
Luther on Faith, Love, and Sermon Preparation

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The call to preach

An opening word from Martin Luther on preaching:
“The call [to preach] is this: watch, study, attend to reading. In truth you cannot read too much in Scripture; and what you read you cannot read too carefully, and what you read carefully you cannot understand too well, and what you understand well you cannot teach too well, and what you teach well you cannot live too well.”¹

Here Luther moved from the individual activity of reading the Bible, to the intellectual work of understanding it well, and finally to the interpersonal experience of sharing that message with others through word and deed. The seemingly solitary experiences of reading the Bible and preparing a sermon turn out to involve a number of communal elements: learning from others, paying attention to the world around us (including how we act in it), and thinking about the community who will experience the sermon. Preparing to write a sermon can be a highly communal experience.

Luther’s words also reveal the influence of Renaissance humanism on Lutheran preaching. With other members of the humanist movement, the Lutheran reformers believed that the classical disciplines of grammar, logic, and rhetoric provided the basis for good understanding and communication.² Philip Melancthon cared so much about teaching these fundamentals of education that he never pursued ordination or a doctorate; instead, he dedicated his career to teaching the building blocks of learning and communication for the sake of good preaching in the church and effective leadership in secular work.³

Focusing on the basics, we hear the Lutheran reformers giving this advice: learn what the words of scripture say, consider what the words mean, and find your own words to share that message effectively with your people. If it seems as if there is too much to say in a single passage (and there usually will be), Melancthon taught that it was entirely acceptable to focus on one particular point in any given sermon; occasions for discussing other topics will arise at other times.⁴ The main goal of delivering a gospel

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message for the people that day helps preachers discern which textual points to focus on, one sermon at a time.

Though apparently simple, this process invites wrestling with the text, pondering its meaning, discerning a gospel message, and searching for the right words to share. These basic activities require often surprising amounts of work and concentration. It reminds me of a time when I was struggling to write an essay in high school and my dad told me, “Just think of what you want to say, and say it.” While I appreciated the advice, I remember realizing that my struggles to write the essay had come from skipping the first step: I rushed to write, without first doing the necessary work of considering what I actually wanted to say.

In sermon preparation, the reformers’ steps of reading the text, discerning a gospel message, and crafting appropriate words might similarly confront us with the fact that we may have not thought hard enough about what we actually want to say. Given all the things we could talk about in the time allotted for a sermon, what good news is most important for this day? Though potentially challenging, such questions do not need to be burdensome. Rather, they invite us into fascinating engagement with scripture, faith, and life in community. As St. Augustine put it, our words and actions as Christians can naturally grow from our spiritual center: to do this, the preacher “must first become a person of prayer before becoming a person of words.”⁵

The gospel in a nutshell

When it comes to interpreting and sharing the word of God, what should the content of a sermon be? In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther posed this very question. “What is this word of God and how should it be used, when there are so many words of God?” He then replied,

Paul explains what this word is in Rom 1[:1, 3]: “The gospel of God, concerning his Son,” who was made flesh, suffered, rose, and was glorified through the Spirit, the Sanctifier. Thus, to preach Christ means to feed, justify, free, and save the soul—provided a person believes the

1. Quoted in Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 41.

2. For a detailed study of Melancthon’s homiletical method, see Uwe Schnell, *Die Homiletische Theorie Philipps Melancthons* (Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1968).

3. Heinz Scheible, “Fifty Years of Melancthon Research,” in *Lutheran Quarterly* 26 (Summer 2012), 168.

4. Schnell, 119.

5. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, R.H.P. Green, trans. (Oxford: Oxford, 1997), 121, emended for gender inclusive language.

preaching. For faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the word of God.⁶

Of the many words of God, the one concerning salvation in Jesus Christ defines and orients the rest. Luther and Melancthon did not subjectively lift this central message up above others. Rather, using tools of linguistic study, they paid attention to Paul's own stated thesis and goals in writing about the gospel, which is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (Rom 1:16). This is an active word that does things: feeding, justifying, freeing, and saving. Faith hears this message, receives Christ's benefits, and shares it with others.

The introduction to Luther's published lectionary study (discussed below) offered a similar summary of the gospel message. Under the title *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, Luther wrote, "The gospel is a story about Christ, God's and David's Son, who died and was raised and is established as Lord. This is the gospel in a nutshell."⁷ With this gospel story at its core, Christians do not need to wonder what to say or listen for in a sermon: we look for none other than the crucified and risen Lord of creation, Jesus Christ.

Biblical interpretation and the creeds

Luther also pointed to the creeds of the church as firm foundations for building up faith in Christ. For the Lutheran reformers, the creeds were not additions to scripture but reliable summaries of it. As he explained in his *Large Catechism*, the creed compactly describes everything that believers need to know about who God is and what God has done for us.

For in these three parts [of the Apostles' Creed] everything contained in the Scriptures is comprehended in short, plain, and simple terms. Indeed the dear Fathers or apostles (or whoever they were) thus summed up the teaching, life, wisdom, and learning that constitute the Christian's conversation, conduct, and concern.⁸

As summaries of scripture, the creeds provide a reliable guide for biblical interpretation and for Christian "conduct and concern." That is, they combine faith with practice. While this high view of the creeds may seem to place the authority of creeds above the scriptures, the opposite is true. The creeds represent far-reaching communal consensus about the meaning of scripture. The Nicene Creed came into being through the ecumenical councils held in Nicea and Constantinople. The Apostles' Creed arose from the Old Roman Symbol of the Latin Church, adapted over centuries until it received its final form in the time of Charlemagne (ca. 800).⁹

6. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in *The Annotated Luther*, Vol. 1, Timothy J. Wengert, ed (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 491; cf. LW 31:346.

7. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986, and St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–) [hereafter LW], 35:118; cf. LW 75:8.

8. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), [hereafter BC] 385.18–19.

9. Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen, *The*

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Letting the creed serve as a basis for biblical interpretation gave Luther and his colleagues a flexible yet firm foundation. On one hand, it provided freedom from the insistence of the Roman hierarchy that only the pope could interpret scripture. On the other, the creeds provided an external guide and standard for interpretation that had been set not by individual Christians—including Luther—but by the witness of diverse Christian communities across time. Because so many teachings were up for debate in the Reformations of the 1500s (including the Trinity and Christ's role in salvation), the creeds provided reformers with reliable benchmarks for biblical interpretation. The creeds can continue to do so today, not as arbitrary dogmatic authorities but as a reliable home for Christian consensus about who God is for us, with preachers asking how their message resonates with the faith and practice of saints across time.

Faith and love in Luther's *Winter Postil*

In his published sermons on lectionary texts, Luther interpreted the Bible for the sake of clear gospel proclamation. The first collection of Luther's sermons covered the epistle and gospel readings for the Sundays in Advent and Christmas. Completed in stages around the time Luther was in exile at Wartburg Castle in 1521 and 1522, these sermon collections have come to be called the *Winter Postil* or the *Wartburg Postil*.

The word "postil" comes from the Latin *postilla*. In the preaching of late medieval Europe, a preacher would read the text, then provide the sermon as commentary on the scripture, introducing the commentary by saying *post illa verba*, that is, "following these words..." Over time, a postil came to mean a sermon or a published commentary on preaching texts.¹⁰ While some of Luther's postils came from sermons he actually preached, many did not. His own original description of these works was *Explanation of the Epistles and Gospel*.¹¹ Therefore, though the postils are sometimes described as Luther's Sermons (as in the Lenker edition of the early 1900s), we might better view the postils as homiletical sketches rather than polished sermons.

As preaching aids or homiletical sketches, Luther did not spend much time providing detailed scholarly background of the text, though insights from the Greek or earlier theologians occasionally appear. For that reason, the postils may appear unfocused, contributing to the inaccurate caricature that Luther was

Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), chapter 1.

10. LW 75:xiii-xv.

11. LW 75:xiii.

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not a systematic theologian. To the contrary, Luther's works here follow clear patterns and goals. In the original dedication letter to the Advent postils, he articulated his primary goal, saying that he hoped to point readers to the king who was born in a stable, the Lord who emptied himself to save the lost: "the Gospel is nothing more than the story of the little son of God and of his humbling, as St. Paul says, 1 Cor. 2:2: 'I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.'"¹² Luther's work consistently revolved around the second article of the creed: the good news of who Christ is and what he has done to redeem creation.

The postils often begin with an introduction of the text in terms of how it presents faith in Christ and love of neighbor. This distinction between faith and love allowed Luther to discuss matters of justification and of good works in ways that rang true to the text and might best serve both internal faith and outward works of service. Luther would then comment on the lectionary texts line-by-line, occasionally taking time to unpack the creedal, Gospel-centered theology that undergirded his discussion. These theological asides, for instance, might examine issues like law and gospel or the right relationship between faith and good works.¹³

The distinction between faith and love gave Luther a chance to craft main points that would help preachers address issues of belief and action. In a given sermon, preachers might emphasize building up faith in the lives of the hearers; or they might choose to discuss the works of love that Christians—as people made new by Christ through faith—do for their neighbors.

For Luther, of course, faith alone justifies people, not love; but love and good works arise as fruits of faith.¹⁴ For instance, the postil on Matthew 11 (discussed below) invites people to meet the goodness of Christ for themselves in faith. At the same time, it ends with favorable citations of James 1:22 and 1 Cor 4:20, respectively: "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only" and "The kingdom of God does not consist in words but in deeds."¹⁵ By distinguishing points of faith from works of love, Luther could commend both without losing the centrality of justification by faith alone.

12. John Nicholas Lenker, ed. *Luther's Church Postil*, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands, 1904–1909) [hereafter, Lenker], 11; cf. LW 75:4.

13. See, for instance, the postil for Matt 11:2–10 (Advent 3), in which headings identifying these topics were added to later editions, LW 75:143 and 153.

14. For instance, "How a Person Is Justified and Concerning Good Works," BC 325.1–3.

15. Citation of these verses follows LW 75:156, which itself follows Luther's German [WA 10/1.2:170].

Luther and Advent 1: Romans 13

Luther's explanations of the texts for Advent 1 follow this pattern of distinguishing between faith and love. The epistle for that Sunday (which remains the epistle for the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A) was Rom 13:11–14. The following citation of Luther's first paragraph reveals a good deal of Luther's methodology in how preachers might frame a sermon on this passage.

This Epistle reading does not teach about faith, but about the works and fruits of faith. It shows how a Christian life should be conducted outwardly and bodily on earth among people. Faith teaches how we are to live in the spirit before God; [Paul] writes and teaches abundantly and apostolically about that previous to this Epistle [cf. Romans 12]. When we look at this Epistle carefully, then it does not so much teach as incite, exhort, urge, and arouse those who already know what they should do. St. Paul divides the preaching office into two parts: teaching and exhortation (Romans 12 [:7-8]). Teaching means that one preaches what is unknown so that people know and understand; exhortation means that one incites and urges what everyone already knows. Both parts are necessary for a preacher, and for that reason St. Paul uses them both.¹⁶

Luther identified this lectionary text as primarily one of exhortation, and affirmed the use of exhortation in preaching. And yet, this approach to the text did not mean that Luther would now only tell people to do good works, forgetting the mercy of God and justification by grace through faith in Christ. For one thing, he reminded readers that most of Paul's teaching in Romans up to this point had been about teaching justifying faith in Christ, a context that should not be forgotten. Further, throughout this postil Luther explicitly connected works of love with their foundation in Christian faith.

For instance, Luther's study included the grammatical observation that the words "let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the weapons of light" are metaphorical (Rom 13:12). He then explained, "Just as Christ is the sun and the Gospel is the day, so faith is the light, or the seeing and watching on that day."¹⁷ Continuing to explore Paul's metaphor, Luther identified the "weapons of light" with the good works that come from faith and that oppose the forces that keep us from God:

Since the devil, the world, and the flesh do not cease to combat us, there should be no end of exhorting, inciting and urging us to watch and work... Therefore, there is certainly a need for good trumpets and drums, that is, for preaching and exhortation that strengthen us and keep us brave in the struggle. Good works are weapons... Therefore, the 'weapons of light' are nothing else than the works of faith.¹⁸

16. LW 75:13.

17. LW 75:19.

18. LW 75:20.

Luther noted that Paul's main point in this passage was to strengthen believers to good works of love. Yet he also reminded readers that such good works are not the light itself, but are more like the tools we use in the bright daylight of faith.

This reveals a typical way that Luther could exhort people to good works without turning the gospel into a moral philosophy or new religious law. Good works do not bring justification, forgiveness, or salvation, but result from God's free justification of the ungodly, received in faith. For this reason, preachers should be very clear about pointing first and only to Christ for life: they should not mistake daylight for the sun, even as they gladly pursue and encourage the good deeds of service that happen in faith.

Luther brought this point home at the end of the Romans 13 postil, as he distinguished between people who pay more attention to works themselves than to the purpose of the works. Such mistaken views "all come from regarding the works and not the use of the works. They turn the armor into a mirror and do not know why they fast or abstain, just like the person who carries a sword so he can look at it but does not use it when he is attacked."¹⁹ Good works are not ends in themselves. They do not exist so we can admire how pretty they are. For Luther, good works come from faith and exist to be used for the sake of the neighbor. Following Luther's model, a sermon on Roman 13 would benefit from clarity on these points, pointing to Christ the light and good works as effects of life in Christ.

Luther and Advent 2: Romans 15

Luther's postil on Rom 15:4–11 discusses the Advent themes of patience and hope. But instead of piously waiting for Christmas Day, Luther spoke of the patience and hope we practice when we bear with the weak, gently teaching and guiding each other in daily life. In its historical context, the postil foreshadows Luther's response to the unrest that would soon force him to leave Wartburg Castle and return to Wittenberg: the strong in faith must bear with the weak out of love.²⁰

As in the previous epistle reading, Luther connected this lectionary passage with the wider context of Romans to show that it is built upon the right relationship between faith and good works: first Paul taught faith, then he described the good works that come from faith.²¹ Luther reminded people that this movement happens through the work of a caring Lord, who gently brings sinners into life. Christ "sees that you are wounded and weak, receives you in a friendly way, and teaches you the real truth and freedom from all human laws."²² Luther anchored this view of gentleness in the lectionary text, in which Paul hoped for harmony in the community (15:5), exhorted believers to "Welcome one another... just as Christ has welcomed you" (15:7), and prayed that all may

They are sent out into the slow work of building up faith and goodness in the imperfect people and communities around them.

"abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (15:13). Luther thus built evangelical views of life together upon biblical foundations. Though Karlstadt and others would find fault with Luther's views, the roots of Luther's ecclesiology are clear and consistent.

Again connecting faith with works, Luther identified a difference between those who are weak in faith and those who are weak in works. For this reason, a careful preacher might notice that not all suffer from the same spiritual problem; the same remedies would not always apply to different people and times.²³ Luther also observed how easy it is to see others' faults clearer than our own, especially in those people we are closest to. In a colorful illustration, he described those who think highly of themselves at the expense of others as "pretty kittens":

Whatever is not like them must stink; they condemn it, despise it, for they alone are the pretty kitten in the house... they are the godly people, they are the good friends... However, they do not see the devilish pride which is hidden at the bottom of their hearts, with which they haughtily and meanly despise their neighbor because of his defects.²⁴

In addition to providing a rare kitten-centric Lutheran sermon illustration, this is an excellent example of Luther's dynamic use of law and gospel. As much as the good news has already been announced—in Paul, in the Christian tradition, and in Luther's own works—God's grace easily gets forgotten and rejected. Therefore, preachers and hearers regularly need to return to the one Lord Jesus Christ, who alone saves us from sin and from ourselves.

With pastoral sensitivity, Luther concluded his introduction to this passage by lifting up the hard, patient task of caring for each other. In faith, Christians do not enter a world suddenly made perfect, to be enjoyed with other sinless saints. Instead, they are sent out into the slow work of building up faith and goodness in the imperfect people and communities around them. He wrote,

let us learn from this Epistle that the life of Christian love does not consist in finding godly, upright, holy people, but in making godly, upright, holy people. Let it be their work and practice on earth to make such people, whether it calls for admonition, prayer, patience, or whatever. Similarly, a Christian does not live to find wealthy, strong, healthy people, but to make the poor, weak, and sick into such people.²⁵

19. LW 75:27.

20. LW 51:67-100, especially 70-83; see also "The Invocavit Sermons" in *The Annotated Luther*, Vol. 4, Mary Jane Haemig, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

21. LW 75:64.

22. LW 75:67.

23. LW 75:68.

24. LW 75:69.

25. LW 75:69-70.

This is a great encouragement for Christians to serve those around them with steadfast patience, addressing hard situations, difficult people, and their own weaknesses with discerning wisdom and care.

Excursus: Luther on James

Before commenting on the gospel for Advent 3 (which the Year A reading shares in common with the lectionary of Luther's time), we should address the letter of James, especially because it is the epistle that accompanies the Revised Common Lectionary's gospel reading for the week. In his preface to the New Testament, Luther famously called James "an epistle of straw."²⁶ This did not mean that he rejected the epistle entirely. It referred instead to 1 Cor 3:12, which identifies straw as poor building material. With this, Luther meant that James is not a good foundation for lasting faith. Comparing the theology of James to the rest of the New Testament, he described the author of James as one who "wanted to guard against those who relied on faith without works, but was unequal to the task."²⁷ Furthermore, the doubts that Luther expressed about the apostolicity of James were not original to him but had appeared already in the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea, a fourth-century writer.²⁸ Even so, far from dismissing James wholesale, Luther could positively cite James on occasion, as he did at the close of his comments on Matthew 11.

In our day, preachers need not start sermons in Advent 3 by disparaging either James or Luther. Luther's view of James does not imply that Luther either hated works or was inconsistent in how he taught good works. Rather, preachers today might take care to represent Luther correctly, understand James in context to the rest of the New Testament, and use scripture for building up rather than tearing down. Enough inaccurate things already get said about the Bible and about Luther that we do not need to spread them further. The following discussion of faith and good works in Matthew 11 might help correct these misconceptions.

Luther and Advent 3: Matthew 11

Luther began his discussion of Matt 11:2–10 by asking why John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus. His answer is evangelical: John wanted his skeptical disciples to meet Jesus for themselves; they should experience firsthand what John already knew about Christ. Luther supposed that these disciples had mistaken the messenger for the message or that they had set their hopes upon someone or something else. Perhaps offended by Christ's humility or low status (11:6), these disciples of John may have wondered if Jesus really could be the long-awaited savior. As Luther put it, "His form and appearance are just too low and despised."²⁹

Having considered the text in this way, Luther then connected the passage with the act of preaching: preachers point people to Christ so they can meet him for themselves. This means alerting

people to the fact that they will not find Christ among the mighty ones of the world but among the lowly, for "the poor have good news brought to them." Those who need mercy and blessing from God will receive it; those who have separated themselves from the poor will miss the gospel because of their pride. Here Luther's words resonate astonishingly well with contemporary theologies of liberation. He observed,

though the Gospel is heard by all the world, yet it is not accepted other than only by such poor people. Moreover, it is to be preached and proclaimed to all the world that it is a preaching only for the poor and that the rich cannot grasp it. Whoever would grasp it must first become poor, just as Christ says that He came "not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:[13]), even though He called the whole world. But His calling was such that He could be received only by sinners, and all He called should become sinners; but they would not do it. So also those who heard the Gospel should all become poor, so that they would be fit for it; but they would not. Therefore, the Gospel remained only for the poor. So also God's grace was preached before all the world to the humble, so that they all might become humble; but they would not.³⁰

For Luther, those who are offended that the gospel is for the poor have set themselves apart from Christ in the same way as those who are offended that Christ came to save sinners. Such a statement invites the wealthy to renounce the status that keeps them from their fellow humans and join them as fellow followers of Christ. With a good Advent admonition to keep watch, Luther followed up this teaching by saying,

Therefore, watch out! Whoever does not preach Christ to you, or who preaches Him otherwise than as one associating with the blind, the lame, the dead, and the poor, as this Gospel teaches—flee from such a person as from the devil himself, because he teaches you how to become foolish and to take offense at Christ, as now the pope, the monks, and their universities do.³¹

In a day like ours when people easily and subtly draw lines between themselves and others, Luther's interpretation of Matthew 11 offers great promise for Advent and Christmas preaching. Pointing to the one born in a manger and crucified on Golgotha, Luther—like John the Baptist—sent people to go meet this unexpected Christ for themselves. "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense" (11:6).

Having taught who Christ is, Luther concluded this postil with strong words about Christian service. "All other works, except faith, we are to direct toward our neighbor. For God demands of us no other work that we should do for Him than only faith in Christ... After this think of nothing else than to do to your neighbor as Christ has done to you, and let all your works with all

26. LW 35:362.

27. LW 35:397.

28. LW 35:395, with footnote 47.

29. LW 75:149.

30. LW 75:147.

31. LW 75:150.

your life be directed to your neighbor.”³² Luther then pushed the self-denying scandal of such works: our works have no holiness in themselves and earn us nothing; their sole value comes in the blessed and important service they provide to those around us. This is the context in which Luther quoted James, saying “as James so beautifully [!] writes: ‘Be doers of the Word...’”

Conclusion

Advent provides rich opportunities for preachers and hearers to meditate upon the kind of messiah we look to for life. Especially given the consumerism of the season in the North American context, Luther’s attention to faith and love invites us consider how our actions match our beliefs; it does so without imagining either that works justify or that faith has nothing to do with love of the neighbor.

Luther’s ability to hold a christological center in his exegesis allowed him to handle these themes with consistency. Sermons that present the lowly Christ as savior keep people grounded in truth of the God who justifies the ungodly by grace and a mes-

32. LW 75:154.

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siah who emptied himself to save sinners (Rom 4:5 and 5:6–11). Saved by grace through faith, people are turned outward to share this grace with others. As Luther wrote in the postil for Romans 15, “learn that Christ is the common blessing of all and you will enjoy blessed peace. For all being alike rich, no one can begrudge another anything. This is what it means to have peace and joy through faith or in faith.”³³

This peace, of course, is not a private possession but a gift that grows in the telling and sharing of it. This sharing includes—but is not limited to—the preaching of well-prepared sermons.

33. Lenker, vol. 7, 62; cf. LW 75:90.