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How Did Luther Preach? A Plea for Gospel-Dominated Preaching

M. Hopson Boutot

As Alasdair MacIntyre and James Davison Hunter have attested, the final decades of the twentieth century were marked by the collapse of ethics, morality, and character.¹ Certainly those trends have continued, if not escalated, in the first two decades of this century. As is often the case, these cultural changes have impacted the church, as Joel Biermann amply demonstrates in *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics*.² This cultural demise of virtue, coupled with a robust Reformation understanding of salvation *sole fide* has created a perfect storm within Protestantism. The end result is a plethora of Protestant preachers who are agnostic and apathetic about the importance of meaningful ethical instruction.

In one sense the Protestant aversion to meaningful ethical instruction is unsurprising. Since the break from Rome, Protestants have been rightly concerned with preaching and teaching that smacks of the twin errors of moralism and legalism. Fear of resorting to what Reinhard Hütter calls the “one unforgivable double sin in Protestantism” has forced many preachers to another extreme.³ Across denominational lines Protestant preachers who avoid ethical imperatives in the pulpit are legion. The result of this overcorrection is, to borrow from Hütter again, “Protestantism’s Antinomian Captivity.”⁴

In Lutheran circles the paucity of meaningful ethical instruction is manifest in a homiletic subsumed entirely under a negative versus positive polarity of the law-gospel dialectic—in other words, a homiletic that uses the law only to expose and crush and the gospel only to fulfill and heal. Joel Biermann illustrates by imagining a Lutheran minister attempting to preach verse-by-verse through the book of Colossians. Armed with a determination to avoid moralistic preaching at all costs,

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

² Joel D. Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

³ Reinhard Hütter, “The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics: Christian Freedom and God’s Commandments,” in Bloomquist and Stumme, eds., *Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, 33.

⁴ Reinhard Hütter, “(Re-)Forming Freedom: Reflections ‘After *Vertis Splendor*’ on Freedom’s Fate in Modernity and Protestantism’s Antinomian Captivity,” *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 2001):117–161.

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the preacher manages to turn a text with moral instructions for human relationships into a powerful display of law and gospel. Instead of teaching his congregants Paul's instructions for Christian families, the preacher uses the text to show them how far they've fallen and how desperately they require the grace of Christ. Meanwhile, his hearers breathe a collective sigh of relief and thank God that, once again, all they really need to do is keep believing the gospel.

What Biermann describes is an anxiety plaguing many Lutheran preachers. Convinced that the gospel should remain the focal point and highlight of the sermon, many have resorted to a homiletic that requires a predictable gospel-centered resolution in *every individual sermon*. Perhaps this heightened emphasis on the individual sermon is central to the issue within Lutheranism. After all, the fictional preacher would have little reason for concern if the gospel *denouement* could be presented in a subsequent sermon. Biermann concludes his imaginary tale by reminding his hearers, "the problem is not the gospel."⁵ The message of forgiveness of sins through the gracious gift of God is indeed the most marvelous news humankind could ever receive. The Lutheran preacher desiring to proclaim this message is profoundly right in his instinct. The problem arises when what the text actually says is ignored *en route* to a message that highlights gospel indicatives while ignoring gospel imperatives. The problem Biermann locates in Lutheran pulpits is not preaching the gospel, but preaching the gospel too narrowly.

Across denominational aisles, the same anxieties riddle preachers and theologians from other branches of Reformation thought. In an effort to ensure their sermons avoid the "unpardonable double sin" of legalism and moralism, many preachers have abandoned meaningful imperatives altogether. In Calvinistic circles, this "Antinomian Captivity" is evident in the advent of a homiletical school of thought called Redemptive-Historical Preaching (RHP).

This brand of Gospel-centered preaching is less dependent on Luther's law-gospel dialectic than its insistence on a robust biblical theology to position rightly the text within the grand storyline of Scripture. When the text is rightly positioned and proclaimed in its redemptive-historical context, the result should be a sermon that centers on Christ and what he has done rather than what the Christian must do in response. As Sidney Greidanus helpfully explains,

The Bible is not an assortment of similar parts (verses) which, like pizza, can be dished out at random; rather, each text must be understood in its own

⁵ Hülter, "(Re-)Forming Freedom," 2.

historical context and in the light of God's progressive revelation before it can be proclaimed as God's authoritative word for contemporary congregations.⁶

This heavy emphasis on Scripture's meta-narrative creates a twofold homiletical necessity. First, the preacher must proclaim Christ as the focal point of the Bible. In other words, faithful preaching requires consistent, explicit mention of Christ and the gospel.⁷ Second, the preacher must, as one theorist insists, preach "the whole story of Scripture from every passage and in every sermon."⁸ In other words, preaching any text of Scripture without bringing the redemptive storyline of Scripture to bear is to rip the passage from its context.

Much like its Lutheran counterpart, redemptive-historical preaching has a heightened emphasis on the individual sermon. The aforementioned twofold homiletical necessity is not a guideline that should inform the preacher in his *pulpit ministry*, but essential components of *every* sermon in *every* circumstance. As Goldsworthy explains, "if we do not *constantly, in every sermon*, show the link between the Spirit's work in us to Christ's work for us, we will distort the message and send people away with a natural theology of salvation by works."⁹ In other words, in each individual sermon event, the preacher must present both the *center* and *telos* of Scripture. A strict application of these principles suggests it is inappropriate for the preacher to develop gospel concepts over time in consecutive sermons.

The dearth of meaningful ethical instruction in many Protestant pulpits is most visible in those denominations with the deepest Reformation roots. Although each tradition may have its own way of achieving so-called Gospel-centeredness, there is certainly some continuity between these varying approaches. A "gospel-centered sermon" (regardless of denominational affinity) may be understood to share these common threads. First, "gospel-centered" sermons are (rightly and obviously) passionate about the gospel. The message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is a clarion call of those committed to "gospel-centered" preaching. Second, "gospel-centered" sermons are viewed atomistically. In other words, the necessary moves from law to gospel must be made in each individual sermon. To put it bluntly, in the "gospel-centered" framework every Christian

⁶ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 72.

⁷ E.g., Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 60–61.

⁸ Jason Keith Allen, "The Christ-Centered Homiletics of Edmund Clowney and Sidney Greidanus in Contrast with the Human Author-Centered Hermeneutics of Walter Kaiser" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 10.

⁹ Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 237 (emphasis added).

sermon is a now-or-never, do-or-die mandate to proclaim Christ and his gospel. Finally, “gospel-centered” sermons share an aversion to meaningful ethical instruction.

I. Meaningful Ethical Instruction

By “meaningful ethical instruction” we mean ethical instruction that is untethered from gospel caveats that minimize its impact—in other words, imperatives that actually demand and expect obedience. Take Biermann’s example, for instance. Those preachers committed to serial exposition will faithfully exposit the gospel indicatives over the course of several weeks, only to advance into an imperatival section without drawing a consistent line from indicatives to imperatives.

One solution to this problem is to issue clear gospel indicatives in close proximity to imperatives. As homiletician Brian Chapell states, “There are many ‘be’ messages in Scripture, but they always reside in a redemptive context. Since we cannot be anything that God would approve of apart from his sanctifying mercy and power, *grace must permeate any exhortation for biblical behavior.*”¹⁰ This permeating grace would likely include, but not be limited to (1) the hearer’s inability to singlehandedly obey the imperatives, (2) the futility of meriting God’s favor through obedience, (3) the necessity of obeying as a response to Christ’s obedience, and (4) the reality that Christ has already obeyed perfectly on the sinner’s behalf.

Nevertheless, requiring preachers to move rapidly from law to gospel in a single sermon may hamper the effectiveness of both. When every shot of law is immediately followed by a gospel chaser, the hearer can become numb to the law’s sometimes-painful ability to drive the hearer to Christ. Conversely, the gospel is far less glorious when not understood against a backdrop of unfettered law. As Owen Strachan laments, “Our modern evangelical movement, particularly the grace-loving wing, . . . has a tendency to take a biblical text, perhaps one anchored in God’s mercy but with some sharp edges, and to blend it all together. To make a gospel smoothie of it.”¹¹

In fairness, not all gospel-centered preaching features the same degree of aversion to imperatives. Nevertheless, the hesitancy to employ meaningful imperatives in Lutheran and Reformed homiletics is unavoidable. John Carrick explains, “Indeed, if the liberal church has been guilty of emphasizing the imperative

¹⁰ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 294. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Owen Strachan, “Pastoring the Idle,” *9marks.org*, April 18, 2013, accessed April 30, 2013, www.9marks.org/blog/pastoring-idle.

at the expense of the indicative, the Reformed church has, *to some extent*, been guilty of emphasizing the indicative at the expense of the imperative.”¹²

This overemphasis manifests itself in noble efforts to avoid works-righteousness and maximize the gospel. Unfortunately, such preaching often presents a truncated gospel that does not proclaim too much gospel, but too little. In noble efforts to avoid the dreaded accusation of legalism, many evangelical preachers quickly follow every shot of law with a gospel chaser. But when the threats of the law too closely precede their gospel remedy, the law is rarely ever able to do its work. And when the law is unable to sufficiently curse and terrify the sinner, the gospel is unable to do its work either. The ironic consequence of this “gospel-centered” approach is a truncated gospel that often leaves the sinner comfortable rather than comforted.

II. Enter Martin Luther

How then can these ills be addressed? My contention is that by considering how Luther *actually preached*, we can glean powerful insight that may remedy what ails much contemporary preaching. To that end, I studied over seventy-five sermons to analyze the way Luther employed law in his preaching. Chief among my concerns was evidence of meaningful ethical instruction in Luther’s preaching, what some theologians refer to as the third use of the law.

Categorizing law and gospel in Luther’s preaching was no easy accomplishment. My analyses employed the following general guidelines. The ultimate purpose of the law in each use is to drive the hearer to Christ, but each use also has a penultimate purpose. The penultimate purpose of the law in its first use is to restrain sin. Therefore, these threats of the law usually appear in a *conditional mood*. For example, in his seventh *Invocavit* sermon Luther warned, “If you will not love one another, God will send a great plague upon you.”¹³ The purpose of this conditional threat was to stop sin in its tracks. However, the first use can also appear in the indicative mood. For example, in a sermon on Jude the reformer warned, “The Lord will punish these ungodly sinners because of their impudent and stubborn

¹² John Carrick, *The Imperative of Preaching: A Theology of Sacred Rhetoric* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 107; Cf. Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 296.

¹³ Martin Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522): vol. 51, p. 96, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AL.

preaching.”¹⁴ Although Luther employed the indicative mood, the context reveals the purpose of his statement: namely, to warn the sinner thereby curbing his sin.

The penultimate purpose of the law in its second use is to reveal the wickedness of the sinner. In this sense, the second use of the law appears primarily in an *indicative mood*, explicating the sinfulness of the sinner. For example, in his first Invocavit sermon Luther declared, “And here, dear friends, have you not grievously failed? I see no signs of love among you, and I observe very well that you have not been grateful to God for his rich gifts and treasures.”¹⁵ The purpose of this indicative statement was to reveal the hypocrisy of his hearers.

The penultimate purpose of the law in its third use is to redirect the hearer towards holiness. The law as guide usually appears in the *imperative mood*. For example, in a sermon against drunkenness he commanded parents “to see to it that your children do not begin too early to fall into this vice.”¹⁶ Words like “must,” “should,” and “ought” will frequently appear alongside the third use.

Nevertheless, the third use is not restricted to explicit imperatives. This use of the law can also appear in the indicative mood. For example, in another sermon Luther stated, “It is not sufficient for his salvation that a man merely refrain from doing harm and evil to his neighbor. . . . It is *required* rather that he be useful to him and benefit him.”¹⁷ What is noteworthy in this indicative statement is the presence of an *implied imperative*.¹⁸ The context of Luther’s remarks indicate he is not employing the indicative to threaten punishment (first use) or highlight wickedness (second use), but to promote obedience (third use). Therefore, the presence of imperatives (either implicit or explicit) characterizes the law in its third use.

Admittedly, there was some degree of subjectivity inherent in the parameters outlined above. Some of the uses of the law contain a greater degree of ambiguity, and upon closer examination of my findings, you may register a difference of opinion here and there. This is not a hard science, but requires some level of interpretation of the *intent* of Luther’s statements throughout his preaching. Nonetheless, in my estimation the potential for disagreements is relatively small and will not render these findings invalid. Others might object to the nomenclature employed in this study, arguing that the imperatives in Luther’s preaching are not

¹⁴ Luther, “Sermons on the Epistle of St. Jude” (1523), AE 30:211.

¹⁵ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AF 51:71.

¹⁶ Luther, “Sermon on Soberness and Moderation” (1539), AE 51:294.

¹⁷ Luther, “Sermon on Matt. 7:12” (1510[?] or 1512[?]), AI 51:7 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ The concept of *implied imperatives* is not original. Bruckner’s dissertation on implied imperatives in the book of Genesis thoroughly demonstrates the concept. James K. Bruckner, *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative: A Literary and Theological Analysis* (New York: Sheffield Academic, 2001).

law, but “commandments.”¹⁹ These commandments, some argue, are fundamentally different from the theological category “law.” In this way of thinking, the law always accuses and kills; therefore referring to law as a guide is “a category mistake.”²⁰ Those who propose this distinction between law and commandment contend that commandments are imperatives grounded in the indicatives of the gospel, whereas the law always operates in opposition to the gospel. Whether one calls these indicatives “law” or “commandments,” however, makes little difference for our purpose, since both terms constitute meaningful ethical instruction.

III. How Did Luther Preach?

This analysis of Luther’s preaching yielded significant fruit regarding the Reformer’s homiletic. No fewer than eight principles can be gleaned from Luther’s handling of the law to equip the modern preacher.

Preach the Law Textually

Luther preached the law textually. When determining how to preach the law effectively, the preacher must consider the text. The preacher’s primary responsibility is to communicate a faithful exposition of Scripture. Luther’s most law-heavy sermons are also the sermons on Scriptural imperatives. Passages like 1 Peter 4:7, with its injunctions to sobriety, resulted in a 1539 sermon laced with blistering law. In a 1532 funeral sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4, Luther’s imperatives on grieving mirrored the text itself. The same is true in his 1540 sermon *On the Cross and Suffering*. His 1523 sermons on Jude revealed a surprising union between the indicative-imperative nature of the text and the sermon. The principle is simple, but profound: the preacher’s use of the law should properly reflect the emphasis of the text.

This is not to argue for *law*-centered preaching to replace *gospel*-centered preaching. Lest the pendulum swing to the other extreme, Luther’s 1545 exposition of the resurrection promises in Hosea and Isaiah create balance. Here Luther preaches a sermon that would rightly be labeled gospel-centered, even by modern

¹⁹ Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 275; Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, 157–58. See also Herman Stuempfle, who speaks of “the call to obedience” rather than referring to the third use as commandments or law. Herman G. Stuempfle Jr., *Preaching Law and Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 62–75.

²⁰ Tullian Tchividjian, “Luther On Law,” *The Gospel Coalition*, *Liberate* (September 12, 2011), accessed April 20, 2014, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tullian/2011/09/12/luther-on-law/>.

standards. That sermon teaches us that preaching likely *should* look gospel-centered when the text itself is radically gospel-soaked and Christ-centered. To turn a sermon on such a text into a fiery exposition of law would have been a categorical mistake. After all, we must not require the preacher to emphasize that which the text does not.²¹ The central issue really is, as one homiletician has put it, to “privilege the text.”²²

The importance of allowing the text to dictate the law-gospel emphasis of the sermon is reiterated by Luther himself. Later in life, someone asked him whether law or gospel should receive greater prominence in the sermon. His answer reflected his robust understanding of law and gospel and his confidence in the Word of God. He replied,

This shouldn't and can't be comprehended in a fixed rule. Christ himself preached [the law and the gospel] according to his circumstances. As a passage or text indicates, therefore, one should take up the law and the gospel, for one must have both. It isn't right to draw everything into the gospel alone; nor is it good always to preach the law alone. The Scriptures themselves, if properly adhered to, will give the answer.²³

Luther's willingness to give the Scriptures the final say is evident in much of his preaching. In a 1545 sermon on Ephesians 5:15–20, Luther preached a sermon loaded with imperatives, not surprising given the text's imperatival nature.²⁴ In a 1546 sermon on the gospel from Titus 3:4–8, Luther almost avoided imperatives entirely while repeatedly magnifying the promises of the gospel.²⁵ In short, Luther strove to preach law and gospel in a manner that properly reflected the emphasis of the text.

How should the preacher respond to this observation of Luther's preaching? The preacher must beware of the danger of superimposing law or gospel over the clear sense of the text. Although most passages contain some element of both law and gospel, the primary focus of the sermon should correlate with the primary focus of the text. Luther explained, “Nevertheless just as the chief teaching of the New Testament is really the proclamation of grace and peace through the forgiveness of sins in Christ, so the chief teaching of the Old Testament is really the teaching of

²¹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008), 292.

²² Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013).

²³ Luther, “Table Talk recorded by John Mathesius” (1540), AE 54:404.

²⁴ Luther, “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity” (1545), AE 58:295–302.

²⁵ Luther, “Afternoon Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany, Titus 3:4–8” (Jan. 10, 1546), AI: 58:388–396.

laws, the showing up of sin, and the demanding of good.”²⁶ The preacher should strive to emphasize the “chief teaching” of the text.

Preach the Law Forcefully

Luther often preached the law forcefully. Such forceful preaching was not a capricious exercise, but one bound by necessity. First, he was bound by God to preach forcefully on occasion. In a 1544 sermon regarding betrothals he explained, “If, [as I said], I judge harshly, what else should I do? It is my duty to preach the Word of God and to tear to pieces the work of the devil.”²⁷ Second, he was bound by his desire for personal salvation. Failure to persevere by obeying the Lord would be indicative of a lack of saving faith. In a 1545 sermon on 1 John 4:16–21 he lamented, “Let the devil be your preacher. If I see peasants, townsmen, noblemen and do not chastise them, then I will go to the devil along with you.”²⁸ Third, Luther was bound to preach forcefully by the sinfulness of sin. He explained in his commentary on Galatians,

[Sin] is a great and terrible monster and for the overthrowing of it, God hath need of a mighty hammer, that is, the law, which is in its proper office when it accuseth and revealeth sin after this sort: Behold thou hast transgressed all the commandments of God and so it striketh terror into the conscience, so that it feeleth God to be offended indeed, and itself to be guilty of eternal death.”²⁹

Some preachers, in a noble effort to emphasize the beauty of the gospel, attempt to soften the appearance of this hammer. The result is hearers not sufficiently frightened by the law. In these “honeyed” sermons, the hammer of the law looks more like a child’s toy. Such cannot be said of Luther’s preaching.

Luther forcefully employed the law to threaten the sinner. He threatened damnation to those who lacked compassion for their neighbor, a plague from the devil for those who refused to listen to the word, banishment from the sacrament for those who failed to teach their children the catechism, and hellfire for drunkards and adulterers. In other sermons, he threatened “the abyss of hell,” the darkening of the sun, “bitter death,” invasion by the Turks, and even the hangman and the executioner’s block. Perhaps even more telling is the language he used to describe the sinner: “children of wrath,” “damned,” “polluted,” “shameful,” “unbelievers,”

²⁶ Luther, “Prefaces to the Old Testament” (1534), AE 35:237.

²⁷ Luther, “Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany: On Parental Consent to Betrothals” (1544), AE 58:87.

²⁸ Luther, “Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity” (1545), AE 58:234–235.

²⁹ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (1531), ed. John Prince Fallows, trans. Erasmus Middleton (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1979), 190.

“ungodly sinners,” “impudent,” “stubborn,” “rascal[s],” “blasphemers,” “revilers,” “godless,” “carnal,” “sensual,” “beastly,” “ignorant,” “blockheads,” “wanton,” “defiant,” “arrogant,” “riffraff,” “villains,” “piggish,” “filthy,” “gluttonous,” “hogs,” “beggars,” “adulterous,” “rabble,” “coarse,” “insolent,” “foolish,” and “wiseacres.”³⁰ These are just the words Luther used to describe the sin prevalent among his hearers; his language against religious opponents was even more blistering.

The point here is not to supply the modern preacher with vocabulary for Sunday’s sermon. Such a haphazard application of Luther’s homiletic would certainly be unwise.

How then can Luther’s sometimes-forceful handling of the law apply to this settled age? At the very least, preachers must be encouraged to proclaim the law as law, resisting the urge to soften its force for confronting sin.

Preach the Law Discerningly

Nevertheless, one should reject the notion that the reformer was a firebrand, fear-mongering preacher who salivated at the chance to scare the hell out of his people. Luther preached the law with discernment, carefully empathizing with his people before entering into the pulpit. He believed that knowing whether to emphasize law or gospel was an exercise of rightly understanding the congregation. Lohse writes,

Where the “law” is in fact already encountered, in suffering, temptation, or other severe experiences, the preaching of the gospel is to be given priority. On the other hand, where the law is denied through self-confidence or hubris, a too hasty preaching of the gospel would only lead to one’s feeling supported in

³⁰ For these and similar remarks, see Luther, “Sermons on the Epistle of St. Jude” (1523), AE 30:204–213; “Sermon on Matt. 7:12” (1510[?] or 1512[?]), AE 51:8–11; “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day, Ps. 19:1” (Dec. 21, 1516), AE 51:18; “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:70, 96; “Ten Sermons on the Catechism” (1528), AE 51:137, 141; “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering” (1530), AE 51:201–204; “Two Funeral Sermons” (1532), AE 51:243; “On Soberness and Moderation” (1539), AE 51:292–294; “At the Marriage of Sigismund von Lindenau” (1545), AE 51:361–367; “The Last Sermon, Eisleben” (1546), AE 51:384; “Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany” (1544), AE 58:70; “On the Verse from the Prophet Hosca” (1545), AE 58:157; “Sermon in the Afternoon, Romans 8: On Consolation Amid Afflictions” (1544), AE 58:169; “A Sermon of Dr. Martin Luther on the Passage from John 5, “Search the Scriptures,” Etc.” (1545), AE 58:250; “A Profitable Teaching and Beautiful Exhortation: How God Visits Us through the Holy Gospel and How We Should Respond” (1545), AE 58:278–279; “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity” (1545), AE 58:301; “On the Conversion of St. Paul, Against the Monks, etc. From the Ninth Chapter of Acts” (1546), AE 58:374.

self-righteousness. Luther's distinction is clearly related to the context of proclamation.³¹

While Lohse writes primarily regarding the law's accusatory function, the principle remains true: the preacher must discern the spiritual status of his congregation before he can preach the law accurately. Luther's preaching is shaped by the unchanging text without being insensitive to his ever-changing hearers.

Many examples of this principle are manifest in Luther's preaching. In a 1532 funeral sermon, he explicated gospel promises no fewer than thirty-two times in a relatively brief sermon, demonstrating a profound pastoral sensitivity to the grief of his people.³² Conversely, in a 1545 sermon on Ephesians 5:15–20, Luther delivered a "stern admonition"³³ loaded with dozens of legal imperatives and accusatory indicatives.³⁴ Particularly noteworthy in this sermon is its historical ties to the errors of antinomianism, what Luther called an "abomination [that] has intruded more and more over time."³⁵

James McCue offers further insight on the importance of preaching the law with discernment. He postulates that the cultural fixation with penance in Luther's day formed the milieu of Luther's "'obsession' with forgiveness of sin."³⁶ Without correctly understanding these cultural and theological developments in Luther's day, the preaching of law and gospel that mimics his style can be dangerous. Preachers should reserve the gospel for those overwhelmed by the seriousness of sin. Preaching that celebrates the good news of Christ's love and forgiveness without first proclaiming the threat of the law and the weight of sin may effectively inoculate its hearers against the gospel.

McCue offers a lengthy excerpt from Luther's *Third Antinomian Disputation* to illustrate these truths:

It is true that when we first began this affair we strenuously taught the gospel and also used those words which now the Antinomians use. But the character of that time was vastly different from today. Then the world was more than sufficiently terrified. . . . There was thus no need to inculcate or even to teach the law to those consciences which were already oppressed, terrified, miserable, anxious, afflicted. Rather the need was to bring to bear that other part of the

³¹ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 269.

³² Luther, "Two Funeral Sermons" (1532), AE 51:243–255.

³³ Luther, "Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity" (1545), AE 58:294.

³⁴ Luther, "Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity" (1545), AE 58:295–302.

³⁵ Luther, "Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity" (1545), AE 58:295.

³⁶ James F. McCue, "Luther and the Problem of Popular Preaching," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16, no. 1 (1985):34.

preaching of Christ, where he commands also that the forgiveness of sins be preached in his name, so that those who are already sufficiently terrified and in despair would learn not to despair but to flee to the grace and mercy set forth in Christ. But now, when the times are different—altogether different from what they were under the pope, those Antinomians of ours, slick theologians that they are, retain our words, our teaching, that sweet promise from Christ; and what is worse, they want to preach only this, not seeing that people now are not like what they were under the flesh-eating pope. People now have become secure and evil [*securos et malos*]*—dishonest, wicked thieves, indeed Epicureans who reverence neither God nor men. And these are the people whom they strengthen and comfort with this their doctrine . . . Now indeed these fellows of ours want to preach sermons for a time of the contrite in a time of the secure. This is not rightly to follow the word of God, but to tear apart and lose souls. Our view has been right up to now and ought to remain: If you see people afflicted and contrite, preach Christ to them, preach grace, as much as you can; but not to the secure, the lazy, the licentious, adulterers, and blasphemers. If you don't follow this advice, you will be guilty of their sins.*³⁷

Although the first principle to preach the law textually takes priority, this principle is not far behind. The preacher must painstakingly exegete the text in order to grasp its meaning. However, he must also understand the spiritual condition of his congregation. Preachers should ask themselves if their churches are filled with individuals “afflicted and contrite,” or are they like “the lazy, the licentious, adulterers, and blasphemers” that filled the pews in Luther’s latter years? The former should hear the grace of God resounding from the pulpit. The latter must hear the law of God in its fullness. The preacher must understand his congregation if he desires to preach the law effectively.

Although this is especially true regarding the law in its second use, it is also true of the third use. The lazy and licentious must hear the accusing force of the second use so they may genuinely repent, and because their disobedience may be indicative of unbelief. However, they must also hear the commands of the third use so they may learn to live out the gospel they claim to believe by good works.

Preach the Law Frequently

Using the parameters to categorize Luther’s preaching of the law mention above, the results are compelling: Luther utilized the law consistently and frequently. It is no stretch to surmise that Luther preached the law in some manner

³⁷ As quoted in McCue, “Luther and the Problem of Popular Preaching,” 37–38, from *D. Martin Luther’s Werke* (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883–), 39/1: 571.10–572.15; 574.5–11.

whenever he preached. Many preachers mistakenly assume that certain passages are primarily law passages and others are primarily gospel passages. This error often appears in the belief that the Old Testament is concerned primarily with law and the New Testament with gospel. While most texts have a “chief teaching,” they also usually contain elements of both law and gospel. Luther’s preaching demonstrated this truth. When he preached the law of the Ten Commandments, Luther found gospel in the phrase “I am the Lord, thy God.” When he preached the gospel of the cross, Luther found law in the severity of God’s wrath against sin.³⁸ Every text contains both law and gospel because every text testifies to the incompleteness of man and God’s provision to make him complete.

Today’s preachers must follow the example of Luther and preach the law frequently. Such preaching does not minimize the gospel, but maximizes it. As Luther himself attests, “The Law, however, is not to be discarded; for if we cast the Law aside, we shall not long retain Christ.”³⁹

Preach the Law Diversely

Faithfully utilizing the law of God in the sermon is not a one-dimensional exercise. Luther’s practice reveals a surprising diversity to his preaching of the law. My analysis revealed the startling reality that Luther used the law as imperative more than he employed the first and second uses combined. In his final sermon on Matthew 11:25–30, he commanded his hearers to be patient. In a 1544 sermon on Revelation 12 he commanded his hearers to give thanks. In his 1539 sermon against drunkenness he commanded his parish to stop being pigs. In his 1522 *Invocavit Sermons* he told his hearers to study their Bibles, confront the devil, help each other, have patience, abolish the private mass, avoid harshness, teach the word, get married, disobey the pope, destroy images of idolatrous worship, thank God, and stop enforcing change too quickly.

Contrary to the “gospel-centered” way, Luther clearly did not shy away from making ethical demands of his hearers. In fact, the Reformer utilized significant homiletical creativity in his use of sermonic imperatives. His imperatives were at times exemplary (urging his hearers to follow an example), at times prescriptive (urging them to behave in a certain manner), and at times exhortative (urging them

³⁸ A modern reincarnation of the principle that all texts contain both law and gospel appears in Bryan Chapell’s “Fallen Condition Focus.” He says, “The Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) is the mutual human condition (i.e. law) that contemporary believers share with those to whom the text was written that requires the grace (i.e. gospel) of the passage for God’s people to glorify and enjoy him.” Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 48–53.

³⁹ Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1–4” (1537–1540), AI: 22:146.

to persevere in a certain attitude or behavior). Luther commanded his hearers to put off and to put on, to believe and to reject, to stop and to start, to quit and to continue. However, though the weight of the law in his preaching primarily leaned towards the third use, Luther was still multi-dimensional in his approach.

For those convinced of the “gospel-centered” approach to preaching, little could be more disturbing than Luther’s unyielding use of exemplaristic imperatives. Yet he did not shy away from using characters in Scripture and church history as examples for his hearers. He urged them to follow the examples of Paul, Christ, Abraham, Adam, Joseph, Mary, Monica, Agatha, and himself, to name a few.⁴⁰ In his sermon *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, Luther mentioned these exemplars as part of the value of the Old Testament: “We read Moses for the beautiful examples of faith, or love, and of the cross, as shown in the fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the rest. From them we should learn to trust in God and love him. In turn there are also examples of the godless, how God does not pardon the unfaith of the unbelieving; how he can punish Cain, Ishmael, Esau, the whole world in the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. Examples like these are necessary. For although I am not Cain, yet if I should act like Cain, I will receive the same punishment as Cain. Nowhere else do we find such fine examples of both faith and unfaith.”⁴¹

Moreover, Luther’s diverse approach to preaching the law was not coincidental. The reformer was suspicious of anything that would hamper or handcuff the preacher’s freedom in the pulpit. In 1539, he said this to Agricola in his book *Against the Antinomians*:

I ask you, dear Doctor, to keep the pure doctrine as you have always done. Preach that sinners must be roused to repentance not only by the sweet grace and suffering of Christ, by the message that he died for us, but also by the terrors of the law. For they are wrong in maintaining that one must follow only one method of preaching repentance, namely to point to Christ’s suffering on our behalf, claiming as they do that Christendom might otherwise become confused and be at a loss to know which is the true and only way. No, one must

⁴⁰ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:77; “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering” (1530), AE 51:198; “Four Sermons on the Resurrection of the Dead and the Last Trumpet of God, from the Fifteenth Chapter of the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians” (1544–1545), AE 58:106–107; “Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity” (1545), AE 58:238; “Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent” (1545), AE 58:343; “The Second Sermon for the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple” (1546), AE 58:434; “The Third Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany” (1546), AE 58:448–449.

⁴¹ Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses” (1525), AE 35:173.

preach in all sorts of ways—God’s threats, his promises, his punishment, his help, and anything else—in order that we may be brought to repentance.⁴²

A clear example of Luther’s diverse approach to preaching the law is visible in his treatment of Matthew 11:25–30. In three separate sermons on the same text, his use of the law was never the same. In his 1517 sermon, he employed the first use once, the second use eleven times, and the third use nine times. In 1525, the first use appeared once, the second use sixteen times, and the third use thirteen times. In 1546, he again utilized the first use just once, but on this occasion, he devoted twenty-one statements to the second use and twenty-three for the third.

Luther’s practice should liberate the preacher to “preach in all sorts of ways” to bring the sinner to repentance and faith. Indeed, the modern preacher should be leery of any legalistic attempts to restrict or minimize the preacher’s impact in the pulpit. Luther’s approach allows for diverse manifestations of law in the pulpit.

Preach the Law Explicitly

Luther did not shy away from preaching against specific sins in his congregation. He condemned loveless inaction in his 1512 sermon on Matthew 7:12.⁴³ He exposed the folly of indulgences in his 1517 sermon on Matthew 11.⁴⁴ He rejected the lopsided ethics of the church in his 1521 sermon on Exodus 25:9–27:18.⁴⁵ He excoriated the sham of relics in his 1546 sermon on Acts 9. In his *Invocavit Sermons*, he outlined clear, practical commands on the biblical execution of reform.⁴⁶ He issued firm admonitions for parenting in his 1528 sermons on the catechism.⁴⁷ In his 1545 sermon from Hebrews 13:4, he told the single to pursue marriage, the married to remain faithful, and the fornicating to repent.⁴⁸ He showed his hearers how to suffer well in his 1530 sermon *On the Cross and Suffering*.⁴⁹ In his 1532 sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14, he taught them how to grieve.⁵⁰

These are no isolated incidents. Luther regularly preached the law explicitly to his congregation. In a 1545 sermon on Galatians 5:16–24, he condemned his people

⁴² Luther, “Against the Antinomians” (1539), AE 47:111–112.

⁴³ Luther, “Sermon on Matt. 7:12” (1510[?] or 1512[?]), AE 51:11.

⁴⁴ Luther, “Sermon on St. Matthew’s Day, Matt. 11:25–30” (Feb. 24, 1517), AE 51:31.

⁴⁵ Luther, “A Sermon on the Three Kinds of Good Life for the Instruction of Consciences” (1521), AE 44:236–237.

⁴⁶ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:69–100.

⁴⁷ Luther, “Ten Sermons on the Catechism” (1528), AE 51:137.

⁴⁸ Luther, “At the Marriage of Sigismund von Lindenau” (1545), AE 51:357–367.

⁴⁹ Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering” (1530), AE 51:197–208.

⁵⁰ Luther, “Two Funeral Sermons” (1532), AE 51:231–243.

for failing to pay their pastors.⁵¹ In a 1528 sermon on the Ten Commandments, he rebuked those who were overcharging their clients.⁵² In a 1532 sermon, he excoriated the antinomians for sermons that were nothing but “loose, lazy, and cold gibble-gabble.”⁵³ In a 1539 sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:1–7, Luther lashed out against sins like theft, fornication, and adultery. He then defended this explicit proclamation of the law by reminding his congregation that the gospel itself was at stake:

The gasbags and honey-sweet preachers object to this. [But a true preacher] must also preach sharply, [pointing out what will happen] if we do not abstain from sin.

. . . Such [honeyed] preaching is not for you. Christ died for those who seek to have their sins forgiven, cease committing them, and then become daily more perfect. Besides, the sweet sermon is vain, wasted words, because those who hear it say, “Indeed, this is a cheerful preacher, [for] he does not add: ‘If you are in sin, you will be damned, etc.’” . . . People want to have such [sweet] preachers today. First, let the terror of judgment be set before them so that they might ponder what they have received from Christ, and then abstain from transgressions. . . . If this is preached, they say, “You will frighten them [with your harshness].” But Christ did not die to no purpose, which is what happens if you remain in your sins.⁵⁴

Preachers today are free to preach the law explicitly; such sermons are not anti-Christian. Even some more moderate proponents of redemptive-historical preaching recognize the need for explicit imperatives. Doriani explains,

One *can* preach an effective sermon without uttering commands.

Nonetheless, “We need strength, not advice” is a false dichotomy, spawned by the ingrown chattering of the cognitive religious crowd. *Theologians* may know all they need, but they are long habituated to biblical laws and ethics. Because they are immersed in biblical law, they are free to underestimate the law. *In theory*, Christians might only need to follow the Spirit’s leading, but life refutes the theory. Not all Christians who want to obey know how to do it. If a renewed mind were a sufficient guide to behavior, why does Paul still propound commands? . . . Thus, *however sophisticated we are, there is a time to tell people*

⁵¹ Luther, “Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity” (1545), AE 58:288.

⁵² Luther, “Ten Sermons on the Catechism” (1528), AE 51:156.

⁵³ Luther, “Sermon on the Sum of the Christian Life” (1532), AE 51:274.

⁵⁴ Luther, “Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent” (1539), AE 58:21–22.

what to do. Whoever denies this is wiser than Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles, none of whom hesitated to command.⁵⁵

Luther would likely agree: “No one understands the law unless it be explained to him.”⁵⁶ Therefore, preachers must labor, explicitly explaining the law of God to their people.

Preach the Law Intentionally

Luther preached the law intentionally to his congregation. During the anti-nomian controversy, he steadfastly affirmed the preaching of the law. In his 1539 thesis *Against the Antinomians*, he responded by highlighting the intentionality with which he proclaimed the Ten Commandments in Wittenberg:

It is most surprising to me that anyone can claim that I reject the law or the Ten Commandments, since there is available, in more than one edition, my exposition of the Ten Commandments, which furthermore are daily preached and practiced in our churches. . . . Furthermore, the commandments are sung in two versions, as well as painted, printed, carved, and recited by the children morning, noon, and night.⁵⁷

Historical evidence supports Luther’s defense that the commandments were vital to the Wittenberg congregation. He preached through the Ten Commandments three times in 1528 alone. On November 29 of that year, he explained the importance of these sermons:

It has hitherto been our custom to teach the elements and fundamentals of Christian knowledge and life four times each year and we have therefore arranged to preach on these things for two weeks in each quarter, four days a week at two o’clock in the afternoon. Because these matters are highly necessary, I faithfully admonish you to assemble at the designated time with your families. Do not allow yourself to be kept away by your work or trade and do not complain that you will suffer loss if for once you interrupt your work for an hour. Remember how much freedom the gospel has given to you, so that now you are not obliged to observe innumerable holy days and can pursue your work.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 263.

⁵⁶ Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day, Ps. 19:1” (Dec. 21, 1516), AE 51:22.

⁵⁷ Luther, “Against the Antinomians” (1539), in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. William R. Russell and Timothy F. Lull, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 177.

⁵⁸ Luther, “Ten Sermons on the Catechism” (1528), AE 51:135.

It is noteworthy to consider how Luther connected the importance of preaching the law intentionally with the reality of the gospel. Christ's atoning work does not free his people *from* obedience to the law, it frees them *for* obedience to the law. Elsewhere he stated, "The law should be interpreted and preached, in order both that love for every man may rightly proceed from a pure heart for God's sake and that the conscience may stand before the world."⁵⁹

Luther's practical understanding of the law permeated his intentional exposition of the Ten Commandments in 1528. First, Luther believed the preacher should explain the law. Every sermon began with a clear explanation of the law. The faithful preacher must never assume that a congregation already understands the law of God; he should carefully explain what God expects of all people. Second, Luther believed the preacher should apply the law. His sermons on the Decalogue contained practical application for his people. Luther refused to speak in mere generalities, but sought to drive the law into the everyday lives of his hearers. Third, Luther believed the people of God should obey the law. He undoubtedly believed that the law instructed the Christian how to live his life. Elsewhere he stated, "You must use the Ten Commandments to teach people how they must live in this life."⁶⁰

At the outset of the Reformation, the Ten Commandments were essential tools in the Christian education of children and adults alike. Sadly, a similar emphasis on the law of God is absent in many churches today. Perhaps many preachers have so lost confidence in the gospel that they now avoid the law. Luther's intentional handling of the law should encourage today's preacher to develop a deliberate plan to proclaim the law from his own pulpit.

Preach the Law Boldly

One of the central claims of redemptive-historical preaching is the plea for gospel exceptionalism. The Christian sermon is not Christian if the unique and exceptional claims of the gospel remain implicit. In other words, the Christian sermon must be distinctively different from the sermon preached in a synagogue, a mosque, or a kingdom hall. Every sermon must articulate clearly and carefully the central, unique claims of Christianity. Few were more passionate about Christian doctrine than Luther. Few held the gospel in higher esteem than he did. After all, how many preachers or theologians today would walk away from Marburg questioning Zwingli's salvation the way Luther did? Nevertheless, despite this indomitable passion for the priority of the gospel, he apparently did not find it

⁵⁹ Luther, "Sermon on the Sum of the Christian Life" (1532), AE 51:274.

⁶⁰ Luther, "Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity" (1533), in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, vol. 3, ed. Eugene F. A. Klug (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 63.

necessary to explicate the uniqueness of the Christian gospel in every individual sermon.

In his 1545 sermon on Hebrews 13:4, he carefully and clearly presented a Christian theology of marriage. None should disregard holy matrimony, not the marriage-forbidding legalists on the right or the sexually licentious on the left. The legalists should abandon their legalism and pursue marriage. The licentious should repent. Those who are faithfully married must labor to remain faithful, while properly raising the children from that union. Yet Luther did not hold a gospel-less view of marriage. His entire theology of marriage was resultant from and consistent with his theology of justification by faith. The gospel is not absent from this sermon, it is merely implicit. Therein lies the problem: many popular ideas of Gospel-centered preaching provide little room for theological implicitness.

Luther's approach to gospel-centered sermons was different. My analysis found a frequent failure to articulate the gospel explicitly in every sermon. Some might contend that Luther's gospel is too small. After all, would not a hearty view of the gospel compel the preacher to explicate its truths at every opportunity? Luther saw things differently. He preached this way, not because his gospel was too small, but because his gospel was infinitely big—so big, in fact, that it was able to do its work even when its claims were implicit. Furthermore, it was not a low view of Scripture that led Luther to preach in this way. On the contrary, he valued the word of God so highly that he was thoroughly content to preach the text and trust God to do the work. In other words, Luther's total confidence in the gospel enabled him to preach the law boldly.

Luther firmly believed that the Evangel was powerless until the *Cacangelium*—the bad news—had done its work. The law must be preached or the gospel will have no effect. Luther's view of the gospel was so expansive that even when its truths were implied, its power remained undiminished.⁶¹ For Luther, the goal of the sermon was not merely to speak accurate words *for* God but to speak in an accurate *manner*. If God speaks through the languages of law and gospel, the preacher must rightly employ those languages in the pulpit.

The expositional imbalance of gospel *exceptionalism* finds remedy in Luther's gospel *expansiveness*. For Luther, preaching the law was essential because it clarified the gospel. The preacher can preach the law boldly because faithfully and effectively

⁶¹ Some of Luther's willingness to leave the gospel implied in his preaching may be due to his liturgical context. The repeated use of certain gospel texts, the recitation of the Apostles' Creed, a gospel-rich hymnody, and the presence of the Lord's Supper ensured that the gospel was always *explicit* in Luther's pulpit setting, even if it was *implicit* in individual sermons.

preaching the law *is* preaching Christ. Regardless of which use of the law is employed, Christ is preached when the law is preached because Christ fulfilled the law and died for the sinner who is helpless to meet its demands. Luther made this connection in his words to Agricola in *Against the Antinomians*:

How can one know what sin is without the law and conscience? And how will we learn what Christ is, what he did for us, if we do not know what the law is that he fulfilled for us and what sin is, for which he made satisfaction? And even if we did not require the law for ourselves, or if we could tear it out of our hearts (which is impossible), we would have to *preach it for Christ's sake*, as is done and as has to be done, so that we might know what he did and what he suffered for us. For who could know what and why Christ suffered for us without knowing what sin or law is? Therefore *the law must be preached wherever Christ is to be preached*, even if the word "law" is not mentioned, so that the conscience is nevertheless frightened by the law when it hears that Christ had to fulfill the law for us at so great a price. Why, then, should one wish to abolish the law, which cannot be abolished, yes, which is only intensified by such an attempt? For the law terrifies me more when I hear that Christ, the Son of God, had to fulfill it for me than it would were it preached to me without the mention of Christ and of such great torment suffered by God's Son, but were accompanied only by threats. For in the Son of God I behold the wrath of God in action, while the law of God shows it to me with words and with lesser deeds.⁶²

Luther's logic is clear. First, the law clarifies the gospel by highlighting the wretchedness of sin. Without clearly preaching the law to reveal man's incompleteness, God's provision in Christ to make man complete will lose its power. Believers and unbelievers alike must hear God's standard preached if they would understand how drastically they fall short. Second, the law clarifies the gospel by highlighting the work of Christ. Luther considered the minimization of Christ's saving work as the tragic failure of antinomianism: "It is apparent from this that the devil's purpose in this fanaticism is not to remove the law but to remove Christ, the fulfiller of the law."⁶³ Luther addressed both Christ's obedience and his sacrifice. Lawless preaching drains Christ's obedience to the law of its meaning. Furthermore, lawless preaching diminishes Christ's sacrifice to pay for man's disobedience. Third, the law clarifies the gospel by explaining the wrath of God. Luther stated, "In the Son of God I behold the wrath of God in action, while the law of God shows it to me

⁶² Luther, "Against the Antinomians" (1539), AE 47:113. Emphasis added.

⁶³ Luther, "Against the Antinomians" (1539), AE 47:110.

with words and with lesser deeds.”⁶⁴ The cross illustrates the wrath of God and the law describes why that wrath is necessary.

Finally, Luther argued, “even if we did not require the law for ourselves . . . we would have to preach it for Christ’s sake.”⁶⁵ Luther’s remarks imply that Christians *do* “require the law” for themselves. Luther reiterated that the function of the law is not restricted to revealing man’s incompleteness to satisfy God’s standard of righteousness. The law also reveals man’s incompleteness by commanding him to change his beliefs or behaviors. In some sense, the law still obligates the Christian. How does this function of the law clarify the gospel? The law clarifies the gospel by revealing how gospel people should live.

Luther preached the law to clarify the gospel. He rightly understood that without the law the good news of the gospel is not good at all. As Lohse reminds us, the law and gospel must be preached in “constant contrast” to each other.⁶⁶

Preachers today should not be afraid or ashamed to preach the law of God. After all, faithfully preaching the law is one of the ways the preacher faithfully preaches Christ. Luther believed that law and gospel are the two languages with which God speaks to his people, which testify of Christ, the eternal Word. Many homileticians have unwittingly clamped one side of God’s mouth shut while holding up a megaphone to the other. However, the preacher is free to proclaim the law in a robust manner, unlike this one-dimensional approach. If God speaks in the two languages of law and gospel, preachers must painstakingly strive for fluency in both languages.

IV. Gospel-Dominated Preaching

In a noble effort to avoid works-righteousness and maximize the gospel, too many contemporary sermons feature castrated imperatives, heavily bandaged in a host of gospel caveats. Such impotent imperatives are largely absent from Luther’s preaching. While Luther did articulate gospel indicatives, he apparently saw no need to follow every proclamation of law with a gospel caveat.

Although Luther’s preaching was not consistently “gospel-centered” in the way the term is often employed in popular literature today, it was “gospel-dominated” even when it featured a preponderance of law. In other words, even when Luther’s exposition did not *center* on the gospel, it remained *dominated* by it. Edward

⁶⁴ Luther, “Against the Antinomians” (1539), AE 47:113.

⁶⁵ Luther, “Against the Antinomians” (1539), AE 47:113.

⁶⁶ Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 269.

Engelbrecht explains the concept of gospel-dominance as characteristic of Luther's preaching:

By *dominance* of the Gospel, I do not mean simply that a message contains more Gospel than Law. Some preachers might adopt that as a goal but it is not always what we see in the Scriptures, Luther's sermons, or the messages of other faithful teachers. The proclamation of the Law often takes more space, depending on the state of the hearers. . . . By dominance, I mean that the proclamation of the Law serves the purpose of the Gospel: our forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ alone. This requires sensitivity to the hearers, addressing their sins appropriately with the Law so that the Gospel may do its life-giving work. It also means proclaiming the Gospel vigorously as our only hope and comfort.⁶⁷

An isolated glance at individual sermons may paint Luther as sometimes antinomian and other times legalistic. But Luther is no homiletical schizophrenic. His strategy was to ground his people in the beauty of Christ's gospel, but that foundation was not built in a single sermon. Even when Luther preached the law unabashedly, he still allowed his imperatives to be dominated by the gospel.

In his fourth *Invocavit* sermon, Luther brilliantly rejected the radical reformers' tendencies to throw out the baby with the proverbial bathwater. His sarcastic rebuke is still relevant today:

We must, therefore, be on our guard, for the devil, through his apostles, is after us with all his craft and cunning. Now, although it is true and no one can deny that the images are evil because they are abused, nevertheless we must not on that account reject them, nor condemn anything because it is abused. This would result in utter confusion. God has commanded us in Deut. 4 not to lift up our eyes to the sun, etc., that we may not worship them, for they are created to serve all nations. But there are many people who worship the sun and the stars. Therefore we propose to rush in and pull the sun and stars from the skies. No, we had better let it be. Again, wine and women bring many a man to misery and make a fool out of him; so we kill all the women and pour out all the wine. Again, gold and silver cause much evil, so we condemn them. Indeed, if we want to drive away our worst enemy, the one who does us the most harm, we shall have to kill ourselves, for we have no greater enemy than our own heart.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Edward A. Engelbrecht, *Friends of the Law: Luther's Use of the Law for Christian Life* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 244-245.

⁶⁸ Luther, "Eight Sermons at Wittenberg" (1522), AL: 51:85.

Christian history is replete with preachers who have damaged the pulpit with the Christ-denying evils of moralism and legalism. It is true that preachers can abuse the imperatives of Scripture, turning Christianity into a legalistic system of salvation by works. However, Martin Luther was not such a preacher, nor are the countless others who follow in his tradition. The recurring tendency to cure moralism in the pulpit by minimizing the law is not a legitimate remedy. Instead, let us embrace Luther's example of gospel-dominated preaching.