

A METHOD FOR DISCOVERING AND APPLYING THE SPECIFIC GOSPEL
IN PREACHING AT YOUR SPECIFIC CONGREGATION

BY

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Abstract

Within confessional Lutheran circles, the term “specific law” has a well-understood and widely-recognized meaning in the field of homiletics. In recent decades, the term “specific gospel” has grown in popularity. However, there is evidence that this term means different things to different people. Recent research seems to be leading toward a more crystallized definition. However, once the term has been defined, what is the practical usage of it? How does the preacher apply the idea of preaching “specific gospel” in his week-to-week sermon writing? The example of apostolic preaching in the book of Acts shows that a solid definition of the specific gospel can be achieved. Furthermore, this definition suggests several clarifying questions that can be included in a pastor's text study. By diligently searching out the answers for these questions, the preacher will more quickly and more accurately arrive at the heart of gospel preaching in the text before him and how he can apply it to his specific congregation.

Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
Modern homiletics textbooks and essays.....	2
The Lutheran Confessions.....	8
Apostolic preaching in the book of Acts.....	11
Richness and variety in gospel expression.....	17
The Foundations of Faithful, Biblical Preaching.....	22
The Specific Gospel.....	23
The specific gospel points specifically to Christ as the only cure for sin.....	23
The specific gospel directly proclaims Christ's cure of forgiveness, peace, and joy.....	25
The specific gospel provides Christ's cure for the specific law of the text.....	26
The specific gospel uses the unique language of the specific text to provide Christ's cure.....	29
Discovering and Applying the Specific Gospel in Your Specific Congregation.....	34
Start with the specific law.....	34
Questions regarding the text.....	35
Questions regarding your congregation.....	38
Applying the Questions to the Gospel of the Day for End Time, Series B.....	41
Structure of the text study summaries.....	41
Reformation.....	42
Last Judgment.....	48
Saints Triumphant.....	53
Christ the King.....	60
Conclusion.....	67
Bibliography.....	69

Introduction

Lutheran preachers are familiar and comfortable with the term “specific law.” There is a widely understood definition for the term. Over time, the term “specific gospel” has also increased in use. However, where “specific law” enjoys consensus of understanding, some confusion has been expressed over the precise meaning of “specific gospel.” This is evidenced by the fact that Pastor Guy Marquardt was asked by the AZ-CA District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod to present a paper in 2014 on the meaning of “specific gospel.”¹

Pastor Marquardt's paper is very helpful toward exploring the matter of the “specific gospel.” However, even Pastor Marquardt indicates that the term itself remains somewhat slippery.² A widely-accepted definition probably remains elusive at the time of this writing. Probably for this reason, there is also a lack of practical guidelines demonstrating how to discover and use the specific gospel in the process of researching and writing a sermon.

This thesis seeks to propose a concrete definition for the term “specific gospel.” It will do this by demonstrating how the apostles preached the gospel in their sermons as recorded in the book of Acts. From these examples, the thesis will draw direct parallels and conclusions toward defining the term “specific gospel” and for using the “specific gospel” in the preacher's specific congregation. Support will also be drawn from the Lutheran Confessions and from modern homiletics textbooks and essays. The result will be a series of questions that the preacher can include in his regular text study and that will lead him to more quickly and more accurately pinpoint the specific gospel and apply it to his hearers. Finally, some practical demonstrations of this technique will be given in a series of text study summaries for End Time, Series B.³

Therefore, the intended result of this thesis is to provide pastors with a conceptual framework and practical tools for discovering and applying the specific gospel in their weekly sermon studies, and applying it to their specific congregations.

1 Cf. Guy Marquardt, “Christus pro Nobis: Preaching Specific Gospel” (presented at the California Pastoral Conference, St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, Citrus Heights, CA, 2014).

2 Cf. *Ibid.*, 11, cf. esp. “Conclusion.”

3 Churches within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod often use a three-year lectionary based on the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship's (ILCW) three year lectionary series. Years A, B, and C of the lectionary focus on readings from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke respectively.

Literature Review

Modern homiletics textbooks and essays

Scope of literature

Preaching in the church is a topic that has maintained wide and enduring interest. The Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library contains 426 items on the topic of preaching.⁴ A search on Amazon or Google would render more material than a single human being could read in a lifetime. The literature reviewed in this thesis can only hope to be a small sample of what is out there. For that reason, the scope of the literature has been limited to reputable sources with a high view of Scripture and an appreciation for expository preaching.

Preaching in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) is based on the presupposition that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God. WELS pastors confess that it is the only authoritative norm for faith and life and is completely trustworthy in all it says. Therefore, most sources chosen were written by authors that approach Scripture with the same presupposition. However, a small minority of sources did seem to come from a different approach to Scripture.

Most sources also approached the subject of preaching either with a respect for or an outright advocacy for what is called “expository preaching.” Expository preaching, by definition, is based on a portion of Scripture. Bryan Chapell defines the term in this way: “Expository preaching attempts to present and apply the truths of a specific biblical passage.”⁵ Naturally, a preacher can only make a proper attempt to “present and apply the truths of a specific biblical passage”⁶ after an in-depth study of the chosen passage. Therefore, expository preaching is also defined by a careful study of the text involved. In the words of C.F.W. Walther, “A genuine sermon comes about only after all the spiritual and intellectual energy of a truly believing preacher has been applied to the utmost, after passionate prayer, after all earthly cares have been chased from his mind, and after the preacher has been freed from all vain desires. This is a difficult task.”⁷

4 Cf. the [WLS Library Catalog](http://janus.wls.wels.net/uhtbin/cgiisirsi.exe/g8s2imcigY/0/0/49) (<http://janus.wls.wels.net/uhtbin/cgiisirsi.exe/g8s2imcigY/0/0/49>).

5 Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 30.

6 Ibid.

7 C. F. W. Walther, *Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House,

Areas of general consensus

Among the sources consulted, there is a strong consensus that all of Scripture proclaims Christ and his work of salvation as its central message. In other words, there is widespread agreement that no biblical text can be divorced from the message of forgiveness found in Jesus Christ, both his vicarious life and his vicarious death. No alternate message, and certainly no alternate savior, is found in the pages of Scripture. Clowney expresses one example of this assertion when he writes:

Not only do the four Gospels tell the story of Jesus. So do the five books of Moses, who gave God's promise of the Prophet to come. So does the rest of the Old Testament. Remember that the apostle Paul, preaching in every synagogue from the Scriptures, was preaching from the scrolls of the Old Testament. Paul gave the apostolic witness to Jesus in whom all the Old Testament Scripture is fulfilled.⁸

Sources also widely agree that effective preaching on this gospel promise of forgiveness through Jesus depends strongly on identifying a specific sinful condition of mankind or sinful condition of the fallen creation that the text exposes. Bryan Chapell, whose work is influential across denominations, writes of a “Fallen Condition Focus.” “The Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God's people to glorify and enjoy him. . . . The more specific the statement of the FCF early in the sermon, the more powerful and poignant the message will be.”⁹ Within Lutheran circles, preachers speak of the “specific law” of the text, a concept very similar to Chapell's Fallen Condition Focus. Gerlach & Balge explain that “specific law” reaches beyond the outward and takes up the heart of sinful behavior. “Specific law preaching requires an in-depth rather than a surface treatment of human behavior.”¹⁰

Another thread found throughout the literature is an exhortation to use the full range of gospel language found in the Bible. There is a recognition that the Bible uses many different

2010), 272.

8 Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2003), 9.

9 Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 50–1.

10 Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, *Preach the Gospel* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982), 8.

words, phrases, and metaphors to convey the forgiveness, hope, comfort, joy, peace, and encouragement found in Christ. Deutschlander, for instance, writes, “Always the center of the sermon will be Christ; the rays that emanate from the heart of the Lamb however are manifold, perhaps inexhaustible.”¹¹ Preachers, therefore, are encouraged to make use of this entire toolbox of terminology provided by the Holy Spirit, rather than sticking to just a few personal favorites. An example of this kind of exhortation comes from Jeske: “Basically, a preacher has the same message to present Sunday after Sunday, year after year. If his preaching is not to become monotonous and repetitious, if his proclamation is to remain fresh and vigorous over a period of years, he will do well to copy the Scripture's many-splendored presentations of the rescue and release Christ brings us.”¹²

Areas of debate

Despite some common threads throughout the literature, there is disagreement on the precise scope of “the gospel” and what it means in a sermon to preach “the gospel.” Chapell's Fallen Condition Focus and the Lutheran church's specific law provide a well-defined framework for preaching of the law from the text. Less well-defined is what the gospel analogue to specific law should be. In Lutheran circles, the term “specific gospel” is sometimes used, but there is not widespread agreement on its meaning.

Gerlach & Balge define “specific gospel” by writing, “Every sermon will contain 'specific gospel'; that is, it will clearly present the way of salvation for the benefit of anyone who does not yet know and confess Christ as Savior and Lord.”¹³ For them, specific gospel seems to be something like a short primer on the basic truths of how we are saved through Jesus' life and death. Both Greidanus and Goldsworthy, however, indicate that gospel preaching is satisfied by exploring the person, work, or even just the teaching of Jesus.

When we think of preaching Christ, therefore, we must think not only of preaching Jesus' crucifixion but also His resurrection, His ascension, His present rule at

11 Daniel Deutschlander, “Marry, Mine, and Mind the Text,” 2006, 1,

http://welswwd.weebly.com/uploads/1/0/4/1/10412170/marry_mine_mind_the_text.pdf.

12 John C. Jeske, “Communicate the Gospel More Effectively” (presented at the Wisillowa Pastoral Conference, Belleville, Illinois, 1980), 4, <http://wlsessays.net/files/JeskeCommunicate.pdf>.

13 Gerlach and Balge, *Preach the Gospel*, 4.

the right hand of the Father, and His coming again to establish God's kingdom in perfection.

But even this definition of preaching the person and/or work of Jesus Christ is hermeneutically too confining for preaching every Old Testament passage with integrity. For example in preaching Old Testament wisdom literature most texts cannot be linked legitimately to the person or work of Christ. We need a broader definition of "preaching Christ," a definition that encompasses also the teaching of Jesus.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Rossow provides yet another term, the "literal Gospel." He explains the "literal Gospel" this way:

By the phrase "the literal Gospel" I mean those things that Jesus did during His life on earth--or which were done to Him--that contributed directly to accomplishing our eternal salvation. They are actual happenings, historical events, like His incarnation, His birth, His life, His circumcision, His baptism, His temptation in the wilderness, His ministry, His suffering and death, His resurrection, His ascension. All of these were key steps in the working out of our salvation.¹⁵

A recent conference paper by Pastor Guy Marquardt provides the fullest definition of "specific gospel" that can be found among modern literature. According to Pastor Marquardt, the "specific gospel" can be defined as:

- "that Gospel which specifically points to Christ;"¹⁶ and
- "choosing words that communicate specifically what I want to say;"¹⁷ and
- "[leading] the listeners to experience that joy of forgiveness in their mind and heart and to draw the same conclusions themselves;"¹⁸ and
- "The specific aspect of Christ and his Gospel as found in the text before us."¹⁹

Another area of debate involves appropriate methods for relating the gospel to the lives of the hearers. Rossow advocates the idea of "gospel handles," which is using a key, interesting word from the text as a launchpad to proclaim the gospel. Rossow gives many examples of this

14 Sidney Greidanus, "Preaching Christ from the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161, no. 641 (January 1, 2004): 6-7.

15 Francis Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1983), 21.

16 Marquardt, "Christus pro Nobis: Preaching Specific Gospel," 4.

17 *Ibid.*, 5.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, 6.

technique in *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*.²⁰ In some examples, the word or phrase that is used as a “gospel handle” has a very clear and direct connection to the gospel message of the text. In other cases, the reader may be left wondering if Rossow is stretching things a bit. By contrast, Zack Eswine argues that, without care, hearers will make a simplistic connection with the text that doesn't seem to play out in their own lives. An example of the “simplism” Eswine talks about might be: Hannah prayed for a child and God gave her Samuel. So, why doesn't God solve my own infertility problems? Instead, Eswine states that a clear “Context of Reality” must be established in order for the hearers to make a proper connection between the gospel message of the text and its application to their own lives.

With basic questions, preachers can diagnose simplism once they have determined the COR [Context of Reality] of the passage.

1. In this passage, with what under-the-sun features are my listeners personally acquainted? (E.g., many of us know something of what it is to feel hungry.)
2. In this passage, with what under-the-sun features are my listeners familiar but inexperienced? (E.g., many of us have not personally experienced a famine in the land although we've seen it on television.)
3. In this passage, with what under-the-sun features are my listeners unfamiliar and inexperienced? (E.g., cannibalism due to forced starvation is a terrible shock.)
4. In light of our inexperience, how might this text expose my communities' naivete toward life (simplism)?²¹

Yet another area of debate involves the gospel's role during what is often called the “application” of the sermon, that is, the section of the sermon that tells the hearers how this text should affect their lives going forward. There was near unanimous agreement that the promises and comforts of the gospel, rather than the threats and demands of the law, should be used to motivate people toward change in their lives. Johnson puts it rather eloquently in saying, “Preaching Christ is preaching *grace*. This may seem obvious, but it is not obvious at all. ... It is possible to preach about Jesus, and even mention grace in the process, and yet be preaching law, calling people to reform themselves with a little help from their heavenly Friend. Such a message breeds either self-deluded complacency or self-contemptuous despair”²² (emphasis his).

20 Cf. Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*, 50-88.

21 Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 39–40.

22 Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures*, 1st ed (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R

However, there is dissent from Hoezee on whether an application section of a sermon is even strictly necessary. Hoezee is unconvinced that every sermon must provide a call to a specific action or set of actions. He writes, “Sometimes sermons prove themselves more than worthwhile to preach and to hear if they do no more than lighten someone’s load of guilt and duty by joyfully celebrating the heart of the gospel in and through the ongoing work and presence of our Lord and Savior.”²³ In other words, Hoezee advocates that when the truth of God's forgiveness is impressed upon the heart and understood as a personal reality, then the sermon has achieved a very worthy goal without needing a specific call to action. Hoezee is saying that “appropriation” is often enough in and of itself.²⁴ Chapell's more general view encapsulates both application and appropriation when he writes, “People have a right to ask, 'Why did you tell me that? What am I supposed to do with that information? All right, I understand what you say is true--so what?’”²⁵

Analysis

It is encouraging to see that the most influential teachers of expository preaching advocate for strong Christ-centered preaching. They correctly recognize that all of Scripture proclaims the Messiah and his saving work for mankind. It is also encouraging to see that there is a strong emphasis on understanding the sinful condition that each text points out to its readers and hearers. Preaching addresses saved children of God, but they are *simul iustus et peccator*. The priceless value of the gospel cannot be appreciated unless people understand the full depths of depravity that exist within each of their souls. On these points, there is much to be commended within the field of modern scholarship on homiletics.

While the sources had agreement on making full use of the various ways the Bible expresses the gospel, there was less agreement on exactly what constitutes gospel preaching and what is necessary to satisfy gospel preaching in a sermon. Certainly, everyone agrees on the most basic element: gospel preaching involves preaching the free grace offered to sinners through

Pub, 2007), 81.

23 Scott Hoezee, “Applying Gracefully,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (November 1, 2012): 247.

24 In homiletics, “appropriation” is the process where a listener not only hears and understands what the preacher is saying from God's Word, but “owns” the truth being conveyed and believes that it is true about them.

25 Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 53.

Jesus Christ. But authors do not seem to have widespread agreement on how, precisely, that is accomplished in any given, specific text. As noted above, Gerlach & Balge define the “specific gospel” as a presentation of the “basics.” However, a full reading of their textbook leaves one with the sense that they would hardly be satisfied with such a bare bones treatment week in and week out. Despite this sense, a detailed explication of exemplary gospel preaching in a sermon is not given. Rossow's “gospel handles” technique is interesting, but its weakness is in occasionally abusing the text, a mistake that Rossow sometimes makes himself. Pastor Marquardt's recent work to refine the definition of the “specific gospel” is probably the most helpful and most instructive. That said, he stops just short of laying out a single, easily digestible definition. His various factors in defining the “specific gospel” are spread throughout his paper and require a careful reading to glean the core elements of his definition.

The Lutheran Confessions

How the Lutheran Confessions address preaching

The Lutheran Confessions, that is, the symbolical books contained in the *Book of Concord*, are not primarily concerned with the technical art of preaching. They are confessional documents, and, as such, are intended to clarify doctrinal positions, distinguish differences between truth and error, point out heterodoxy, and instruct and teach in pure doctrine. The Lutheran Confessions do not discuss homiletical philosophies or methods contemporary to the time of their writing. That said, the Lutheran Confessions do address preaching in broad strokes. They discuss the purpose of preaching and what its proper content should be. Therefore, salient and helpful guidance for preaching is found in them.

Guidance for preaching from the Lutheran Confessions

The Lutheran Confessions are clear that preaching must be based on the pure truths of the Bible. In fact, wherever the gospel is preached clearly and faithfully, Christians may know that the Holy Spirit will always be working faith in at least some of the hearts of the hearers. The Augsburg Confession states:

It is also taught that at all times there must be and remains one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and

the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel²⁶

From this, one gathers the importance that the Lutheran Confessions place on preaching that is faithful to a right understanding of the Bible. In fact, Luther warns rather strongly that preachers must not adapt or change God's Word to suit their own ideas and preferences. In his *Large Catechism* Luther says that false preaching is actually the worst possible violation of the Second Commandment. “The greatest abuse [of the Second Commandment], however, is in spiritual matters, which affect the conscience, when false preachers arise and present their lying nonsense as God's Word.”²⁷ And with regard to teaching the Bible in its truth and purity, the Lutheran Confessions actually do provide some very practical advice. Luther commends the preacher to begin by preaching God's Word simply and plainly. Help people to understand the basic and simple teachings first. Then proceed to deepen their understanding of what the Scriptures say. While Luther may be thinking about the broader work of the ministry, and not just preaching, he says, “after you have taught the people a short catechism like this one, then take up a longer catechism and impart to them a richer and fuller understanding.”²⁸

The Lutheran Confessions also state that preaching's overall purpose is to bring comfort through the gospel, that is, through the message of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ and his work for us. For centuries, the law and works-righteousness dominated in Roman Catholic preaching. The Lutheran Confessions emphasized that, for the true salvation of souls, the gospel must predominate.

In former times people did not emphasize this comfort in sermons but instead drove the poor consciences to their own works. As a result, all sorts of works were undertaken. For the conscience forced some into monasteries, in the hope of obtaining grace there through the monastic life. Some devised other works as a way of earning grace and making satisfaction for sins. Many of them discovered that a person could not obtain peace by such means. That is why it became necessary to preach this teaching concerning faith in Christ and diligently to emphasize it, so that each person may know that God's grace is grasped by faith alone, without merit.²⁹

Two other major emphases in Roman Catholic preaching were (and are) the traditions of the

26 Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), AC VII 1.

27 *Ibid.*, LC I 53.

28 *Ibid.*, SC Pr 17.

29 *Ibid.*, AC XX 19–22.

church fathers and philosophy. This, also, is found to be unsatisfactory by the Lutheran Confessions. Preaching must focus on the gospel, not on any human works or words.

Meanwhile, they neither hear nor preach the gospel about the free forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake, about the righteousness of faith, about true repentance, about works that have the command of God. Instead, they spend their time on either philosophical discussions or ceremonial traditions that obscure Christ.³⁰

Preaching of the gospel is also highly extolled in the Lutheran Confessions as a means of grace. In fact, so highly did the Lutheran Confessions value preaching, that the word “preaching” itself is often used in synecdoche to speak of all proclamation of the gospel. This is no accident, and is intended to exalt the function of preaching. The Augsburg Confession says:

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit, but through Christ's merit, when we so believe.³¹

Luther spoke quite strongly in favor of preaching in the Smalcald Articles. “Christ's merit is not acquired through our work or pennies, but through faith by grace, without any money and merit-- not by the authority of the pope, but rather by preaching a sermon, that is, God's Word.”³² Also, in preaching, the power of the keys is exercised, as the Augsburg Confession states:

The same power of the keys or of the bishops is used and exercised only by teaching and preaching God's Word and by administering the sacraments to many persons or to individuals, depending on one's calling. Not bodily but eternal things and benefits are given in this way, such as eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. These benefits cannot be obtained except through the office of preaching and through the administration of the holy sacraments. For St. Paul says [Rom 1:16]: “The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.”³³

Yet, the Lutheran Confessions are also clear that preaching can lose a portion of its power and effectiveness when it obscures the pure Word of God and inserts false teaching in its place. Christians trust that by the Spirit's power the Word is always powerful in and of itself. However, false preaching and false doctrine can serve as a barrier between human hearts and that powerful Word. For this reason, the Lutheran Confessions emphasize so strongly that preaching must point to Christ who has won everything for his people.

30 Ibid., Ap XXVII.

31 Ibid., AC V 1–3.

32 Ibid., SA II 24.

33 Ibid., AC XXVIII 8–9.

Where [the Holy Spirit] does not cause [God's Word] to be preached and does not awaken the understanding of it in the heart, all is lost, as happened under the papacy, where faith was swept completely under the rug and no one recognized Christ as the Lord or the Holy Spirit as the one who makes us holy. That is, no one believed that Christ is our Lord in the sense that he won such a treasure for us without our works and merits and made us acceptable to the Father.³⁴

A true preaching of God's Word will always involve preaching the gospel promises found in Christ. Any other preaching that claims to be based on the Bible and yet obscures, ignores, or misrepresents Christ, will not bring the Holy Spirit with it. “For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church, apart from which no one can come to the Lord Christ.”³⁵

Apostolic preaching in the book of Acts

Examples

The book of Acts presents a number of scenarios where the apostles preached messages of warning, forgiveness, comfort, and encouragement to others based on words and events in the Old Testament or in the life of Jesus. It is these scenarios that most closely approximate the experience of modern-day sermons. Therefore it is these scenarios that provide the basis for an understanding how the apostles discovered and proclaimed the specific gospel to others.

Why turn only to apostolic preaching? God did, of course, send many a preacher to his people in the Old Testament as well. However, apostolic preaching was done in light of the full revelation of God's saving work in Christ Jesus. The prophets did their preaching from the age of foreshadows and prefigures. In other words, by God's grace, modern preachers share with the apostles the perspective of seeing how Christ fulfilled what God prophesied in the Old Testament. Furthermore, the apostles preached in a format more similar to modern-day sermons. Few preachers write an entire sermon in the same highly poetic and highly metaphorical manner that the Old Testament prophets used.

Two exemplars of apostolic preaching form the core examples that this thesis will consider. These are Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2:14-41 and Paul's sermon to the Jewish synagogue at Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:15-42.

34 Ibid., LC II 43.

35 Ibid., LC II 45.

A half-dozen other examples from Acts show common threads that are instructive. These are:

- Peter speaking at the temple after healing the crippled man (Acts 3:11-26); and
- Stephen's discourse to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1-53); and
- Peter's message to the Gentiles in Cornelius's home (Acts 10:34-43); and
- Paul's message in Athens at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31); and
- Paul's farewell to the elders of the Ephesian churches (Acts 20:17-35); and
- Paul's defense before King Agrippa and Festus (Acts 26:1-29).

Finally, several other potential examples of apostolic preaching were considered but ultimately rejected. Although they relate words spoken by the apostles, they do not represent sermons as such. These include:

- Paul and Barnabas in Lystra objecting to being considered as gods (Acts 14:14-18). This carries the feeling more of a brief (and urgent) apologetics statement rather than a fully preached sermon.
- The deliberations of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:6-21). This is not a sermon preached as an exhortation, but a discussion between the apostles about how God's Word instructs them on the particular matters before council.
- Paul's personal testimony about his call to apostleship (Acts 22:1-21). Unlike Paul's defense before King Agrippa and Festus, the story gets cut short and lacks a direct exhortation toward the crowd.
- Paul's words to the Jewish elders in Rome. Although it mentions that he preached a sermon, the text doesn't give us the sermon itself (Acts 28:17-28).

Analysis of core examples

Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost was, of course, precipitated by the Pentecost event itself. When the crowd of people heard the sound of the wind and also heard the apostles praising and glorifying God in their own languages, they were mystified. Others, however, mocked the apostles, accusing them of being drunk.³⁶ It was this accusation that prompted Peter to address

³⁶ Cf. Ac 2:1-13.

the crowd.³⁷ However, it is also important to remember the larger context. Among those Peter is speaking to are many who only fifty days earlier had witnessed, and at least tacitly participated in, the crucifixion of Jesus.

There is no question that Peter bases his sermon on a biblical text. Several passages are quoted outright. Peter first quotes Joel 2:28-32 and explicitly states that this prophecy has been fulfilled in the Pentecost events.³⁸ However, it is unlikely that Peter's sermon is based on Joel 2. His quotation of Joel is given more as an explanation for the events that drew the crowd and as a response to the accusation that the apostles were drunk. The main thrust of Peter's sermon is Acts 2:36, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." This point is vigorously supported by the resurrection of Jesus, which Peter expounds on throughout most of the rest of his sermon.³⁹ Therefore, the text that really forms the basis of Peter's sermon is his quotation of Psalm 16:8-11.⁴⁰

Direct ties between Psalm 16:8-11 and Peter's words are obvious. In Psalm 16, David speaks of death, but also of not being abandoned to the grave. Peter explains quite well, how Jesus fits David's words perfectly.

Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. 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. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.⁴¹

Peter's sermon is not merely based on a text. It is also Christ-centered. As it has already been stated, Peter expresses the main point of the sermon when he says, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."⁴²

Peter's proclamation of the gospel depends first on him exposing a sin that his hearers are guilty of. Peter's specific law can be seen in Acts 2:23, "you, with the help of wicked men, put

37 Cf. Ac 2:15.

38 Cf. Ac 2:16-21.

39 Cf. Ac 2:22-24 and Ac 2:29-35.

40 Cf. Ac 2:25-28.

41 Ac 2:29-32.

42 Ac 2:36.

[Jesus] to death by nailing him to the cross.” While Peter alludes to gospel comfort in Acts 2:32-33, his hearers are still feeling stung by this law and feel terrors of conscience when Peter says that the very Jesus they crucified has been made Lord and Christ.⁴³

All this leads to Peter's proclamation of gospel promises in Acts 2:38: “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.” There are a number of aspects to this proclamation. First, it is clear that Christ is given as the only possible cure for the hearers' sin. Peter speaks the words of Acts 2:38 right after the crowd asks, “Brothers, what shall we do?”⁴⁴ Peter proclaims this forgiveness directly, applying it specifically to his hearers, but also specifically for the sin of putting the Lord to death.

Another interesting aspect to Peter's use of the gospel is the way he expresses it. In summarizing part of David's words from Psalm 16, Peter said, “But [David] was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne.”⁴⁵ Then notice how Peter applies the gospel message to his hearers: “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”⁴⁶ Peter takes the promise language from Psalm 16—the repeated statements about God, “you will”⁴⁷—and he tells his hearers, “the promise is for you!”⁴⁸ In other words, Peter draws specifically from the language of his text to proclaim gospel hope and forgiveness to his hearers.

In Acts 13, Paul's preaching to the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch follows a similar pattern. However, it is somewhat more complex. Admittedly, Paul's “text” is a little looser than Peter's use of Psalm 16 in Acts chapter 2 or the use of a chapter-and-verse pericope as preachers use today. However, in giving a summary of Israelite and contemporary Jewish history to that point, Paul has some specific, watershed moments in mind. Furthermore, he knows that he can count on these Jews who have been faithfully attending synagogue to recall the various texts that

43 Cf. *Ibid.*

44 Ac 2:37.

45 Ac 2:30.

46 Ac 2:39.

47 Cf. Ps 16:8-11.

48 Ac 2:30.

he is stitching together into a brief Bible history.⁴⁹ Paul also intends to give a biblical review and assessment of the unfortunate Jewish attitude toward God throughout history: rebellion.

It is that attitude and ongoing act of rebellion against God that makes up the specific law Paul preaches to the hearts of the Jews in Pisidian Antioch. Regarding their forefathers in the wilderness, Paul says that God “endured their conduct.”⁵⁰ He refers to the time of the judges, during which “everyone did as they saw fit.”⁵¹ Even the king of the Israelites, Saul, needed to be removed because of his rebellion. Although God raised up David, the prefigure of Christ, who “will do everything I want him to do,”⁵² still, the people at large rebelled against God throughout the generations. Right up to the time of John the Baptist, the last great prophet before Jesus’ earthly ministry, the Jews remained in rebellion. Their rebellion culminated in an unjust sentence against their very Messiah. “Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed.”⁵³

As with Peter’s sermon, Paul proclaims a gospel message that directly forgives them of their sin and their rebellion while also using the unique language associated with the concept of rebellion that Paul has pointed to in Scripture. Paul said, “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.”⁵⁴ They and their ancestors had rebelled against God’s law from the moment the Lord let them out of Egypt. But in Jesus, they were justified for their guilt as rebels in a way they could never achieve by attempting to follow the law of Moses.

That the sermon is also Christ-centered is also quite apparent. Paul returns to the promise of the Messiah several times and specifically names Jesus as the fulfillment. For instance, he said to them, “We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us,

49 Paul’s approach in this sermon of pulling from various texts in order to tell an entire Bible history may not be advisable in every congregation today. Sadly, as biblical literacy wanes, this approach may cause more confusion than enlightenment.

50 Ac 13:18.

51 Ju 17:6 and Ju 21:25.

52 Ac 13:22.

53 Ac 13:28.

54 Ac 13:38,39.

their children, by raising up Jesus.”⁵⁵ Similar to Peter's sermon, Jesus is rightly portrayed as the fulfillment of the Messianic promise given to David. “Now when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.”⁵⁶

In both Peter and Paul's sermons, then, some common threads are seen in the way they delivered the gospel message. First, both are based either on a specific Bible text or on textual events. Second, both point specifically to Jesus Christ as the source of forgiveness from sin. Third, forgiveness is directly offered to the hearers. Finally, in both cases, Peter and Paul use gospel language that either comes directly from their text or walks hand in hand with the concepts from their text.

Notable threads in additional examples

In the half-dozen other examples of apostolic preaching from Acts discussed above, many of these same threads can be seen. The Old Testament text almost always forms the basis of the sermons that are delivered. On those few occasions where an Old Testament text was not used, New Testament events and/or teachings from Jesus were used. Of course, the Holy Spirit wrote these very things into the inspired canon either in the four Gospels or in the book of Acts itself. In that sense, they truly are a biblical text that the apostles' sermons were based on.

Jesus always remains the center of every apostolic sermon. Usually the emphasis is placed on how he fulfilled the Old Testament promises and prophecies about the Messiah. In the example of Paul's sermon to King Agrippa and Festus, Jesus' effect on Paul's life predominates over the fulfillment of prophecy, but Christ remains the center nonetheless.

Also evident from the apostolic preaching is the intimate connection between the law-preaching and the gospel message in each sermon. The proclamation of the gospel always offers forgiveness, encouragement, or hope that directly counters the sin or temptation that the apostle preaches against.

55 Ac 13:32.

56 Ac 13:36,37.

Non-Apostolic examples for further consideration

There are other examples of preaching in the Bible that were not included for review. One example would be preaching in the ministry of Jesus himself. Certainly, there are limitless lessons to learn from the preaching ministry of the sinless Son of God who is also the Word incarnate. However, because he is the Word incarnate, his preaching has key differences from the modern pastors' preaching. Unlike the parish pastor, Jesus did not derive the authority of his words solely from Scripture, because his words are the very words of God. Jesus' words were always fully authoritative and sufficient in and of themselves. Although he often did base his preaching on an Old Testament text or concept, he did not always do so, nor did he need to. This makes Jesus' preaching ministry fundamentally different from that of the pastor's preaching ministry.

Another potential example that was not reviewed is the letter to the Hebrews. Johnson maintains that the letter to the Hebrews is perhaps the clearest parallel in the Bible between apostolic preaching and modern preaching in churches. He considers it, “an apostolic sermon in written form—the only such sermon delivered to a regular congregation of Jesus' followers after Pentecost that the New Testament records.”⁵⁷ This does seem to have merit. However, the potential weakness is that the letter to the Hebrews is, in fact, a written circular and not a sermon preached at a weekly gathering of believers. It cannot be known for certain if the author's preaching style was the same as the way in which he wrote the letter. It is also possible that his preaching methods differed in significant ways.

Richness and variety in gospel expression

Notable contributors

One area of gospel preaching that has received, perhaps, less attention than it deserves, is an exploration of the vast richness and variety the Bible uses to express the promises, forgiveness, comfort, encouragement, joy, and hope of the gospel. Among those who have done significant work in this field are Jacob A.O. Preus, Leon Morris, Gary A. Griep, and Robert J. Koester.

⁵⁷ Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 20.

Leon Morris's *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* is an early and important work that explores the various key gospel terms such as “justification,” “propitiation,” “covenant,” “redemption,” and a few others. Morris sets out to do an in-depth word study for these terms to establish what their meaning and significance was when the apostles and apostolic writers wrote them into the Gospels and epistles of the New Testament.

Preus “happily acknowledges” that Morris's work had a “powerful influence on my thinking” when he wrote *Just Words*.⁵⁸ In *Just Words*, Preus seeks to help the reader rediscover the significance, uniqueness, and power for a variety of ways in which the gospel message is expressed. His book is less technical than Morris's, but also more comprehensive.

Robert J. Koester's book, *Gospel Motivation*, is actually not aimed so much at pastors and preachers, but at all Christians. Yet he also explores the various ways that the Bible expresses the gospel message and how those various ways work to encourage and empower a life of sanctification. Koester makes an important distinction about the usage of the gospel when he writes, “Although we speak of gospel motivation, the gospel is never merely a means to that end. It is the end itself. It is God's gift to us. The gospel spurs us to action, but it does so because it is our main focus. It motivates us because it dominates our lives. Unless it does so, it cannot really motivate us.”⁵⁹

Griep's essay, “Using Law-Gospel Pairs in Preaching” is a useful summary and primer on the incredible variety that the Bible has in expressing the gospel message. While it is extremely comprehensive, it does not set out to deeply explore the law-gospel pairs. It simply surfaces them for the preacher who may be struggling to see the unique way the gospel is expressed in the text he has chosen on a given week.⁶⁰

58 Jacob A. O. Preus, *Just Words: Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub, 2000), 11.

59 Robert J. Koester, *Gospel Motivation: More Than “Jesus Died for My Sins”* (Milwaukee, Wis: Northwestern Pub. House, 2006), 12.

60 A word of warning may be necessary here. Griep's essay, particularly in part III, may give the impression that any law/gospel pair could appropriately be used with any text in order to add variety to one's weekly preaching. This thesis cannot approve of such an approach and, in fact, specifically directs the reader to draw their law/gospel pairing from the text itself. If that results in the same or a similar pair being used for two weeks in a row, so be it. Fidelity to the text is more important than contrived variety. This is to say nothing of the fact that

Principles regarding the rich variety of gospel expressions

While the Bible does use a rich variety of language to convey the gospel message, it is important to remember the big picture. The doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone remains the doctrine by which the Church stands or falls. However, the Bible does not always use the metaphor of justification in order to describe the doctrine of justification. What does this mean? One way to express the doctrine of justification is to use the matching forensic, courtroom language of justification. The latter is a metaphor that describes the reality of the former. Indeed, God's Word often employs the metaphor of justification in order to support the doctrine of justification. Such language is seen often throughout Scripture and especially throughout Paul's epistles. When Paul wanted to make a clear, strong statement to the believers in Rome about how we are saved, he said, "For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law."⁶¹ Yet this metaphor of justification is not the only way to speak about the doctrine of justification. Preus helps his readers to understand the distinction between the doctrine of justification and the metaphor of justification in this way:

The Bible uses the words *justify* and *justification* to refer to God's saving work among humankind. It is legal, or forensic, language. Such language is especially common in Paul's letters. We also use the word *justification* in a broader way to denote the doctrine of justification as distinct from the doctrine of sanctification or any other article of faith. In this sense, that is synecdochally, the doctrine of justification is more than the legal language. It stands in for all the ways of saying the Gospel and includes all the words--all the rich and variegated language--of the Gospel. In terms of language, justification is *one* of the words. In terms of doctrine, it contains *all* the words--all the ideas--within itself and cannot be reduced merely to one or two words.⁶²

Understanding that the doctrine of justification is at the heart and soul of the gospel message, it is also important to recognize that the Holy Spirit uses a rich variety of expressions to convey that doctrine. While it is good and right that Lutherans hold dearly to the forensic, courtroom language of justification, expanding one's horizons of gospel expression can only aid the preacher in meeting the spiritual needs of his parishioners. The apostle John, for instance, is

preaching from the lectionary while staying true to the text's expression of law and gospel is almost guaranteed to provide plenty of variety.

61 Ro 3:28.

62 Preus, *Just Words*, 23 (emphasis his).

quite fond of conveying the gospel message through the metaphor of light and darkness. He writes in the opening chapter of his Gospel:

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.⁶³

While Paul often used the metaphor of justification (that is, the courtroom language), it is clear that he was also quite fond of expressing the gospel through the idea of victory and related images. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15 he writes, “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶⁴ And to Timothy he writes, “Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”⁶⁵ And the Bible contains many other ways of expressing the gospel message.

Preus argues that preachers cannot ignore this rich variety. “Each Gospel word, phrase, and idea is necessary to the fullness of the biblical doctrine of justification. Every Gospel word contributes something distinctive, something unique, which, if it were not present, would make the doctrine less than whole, less than fully what the Lord revealed.”⁶⁶ The key thing to remember is that in using this rich variety, preachers are not inventing new ways to express the gospel. Rather, they are rediscovering and revitalizing old ways—biblical ways—of expressing the gospel. Preus says, “The primary task is not to come up with *new* ways to say the Gospel, but to return to and revitalize the *old* ways to say it.”⁶⁷

What practical purpose does the rich variety of gospel expression serve? As our Creator, God knows full well that humans are multi-faceted creatures. He also knows full well that since the fall into sin believers and people in general are assaulted by sin, temptation, tempest, and trial on many different levels. The devil, the world, and the sinful nature attack people physically,

63 Jn 1:4-9.

64 1 Co 15:57.

65 2 Ti 4:8.

66 Preus, *Just Words*, 24.

67 *Ibid.*, 28 (emphasis his).

emotionally, and psychologically. Humans go through various phases of life and have different life experiences that shape and direct how they view the world and think about God's message in relation to their lives. What's more, human beings have been raised in hundreds of different cultures over the course of human history. A “one size fits all” approach to conveying the gospel would not be adequate. The Spirit in his infinite wisdom provided a multitude of ways to speak of the saving grace we have in the life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Preus points out that this “human dimension of the Gospel” is crucially important.

The human dimension of the Gospel, therefore, is not a necessary evil. It is the very essence of the Gospel and necessary for it to be truly the Gospel. This implies everything for our proclamation of the Gospel. It means we must give close attention to the words, their formulation, their metaphorical value, their evocative powers. To slight the human nature of the Gospel by diminishing the importance and necessity of words in our proclamation is to commit an egregious error that in the end may render it no longer the Gospel that reconciles sinners.⁶⁸

The implications for preachers as stewards of the Word are obvious. If the Holy Spirit saw fit to provide this rich variety of language to express the gospel, preachers do well to use the verbal tools he has provided. In fact, these are truly more than mere tools. They are God's very own attempt to plumb the infinite riches of his grace using the finite vehicle of human language. Rossow says:

I believe that the God-conceived, God-executed, God-communicated plan of salvation for the human race is so colossal that it defies the capacity of language to contain it and to convey it. Hence, God pulls out all linguistic stops in order to convey it to human minds and human hearts. He comes at it from every possible angle. Although language is not equal to the beatific Gospel it describes, nevertheless it is the vehicle God chose to describe it ... So God exploits the medium He selected. He taps its maximum potential.⁶⁹

This is not merely variety for variety's sake. It is a treasure trove provided by God himself to enrich preaching and enable it to reach deep into the hearts of its hearers. The preacher who avails himself of these treasures is making full use of what God has provided to help heal souls.

68 Ibid., 212.

69 Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*, 34.

The Foundations of Faithful, Biblical Preaching

The task of preaching, the task of unpacking the treasure trove of God's grace, must begin somewhere. The apostle Paul wrote that the Church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”⁷⁰ In saying this, Paul indicates that all faithful, biblical preaching is both textual and Christ-centered.

Textual preaching takes God's Word seriously that it is truly from him, verbally inspired and completely inerrant. Textual preaching seeks to understand a text within its immediate context and within the greater context of all of Scripture. Textual preaching seeks to let the sermon be shaped and woven with the words of the text without allowing preconceptions or ulterior motives creep in.

Meanwhile, Christ-centered preaching understands that all of God's Word points to Jesus as the Savior. Christ-centered preaching understands that the Church and indeed the world has no other savior. Christ-centered preaching glories in the offense of the cross.

These are truths that Lutheran preachers are willing to die for. In fact, there is much within these statements that is worth exploring and expanding upon. However, for the purpose of this thesis, the statements above will serve as the presuppositions for discovering and applying the specific gospel in your specific congregation.

70 Eph 2:20.

The Specific Gospel

No attempt to discover and apply the specific gospel can begin without an appropriate definition of what the specific gospel is. Lutheran preachers agree that it is right for the gospel to predominate in preaching. Yet that is easier said than done. How does the preacher let the gospel predominate week in and week out in a way that is specific to the text in front of the congregation every Sunday?

The term “specific gospel” is actually relatively recent.⁷¹ However, there has been a lack of consensus on the precise meaning of the term “specific gospel.” This can be evidenced by the fact that the WELS Arizona-California District asked Pastor Guy Marquardt to write a conference paper defining the specific gospel.⁷² What follows is a refinement and modest expansion of Pastor Marquardt’s invaluable contribution to the field of homiletics.

The specific gospel points specifically to Christ as the only cure for sin

In order to proclaim the gospel it is crucially necessary for the preacher’s sermon to point specifically to Christ as the only cure for sin. It has already been demonstrated that all faithful, biblical preaching is Christ-centered. To be precise, all faithful, biblical preaching focuses on the free grace and forgiveness of sins that is found only in Christ Jesus. This portion of the definition of “specific gospel” fulfills that requirement. When Paul told the church in Corinth, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified,”⁷³ he was saying that his preaching had always held out Christ and his sacrifice as the sole cure for mankind’s sinful condition.

This point may seem somewhat obvious, but, in the words of Jeremiah, “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”⁷⁴ The sinful nature both

71 This thesis was unable to determine the origin or first-usage of the term. A search on <http://wlsessays.net> provided no usages of the term prior to the publishing of *Preach the Gospel* by Gerlach & Balge in 1978. It is possible that Gerlach & Balge coined the term, but this cannot be authoritatively ascertained. It is also worth noting that *Preach the Gospel* uses the term “specific gospel” in a way rather different from how this thesis will define it.

72 Cf. Marquardt, “Christus Pro Nobis.”

73 1 Co 2:2.

74 Jer 17:9.

within the preacher and his hearers will entice people to find comfort, solace, and hope in worldly things. Preaching the specific gospel means making it clear that Jesus is the only Savior to the exclusion of all others. As Peter preached in the temple courts, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”⁷⁵

Preaching the specific gospel also means that Christ alone is preached as the cure for all sin. The writer to the Hebrews is quite explicit about this. “Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.”⁷⁶ Paul says that the clear evidence of this fact is found in the resurrection when he writes, “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”⁷⁷ C.F.W. Walther echoes this thought by writing, “For by the resurrection of Christ, the Father, in the presence of heaven and earth, angels and people, declared: 'Just as My Son cried out on the cross, 'It is finished,' so I announce, 'It is finished indeed!' You sinners are redeemed. Forgiveness of sins is prepared for everybody. It is already here. It must not first be acquired by you.”⁷⁸

Since it has been established that faithful, biblical preaching is also textual preaching, one may ask where this specific point may be found in any given text. Obviously, the answer will vary. In many cases, it is more or less explicitly stated when the promise of the Messiah to come or the reality of Jesus' life and death is found in the text. Other times, the text will point to Christ in a more implicit or subtle fashion. Goldsworthy admits that it is not always an easy task when he writes, “I know it will not always be a simple matter to show how every text in the Bible speaks of the Christ, but that does not alter the fact that he says it does.”⁷⁹ A careful study of the text is crucial to surface the manner in which it proclaims our Redeemer.

One way of falling short of this element of the specific gospel is speaking of God's love in a general way without getting down to specifically proclaiming Christ. “God so loved the

75 Ac 4:12

76 Heb 7:27.

77 Ro 4:25.

78 Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 186.

79 Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 23.

world” is a true and Scriptural statement. However, Jesus did not stop there. He pointed specifically to himself as the “one and only Son” given for the sins of the world.⁸⁰ Similar to this is preaching about faith without giving proper explanation regarding the object of faith. Walther warns against the disastrous results that can happen in this case:

The best preachers imagine they have accomplished a great deal when they have beat their listeners over the head with the saying "Faith alone saves." But by their preaching they merely make their listeners sigh: "Oh, if only I had faith! Faith must be something very difficult to get, for I have not yet obtained it."

These unfortunate listeners would go home from church with a heavy heart. The word faith would still be ringing in their ears, but it would give them no comfort. Even Luther complained that many in his day were preaching about faith without showing their listeners what faith really is and how to attain it.⁸¹

Another mistake involves failing to do justice to the specific law of the text. No one is interested in taking medicine if they do not believe they are sick. So, too, with the gospel—a person will not appreciate and take to heart the gospel message unless they first see the depravity of their sin.

The specific gospel directly proclaims Christ's cure of forgiveness, peace, and joy

Specific gospel will also proclaim the forgiveness found in Jesus directly to the hearers. In other words, the preacher will make it very clear and explicit that the hearers are personally forgiven. The preacher will make it very clear and explicit that the hearers now have peace and joy as their own personal possession through faith in Christ Jesus. This is in line with Walther's advice that when people listen to a sermon, “everyone in your audience must have the impression: 'He is preaching to me!'”⁸² The text itself will contain the necessary vocabulary to speak this forgiveness, peace, and joy in a direct manner.⁸³

One cannot assume that the hearer will make this explicit connection on their own. Such direct statements are necessary because Satan loves to worm his way into the middle of a sermon. After the law has properly exposed sin and crushed hearts, the Accuser will make every

80 Cf. Jn 3:16.

81 Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 288.

82 *Ibid.*, 29.

83 Cf. the upcoming section, “The specific gospel uses the unique language of the specific text to provide Christ's cure.”

effort to convince people that they can certainly not be forgiven.⁸⁴ However, one little word can fell him. Christ and his forgiveness applied directly to the hearer will drive the Accuser away. By telling hearers they are personally forgiven, the preacher will lead them to say along with Paul, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God.”⁸⁵

The preacher should not feel that he has properly preached specific gospel if he simply talks about the gospel. Describing the gospel as a “glorious,” “wonderful,” “blessed,” or “incredible” thing is certainly true. However, these words do not provide comfort to souls. Nor is it helpful to talk about how the gospel “should” or “ought” to make someone feel. Injecting words like these is really a use of the law, commanding an appreciation of the gospel. They do not offer comfort to the hearer. Rossow explains, “the real mistake is the assumption that the listener has a feeling of gratitude that will respond to a recital of God's gracious acts; the assumption that if you rub Gospel and gratitude together like two sticks of wood, some sort of spiritual fire will result.”⁸⁶ Certainly, the preacher can talk about the blessed and joyous effect that the gospel has on the emotions, but he should not neglect directly proclaiming personal forgiveness, peace, and joy for his hearers.

The specific gospel provides Christ's cure for the specific law of the text

Although the matter of the specific law is beyond the current scope, the specific law remains a crucial part of the sermon. Hearts must be crushed and led to see the full depth of their unholiness and unworthiness before God. It is the job of the specific law to bring that out with regard to a specific sin or with regard to a specific sphere of sins (e.g., sins against the Fifth Commandment).

Once the preacher has done this, he can be sure that at least some consciences in the congregation will be severely disturbed and terrified. Some will feel the temptation to wonder if that particular sin can possibly be forgiven. The preacher dare not leave such people with doubts.

84 Cf. Zec 3:1.

85 2 Co 1:20.

86 Francis C. Rossow, “Unintentional Gospel-Omissions in Our Preaching,” *Concordia Journal* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 1979): 10.

Preaching the specific gospel means proclaiming precisely how Christ has provided his cure for the sin of the specific law. Since the preacher strives to let the gospel predominate in his sermon, he does best to remember that the gospel is unlikely to predominate for his hearers when the arrows of the specific law are still lodged in their chests.

Peter and Paul both demonstrated this technique in their sermons. In Acts 2, Peter makes it explicit that his hearers are responsible for Jesus' death. "This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."⁸⁷ His specific gospel is centered on Christ's resurrection. Despite the sin of the Jews in rejecting Jesus and his ministry, even to the point of putting him to death, God raised him from the dead. Their sin was overcome by the power of God. They no longer needed to fear this horrible sin they committed against the Son of God. First of all, it was all part of God's plan to rescue them from sin. Second, God set everything right by raising him from the dead and proving the price was paid. "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."⁸⁸ This specific gospel proclamation both heals the specific law preached against his hearers, and directly supports the main theme of Peter's sermon that Jesus has been appointed by God as both "Lord and Messiah."⁸⁹

Paul exercises this same technique in Pisidian Antioch. The historic and ongoing rejection of God and rebellion against his plan of salvation is exposed as their sin. But Jesus has rescued them from this rebellion. In fact, he offers a righteousness that could never be acquired by them even if they had done a much better job of trying to follow the Law of Moses. Paul said, "Through [Jesus] everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses."⁹⁰

This kind of specific gospel preaching goes beyond comforting terrified consciences. It also provides the precise gospel power needed for a life of sanctification against the temptations related to the specific law. Aho gives the encouragement, "The mode in which the Law is

87 Ac 2:23.

88 Ac 2:24.

89 Cf. Ac 2:36.

90 Ac 13:39.

preached must find its correlate in the way the Gospel is proclaimed. ... When the Law demands obedience, the Gospel is to promise power.”⁹¹ The more a person is able to tie the specific gospel's power to overcome the specific law, the more equipped a person will be to defend against that particular temptation in the future. Such preaching builds up and strengthens “the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.”⁹²

Often this specific gospel cure for the specific law is found in some particular aspect that the text highlights either in Christ's active obedience or his passive obedience. Perhaps the text shows how our Lord resisted the sin and temptation found in the specific law. In other cases it may show how Jesus performed the good works God requires that are in contrast with the sins of the specific law. Naturally, Jesus' submission to suffering and death on the cross for our sake is always a gospel proclamation. However, look for aspects of his suffering, his death, and his separation from the love of the Father on the cross that may particularly tie into the specific law.

The most frequent omission in this regard is usually a failure to preach on how the active obedience of Christ contributes to curing the sin of the specific law. Gerlach & Balge write:

It is possible to neglect the active obedience so that people are left with a truncated view of how God reconciled the world to himself in Christ. That view may rob them of the certainty of salvation God intends them to have. It frequently causes a person to look to something within himself rather than outside himself to God's promises for the assurance of right standing with God.⁹³

A thorough effort to find the comfort of Christ's active obedience in the text will usually be rewarded with success. Even his suffering and death on the cross, the defining moment of his passive obedience, was marked with works we would assign to Jesus' active obedience. For example, when he cried out, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”⁹⁴ or when he made sure that his mother, Mary, would be provided for after his death, resurrection, and ascension.⁹⁵

91 Gerhard Aho, “Law and Gospel in Preaching,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45, no. 1–2 (January 1, 1981): 2.

92 Eph 6:16.

93 Gerlach and Balge, *Preach the Gospel*, 10.

94 Lk 23:34.

95 Cf. Jn 19:26,27.

The specific gospel uses the unique language of the specific text to provide Christ's cure

Every sermon text has its own particular gifts to bring to the hearts of God's people. Preaching the specific gospel means unwrapping and displaying those specific gifts through the language used in the sermon. When the text speaks of Christ as our redeemer, the preacher should follow suit. When the text speaks of Christ as the light of the world, the preacher should speak of how Jesus enlightens his people. When the text speaks of how God purifies and cleanses his people, the preacher should speak of how his congregation has been washed clean by Christ.

All of these gospel expressions are metaphors for what Christ has done for us. Paul says, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them."⁹⁶ He also says, "[We] know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ."⁹⁷ Yet the gospel is also expressed in so many other ways, so many other metaphors. Each helps God's people to see a new aspect of the glorious new life they have in Jesus. Each has its own invaluable use. Preus passionately insists that a failure to mine the depth of these metaphors is a failure to do justice to the text.

Preaching the Gospel as metaphor is textual. It is based on sound principles of historical and grammatical interpretation of Holy Scripture. It finds the meaning of a text in the words. It does not impose words or meaning on the text, but rather draws the meaning out of the passage itself. Every unit and every passage of Scripture contain one or more of these metaphors. The preacher's task is simply to explicate the text by choosing one of the metaphors, the dominant metaphor (if there is one), and crafting the sermon around it.⁹⁸

The preacher shows the highest regard for the text in front of him when he makes a concerted effort to use the riches of the gospel expressions found in that text.

Furthermore, relying predominantly on the gospel expressions found in the text helps to avoid confusion. When a preacher ignores the language of the text he must, by definition, import other language into his sermon that is foreign to that particular text. These statements may certainly be true. They may be edifying. But they will also cause the sermon to suffer in its textuality and may even introduce some confusion to the hearers.

It is largely through using the unique language of the text that many of the other aspects of the specific gospel will be satisfied. The sermon will be a faithful and biblical in the way it

96 2 Co 5:19.

97 Gal 2:16.

98 Preus, *Just Words*, 215.

expounds on the text. The sermon will directly proclaim forgiveness of the sins and temptations of the specific law, and this found only in Christ. The preacher will have the immense privilege of showcasing this text's particular facet of the gospel jewel.

Locating the particular gospel expressions unique to this text is not usually a difficult task. It simply takes some presence of mind. Deutschlander says, “Pay particular attention to the specific words the Holy Spirit has chosen and carefully note difference in emphasis in synonyms.”⁹⁹ Recall what the gospel is: anything that promises, forgives, and offers God's gifts freely, without any requirement of human merit. Then look for those words and phrases within the text. If necessary, there are helps available in the literature. Griep provides a table of law-gospel pairs that may help identify the law-gospel pair in any given text.¹⁰⁰ Preus,¹⁰¹ Koester,¹⁰² and Morris¹⁰³ all offer an exploration of different gospel expressions and metaphors that can help to sharpen the preacher's ability to find such metaphors in the text. Most importantly, the unique language of the specific gospel will almost always be in direct contrast to the specific law. In fact, a difficulty in finding this contrast may be an indication that the preacher has not yet arrived at the heart of the specific law. Conversely, the gospel element of the text may be so obvious that it helps the preacher to identify the specific law better.

It has already been demonstrated that this is also a thoroughly apostolic manner of preaching. Peter's Pentecost sermon was based on God's promises to David about the Messiah and the resurrection made possible through him. Peter emphasized that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise given to David. Then he used this exact language by saying that the promise is not just for David, but for all of them as well. “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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the

99 Deutschlander, “Marry, Mine, and Mind the Text,” 3.

100 Cf. Gary A. Griep, “Using Law-Gospel Pairs in Preaching | Essay File,” 2, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://wlsessays.net/node/678>.

101 Cf. Preus, *Just Words*.

102 Cf. Koester, *Gospel Motivation*.

103 Cf. Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Third (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1965).

Lord our God will call.”¹⁰⁴ Peter repeated the promise language of Psalm 16 by telling his hearers, “the promise is for you.”¹⁰⁵

Paul, likewise, draws on the specific themes from his summary of Old Testament history. Since his focus is on Israel's rebellion against God both through the ages and ongoing into the present, his specific gospel addresses that particularly. He tells his hearers, “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.”¹⁰⁶ The Israelites deserve condemnation from their great Judge and King because of their ongoing rebellion against him. Yet through Jesus they are justified from all these sins. In fact, even if they had tried fervently and passionately to follow the law of Moses (as many thought they were doing), they would not have justification. But in Jesus, they did.

When preachers fail to use the unique language of the text on a regular basis, it can have a dampening effect on the entire scope of their gospel preaching. Preus warns about this when he writes, “Instead of hearing and communicating the Gospel with the richness and vividness that each metaphor contains within it, we tend to blend language together. We generalize metaphors and flatten them out so they all end up meaning virtually the same thing. We wind up with the doctrinal nutrients, but we lose the distinctive flavors of the language.”¹⁰⁷ When the language of our gospel preaching begins to flatten out, people may also start to tune out. The gospel begins to sound like “the same old thing,” not because it lacks freshness on its own, but because the freshness of each text has not been fed to the people.

Furthermore, Preus warns that gospel metaphors that fall into overuse can also fall into misuse.

Often culture and context so influence church theologians that they allow a single metaphor to dominate the discussion or interpretation of Christ's work of salvation. For example, in feudal times, commercial metaphors dominated. This led to a conception of the Gospel in primarily monetary terms. This, in turn, led to such errors as the “treasure

104 Ac 2:38,39.

105 Ibid.

106 Ac 13:38,39.

107 Preus, *Just Words*, 36.

of merits" and the buying and selling of forgiveness through the sale of indulgences.¹⁰⁸ A solid, Lutheran emphasis on the Bible's primary gospel metaphor of justification may seem unassailable to this kind of vulnerability. However, Paul himself saw the way people could abuse this metaphor. At the end of Romans 5, he lays out the basic doctrine of justification.

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁰⁹ And then Paul immediately anticipates the possible abuse of this concept. "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"¹¹⁰ The apostle Paul greatly treasured the metaphor of justification. However, if he could see its potential abuse and incorporate a variety of other gospel metaphors as well, the preacher does well to take a cue from the apostle. In fact, Johnson notes that this thread of gospel variety runs throughout Paul's letters. "Paul's preaching, centered as it is on Jesus Christ, is unified but not monotonous. This single message is as manifold as the manifestations of human sin and suffering, as manifold as the wisdom of God, now displayed in the church to which the gospel has given birth."¹¹¹

In taking a cue from the apostle, the preacher should be wary of inventing and using his own expressions and metaphors. It is not strictly wrong to do so, of course. And in some cases, a modern-day metaphor may work quite well. However, since the text itself will supply a gospel expression from the mind of the Holy Spirit, that metaphor is better as the predominant one. Again, Preus says, "The primary task is not to come up with new ways to say the Gospel, but to return to and revitalize the old ways to say it."¹¹²

Some preachers feel that they have not preached gospel fully or completely without

108 Ibid., 24.

109 Ro 5:18-21.

110 Ro 6:1,2.

111 Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 38.

112 Preus, *Just Words*, 28.

mentioning Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Certainly, speaking of the crucifixion is salient, applicable, and important, probably in the vast majority of sermons. However, it is a mistake to believe that every sermon absolutely must mention the crucifixion. This is especially true if working the crucifixion into the sermon comes at the expense of the predominant gospel language already in the text. Consider that the famous “gospel in a nutshell,” given to us by Jesus himself, does not explicitly mention the crucifixion (though it is implied). “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”¹¹³ Paul's preaching did not always mention the crucifixion either. For example, it is notably absent from his message at the Areopagus.¹¹⁴ And of course, much gospel preaching from the Old Testament does not make explicit mention of the crucifixion, since the practice had not yet been invented. None of this is said to devalue preaching that speaks of the crucifixion. In most cases, speaking of the crucifixion will go hand-in-hand with the unique gospel language of the text. However, the preacher need not feel that every last sermon he ever preaches must make explicit mention of the crucifixion.

In brief summary, then, the specific gospel is defined by these four principal parts:

- *The specific gospel points specifically to Christ as the only cure for sin.*
- *The specific gospel directly proclaims Christ's cure of forgiveness, peace, and joy.*
- *The specific gospel provides Christ's cure for the specific law of the text.*
- *The specific gospel uses the unique language of the specific text to provide Christ's cure.*

There are likely few surprises in this definition of the specific gospel. Some of the best Lutheran preachers have intuitively grasped these things. In light of a formal definition, it is clear to see how the principal parts of this definition have shaped some of the best sermons ever preached, from the apostles on down through Luther to the exemplars of modern preaching. Is there hope for the preacher who does not have an intuitive grasp on these things?¹¹⁵ A series of analytical questions included as part of the preacher's regular text study should provide a way for all preachers to discover and apply the specific gospel in their specific congregations.

¹¹³ Jn 3:16.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Ac 17:22-31.

¹¹⁵ The author of this thesis hopes so, since he does not count himself among those with an intuitive grasp.

Discovering and Applying the Specific Gospel in Your Specific Congregation

Start with the specific law

Before the preacher can start his quest for discovery, he must understand the important connection between the specific gospel and the specific law. In fact, the specific gospel of the text is inextricably linked to the specific law of the text. The questions below assume that the preacher has properly plumbed the depths of the specific law. While a deep exploration of how to expose the specific law is out the current scope, a quick reminder is in order.

The specific law does not deal only with the surface issue. For example, the outward act of lying, gossiping, or cursing is what is on the surface. The specific law seeks to expose the root behind this outward act. Gerlach & Balge write, “Specific law preaching requires an in-depth rather than a surface treatment of human behavior. When preaching against sin, don't hack at the branches; strike at the root! Generally it is more effective to say a lot about a little than a little about a lot.”¹¹⁶ They are really only echoing the words of our Savior, when he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”¹¹⁷ In other words, a proper understanding of the specific law in the text is not satisfied with preaching against the outward action. It is satisfied only by discovering and preaching against the lie of Satan in the heart that causes the outward action.

Why is this necessary? If the preacher makes the outward action sound like it is the sum total of the problem of sin, then that problem will seem rather small to many hearers. With enough effort, many people are capable resolving to stick to the truth, quitting a bad habit like gossip, and cleaning up their foul language. Like the Pharisees, they will begin to believe that they have kept God's law perfectly. Meanwhile, the sinful root causes of those sins (e.g., selfishness, a lurid interest in others' secrets, an inability to curb violent emotions or think pure thoughts), these continue to fester in the heart. Left unabated, they may harden the heart into total unbelief. Only the specific law that “strike[s] at the root”¹¹⁸ can lead the hearer to see that

116 Gerlach and Balge, *Preach the Gospel*, 8.

117 Mk 7:20-23.

118 Gerlach and Balge, *Preach the Gospel*, 8.

the problem is too large for them and they need an answer bigger and better than their own good behavior.

Another important thing to remember is whether the specific law that the text presents is primarily the law acting as mirror or the law acting as curb. Lutheran preachers are quite used to applying the law as a mirror. However, not every text is best handled in this way. Should the widow of Nain be rebuked for mourning?¹¹⁹ In turn, is it proper to cause modern hearers to believe that all mourning implies doubt in the resurrection? Certainly there are cases where it may. However, it seems improper to accuse all mourners of having such doubts. This is a case where it is best to preach the law as curb to warn people from descending into such despair. Then, likewise, the text points specifically to Christ's cure of the resurrection to help people avoid driving over that curb.

Overall, in order to properly discover and apply the specific gospel, the preacher must have a strong grasp on the specific law. With that firm understanding of the specific law, he may then proceed to the following questions.

Questions regarding the text

Question 1: How does the text point to Christ alone as Savior from sin?

While this question may seem somewhat basic, it is important not to rush past it. Indeed, it is vitally important that the preacher wrestle with how this particular text points specifically to Christ. Old Testament texts can occasionally present a special challenge. Goldsworthy encourages the preacher to avoid moralizing¹²⁰ from Old Testament texts, but instead to diligently study the connection to the salvation found only in Jesus. “The nature of the relationship between the salvation revealed in the Old Testament and gospel of Jesus Christ is something that we strive to understand on the basis of our biblical theology. This is not an easy task, and it is one that is readily shelved in favor of a more platitudinous and moralizing approach to the meaning of the

¹¹⁹ Cf. Lk 7:11-17.

¹²⁰ Moralizing is the practice of preaching that the sanctified (or immoral) living of Old or New Testament believers (or unbelievers) should cause the hearer to see why they need to improve their habits or practice better good works. In other words, it is law-motivated sanctification preaching that either fails completely to mention forgiveness and grace or gives it just a brief enough mention to meet some kind of preaching checklist.

Old Testament for us.”¹²¹

In order to avoid this pitfall, it is helpful to recognize three chief ways that a text may point to Christ alone as the Savior from sin. The first way is obvious: when the text itself clearly speaks of Christ and his saving work for the sinner. Such cases provide little or no difficulty. In other texts (e.g., many Old Testament narratives), Jesus or the Messiah are not spoken about directly, but the text does speak about God as the agent of salvation. In such cases, the overall context of Scripture (or perhaps even the immediate context of the passage or its book) helps to show how the text points specifically to Christ. Do not be afraid to draw on that greater context.

The most difficult texts are those that seem to contain no direct gospel at all. Amos 6:1-7, the First Lesson for Pentecost 19, Year C, is often considered a difficult text because it is dominated almost entirely with the invective of the law. The preacher may despair of how such a text could possibly point to any savior, let alone Christ. It is perfectly valid in such scenarios to consider how Christ and only Christ provides hope from such crushing law. It is valid to see how only Christ could be the perfect opposite of the sins that this text preaches against. However, as the preacher conducts his exegesis of the text, sometimes it helps to use Reed's Rule and ask: “Why is this word, and no other word, in this place, and no other place?”¹²² In the aforementioned text from Amos, verse seven says: “Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile.”¹²³ Why “exile?” Why not “complete destruction?” Through such questioning a gospel finger pointing to Jesus begins to emerge.¹²⁴ This line of questioning also shows how the specific words of the text point to the broader context—why does Amos even exist? Why is Israel given yet another chance after all their failed chances in the past? Weren't Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah enough? Yet the God of grace shows his enduring love and patience for Israel. Even this harsh message of law from Amos is itself a call to wake up from spiritual slumber and see the spiritual blessings that God so greatly desires to shower upon them.

¹²¹ Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 6.

¹²² Elizabeth Kantor, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to English and American Literature* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2006), 218.

¹²³ Am 6:7.

¹²⁴ Other words in Amos 6:1-7 may have more significance than is first apparent. Might the word “Zion” (Am 6:1) instead of “Jerusalem” have significance? Is there something to unpack in the name “Israel” (Am 6:1)?

Question 2: What aspects of Christ's active and passive obedience does the text offer in answer to the specific law?

At some point in his sermon, the preacher must fire arrows of specific law deep into the heart of his hearers. It is an unpleasant and “alien” task, but important nonetheless. By pinning down the aspects of Christ's active and passive obedience that the text brings forward, the preacher will have the precise tools necessary to pull those arrows back out and heal the wounds with Christ's cure. Part of this cure is helping his hearers understand the importance and significance of events in Jesus' life. He was not merely a miracle worker who did nice things for people. Capon writes, “None of those miracles was a program for fixing up history: most of the blind of Jesus' time went on being blind; Lazarus rose only to die again another day; lepers are still with us; and the descendants of the bridegroom at the wedding received no guarantee of a full wine-cellar in perpetuity. As *salvation scenarios*, they're a bust.”¹²⁵ Neither were Jesus' acts of kindness, love, and mercy simply a presentation of the divine character. They were done on behalf of and in place of all sinners. These good and perfect works were done to give true righteousness and holiness of life as a gift to the world. Jesus' merits are credited to all who believe. Therefore, answering this question will help hearers to see this connection and to appropriate Christ's inexhaustible gifts to themselves.

In essence, this question takes to heart encouragement from Griep, “Since the proclamation of law and gospel is our most important task, we want that proclamation to strike home in the hearts of our members. We will consequently give careful study to the scriptural pairings of law and gospel and seek to use God’s variety faithfully.”¹²⁶ As Griep implies and as noted above, the specific gospel in the text is in direct contrast to the way the specific law is portrayed.

Question 3: What unique language does this text use to describe Christ's saving and sanctifying work?

With this question the preacher is attempting to pinpoint the unique gospel expressions

125 Robert Farrar Capon, *The Foolishness of Preaching: Proclaiming the Gospel against the Wisdom of the World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1998), 11, emphasis his.

126 Griep, “Using Law-Gospel Pairs in Preaching | Essay File,” 3.

and metaphors that the Holy Spirit used in this particular text. Look for words and phrases that offers forgiveness, promises, hope, and strength for Christian living, then pay careful attention to the words used to convey those things. Preus writes,

The Scriptures say that in Christ we are enlightened, we are reborn, we are redeemed, we are justified, we are reconciled, we are hallowed, we are delivered, we are saved, and we are forgiven. We tend to hear all these as virtually synonymous, as indeed they are when we speak doctrinally. But in their linguistic meaning, such phrases are not synonymous. They are metaphors that have died, that have become lifeless, because of frequent use (and abuse). Each word, each metaphor, waits to be raised to life.¹²⁷

When considering this question, be sensitive to your own propensity to “hear all these [gospel metaphors] as virtually synonymous.”¹²⁸

Questions regarding your congregation

Question 4: In the lives of my congregation members, what wound of sin related to the specific law could most use healing from this gospel comfort?

The beauty of the Scriptures is that they are the timeless truths of God applicable to all people of all cultures of all times. The challenge for the preacher is to see how a given portion of God's Word best applies to his people. Just so with the comfort of the specific gospel in any given text. Preaching will have the greatest impact when it touches on the aspects of your hearers' lives that most need God's promises. Jeske notes, “A sermon may be doctrinally correct and still not touch the hearts of our hearers if they feel it's isolated from what they feel are the actual realities of their lives. When Christ preached, he met people on their level.”¹²⁹

This question also challenges the preacher to be willing to confront what Zack Eswine calls “expository bans.” He writes, “By an *expository ban* I refer to those aspects of reality that we tend to avoid or that are culturally forbidden to mention from the pulpit. Sexuality, emotions, famines, joys, tsunamis, celebrations, dreams, promotions, murders, crime victims, cancer survivors, and injustice are part of everyday life, but we avoid them.”¹³⁰ The preacher should

127 Preus, *Just Words*, 34–35.

128 Ibid.

129 Jeske, “Communicate the Gospel More Effectively,” 4.

130 Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture*, 30, emphasis his.

retain tact and propriety in the word choice within his sermon. However, he should be willing to address sensitive and touchy topics. Otherwise, where else and how else will God's people receive the comfort they need regarding those things?

It's important to remember that this question directs the preacher to the wounds of sin in the lives of his hearers, not to the preacher's personal pet peeves about the health, wealth, or status of the church as an organization. Jeske also gives this word of warning,

Remember that communicating the gospel effectively means being interested in people for *their* sake, and not for the *congregation's* sake. When you attempt, perhaps in the concluding paragraphs of your sermons, to lead people to make a particular decision, show that your interest in them is personally, not institutionally motivated. Your job is to see to it that the Holy Spirit has all the elbow room he needs to move that person in God's direction.¹³¹

Staying focused and directed on healing the wounds of sin in the lives of the hearers will help to avoid making the mistake that Jeske highlights here.

Question 5: How can the specific gospel of this text best be used to motivate my congregation members in their growth and/or living of faith?

While the specific gospel forgives and heals, it also motivates and inspires. Sometimes the gospel motivation from the text simply encourages the hearer to apply the grace-filled, merciful truths of God's Word directly to their hearts and lives (i.e., to “appropriate” those truths to themselves). Other times, God's great mercy from the text has the goal of not only offering forgiveness, but also powerfully moving the heart toward God-pleasing living. Paul begins his discussion of sanctified living in Romans with these words: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.”¹³² This question directs the preacher to consider how the encouragement of the specific gospel can best be directed to help his hearers grow more deeply in their trust of God's truths and/or grow in their life of sanctification. A number of possibilities may present themselves. In order to pick the best option, the preacher will consider the challenges that his hearers face in their everyday lives. Jeske offers advice in this regard by saying, “The pastor who wants to communicate the gospel effectively dare never forget that the decisive battles of faith are not fought within the four walls

131 Jeske, “Communicate the Gospel More Effectively,” 6, emphasis his.

132 Ro 12:1

of a church building, but in the social, political, economic and cultural areas where our parishioners spend most of their waking hours.”¹³³ Clearly, a significant knowledge about the lives and workings of his congregation members will serve the preacher well.

When considering this question it is important that the specific gospel not become overshadowed by a desired result. Recall Koester's warning, “Although we speak of gospel motivation, the gospel is never merely a means to that end. It is the end itself. It is God's gift to us. The gospel spurs us to action, but it does so because it is our main focus. It motivates us because it dominates our lives. Unless it does so, it cannot really motivate us.”¹³⁴ In fact, one aim of this question is to let the specific gospel help define and guide the way “training in righteousness” occurs during the sermon, rather than speaking about something foreign to the text itself.

133 Jeske, “Communicate the Gospel More Effectively,” 5.

134 Koester, *Gospel Motivation*, 12.

Applying the Questions to the Gospel of the Day for End Time, Series B

Structure of the text study summaries

The following text study summaries give an example of how to apply the questions outlined above. These summaries will use the following structure:

- Readings for the Sunday: A list of the readings for the given Sunday. This thesis has used the *Christian Worship Supplemental Lectionary*¹³⁵ readings where they differ from the ILCW series.
- Insights from the pericope's context: Brief comments on how the context of the passage helps to shape the exegete's understanding of the passage.
- Connections with the rest of the proper for the day: Reflections on how the first and second lessons help solidify the overarching theme for worship on that day and how that may shape a sermon based on the Gospel of the Day.
- Key insights gained from exegesis: Aspects of the text's translation and grammar that have the most impact on understanding the text correctly and preparing the pastor to preach on it.
- Specific law from the text: The sin of the heart that this text either accuses its hearers of having or warns its hearers against.
- Uncovering the specific gospel with the questions: Answers to the questions proposed in this thesis which are used to uncover the specific gospel of the text.
- Text analysis: The malady, cure, corresponding virtue, telic note, and propositional statement that emerge from the study of the text.
- Proposed basic outline: A possible theme and parts for a sermon based on this text.
- Example paragraph for preaching the specific gospel: An example of what the gospel preaching in a sermon on this text might sound like.

¹³⁵ Cf. *Christian Worship: Supplement* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Pub. House, 2008).

Reformation

Readings for the Sunday

- *First Lesson*: Daniel 3:16-28
- *Second Lesson*: Revelation 14:6,7
- *Gospel of the Day*: Mark 13:5-11

Insights from the pericope's context

The discourse on the last days in Mark 13 takes place on Tuesday evening of Holy Week after Jesus has spent most of the day being challenged by the Pharisees and Sadducees. At the end of the day, he and the disciples are leaving the Temple grounds, probably headed back to Bethany where they were likely staying with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

So here, as Jesus' earthly ministry comes to an end he takes an opportunity to instruct the disciples on the signs pointing to his second coming. What prompts this discourse is the disciples' amazement with the glory and splendor of the Temple. No doubt Jesus detected a certain preoccupation with the glories and splendors of this earth. Such preoccupation has the potential to encroach on a proper focus toward the glories and splendors to come in heaven.

After the pericope ends, Jesus' discourse continues. As his discourse continues, its scope broadens. Earlier, Jesus spoke of personal warnings for individual believers and about experiences they can expect in those last days. From here, Jesus talks about the events of the last days themselves. Or is he speaking of the fall of Jerusalem? In the prophetic vision, the two events merge somewhat. Thankfully, the pericope applies to the entire New Testament era after Jesus' ascension, and not just the fall of Jerusalem.

Connections with the rest of the proper for the day

The first lesson is the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednigo being thrown into the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:16-28). The second lesson is John's vision of the "angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth" (Revelation 14:6-7). It would seem that the first lesson emphasizes Jesus' words about being made to stand before kings and rulers and testifying to them. Meanwhile, the second lesson emphasizes more Jesus' prophecy that the gospel would be proclaimed to all nations first before the end.

Is there a common thread here? It's the proclamation of the gospel. Sometimes that proclamation is trumpeted far and wide by influential “angels” like the apostles, like Luther, like Walther, and others. Other times it comes simply from the firm witness of individual Christians in the face of persecutions both great and small. In either case, God's promise to preserve and proclaim the Gospel has been kept true from the time of the apostles until now and signals that his return is coming soon.

Key insights gained from exegesis

One is struck by the present imperatives Jesus uses when he warns Christians twice to “watch out” (Βλέπετε), and also not to be frightened (μὴ θροεῖσθε) at wars and rumors of war. Thus, the things Jesus urges are to be practiced continually. They are more more of a mindset than one-time, even if repeated, actions.

Jesus also uses several future indicatives when he says that people will be deceived and that Christians will be arrested, beaten, and made to stand before kings and rulers. While these things may not happen for individual Christians, they are guaranteed as the general tenor and *zeitgeist* of the end times.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this pericope is the symmetrical way in which the verb δεῖ is used. On the one hand, it is necessary that war and rumors of war go out into the world before the end. On the other hand, it is necessary that the gospel first be proclaimed to all nations before the end comes. Just as all people are destined to experience, or at least hear about the horrors of war, they will also hear the ultimate proclamation of eternal peace found only in the gospel. In fact, the very calamities that Jesus says are inevitable, war, earthquakes, and famines, are used by our Lord to prepare hearts to hear his proclamation of peace in the gospel.

Specific law from the text

It is unlikely that the preacher will be able to seriously castigate his own congregation for being deceived by false Christs and for giving up the faith in the face of persecutions. If those things were true, they would hardly be sitting in the pews. For that reason, the preacher here is wise to employ the second use of the law more than the first use of the law in this sermon. The

warning that ties all these things together is self-confidence. Christians will guard against the self-confidence that can lull them into thinking they are immune to deception from false Christs, immune from worry and panic over calamity, and immune from falling from the faith when persecuted. In fact, much like the disciples, Christians today may get caught up in the glory and splendor of earthly things that would lead them away from anything but complete trust in Jesus himself. Just as the disciples longed for a glorious Jewish kingdom with a splendorous temple at its center, Christians today also can be lulled into the siren song of desiring political victory, glory, attention, and approval from this world, with the church leading the way. Yet that is not the church Jesus tells Christians to expect or to follow here on earth.

Uncovering the specific gospel with the questions

Question 1: How does the text point to Christ alone as Savior from sin?

The text consists largely of warning and guidance from Jesus. That is to say, the text itself largely consists of second and third uses of the law. Admittedly, there is little direct proclamation of the gospel. However, looking at the implications behind the text, there is rich gospel to be found.

Christ says in verse five not to trust or follow any savior but him alone. In verse six he says that Christians do not need to be frightened by earthly calamities. In verse nine he warns about the persecutions that will come on Christians. What is unspoken, but is obviously implied in both of these cases, is that since Christians have forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus, they need not fear either global calamity or personal calamity. Rather, they can trust Jesus their Savior to bring them through such things, either rescuing their life, or bringing them home to eternal glory. To be sure, the very fact that Jesus can tell Christians precisely what will happen, is a powerful indication that he is the very Lord of history who holds all human events in his all-powerful hands. This answers the lurking hope in human hearts to put trust in worldly things and points to Jesus as the only Savior that will be left standing at the end of this world.

Question 2: What aspects of Christ's active and passive obedience does the text offer in answer to the specific law?

Again, the preacher must look a little bit between the lines and draw from some of the

larger context. In just a few short days after he said these words to the disciples, Jesus experienced exactly what he was talking about. He was brought before the Sanhedrin. He was beaten and flogged. He was made to stand before rulers and kings and he testified to the truth in front of them. How did Jesus prepare for these trials? He prayed to his Father and depended on him for the spiritual strength that he sent to Jesus. The few times he responded to his accusers, he spoke of the higher truths of God's Word rather than relying on a personal defense. And although Jesus' situation ended in death, he still put his confidence and trust in God through it all. Where Christians fail to put their hope in God in times of trouble and calamity, Jesus' perfect trust, hope, and confidence in God is given in their place.

Question 3: What unique language does this text use to describe Christ's saving and sanctifying work?

Verse eleven provides the key words for the specific gospel language in this text. Jesus gives or supplies the Holy Spirit. Through his Holy Spirit, Jesus gives comfort that he truly is the Lord of history and in complete control, even when things appear desperate. Through his Holy Spirit, Jesus gives his Word to defend Christians against deceivers and fear. He gives his Word when the time comes to witness. And he gives it in just the right time, just the right hour, so that Christians do not need to be anxious or worry about anything.

Naturally, this will not happen in a sudden or magical way. But Jesus prepares his followers because he has already given his Word, available for us to study and take to heart regularly. In that way he daily gives Christians the Word they need to prepare them for times of calamity and trouble in life.

Another unique phrase used in this text is "birth pangs." Those who have experienced birth pangs can testify to how painful they are. Yet, they can also testify as to the happy and joyous product of birth pangs. Though Christians must experience pain and hardship in these last times, the Lord of history assures his followers that the end result will be a joy and peace that surpasses all understanding.

Question 4: In the lives of my congregation members, what wound of sin related to the specific law could most use healing from this gospel comfort?

Perhaps for many congregations, the wound that needs the most healing is the fear of not knowing what to say or how to say it when an opportunity to witness arises. There is probably also a fair amount of guilt over failing to rise to the challenge during past opportunities. A “current events” conversation at work provided the perfect opening to talk about the hope only Jesus gives. Perhaps a specific and pointed question was asked: “What do you believe about this issue?” The Christian is put on the spot. They know the disdain their culture has for strident, biblical statements. It is all too easy to shrink back or give a half-hearted, insufficient answer. Guilt results. Fear is inbred.

This fear and guilt often stems directly from the issues brought forward by the specific law: people think they need to draw from their own self-confidence and their own rhetorical abilities in order to effectively witness. In the first place, the truth is that Jesus forgives all such failings. More than that, Jesus is the one who supplies and gives the Word necessary to witness. Christians cannot possibly prepare specifically for every specific situation that may arise, but God's Word, freely given to them, will help them be prepared. And when the time comes, God will lead them to the right words to say.

Question 5: How can the specific gospel of this text best be used to motivate my congregation members in their life of sanctification?

It has already been stated several times, but the best motivation is to point out that Jesus' promise has already come true because he has already given his Word. Yes, Christians can depend on his promise to give the right words to ward off deceivers or fear, or the right words to witness properly in front of mockers, scoffers, or worse. Yet, the way he fulfills that promise, is through the Word he has given to his believers for regular study. So Christians turn to his Word and solidify it in their hearts, trusting that Jesus' Holy Spirit will help them recall the best and most effective ones at the right time. When the next water-cooler conversation comes, the Christian can draw on their knowledge of the Word and trust that even if they think their words sound weak and ineffective, God's all-powerful Word is never weak and always efficacious.

Text analysis

Malady

The human heart naturally looks toward its own strength and self-confidence which will ultimately fail in the face of deception, calamity, or persecution.

Cure

For all people, as their perfect substitute, Jesus leaned on truths from God's Word and prayed for strength from God when he was submitted to trial, beatings, and crucifixion.

Corresponding Virtue

Trusting in Jesus' powerful gift of the Holy Spirit and his Word, the Christian studies their Bible often and knows that through this the Lord prepares them to face all challenges to the faith.

Telic Note

The Holy Spirit will use this sermon to help its listeners trust the Holy Spirit to supply from the treasury of his Word which has been solidified in the mind through regular study.

Propositional Statement

Jesus sends his Holy Spirit to give us the exact Word we need to defend us from deception and fear and to embolden us even before our enemies.

Proposed basic outline

Jesus gives his Word

1. to defend you
2. to embolden you

Example paragraph for preaching the specific gospel

Jesus gives his Word to you. He gives you his Word to defend you from every worry, care and concern that this world could ever throw at you. Trusting in the Word he planted in your heart through baptism, you can identify and guard against every spiritual deception. Trusting in the Word he gives you through regular Bible study, you can turn back every fear over earthly disaster. Trusting in the Word that his Holy Spirit brings to your mind, you can be worry-free and

completely emboldened when enemies scoff and mock and demand that you give an answer for the hope that you have. The same Lord who boldly witnessed to the truth before enemies and accusers is right there at your side. His hand is on your shoulder. His Spirit is in your heart. Trust him to put his Word on your lips.

Last Judgment

Readings for the Sunday

- *First Lesson*: Malachi 4:1-3
- *Second Lesson*: Hebrews 9:24-28
- *Gospel of the Day*: John 5:19-30

Insights from the pericope's context

In the previous chapter, chapter four, John relates stories of how two non-Jewish unbelievers came to believe in Jesus. Yet, neither situation was without its moments of unbelief to overcome. The Samaritan woman wanted to argue about religious minutiae, completely missing the forest for the trees. Meanwhile, the royal official in Cana seems to have viewed Jesus as a miracle-worker, and yet had reservations about whether or not Jesus was truly the Messiah.

In chapter five, we are shown the tragic example of how God's own people, and their religious leaders at that, rejected the evidence of Jesus' miracles (unlike the royal official in Cana) and held tightly to their religious minutiae (unlike the Samaritan woman). In so doing, they rejected the life Jesus had to offer and remained dead in their sins. And so Jesus was pleased to give life to the Gentiles who did not reject him. Sadly, the Jews who did not do what the Father wanted and who would not believe Jesus' testimony (see the verses following the pericope), secured only judgment for themselves instead of life.

Connections with the rest of the proper for the day

Whereas Jesus' words in the gospel focus more on the gospel promise and less on the fiery judgment, the first lesson from Malachi 4:1-3 reverses that focus. In the prophet's message the flip side of the coin is revealed, that those who do not cross over from life to death will be thrown into ever-lasting fire, as powerless as ash under the feet of the believers whom they once

scorned and mistreated. Yet even then, the gospel note sings forth: Jesus returns with healing in his wings for those who already have life in him. It is the second lesson that reveals how that life was purchased: with a single sacrifice, the Savior himself, to do away with sin completely. And the goal and purpose of it all was “to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

Key insights gained from exegesis

The word order of the Greek makes it clear that the primary emphasis in Jesus' words is the unity of action between himself and the Father. It often does this by front-shifting certain words. For instance, the end of verse nineteen literally reads, “for those things which [the Father] does, *these things* (ταῦτα) also the Son, likewise, does.” Verse twenty front-shifts the word “all” (πάντα) so that it receives emphasis, again, making it clear that Father and Son are in complete harmony. That is, not only does the Son do what he sees his Father doing, but nothing is hidden from the Son, either.

Both of the “ἀμὴν ἀμὴν” statements in this chapter are part of the pericope. That phrase, obviously, points to something the reader should take special notice of. If the exegete were to crystallize the text to just those two sentences, you'd still get the overall point: the Father and the Son are in full accord with one another, therefore, whoever listens to Jesus and believes the Father who sent him has eternal life and will not be judged.

Specific law from the text

The overall point of the text, especially when used for Last Judgment Sunday, is that Jesus and the Father are completely united in thought, word, and action. And for that reason, the Father has actually entrusted all judgment on the last day to his Son.

This is another good candidate for law-as-curb to predominate in the specific law. The preacher is going to have a difficult time accusing his parishioners of trying to worship God apart from Jesus. However, the contemporary American culture stresses tolerance, diversity, multiculturalism, and the idea that what matters is faith and sincerity rather than the particular object of that faith. It is here where congregation members will feel the most pressure to give in. In order to avoid conflict, Christians can be tempted to think, “I've got Jesus. My coworker has her own religion. What matters is sincere faith. God will be happy with both.”

Uncovering the specific gospel with the questions

Question 1: How does the text point to Christ alone as Savior from sin?

Verse twenty-four is direct and to the point: “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” Just as interesting as what Jesus says is how he says it. He says that people who believe in him “will not be judged.” They certainly deserve judgment, but due to their Spirit-given faith in Jesus, they escape judgment. On top of that, the whole point of the entire text is that Jesus and the Father have complete unity. Anyone who wants the Father's approval must turn to Jesus alone and no other.

Question 2: What aspects of Christ's active and passive obedience does the text offer in answer to the specific law?

The text is a celebration of Jesus' entire life as one of perfect active obedience. While it does not necessarily point to any one specific sphere of activity within his active obedience, Jesus does give us the evidence that his life was one of perfect active obedience when he says that the Father has entrusted all judgment to the Son. While Jesus' passive obedience is not mentioned explicitly, it is notable that Jesus, who was already appointed as judge of all heaven and earth, allowed himself to be judged unjustly by humans and judged for our sins by his Father.

Question 3: What unique language does this text use to describe Christ's saving and sanctifying work?

The unique language of this text happens to be language that is not particularly unique in terms of describing what Jesus has done to save us. Jesus says repeatedly that he does what he sees the Father doing. In that way, then, Jesus “did” it for us. Another major theme is “judgment,” which one might normally think of as a law-oriented word. However, in the context of this pericope, Jesus says that his followers will not be judged for his sake, but that they have crossed over from death to life because of what he has done.

Perhaps the best little word to key on from the text is that word “life.” In verse twenty-

one Jesus says, “the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.”¹³⁶ He is able to give that eternal life because he also gives Christians his perfect life in place of theirs. He is able to do that because he always did the Father's will, always did what his Father showed him, at all times.

In fact, there is a connection between the words “judgment” and “life.” To be under judgment is to be under the sentence of eternal death. However, since Jesus' followers will not be judged, they have true and eternal life.

Question 4: In the lives of my congregation members, what wound of sin related to the specific law could most use healing from this gospel comfort?

If the specific law of this text focuses on a temptation to defer to pluralism (the desire to approach God apart from Christ), perhaps the wound behind that is a certain level of embarrassment about Jesus. American culture makes Christians feel judgmental for sticking only to Jesus, or worse yet, it makes them think that Jesus is unfairly judgmental.

Question 5: How can the specific gospel of this text best be used to motivate my congregation members in their life of sanctification?

In this case, the text points toward a goal of appropriating and solidifying the truths that Jesus is totally one with the Father, that he is totally one with the Father's will, and that Jesus gives Christians that perfect life. So when he comes to judge all the earth, he will really look upon his own life granted to us and say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

This perfect, substitutionary life is given for all people. There is absolutely nothing embarrassing about that truth. And since what Jesus did, he did to save all humankind, he is not unfair in his judgments in the least. Rather, he offers eternal life to all who listen to him. And he gives Christians the opportunity to be his mouthpieces here on earth. The appropriation and solidification of this truth will help to guard their hearts against the pluralistic temptations of contemporary American culture.

Text analysis

Malady

136 Jn 5:21.

The human heart is tempted to split apart the Father and Jesus, allowing for other ways to access the Father.

Cure

Jesus was of full accord with his Father's will at all times and never misinterpreted his Father's will. His perfect life is the one that will stand in place of the Christian's at the judgment, and so the Christian will escape the judgment they deserve.

Corresponding Virtue

Confident that eternal life is theirs and is offered freely to all people through Jesus, the Christian will not feel embarrassment over Jesus, but boldly point to him as the only Savior from sin.

Telic Note

The Holy Spirit will use this sermon to solidify in its listeners the truth that honoring Jesus who did it all for us is truly honoring the Father and will avoid his judgment.

Propositional Statement

Eternal life comes only through Jesus because only he perfectly imitated and followed his Father's will, and only by listening to him have Christians crossed over from death to life.

Proposed basic outline

Jesus' life frees you from judgment

1. The life he lived imitating his Father
2. The life he gives to those who listen

Example paragraph for preaching the specific gospel

No one else in all of history can claim to be so closely and so tightly connected to God the Father. No one else has so perfectly imitated and so perfectly done exactly what God the Father wills. Jesus did it all for you by living the perfect life in imitation of our Heavenly Father,

and it's that same life that he gives to all who listen to him. And when you have Jesus' life covering you, then no judgment can possibly come upon you. Because the Father appointed his perfect Son to judge and approve of the perfect life he gave you.

Saints Triumphant

Readings for the Sunday

- *First Lesson:* Daniel 12:1-3
- *Second Lesson:* 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
- *Gospel of the Day:* Mark 13:24-27

Insights from the pericope's context

Reformation Sunday had drawn from verses earlier in this chapter. Now, this pericope picks up near the end of Jesus' discourse on the last days. In the verses that are in closest context to this pericope, the reader can see that an overarching theme of Jesus' discourse is God's preservation of the elect stitched in right next to his warnings against falling away. While Jesus does say repeatedly that his followers should be on their guard,¹³⁷ yet he also says that “for the sake of the elect,” God has determined to “cut short those days.”¹³⁸ Using the illustration of a fig tree, he also tells his disciples that he has told them these things for their benefit, that they may know when the end is near.¹³⁹ The overall sense is that there will certainly be convincing-sounding deceptions and incredible difficulties in those end days, and believers must be vigilant against them. Yet, they are not alone in their efforts to stay vigilant and believe. God will preserve and protect his elect, whom he will not fail to “gather ... from the four winds.”¹⁴⁰

Connections with the rest of the proper for the day

Both Jesus and the prophecy given to Daniel speak of the terrible distress that will happen on the earth. In the prophecy given to Daniel it is simply given in relative terms, a

137 Cf. Mk 13:5, 9, 21, 23, 33, 35.

138 Mk 13:20.

139 Cf. Mk 13:28-29.

140 Mk 13:27.

distress “such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then.”¹⁴¹ Jesus makes it clear that this distress is the unraveling of the universe on the last day when he quotes Isaiah, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”¹⁴² Both also sound the same note regarding the outcome of these signs. “Your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book”¹⁴³ or as Jesus says, “[the Son of Man's] elect”¹⁴⁴ will be gathered up and given “everlasting life.”¹⁴⁵

Perhaps the biggest question about the Daniel text is this: who is Michael? Given Michael's close connection to the judgment in these verses, some have seen “Michael” here not literally as the archangel, but as a picture of Christ himself. Therefore, Michael arising would be identified with Jesus “coming in clouds.”¹⁴⁶ While this is a possible interpretation, Daniel 10:15-11:1 may suggest that Michael is distinguished from Jesus in Daniel's prophecies (this depends on whether or not the preacher thinks the “one who looked like a man”¹⁴⁷ is to be identified as Jesus or just another angel). Furthermore, in the Second Lesson, Paul says that Jesus' appearing will be “with the voice of the archangel,”¹⁴⁸ who would be none other than Michael himself.¹⁴⁹ While the preacher can say little with dogmatic certainty, the preponderance of clues seem to point to Michael in Daniel chapter twelve as simply the archangel rather than a pseudonym for Jesus.

So what is the significance for preaching on Mark chapter thirteen? Rather than equating Michael and Jesus, the preacher may wish to encourage his congregation with the fact that Michael is called “the great prince who protects [Jesus'] people.”¹⁵⁰ Amidst all of the trials,

141 Da 12:1.

142 Mk 13:24-25.

143 Da 12:1.

144 Mk 13:27.

145 Da 12:2.

146 Mk 13:26.

147 Cf. Da 10:16, 18.

148 1 Th 4:16.

149 There is some debate as to whether or not God has created and/or appointed more than one archangel. However, Scripture seems to more consistently indicate that there is just one archangel, and Michael is identified as that archangel.

150 Da 12:1.

tragedies, and distress in our life that prefigure and point to that great day of distress, Jesus has given us a mighty protector to guard not only his church but also his people individually. This mighty prince and protector, will be the general of the angels Jesus sends out to make sure that all his people are gathered to be with him and none are left behind.

That is a good segue into a discussion of how the Second Lesson intersects with the Gospel of the Day. Paul's overall point is that whether a person is alive or dead at the coming of the Last Day will not matter. Jesus will gather all those who had and have faith in him to be with him. In fact, those who have died in the Lord will actually be raised first and then those who are alive will join them. For that reason, death does not hold the same grief for the believer that it holds for the unbeliever. The unbeliever has no hope of a blessed reunion. The believer, though they will miss their loved ones while here on earth, knows that they will enjoy an eternity with their loved ones who died in Christ. So, just as Paul says, believers may encourage each other with these facts.

Key insights gained from exegesis

The pericope begins by saying, “In those days, following that distress...”¹⁵¹ So what is “that distress” (τὴν θλίψιν ἐκείνην)? One natural interpretation may be to say that what Jesus says next can only take place after the fall of Jerusalem described in verses fourteen through nineteen. That is certainly a plausible explanation. However, the book of Revelation often speaks of the entire end times era (that is, all of world history from the ascension and Pentecost up to the present time) as being a time of θλίψις. Furthermore, Jesus' next words are clearly speaking of Judgment Day itself and the unraveling of creation that will occur on that day. As a result, it seems best to understand “that distress” as referring to all the evil (wars, famine, etc), all the deceptions (false Christ's, counterfeit miracles, etc), and all the persecution directed toward Christians throughout the end times. “Following that distress,” the world will end.

After his paraphrase of Isaiah 13:10 and Isaiah 34:4, Jesus says, “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.”¹⁵² What is the significance of the clouds? Throughout the New Testament, νεφέλη is used in two senses. A few times, it is used

151 Mk 13:24.

152 Mk 13:26.

to speak of natural, meteorological clouds that either bring or portend rain. However, the majority of times the word is used it is either used in a variation of this same expression, or to refer to God's presence. God's voice spoke from a cloud at the Transfiguration.¹⁵³ God speaks from the clouds several times in Revelation as well.¹⁵⁴ No doubt the picture of the clouds as the seat of God's presence hearkens back to his presence before the Israelites in the cloud during the Exodus.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, the fact that Jesus said that he would return ἐν νεφέλαις is an unabashed and obvious way of him saying that he is in fact God and wields the full authority and power that the Father wields.

Using that very authority and power, Jesus says that he will send out his angels in order to “gather together” (ἐπισυνάξει) the elect. The word is used sometimes to indicate a crowd gathering and the way people press up against each other to see or hear something.¹⁵⁶ However, here it is probably used in a way more similar to Jesus' poignant statement in Matthew 23:37 when he said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together.” The closeness implied by the “gathering together” then goes beyond the physical distance alone, but includes the emotional closeness either that the gatherer has for those being gathered, or that both gatherer and gathered have for each other. So then, the physical gathering brings with it a sense of happiness and relief at the end of an “unnatural” separation.

Those who are gathered are the elect. Since a major emphasis of the context and the pericope itself is the protection and preservation of the elect, the preacher does well to consider that word a little more deeply. It is not merely a synonym for “believer.” It emphasizes that the believer was chosen by God, and that this choosing had nothing to do with the believers themselves. Rather, it was an act of God's pure grace. As Jesus once said, “Many are invited” (i.e., had the opportunity to hear the message of the gospel), “but few are chosen.”¹⁵⁷ Since it is God who has made this choice of his own free volition without any influence from the believer,

153 Cf. Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7.

154 Cf. Rev 11:12; 14:15.

155 Cf. Ex 13:21; 1 Co 10:1.

156 Cf. Mk 1:33; Lk 12:1

157 Mt 22:14.

then the believer can be sure that God will not fail to keep safe what he has chosen. After all, “God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?”¹⁵⁸ That God's gathering of these elect will include all of them, with none left out, is emphatically stated in two different ways. They will be gathered “from the four winds” and “from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.”¹⁵⁹ Not one will be overlooked.

Specific law from the text

The most basic foundations of the earthly experience, the sun, the moon, and the stars, will be totally unraveled when Jesus appears in all his power and glory. No one will be able to hide from the judgment he brings on that day. Believers must beware that they do not get caught up in the cares and worries of a distressed world that will be totally destroyed in the end. It is all too easy to fixate on those distresses, living life in worry and fear. When personal trouble strikes or world events cause worry, the Christian is tempted to fall into the despair that all is lost, that hope has failed, and wickedness will prevail.

Uncovering the specific gospel with the questions

Question 1: How does the text point to Christ alone as Savior from sin?

When Jesus comes “in clouds with great power and glory,” then “he will send out his angels and gather his elect.”¹⁶⁰ Apart from that relationship with Christ, no one will stand before his judgment. However, he has chosen people to be in a spiritual relationship with him and him alone. This perfect love from Jesus drives out all fear and calms the despair and distress that threaten to overtake the soul.

Question 2: What aspects of Christ's active and passive obedience does the text offer in answer to the specific law?

Much of the gospel in this pericope hinges on that word, “elect,” and its implications.

158 Nu 23:19.

159 Mk 13:27.

160 Ibid.

How can God in all his holiness choose sinful human beings to be in his presence? It is certainly not because of anything inside of them. Rather, he chooses them to be with him for the sake of his Son, Jesus and the perfect life that Jesus lived in their place. God, who spoke from the cloud and said, “This is my Son, whom I love” now chooses to view believers as his sons and daughters as well, because of the substitutionary life and death that Jesus offered for them. More than this, the same Jesus conquered the grave, was seated at the right hand of God, and will come down in glory on the clouds. At that time he will gather his elect together and hand all this same victory, glory, and honor to those who trusted in him despite the distress all around them.

Question 3: What unique language does this text use to describe Christ's saving and sanctifying work?

There are several options here. Once more, the word “elect” figures in prominently—the idea that God in his love, mercy, and sovereignty chose people to be his dear children, brothers and sisters with Jesus, before the beginning of the world itself. Another important word is “gather” (ἐπισυνάξει). These same elect he promises also to gather, to bring together in a joyous reunion that will never end. What a contrast this offers to the chaos, confusion, and dispersion caused by a distressed world. All of this is beyond doubt for Jesus' people because the judge who returns in clouds is also their Savior, and he comes with all of his Father's great power and glory to gather his believers away from this world of distress.

Question 4: In the lives of my congregation members, what wound of sin related to the specific law could most use healing from this gospel comfort?

Everyone experiences the tragedies and distresses that this world places on our livelihood and our relationships. The preacher here would be encouraged to emphasize the ones that pertain most to their own church community. However, there are some things that probably apply broadly to many WELS congregations. A distressed economy and its impact on the family or the church itself may be one possible wound that Jesus can heal here. The distress that can be caused by fraying or broken relationships in the family is another that many can relate to. Behind all these things is the wound of sin that fixates on the distress rather than looking to Jesus for deliverance. The downward spiral of alternating self-reliance and despair that accompanies such

fixation threatens to rob Christians of the peace and comfort they have in knowing that Jesus has already made them conquerors and victors and their final deliverance is a present reality simply waiting to be ratified on Judgment Day.

Question 5: How can the specific gospel of this text best be used to motivate my congregation members in their life of sanctification?

Just as Jesus will gather together all his elect, his chosen ones, on the last day, believers have the opportunity to frequently gather together in God's presence. Gathered together as a group of his elect, believers worship their almighty Lord and encourage each other with the knowledge that he will not overlook any one of them or their troubles, but will bring all the distress his followers experience to an end in that final, great gathering in heaven.

Text analysis

Malady

Believers fixate on their worries and cares caused by the distress in this world, forgetting the great mercy and power of God on their behalf.

Cure

God did not fixate on the distress and evil that creating the world would cause, but chose to patiently endure it for the joy set before him of choosing his elect to be with him forever.

Corresponding Virtue

Rather than being overwhelmed with distress, the Christian gathers together with other believers for regular “victory celebrations” in worship, trusting in and looking forward to their Savior's return in glory.

Telic Note

Through this sermon the Holy Spirit will help its listeners to find joy and mutual encouragement in their status as God's chosen people.

Propositional Statement

Christians can take heart that their Judge, the Son of Man, is also their substitute, and he is coming to destroy this distressing world and to gather all his elect to the glories of heaven.

Proposed basic outline

The Son of Man is coming!

1. To destroy a distressing world
2. To gather his elect to glory

Example paragraph for preaching the specific gospel

God elected you, that is he chose you to be his very own. And he did this before the world ever began, before time itself ever started ticking. The holy and perfect God was willing to endure all the filth and violence of the distressing sin in this world. And he was willing to do it because he chose you, because he chose that through Jesus, your substitute, you might overcome the distress of sin in this world and join him together with all the elect in the glorious and blessed home of heaven. If that was God's choice, if he put up with all the world's sin, just for you, then you can be sure he will gather you, deliver you, from this world of sin.

Christ the King

Readings for the Sunday

- *First Lesson*: Daniel 7:13,14
- *Second Lesson*: Revelation 1:4b-8
- *Gospel of the Day*: John 18:33-37

Insights from the pericope's context

Jesus' kingly power is shown from the beginning of John chapter eighteen when the officials first attempt to arrest him. Upon acknowledging that “I am he” (that is, “Jesus of Nazareth”), the soldiers and officials from the chief priests and Pharisees, “drew back and fell to the ground.”¹⁶¹ They had no power to arrest him or take him by force. Jesus gave himself up

¹⁶¹ Jn 18:6.

willingly. And as he told Pilate, he did so because his kingdom is not an earthly one, but a heavenly one.

Also of special interest within the context of John chapter eighteen is the contrast between Jesus as the bearer of truth and the many examples of “un-truth.” Judas betrayed the truth. The chief priests and the Pharisees fought against the truth. Peter denied the truth. Pilate, who cynically asked, “What is truth?” ultimately tried to have it both ways. He tried to say he personally believed the truth that Jesus was innocent while nevertheless crucifying Jesus in order to placate the Jews. One might even say that Pilate prioritized defending his own “truth” that a crowd of angry Jews could be disaster for his political career. How sad that as the King of all creation stood before him, Pilate could not see anything regal in the Savior. He rejected Jesus' invitation to stand on the side of real truth and recognize him as the one true King. So also today, many see nothing regal in Jesus. Like Pilate they see nothing they want, and only a beaten and bloodied man, rejected by his own people.

Yet, throughout his unjust trial, the Savior, the bearer of truth, never spoke a false word. More than that, he was able to point back to his entire life and say, “I said nothing in secret. Why question me? Ask those who heard me. ... If I said something wrong ... testify as to what is wrong.”¹⁶² In the overall context, Jesus is not simply a king that comes with power, but his power is the power of truth.

Connections with the rest of the proper for the day

Daniel saw what was hidden from the eyes of Pilate. Standing trial in front of him, beaten and bloodied, Jesus certainly looked like no king. Yet in overcoming sin, death and hell on the cross, Jesus earned the right to receive what his Father gave him in Daniel's vision: all “authority, glory, and sovereign power.”¹⁶³ By the Spirit and the faith given through him, “all nations and peoples of every language [worship] him”¹⁶⁴ and honor him as their king.

Not only did Jesus earn this right in time, but he has ever been the King of Truth from the beginning of time. As John's vision in Revelation declares, he is the one “who is, who was, and

¹⁶² Jn 18:20-21, 23.

¹⁶³ Da 7:14.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

who is to come, the Almighty.”¹⁶⁵ By freeing us from our sins, he has made us into his kingdom, “a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.”¹⁶⁶

Key insights gained from exegesis

When Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews,” it was a loaded question on several levels. First of all, there is the obvious matter of being an unauthorized government official apart from the Roman empire. Such a “sovereign” would not be tolerated. But that is not what Pilate is aiming at. Pilate was probably not ignorant of the special meaning it would have to be “king of the Jews.” Such a person would be claiming to be taking David's throne, and probably claiming to be the Jewish Messiah. Furthermore, Pilate would have been fully aware that contemporary Jewish thought about the Messiah was focused around the earthly liberation of and sovereignty of the Jewish nation. The point is, by asking Jesus this question, Pilate isn't concerned so much about whether Jesus is claiming to be an earthly ruler. It is clear that he does not command armies or live in a palace. After all, Pilate pointed out that “your own people and chief priests handed you over to me.”¹⁶⁷ Rather, Pilate is acutely aware of and inquiring about whether or not Jesus is trying to start a new Messianic cult. Such cults had proved to be troublesome in the past and had attempted to stir up political uprisings.

This further explains Pilate's waning interest in the whole matter. Jesus tells him both that “my kingdom is not of this world,”¹⁶⁸ and that his servants' inaction shows that he is not interested in ruling this world (at least, in the earthly sense). When pressed on the issue, Jesus says that his whole purpose for being on this earth “is to testify to the truth.”¹⁶⁹ Pilate soon concludes that whatever Jesus may be up to, it is no threat to the Roman empire or even to the peace of the empire's Jewish province.

The irony of the situation, of course, is that the true King of all the universe is on trial in front of someone who, relatively speaking, is fairly low on the chain of command. What's more, Pilate, the one who is nominally in charge of the situation, comes off as the one who is fairly

165 Rev 1:8.

166 Rev 1:6.

167 Jn 18:35.

168 Jn 18:36.

169 Jn 18:37.

clueless about the facts. It is Jesus who testifies to the truth. And those who are on the side of truth listen to him.

As the bloodied and beaten Jesus stands before Pilate, the tragedy is that he cannot see the truth that Jesus invites him to recognize and stand with. The truth that Jesus came to testify about is that he really is the King of the universe, the King of all creation, and that his Kingship is a kingship of grace and mercy. The true King of all the world is most kingly when he willingly submits to the cross for the sake of his people.

Specific law from the text

The Truth was right in front of Pilate, but he refused to see it and refused to hear it. The Holy Spirit has placed the truth in the hearts of believers. However, the sinful nature daily struggles to blind people to the truth that Jesus is King. The sinful nature is attracted to earthly glory, power, and might with all its pomp and ostentation. From that earthly perspective, Jesus does not seem like a king, but like a helpless and weak victim. Christians are tempted to be disappointed in a King who rules by grace and mercy rather than by sword and retribution.

Uncovering the specific gospel with the questions

Question 1: How does the text point to Christ alone as Savior from sin?

Jesus draws a clear line in the sand in verse thirty-seven. “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”¹⁷⁰ Anyone looking for truth, enlightenment, or any kind of salvation apart from Jesus is not on the side of truth, but joined with lies. Yet this line in the sand is not a barrier so much as an invitation. Jesus wants people, even Pilate, to come over to his side, the side of truth, and stand with him against the lies on the other side. Jesus invites the Christian already on his side to thankfully rejoice and stand firm with him, seeing his Kingship through the eyes of faith, even and especially when the eyes of flesh see only a beaten and rejected man.

Question 2: What aspects of Christ's active and passive obedience does the text offer in answer to the specific law?

Jesus willingly submitted to this unjust trial, not because he was powerless, but because

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

as the one true King, he set out to be the defender and champion of his people.

Question 3: What unique language does this text use to describe Christ's saving and sanctifying work?

The prominent words of the specific gospel in this pericope are “kingdom” and “truth.” Through his Spirit-given word of truth, Jesus has made his believers part of his kingdom. It is a kingdom of truth and a kingdom he rules with truth. Those who listen to Jesus' words see the truth that he really is King over all the universe. The eyes of faith perceive the truth of Jesus regal nature behind the bleeding wounds. Indeed, it is in those bleeding wounds that Jesus has become the King of his people and it is in submitting to wounds and death that he acts the most kingly. Could there be anything more comforting than this great truth?

Question 4: In the lives of my congregation members, what wound of sin related to the specific law could most use healing from this gospel comfort?

Christianity is under constant attack in this world, and many individual Christians feel more and more threatened by a hostile world. The gospel comfort is the truth that Jesus truly does reign from his heavenly throne. No one can oppose the true King.

Question 5: How can the specific gospel of this text best be used to motivate my congregation members in their life of sanctification?

When Christians doubt that Jesus is really reigning as King, they can remember that he is the King of truth. He knows and understands the truth of the situation far better than anyone. Therefore, they can trust his rule completely, and look to his word of truth for comfort.

Text analysis

Malady

Christians are tempted to doubt Jesus' credentials as the true King, especially when it seems that his church is under attack.

Cure

Jesus willingly submitted, not because he was powerless, but because he truly is the King and champion of his people who won true victory for them.

Corresponding Virtue

Christians take pride in their true King, glorying in the victory he won for them on the cross.

Telic Note

The Holy Spirit will use this sermon to help its listeners trust that Jesus truly is their King in complete control over the universe.

Propositional Statement

No matter how much power this world seems to have, Christians can trust the King, because truth is on his side, and as his brothers and sisters, by faith Christians are on his side.

Proposed basic outline

Trust the King!

1. Truth is on his side
2. You are on his side

Example paragraph for preaching the specific gospel

Here's the truth: Jesus' wounds are not weakness. His blood is not belittling to him or to you. His bruises are not an embarrassment. In fact, they are his marks of true glory and Kingship. His pierced hands, feet, and side are not a defeat, but a glorious victory by the King who is the ultimate champion for his people. Trust the King! He's your champion and he has the truth on his side. He knows the real truth of every situation, far better than you or I do. Just as the dark day of his arrest and his crucifixion was worked out to save you and bring you into his kingdom, you can trust the king that every dark day his church experiences—that you experience—is ruled and guided and worked out by the King who has the truth on his side.

Conclusion

Preaching specific gospel is an important part of faithful, biblical preaching. It mirrors the practice of the apostles, is supported by the Lutheran Confessions, and garners from the best insights in modern homiletics. To date, a widely-recognized and acknowledged definition of specific gospel does not exist. Through this thesis, it is hoped that the specific gospel can be recognized as:

- Preaching Christ alone as the only cure for sin;
- Directly proclaiming forgiveness of sins, hope, comfort and encouragement;
- Offering Christ's cure for the sins and temptations of the text's specific law; and
- Exploring, explaining, and using the unique gospel expressions in metaphors provided by the text.

However, a working definition for the specific gospel is just a beginning. Defining the specific gospel is not merely about contributing yet another fancy piece of terminology to the field of religious studies. Rather, it is in an attempt to give the preacher a practical tool to improve their preaching and better edify God's people. Therefore, this thesis has also presented five questions that the preacher may use during his text study to pinpoint the specific gospel and apply it to his specific congregation.

- 1) How does the text point to Christ alone as Savior from sin?
- 2) What aspects of Christ's active and passive obedience does the text offer in answer to the specific law?
- 3) What unique language does this text use to describe Christ's saving and sanctifying work?
- 4) In the lives of my congregation members, what wound of sin related to the specific law could most use healing from this gospel comfort?
- 5) How can the specific gospel of this text best be used to motivate my congregation members in their life of sanctification?

It is hoped that the demonstration of this method for the End Time season, Series B, shows that the questions are quite effective in surfacing the specific gospel for the preacher and helping him apply it to his congregation.

Additional avenues of further study present themselves. For instance, Johnson suggests

that the book of Hebrews provides a better example of modern-day preaching than the book of Acts.¹⁷¹ Does the book of Hebrews give a similar model or a different one for unearthing specific gospel from the texts that it uses? It would also be interesting to study Luther's sermons and get a feel for the breadth of his "range" in using gospel metaphors. Was he generally faithful to the gospel metaphors presented by the text, or did he frequently deviate from them? If so, what might have been the reason? Future research on these and other related topics is most welcome.

What does become clear from the preaching of the apostles is that they made full use of the rich gospel language that God provided in the Old Testament writings. They boldly and specifically pointed to Christ and pointed people to apply his forgiveness and grace to their own lives and hearts. Preachers today have the same gospel power available to them. They can speak not just about the gospel, but rather proclaim it directly by pointing to Jesus as the only Savior from sin. They can heal troubled hearts and minds and rescue souls from eternal death by preaching Christ as the cure against whatever sins God's Word exposes. They can have a rich and varied message to bring each new Sunday by drawing on the rich and varied language God uses to express his grace, forgiveness, comfort, and consolation. What's more, this rich and varied language provides the exact bulwarks needed against the different assaults from Satan, the world, and the sinful flesh. Trusting in the power and efficacy of God's Word, and faithfully mining the specific gospel from each text, the preacher can preach with confidence and with vigor.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 20.

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