

Describing or Declaring the Law and Gospel—What is a Sermon?

Presenter: Rev. Dale R. Hanson

Michael Horton, in an article in the theological journal, *Modern Reformation*, asks this question: “Is preaching an indifferent medium that just happened to be available during the time of Jesus and the apostles but can be replaced with more effective media in our day? Or is there something intrinsic to the preached (proclaimed) word that makes it essential to the ministry and mission—indeed, the very existence—of the church?”

(“Hearing is believing: article by Michael Horton in the theological journal, Modern Reformation January/February, 2010)

This appears to be the question behind the question of this session:

Describing or Declaring the Law and Gospel—What is a Sermon?

Preaching is declaring God's Word; different from describing and explaining, talking about and giving out information or entertaining and telling stories. A sermon is not just an interesting speech that is suppose to delight the audience and hold their attention. It is not about you and your personal stories. It is declaring/proclaiming something that people hear no where else. The sermon is the one time and place where people can meet God and be confronted by His truth. It is the most important thirty minutes of a person's week.

To preach; to declare God's Word in such a way that the hearers are convicted of their sin and set free in the gospel is a rare gift—received and sharpened in the school of grace and suffering. It is given to those who understand their own sinfulness and inability to see the gospel except by revelation. It is given to those who love to read and study the scriptures and the subjects of sin and grace, Law and Gospel, and justification and sanctification. May God give us a desire to know his Gospel and to declare it in our preaching.

To be able to declare the Law and Gospel we need a Biblical view of preaching.

Michael Horton continues: “You may have heard or even thought things like this: Preaching is too intellectual. It aims at the mind but doesn't really transform the whole person. Besides we live in a culture that distains authorities who tell us what to believe and what to do. Preaching gives the pretense of someone having all the answers. What we need are more conversations. The truth emerges in dialogue, not from a monologue. Besides conversations, we need more practices in community gatherings that envelop all of the senses. Preaching is too static. We need more visual movement and imagery like dance, drama, and video clips. More sounds besides words. Even smells, like incense.” Have you ever entertained such thinking?

The point I want to establish is that God has chosen preaching (the proclamation of the Law and Gospel) as the chief means of creating and sustaining faith. We need a renewed commitment to a Biblical view of preaching.

Hebrews 4:12 tells us that God's Word is living and active; it is the means by which the triune God created the world, upholds it and also how he redeems and brings eternal life to people. It is that Word that we must hear if we are to be saved.

The primary mission plan of Jesus is stated in the following Bible verses:

Matthew 10:7 – As you go, preach this message: “The Kingdom of heaven is near.”

Mark 13:10 – And the gospel must be preached to all nations.

Mark 16:15 – Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.

Luke 9:2 & 6 – And he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick . . . and so they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere.

Acts 8:4 – Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

Romans 1:15-17 – I am so eager to preach the gospel to you . . . because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes . . . for in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed

Romans 10:8-17 - But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); (9) because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (10) For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. (11) For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." (12) For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. (13) For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (14) How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (15) And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" (16) But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" (17) So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

I Corinthians 1:18-25 & 2:1-5 – For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing . . . God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe . . . For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified . . . my message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power

II Corinthians 4:5 – For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord

Galatians 2:7 – They saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter has been to the Jews

II Timothy 4:2-3 – Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction for the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine.

The preaching of the Word of God, the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus is the primary mission plan of the church instituted by Jesus and practiced by the Apostles. We need to renew our commitment to preaching.

One of the church fathers, actually called the preaching of the Word—the sacramental word; and understood it to be the appointed instrument by which the Spirit of God imparts faith: awakening, regenerating, and sanctifying sinners.

It is critical to understand that the gospel is not a mere invitation to fellowship with Christ, but the effective means by which a relationship with Christ comes about.

We gather each Lord's Day to hear God, not to have exciting experiences, express our spiritual instincts, have warm fellowship, or even merely to hear interesting and informative discourses. Furthermore, we come not only to hear God's Word proclaimed in the sermon but to hear God address us throughout the service; in the greeting, in the public reading of the scripture lessons, in the hymns and spiritual songs, in the responsive readings from the Psalms and in the benediction.

Although private reading of the Bible is of enormous value in strengthening our faith by deepening our understanding, God has chosen preaching as a social event of hearing that creates faith in those who believe.

The Word of God is the means of God's saving actions just as the bronze snake was the means of salvation for the people in Numbers 21:4-9.

The spoken Word of God gives life to those who are dead in their sins just like it was so powerfully and wonderfully shown in Ezekiel 37:1-10 where God gave life to dry bones as the Word of God was proclaimed.

A search of the Bible for the words: preach, preached, preaching and proclaim indicated there are over 200 hundred such references.

***The preacher is the mouth of God.
The ears alone are the organ of the Christian.***

The rationale for preaching is not in its effectiveness for education or reform . . . it is God's intention and action that makes it effective. *It is an affront to God to demand more interesting, relevant, and effective methods than what he has chosen.*

Where medieval worship subordinated speech to sight; *the Reformation and Martin Luther led the way in recovering this emphasis on hearing over seeing.* This emphasis on hearing over seeing is not a slight point for Luther. For him everything depends on preaching and hearing for it is the living voice of the gospel.

This is how the kingdom comes. The Word became flesh—not a vision or a video clip or an experience, but a person. And the spoken Word comes to us normatively in the language of the prophets and apostles, evangelists and preachers who are committed to proclaiming this written word, which is meant to be proclaimed to everyone in the world. Throughout the book of Acts, the advance of Christ's kingdom is expressed this way, "And the Word of God spread."

One generation put all the emphasis on the sermon, as if it were not only the primary but the only conveyer of the Word. And now their adult children are wondering whether we need the sermon at all. Bit by bit, the Word of God is being heard less in churches. One older saint asked, "Why don't the pastors preach the Word of God anymore? Besides the sermon, "the public reading of Scripture" that Paul regarded as essential (I Timothy 4:13 – devote yourselves to the public reading of Scripture) seems to have vanished from many services. We need to be wise in the way we think through

changes to the liturgy (order of service); the songs, the prayers, and other means through which the Word is communicated from generation to generation. *Pastors, don't assume your only concern is the sermon while passing the rest of the service of the Word off to a worship committee.* Not only are critics of preaching wrong when they look for a “more relevant” media, we are wrong when we reduce the ministry of the Word to mere instruction—explaining instead of proclaiming the Law and Gospel. It's a big day whenever God arrives to speak to his people. Faith will always come—be given and confirmed—through the hearing of the gospel.

There needs to be a renewed understanding and commitment to the office of the Holy Ministry among our pastors, elders and congregations.

“The Office of the Holy Ministry” – Why I am a Lutheran

Author: Daniel Preus

Without the Gospel, the church cannot survive. The benefits of Calvary must continue to be dispensed. Just as our bodies must be fed with good food and drink to remain healthy and alive, so faith, too, must be fed. *For this reason, the church historically has met at least weekly to be fed with the Word of God.*

God instituted the office of the holy ministry. Through the office of the pastoral ministry, the Gospel will be proclaimed and people will be brought to and sustained in the faith. Therefore, a pastor is primarily a preacher or proclaimer of God's Word and specifically of God's grace. He is ordained into the ministry to bring to people God's Gospel and the Sacraments.

As far as Luther is concerned, the feeding of the flock and the growth of the church (there is no difference between the two) occurs only when the Word is faithfully and correctly preached. There is an inseparable relationship between the pastoral ministry and the preaching of God's Word. The relationship is so intimate that the preacher ought to be able to say that it is truly God who speaks to the people through his preaching.

Luther indicated that the pastor's preaching should always be focused on Christ, that is, Christ is at its center. The pastor is to constantly point to Jesus, His person and His work, so faith in the Son of God may be created and the church expanded. Luther condemns sermons that are not preached to engender and nourish faith in Jesus. “May every single sermon be forever damned which persuades a person to find security and trust in or through anything whatever except the pure mercy of God, which is Christ.”

The office of the ministry is not a Mosaic office. It is not an office meant to bring people to the Law, to encourage them to live there, to gain their hope there and to stand before God there. *The office of pastor is an office of the Gospel.* This does not mean that pastors should not preach the Law; but they do so only so their people might see the futility of living by the Law and in need embrace the glory of God's riches. The preaching of the Gospel is despised when people do not hear the Law and come to the knowledge of their sin. But the glory of the pastoral ministry is not in preaching God's Law.

Unfortunately, many preachers do not seem to understand the nature of their own office. Thus the major thrust of their preaching is not on the grace and forgiveness found in Christ but on the importance of living a good life. This puts their people back under the Law.

Faithful pastors want their people to live, not perish, so they preach the Gospel. They proclaim to people that no matter what shame they feel, God washes them clean. No matter what wrongs haunt them and never leaves them in peace, Jesus, the Lamb of God, has taken all their sin away. Pastors proclaim that grace covers every sin and that grace is free, which means that no one can say that Jesus didn't come for me, didn't die for me. Paul says, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. When pastors preach the Gospel in this way, the people of God rejoice because they see Jesus. They see him not as the One who condemns, threatens or accuses them but as the One who forgives, saves and justifies them.

Pastors spend many years baptizing, instructing children, teaching adults, administering the Lord's Supper, preaching, marrying, burying, comforting, admonishing sinners, visiting the sick, defending the faith, warning against false teachings, advising, encouraging, nourishing and strengthening. They do this so the flock of Christ may know the Shepherd and that sinners may know the Savior. Like John the Baptist, faithful pastors continually point people to Jesus and say, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. God calls pastors to take care of his flock, like he did when he reinstated Peter: "Feed my lambs." "Take care of my sheep." "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-25)

But what is really being preached today? How we are being influenced away from the gospel of Jesus.

Christless Christianity – The Alternative Gospel of the American Church

Author: Michael Horton

It is easy to become distracted from Christ as the only hope for sinners. Where everything is measured by our happiness rather than by God's holiness, the sense of our being sinners becomes secondary, if not offensive. If we are good people who have lost our way but with the proper instructions and motivation can become a better person, we need only a life coach, not a redeemer. In order to push us off point, all that Satan has to do is throw several spiritual fads, moral or political crusades, and other "relevance" operations into our field of vision. Focusing our conversation on us—our desires, needs, feelings, experiences, activity, and aspirations—energizes us. At last, now we're talking about something practical and relevant.

Wherever Christ is truly and clearly being proclaimed, Satan is most actively present in opposition. Yet, even in this pursuit, he is more subtle than we imagine. He lulls us to sleep as we trim our message to fit in with the popular culture and invoke Christ's name for anything and everything but salvation from sin and the coming judgment.

I think that the church in America today is so obsessed with being practical, relevant, helpful, successful and perhaps even well-liked that it nearly mirrors the world itself. *Aside from the packaging, there is nothing found in most churches today that could not be satisfied by any number of secular programs and self-help groups.*

"Christless Christianity." Sounds a bit harsh, doesn't it. Yet, the regular diet in many churches across America today is a weekly challenge and call to action, "do more, try harder" rather than a clear proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The evangelical movement seems to be booming. But is it still Christian? God is used as a personal resource rather than known, worshiped, and trusted. The Holy Spirit is an electrical outlet we can plug into for the power we need to be all that we can be. The focus seems to be on us and our activity rather than on God and his work in Jesus Christ. There seems to be a tendency to make God a

supporting character in our own life movie and we end up saying very little that the world could not hear from Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, or Oprah.

Besides the preaching, our practices reveal that we are focused on ourselves and our activity more than on God and his saving work among us. The search for the sacred is largely oriented to what happens inside of us, in our own personal experience, rather than in what God has done for us for in history. *Even Baptism and the Lord's Supper are described as means of commitment rather than means of grace by many contemporary progressive evangelicals.* Rather than letting "the word of Christ dwell in your richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thanksgiving in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16) the purpose of singing (the "worship time") seems more focused on our opportunity to express our own individual piety, experience, and commitment. We come to church; it seems, less to be transformed by the Good News of the Gospel than to celebrate our own transformation and to receive fresh marching orders for transforming ourselves and our world.

Far from clashing with the culture of consumerism, American religion appears to not only be at peace with our narcissism but gives it a spiritual legitimacy.

Many celebrate an emphasis on Christ-as-example rather than Christ-as-Redeemer as the indication of a new kind of Christianity, but is it not really an old kind of moralism? Nobody will raise a fuss if you find Jesus helpful for your personal well-being and relationships, or even if you think he was the greatest person in history—a model worthy of devotion and emulation. But start talking about sin—where our best efforts are filthy rags and Jesus came to bear the condemnation of helpless sinners who place their confidence in him rather than themselves—and people begin shifting in their pews.

Discipleship, spiritual disciplines, life transformation, culture transformation, relationships, marriage and family, stress, the spiritual gifts, financial planning, radical experiences of conversion, end-time curiosities that seem to have less to do with Christ's bodily return than with matching verses to newspaper headlines, and accounts of overcoming significant obstacles through the power of prayer. This is the sad diet we're getting today, and it is bound to burn us out because it's all about us and our work rather than about Christ and his work. Today, *Christless Christianity is pervasive, crossing all denominational lines.*

Evangelicals are as likely as mainliners today to talk pop psychology, politics, or moralism instead of the gospel.

Newsweek magazine reported, churches have developed a "pick and choose" type of Christianity in which individuals take what they want and pass over what does not fit their spiritual goals. Disguised in the secular language of psychotherapy, the search for the sacred has turned sharply inward—a private quest.

Ironically, while Robert Schuller, ordained in the Reformed Church in America, encourages people to exchange the categories of sin and justification for those of shame and self-esteem; the Roman Catholic, Pope Benedict, expresses concern that the world today "is losing the notion of sin." He goes on to say, "People who trust in themselves and in their own merits are, as it were, blinded by their own 'I' and their hearts harden in sin. On the other hand, those who recognize themselves as weak and sinful entrust themselves to God, and from him obtain grace and forgiveness."

Once one makes peace of mind rather than peace with God the main problem to be solved, the whole gospel is radically redefined. "How can I, a sinner, be right before a holy God?" is simply off the radar in a therapeutic mind-set. *Once the self is enthroned as the source, judge, and goal of all of life, the*

gospel need not be denied because it is beside the point. But people need to see—for their own good—that self-realization, self-fulfillment, and self-help are all contemporary twists on an old heresy, which Paul identified as works-righteousness and self-salvation.

Being “religious” is about being good and it’s not about forgiveness. *A moralist religion of self-salvation is our default setting as fallen creatures. If we are not explicitly and regularly taught out of it, we will always turn the message of God’s rescue operation into a message of self-help.*

The theological term for all this is Pelagianism, named after the fourth century British monk named Pelagius. He and his followers denied original sin and taught that sin is not a universal human condition but simply a choice that each of us makes. With our free will we can choose to follow Adam’s bad example or Jesus’ good example. Although it was officially condemned by the church including its softer “semi-Pelagian” form, it has always been a threat. After all, it is our most natural theology. Arminianism, named after a 16th century Dutch theologian, was one step removed from Pelagianism. Since the second great awakening much of American Protestantism has been either Pelagian or semi-Pelagian.

William Willimon states, “Self-salvation is the goal of much of the preaching today. Most evangelistic preaching I know about is an effort to drag people even deeper into their own subjectivism rather than an attempt to rescue them from it. The real situation, whether we know it or not, is that much of the preaching systematically distorts and ignores the truth. This is why we need “an external word” . . . because we don’t discover the gospel, it discovers us. ‘You did not choose me but I chose you,’ Jesus says in John 15:16. Willimon concluded, “The gospel is good news, because it is about grace. Yet it is also news because it is not common knowledge, not what nine out of ten average Americans already knows. The Gospel isn’t understood by the natural man. It comes only where Jesus is proclaimed.” Another theologian has remarked, *“The Biblical message of grace may even be more needed today than it was in the sixteen century, since now Pelagianism seems comfortably at home in many churches across American.”*

If Christianity is about public truth delivered through an external word, then ministry and evangelism requires educated and trained leaders who can expound and apply the truth of God’s Word for the benefit of those under their care. By contrast, however, if Christianity is reduced to personal experience, then its leadership will consist of the most successful entrepreneurs, CEOs, or managers of extraordinary staged events and the pastoral call has significantly shifted from the Biblical model.

To be able to declare the Law and Gospel we need to have a Biblical view of the nature of man; there is a significant need in the church today for a rediscovery of the Biblical Doctrine of Man.

This calls us to address two important theological shifts:

1. The first is a shift from original sin to “innate human goodness”
2. The second is a shift from the bondage of the will to an emphasis on “free will”

A Theology to Live By

Author: Herman Preus

First, Preus make a point about the importance of theology.

It is a lie to say that dogma (doctrine) does not matter; it matter enormously . . . it is absolutely impossible to teach Christianity without teaching Christian doctrine. The reason why churches are

discredited today is not that they are too bigoted about theology, but that they have run away from theology.

Second, Preus makes a point about why studying Luther is important for us today. Why turn to Luther and the dim past? Because without the light that comes out of the past, we shall be groping in darkness in the present. We shall be wasting time trying solutions and remedies that have already been tried and have failed. We shall be overlooking an inheritance of wisdom and experience that has enriched life in every generation. *To interpret life in the present without a historical perspective is like sailing a ship while despising the use of a compass because it was invented 4,000 years ago.* The cult of “contemporary theology” has reached such proportions that we need to remind each other what someone said about a century ago, “Great thoughts are not born in the latter days, but were given by the Lord to His church from the beginning. Novelty and falsehood are synonymous. Every novelty in matters of theology ought to be doubted. A historical perspective is particularly important when dealing with things spiritual and eternal, things pertaining to God and our relation to God. The Ten Commandments are as relevant to life today as they were the day they were given on Mount Sinai. So is the Gospel of God’s love in Christ. So is the theology of the Bible. If one wants to extract the true theology of the Bible, one needs the help of the saints and scholars who through the ages have struggled with the same problems and questions. Martin Luther is himself a fine example of this kind of scholar. He spent a lifetime extracting the theology of the Bible.

How is man portrayed in Holy Scripture?

Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. (Isaiah 6:5)

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:24)

Romans 3:9-18 and Ephesians 2:1-10

In fact, the answer to the question, “What is man?” is not to be found in philosophy but only in theology, a theology based on revelation. Man can be known only by the revelation of God found in Holy Scripture. *“This is exactly why Scriptures are so important,” writes Mark Dever, in the book, It Is Well, “because you and I will never come naturally to a right understand about either God or man. We cannot assume that the intuitions and hunches that we have, theologically or morally, are correct. We need the Scripture to instruct us.”*

We need to proclaim the utter lost condition of man, the totality of grace and that “free will,” without God’s grace, can do nothing but sin.

Creation loomed large with Luther. God the Creator is never divorced from God the Redeemer. The doctrine of creation reminds us that our salvation is completely in the hands of God; it is God who gives both life and faith and he does so by his spoken word.

Let twentieth-first century man, stewing in the muck of his own dechristianized anthropology, claiming to be the captain of his own soul but headed for destruction, be reminded by the church that he is a creature of Almighty God. Let him hear that he is answerable to God, so that he may repent. Let him know that he is created with infinite possibilities for joy and accomplishment, so that he may have hope. Let him learn again that God has a great purpose and a glorious destiny for him, made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, so that he may believe in Him. For those who believe and

acknowledge that they belong to God by virtue of creation and redemption will by the grace of God have their whole life directed into the channel of God's eternal purpose. And thus will attain the highest goal of living, which is to glorify God. For no higher goal can be reached, no nobler end aimed at, than to become conscious of one's function in the plans of God.

Man was created in the image of God.

How can sinful man possibly comprehend the glory and perfection of man in the Garden before the fall? Although we utter the words, who can understand what it means to have a life without fear, without terrors and dangers, and to be wise, upright, good, to be free from all disasters and diseases, spiritually as well as physically.

The image of God according to which Adam was created was a thing of beauty and excellence, since obviously no leprosy of sin adhered either to his reason or to his will. Both his inner and his outer sensations were all of the purest kind. His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straightforward—all in the most beautiful tranquility of mind, without any fear of death and without anxiety. *"I am fully convinced," Luther states, "that before Adam's sin his eyes were so sharp and clear that they surpassed those of the lynx and eagle. He was stronger than the lions and the bears, whose strength is very great; and he handled them the way we today handle puppies."*

When God created man in His image, He graciously endowed him with "free will." This freedom was perhaps the highest of God's gifts to man.

The Doctrine of Original Sin

But since the fall the whole man is corrupt and utterly sinful. Luther had no patience with "man's rosewater dream about human nature. For everything that is left is totally corrupted, and man is left completely incapacitated to move 'God-ward,' or to will or do good."

It would take volumes to contain all that Luther has to say about the utter sinfulness of fallen man. With his tremendous vocabulary he still seemed unable to find words to express the depth of depravity to which man has fallen and in which all are now born. Everything that man is, by virtue of his birth and his reason, is only sin and corruption by which he has brought upon himself the wrath of God.

The doctrine of original sin, which states that the sin of Adam has contaminated the whole man in his very nature, including his reason and will, is probably the most offensive teaching in the Bible and Lutheran doctrine. It is therefore, not surprising that there is an almost universal rejection of the Augustinian-Lutheran doctrine of original sin by leading contemporary Protestant theologians. *This resistance to the doctrine of original sin, however, seems to be rooted more in a humanistic approach rather than a Biblical/theological approach to the subject.*

Luther's doctrine of man is the part of his theology that his critics refer to as Luther's "pessimism." But they seem to know only half of Luther, the half that proclaims the utter sinfulness and helplessness of man to save himself or to cooperate in his salvation. But then comes the glorious Gospel that through the cross and resurrection of Christ the image of God is restored to the one who believes, and thus dignity is regained.

In Luther, it is total sinfulness on man's side and total grace on God's side. You can't have the one without the other. If man is not altogether sinful, but has the capacity to cooperate with God in his salvation, then it is no longer grace alone that saves him. *Luther insists on grace alone, precisely*

because there was not one iota of power in man to cooperate in his justification or salvation. Luther further comments that this does not describe men as they appear in their own eyes and before other men but as they are before God, where they are all under sin, both those who are obviously evil even in the sight of men and those who appear to be good to themselves as well as to other men. *This doctrine of original sin is extremely distasteful to the natural man.*

The Bible teaches that God kills in order to make alive! God's "proper work" is saving and sanctifying and blessing men, and this he does through the Gospel. But before He can do His "proper work", he must do his "alien work," which is to convict of sin, to make man aware that he is a lost and condemned creature under the wrath of God. This alien work God performs through the Law. It is by the Law He kills. By the Gospel He makes alive. Therefore the proper function of the Law is to make us guilty, to humble us, to kill us, and to take everything away from us. But we dare not stop there, for there is only despair and death. But this convicting, killing process of God has a divine purpose, which is carried out through the Gospel. And the purpose is that we may be justified, exalted, made alive, and endowed with all things. Therefore, it does not merely kill, but it kills for the sake of giving life. Here we are wrestling with one of the most profound mysteries and doctrines of the Bible.

It is important that pastors understand and distinguish well between these two works in the human heart and conscience. Let everyone know this basic truth of Jesus—Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. (Matthew 9:12)

Once someone has become a Christian they have come to understand the meaning of the alien and proper work of God. Now they begin to live in the tension between Law and Gospel and the struggle between their old and new nature. For while their sin is forgiven; they are still sinners. *Sins are forgiven only for those who are dissatisfied with themselves, and this is what it means to repent.*

In the Fall man lost his "free will"

The fall into sin has also affected our "free will." Augustine is right, when, he calls it the enslaved, rather than free, will. Luther adds, "I would wish that the words, 'free will,' had never been invented. They are not found in Scripture and would better be called 'self-will.' Free will, after the fall, exists in name only" This means that our will is no longer free but captive and subject to sin. Not that it is nothing, but that it is not free except to do evil. "Free will" without grace has the power to do nothing but sin." The real debate on the freedom of the will came when the great Erasmus in his Diatribes of "Free-Will" challenged Luther's teaching on the bondage of the will. Erasmus states the problem; "By freedom of the will we understand it in connection with the power of the human will whereby man can apply to or turn away from that which leads unto eternal salvation." *This argument between Luther and Erasmus is dealing with one of the most important of Luther's theological positions.* At first Luther thought he had found an ally in the work of reformation when he saw Erasmus attacking corruption in the clergy, calling for an open Bible among the laity, and fighting superstition and ignorance in the Church. But he soon realized that Erasmus was at heart a humanist and a child of the Renaissance. With the tremendous force of his personality Luther led the way from the cultural religiosity of Erasmus back to the faith religion of the Apostle Paul.

Luther stated, "A man will never be thoroughly humbled until he learns that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers . . . and absolutely dependant on the will, counsel, pleasure, and work of another, that is, of God alone."

What hope is there for man then? None at all in the powers he has within himself. He must abandon his pride and look outside himself. He must be changed. He must be made a new creation by God. His will must be changed by God. For his will shares in the total corruption of the whole human

nature. And here again it is no mere dormant disease. It is a will in rebellion against God and His Law, actively hostile against God and against everything that concerns God.

Luther insisted that this manifold corruption of our nature should not be minimized; it should rather be emphasized.

With this attitude in the will, and this corruption permeating our very nature, it is easy to see how there will flow forth from original sin all the actual sins that are spoiling human life. It reveals the tragic hopelessness of humankind. Put all these together; the loss of original righteousness, the blight of original sin, and the transgression of God's Law that are our sins, and you have piled up a mountain of guilt that throw human beings in the terrible shadow of God's wrath. And the penalty for all this is death. "For the wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23)

God saves man by a miracle of his grace. Luther insists that the same God who accomplished man's salvation at the price of his own Son will also to make that salvation available to everyone.

God must actually bring salvation to man, give it to him, and persuade him to believe it. He must bring life to the dead and sight to the blind. And it is through the Word of God and the Sacraments that he purposes to perform this miracle of grace. The theology of grace alone, of God reaching out to raise up the fallen and condemned sinner is so simply and beautifully stated in the meaning to the third article of the Apostle's Creed – "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and kept me in the true faith." It is God who calls man through the Gospel, and that Gospel has the power in it to draw those he calls. It is God who enlightens the darkened understanding, which to Luther means the same as to kindle faith. It is God who sanctifies the man whom He has brought to faith, and who preserves him in that faith to the end. The Lutheran confessions state it this way: "Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, The Holy Spirit is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel."

Man's reasoning wants to know "why some are convicted by the Law and others are not, so that the former accepts and the latter despises the offered grace." Here Luther says, "We are trying to search the will of the hidden God. This is not to be inquired into, but reverently adored, as by far the most awe-inspiring secret of the Divine Majesty, reserved for Himself alone. Things above us are no business of ours."

Luther will not allow Erasmus nor any other humanist to psychologize this experience of conversion, the coming of faith. This is a divine miracle of grace, nothing less. You must be born again—this new birth is a complete miracle. Luther was nauseated with the kind of humanism that presumes to rationalize the miracle of the birth of faith. True faith cannot be manufactured by our own thoughts or choices, for it is solely a work of God in us, without any assistance on our part. *God is not a far off spectator, Luther tells Erasmus, who sits twiddling His thumbs waiting for man's "free-will" to come to a decision. No, justification by faith is God's act of grace from beginning to end.* A man will not be thoroughly humbled until he comes to know that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsel, endeavors, will and works and comes to realize he is absolutely dependent upon the will, counsel and pleasure of another. And yet it is man who believes. Luther calls faith a work, and of all works the most excellent and the most difficult to do. Through it alone you will be saved. For it is a work of God, not of man, as Paul teaches in Ephesians 2. For neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ or believe on Him, and obtain Him as our Lord, unless it were offered to us and granted to our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel. This work is done and accomplished by God alone. So when I believe in Him, everything that He has done is mine. His

obedience is mine. His righteousness is mine. His fulfillment of the Law is mine. His payment for sin is mine. His satisfaction of God's wrath is mine. His victory over sin, death, and hell is mine. And God looks at me in Christ as though I had never sinned.

Therefore, included in faith is the knowledge that I am a sinner, lost and condemned under the Law of God. Likewise this saving faith rests in the Word of forgiveness in the Gospel. Luther made it clear that true faith is a sure trust and firm acceptance in the heart. It takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith. It is more than knowing about God; it is actually believing and trusting in God.

The Christian is both a sinner and righteous

The Christian is righteous, justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, but still remains a sinner. This too is a part of the doctrine of original sin that the church is in danger of losing. Preachers, if they preach sin at all, preach about our sins, particularly our social sins: materialism, sexual sins, greed; and it is well that they do so. But to lay open the natural wickedness and deep corruption of the human heart, how many preachers dare to throw this charge at their respectable congregation of "good people?" It is not enough to acknowledge before God that I have lied or cursed or cheated or failed to love as I should. I must lay open before Him my innermost heart and thoughts that cause me to do those things the Bible calls sin. Even as a Christian I must approach God humbly with a sense of my own unworthiness and sinfulness praying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." This evil inclination is sin, even in the one who is born again in baptism and by faith. This marks the struggle between the old nature and the new nature, the flesh and the spirit; this inner struggle of flesh and spirit is a paradox and a mystery. Romans seven does not teach that it is the "old man" who is the sinner and the new man is righteous. But that the whole man is a sinner, yet, at the same time he is wholly covered by the righteousness of Christ. One and the same man is spiritual and carnal, righteous and sinful, good and evil. *It is characteristic of the spiritual and wise man that he is dissatisfied with himself and hates himself and that he agrees with the Law of God.* The Christian is a sinner but the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him and thus covers his sin. Therefore, believers are before themselves and in truth unrighteous, but before God they are righteous because He reckons them so on account of their confession of sin and the righteousness of Christ imputed to them. Every Christian, Luther taught, must be constantly aware of his double character as sinner and righteous. Even the good work of a Christian is tainted with sin. *The reason why God leaves us in sin is that he wants to keep us in fear of him and in humility so that we may always keep running to his grace, always fearful that we may sin, always praying that he does not impute our sin to us and that he does not let it get dominion over us.* Luther sums it all up, "All your works are polluted and unclean on account of that part of you which is God's adversary; yet according to your position in Christ, you are genuinely pure and righteous."

For us to proclaim the Law and Gospel clearly we must be broken, contrite sinners who understand the continual struggle in our inner being, who daily groans and suffers in the spirit, and who depends on God's Word of the Gospel alone.

According to Scriptures we can know neither God nor man except through the cross. Luther speaks of the theology of the cross versus the theology of glory as well as the hidden God and the revealed God. Luther's theology of the cross presents a life lived in tension between Law and Gospel, between what Luther calls the alien work and the proper work of God. This is not the kind of theology that is palatable to the natural man. Nor is it palatable to many who sit in the pews of our churches. The Law must destroy all our pride and self-righteousness, and the Gospel must make us glory in nothing "save the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." *This kind of theology is puzzling to the average Christian, who is apt to think that as he or she increases in Christian maturity, spiritual struggles and doubts will*

diminish. But we need only look at the saints of God to see that the greatest saints are the ones who experienced the greatest intensity in their struggle. Painful as it is, spiritual anguish, discouragement and depression is a normal part of the Christian life and those who never experience it should ask themselves if they are really Christians. When tempted to despair, Luther would turn back to the heart of the Gospel, that justified by faith we have peace with God. But the question of justification is an elusive thing—not in itself, for in itself it is firm and sure, but so far as we are concerned. Luther explained, “I myself have had considerable experience of this, for I know how I sometimes struggle in the hours of darkness. I know how often I suddenly lose sight of the rays of the Gospel and of grace, which have been obscured for me by thick, dark clouds. I know how slippery the footing is even for those who are mature and seem to be firmly established in matters of faith.”

Luther lived a way of life he pursued doggedly and methodically. It had three elements: First, says Luther, “We must know that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness. Despair of reason, but kneel down in your little room and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding.”

Secondly, you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. *Luther here lays down a principle that has become a unique mark of Lutheranism and of Luther’s theology of the cross. For God will not give you his Spirit without the external Word.* Meditation on the Word of God is the prime business especially of the Christian preacher but also of every Christian and the very source of spiritual life.

And then the third element, which Luther described with a German word, *Anfechtung* . . . refers to the suffering, turmoil, testing and trial that the Christian must endure in the face of temptation. It is the suffering one must tolerate because he meditates, that is, because he is occupied with God’s Word and His Gospel. For as soon as God’s Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will attack and by his assaults seek to destroy you but the Holy Spirit will teach you to seek and love God’s Word.

Luther explains, “When you have begun to live and study according to these three rules, then you can hope that you have begun to become a real theologian. But beware of pride. And if you begin to flatter yourself with the idea that you have made it . . . then take yourself by the ear, and if you do this in the right way you will soon find that you have a beautiful pair of big, long, shaggy donkey ears.” Finally, if we are going to be able to proclaim the Law and Gospel we must always be reading good Lutheran material; by that I mean not just reading the best selling evangelical material that is always being advertized and promoted. What we read will determine to a large measure what and how we preach.

Brothers, preach well because the very lives of your people depend on it.

Suggestions: Why not start with some of the old classics

Concordia – The Lutheran Confessions – A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord

Dr. C.F.W. Walther – The Proper Distinction of the Law and Gospel

C. O. Rosenius – A Faithful Guide to Peace with God
The Believer Free from the Law

Anything from or about Martin Luther:

The Bondage of the Will – Martin Luther

The Freedom of a Christian – Martin Luther

On Being a Theologian of the Cross – Gerhard Forde

Luther's Theology of the Cross – Alister McGrath

The Theology of Martin Luther – Paul Althaus

Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development – Bernhard Lohse

The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church – Robert Kohl and Charles Arand

Luther the Reformer – James Kittelson

A Compend of Luther's Theology – Hugh Kerr

Luther for Armchair Theologians – Steven Paulson