

## To Correctly Handle the Word of Truth

# *Preach Text-Specific and Hearer-Specific Specific Gospel*

By Jonathan Scharf

"He is properly prepared who believes these words: 'Given' and 'Poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.' But whoever does not believe these words or doubts them is not prepared, because the words 'for you' require nothing but hearts that believe."<sup>1</sup> I'm sure you recognize this excerpt. In describing the miraculous gift of Holy Communion, Luther zeroes in on the heart of what is so spectacular in the Sacrament: "For you." For me.

"God so loved the world..." is only valuable to me because I am included in that "world." "Christ is risen!" is only a celebration for me because that same Christ promised me, "Because I live, you also will live."<sup>2</sup> Jesus being seated at the Father's right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come, with all things under his feet, is only wonderful because this all happened "for the church," of which I am a part.<sup>3</sup>

To correctly handle the word of truth, we must preach text-specific AND hearer-specific specific gospel. In other words, we strive to mine from the text the clear good news of salvation and present it to our people where they're at after hearing specific law preaching.<sup>4</sup> It's more than the "Jesus drop"<sup>5</sup> shortcut that is so tempting after you've stung your hearers with specific law. It's the comfort *this* text and *this* context gives. It's the gospel. It's God's love in *this* situation. When the preacher of that gospel knows his people, his goal is to get them to understand that this grace is "for you." He wants to drive them to want to hear it again and read their Bible more.

But how? I love how one of my brother pastors described his definition of a good preacher: "He's been eating it up so his breath smells like the Bible." So to preach text-specific and hearer-

specific specific gospel, you first have to know both—the text and your hearers. The text includes not just the pericope at hand, but the whole of Scripture. You've heard it before for your personal walk with God—but the side effects of it are powerful in your preaching as well. Eat up Scripture so that your breath smells like the Bible.

*"He's been eating it up so his breath smells like the Bible."*

Consider Peter's sermon on Pentecost. This section of Scripture is coming up as the first reading in Year A for Easter 2 and 3, so let's take a walk through it. Let's learn from a powerful preacher, preaching an effective sermon. I don't call it effective because 3000 were baptized that day as a result of it. Peter's sermon is effective because it clearly proclaims law and gospel. What numerical effect God chooses is up to him, thank God!

So, set the stage: Fifty days after the resurrection, ten days after the Ascension. The disciples have been on that roller coaster between fear and faith. Peter has mourned his failure and been so personally and preciously restored with Jesus' "Feed my lambs."<sup>6</sup> Then their world and their city were rocked by the sound of the wind. Fire marked those who were speaking. The crowd was in

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turmoil, confused and trying to make sense of what was going on. That's where the appointed lesson begins.

**"Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd."<sup>7</sup>** (Pause for a moment and consider the power of the gospel for Peter that he was even able to do this. If you haven't read footnote 6 yet, do that now.) Peter's next words aren't included in the assigned pericope (although they do show up on Pentecost Sunday a few weeks later). Basically, Peter debunks the *drunk disciples* hypothesis and explains that the amazing thing they are seeing is actually a fulfillment of prophecy. Joel had said the Holy Spirit would be active like this until the end, the Day of the Lord's Judgment. Peter then concludes his quotation of Joel: **"And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."**

Basically, we've now heard Peter's introduction (catching the attention of the hearers and dispelling reasons not to listen) and his text. So what does he say now to these hearers whose attention he has?

**<sup>22</sup>"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know."** Peter draws in his hearers. They couldn't help but agree that, yes, God did some special things through Jesus. Time and again in the Gospels that was made clear as "news about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee."<sup>8</sup> As for Jerusalem, "The whole city was stirred"<sup>9</sup> when they saw what he did. Peter's preaching, inspired by the Spirit, is hearer-specific.

He goes on: **<sup>23</sup>"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."** Not only did Peter put the hearers at the scene, he preached specific law. Even though you couldn't help but admit that Jesus was something special from God, you put him to death. Peter pulls no punches in specific law for that particular group—the one in Jerusalem that had just committed this atrocity.

As the law is specific, it serves as foil to the good news. You killed him, but he didn't stay dead: **<sup>24</sup>"God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."** Since Jesus was who he was, death could not hold the Holy One. But notice, Peter doesn't just let this float out there. He now starts working to get the hearers to understand the ramifications of this information and apply those ramifications to their lives. He starts by quoting their own source of authority, God's Word. In fact, he uses David's prophecy about the Holy One who would not see decay or be abandoned to the grave.<sup>10</sup> Then he goes on.

**<sup>29</sup>"Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. <sup>30</sup>But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. <sup>31</sup>Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay."** So he shows them proof of

this good news from the Word. Now he will start to show them how they are brought into the celebration of it.

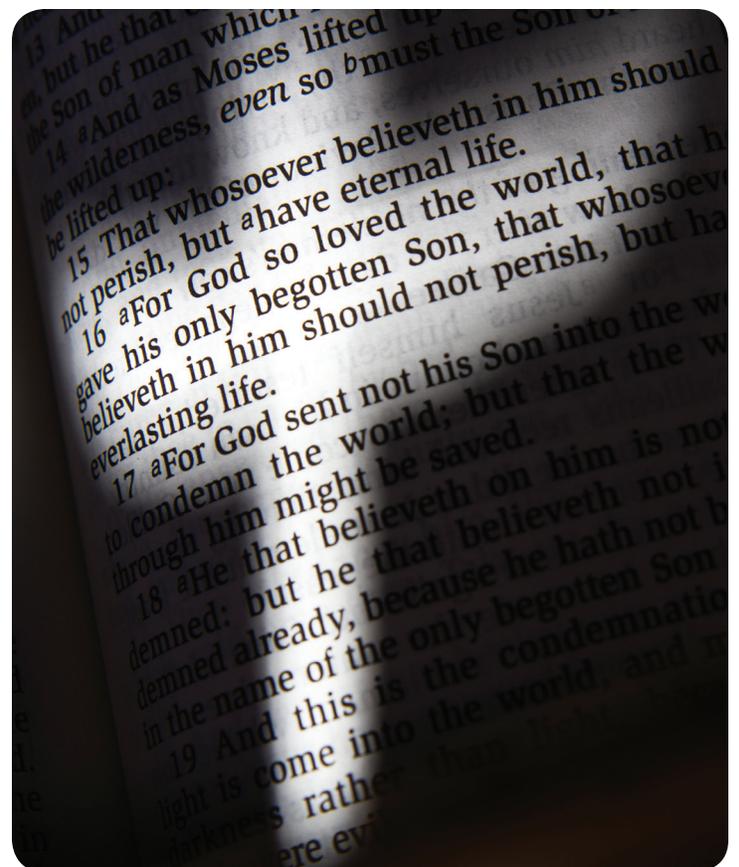
**<sup>32</sup>"God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact."** There is no disputing this. If he wasn't alive, they all know the body would have been produced. The Word had spread. You can imagine Peter making that sweeping gesture, "We are all witnesses of the fact." He goes on celebrating the ascension in verses 33-35 and then concludes:

**<sup>36</sup>"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."** The text from Joel that Peter started with ended: "Everyone who calls on the name of the *Lord* will be saved." Now Peter ends by proving who this *Lord* is. And the people got it. It was Jesus who walked and worked among them. But they killed him. The law and gospel had both very specifically been preached. So they react:

**<sup>37</sup>When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"**

**<sup>38</sup>Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup>The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."**

**<sup>40</sup>With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."**





<sup>41</sup>Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

For three thousand people, the Holy Spirit worked through Peter's words that struck home in their hearts, and there was faith. Of course, we aren't speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit like Peter was. But we can certainly learn from how God used Peter and we can study and prepare to follow his lead in preaching text-specific and hearer-specific specific gospel.

We can do that by asking ourselves and asking our texts some questions about what is specific to our texts. Your hearers know that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. Yet in his Word he finds thousands of ways to describe how astounding that love is, and how astounding it is "for me." Try these on for size:

- What is unique about the good news in this text? What words or phrases or pictures set it apart from other ways I've heard the gospel explained?
- What is surprising about God's reaction or action here? What factors make it surprising?
- How have hymn-writers handled this text?<sup>11</sup>
- If the message of the cross is foolishness to the world, what would the world hate about this aspect of Jesus and what he has done for me?
- How is the gospel offensive in this text? In other words, in talking about this at a Christmas party with my wife's co-worker,

what might I be tempted to soften and "make sense of" so that they don't think we're weird?<sup>12</sup>

*"In his Word he finds thousands of ways to describe how astounding that love is, and how astounding it is "for me."*

Christ has died! Christ is Risen! Christ will come again!<sup>13</sup> For you. May God bless your preparation and your preaching of text-specific and hearer-specific specific gospel.

## Walther's Thesis IX

I've found for my hearers in the Bible Belt that Walther's Thesis IX with comments have helped me preach hearer-specific specific gospel for those whose religious upbringing has been obedience driven and who have been taught that the power of their prayers is in the power of their praying.

Thesis IX—"In the fifth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when sinners who have been struck down and terrified by the Law are directed, not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to their own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that they may win their way into a state of grace; in other words, when they are told to keep on praying and struggling until they feel that God has received them into grace." Pg. 127

"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." Pg. 135



<sup>1</sup> Luther's Small Catechism. I was reminded of the importance of this by a comment from my panel of former "seekers" who found great joy in properly divided law and gospel. Cindy spoke of the difference, saying, "Now, for me, it's not always trying to figure it out, 'What's he doing with me?' anymore. It's just being confident that he is for me."

## Text-specific and hearer-specific gospel—an example:

With each issue I'll try to include a snippet of a sermon on an upcoming text that clearly, simply, and textually declares law and gospel. In this issue let's look ahead to Easter 3A and a sermon on Peter's Pentecost sermon. The theme of this sermon on Acts 2:14a, 32-41 is "Cut to the Heart!"<sup>14</sup>

In this Acts lesson, Peter does the same thing. He calls his hearers murderers—but then he answers the questions their hearts can't help but ask: "What can we do?" And his answer isn't something to do but what is done for them, to them. "Repent!" He says. "Change your heart."

Isn't that what God just did with the power of His word, changing them from those who thought they had it all going on to those begging for God's answer? And then Peter says, "Be baptized"—again something that only has power because of what God has put into it. Look at how he describes what happens:

**"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.**

That's not something their work could get. That's only a gift from the one who died to pay for that forgiveness and prayed that they might receive it. Did you ever think about that? Your baptism is God answering Jesus' prayer from the cross—"Father, forgive them." And Peter goes on:

And you will receive the *gift* of the Holy Spirit. You receive the *gift* of faith—something that only comes through the Holy Spirit. So when they asked what they had to do—Peter just shows them what has been done. In fact, he calls it a promise. Look at verse 39: **The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.**"

As much as only God's law can cut to our hearts through all of our defenses and excuses, notice how Peter makes clear that only the gospel, the good news of Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection can cut to the heart and heal.

Just like in a surgery, the surgeon has to cut in order to fix what is wrong, removing what is blocking or broken before they can replace what is needed. Praise God that he has given his Word and has given us the opportunity to hear his Word and take it to heart, that it might cut out all of our foolishness. He then replaces what has been cut out with the power and love of God, the forgiveness he won and paid for fully and freely, the position as his child he earned and gave to you in your baptism, the sweet, sweet healing balm of the gospel. Like the hymnwriter put it:

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;  
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

May God's law always cut to the heart, so that we may always cherish the healing Gospel truth that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Alleluia. Amen.

<sup>2</sup> John 14:19

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4:20-23

<sup>4</sup> See PTW Vol. 20, No. 3.

<sup>5</sup> That generic mention of Jesus' work without doing the work of wrestling with the text and finding the unique way that God's love for sinners is evident.

<sup>6</sup> John 21 – Talk about specific gospel for me as a preacher when I consider all the times I haven't perfectly preached specific gospel! Peter, in his self-focus and desire for power, had preached some bad sermons. In the High Priest's courtyard his sermon was self-preservation. In the upper room, it was fear instead of victory. I have preached some bad sermons, so have you—in our preparation for them, in our attitude about them, in our failure to apply them to ourselves and live them. So what does Jesus do? He makes Peter a meal and then shows him how unconditional, how certain, how promising the gospel is. Making sure Peter knows how personally it is for him ("Do you love me?") he preaches love and forgiveness and promise and purpose and power in giving him the command: "Preach!" Peter you are so forgiven that you will now be my washed and cleansed perfect representative. "Feed my lambs." Sound familiar, shepherds? Restored by Jesus, and fed by Word and sacrament: "Preach the Word." That's how much he loves you.

<sup>7</sup> The appointed readings are: Acts 2:14a, 22-32 for Easter 2A and Acts 2:14a, 32-41 for Easter 3A.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 1:28

<sup>9</sup> Mathew 21:10

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 16:8-11 quoted in Acts 2:25-28.

<sup>11</sup> I've found so often that our hymn-writers have ways of phrasing things that so succinctly get to the heart of the good news in a text. I've been rewarded during my text studies, even just for my personal growth, by checking Mike Schultz's index to scripture references in hymns, *Christian Worship Manual*, pages 939-971.

<sup>12</sup> Not that we ever would soften it, but when is it that the little voice in your head is shouting "Danger!"?

<sup>13</sup> An acclamation quoted in "This is the Threefold Truth" by Fred Pratt Green, CW 406.

<sup>14</sup> The full text of the sermon can be found at <http://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-20/>.