

Theology of Preaching in Martin Luther

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Introduction

James Mackinnon, a Luther scholar, observed that there is 'no exhaustive treatise, even in German, on Luther's preaching'.¹ Theology and preaching, for Luther, are indissolubly one. In his *Large Catechism*, 1530, Luther declared: 'I am both a doctor and a preacher'² Luther elevated preaching as an indispensable means of grace, seeing it as central to the church liturgy. 'To hear mass means nothing else but to hear God's Word and thereby serve God.'³ In his *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), Luther asserted that the preaching office constitutes the sure sign of a true church: Now, wherever you hear or see this word preached, believed, professed, and lived, do not doubt that the true Catholic church: 'a Christian holy people' must be there, even though their number is small.⁴

It is supremely through the words of the preacher that the Word of God in the Scriptures is made alive in the present. Luther says that 'one must see the word of the preacher as God's Word'.⁵ He elaborated on this in his *Operationes in Psalmos*:

The apostles wrote very little, but they spoke a lot... Notice: it says let their voices be heard, not let their books be read. The ministry of the New Testament is not engraved on dead tablets of stone; rather it sounds in a living voice... Through

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a living Word God accomplishes and fulfils his gospel.⁶

Following the same vein of thought, in his *Church Postil* of 1522, Luther insisted on calling the church a 'mouth house', not a 'pen house'.

For since the advent of Christ, the gospel, which used to be hidden in the Scriptures, has become an oral preaching. And thus it is the manner of the NT and of the gospel that it must be preached and performed by word of mouth and a living voice. Christ himself has not

¹ MacKinnon, James, *Luther and the Reformation*, 4 vols, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1930), 4:318, n. 66.

² WA 30, 1, 126. The primary source for this study is the critical edition of Luther's works, the *Weimar Ausgabe*, abbreviated as WA, most of which have been translated into English, abbreviated as LW.

³ LW 51, 262, WA 36, 354.

⁴ LW 41, 150.

⁵ LW 22, 526, WA 47, 227.

⁶ WA 5, 537 as quoted in A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word. Martin Luther. Doctor of Sacred Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969), 90.

written anything, nor has he ordered anything to be written, but rather to be preached by word of mouth.⁷

Pelikan wrote accurately of Luther: "The "Word of God" was the speech of God, and "the God who speaks" would be an appropriate way to summarise Luther's picture of God".⁸ The Word of God spoken is itself the Word of God in preaching or God's own speech to us. Thus preaching has a dual aspect: divine activity and human activity, God's Word and human speech. This article will focus on four aspects to elucidate Luther's theology of preaching:

- (I) How his doctrine of the Word of God governs his preaching;
- (II) How law and gospel are both the functions of the one and same Word, are to be preached;
- (III) Preaching Christ as sacrament and example, the appropriateness of which will be delineated;
- (IV) How the Word and the Spirit work together in unity, fulfilling the efficacy of preaching.

The Word of God in preaching

While medieval theology developed the doctrine of sacraments, Luther was the first to construct a doctrine of the Word of God.⁹ This doctrine permeates all of his lectures, commentaries, treatises and sermons. The reformer, being held captive by and to the Word of God, preached extensively and his sermons number over two thousand. In Luther's *Table Talk* he expounded on the various constituents of the term 'Word':

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Somebody asked, 'Doctor, is the Word that Christ spoke when he was on earth the same in fact and in effect as the Word preached by a minister?' The doctor replied, 'Yes, because he said, "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16). And Paul calls the Word 'the power of God' (Rom. 1:16)'.

Then the inquirer asked, 'Doctor, isn't there a difference between the Word that became flesh (John 1:14) and the Word that is proclaimed by Christ or by a minister?'

'By all means!' he replied. 'The former is the incarnate Word, who was true God from the beginning, and the latter is the Word that's proclaimed. The former Word is in substance God; the latter Word is in its effect the power of God, but isn't God in substance, for it has a man's nature, whether it's spoken by Christ or by a minister'.¹⁰

⁷ WA 10, I, 48 as quoted in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 91.

⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings Luther's Works, Companion Volume* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 50.

⁹ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-book of the History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles E. Hay, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), 2:282.

¹⁰ LW 54, 394, no. 5177; WA 4:695-96.

God continues to speak to people through the preached Word. It is through this Word that he is present with his people and continues to meet people salvifically. God assumes human form in order to speak with them 'as man speaks with man',¹¹ Preaching must thereby observe the limit which God has prescribed:

We have to argue in one way about God or the will of God as preached, revealed, offered, and worshipped, and in another way about God as he is not preached, not revealed, not offered, not worshipped. To the extent therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours. For here the saying truly applies, 'Things above us are no business of ours'.¹²

Luther, in his *The Bondage of the Will*, criticised Erasmus for failing to see the distinction between the God preached and God hidden, between the Word of God and God himself.

God must be left to himself in his own majesty, for in this regard we have nothing to do with him, nor has he willed that we should have anything to do with him. But we have something to do with him insofar as he is clothed and set forth in

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his Word, through which he offers himself to us and which is the beauty and glory with which the psalmist celebrates him as being clothed.¹³

Any speculations apart from the Word of God for Luther, is a 'theology of glory'. The true theologian is not one 'who perceives the invisible God through those things which have been made'. Rather the true theologian, whom he calls a 'theologian of the cross', discerns God's being in his deeds, in the 'visible things of God', or 'back' of God, in those things which are perceived through the suffering and cross of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁴ One must 'go to the child lying in the lap of his mother Mary and to the sacrificial victim suspended on the cross, there we shall really behold God'.¹⁵ Luther's theology of the cross is primarily concerned with God as he wills to be found. God has designated a place and person, showing where and how he can be found. Luther instructed us to listen to God's Word alone if we wish to learn who God is and what his will is towards us. Hence we are to follow the way of the baby in the cradle, at his mother's breasts, through the desert, and finally to his death on the cross.

Preaching must deal with this Word, Christ incarnate, crucified, and resurrected from the dead. With audacity, Luther identified the Word of God as the gospel. In his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*, commenting on Romans 1 he remarked: 'The Word is the Gospel of God concerning his Son who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies'.¹⁶ The true nature of the gospel as Word was the spoken form. 'The gospel is essentially proclamation, Christ coming to us through the sermons'.¹⁷

¹¹ LW 4, 61, WA 43, 179.

¹² LW 33, 138-39. See Dennis Ngien, *The Suffering of God According to Martin Luther's 'Theologia Crucis'* (Bern/New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 113-33. See also Gerhard O. Force. *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

¹³ Ibid. For a discussion of Luther's dictum—'Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos' which has its roots in Socrates, see Eberhard Jüngel, 'Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos', in *Entsprechungen: Gött-Wahrheit-Mensch* (München: Kaiser, 1980), 168ff.

¹⁴ LW 31, 38, WA 1, 354, 17-18 (Heidelberg Disputations, 1518).

¹⁵ LW 3, 176-77, WA 43, 72-73.

¹⁶ LW 31, 346, WA 7, 51.

¹⁷ E. Theodore Bachman, 'Introduction to volume 35', LW 35, xvii.

This explains why Luther insisted that the NT is essentially the spoken word that it is to be preached and discussed orally with a living voice.

In his *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther, explaining the verse 'And God said: Let there be light and there was light', spoke of the Word as the instrument which God employs to accomplish his work of creation.¹⁸ The phrase 'God said' for Luther means not only the utterance of God, but also the action and deed of God. God's Word is causative efficaciously, speaking reality into existence in his Covenants. This understanding came from his reading of Ockham and his own study of Psalms and Genesis in particular. The prophets speak and in their speaking the deed of God is accomplished. 'In the case of God to speak is to do, and the word is the deed.'¹⁹ God's Word acts and accomplishes his will. God's Word is his instrument of power which takes created forms. Luther, following Ockham, claimed that God has chosen selected elements of his created order, which are intrinsically good, to effect his saving will. God speaks in calling into existence

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the created order. In speaking through the created order God employs the words of the finite human beings to communicate with us. 'For just as a man uses the tongue as a tool with which he produces and forms words, so God uses our words, whether gospel or prophetic books, as tools with which he himself writes living words in our hearts'.²⁰ The Word of God comes to us only in the spoken form because here on earth God cannot be seen but only heard. God speaks and reveals himself 'through the external word and tongue addressed to human ears'.²¹ Although the spoken word is 'the word of human being', Luther argued, 'it has been instituted by divine authority for salvation'.²² Luther ascribed 'an almost sacramental quality' to the office of preaching so that when the Word of God is preached, no one is exempted from its benefits.²³ The Word of God remains free to be heard even if it comes from the mouth of Judas, Annas, Pilate or Herod.²⁴ 'One should not consider who is speaking but what he is saying: for if it is the Word of God how would God himself not be present?'.²⁵

Unlike the Aristotelian God, Luther's God is the One who speaks with us in human language. Luther wrote, 'Hear, brother: God, the creator of heaven and earth, speaks with you through his preachers... Those words of God are not of Plato or Aristotle but God himself is speaking'.²⁶ God must be apprehended in human speech because God so graciously wills to meet us in it. Human language, Peter Meinhold writes of Luther, is 'a divine order in which human speech and the divine Spirit are brought together into a unity'.²⁷ Luther intimates:

¹⁸ See Robert Kolb, "'What Benefit Does the Soul Receive from a Handful of Water?': Luther's Preaching on Baptism, 1528-1539", *Concordia Journal* 25:4 (1999), 358, where he speaks of the Word of God as God's creative instrument.

¹⁹ LW 12, 33; WA 40, II, 231 (Ps. 2, 1532).

²⁰ LW 10, 212; WA 3, 256.

²¹ LW 10, 220, WA 3, 262.

²² LW 3, 273; WA 43, 71.

²³ George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 91.

²⁴ LW 35, 396.

²⁵ LW 3, 220, WA 43, 32.

²⁶ WA TR 4, 531, no. 4812.

²⁷ Peter Meinhold, *Luthers Sprachphilosophie* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1958), 13. 'einer göttlichen Ordnung, in der menschliche Rede and göttlichen Geist zur Einheit zusammen geschlossen sind'.

no difference is perceptible between the word of man and the Word of God when uttered by a human being; for the voice is the same, the sound and pronunciation are the same, whether you utter divine or human words.²⁸

In the prophets the term 'voice' applies without exception to the 'voice of the Lord', so that we must accept every word which is spoken as if the Lord himself were speaking, no matter by whom it is spoken, and we must believe it, yield to it, and humbly subject our reason to it.²⁹

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There abides a correspondence between God hiding in his humanity to reveal himself and God hiding in human language to communicate with us. God's descent into human language is indeed God's way of relating to us, not in a foreign language but in the day to day language of human beings. Henceforth when we hear God's Word spoken, we should obey it wholeheartedly because 'God does everything through the ministry of human beings'.³⁰

Law and Gospel: an antithetical unity

Unlike Calvinistic preaching that tends to separate the gospel from the law, Luther insisted on their antithetical unity.³¹ In a sermon preached in his home, 1532, Luther said, 'When I preach a sermon I take an antithesis'.³² In other words, he never proclaims God's great 'Yes' without at the same time proclaiming his terrifying 'No'. Here the distinction between law and gospel, Luther argued, must be made if we want to be great preachers.³³ His hermeneutical distinction between law and gospel, which corresponds to his antecedent distinction between the 'Letter' and the 'Spirit', forms two types of preaching.³⁴

The words of the apostle, 'The letter kills, the Spirit gives life', might be said in other words, thus: 'The law kills, but the grace of God gives life', or 'Grace grants help and does everything that the law demands, and yet is unable to do it by itself'.³⁵

The Word of God comes to us in two forms, as law and as gospel. God first speaks his Word of law, his alien work, which kills the sinner. Then he speaks his Word of gospel, his proper work, which recreates the sinner through the forgiveness of sins.³⁶ The law as his alien work truly condemns, but so that we might be saved as his proper work. Law and gospel both belong to the work of the revealed God. In Luther's words:

²⁸ LW 4, 140; WA 43, 236.

²⁹ LW 25, 239-40; WA 56, 253.

³⁰ LW 3, 274; WA 43, 71.

³¹ See Karl Barth, *The Preaching of the Gospel*, trans. B.E. Hooke (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 17-18.

³² WA 36, 181 as quoted by John Doberstein, LW 51, xx.

³³ LW 26, 10.

³⁴ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther. An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 110ff.

³⁵ Luther, 'Concerning the Letter and the Spirit', in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 83.

³⁶ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1966), 258. See also Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus Christ. Savior and Lord* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 200, where he compares Luthers with Calvins: 'According to him [Calvin] the law is always with the gospel rather than simply before the gospel [as in Luther]'.

for through the law all must be humbled and through the gospel all must be exalted. They are alike in divine authority, but with respect to the fruit of ministry

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they are unlike and completely opposed to each other.³⁷

God's assuring 'Yes' is hidden in his severe 'No'. This double or contradictory act is done by 'the same God who works everything in everyone' (1 Cor. 12:6). God corresponds to himself precisely in these two contradictory activities. The paradox of God's being is that God kills in order to make alive (1 Sam. 2:6). The law is not against God's promises but leads to those promises. The annihilating knowledge of God, revealed in the law is causally useful, if and when it drives us into the arms of Christ. This is made very clear in his Galatians commentary, where he wrote:

This does not mean that it was the chief purpose of God in giving the law only to cause death and damnation... For the law is a Word that shows life and drives us towards it. Therefore it was not given only for the sake of death. But this is its chief use and end: to reveal death, in order that the nature and enormity of sin might thus become apparent. It does not reveal death in a way that takes delight in it or that seeks to do nothing but kill us. No, it reveals death in order that men may be terrified and humbled and thus fear... Therefore the function of the law is only to kill, yet in such a way that God may be able to make alive. Thus the law was not given merely for the sake of death, but because man is proud and supposes that he is wise, righteous, and holy, therefore it is necessary that he be humbled by the law, in order that this beast, the presumption of righteousness, may be killed, since man cannot live unless it is killed.³⁸

Thus for Luther, as for Paul, there is a preaching which is anything but saving, which works the opposite of justifying grace. Through the preaching of the law, people are made aware of the law's power, which constantly accuses them, delivers them up to God's wrath, to eternal judgement and death. This bitter counter truth of God's alien work must be preached, otherwise we moralise our sin, placing it in the context of our enmity to God and God's enmity to us. The deepest antithesis is not between our sin and God's grace, but between God's law and God's grace. This antithesis, so offensive to moralists, requires revelation.

Luther deplored that the sermons of his day emphasised the works of the law, turning Christ's mediatorship into a judge, demanding from people a righteous living. The Bielian premise, 'doing what lies within us', was the presupposition of all medieval men. This Sasse explained:

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For all medieval men the gospel was essentially the *lex Christi*, the law of Christ that man must fulfil if he wants to be like the rich young man in Matthew 19. It is not accidental that just this story together with Matthew 10 made such a deep impression on all medieval men. This was to them real gospel, the answer to the question, 'What shall I do to inherit eternal life?' ... Medieval men knew that only grace could save him, but he was to do something to merit God's grace. 'No one who tries to do his best will be denied grace'.³⁹

³⁷ LW 9, 178; WA 14, 676 (Lectures on Deuteronomy, 1525).

³⁸ LW 26, 335, WA 40, 1, 516-18.

³⁹ Hermann Sasse, 'Luther and the Word of God', in *Accents in Luther's Theology*, ed. Heino O. Kadai (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 61-62. See also Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*:

This type of preaching precipitated in the earlier Luther hatred of Christ. 'Christ was for me', said Luther, 'not a Mediator, but a judge'.⁴⁰ In his *Table Talk*, 1545, Luther wrote of his evangelical breakthrough:

I was long in error under the papacy... until at last I came upon the saying in Romans 1:17: 'The righteous lives by his faith'. That helped me. Then I saw of what righteousness Paul speaks, where there stood in the text *Iustitia*, righteousness. Then I became sure of my case, learnt to distinguish the righteousness of the law from the righteousness of the gospel. Before, I lacked nothing but that I made no distinction between law and gospel, held them to be all one.⁴¹

To counteract the one sidedness of medieval preaching, Luther insisted that proper preaching must constitute both law and the gospel. Luther lamented that 'for many centuries there has been a remarkable silence about this (law and gospel) in all the schools and churches'.⁴² This prolonged silence, he argued, contributed to an inadequate understanding of the doctrine of justification.⁴³ Law and gospel must never be mixed, and it is the mark of a 'real theologian' to know well how to radically distinguish between them.⁴⁴ Both are parts of the same Word of God. The 'Pope has not only confused the law with gospel, but he changed the gospel into mere laws'.⁴⁵

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When the law is presented as the gospel, the law itself is lost. The law-gospel distinction does not mean a division or separation.

Nothing is more closely joined together than fear and trust, law and gospel, sin and grace, they are so joined together that each is swallowed up by the other. Therefore there cannot be any mathematical conjunction that is similar to this.⁴⁶

A real preacher must diligently know and maintain the distinction between law and gospel, without reducing the latter into the former nor rejecting the former completely in favour of the latter. Both law and gospel are constitutive of the two functions of the same Word that confronts the sinner, accusing him as his alien work and making him alive as his proper work. Thus the ministry of the Word must proclaim both law and gospel. This Luther saw is God's will and commission, and this is precisely what Christ himself has done.⁴⁷ Henceforth Luther repudiated both legalism and antinomianism.

Both groups sin against the law: those on the right, who want to be justified through the law, and those on the left, who want to be altogether free of the law. Therefore we must

Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism (Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 63-68, for a discussion of 'nomini facienti quod in se est, deus non negat gratiam'.

⁴⁰ WA 40, I, 326.

⁴¹ WA TR V. 210.7ff as cited in Philip S. Watson, *Let God be God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1950), 31, n. 56.

⁴² LW 26, 115; WA 40, I, 207.

⁴³ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 251.

⁴⁴ LW 26, 115; WA 40, I, 207.

⁴⁵ LW 26, 343; WA 40, I, 527.

⁴⁶ LW 26,343; WA 40, I, 527.

⁴⁷ See WA 39, I, 428; 430, 533 as cited in Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 260.

travel the royal road, so that we neither reject the law altogether or attribute more to it than we should.⁴⁸

The legalists, by their attempts to satisfy the law and to be liberated from it, have put themselves all the more under its yoke. 'That is a crab's way of making progress, like washing dirt with dirt!'⁴⁹ This explains why the preaching of the law must be followed by the preaching of the gospel.

We are not to preach only one of these words of God, but both: ... We must bring forth the voice of the law that men may be made to fear and come to a knowledge of their sins and so to repentance and a better life. But we must not stop with that, for that would only amount to wounding and not building up, smiting and not healing, killing and not making alive, leading down into hell and not bringing back again, humbling and not exalting. Therefore we must also preach the word of grace and the promise of forgiveness by which faith is taught and aroused... Accordingly man is consoled and exalted by faith in the divine promise after he has been humbled and led to a knowledge of himself by the threats and the fear of the divine law.⁵⁰

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The preaching of the law by itself, without the preaching of the gospel, works in us total despair, which in turn might lead us to the new sin of hating God. However this despair may be healed only when we hear the word of the gospel. The law is not God's final word. The negative aspects of the law—its terrors, judgements and death—are not the goal but only the means in God's hands.⁵¹ Thesis 18 of Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* reads: 'It is certain that man (through the law) must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ'.⁵² The law, under the consolation of the gospel, becomes a 'disciplinarian that drives a man to Christ'. This 'is a comforting word and a true, genuine and immeasurably joyful purpose of the law'. Being assured of this, Luther said: 'I feel great comfort and consolation, when I hear that the law is a disciplinarian to lead me to Christ rather than a devil or a robber that trains me not in discipline but in despair.'⁵³ The law by itself works damnation, but with the gospel it works salvation.

The antinomians, on the other hand, taught that since the law contributes nothing to justification, the preaching of it is superfluous. It suffices to preach the gospel, which by itself could work repentance and forgiveness of sins. Although Luther agreed with them that the law is not a way of salvation, he affirmed the disciplinary purpose of the law. To abolish the law as the antinomians did is to abolish sin itself. 'But if sin is abolished, then Christ has also been done away with for there would no longer be any heed for him.'⁵⁴ Not until we place ourselves under the law, or under its terror would we be able to recognise the greatness of what Christ does for us. The law was given with a view to justification. It is necessary that the law be preached so that it might convict the sinner and drive him to Christ. The law makes him despair of himself and his own ability so that he expects nothing from himself but

⁴⁸ LW 26, 343, WA 40, I, 528.

⁴⁹ LW 27, 13; WA 40, II, 14.

⁵⁰ LW 31, 364, WA 7, 63-64.

⁵¹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 259.

⁵² See 'Heidelberg Disputation', in Timothy Lull, ed. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 42.

⁵³ WA 39, I, 446, cf. 441 as cited in Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 259-60.

⁵⁴ WA 39, I, 546; cf. 348ff as cited in Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 258.

everything from Christ. The knowledge of sin, which came through the law, is for Luther 'a great blessing', that the inner might seek healing in the gospel.⁵⁵ Since the law is God's own word, it must be preached and heard. To do otherwise, as the antinomians did, is to refuse to hear the truth of God.

Did Christ put an end to the law? To the antinomians, yes. Luther faulted them for failing to see the significance of the 'duration of the time of the law'. This, Luther understood 'literally or spiritually'.⁵⁶ 'Literally: the law lasted until Christ... At that time Christ was baptised and began to preach, when in a literal way the law... came to an end'⁵⁷ There is a time for each to fulfil its own proper function. Spiritually, the law does

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not rule the conscience after 'it has discharged its function by adequately disclosing the wrath of God and creating terror. Here one must say: "Stop, law!"'⁵⁸ Now the gospel takes over, puts an end to the accusing voice of the law and fills our hearts with joy and victory. This does not mean, as Forde recognises, the gospel puts an end to the voice of the law, rather puts an end to the negative voice of the law.⁵⁹ The role of the law as 'our custodian' comes to an end with the coming of Christ.

The theological use of the law continues to function in the life of the Christian, but as a 'schoolmaster'.⁶⁰ The Christian is never beyond law and gospel, which are 'radically distinct from each other and mutually contradictory but very closely joined in experience'.⁶¹ Paul indicates this when he says that 'we who are terrified by the law may taste the sweetness of grace, the forgiveness of sins, and deliverance from the law, sin and death, which are not acquired by works but are grasped by faith alone'.⁶² We are confined under a custodian, the law, not forever but until Christ, who is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4). When faith comes, says Luther, the 'theological prison of the law' comes to an end. 'Therefore you are being afflicted by this prison, not to do you harm but to re-create you through the Blessed Offspring. You are being killed by the law in order to be made alive through Christ'.⁶³

God's wrath remains a reality in an ongoing tension, side by side with God's love. 'A Christian is not someone who has no sin or feels no sin, he is someone to whom... God does not impute his sin' for Christ's sake.⁶⁴ He is 'a sinner in fact, but a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God that he will continue to deliver him from sin until he has completely cured him'.⁶⁵ Insofar as the person is a sinner, he cannot escape the terrifying voice of the law that could only be stopped by the gospel. Nestingen writes appropriately of Luther's sense of the end of the law: 'One of the benefits of Christ is that the law loses its power. The Word and faith take the hearer beyond the law, so that it can be spoken of as

⁵⁵ WA 39, I, 517 as cited in Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 260.

⁵⁶ LW 26, 317; WA 40, I, 492.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Gerhard O. Force, 'The Newness of the Gospel', *Dialog* 6 (Spring, 1967), 91.

⁶⁰ LW 26, 345ff, WA 40, I, 529ff.

⁶¹ LW 26, 337, WA 40, I, 520.

⁶² LW 26, 338, WA 40, I, 520-21.

⁶³ LW 26, 339; WA 40, I, 521-22.

⁶⁴ LW 26, 133; WA 40, I, 235.

⁶⁵ LW 25, 260, WA 46, 273.

ending, as "no longer" being in force'.⁶⁶ 'Insofar as Christ is raised in us', the law is 'quieted' or 'emptied' of its accusation.⁶⁷ Preaching Christ is not a discursive act, as is done in the university; rather it is the actual bestowal of Christ's benefits on the hearer. Luther says, 'Preaching Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it'.⁶⁸ The word is the power of Christ functioning

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in the act of preaching, through the preacher's mouth, to effect what has been proclaimed.

Preaching Christ as sacrament and example

Christ is the content of preaching. Should we preach Christ as Saviour only or as example only? Or both? For Luther, it is not either/or, but both/and, because 'Scripture presents Christ in two ways. First as a gift... Secondly... as an example for us to imitate'.⁶⁹ The sequential order must be observed: Christ as gift must necessarily precede Christ as an example. One must observe its proper time in which both forms of preaching are done. With Augustine, Luther adopted the Sacrament and example Christology. Commenting on Galatians 2:20, 'with Christ I have been crucified', Luther explained:

Saint Augustine teaches that the suffering Christ is both a sacrament and an example... a sacrament because it signifies the death of sin in us and grants it to those who believe, an example because it also behoves us to imitate him in bodily suffering and dying.⁷⁰

Furthermore he insisted that Paul's phrase 'putting on Christ' (Gal. 3:27) has double meaning.

Putting on Christ is understood in two ways: according to the law and according to the gospel. According to the law (Rom. 13:14), 'Put on the Lord Jesus Christ': that is, imitate the example and virtues of Christ. 'Do and suffer what he did and suffered'. So also 1 Peter 2:21: 'Christ suffered for us leaving us an example that we should follow in his steps'. In Christ we see the height of patience, gentleness and love, and an admirable moderation in all things. We ought to put on this adornment of Christ, that is, imitate these virtues.

To put on Christ according to the gospel however, is a matter not of imitation but of the rebirth and renewal that takes place in baptism. Paul is speaking about a 'putting on', not by imitation but by birth.⁷¹

Christ's sacrificial death includes both the sacrament—what Christ has done for us in the cross—and the example—what Christ has done before us. 'When we have put on Christ as the role of our righteousness and salvation, then we must put on Christ also as the garment of imitation'.⁷² The appropriate response to the sacrament of the crucified Christ is faith. In lieu of the medieval imitation of Christ Luther emphasised the

⁶⁶ James Nestingen, 'The Role of Apocalyptic in the Lutheran Reform', *Word and World* 15 (1995), 197.

⁶⁷ WA 39, I, 443 as cited in Nestingen, 'The Role of Apocalyptic in the Lutheran Reform', 200.

⁶⁸ LW 31, 346; WA 7, 51.

⁶⁹ LW 27, 34.

⁷⁰ LW 27, 238; WA 2, 501.

⁷¹ LW 26, 352-53, WA 40, 1, 539-40.

⁷² LW 27, 128.

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pre-eminence of 'abstract faith', which means 'putting on Christ and having all things in common with him'.⁷³ This faith 'conjoins the soul with Christ like a bride with her bridegroom', making the believer and Christ into 'one person'.⁷⁴ Following his break with scholasticism and throughout the course of his career Luther constantly upheld that abstract faith alone justifies our being and our deeds. All that is required of the believer is to 'cling in faith to this man, Christ—that is the sufficient and necessary condition' by which he receives in pure passivity Christ's 'alien' righteousness.⁷⁵

Luther nevertheless introduced in his discussion of the relationship between faith and works, another concept of faith—that is 'incarnate faith' which he distinguished from 'abstract faith'.

We also distinguish faith in this way, that sometimes faith is understood apart from work and sometimes with the work. For just as a craftsman speaks about his material in different ways... so the Holy Spirit speaks about faith in different ways in Scripture: sometimes, if I may speak this way, about an abstract or an absolute faith and sometimes about a concrete, composite, or incarnate faith.⁷⁶

Since 'faith is followed by works as the body is followed by its shadow', says Luther, '[it becomes] impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible to separate heat and light from fire'.⁷⁷ He writes of Paul, 'it is true that faith alone justifies, without works, but I am speaking about genuine faith, which, after it has justified, will not go to sleep but is active through love'.⁷⁸ Real faith must be active, seeking its concretization and validation in good works. The fruits bear testimony to the tree that produces them. The theological impetus to act is understood as the inherent consequence of Luther's understanding of faith itself—that is faith as incarnate faith. At times when criticised by Karlstadt and the Anabaptists for dividing the Christian life into two areas, Luther asserts faith as incarnate faith: '[I]f good works do not follow it is certain that this faith in Christ does not dwell in our hearts'.⁷⁹ The idea of incarnate faith helped Luther to meet Karlstadt's and the Anabaptists' accusation that he had divorced faith from works.

While at times Luther speaks of abstract faith—'faith without works'—at other times he even speaks of an antithetical relationship between faith and works. This is evident in his statements: 'Faith does not perform work, it believes in Christ'; 'all that is kept is faith, which justifies and makes alive'.⁸⁰ It is from this perspective that Luther repudiated

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the soteriology of the Anabaptists for suggesting that the believer 'must suffer many things... and imitate the example of Christ', arguing instead that faith 'learns about Christ and grasps

⁷³ WA 3, 504 as cited in *Dietmar Lage, Martin Luther's Christology and Ethics* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 85.

⁷⁴ WA 7, 25 as cited in *Lage, Martin Luther's Christology and Ethics*, See also LW 26, 168; WA 40, I, 285.

⁷⁵ LW 26, 5-5; WA 40, I, 41.

⁷⁶ LW 26, 264 ; WA 40, I, 414.

⁷⁷ LW 44, 135; LW 35, 370.

⁷⁸ LW 27, 30, WA 40, II, 37.

⁷⁹ LW 34, 111.

⁸⁰ LW 26, 274, WA 40, I, 428.

him without having to bear the cross'.⁸¹ This is made clear in Luther's commentary on Galatians 5:8, where he writes, 'The Anabaptists have nothing in their entire teaching more impressive than the way they emphasise the example of Christ and the bearing of the cross', but we must distinguish 'when Christ is proclaimed as a gift and when as an example. Both forms of proclamation have their different time, if this is not observed, the proclamation of salvation becomes a curse'.⁸² Here his pastoral advice on the proper time in which preaching is done is relevant:

To those who are afraid and have already been terrified by the burden of their sins, Christ the saviour and the gift should be announced, not Christ the example and the lawgiver. But to those who are smug and stubborn the example of Christ should be set forth, lest they use the gospel as a pretext for the freedom of the flesh, and thus become smug.⁸³

The function of the imitation of Christ corresponds to the function of the law as an alien work, leading us into inner conflict, death and hell—not that we should perish, but that we might cleave to the prior and proper work of Christ's saviourhood. Good works performed in imitation of Christ will inevitably end in despair and failure. 'What in example the Lord has placed before our eyes', says Luther, 'but we cannot equal it: our light is like a burning straw against the sin'.⁸⁴ Our failure and despair remind us that we are still a saint and a sinner at the same time; they reveal 'how much we are still lacking' in our faith, and which could only be healed by embracing Christ again, but as our saviour, God's gift to us.⁸⁵ This explains why Luther admitted this:

But I will not let this Christ be presented to me as exemplar except at a time of rejoicing, when I am out of reach of temptations (when I can hardly attain a thousandth part of his example), so that I may have a mirror in which to contemplate how much I am still lacking, lest I become smug. But in the time of tribulation I will not listen to or accept Christ except as a gift.⁸⁶

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The Preaching of the Word and the Holy Spirit

How does the preached Word become a personal word? How does one become convinced of God's redemptive act on the cross? In *The Magnificat*, 1521, Luther explained, 'No one can correctly understand God or his Word unless he has received such understanding immediately from the Holy Spirit... outside of which nothing is learned but empty words and prattle'.⁸⁷ The Holy Spirit's work is not to reveal God apart from the incarnate Word. It is not his office to fill our hearts with other glory than the glory of the cross. The Spirit creates faith in Christ. Faith, a gift of the Spirit, is justifying faith—faith in the incarnate and crucified Christ, which believes against reason and all appearances.

Luther's understanding of the Spirit emerges in clear fashion in his response to the charismatic challenges to his understanding of the doctrine of salvation. The central question addressed by Luther in his inquiry about Karlstadt is 'What makes a person a Christian?' To

⁸¹ LW 26, 270; WA 40, I, 424.

⁸² LW 27, 34, WA 40, II, 42.

⁸³ LW 27, 35.

⁸⁴ WA 15, 497 as cited in Lage, *Martin Luther's Christology*, 162.

⁸⁵ LW 27, 86.

⁸⁶ LW 27, 34.

⁸⁷ LW 21, 299; WA 7, 546.

Luther, we are related to God through Jesus Christ, and are to trust him alone for salvation, not in the inner or mystical life nor in outward behaviour. So, says Luther,

My brother, cling firmly to the order of God. According to it the putting to death of the old man, wherein we following the example of Christ, as Peter says (1 Peter 2:21), does not come first, as this devil (Karlstadt) urges but come last. No one can mortify the flesh, bear the cross, and follow the example of Christ before he is a Christian and has Christ through faith in his heart as an eternal creature. You can't put the old nature to death, as these prophets do, through works, but through the hearing of the gospel. Before all other works and acts you hear the Word of God, through which the Spirit convinces the world of its sin (John 8). When we acknowledge our sin, we hear the grace of Christ. In this Word the Spirit comes and gives faith where and to whom he wills. Then you proceed to the mortification and the cross and the works of love. Whoever wants to propose to you another order, you can be sure, is of the devil. Such is the spirit of this Karlstadt.⁸⁸

The work of the Holy Spirit is to create faith by hearing the Word which in proclamation comes from outside of us. Luther's quarrel with Karlstadt, Müntzer and others is that they invert this order.

Dr Karlstadt and these spirits replace the highest with the lowest, the best with

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the least, the first with the last. Yet he would be considered the greatest spirit of all, he who has devoured the Holy Spirit feathers and all.⁸⁹

The Word and the Spirit are closely related like the voice and breath in speaking. One cannot separate the voice from the breath. Whoever refuses to hear the voice gets nothing out of the breath either'.⁹⁰ God who comes by the way of the cross deals with His in a two-fold manner: first 'outwardly', then 'inwardly'.

Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. Whatever their measure or order, the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give no one the Spirit or faith except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him, as he says in Luke 16:29, 'Let them hear Moses and the prophets'. Accordingly Paul calls baptism a 'washing of regeneration' wherein God 'richly pours out the Holy Spirit' (Titus 3:5). The oral gospel is 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (Rom. 1:16).⁹¹

The order of salvation in Luther's theology begins with the Word addressing us, outside of us, through preaching of what Christ has done for us, followed by the Word being heard and believed, and thereby we are saved by calling upon God.

⁸⁸ LW 21, 299; WA 7, 546.

⁸⁹ LW 40, 83.

⁹⁰ WA 9, 632-633 as cited in Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 38.

⁹¹ LW 40, 146.

This order is constituted by the 'whole root and origin of salvation' which 'lies in God who sends'.⁹² Luther elaborates:

For these four points are so interrelated that the one follows upon the other, and the last is the cause and antecedent of all the others, that is, it is impossible for them to hear unless they are preached to; and from this, that it is impossible for them to believe if they do not hear, and then it is impossible for them to call upon God if they do not believe, and finally it is impossible for them to be saved if they do not call upon God.⁹³

While preaching is indispensable to the engendering of faith, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to give faith in the heart. Here we see that Luther's view differs from

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Augustine's. Jansen notes:

Augustine emphasised the following: the Spirit, who is none other than God himself, is given to us as grace, awakens in us love for God. Here Luther took over the basic structure of this Augustinian thought but filled it differently. Faith as the effect of the Holy Spirit appears in Luther instead of love.⁹⁴

The work of the Holy Spirit is related to the Word and the community of the Word, as Luther expressly says:

The creation is past and redemption is accomplished, but the Holy Spirit carries his work unceasingly until the last day. For this purpose he has appointed a community on earth, through which he speaks and does all his work. For he has not yet gathered together all his Christian people, nor has he completed the granting of forgiveness. Therefore we believe in him who daily brings us into this community through the Word, and imparts, increases, and strengthens faith through the same Word and the forgiveness of sins.⁹⁵

The same idea also appears in his gospel sermon preached on a Pentecost Sunday in 1522:

It is a faithful saying that Christ has accomplished everything, has removed sin and overcome every enemy, so that through him we are lords over all things. But the treasure lies yet in one pile; it is not yet distributed nor invested. Consequently, if we are to possess it, the Holy Spirit must come and teach our hearts to believe and say: I, too, am one of those who are to have this treasure.⁹⁶

The work of the Holy Spirit thus is to communicate to us the gospel that, in Christ's cross and resurrection, the divine blessing has conquered the divine curse. 'The work [redemption] is

⁹² LW 25, 413; cf. LW 40, 81; 128ff.

⁹³ Ibid. Cf. LW 24, 172, WA 45, 618.94 Reiner Jansen, *Studien zu Luthers Trinitätslehre* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1976), 123. Cf. Bertrand de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*, trans. Edmund J. Fortman (Mass: St. Bede's Publications, 1982), 202 'The Spirit of prayer (cf. Rom. 8:26) draws us to Christ in faith, the Spirit of grace places us in the reality of Christ as his instruments in the works of love'.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 124.

⁹⁵ See 'The Large Catechism', in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 419.

⁹⁶ See 'Gospel Sermon, Pentecost Sunday', in *Luther's Church Postil. Pentecost or Missionary Sermons*, ed. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1907), vol. 12, 279, no: 16. Cited also in Arnold E. Carlson, 'Luther and the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit', *Lutheran Quarterly* 11 (May, 1959), 136-37.

finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death and resurrection, etc'.

But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, lost. In order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed,

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God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation. Therefore to sanctify is nothing else than to bring us to the Lord Christ to receive this blessing, which we could not obtain by ourselves.⁹⁷

The Holy Spirit is 'the mediator of the real presence of Christ in faith'.⁹⁸ Thus to spurn knowing the Father in the Son loses all knowledge of God. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are led to see God in the flesh, in whom the Father is mirrored.⁹⁹ The God who came to us in Christ is the same God who comes as the Holy Spirit. More fully:

Although the whole world has sought painstakingly to learn what God is and what he thinks and does, yet it has never succeeded in the least. But here you have everything in richest measure. In these three articles God has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unutterable love. He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover... we could never come to recognise the Father's favour and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is the mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we know nothing but an angry and terrible judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁰

The Holy Spirit is a 'real and divine sphere of revelation in which the risen Christ alone is present, (not as) an idea (but as) a redemptive reality'.¹⁰¹

By this Holy Spirit, as a living, eternal, divine gift and endowment, all believers are adorned with faith and other spiritual gifts, raised from the dead, freed from sin, and made joyful and confident, free and secure in their conscience.¹⁰²

The Spirit confers in our hearts the assurance that God wills to be our Father, forgive our sin, and bequeath eternal life on us.

We should, therefore, not believe the gospel because the church has approved it,

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⁹⁷ See 'The Large Catechism', 415. See also Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, vol. 1., trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 72-73.

⁹⁸ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. John M. Jensen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), 52.

⁹⁹ WA 30, I, 192 as cited in William Clebsch, 'Luther's Conception of God', *Anglican Theological Review* 37 (1955), 39: 'Von Christo aber kundten wir auch nichts wissen, wo es nicht durch den Heiligen gerst offenbaret were'.

¹⁰⁰ 'The Large Catechism', 419, cf. LW 33, 286.

¹⁰¹ Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*, 203. See also Eilert Herms, *Luthers Auslegung des Dritten Artikels* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1987), 53.

¹⁰² LW 37, 365.

but rather because we feel that it is the Word of God... Everyone may be certain of the gospel when he has the testimony of the Holy Spirit in his own person that this is the gospel.¹⁰³

The Spirit comes to us, says Luther, in order to 'inculcate the sufferings of Christ for the benefit of our salvation'.¹⁰⁴

It is easy enough for someone to preach the word to me, but only God can put it into my heart. He must speak it in my heart, or nothing at all will come of it. If God remains silent, the final effect is as though nothing had been said.¹⁰⁵

The activity of the Holy Spirit is intrinsically bound to the Word that is spoken. Except the Holy Spirit draws, no one would come. But how does God draw us? This Luther explains:

When God draws us, he is not like a hangman, who drags a thief up the ladder to the gallows, but he allures and coaxes us in a friendly fashion, as a kind man attracts people by his amiability and cordiality, and everyone willingly goes to him. Thus God, too, gently draws people to himself, so that they abide with him willingly and happily.¹⁰⁶

Why do some repent earlier while others much later? Here Luther gives credence to the freedom of the Holy Spirit so that the control is taken out of the preacher's hand. The Holy Spirit works freely through the word in the manner appropriate to the specific context. In some cases, the word, which has been preached many years ago, may remain in the heart without effect; then God's Spirit comes, and 'effectively calls to mind and enkindles in our hearts', gives new power to the formerly preached word, making it finally effective.¹⁰⁷ It is God who works all in all. The 'whomever' and the 'whenever', Luther argues, is the Spirit's prerogative, which we could do nothing except to submit to his working. In his words:

God wills that we should teach the law. When we have done this he himself shall see who will be converted by it. He will certainly turn anyone whom he wishes to repentance whenever God wills... The gospel is for all but not all believe. The

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law is for all but not everyone feels the power and significance of the law. I thus repent whenever God strikes me with the law and with gospel. We are not able to say anything about the time and the hour. God himself knows when he wills to convert me.¹⁰⁸

Why does preaching not meet with the same level of effectiveness? Why does the Holy spirit work efficaciously in some and not in others? Why do some respond favourably, while others reject the gospel? His answer is this: [T]his has not been revealed to us but rather is to be left to the judgement of God'. Our task, he says, is to remain faithful to preaching and hearing, and 'leave the matter in God's hands; he will move whatever hearts he wills'.¹⁰⁹ Contrary to the enthusiasts who emphasise human preparation to receive the Holy Spirit, Luther affirmed

¹⁰³ WA 30, II, 687ff as cited in Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 38.

¹⁰⁴ LW 37, 365.

¹⁰⁵ WA 10, III, 260, WA 17, II, 174 as cited in Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 39.

¹⁰⁶ LW 23, 86, WA 33, 130-31.

¹⁰⁷ LW 14, 62, WA 31, I, 100.

¹⁰⁸ WA 39, I, 370, cf. *ibid.*, 404 and 406 as cited in Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 39.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

that God's word enters my heart without any preparation or help on my part.¹¹⁰ There is only one 'true preparation'—to hear or read or preach the word. The efficacy of preaching does not lie in human power or techniques, but rather in God's power.¹¹¹

Conclusion

The uniqueness of Luther's theology of preaching lies in that preaching is not mere human speech about God, rather it is God's own speech to human beings. Preaching is indeed the minister's activity; it is also God's activity. When we hear the sermon, we do not hear the pastor. The voice is his, but the words he uses are really spoken by God. God meets human beings through the agency of human voice. Preaching is God's Word speaking to us, not a rehashing of the old stories. Wingren's words elucidates most succinctly Luther's view:

[P]reaching, in so far as it is Biblical preaching, is God's own speech to man, is very difficult to maintain in practice. Instead it is very easy to slip into the idea that preaching is only speech about God. Such a slip once made, gradually alters the picture of God, so that he becomes the far-off deistic God who is remote from the preached word and is only spoken about as we speak about someone who is absent.¹¹²

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Luther's God is not an impassive deity of the Greeks, but an ever-present deity who hides in human speech, who is active in preaching through human voice. Accordingly, the faithful hearers will respond: 'Pay attention, we are hearing God's speech'.

Right preachers should diligently and faithfully teach only the Word of God and must seek only his honour and praise. Likewise the hearers should also say: I do not believe in my pastor, but he tells me of another Lord, whose name is Christ: him he shows to me, I will listen to him, in so far as he leads me to the true Teacher and Master, God's Son.¹¹³

Preachers must assume the 'right to speak', though not the 'power to accomplish'.¹¹⁴ It is God's good pleasure to shine his Word in the heart with law and gospel, but not without the external, spoken Word. What an office, a name and an honour of preachers to be 'God's co-workers' to achieve his purpose!¹¹⁵

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¹¹⁰ WA 12, 497 as cited in Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 41.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word. A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church*, trans. Victor C. Pogue (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 19.

¹¹³ LW 51, 388; WA 51, 191.

¹¹⁴ LW 51, 76, WA 10, 111, 15.

¹¹⁵ WA 17, II, 179 as cited in Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 40.

