doctrine, it has no more of a claim to using the “actual language of the Bible” than “universal justification.” Both metaphors of Scripture are used with clear references to the universal nature of Christ’s accomplished work (see Romans 4:24, and Romans 5:15-19).
- The last concern is merely stylistic. The opening of each chapter takes the form of a “real life” narrative. There is much wisdom in that design. We live in a storied culture, and there is considerable scriptural precedent in using narratives to illustrate the intersection of human sin and divine grace. However, many of the narratives felt a bit forced and contrived.

None of these stated concerns should be read as a discouragement to read and benefit from this helpful book. The basic premise of this book is critical for gospel proclamation. This book assists any preacher who is seeking to reflect more accurately the rich variety of terminology Scripture uses to proclaim the gospel. Preus is inviting those who preach to enjoy the rich and varied banquet of gospel proclamation that each unique text sets before them. Our preaching will be the richer if we take Preus’ encouragement to heart.