

To Correctly Handle the Word of Truth *That They Would See Him*

By Jonathan Scharf

Mitch thought it was a nervous habit. He had noticed it ever since this woman he was dating started bringing him to her Lutheran church. The preacher would rub the top of the pulpit with his hand as he preached. He certainly never started a sermon without his hand feeling the grain of the wood. And it didn't change as Mitch went through Bible Information Class and got to know the pastor a bit more and then became a member. It got to the point where it seemed natural for the preacher to be rubbing the pulpit as he preached. It wasn't until Mitch became an elder with the responsibility of helping to set some things up for worship that he noticed it. There in the wood, where the faithful pastor so often rubbed, were words scratched into the surface. "That they would see him."

The only other thing I know about Mitch's former LCMS pastor was that he steered Mitch to find a WELS church when he moved to Georgia because he was confident of what would be taught there. But even with so little to go on, I think I like the guy. "That they would see him." That they would see Jesus. What a motto! What a great reminder for us preachers!

"That they would see him."

It calls to my mind another great preacher. The apostle Paul once summed up his message: "But we preach Christ crucified."¹ And while that's a great verse to emphasize in this article, it hits home even more when you consider its context. It carves in wood the motto, "that they would see him," as the job of the preacher.

You know the section. Paul appeals to us in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that we agree with one another and that there be no divisions, that we be perfectly united in mind and thought. He reports hearing of divisions, people liking one preacher over

another, battling between traditions and ceremonies and rituals, finding all sorts of ways to exalt themselves by exalting their pastor.

"But we preach Christ crucified."

And as hard as it would have been for me to do, Paul refuses to play into it. He refuses to let them compare speaking styles or even personal history with the leaders. He says those outside of the church look for things like that ("Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom"). But not us. "We preach Christ crucified." Our preaching is all "that they would see Jesus."

I wish. As easy as it is to say and agree to, wrestling with this topic has made me realize even more how difficult it is for me to do. I've failed too often. True story: just yesterday I went along with my vicar to watch him doing his first shut-in calls. On one of them, I listened to one of our more outspoken shut-ins tell him how much she loved reading his first sermon when it came to her email. She then went on and on about how she always loves reading my associate's sermons. Sounds great, right? Try telling that to my ugly pride that wanted to shout out, "What about mine? They asked me to write for *Preach the Word*. You should like mine too!" Thankfully, I knew that wasn't the kind of thing you should say out loud, so I didn't. But that didn't stop it from going through my mind.

This article is also available at blogs.wels.net/worship. We welcome your comments or questions.

Then today I sat down with my notes to write and felt the edge of that double-edged sword. Does my pride actually want people to like my preaching more than my brother's in the ministry? Am I trying to get some to follow Paul and others Cephas? "Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"²

In the July/August 2016 *Preach the Word*, Pastor Patterson encouraged telling stories to tell The Story, but warned about stories that don't "let them see Jesus." Thanks, Don. I always need that reminder. As simple as it sounds, correctly handling the word of truth demands that I preach "that they would see him." Maybe I should carve that into our ambo. At least, let me keep it before me as I write. Let them see him.

When we write and preach our sermons with the goal that they are well-crafted and beautiful, moving and memorable, we miss it. When we struggle and sweat to write and preach well-crafted and beautiful, moving and memorable sermons so that the hearers see Jesus, that's what we're talking about.

Do you see the difference? It's in the heart. It's the difference between using the tools of communication to show how good I am at communicating and using all the tools in our possession to show the simplicity of Jesus' love. That's why Paul goes on and on about the wisdom of the world and foolishness of God. That's why he has us consider³ what we were by human standards (not much) so that we can praise God for what he has made us: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

So Paul goes on explaining that he didn't come with eloquence or human wisdom. He did that on purpose: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."⁴ Again, his goal was "that they would see Jesus," not him, "that they would see Jesus," not be impressed by the followers he's won, "that they would see Jesus," not his amazing skills. May that be our goal as well.

Do they see him?

Last issue, I promised that I'd share with you some of my interview with six "seekers" who have found Lutheran preaching after listening to seemingly everything else. In one of the questions, I asked them to contrast what they've heard from WELS preachers⁵ with whatever else they've heard.

Tom said, for him, listening to preaching now was "No longer about searching, but now about growing." You see, years ago, he came to Bible Information Class (BIC) because we showed up at his door at the right time. He had been growing in the frustration of not feeling like he was being taught the truth where he was worshiping, and so he was going less often. Before we had even completed the BIC materials, he had purchased his own copy of the Confessions. In fact, he so appreciated the stability and certainty of teaching and preaching he was now hearing that, on the Sunday of his confirmation, he rolled up his sleeve and showed me his new tattoo of Luther's seal.



After Tom explained that key difference in what he was receiving, one of the other gentlemen at the table explained why that was. He had been trained to preach in his former church (same denomination as Tom's had been). He summed up the training to prepare sermons with a three-step method.

- First, empathize with what people are going through.
- Second, discuss current events that relate.
- Third, find a Bible passage that says something similar.

Another former preacher (very different denomination) agreed and said his seminary training was much the same. They both discussed how rare it was to hear expository preaching that starts with a text and lets that speak. But they also said it is the only way that lets God's Word speak instead of trying to make it say what you want it to say.

Here's where Donna jumped in, having been what she describes as "all in" in several different denominations previously in her searching. She described looking back at what she had been taught in the past and now asking herself, "How did you fall for that?" She related that even with decades of searching, she had no idea that something like Lutheran law/gospel preaching and teaching existed. She believed what her pastors had said because she didn't know any better. She described how natural it sounded then, but how horrendous to her now, when her preacher would say things like: "For the sake of time, let me tell you what I believe" or "Let me tell you what this says," instead of letting the Word say what it says so simply. Donna kept coming back to that question: "How did I fall for that?" I'll say this. It was an understatement when she said, "It's not like I'm dumb."

Consistently in our discussion, the entire panel was nodding in agreement with various comments, even though the six of them represented at least five different denominations. There seemed to be much in common with "what else" is out there. Their experiences were eerily similar. They echoed Donna's thought:

“How did I fall for that?”

And the answer they came up with? It was a difference in philosophy of preaching to which they had become accustomed. They weren't aware there was anything better out there. In chapter 2 of 1 Corinthians, right after resolving to know nothing but Jesus, Paul says this, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.” My panel described their faith that had too often rested on “what the preacher said” instead of “what God's Word said.” What a great reminder for me to make sure I stayed in that second category. What a great reminder to make sure that every time I preach, my goal be to “let them see Jesus.” That happens in expository preaching, because, after all, as Jesus said, “These are the Scriptures that testify about me.”⁶

In Walther's *Law and Gospel*, he addressed this same discussion my panel had 130 years earlier. Here's how he spoke to their conversation: “When you hear some sectarian preach, you may say, ‘what he said was the truth,’ and yet you do not feel satisfied. Here is the key for unlocking this mystery: the preacher did not rightly divide Law and Gospel, and hence everything went wrong” (32).

In this issue we've focused more on the gospel side, letting the gospel predominate. I pray that you might have that vision of the preacher with his hand on the etched wood in your mind as I do when I consider my sermons. “Let them see him.”

Next issue, we'll wrestle some more with this correct handling of the Word of Truth and highlight especially our use of the law. Until then, let's celebrate the privilege and pleasure we have in the simplicity of our job. We just tell them about Jesus. Here's how Luther describes it. (A portion this quote can be found on the base of the Luther statue at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.)

I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing: the Word did everything.⁷

That Word lets them see him.

*“Woe to me if I don't preach the Gospel”
(1 Corinthians 9:16)*



¹ 1 Corinthians 1:23

² 1 Corinthians 2:20

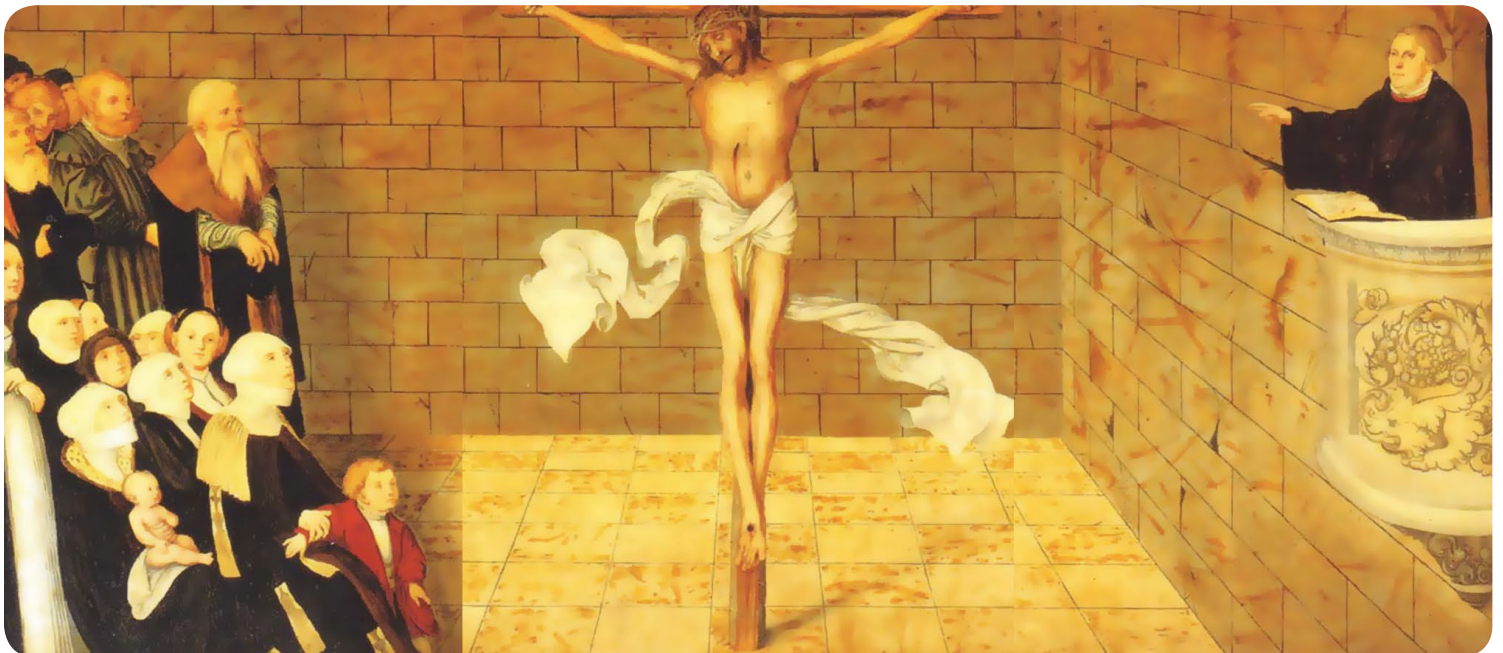
³ 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:2

⁵ Permit a disclaimer explaining the way the question was worded. Of course, it is not only WELS preaching that proclaims Christ, and there are plenty of WELS pastors that from time to time get in the way of “letting them see Jesus.” It is not the WELSness of it, but the Christ-centered nature of preaching we're discussing. For the sake of the question though—I asked them to contrast the nature of preaching they heard from our pastors and vicars with “everything else,” which in their experience, was not so Christ-centered.

⁶ John 5:39

⁷ Luther's Works vol. 51, pg. 77



Walther's Law & Gospel, pg. 135

In the first place, the sects neither believe nor teach a real and complete reconciliation of man with God because they regard our heavenly Father as being a God very hard to deal with, whose heart must be softened by passionate cries and bitter tears. That amounts to a denial of Jesus Christ, who has long ago turned the heart of God to men by reconciling the entire world with Him. God does nothing by halves. In Christ He loves all sinners without exception. The sins of every sinner are canceled. Every debt has been liquidated. There is no longer anything that a poor sinner has to fear when he approaches his heavenly Father, with whom he has been reconciled by Christ.

Four Branches

As you constantly hone your preaching craft, take advantage of the new resource put out by the Seminary's "Grow in Grace." Beginning September, 2016, the "Four Branches" monthly newsletter has been emailed to all pastors in our ministerium. Each issue features articles on Biblical, Historical, Systematic, and Practical Theology. You can access the previous issues and articles at www.wls.wels.net/grow-in-grace/the-four-branches-review.

Lectionary on Google Calendars

Three new calendars for upcoming years A, B, and C are available at worship.welsrc.net. More info at welstechwiki.gapps.wels.net/planning-policy/lectionary-gcal. For each Sunday and Major Festival the calendar entry includes

- Lessons and Psalm, including Supplemental Readings
- Prayer of the Day
- Verse of the Day
- Hymn of the Day
- Church year color

That they would see him—an example:

With each issue I'll try to include a snippet from a sermon on an upcoming text that clearly, simply, and textually declares law and gospel. In this issue let's look forward to Christmas Eve. This is from a sermon on Luke 2 with the theme: "Mary did you know?" Earlier the sermon explored the reality behind the front we put up at Christmas and in our lives. The full sermon is at: worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-20.

The sign that your Savior is here...the sign that God has come to keep his promises and save you, is that you will find him wrapped in cloths and lying in an animals' feed trough.

Why? Because he came here to know trouble. He came here to know our trouble. All that junk we described in our lives—the broken relationships, the guilty feelings, our coping mechanisms and the problems they cause—all of them—we brought on ourselves. God promised that the wages of sin is death, and we sinned—as a race and as individuals. We fall short of perfect love and generosity. We fall short of clean living and holy speech. We fall short of pure intentions and clean motives. We sin. So we have death and all its symptoms coming—we earned the guilty feelings and the shame, the sickness, and loss.

But not him. That child in the manger was pure—not because he was a cute little kid, but because he was and is God's eternal Son—the Great I AM. So he was born without the failure we entered with. He just had to endure its frustration because he came to be our substitute, to be what the angel called him, our Savior.

That's why the angels in the fields could not help but trumpet the truth, breaking out in song—glory to God in the highest—peace on earth. That's why the shepherds could not help but share it. God sent his Son to be our Savior.