

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LUTHERAN PREACHING: A REVIEW OF SELECT SERMONS

BY MARTIN LUTHER, C.F.W. WALTHER, AND SIEGBERT BECKER

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INTRODUCTION .....	1
PART I: WHY—WHAT—HOW .....	2
Why Lutherans Preach .....	2
What Lutherans Preach .....	4
How Lutherans Preach .....	7
Methodology .....	9
PART II: ORIGIN OF LUTHERAN PREACHING .....	10
Luther the Preacher .....	10
Luther’s Preaching Style .....	17
Luther’s Christmas Sermon.....	20
Luther’s Sermon on Soberness and Moderation .....	29
PART III: PREACHING THROUGH THE CENTURIES .....	35
Overview of 17 <sup>th</sup> Century Preaching.....	35
C.F.W. Walther .....	38
Walther’s Sermon on the Lord’s Supper.....	39
Walther’s Sermon on the Death of the Sinner.....	44
Dr. Siegbert Becker .....	47
Becker’s Sermon on Jesus’s Attitude Toward Little Children.....	50
PART IV: CONCLUSION .....	53
What Does This Mean? .....	53
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	59

## ABSTRACT

The phrase *Sola Scriptura* rings loudly in the minds of Lutheran ministers. Scripture alone is the means by which God brings his life saving message to all people. Pastors want to rightly handle the Word of God as they bring it to his people—the Church. A Lutheran pastor who wants to do justice to the holy Word of God will think long and hard on why, what, and how he preaches. Why and what we preach are firmly established in the Word of God, but how we preach is up for debate. How to do this is no small question. Lutheran preachers since the time of Martin Luther have answered this question in different ways. This thesis will explore the roots of Lutheran preaching to establish why and what we preach. The thesis will then examine the preaching of Martin Luther, C.F.W. Walther, and Siegbert Becker to analyze how Lutheran preaching has changed or stayed the same.

## INTRODUCTION

If you ask the average person what exactly it is their pastor does, the number one duty on their list is going to be preaching. Yes, it is true that pastors have several other duties among a congregation such as administration, visiting the sick, calling on those who are straying, evangelism, teaching, organizing worship, and leading meetings to name a few; but the number one task on most people's lists of what it is that a pastor does would still be preaching. It is no coincidence that some people call their pastors, "preacher!"

Preaching has been the task of the leaders of God's people since God established his church. Ever since our most ancient ancestors began to "call on the name of the Lord" (Ge 4:26 CSB), there have been preachers. Moses preached to the people of Israel on the banks of the east side of the Jordan River. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah preached in the temple courts. Jonah preached to Gentiles in a faraway land. Jesus preached his famous Sermon on the Mount. Peter preached to thousands of Jewish followers on Pentecost. Paul preached before courts and authorities. Martin Luther preached against error and proclaimed the truth of salvation. Countless others have preached the Word of God since and will continue to do so until Jesus returns on the last day.

Just because people have always preached, however, does not mean that they have always preached the same way. The purpose of this paper is to explore how preaching has changed among Lutheran preachers since the time of Martin Luther. This paper will examine sermons from popular Lutheran preachers: first, Martin Luther himself; second, C.F.W. Walther; and third, Siegbert Becker. This paper looks to specifically examine how sermon writing and preaching has evolved since Martin Luther's time to the present day in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). First, several critical sources about Martin Luther the

preacher will be examined and expounded to discover the origins and philosophy of Lutheran preaching. Second, sermons will be examined on the basis of current homiletical theory, moving from Luther to present day. Finally, a synthesis of my findings will be put together to describe how preaching has changed since Luther's time or stayed the same. The cornerstone of Lutheran preaching has always remained the same, but Lutheran preaching has been produced in many different forms throughout the centuries.

## PART I: WHY—WHAT—HOW

### **Why Lutherans Preach**

Preaching is the foundational method by which God's Word is propagated throughout the world. Ever since there have been unbelievers in the world, there have been people preaching the will of God and the promise of his Savior. In Genesis chapter 4, we observe a small world that has just begun. Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. At this time, we also observe that all the people of the earth knew about the one true God. Adam and Eve had undoubtedly spoken to their sons about God, the perfection of the Garden of Eden, the serpent and fall, as well as God's promise of grace and salvation. Both Cain and Abel were bringing sacrifices to the Lord. A sign of faith in Abel but not so in Cain. It was Cain's contempt for God that led to the first murder recorded in history and, it was that same contempt that led Cain's children after him to fall into abject unbelief. Genesis chapter 4 shows us an entire line of people growing apart from God. It is also in this chapter where we first see people "call on the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26). In his commentary on Genesis 1–11, Carl Lawrenz says this about the phrase:

We, like the commentaries of Franz Delitzsch, Carl F. Keil, H.C. Leupold, G. Ch. Aalders, and many others, take this to refer to the use of the name of the LORD in public worship. Furthermore, with Luther we take this public use of the name

of the LORD, begun at the time of Enosh, to have been preeminently a public proclaiming of the name of the LORD.<sup>1</sup>

This proclaiming of the name of the Lord, at a time when people had first fallen away from faith in the one true God, is what we could call preaching. This preaching likely looked different in style and scope than it does today, but the basis for the message was surely the same: there is one God, the God of creation, who will send (or has sent) a Savior to win life forever for you.

Many years later Abraham identifies himself with the God-fearing line of Seth and Enosh when he “called on the name of the LORD” (Gen 12:8, 13:4). His son Isaac did the same.<sup>2</sup> God then continued to have his name proclaimed throughout salvation history as he chose people such as Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Isaiah, and many other prophets to proclaim his name, to preach his will.

Hundreds of years later, God’s own Son came into the world and also began to preach. “From then on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Matt 4:17). During his ministry, Jesus also sent out his followers to preach the good news of the kingdom. “After this, the Lord appointed seventy-two others, and he sent them ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself was about to go” (Lk 10:1). After he ascended into heaven, Jesus sent out his disciples on a mission to proclaim the good news to all people. He sent them to preach. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Ac 1:8).

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1. Carl Lawrenz, *A Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 205.

2. Gen 26:25

Jesus has made it the mission of Christians to proclaim the Word to all people.<sup>3</sup> He himself has appointed specific people throughout time to be the preachers of his Gospel. “He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11). The Apostle Paul was one of those evangelists. He traveled around all the known world preaching the good news about a loving and saving God. Paul recognized the importance of preaching the Word when, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote these words: “How then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news” (Rom 10:14–15). This is why we, along with the Apostle Paul, the prophets of old, and the Lord Jesus himself, preach. We preach so that people might hear the message and believe. We preach so that they too might call on his name who has saved them from sin and death.

### **What Lutherans Preach**

It would be possible to answer the question “what do we preach?” with the simple answer: the Word of God. That, however, is not enough! There are many denominations throughout Christianity that would claim the same thing, though the subject matter of their preaching could differ wildly from ours.<sup>4</sup> This stems not only from different theology, but also a different purpose of preaching. As stated above, we preach so that the Word of God might create and strengthen faith.

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3. Matt 28:19–20

4. Joel Osteen’s website says that they believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, yet you are hard pressed to find saving Gospel in his sermons. In his sermon “Peace with Yourself,” preached on December 10th, 2016, he talked a lot about accepting yourself and very little about why God accepts you: because of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

Therefore, it is important to define the Word of God. The Word of God is both the law and the gospel. Therefore, for a Lutheran, it is important to preach both the law and the gospel. The law condemns the sinner and prepares him to receive the gospel; and it is the gospel alone that has the power to work faith in a believer's heart.

God has given this gospel to us in the Means of Grace, which is the gospel in Word and Sacrament. God has told us that the Holy Spirit works through these means to affect faith. "The Spirit is the one who gives life. The flesh doesn't help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (Jn 6:63). Again, "Jesus answered, 'Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God'" (Jn 3:5).

The Spirit works through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. What then is the gospel? The gospel as we define it could have a few different meanings. Adolf Hoenecke spells it out best in his dogmatics.

The gospel in the narrowest sense is the message that in Christ, the Son of God who became man, we have the Redeemer from sin. In other words, it is the preaching of the forgiveness of sins in the Redeemer who has appeared... Used in a still wider sense, the word appears in Mark 1:14 and 16:15, as embracing the preaching of both the law and the gospel in the narrower sense.<sup>5</sup>

The gospel in the narrowest sense is that message about Christ which creates faith in the unbelieving heart. This message of the gospel is a total mystery to mankind as it cannot be discovered or understood by man's reason alone. "As it is written, 'What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has conceived – God has prepared these things for those who love him.' Now God has revealed these things to us by the Spirit, since the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (1 Cor 2:9,10). The gospel in the wider sense refers to a preparatory preaching of the law in conjunction with the gospel in the narrow sense. When Jesus commands

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5. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* (2nd ed, Vol. IV, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), 39.



his disciples to “go into all the world and preach the gospel” (Mk 16:15), he is using it in the wider sense.

We can see this method of gospel proclamation by looking at the various sermons that are recorded for us throughout the book of Acts as well as the epistles. When Peter gives his sermon on Pentecost he makes use of both the law and the gospel, fulfilling Jesus’ command to preach the good news.

Therefore, let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” When they heard this they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles: “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter replied “Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac 2:36–38).

The law and the gospel work together in the hearts of people to create faith. The law reveals our sin. “For no one will be justified in his sight by the works of the law, because the knowledge of sin comes through the law” (Rom 3:20). The law also drives sinners to despair as it reveals sin and condemns the sinner to death. King David writes about the effect the law had on him in Psalm 32, “When I kept silent, my bones became brittle from my groaning all day long” (Ps 32:3). The message of the gospel then gives faith, hope, and joy to the sinner as he is proclaimed not guilty through Christ. “Because we know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we ourselves have believed in Christ Jesus. This was so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified” (Gal 3:16).

For this reason, we preach the law and the gospel. The law serves to convict and condemn, the law serves the purpose of the gospel. When the law has broken a sinner, the gospel works to build him back up in faith in Christ Jesus.

## How Lutherans Preach

This is the topic that this paper seeks to explore. How do we preach? This question has been answered in many ways over the centuries. Scholarship on preaching has flourished since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One great example was published by Fred Craddock in 1979. *As One Without Authority* sparked new interest in the theory of preaching. In his book, which speaks of the value of inductive preaching, Craddock has this to say: “So is it with all preaching: *how* one preaches is to a large extent *what* one preaches.”<sup>6</sup> That is to say, there is a very close relationship with what we preach and how we preach. If the method we use to preach (the how) interferes with the content we preach (the what), then we are doing a disservice to the gospel. So how do we preach to avoid interfering with the what of our preaching? As Lutherans, we preach in a way that puts all the focus on Jesus. We preach in a way that highlights our sin and our need for forgiveness and then leads us to the cross.

There are several styles that preachers have used over the centuries including: expositional preaching, thematic preaching, cognitive preaching, and affective preaching. Expositional preaching strives to explain one text as clearly as possible in light of the rest of Scripture and uses it to point to Christ. Thematic preaching does not constrict itself to one text, but rather the preacher will pick a theme for his sermon and find multiple texts to support his theme. Cognitive preaching appeals to the mind. “The key to cognitive preaching is to focus on the ideas in the sermon. While imagery is useful, the primary emphasis in the cognitive sermon is on the propositions. Truth is taught by precept, and it is in the ideas of the sermon that truth is clearly realized and understood.”<sup>7</sup> Affective preaching appeals to the emotions. “While cognitive

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6. Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 44.

7. Kenton Anderson, *Choosing to Preach*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 89–90.

preaching focuses on the ideas of the sermon, affective preaching focuses on the images. The preacher touches the heart of the listener through the pictures and descriptions of the sermon, creating a desire for change that works at a different level than logic does.”<sup>8</sup> Although these styles approach preaching differently, it is still possible to use more than one of these styles in one sermon.

Preaching style is different from preaching form. If your preaching style is like the car, then your sermon form is like the road map. The sermon style serves the purpose of getting you where you need to go as you preach. The sermon form tells you where you are going. There are two main forms that preachers use today: deductive preaching and inductive preaching. Deductive preaching states the sermon’s point clearly from the outset as the preacher then expands on that main point. In inductive preaching, the preacher allows the theme to develop itself as the sermon goes on. Simply put: deductive preaching begins with the text while inductive preaching begins with the listener.<sup>9</sup>

How do Lutherans preach? The why and the what are clearly established, but the how can vary widely. Historically, Lutherans have been expositional, deductive preachers. But even under those two broad categorizations, preaching can vary widely as well. We will now explore a few great Lutheran preachers and examine what and how they preach. First, we will examine some of the scholarship about Martin Luther’s preaching and then look into two of his sermons to analyze a small sampling of how Luther preached. Second, we will examine two sermons from the father of the Missouri Synod, C.F.W. Walther. Third, we will make some observations about two sermons written and preached by one Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) professor, Siegbert

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8. Anderson, *Choosing*, 106.

9. Anderson, *Choosing*, 51, 69.

Becker. We will look at how they preached and what they preached. Finally, we will determine what we should learn from these three powerful and influential preachers.

### **Methodology**

Throughout this paper I have evaluated sermons based on David R. Schmitt's *Tapestry of Preaching*. In his article he points out four threads of discourse used in a sermon: textual exposition, theological confession, evangelical proclamation, and hearer interpretation.<sup>10</sup> David Schmitt defines these four threads of discourse as follows. "Textual exposition communicates the intended meaning of the text in its historical context."<sup>11</sup> Theological confession is when "the preacher makes confession of the teachings of the faith."<sup>12</sup> Evangelical proclamation is when the preacher "enact[s] Christ's command that repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached in his name."<sup>13</sup> Hearer interpretation is "the language of the sermon that depicts and interprets the contemporary life experience of the hearers."<sup>14</sup>

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10. David Schmitt, "Tapestry of Preaching," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Spring (2011): 108.

11. Schmitt, *Tapestry*, 109.

12. Schmitt, *Tapestry*, 112.

13. Schmitt, *Tapestry*, 116.

14. Schmitt, *Tapestry*, 119.

## PART II: ORIGIN OF LUTHERAN PREACHING

### Luther the Preacher

John Gerhard described Martin Luther's sermons as "heroic disorder."<sup>15</sup> So how did the "hero" of the Reformation, who rediscovered the tenants of *Sola Fide*, *Sola Scriptura*, and *Sola Gratia*, become such a hero not only of the Gospel but also of preaching? Just as Martin Luther's theology slowly evolved as he studied Scripture, so did his preaching. Just as Lutheran preaching throughout the ages has slowly changed and evolved to accommodate the times, so did Luther's preaching evolve over the course of his life to accommodate his theology.

Luther first started preaching as a Catholic monk. Preaching was not a huge part of his theology at this point in his life, since preaching in the Catholic church was not taken very seriously. Before Luther popularized the sermon, the sacrament, namely the Eucharist, was the star of the show.<sup>16</sup> That being said, Luther still did preach at this point in his life. The earliest extant sermon that we have from Luther is from either 1510 or 1512,<sup>17</sup> well before Luther's Reformation began when he nailed the 95 theses to the doors of the castle church in Wittenberg. This sermon, according to Heinz Bluhm, "contains the highest possible development of a religion of law."<sup>18</sup> In this sermon on Matthew 7:12, Luther describes the doctrine of doing good to others. "It is not sufficient for salvation that a man merely refrain from doing harm and evil to his neighbor with these three goods [external, intermediate, internal<sup>19</sup>]. It is required rather that

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15. Fred Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), 57.

16. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 46.

17. Heinz Bluhm, "Significance of Luther's Earliest Extant Sermon," *Harvard Theological Review* 37, (no. 2, 1944), 175–184.

18. Bluhm, *Significance*, 183.

19. External goods are things such as possessions. Intermediate goods, goods which are neither internal or external are things such as strength, beauty, aptitude of body and senses, reputation, and honor. Internal goods are things such as knowledge, virtue, love, and faith.

he be useful to him and benefit him with these three goods.”<sup>20</sup> Since Luther came from the Catholic Church which so greatly enshrined “doing what was in you,” it follows that he would preach that way as well. Although Luther’s preaching evolved gradually with his theology, it appears that his Catholic influence had a lasting impact on how he preached.<sup>21</sup> As Luther rediscovered the sweetness of the gospel, it came to dominate his sermons.

The way in which he preached the law, however, did not sound like Lutheran preaching does today. As one reads Luther’s sermons, he will notice an abundance of law directives in Luther’s preaching. In a sermon preached on Matthew 22:37–39 at Weimar in 1522, Luther spends a great deal of time explaining what it means to love God and your neighbor. His directives are styled in this way “If you have an opportunity to do X, drop what you are doing and do it!” Towards the end of the body of his sermon he caps off his discourse on loving God and neighbor when he says, “You owe nothing except to love Christ and your neighbor; otherwise you are eternally condemned.”<sup>22</sup> Luther’s sermons contain an abundance of law, but all of his law preaching is used in direct service to the gospel. In the conclusion to this sermon Luther says, “Therefore, this is what we say about the law; this is what it is and nothing else: The law kills; your God saves you. And he who does not believe is condemned.”<sup>23</sup> Luther’s extensive use of the law throughout his sermon always had this purpose: to point to Christ.

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20. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 51 (Helmut Lehmann, John Doberstein, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 7.

21. Luther was not afraid to preach the law powerfully, though he did it in the service of the gospel.

22. Luther, *Works*, 109.

23. Luther, *Works*, 110.

According to Hopson Boutot, Luther made regular use of all three uses of the law. Which use of the law is present depends on which mood of the verb is used. The first use of the law (as curb) is to restrain sin; this law would be seen in the subjunctive mood as a conditional construction. “For example, in his seventh *Invocavit* sermon Luther warned, ‘If you will not love on another, God will send a great plague upon you.’”<sup>24</sup> The second use of the law (as mirror) is to reveal the wickedness of the sinner; this law would appear in the indicative. “For example, in his first *Invocavit* sermon Luther declared, ‘And here, dear friends, have you not grievously failed? I see no signs of love among you, and I observe very well that you have not been grateful to God for his rich gifts and treasures.’”<sup>25</sup> The third use of the law (as guide) is to redirect the hearer towards holiness; this law would be given in the imperative mood.<sup>26</sup> “For example, in a sermon against drunkenness he commanded parents ‘to see to it that your children do not begin too early to fall into this vice.’”<sup>27</sup>

At times, Luther’s preaching may seem to emphasize the law too much. Boutot spoke of this interesting phenomena in Luther’s preaching, “My analysis found a frequent failure to articulate the gospel explicitly in every sermon.”<sup>28</sup><sup>29</sup> Luther preached this way not because he loved the law, but rather because he loved the gospel and had full confidence in it. Luther emphasized the law so strongly and so often because in his view it made the gospel that much

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24. Hopson Boutot, “How Did Luther Preach? A Plea for Gospel-Dominated Preaching.” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 81 (2017), 99–100.

25. Boutot, *Gospel-Dominated Preaching*, 100.

26. Boutot, *Gospel-Dominated Preaching*, 99–100.

27. Boutot, *Gospel-Dominated Preaching*, 100.

28. Boutot, *Gospel-Dominated Preaching*, 113.

29. This may have been a flaw in Luther’s preaching.

stronger. Since the gospel, specifically Jesus' vicarious sacrifice on our behalf, has the capacity to forgive an infinite amount of sin, there is no amount of law too big for the gospel to handle. Since there is no preaching of the law too intense for the gospel to soothe, Luther made full use of it.

Martin Luther's confidence in the gospel was so strong that he did not feel the need even to make the gospel explicit in every sermon that he preached. Boutot references Luther's sermon on Hebrews 13:4 in which he talks about the Christian theology of marriage. Luther spent a copious amount of time talking about what a proper marriage looks like. This involved a large amount of law directives to his hearers in an attempt to mold their views on marriage. In this sermon, however, there was no explicit mention of Christ's work for the forgiveness of sins. Just because there is no explicit mention of Christ's work, does not mean that there is no gospel in the sermon. The gospel was implicit.<sup>30</sup> Luther believed that the gospel was so powerful that God could do his work even when its claims were implicit.<sup>3132</sup>

Luther preached the law boldly for several reasons as outlined by Boutot.

Lawless preaching drains Christ's obedience to the law of its meaning. Furthermore, lawless preaching diminishes Christ's sacrifice to pay for man's disobedience. Third, the law clarifies the gospel by explaining the wrath of God. Luther stated, "In the Son of God I behold the wrath of God in action, while the law of God shows it to me with words and with lesser deeds."<sup>33</sup>

Luther's preaching of the law at all times was in service of the gospel. He understood that the law was the handmaiden of the gospel.<sup>34</sup>

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30. Boutot, *Gospel-Dominated Preaching*, 113.

31. Boutot, *Gospel-Dominated Preaching*, 113.

32. This is not to say that we should strive to emulate this type of preaching. This is simply an analysis.

33. Boutot, *Gospel-Dominated Preaching*, 114-115.

34. Professor Gurgel from WLS uses this term repeatedly in his preaching course.



The preaching in the Catholic church which Luther grew up in was not the same as the preaching of Luther after the Reformation. “The content of the pre-Reformation sermon was ethical rather than doctrinal.”<sup>35</sup> Paul Siegler also mentions that in Luther’s earliest extant sermon (which has been covered up above), “there is no reference to Christ and the Gospel. It seems clear that that is assumed. The whole is simply a lecture on ethics.”<sup>36</sup> I would argue that it is not so clear that the gospel is assumed at all. In his earliest sermon Luther made statements such as, “the one who merely does no harm would be like wood and stones, and this is not sufficient for salvation.”<sup>37</sup> He also says this about the rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, “He was damned rather because he did not do good to his neighbor, namely, Lazarus. This parable adequately teaches us that it is not sufficient merely not to do evil and not to do harm, but rather that one must be helpful and do good.”<sup>38</sup> Nowhere does Luther mention anything about what Christ has done for us, only what we must do to be worthy of salvation. This pre-Reformation sermon by Luther does not contain the “implicit gospel” of Luther’s later sermons as discussed by Boutot. If Heinz Bluhm is correct that that sermon contains the highest possible development of a religion of law, the gospel could only be assumed insofar as the preaching was being done in a Catholic church.<sup>39</sup> But as Siegler also points out Luther’s preaching did evolve with his

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35. Paul Siegler, *Luther as Preacher* (WLS Essay File), 4.

36. Siegler, *Luther as Preacher*, 7.

37. Luther, *Works*, 7.

38. Luther, *Works*, 8.

39. And that only because you would expect to hear about Christ in a Christian church.

theology, “more and more, God and our Savior are the center of attention rather than man and ethics.”<sup>40</sup>

Preaching during the Reformation served a dual purpose. The first was to announce the Word of God which is efficacious to create faith. Since the sermon was simply an exposition of God’s Word, it too was efficacious to create and strengthen faith. In fact, Luther’s opinion of the spoken Word was so high that he saw the Lord himself speaking through the sermon. According to Luther, the preacher should be able to say after preaching, “thus sayeth the Lord!” The implication being that it was not the preacher speaking to the people, but actually the Lord himself! He also thought that the hearers should think the same thing. He illustrates this thought in a sermon he preached on September 11, 1540, on John 4:9–10.

People think: If I could hear God speaking in His own Person, I would run so fast to hear Him that my feet would bleed.... If in former times someone had said: I know of a place in the world where God speaks, and when you arrive there, you hear God Himself talking; and if I had come there, had seen a poor preacher baptize and preach, and people had said: This is the place; there God is speaking through the preacher: he is teaching God’s Word – then I no doubt would have said: Ha! I have taken pains to come here, and I see only a minister! We should like to have God speak in His majesty; but I advise you: Do not go there. So experience certainly teaches. If he were to speak in His majesty, you would see what a running would begin, as there at Mount Sinai, where, after all, only the angels spoke; yet the mountain smoked and trembled. But now you have the Word of God in church, in books, in your home; and this is as certainly God’s Word as if God Himself were speaking.<sup>41</sup>

Luther believed that wherever the Word of God was preached, read, or taught, there also spoke the Lord himself. Luther spoke the Word of the Lord primarily because he believed that when Christ was preached it was efficacious to produce faith in the listeners. In 1531, Luther preached on 2 Corinthians 3:4–6 and had this to say about preaching, “But [Paul] says, ‘Such is the

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40. Siegler, *Luther as Preacher*, 7.

41. Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1460.

confidence that we have through Christ toward God' [II Cor. 3:4]. And that we can set down and let stand. If I can't convert the whole crowd, then I'll gain one or two. This is our confidence: when we have preached, it will not have been in vain."<sup>42</sup>

The second purpose of the sermon during the Reformation was to teach the people. Luther used the sermon as a way to teach his people during a time of great change in the church. He used the sermon to communicate to his people a new way<sup>43</sup> of understanding God's grace. This new understanding did not happen overnight for the laity in Luther's care (it took him many years before his "aha! tower experience"). Rather, Luther patiently instructed them on the doctrines he had rediscovered and affirmed during the Reformation through his sermons. Patrick Ferry weighs the importance of Luther's preaching during the Reformation as a teaching tool.

The Protestant Reformation would not have been possible without the sermon. Regardless of how the reformers gained their new theological insights, they used the sermon to bring their doctrines directly to their followers in the immediate and practical religious needs of the people. Since the pulpit was one of the most important means of communicating information in the sixteenth century, the role of the sermon in making the Reformation a mass movement can scarcely be overestimated.<sup>44</sup>

Though Luther used his sermons to teach the people, it should not be assumed that he only used his sermons to enlighten the people as far as their understanding of the doctrines of the Reformation as opposed to the doctrines of the Pope. Luther also regularly used his sermons to teach the laity about the simple matters of faith and doctrine as well. One such example of this is the three series of sermons that Luther preached on his catechism. In 1528, Luther preached three

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42. Luther, *Works*, 222.

43. Or maybe better said, the "old" or "original" way.

44. Ferry, Patrick. "Martin Luther on Preaching: Promises and Problems of the Sermon as a Source of Reformation History and as an Instrument of the Reformation." *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, (Vol. 54, Num 4, 1990), 268.

series of sermons on the catechism, emphasizing the importance of the foundational principles of the Christian faith. In his sermon on the first commandment Luther says, “I will say it as crudely as I can: He who fears God and trusts him is keeping this commandment, but he who fears something else and trusts it is transgressing.”<sup>45</sup> In his sermon on the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer he says the hallowed be thy name is the equivalent of, “O dear Father, may thy name be holy! But what does this mean? Is it not already holy? It is holy in its nature, but not in our use.”<sup>46</sup> These sermons show the magnitude of the importance that teaching even the basics of Christian doctrine held in Luther’s preaching.

The content of Luther’s preaching has been described, as well as how his preaching shifted along with his theology. His preaching began as simple moralizations, as seen in his earliest sermon. But as his theology developed, he put more and more emphasis on Christ as the center of his preaching, which in turn allowed him to be bolder in proclaiming the law. He also began to use the sermon as a teaching tool. He trusted that if the Word of God was spoken, God was present and using it for his purpose. Now, we will look at *how* Luther preached, as well as look in-depth at two selected sermons.

### **Luther’s Preaching Style**

Martin Luther did not write out his sermons. He only brought an outline with him which was called a *Konzept*.<sup>47</sup> The only reason his sermons still exist today is due to his friends and

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45. Luther, *Works*, 138.

46. Luther, *Works*, 173.

47. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 36.

colleagues who would write down his sermons in shorthand in German or Latin<sup>48</sup> and then reconstruct them later so that we could read them today. In his outlines he generally had two or three main points that he wanted to expound upon in his sermon. “There was recognizable progression that Luther stressed with ‘first, second, third, etc.’ Sometimes he lost count and repeated numbers or skipped one, but he kept his audience with him.”<sup>49</sup> Because of this, Luther’s sermons were very lively as they quite literally developed as he was preaching them. Fred Meuser quotes Paul Althaus to describe exactly the lively feel that Luther’s sermons had in comparison to his contemporaries.

Paul Althaus puts it just right when he says, "Luther's sermons were born in the pulpit." They were conceived in the study and born in the pulpit. "The whole is not undisciplined, but it is unregulated, uncalculated, alive, like a free-flowing stream, while the later Lutheran *Schulpredigt* resembled a canal - symmetrical, careful, calculated, but hardly alive."<sup>50</sup>

Luther’s deep and intimate knowledge of Scripture flowed from his study into his sermons quite naturally. His sermons, which were formed from his daily study of Scripture, also had an innately personal touch. Luther often described not only the plain gospel and how it should be comforting to the hearer, but also how this specific gospel was comforting to himself. Here is one such example from his Sermon on St. Matthew’s day on Matthew 11:25–30 when he talked about how the words and sermons of Christ are more comforting than the miracles of Christ.

Other Gospels in which the miracles of Christ are described are not so comforting as those which contain the sermons of Christ in which he so lovingly teaches and entices us. *I* am not so certain of the grace which *I* see in miracles shown to others as when *I* have before *me* plain, clear words. To *me* it is also more comforting to

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48. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 36.

49. Siegler, *Luther as Preacher*, 8.

50. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 57.

hear such loving admonitions and allurements than to hear preaching on the miracles, although they too strengthen *my faith* and are examples of the fact that as he helped these people so he will *help me also*.<sup>51</sup> [Emphasis mine.]

Direct address is a high proportion of Luther's sermons.<sup>52</sup> When using the second person he aimed to explicitly convict his hearers of a specific sin such as in his Sermon on Soberness and Moderation against Gluttony and Drunkenness, a sermon based on 1 Peter 4:7–11.

Listen to the Word of God, which says, “keep sane and sober,” that it may not be said to *you* in vain. *You* must not be pigs; neither do such belong among Christians. So also in I Cor. 6 [:9–10]: No drunkard, whoremonger, or adulterer can be saved. Do not think that *you* are saved if *you* are a drunken pig day and night. This is a great sin, and everybody should know that this is such a great iniquity, that it makes *you* guilty and excludes *you* from eternal life.<sup>53</sup> [emphasis mine.]

He also used the second person to bring to them explicit gospel to comfort his hearers with the good news that Christ is for them.

Therefore this is the chief article, which separates us from all the heathen, that *you*, O man, may not only learn that Christ, born of the virgin, is the Lord and Savior, but also accept the fact that he is *your* Lord and Savior, that *you* may be able to boast in *your* heart: I hear the Word that sounds from heaven and says: This child who is born of the virgin is not only his mother's son. I have more than the mother's estate; he is more mine than Mary's, for he was born for me, for the angel said, “to *you*” is born a Savior. Then ought *you* to say, Amen, I thank thee, dear Lord.<sup>54</sup> [emphasis mine.]

Luther was an expert in the conversational style of preaching. Every now and then he would even include humor in his sermons. In a sermon about the means of grace against the errors of the pope he once sarcastically quipped, “What, baptism, sacrament, God's Word? –

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51. Luther, *Works*, 122.

52. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 50.

53. Luther, *Works*, 293.

54. Luther, *Works*, 215.

Joseph's pants, that's what does it!"<sup>55</sup> He was also a master speaking the language of the people for that conversation. Luther valued highly the preacher who, though he was educated, could bring himself down to the people and speak in words that they would readily comprehend. Luther spoke this way about how the learned preacher should preach. "A sincere preacher must consider the young people, the servants and maids in the church, those who lack education.... To spout Greek, Hebrew, and Latin in sermons in order to have admiring people praise them is conceit and is out of place."<sup>56</sup> This conviction to preach simply came from his desire to have the Word of God understood by all.

### **Luther's Christmas Sermon**

Now that we have an understanding of Luther's style of preaching, we will examine two of Luther's extant sermons as a way to identify general trends found in Luther's preaching. I analyzed a few dozen of Luther's sermons to get a feel for how he preached, but my reading of Luther's sermons was by no means exhaustive. The first sermon that we will examine in Luther's sermon on the afternoon of Christmas day, 1530.<sup>57</sup> This sermon was preached on Luke 2:1–14. His theme (if he had one in mind) would sound something like this: "This Savior is *for you!*" Here is a rough outline.

Text:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around

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55. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 16.

56. Plass, *Luther Says*, 1130.

57. Luther, *Works*, 291.

them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord (Luke 2:8–11).<sup>58</sup>

#### Introduction:

Luther refers to his sermon from the morning in which he focused on the baby born of a virgin, our Lord and Savior. He says many people believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, yet do not have faith because they either deny his deity or his saving power.

#### Exposition:

- I. What did the angels say about him? “This Savior is born for you.”
  - a. It is just as hard to believe the fact that the Savior is “for you” as the fact that Jesus is the “Lord and Savior.”
- II. Who is the message for? Shepherds.
  - a. For the faint-hearted, those who feel sin’s burden.
  - b. Not for the rich and others who deny this fact.

#### Application:

- I. Why did the angels give us this message “for you”?
  - a. So that we would magnify the babe, not the mother.
    - i. We magnify him above all things (money, power, etc.) because he saves and no one else can.
    - ii. We have more claim to the baby in the manger as his redeemed than Mary does as his mother.
- II. Others hear this good news but don’t accept it.

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58. These passages serve as the focus of his sermon so I have included only these verses.



- a. Even the Turks, the Pope, and sectarians believe that Jesus was born of a virgin.
  - b. But they view it only as a fact on a piece of paper, but do not receive and believe the comforting words “for you.”
  - c. The chief article of faith is that you believe that this is the Savior “for you.”
- III. Being sure that he was born for you.
- a. Reason leads you to believe that Christ came for people better than you, like Paul or Peter.
  - b. This is not faith unless you believe that he was born for you.
  - c. If you believe he was born for you, that will fill your heart with assurance, joy, and confidence.
  - d. Nothing on earth can compare to the joy of receiving the Savior who was born for you.
- IV. Don't make another Savior.
- a. The papists have chosen innumerable saviors.
    - i. Mass, saints, works can save!
    - ii. It's like saying, “I don't believe in the Savior.”
  - b. They say the words (Jesus is my Savior) but don't believe them.
  - c. If you think anything else saves, you make that your savior and lose THE Savior.
- V. Final exhortation.
- a. Be on the lookout for those who try to trick you into giving up your Savior for another savior.

b. Never doubt that he was sent for you and will save you from all misfortune.

Several things can be said about Martin Luther's style in this sermon. First, his method of preaching is expositional. Luther had moved away from the moralizing of the Catholic church and found a new style fitting to the Reformation, the expository sermon. "Luther had long since come to the conviction that such a laying out of the plain central message of Scripture was priority number one in the needed correction of the church's teaching and life."<sup>59</sup> Luther began his sermons by describing the event of the text, what was said, to whom, what it meant for the original hearers in their time. He then uses his exposition as the basis for the rest of his sermon.

Second, Luther's style of preaching has deductive characteristics. A common phrase used when describing informational speech or deductive preaching is this: "First, tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you told them." Luther does not always preach in this manner, but he does operate this way in this Christmas sermon. He tells his congregation what he is going to tell them in the introduction, then he tells them, then he tells them again, and again, and again, and then finally he tells them what he told them. If you look at the outline above, you will notice that the entire sermon from beginning to end is about the same thing, "This Savior is *for you*." This is not to say that Luther is a boring or unimaginative preacher, in fact, it is quite the opposite. Luther had a very unique way of being able to repeat the same point from a different angle several times throughout his sermon.

Third, Luther had a unique ability to preach a point of doctrine as if he was anticipating every attack that the devil or the sinful nature would throw at it. It is almost as if Luther as a preacher saw himself as one debating against the devil and the sinful flesh. Using our Christmas sermon example Luther combats several attacks against this "Savior for you" doctrine. He often

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59. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 46–47.

does this in dialog form, anticipating what a doubting or troubled Christian might be thinking in his mind, and speaks from his listener's perspective. In his first point, he attacks the Catholic doctrine of venerating Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Mary bore the child, took it to her breast and nursed it.... Why did God do all this?.... And reason answers: in order that we may make an idol of her, that honor may be paid to the mother. Mary becomes all this without her knowledge and consent, and all the songs and glory and honor are addressed to the mother. And yet the text does not sound forth the honor of the mother, for the angel says, "I bring to you good news of great joy; for to you is born this day a Savior."<sup>60</sup>

In his second point, he attacks knowing the objective facts of Jesus' birth without believing whom he came for, namely, you.

For they receive the Word only as a piece of paper.... The paper does no more than contain something and pass it on to others.... Thus you copy something from one paper on another paper; from my tongue the Word sounds in your ear, but it does not go to the heart. So they receive this greatest of treasures to their great harm and still think they are Christians, just as though the paper were to say: I certainly have in me the written words, "to you is born this day the Savior"; therefore I shall be saved. But then the fire comes and burns the paper.<sup>61</sup>

In his third point, he attacks the notion that Jesus may have come for the good people, but for people like you who are much worse sinners than the saints of the past, Jesus did not come.

But then reason says: Who knows? I believe that Christ, born of the virgin, is the Lord and Savior and he may perhaps help Peter and Paul, but for me, a sinner, he was not born. But even if you believed that much, it would still not be enough, unless there were added to it the faith that he was born for you.<sup>62</sup>

In his fourth point, he attacks the *opinion legis* and the doctrine of the Catholic church which created other saviors.

You can see what our papists and Junkers, who have chosen innumerable saviors, have felt about this faith. Indeed, the papists still want to retain the mass, the

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60. Luther, *Works*, 213.

61. Luther, *Works*, 214–215.

62. Luther, *Works*, 215.

invocation of saints, and their invented works by which we are to be saved. This is as much as to say, I do not believe in the Savior and Lord whom Mary bore.... They speak the words with their tongues but their heart has another savior.<sup>63</sup>

A fourth characteristic of Luther's preaching is that he would often preach one part sermons. In his Christmas sermon he focuses solely on the words "for you" and his entire sermon is intended to emphasize that point. He uses the entire text to reinforce the importance of believing that Christ came *for you*. "But for whom was he born and whose Lord and Savior is he? The angels declare that he was born Lord and Savior.... But that anyone could say, 'to *you* is born,' as the angel says, this is the faith which we must preach about."<sup>64</sup>

A fifth characteristic of Luther's preaching is his forceful use of the law. He explicitly condemns anyone who does not believe these words: "for you." He talks in this way typically in reference to the papists and Turks. "In the papacy this message<sup>65</sup> was not preached in the pulpit, and I am afraid that it will disappear again. It was the other message that the devil initiated and has allowed to remain in the papacy. All their hymns are to this effect. Among the Turks the devil has completely wiped it out."<sup>66</sup> Though he also implies that, if any of his hearers did not believe these words, they too would lose their Savior and their salvation. Luther's law in this sermon is condemnation for the sin of unbelief. He also condemns any attempts at finding another savior. Again, this threat is in reference to the papists and the Turks, but he implies that if any of his hearers were to believe this and find another savior in which to put their trust, they

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63. Luther, *Works*, 217.

64. Luther, *Works*, 212.

65. That we receive the blessing of Christ without any merit on our part.

66. Luther, *Works*, 217.

would also be condemned. Luther's law and gospel are so closely intertwined in this sermon that he passes from one to another seamlessly throughout his sermon.

Before looking at another sermon from Luther, we will evaluate Luther's Christmas sermon with David Schmitt's threads of discourse. In this sermon textual exposition is there, though it is not very prevalent. Most of what might be considered his textual exposition happens in his introduction when he reminds his hearers of his morning sermon when he more fully expounded on the story of the virgin birth. "Thus we spoke of the story, how it unfolded, and who the persons were."<sup>67</sup> Luther then goes on to specifically mention the message of the angels which was brought to the shepherds. He talks about what this message would mean to the shepherds and why God chose to deliver the message to them instead of the rich and the nobility. He brings other parts of the story back into his sermon to make points more clear. His textual exposition in this sermon is scarce, though this is not characteristic of all Luther's sermons.

Theological confession is something that is easy to find in all of Luther's sermons. During the Reformation, the sermon was used to teach the people proper doctrine. Luther used this to the fullest. Many of his sermons, including this one, taught the confessions of the church as opposed to the teachings of the papists. In this sermon, Luther makes it quite clear what he is doing when he says, "this is our theology."<sup>68</sup> Luther constantly returned to points of doctrine which he worried would still cause confusion and doubt among the people. The confession in this sermon boils down to the foundational articles of the faith, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary."

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67. Luther, *Works*, 211.

68. Luther, *Works*, 213.

Like theological confession, evangelical proclamation is abundant in Luther's preaching; maybe even more so. This was the core of Luther's preaching, so it is fitting that David Schmitt also calls evangelical proclamation the "heart of Lutheran preaching."<sup>69</sup> Luther always had it on his heart to comfort troubled souls, and he did it by proclaiming Christ. His whole Christmas sermon is based around the premise that Jesus Christ is the Savior *for you*. This sermon is evangelical proclamation from beginning to end; and is especially evident in his conclusion.

What we have said, then, has been about that second faith,<sup>70</sup> which is not only to believe in Mary's Son, but rather that he who lies in the virgin's lap is our Savior, that you accept this and give thanks to God, who so loved you that he gave you a Savior who is yours.... Him, therefore, we should acknowledge and accept; confess him as our Savior in every need, call upon him, and never doubt that he will save us from all misfortune. Amen.<sup>71</sup>

Many of Luther's sermons are the same. For example, in his funeral sermon for Elector John of Saxony Luther he contrasts the elector's death with the death of Christ. "Therefore, if we are going to grieve, we should also grieve over Christ's death. That was a real death, not only in itself, because it was so bitter, ignominious, and grandiose, but also because it is so potent that it has baptized all the other dead, so that now they are called, not dead, but sleepers."<sup>72</sup> "The best consolation is to say with St. Paul: Beloved, look not at this dead body; you have something higher and better to contemplate, namely, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."<sup>73</sup> In his sermon on Cross and Suffering preached at Coburg in 1530, Luther always brings the sermon

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69. Schmitt, *Tapestry*, 116.

70. In Luther's sermon, the second faith is believing that the Savior is *for you* contrasted with the first faith which is believing the fact that the Savior Jesus was born of a virgin.

71. Luther, *Works*, 218.

72. Luther, *Works*, 234.

73. Luther, *Works*, 235.

back to Christ. “We must not in the first place that Christ by his suffering not only saved us from the devil, death, and sin, but also that his suffering is an example...”<sup>74</sup> “Therefore in affliction, every Christian should so arm himself that he may defend and guard himself with the fine, comfortable assurances which Christ, our dear Lord, has left us when we suffer for his Word’s sake.”<sup>75</sup>

Hearer interpretation is easy to identify, since Martin Luther preached this sermon to his specific congregation. Schmitt further defines hearer interpretation as a discourse that “reveals how people are relevant to God.”<sup>76</sup> It involves identifying the lives of the hearers and showing them how their lives, no matter how ordinary or mundane, are relevant to God. Luther accomplishes this by speaking to his hearers in contemporary language that they understand. Luther mentions several items of the day that would be on the people’s minds to help elaborate his points. When Luther mentions the Turks, he would evoke a specific image in the minds of his hearers. When Luther mentions St. Bartholomew, St. Anthony, and a pilgrimage to St. James<sup>77</sup> he talks about things that are immediately relevant and understandable to his audience. If a Lutheran pastor were to attempt to preach Luther’s sermons verbatim today, the hearer interpretation would miss the mark since Luther intended this message to be heard by 16<sup>th</sup> century Germans.

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74. Luther, *Works*, 198.

75. Luther, *Works*, 205.

76. Schmitt, *Tapestry*, 119.

77. Luther, *Works*, 217.

### **Luther's Sermon on Soberness and Moderation**

I will analyze one more of Luther's sermons before moving on to our next preacher. Luther preached this next sermon on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1539, in Wittenberg.<sup>78</sup> Whereas Luther's Christmas sermon has an extremely merry tone to it, this sermon has a much more somber feel. This contrast between this and his Christmas sermon will allow us to see a wider array of Luther's style. His sermon text was 1 Peter 4:7–11 and his theme (if he had one in mind) would be something like this: The Importance of Moderation for Christian Living. Here is an outline.

Text:

The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Introduction:

Lament about the horrible state of German culture. All other nations stereotype us for our excessive drinking, and they are right! Someone should stop this, but even our rulers fall into this vice. It's okay to drink a little bit, but you all are pigs!

- I. If our government won't crack down on our vice, how do we curb it?
  - a. God doesn't admit piggish drinkers into heaven!

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<sup>78</sup>. Luther, *Works*, 291.



- i. The Lord's day will come suddenly and you may be too drunk to be ready!
    - ii. If you don't wish to be saved, ignore Peter and drink like pigs.
  - b. How to stop this vice.
    - i. Christian parents must guide their children in this matter.
    - ii. After all, drunkenness isn't punished by the government as other sins are.
    - iii. Just because our government fails in their office, doesn't mean we should fail in ours.
- II. The reason to be sober.
  - a. You are all priests.
    - i. You must be sober to pray.
    - ii. You must be sober to combat the devil with God's Word.
  - b. (Aside on how early Christians made too big of a deal about praying, they were "overdoing it").
- III. What does God say about drinking?
  - a. He doesn't forbid it.
    - i. But he has punished it in the past (Sodom and Gomorrah).
  - b. Being sober, includes moderation in all things not just alcohol.
  - c. As Christians we should be examples to the Turks (and all people) in this matter and yet they are the example to us.
- IV. Above all.
  - a. A more important quality than even soberness is love.

- b. Love must be shown to all people.
    - i. Love covers over a multitude of sins.
    - ii. Your love for God doesn't cover your sins. Christ's love for you covers your sins.
  - c. Love must be shown especially to other Christians.
    - i. Love covers offenses done to each other.
  - d. Love fulfills the law of Christ.
    - i. Christ bore your sins, so that you might bear other's sins.
- V. Love performs its duties.
- a. Show hospitality to your neighbors.
  - b. Heads of households should manage their family with love.
    - i. Which includes discipline.
  - c. Friends point out sins.
  - d. Love preaches Christ in the office he is given.
    - i. Whether you are a preacher, magistrate, husband, or father.

Here are some observations about this sermon: first, hearer interpretation is very strong. Luther knows he is talking to a people who in general struggle with the vice of drinking. He makes several references to the German people in comparison to others, lumping his hearers together with the nation. "This gluttony and swilling is inundating us like an ocean and among the Spaniards, Italians, and English it is reprehended."<sup>79</sup> He also speaks to them individually as he addresses people specifically by their work: farmers, fathers, nobility, etc. "Rather look to the

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79. Luther, *Works*, 293.

station to which you have been called. If you are a preacher, a husband, a magistrate...”<sup>80</sup> He also shows them how they are relevant to God. “Christ has borne your sins, in order that you may bear with the sins of others.”<sup>81</sup> He explains to them how they are representatives of God here on earth. “We Christians ought to be examples.”<sup>82</sup> He tells them how when they show love to each other, they emulate Christ and give praise to his name. “When everything that is said and done is said and done in accord with God’s Word, then the glory of Christ and God will be done to all eternity.”<sup>83</sup>

Second, in this sermon we see a common feature of Luther’s preaching in that he makes liberal use of the law. If you were to label each paragraph as predominantly law or gospel you might suppose that there is a disparity. I counted one paragraph in this sermon that was predominantly gospel, there rest were predominantly law. This is in line with Hopson Boutot’s observations about Luther’s preaching. Boutot quotes Edward Engelbrecht while discussing this tendency of Luther.

By dominance of the Gospel, I do not mean simply that a message contains more Gospel than Law. Some preachers might adopt that as a goal but it is not always what we see in the Scriptures, Luther’s sermons, or the messages of other faithful teachers. The proclamation of the Law often takes more space, depending on the state of the hearers.... By dominance, I mean that the proclamation of the Law serves the purpose of the Gospel: our forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ alone. This requires sensitivity to the hearers, addressing their sins appropriately with the Law so that the Gospel may do its life-giving work. It also means proclaiming the Gospel vigorously as our only hope and comfort.<sup>84</sup>

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80. Luther, *Works*, 299.

81. Luther, *Works*, 298.

82. Luther, *Works*, 296.

83. Luther, *Works*, 299.

84. Boutot, *Gospel-Dominated Preaching*, 116.

This holds true in this sermon as well. Luther preached the law powerfully in this sermon all in the service of the Gospel. Luther did not feel compelled to follow up the hammer of the law with a gospel caveat. "Some preachers, in a noble effort to emphasize the beauty of the gospel, attempt to soften the appearance of this hammer. The result is hearers not sufficiently frightened by the law. In these 'honeyed' sermons, the hammer of the law looks more like a child's toy. Such cannot be said of Luther's preaching."<sup>85</sup> While telling them how to live according to God's will, Luther threatens punishment, such as being barred from eternal life, to elicit obedience. Luther uses all the power of the law to crush the sinful nature within his audience, all while holding back the gospel until the proper time. The gospel climax of his sermon is then able to heal the wounds of the law. After a long exposition on the importance, consequence, and severity of the Law, Luther shows them where this has been leading all along—the Gospel.

You have been called to love one another. . . . If you want to be saved, you must possess the red dress<sup>86</sup> which is here described. You have put on the vestment. You are white as snow [Isa. 1:18], pure from all sins. But you must wear this red dress and color now, and remember to love your neighbor. Moreover, it should be a fervent love, not a pale-red love, not the love which is easily provoked to revenge [I Cor. 13:5]. It should be a strong color, a brown-red love, which is capable not only of doing good toward your neighbor but is also able to bear all malice from him [I Cor. 13:4, 7]. For this is the way sins are covered, even a multitude, a heap, a sea, a forest of sins. How does it do this? It does not mean my sin in the way the pope interprets this, i.e., whenever I love God and my neighbor then I blot out my sins. No. It is another's love, namely, Christ's love, which has covered my sins, as Peter says in chapter two: He bore them in his body on the cross and erased them completely [I Pet. 2:24]. This is said with regard to your sins, the sins you commit against me and I against you.<sup>87</sup>

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85. Boutot, *Gospel-Dominated Preaching*, 103.

86. Figurative for love.

87. Luther, *Works*, 297.

This one gospel paragraph destroys the fear of eternal death while at the same time providing context to the “why” of Luther’s sermon. Why should his hearers be sober minded? Why should they love each other? Not because they fear the law, but out of thanksgiving and love for what Christ has done for them.

Finally, Luther preached textually. In contrast to Luther’s Christmas sermon, where out of his entire text he grabbed hold of two words “for you” as the basis for his entire sermon, here Luther treats the entire text, showing versatility in his approach to preaching. An outline of 1 Peter 4:7–11 would look remarkably similar to the outline of Luther’s sermon. The general flow of thought in this section of Peter goes like this: The end is near; therefore, be sober so you can pray; show love to each other to cover over sins; use your gifts to serve each other; and speak the Word of God through the strength that God provides. The flow of thought for Luther’s sermon is similar: Germans drink too much; we should not fall into this vice because the end is near; you need to be sober so you can pray; God does not forbid drinking, but gluttony; above all show love as Christ showed you love; perform your duties in love, use you gifts in your offices to speak the Word of God. One popular idea in homiletics today is to outline the text and mimic the outline in your sermon, which is exactly what Luther did here.

Overall, this style of preaching is very similar to the classic homily, in which the preacher comments on his text verse by verse. This observation provides a good point of departure from Luther to move on to a brief overview of preaching in the 17<sup>th</sup> century of orthodox Lutheranism.

## PART III: PREACHING THROUGH THE CENTURIES

### Overview of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Preaching

Preaching in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was of great interest in Germany and throughout Europe. During this age many homiletical manuals were produced.<sup>88</sup> The first one was produced by a man named Andreas Hyperius (1511–1564) whose manuals sound very similar to what is taught in the WELS today. Hyperius taught that above all, a sermon was an exposition of Scripture and that the sermon should teach, inspire devotion, and change lives.<sup>89</sup> This followed the tried and true method of oratory also espoused by Augustine, “Drawing upon his Ciceronian roots, Augustine agrees that the purpose of the speaker is ‘to teach, to delight and to move... of these teaching is the most essential.’”<sup>90</sup>

During the Reformation the common form of preaching was the university or scholastic sermon. This sermon structure was popularized in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by a French theologian named Alan of Lille. “Alan crystallized the method of taking a theme and text and dividing it.... The narrative usually was divided into three parts, with a rhyming scheme to help preacher and listener remember.”<sup>91</sup> This sermon structure can be seen in Luther’s earliest extant sermon. Luther’s introduction in that sermon reads, “This sermon will have three parts. First I shall say something which is noteworthy by way of introduction; secondly, I shall draw a useful conclusion for our own instruction; and thirdly, I shall answer some questions with regard to

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88. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* Vol. 4 (Vol. 7, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 371.

89. Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 371.

90. David Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 93.

91. Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers*, 131.

what has been said.”<sup>92</sup> His outline for that sermon was divided and subdivided as follows: I, II, II.A, II.B, II.B.1, II.B.2, II.B.3, II.B.4, II.B.5, II.C, III.<sup>93</sup> (Luther later moved away from this strict style of preaching). These university sermons heavily leaned on structure and division and were often more akin to lectures for the educated rather than sermons for the common folk. Hyperius aimed to synthesize the ancient homily with the university sermon, bringing some structure to the ancient sermon tradition while pushing the university sermon into the background. Larsen observes “The strong emphasis on audience is an obvious effort to overcome the excessively scholarly preaching of the *oratio*.”<sup>94</sup>

As far as preachers from the 17<sup>th</sup> century are concerned, generally they preached in homily. David Larsen observes this about 17<sup>th</sup> century preaching, “A veritable torrent of biblical preaching was unleashed in the Reformation. In form the Reformers reverted to the ancient Augustinian pattern of the personal conversational homily.”<sup>95</sup> Hughes Old states that “preachers generally went through the passage of Scripture on which they were to preach, commenting on it phrase by phrase.”<sup>96</sup> Building on the foundation of *Sola Scriptura*, Lutheran preachers did their best to exposit the Word of God as thoroughly as they could.

A man named Valerius Herberger (1562–1627) was a spiritual preacher. That is to say, Herberger very much turned his sermons into a conversation between the congregation and God. He often (many times in one sermon!) would interrupt his train of thought to pray.<sup>97</sup> His prayers

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92. Luther, *Works*, 6.

93. Structure this strict was not found in any of the other sermons by Luther that I examined.

94. Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers*, 203.

95. Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers*, 200.

96. Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 372.

97. Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 376.

would serve a three-fold purpose; one, to emphasize the point he was making; two, to ask God for help in some aspect of Christian living; three, to bring Christ intimately into this “conversation” of the sermon. “Oh, dear Lord Jesus, history is beginning to wind down, and at last as Son of the Father you have been born in these last days; help us to be ready for the last Day, the day of judgment.”<sup>98</sup>

Herberger saw Christ in almost everything, maybe even to a fault. In a series he preached on the story of Joseph in Genesis,<sup>99</sup> there are many examples of his typology that are a bit unorthodox. He compared Joseph’s being born to Jacob in his old age to Christ who was born to his Father in his old age.<sup>100</sup> He draws that comparison in the sense that, in the history of the world, Jesus was born in the later age.<sup>101</sup> Though I will not fault him for trying to see Christ in the Old Testament, this is clearly lapsing into allegory. This type of preaching was prevalent among preachers at this time as it spoke to the spiritual thirst of the people of that generation.

Preaching was still very much a teaching tool at this point of Lutheran orthodoxy in Germany. Christian Sriver (1629–93) has extant sermons which he preached on Luther’s catechism. “Apparently it was a custom of long standing in Stendal that four times a year the catechism was preached through each day of the week from Sunday to Sunday.”<sup>102</sup> Hughes Old says that because of this we can determine that catechetical preaching “was increasingly

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98. Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 377.

99. 50 sermons for 12 chapters of the bible, about 4 per chapter!

100. Cf. prayer in previous paragraph.

101. Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 376.

102. Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 387.



recognized as a significant dimension of the preaching ministry.”<sup>103</sup> The custom of Luther to preach on the catechism during his time in Wittenberg had not faded away in the one hundred years after his death. It was still viewed as important to feed God’s children the milk (foundational doctrines) that they needed for the preservation of their faith.

What can be said about these preachers from the 17<sup>th</sup> century is this: generally, they strived to preach the plain Word of God and to edify the spiritual lives of their hearers. This is seen mostly in their sermon structure, which was by and large homily. This was also a very spiritual and devotional time in preaching. Whether it was interrupting the sermon with a prayer or pausing the sermon for the congregation to sing a hymn,<sup>104</sup> the sermon was a spiritual time for the preacher and congregation. The sermon was also still in large part a teaching tool for the pastors of the time. Above all, preachers strived to see Jesus and make Christ the center of their preaching.

### **C.F.W. Walther**

Next, we will examine a preacher from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther was a man who was far more than a preacher to many, but was above all just that, a preacher. Henry Eggold was the translator of a selection of C.F.W. Walther’s sermons which were published as part of a series of Walther’s writings. In *Selected Sermons*, Eggold says the following about Walther as a preacher.

As to form, Walther’s sermons are more goal-centered than text-centered. The text suggests the theme for Walther, but from that moment on the theme is the master of the sermon.... His sermons bear the marks of painstaking care in their exactness and beauty of style.... But the chief legacy which Walther has left us is

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103. Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 387.

104. According to Hughes Old, a man named Heinrich Müller did this during his sermons.

his view of the sermon as a confrontation of man by God in His justice and mercy. His sermons leave one with the unmistakable impression that one has been in the holy of holies. There he has seen God, the God of Sinai and the God of Golgotha, the God of awful justice and the God of infinite mercy.<sup>105</sup>

Hyperius' impact in bringing order and logical structure back to the traditional conversational homily is clearly seen here. Walther's sermons are logically structured in a series of points. He often had a theme and parts structure which he announced obviously to his congregation after his introduction. He generally divided his sermons into two parts, though, if his text called for it, he would divide his sermon into three or more parts. As a general rule, if his sermon was intended to be more of a teaching sermon he would opt to use more parts as there were often several points he wanted to make on the doctrine. This is seen in sermons such as his Maundy Thursday sermon on the Lord's Supper in which he had three parts and in his sermon on predestination in which he divided his sermon into five parts. Because of this structure it is much easier to outline Walther's sermons than Luther's. I will now examine two of Walther's sermons to see in what ways Walther preached similarly to his Lutheran forefathers and in what ways he preached differently.

### **Walther's Sermon on the Lord's Supper**

The first sermon I have chosen is one that exemplifies Walther as a teacher-preacher: Walther's Maundy Thursday sermon on the Lord's Supper, based on 1 Corinthians 11:23–32. His theme and parts for this sermon were as follows: How Important and Necessary It Is That We Also Henceforth Hold Fast to the Pure Doctrine of the Lord's Supper with Constant Faithfulness. [Because of] 1) the reliability of the clear Word of God; 2) the real presence of Christ with His

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105. Henry Eggold, *Selected Sermons* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 11.

church; 3) the precious and incontrovertible pledge of the forgiveness of our sins.<sup>106</sup> In his usual fashion, Walther begins his sermon with a prayer that has a dual purpose; first, to ask God to help the congregation grasp these truths, take them to heart, and strengthen them in their conviction of it; second, to highlight to the congregation just what the sermon will be about.

Lord Jesus, true God and man in one person! You have indeed withdrawn Your visible presence from Your dear congregation because You here want to be believed in rather than seen; but yet You are and remain inseparable from it. You have not left us orphans. Although invisible, You are today really and truly with us, You Yourself with all Your grace. And in order that we may and can comfort ourselves in this truth without doubting, You in the night in which You were betrayed instituted a meal in which You give us to eat of Your body and drink of Your blood until you come. Oh, therefore help us that we do not let ourselves be robbed of this comfort but hold fast to it until with these eyes we finally see You, with these ears hear You, and with these our hands touch You and thus enjoy perfect fellowship with You in eternally blessed joy. Amen.

Walther often began his sermons in this way. It is a custom that still survives to this day even among some WELS preachers.<sup>107</sup>

Walther then moves into his introduction in which he lays the foundation for the content that he is about to discuss. He describes the theology of the Lord's Supper as well as its significance. He then explains to the congregation that throughout Christendom there have been people who hold different views on the Lord's Supper. In view of this he proposes the question: "Why don't we commune with these people?" This could alternatively serve as the title for his sermon since his three parts in effect answer this question.

Walther's sermons are captivating due to the variety of material he includes. In part one he includes a reference to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to illustrate the importance of

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106. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 61.

107. I observed this during my vicar year. The lead pastor at my church (not my bishop) usually began his sermons with such prayers.

taking God at his clear word. “Now what did Satan do to ruin Adam and Eve? He sought to awaken doubt in them about this clear word of God and said: ‘Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden’?’ And see, as soon as man let that clear word of God become uncertain, he fell and lost his salvation.”<sup>108</sup> Elsewhere in part one he includes a powerful comparison about the word *is*. “If we can interpret the clear words of Christ: ‘This is My body’ to mean: ‘This only *represents* My body,’ then we can interpret also the clear words of God: ‘Christ *is* the Son of God, Christ *is* the Savior of the world’ to mean: ‘Christ only *represents* the Son of God, Christ only *represents* the Savior of the world.’”<sup>109</sup> Walther is also known as someone who was deeply read in the Lutheran confessions and Luther’s works. He uses quotes from both Luther and Melancthon to further convince his people that they must take Christ at his Word that the bread and wine *are* his body and blood. Walther’s powerful use of story, illustration, and quotes from Lutheran forefathers are just some examples of Walther’s wide variety of tools he uses in preaching.

Walther, like Luther, had as one of his goals of preaching to be a teacher of the true doctrine of the church. To Walther, the sermon was an incredibly useful tool to teach his people. Teaching held a very important position in Walther’s preaching; but for Walther it was even more important to preach the grace of God and the comfort it brings.

In part two, he sets out not so much as to convince his hearers that Christ is really present with his church, but to help them realize the amazing comfort that this can bring them. He says, “the Christian church distinguishes herself from all other religious organizations in this, that she

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108. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 62.

109. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 63.

not only has *the teaching of her founder* but also her *founder Himself* in her midst.”<sup>110</sup> Though he mainly aims to comfort in this part of his sermon, he still takes up the opportunity to teach as he commits an entire paragraph to teaching some Christology, namely that one does not separate the two natures.

The third part of his sermon focuses mainly on comfort and grace. Walther beautifully unfolds the grace that lay in the Lord’s Supper with a powerful illustration.

“Can a debtor still fear his creditor when his guarantor has not only paid his debt but gives into his hand the very sum with which he has already abundantly paid the debt? Certainly not! Can a person therefore still doubt that he has no more trouble with his debt of sin and that he has a share in Christ’s reconciliation when the costly ransom money which God has already accepted as the full payment for the debt of all men has itself been put into his hands, into his mouth, and into his heart? No, there cannot be a more precious, more incontrovertible divine pledge.”<sup>111</sup>

Walther’s expert use of the gospel to comfort and reassure Christians is evident especially here when dealing with this special means of grace.

At first glance this sermon has relatively little law. But this would be to ignore the implicit law throughout his sermon. This sermon is based on the doctrine of the real presence in the Lord’s Supper and Walther specifically condemns teachings that rob the Lord’s Supper of its comfort and grace. When he states that those who deny this truth of Scripture turn the “living and present Christ... into a dead and absent one,”<sup>112</sup> he not only condemns those who believe this, but also presents his hearers with this sharp law. It is as if he is saying that if his hearers deny any truth of the Word of God they are in danger of losing it and Christ altogether.

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110. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 65.

111. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 68.

112. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 66.

If we evaluate this sermon on the basis of Schmitt's four threads of discourse, textual exposition, theological confession, evangelical proclamation, and hearer interpretation, we can make a few observations. First, due to the teaching nature of this sermon, textual exposition is of low importance to Walther here. However, he does offer some context as to why Paul wrote this to the Corinthians and explains that the doctrine of the Lord's Supper was just as important then as it is now.

Second, theological confession is the driving force behind this sermon. Not only does Walther speak about the doctrine of the Lord's Supper at great length, but he also offers teaching on Christology; the natures of Christ and the offices of Christ as head of the church. The driving force of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper serves the goal of his sermon: make clear the comfort found in the Lord's Supper.

Third, evangelical proclamation is the goal of this sermon. To Walther, the reason to hold so strongly to this doctrine is because of the comfort and grace that it provides to the recipient. He makes that evident throughout the latter half of his sermon as he announces the grace found in the Lord's Supper to his hearers for their comfort.

In the Lord's Supper Christ gives the consecrated bread to His Christians with the words: "*Take and eat; this is My body which is broken for you,*" and the consecrated cup with the words: "*Take and drink; this is My blood which is shed for the forgiveness of your sins.*" Hereby the Savior manifestly wants to say: There, take My body and eat it, but not as food for your body but as the body offered into death for your sins; there, take My blood and drink it, but not as drink for your body but as the reconciling blood shed on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. Oh, who may express what a glorious, comforting, heavenly, sweet meal the Lord's Supper is?<sup>113</sup>

Fourth, hearer interpretation is done well in this sermon. Walther has a conversation with his people as he offers up several rhetorical questions throughout and speaks in personal terms.

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113. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 67.

He also touches the hearts and minds of people with powerful illustrations. This sermon could be preached word for word in any WELS congregation today and it would still speak powerfully, over one hundred years later.

### **Walther's Sermon on the Death of the Sinner**

The second sermon that I will analyze is his sermon on the tenth Sunday after Trinity Sunday, in 1847. In contrast to his Maundy Thursday sermon which showed him as a teacher-preacher, this sermon exemplifies Walther as the shepherd-preacher. Here he tackles the poignant question of why so many people die eternally. He answers that question by setting before them the justice of God, but above all emphasizes the love of God in saving sinners.

His theme and parts are as follows: God Does Not Desire the Death of Any Sinner, Even Though So Many Perish Eternally. Does God really not desire the death of any sinner? How is it possible that so many nevertheless die eternally?<sup>114</sup> Walther's introduction to this sermon is a masterful composition to help his listeners understand the scope of eternal death and the massive consequences of sin. Here is a short excerpt from that introduction: "There is no land, no city, yes, hardly a house where people are not born who one day will die eternally—millions will one day die eternally! When this thought becomes real to a person, all the vain joy of the world comes to an end forever; when a person meditates deeply on this thought, it becomes unbearable." Walther lamented for what probably amounted to several minutes on the sorry state of the unbelieving sinner. This technique of rhetoric cleverly mimicked what the very subject of his sermon was to be: Jesus weeping over Jerusalem.

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114. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 109.

Throughout this sermon Walther makes his evangelical proclamation the very center. To answer the question, “does God really not desire the death of any sinner?”, Walther points incessantly to God’s love in Christ. “Who can therefore doubt that God does not desire the death of a single sinner? Indeed, no one can look into the heart of God, but in Christ bursting into tears we at the same time see the love in the Father’s heart like a sea of undulating love.”<sup>115</sup>

He sent into the world His own, only begotten Son... and let Him become a human being like us in order that as a human being He might fulfill the Law for us, suffer for our sins, and die on the pole of the cross as the offering of reconciliation. How? Should God offer more than heaven and earth to save humanity fallen into sin... and shall we still doubt that God does not desire the death of any sinner? Now consider this: When the Son of God shed His blood, God Himself paid a price which is infinitely greater than all the debts of all sinners; for if millions of worlds with their sins had sold themselves into Satan’s slavery, a single drop of blood which the Son of God Himself shed would be sufficient to purchase freedom for them all.<sup>116</sup>

Even when he proposes the question, “how is it possible that so many nevertheless die eternally?”, which inevitably leads to the answer that God is just and must punish sin, he still holds forth the Gospel message above all.

For if Christ had not died for sinners, God’s love, as great as it is, could not save any sinner, because if God wanted to do that, God would by that action cease to be a good and just God. But after Christ died and suffered everything for the human race that God’s justice demanded of them, God’s love can save all those who in faith take Christ as their Savior and Mediator. For if God’s justice wanted to damn a believing sinner, the Son of God would stand up for him and say: I have paid for him.<sup>117</sup>

His textual exposition is again somewhat lacking. The only part of the text that he truly points to at all is Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. He does not really treat the text at hand at all,

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115. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 110.

116. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 111.

117. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 113.



rather, he uses Jesus' sorrow over the death of sinners in Jerusalem as a spring board to prove that God does not desire the death of any sinner. By and large, Walther is more of a dogmatic preacher than an expositional preacher as Martin Luther himself was.

His theological confession is very strong in this sermon as well, though it is not nearly as prevalent as it is in his sermon on the Lord's Supper. His chief points of doctrine in this sermon are two characteristics of God: his love and his justice. He also tackles another difficult question in this sermon, "Has [God] given all people the means by which they can easily come to the knowledge of their fall and to faith in His Son?"<sup>118</sup> He answers that question with all the theological accuracy that would make the Lutheran dogmaticians proud.

His hearer interpretation is appropriate in this sermon. He works to move the listener to feel the same sorrow over death that their God feels. He also leads them to recognize their blessed position to believe in the one who has paid for the sins of the world. This sermon, however, still has a distinct lecture feel to it—that is to say it is not conversational in tone. Walther does not make any of his gospel proclamations in the second person, proclaiming them to the people. Rather, his gospel proclamations are predominately in the third person. "What are the conditions which God has established for a person who wants to be saved? They are none other than these: He should realize that he is a lost sinner, and should believe in the Son of God crucified for him."<sup>119</sup> This aids in the sermon sounding much more like a theological lecture than what we would recognize today as a sermon.

Walther preaches deductively using a theme and parts form. His themes either propose a question that needs answering or a truth that needs to be explored. His parts then serve as the

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118. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 111–112.

119. Eggold, *Selected Sermons*, 111.

answer to that question or the points that explore that truth. Walther's preaching could be considered the textbook example of a deductive sermon. This sermon on the death of sinners is no different as he proposes his truth, "God does not desire the death of any sinner," and answers two questions that arise from considering this truth.

Walther may be considered the height of thematic, deductive, Lutheran preaching. He lands on his theme and parts and very rigidly follows the path of his theme as he brings his congregation with him. Eggold's generalization above is apt to describe Walther's preaching. Rather than being text-centered, Walther was theme-centered. His text gave him his theme, so that his sermons were still thoroughly Biblical. His theme and parts centered approach made for a clear goal of the sermon that shines throughout the manuscript.

### **Dr. Siegbert Becker**

This paper will now move on to a preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dr. Siegbert Becker (1914–1984) did his preaching as a pastor in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod from 1938–1963; then as a pastor in the WELS from 1963–1984. Becker joined the faculty at WLS in 1969 and served there until his retirement.

In Becker's sermons, there is a large variance in style, but nearly no variance in structure. That is to say, Becker may have preached in the style of a narrative sermon, a doctrinal or teaching sermon, or somewhere in between, but he almost always preached with the theme and parts structure. His preaching style was heavily expositional. Becker often used a narrative style in his preaching; if there was a story to tell, Becker told it. At times, he allowed the story of the text to do the preaching for him. Becker does not explicitly mention law and gospel in every sermon, rather he just tells the story and lets the law and gospel extant in the story do its work

naturally. A great example of this is in his sermon on the fifth Sunday in Lent on John 11:47–57.<sup>120</sup> Becker does not preach this sermon in the style taught at WLS, i.e. exposition followed by application. He tells the story and explains what it means, i.e. he only exposit and lets the application be implicit. “The words of Caiaphas demonstrate insufferable pride and a lack of trust in God.... The words of Caiaphas are also unjust.... And Caiaphas was wrong in his hope that if Jesus would die, the nation would not perish.”<sup>121</sup> His sermon is entirely a retelling and exposition of the story and it still beautifully proclaims the gospel message and God’s story of redemption. “And yet, it is remarkable how words that are so dead wrong can be so completely right from another point of view. Immediately after recording these words of Caiaphas, the evangelist tells us in our text, ‘This spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied....’ This text makes it very clear that wicked Caiaphas was saying something that God wanted said.”<sup>122</sup>

A sermon that could serve as a model for how preaching is taught at WLS is his sermon on Palm Sunday on John 12:1–19. This sermon follows the model of a theme and two parts, each part consisting of exposition and application. His theme and parts are as follows: How We Should Receive Jesus When He Comes. 1) Not as Judas and the Pharisees did, 2) but as Mary and the believing disciples did. About half of this sermon is him retelling the story, adding context and extra information. The other half is him applying the lessons learned to his unique congregation. He compares Judas holding Mary in contempt for her use of money to how

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120. Siegbert Becker, *The Word Goes On* (James Becker, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 108-112.

121. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 110-111.

122. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 111.

congregation members fight and complain about the amount of money that the church sends to home missions.

Even then [Judas] pretended to be faithful. But in the end Judas gained nothing. It often happens that those who have a selfish reason for complaining pick out some other worthy cause for which they really care little, but which gives them a least a show of right.... It often happens that way in the church too. Often we hear complaints and always they are put in such a way that it seems that the person doing the complaining is in the right. Just to cite an example which fits in very well with our text—people sometimes say that we are sending away too much money for missions, that we ought to use more at home. Often the real reason is that they do not want to give.<sup>123</sup>

He then leads his congregation to Christ. “The only solution is to accept Christ.... We should follow him, not because others do it, but because we are really convinced that he is our Savior and our King.”<sup>124</sup> Then he compares Mary’s act of anointing Jesus with expensive perfume and the fact that it seemed unnecessary to the church’s use of resources to erect beautiful churches. The beautiful churches are not necessary and maybe the resources could be better used elsewhere, yet those resources are used to honor the Lord and Savior of the world. “For instance, it is not necessary to have beautiful churches. We could worship just as well in a very plain building. But if a beautiful church is built to honor the Savior and to show our love for him, then we know that it is pleasing to him.”<sup>125</sup> Again, he leads his listeners at the end to Christ. “On this Palm Sunday... we shall also acclaim Jesus... to whom all honor and worship and devotion is due.... And if you receive him as Mary did, in faith and in love, then on Good Friday you will see his death as the payment of your sins, and on Easter you will see his victory over the tomb as your victory over death and the grave.”<sup>126</sup>

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123. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 115.

124. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 115.

125. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 116.

126. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 116–117.

### Becker's Sermon on Jesus's Attitude Toward Little Children

We will look at one more sermon from Becker. This one was preached on the Sanctity of Human Life Sunday on Mark 10:13–16.<sup>127</sup> This sermon follows his familiar pattern, theme and three parts. The Attitude of the Lord Jesus Toward Little Children: 1) Jesus sets a high value on little children, 2) He loves little children 3) He wants to bless little children. This sermon is preached against abortion. Sermons on topics such as this that are so relevant both to the sinful climate of the culture and the words of Jesus himself are always beneficial.

If we examine this sermon based on Schmitt's four threads of discourse, we can make a few observations. As far as textual exposition is concerned, Becker gets high marks. He does not allow one portion of this text go unmentioned in his sermon. To Becker, every part of his text was a piece to the puzzle that had to be placed just right to form his sermon. He mentions every word of his text and shows that listener how it fits into his outline and train of thought.

His theological confession is found in the sermons parts. Each part of his sermon is a theological confession and he exposit the text to show the hearer how this is so. *Jesus sets a high value on children.* “‘Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not.’ It is very clear from this that the little babies are important to Jesus. He sets a high value on them.”<sup>128</sup> *He loves little children.* “[Jesus] demonstrates very clearly that he loves them. We are told that he took them up in his arms. Child psychologists often tell us how important it is that little babies be picked up and held... so that they may know that they are loved.”<sup>129</sup> *He wants to bless little children.* “[Jesus] also wants to bless them as only he can bless. He took them up in his arms and

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127. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 293–297.

128. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 295.

129. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 295.

blessed them, it says in our text. What the blessing is that he wants to give them is made clear when he says, ‘Of such is the kingdom of heaven.’”<sup>130</sup>

Evangelical proclamation is found to a small extent in part two when he talks about what Jesus’ love for children (and all people) drove him to do. “That Jesus loves [little children] is not something that we learn only from this story. We know that Jesus loves all men, that he loved the whole world enough to lay down his life so that forgiveness and salvation might be won and purchased for all men with his holy precious blood.”<sup>131</sup> Evangelical proclamation is found to a much greater extent in part three where he talks in depth about the blessings that Jesus provides, not only to children but to all people. “When we talk about the sanctity of human life, we, as Christians, recognize that while physical life is a great gift of God, it is greatly overshadowed by spiritual life which brings us the blessings of forgiveness and salvation and gives us the assurance that we will live in bliss with God forever. Jesus wants that for the little children of the world. We surely want it too.”<sup>132</sup> He especially includes mothers who have been unfortunate enough to have an abortion, Jesus forgives them too. “An unwanted pregnancy may bring anguish for months and perhaps years, but an abortion often brings a lifetime of regret, and the only place where true relief from that kind of anguish can be found is in the blood of the Lord Jesus, who is willing to forgive even this terrible sin.”<sup>133</sup>

Hearer interpretation is strong in this sermon, not only because he addresses a subject that is relevant to his hearers, but because through this sermon he shows how they – and especially

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130. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 295.

131. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 295.

132. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 297.

133. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 296.

their children – are relevant to God; Jesus loves the little children and wants to bless them. Jesus loves the parents and other adults and wants to bless them as well. The strong images he evokes in his listeners’ minds of the horrors of abortion, show that Becker is not afraid to address the severity of this sin head on. “Many of you have seen pictures of the bodies of aborted babies in the hospital garbage cans. But heart wrenching as the sight is, this is far worse. These children are not only being denied a normal physical birth; that are not only being deprived of human life. They are killed, deliberately and intentionally, without the opportunity to be born again by the washing of holy baptism.”<sup>134</sup> Becker is a full preacher. All of the threads of discourse are woven throughout this sermon and many of his other sermons as well.

Becker is a highly expositional preacher. He sets forth his theme and parts to outline the path he will take to guide his listeners again through the text. Becker was partial to the narrative style of preaching as he loved to take his listeners back to the text again and again. Becker stays true to his Lutheran heritage as he champions the expository sermon.

Becker has some other traits as a preacher that are interesting to note. First, he has a clear introduction before he announces his theme and parts in all of his sermons. His introduction is almost always Scripturally based. Second, he tends to end his sermons with a request that God help them (the congregation) apply what was learned in the sermon to their lives. His most common phrase is “God grant us...” or a variation of it. Third, in comparison to his Lutheran forefathers<sup>135</sup>, Becker was not a terribly long preacher. He kept his sermons to a reasonable length, to the point, and avoided long unnecessary stories or anecdotes when he could just simply preach the Word.

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134. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 297.

135. In my reading, Luther’s sermons on average were longer than Walther’s and Walther’s sermons on average were longer than Becker’s.

## PART IV: CONCLUSION

### **What Does This Mean?**

So how has preaching changed since Martin Luther revived the sermon? Martin Luther brought back the expositional sermon, favoring to preach the Word of God over moralizing from the pulpit. Luther's blend of expositional preaching with both deductive and at times inductive techniques made for thrilling sermons. Luther aimed at both the mind and at the heart in his preaching as he preached cognitively and emotionally. His sermons varied greatly in length as many times he would preach until he had said everything he wished to say.

Something that has remained consistent throughout the many years of Lutheran preaching (and all preaching for that matter) is hearer interpretation. We can read Luther's sermons today and understand what he was saying because we can study the context of the time and place in which Luther preached. Every other thread of discourse in a sermon can be understood outside of its time and place and therefore should not change nearly as much as hearer interpretation does from sermon to sermon, pastor to pastor, congregation to congregation, and generation to generation. In fact, it is this vital element of sermon writing that requires that we keep training new pastors to shepherd God's people, because the people are always changing.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the art of the sermon began to find footing as exegetical theory began to take shape. Preaching was heavily influenced by both Luther's expositional style and the university sermon. This blended style was suited well to the homily of the ancient church. The rigid organization of preaching a text verse by verse found new life as the structure of the university sermon made its way into the expositional preaching that Luther popularized. In an attempt to be creative this era also dove deep into allegory, embracing a technique that Luther found distasteful.



Moving on the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America, Walther epitomized the thematic approach to preaching. Walther's sermons were thoroughly Biblical though he tended to move away from the traditional Lutheran expositional sermon and into thematic preaching. Deductive preaching was still the method of choice. His sermons may be described as theological lecture with gospel proclamation.

Becker took Luther's expositional preaching to its purest form. Becker's used the theme and parts model of preaching to clearly organize the text which he preached. His preaching style is heavily reliant on the text. Many of his sermons could be categorized as narrative. Becker was a shorter preacher than both Walther and Luther, a trend that moved with the times.

Here are a few takeaways from this study: First, if one were to examine the WELS preaching today, it would look very much like how Becker preached. I have observed from my years as a WELS member that some preachers like to use relevant and catchy introductions to grab their audience's attention. This is a fine tactic for speaking, but notable among the preachers I examined, (Luther, Walther, and Becker), they generally did not have use for a such an introduction. For example, in Becker's sermon on Good Friday on the text Luke 23:27–31,<sup>136</sup> he preaches a sermon focusing on the words that Jesus said, "If they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" Becker's introduction to this Scriptural sermon is another Biblical observation. He introduces his sermon by talking about how little Jesus actually spoke through his whole suffering and death. He hardly spoke before the Sanhedrin, before his accusers, or even before Pilate, yet he stopped to say quite a bit to women who were mourning over him. How significant must those words be then! This introduction serves not only to grab his audience's attention, but it also gives them right away what they came for, the Word of God.

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136. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 120–124.

In the same way, Walther's introductions dove right into the Word. He often spent most of his introduction commenting on the significance of the Sunday of the church year, or on the significance of the doctrine he was about to preach. Luther did not really have any use for introductions, he just dove right into the thick of his sermon, and he is considered among us (and many others) to be one of the greatest preachers to ever live. I wonder if it would be more prudent to stick to the text even in the introduction of the sermon; or at the very least keep the introduction biblical. I offer this: perhaps the introduction should make the congregation ready to hear *the Word of God about to be proclaimed*, not *the sermon about to be preached*.

Second, law and gospel must be used together as a preacher proclaims the Word of God. Walther is well known for his series of lectures, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, in which he explains at length how a preacher should and must use the two. There is a place for law and a place for gospel, and in a sermon they must both be present. WELS preachers are taught the importance of law and gospel preaching, and rightly so. Yet, this is a skill that is just as much gained from experience as it is from the classroom. It is one thing to divide law and gospel conceptually, it is another to do it in practice. When Luther preached, law and gospel were so closely intertwined that he passed from one to another seamlessly throughout his sermons. This is a feature of Lutheran preaching that preachers today can all strive toward. It is not so simple as to have a paragraph on exposition, followed by a paragraph of law application, followed by a paragraph of gospel proclamation. Luther showed us how closely the law and the gospel can work together. By reading his sermons, our dividing of law and gospel will surely be improved in our own preaching.

Third, a popular idea in homiletics today is to outline the text and mimic the outline in your sermon. In my brief study of Luther's sermons, I found that he was doing that long before

recent scholars of homiletics proposed it. Following this pattern that Luther sometimes employed might aid in both our expository preaching and in our effort to preach law and gospel as fluidly as Luther did.

Fourth, evangelical proclamation is the goal of every Lutheran sermon. Leaning on Schmitt's four threads of discourse, I noticed that each of the preachers studied had this goal as their main focus. Each preacher, however, arrived at their goal in different ways. Each preacher studied in this paper made use of all four threads of discourse, yet each one seemed to favor one over another. Luther's sermons are captivating with his use of illustrations and fiery personal discourse. He used the thread of hearer interpretation extremely efficiently to engage his audience and lead them to the gospel truths. Walther's sermons are heavily doctrinal. He used the thread of theological confession to its greatest effect as he used the doctrines of the church to lead his people to powerful realizations, namely, sin and the need for grace. Becker's sermons are fantastic explanations of the text at hand. He used the thread of textual exposition expertly as he made the gospel shine forth through narrative and interpretation. Whether a preacher predominantly uses textual exposition, theological confession, or hearer interpretation, his goal is always to make evangelical proclamation, the good news of sin forgiven and life given, shine forth above all!

Fifth, Lutheran preaching very much has its heritage in using the sermon as a teaching tool. Luther did this to great extent as he preached multiple times a week. He made the most of his opportunities to reeducate his parishioners on the true doctrines of the church. The 17<sup>th</sup> century preachers also made high use of the sermon as a teaching tool as they continued the tradition of preaching regularly on Luther's catechism. The sermon as teaching tool found its superlative in the sermons of Walther. Walther wasted no opportunity to teach his people even

the finer points of doctrine, all while staying true to his Lutheran heritage. Luther and the 17<sup>th</sup> century preachers made it a point to reinforce even the most basic doctrines of the church. This may be a practice that has been lost. I certainly have never heard a sermon on any part of Luther's catechism; but maybe there is still a place for a sermon like that in the WELS today!

Sixth, Luther was an expositional preacher and, we still strive to be expositional preachers within the WELS today. We recognize the importance of the expositional sermon that Luther brought into the church. Expositional preaching is invaluable as we strive not only to bring to God's people his Word of promise, but also to lay out before them salvation history. However, with all the other styles of preaching out there, it can be easy to look past our Lutheran heritage. There is value in expanding horizons in order to enrich preaching. Preaching can be done well in more ways than one (expositional). However, we should be careful to never abandon it entirely. To expand our horizons in preaching at the cost of the advantages of our Lutheran preaching heritage would be a great loss.

Lutheran preaching has remained mostly static since Luther. There have been variations in styles here and there, but the pendulum has always swung back to expositional preaching. There is good reason for this. As seen above, the advantages of expositional preaching are that you can bring God's gospel promises to his people while also revealing salvation history to them. When it comes to tradition and heritage, it is always a good question to ask, "why are we doing this?" If the answer is "because we always have," that is not sufficient. However, when it comes to expositional preaching, the answer is, "because it allows us to do our very best in the service of the gospel."

Lutheran sermon writing, though its form has shifted back and forth through the centuries, has remained remarkably consistent in its foundational goals until today. We preach so

that people might hear the message and believe. We preach so that they too might call on his name who has saved them from sin and death. We preach the law and the gospel. These facets of Lutheran preaching must always remain the same: Lutheran preachers preach the text, they preach to teach the doctrine of the Bible, and most importantly they preach to reveal Christ.

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