

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 87:3-4

July/October 2023

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Reinhold Pieper’s Strictly Textual Preaching: Proclaiming Law and Gospel in Accordance with Scripture

Isaac R. W. Johnson

A movement gained momentum in the Missouri Synod some sixty years ago with Richard Caemmerer that ultimately moved the truth of the atonement from one of the chief biblical truths in preaching (if not *the* chief truth) to the only viable message for every sermon.¹ In other words, the cross is not merely to be *a* point in the sermon; the cross must be *the* point—every time. As Donald Deffner wrote in 1991, “The forgiveness of sins is not just ‘another doctrine in the Bible’ in addition to covenant relationship, Kingdom of God, community, etc. It is *the* message. And it must be ‘rightly proclaimed.’”² In the Missouri Synod, we often refer to this as law-and-gospel preaching: first you convict sinners (law), then you absolve them with the message of the cross (gospel).

Criticism of the law-gospel dynamic as it often manifests in sermons has taken shape in recent years. Some may be familiar with Adam Koontz’s two articles.³ Others broached this topic in previous years as well, albeit in different ways, including Benjamin Mayes and David Schmitt.⁴ The discussion in these articles includes, in part, topics such as law-gospel, Richard Caemmerer, the fivefold use, and the classical Lutheran homiletics of Lutheran fathers such as Luther, Johann Gerhard, Walther, and, most recently, Reinhold Pieper (hereafter simply “Pieper”), the older brother of Francis. It is useful to observe the practices of our fathers in law-gospel dynamics and preaching, since they were dedicated to the same principles as we are while being removed from some of our current tendencies and biases. This study will include a consideration of Pieper’s homiletical theology as it pertains to the discussion.

¹ Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959).

² Donald L. Deffner, *Compassionate Preaching: A Primer/Primer in Homiletics*, rev. ed. (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1991), 22.

³ Adam C. Koontz, “Speak as the Oracles of God: Reinhold Pieper’s Classical Lutheran Homiletic,” *CTQ* 85, no. 1 (January 2021): 23–36; and Adam C. Koontz, “From Reinhold Pieper to Caemmerer: How Our Preaching Changed,” *CTQ* 85, nos. 3–4 (July–October 2021): 193–213.

⁴ Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “The Useful Applications of Scripture in Lutheran Orthodoxy: An Aid to Contemporary Preaching and Exegesis,” *CTQ* 83, nos. 1–2 (January–April 2019): 111–135. David Schmitt, “Richard Caemmerer’s Goal, Malady, Means: A Retrospective Glance,” *CTQ* 74, nos. 1–2 (January–April 2010): 23–38.

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One question, as raised by some of these recent writers, could be phrased as follows: Is it enough to preach exactly what the sermon text is saying with the express goal of, for example, teaching a divine truth or training in righteousness (as Koontz put it, “If it is in the text, one discusses it. If it is not, one does not”⁵), or must the goal of every sermon be to convict sinners and absolve them with the message of the cross through the given text? The way a pastor answers this question will profoundly impact the liturgical catechesis of his congregation. It has, at least in my experience and in recent decades, almost always been answered in favor of centralizing the atonement in the theme of the sermon. But the authors mentioned above, from both of our seminaries, have raised critical voices. They are not critical of the cross, but they advocate complementary homiletical techniques in the sermon, not limited to but including the fivefold use of 2 Timothy 3:16 and Romans 15:4.

I argue in this essay that, although we must preach repentance unto forgiveness, not all repentance-forgiveness preaching is scriptural (*schriftgemäß*). In reaching this conclusion we will (I) summarize some of the recent criticism of the law-gospel dynamic as it pertains to preaching, (II) survey the role of Scripture in Pieper’s homiletical theology, and (III) draw clear boundaries for scriptural preaching as described in his *Evangelical Lutheran Homiletics*.⁶ We will end by (IV) examining the impact of Pieper’s teachings on preaching law and gospel today.

I. State of the Question

Law-and-Gospel Preaching: What Is the Real Issue?

Two criticisms of the law-gospel dynamic in Lutheran preaching have emerged that are closely related and yet, in my estimation, must be distinguished. The first concern is that the law-gospel dynamic functions as a “procrustean bed”⁷ or a “stencil,”⁸ forcing the sermon outline for every text into something like the following: (I) How does this text show our sin? (II) How does this text show our Savior? This interplay is caricatured in many ways, such as (I) You should feel bad, but (II) Jesus died for you, so you can feel good. Or perhaps, (I) You have to do all these things, but (II) Don’t worry about it, because Jesus did it all for you. These caricatures fail to address a legitimate concern. Indeed, the problem is not so much with the outline of law-then-gospel itself. If the scriptural text says it this way, then that

⁵ Koontz, “From Reinhold Pieper to Caemmerer,” 210.

⁶ Reinhold Pieper, *Evangelisch-Lutherische Homiletik: Nach der Erläuterung über die Praecepta Homiletica von Dr. J. J. Rambach* (Milwaukee: Germania, 1895). Concordia Publishing House reprinted the text without any change in 1905.

⁷ Mayes, “Useful Applications,” 115.

⁸ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1992), 43.

is a good outline. The concern is, apparently, when *every* sermon outline takes this form, regardless of the expression of the text.

What I find interesting is that, with regard to the scholarship, everyone seems to complain about wooden law-then-gospel preaching, while no one actually espouses it. I have found no Lutheran scholar demanding that every sermon begin with the law and end with the gospel. On the contrary, I have seen the tendency to use law-gospel as a stencil criticized on every side, even among those who might have been considered proponents of such preaching. Consider Donald Deffner, who demands that repentance unto the forgiveness of sins must always be preached. He states as much in a note to the reader in *Compassionate Preaching*: "In other words, it is still our task to preach Law and Gospel *every* Sunday, no matter what the text is, and to do so *dialogically*."⁹ He is a dogged proponent of the law-gospel dynamic. Nonetheless, he states in chapter 2, "Preaching repentance to the forgiveness of sins is never laminated to the sermon. That is, the Gospel should never be 'glued on' to the end of the message. It should sprout from the text and be an implicit part of the sermon as a whole."¹⁰ The expression of law-gospel preaching is supposed to be unique every Sunday as it organically flows from the text. In other words, good law-gospel preaching is supposed to be textual preaching.

Caemmerer has likewise been criticized since his days teaching at the seminary in St. Louis because of his homiletics teaching on goal, malady, means. He has, however, personally rebuffed the notion that each sermon outline should be (I) goal, (II) malady, (III) means (which corresponds with the law-then-gospel format): "Years of teaching helped to develop the triad of 'goal, malady, means' which seminarians distort into sermon outlines."¹¹ David Schmitt writes concerning the misunderstanding of Caemmerer, "[Y]ear after year Caemmerer watched as seminarians distorted it (goal, malady, means)."¹²

Who, then, are the critics writing against with regard to this first complaint? Perhaps "wooden law-gospel sermons" in the Missouri Synod can be criticized not so much because that is what has been taught but more because that is how it is often preached. If this were truly the heart of the problem, however, we would have a simple answer: "Work harder, lazy preachers!" It is far easier to look for a little law in a text and then transition into a recitation of AC IV than it is to figure out how *this* text shows my sin and Savior. As big of an issue as laziness is, the problem of

⁹ Deffner, *Compassionate Preaching*, 5–6.

¹⁰ Deffner, *Compassionate Preaching*, 26.

¹¹ Richard R. Caemmerer, "Stance and Distance," in *The Lively Function of the Gospel*, ed. Robert W. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 4.

¹² Schmitt, "A Retrospective Glance," 23.

wooden law-gospel preaching would perhaps not garner as much attention if it were not for the second criticism of recent scholarship.

The second complaint is more serious than the first, although it is related: law-gospel preachers always aim at the *atonement*, or in other words, the goal of every sermon is preaching repentance to the forgiveness of sins “no matter what the text is.”¹³ I refer to this as the repentance-forgiveness approach. This approach does not claim that the atonement is the only thing the Bible says. Rather, the atonement is *the ultimate* thing the Bible says; in other words, whatever the text is saying, it is ultimately communicating the atonement. Therefore, it must always be the clearly communicated heart of every sermon, with every point leading to and flowing out of it. After all, Paul boldly states, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23) and, shortly thereafter, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Why, then, preach anything but the cross?

To be sure, no one that I have read has suggested that we stop preaching the cross. This is decidedly *not* the point, just as preaching repentance unto forgiveness is not meant to be law-then-gospel on each and every occasion. The problem seems to be when every text has a sort of primary and secondary meaning. The primary meaning is the atonement, and the secondary meaning is whatever the text is literally saying. The pastor is tempted to pass over the literal meaning of the text in order to preach repentance and forgiveness. This is the issue: the divine truths, as presented uniquely in that text, are reduced to unimportance, even to the point of being swallowed up by the need to preach forgiveness.

The issue, then, is not that we preach Christ crucified, repentance unto forgiveness, or the atonement. The concern, as I have come to understand it, is that Christ also called us to teach them to observe “everything whatsoever [πάντα ὅσα]” he has commanded (Matt 28:20). That is to say, the atonement is *a* biblical truth, even the most important biblical truth on which the church stands or falls. The atonement is not, however, the *only* biblical truth, and all biblical truths must be preached in their fullness to the congregation (Acts 20:26–27). Schmitt described this issue with the following words:

Each time these passages from the Scriptures are encountered, the hearers hear only one part of the story: sin and forgiveness. They see sin and grace at work in the text and, by analogy, hear about sin and grace at work in their lives, yet all the while miss the larger story unfolding in the Scriptures, the eternal fellowship of the triune God and this God’s mission in creating, redeeming, and recreating the world to live in fellowship with God.¹⁴

¹³ Deffner, *Compassionate Preaching*, 6.

¹⁴ Schmitt, “A Retrospective Glance,” 36.

Are there methods complementary to the repentance-forgiveness approach that are faithful to Scripture and yet not always aimed at convicting and absolving the sinner in real time? In 2019 Mayes directed his readers (especially through Johann Gerhard and Walther) to remember Scripture's own instruction for application in 2 Timothy 3:16 and Romans 15:4—namely, the fivefold use of Scripture. Mayes noted that this is historically how Lutherans have preached and that it “has been lost and needs to be restored.”¹⁵ Likewise Koontz wrote in 2021 on the classical Lutheran homiletic of Pieper, “A textual sermon uses Scripture according to its own internally expressed *fivefold* use (2 Tim 3:16; Rom 15:4). . . . What we have lost, and what Pieper demonstrates and recommends, can be recovered. . . . It can be found and recovered, dusted off, and put to use.”¹⁶ We shall commence with some dusting now, not necessarily in the effort to repriminate, but to see what our fathers have to contribute to the current conversation. The fivefold use as such, however, will be only briefly considered.¹⁷ Instead we shall examine Pieper's homiletical theology, especially the role of Holy Scripture in preaching, and learn what it has to teach us about the boundaries of preaching.

II. Pieper's Homiletical Theology: The Primacy of the Text

Pieper's textbook on preaching, *Evangelisch-Lutherische Homiletik (Evangelical Lutheran Homiletics)*, expounds in depth on centuries of Lutheran teaching on preaching. He includes, in large portions, J. J. Rambach's treatise on homiletics, *Erläuterung über die Praecepta Homiletica (Commentary on Homiletical Teachings)*, which was published in 1736.¹⁸ He also includes lengthy quotations from many other Lutheran fathers, including Luther, Gerhard, and Walther. Pieper, while contributing much in his *Homiletics*, is careful to build upon centuries of Lutheran homiletical teachings. In the introduction to his textbook, Pieper defines preaching with the following words: “Spiritual eloquence is nothing else than the practical competency for speaking in a proper way about divine things derived from Holy Scripture. This competency for speaking is bestowed by God and acquired through certain means in order to lead the listeners to the knowledge and adoption of the

¹⁵ Mayes, “Useful Applications,” 117.

¹⁶ Koontz, “Speak as the Oracles of God,” 35.

¹⁷ For an explanation of the five uses, see Mayes, “Useful Applications,” 123–130.

¹⁸ This treatise served as the homiletics textbook for Walther and other predecessors of Pieper. Johann Jacob Rambach, *Erläuterung über die praecepta homiletica: von dem seligen auctore zu unterschiedenen mahlen in collegiis vorgetragen, nun aber aus dessen manuscriptis herausgegeben*, ed. Johann Philipp Fresenius (Giessen: Johann Philip Krieger, 1736).

truth and to salvation.”¹⁹ Pieper later bases this definition on the clear witnesses of Holy Scripture from 2 Corinthians 3:5–6; 2 Timothy 3:17; and Hebrews 5:12.²⁰

The empowering, legitimizing component that enables the preacher to reach these goals of illumination and blessedness is God working specifically *through Holy Scripture*. As he states later, “The norm of holy eloquence is Holy Scripture, that inexhaustible fount of heavenly truths.”²¹ To that point, Pieper commented that the “essential difference” between preaching and a public speech is that the worldly speech takes its topic from life and a Christian sermon takes its topic from Holy Scripture.²² Any preacher who has a topic outside the text of Holy Scripture is not really preaching at all. He is merely giving a speech.

There is a tendency in Lutheran preaching to take the view that the Bible is the only viable *starting* point, but that every sermon must move to consider another “text”—that is, the context of the listeners. The Bible is 50 percent of the sermon material, while the listeners are the other 50 percent. One gets this impression from Deffner, who wrote, “True, a sermon which starts in the world and never gets into the Bible is not a Biblical sermon. But the sermon which starts in the Bible and stays in the Bible is not biblical, either!”²³ To be sure, Deffner’s point was that the preacher must apply the text to the listener’s life, combating what was, in his opinion, academic lecturing that was “lethal—supernaturally dull.”²⁴ While Pieper avidly avoids dry preaching and would certainly agree with the necessity of applying the text to the hearers present,²⁵ a reader would, nevertheless, find no such statement in his *Homiletics*. Regarding the function of the text for the sermon, he writes:

A passage of the *divine* Word shall serve as the basis of the *divine* sermon (1 Thessalonians 2:13) but not merely as a building rests on its foundation. Rather, as much as possible is to be taken from the text as material for the construction of the sermon . . . since Holy Scripture is complete, containing everything that is necessary for faith and life, there are appropriate texts for every topic in which the preacher is to instruct his listeners.²⁶

While admittedly leaving a small caveat in the words “as much as possible,” Pieper’s view is that the Bible is sufficient for preaching to the hearers. He does not start with the Bible and move away from it. The text forms the foundation *and* as much of the

¹⁹ Pieper, *Homiletik*, x. All translations are the author’s own.

²⁰ Pieper, *Homiletik*, xv.

²¹ Pieper, *Homiletik*, xviii.

²² Pieper, *Homiletik*, xv.

²³ Deffner, *Compassionate Preaching*, 30.

²⁴ Deffner, *Compassionate Preaching*, 30.

²⁵ “Through the explanation, the listeners have come to understand the truths of the text; it cannot be doubted that these truths must now be applied.” Pieper, *Homiletik*, 275.

²⁶ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 22.

building material for the sermon as possible. This is not to say that the listeners are ignored in any way, but that the text itself provides the material for addressing their lives. The preacher, according to Pieper, shall start in the Bible and stay there as he addresses his hearers, and each application shall be grounded in the biblical text; anything else is a human invention.²⁷ Pieper consistently applies this principle of Scripture throughout his *Homiletics*.

A summary of the benefits of the scriptural text for the sermon is found in chapter II, on the selection of the text:

On the other hand, the advantages which the text itself offers the preacher are not meager; the text gives him, namely, *the material* for the sermon, *leads him deeper into the Scriptures* and yet *restricts him*. Regarding the first point, the word of Hüffel is entirely correct: "If one is in a dilemma for finding material, all he needs to do is open the Bible. Now he will have the dilemma of deciding what to choose first from the abundance which is there." This is so true about the Bible because there are no two texts which are completely the same. They may indeed teach the same doctrine, even the same point of the same doctrine, but they will nevertheless have differences. The perspective, the context, some addition, often a single word, will give a unique imprint to every text through which it differentiates itself from others which may be very similar. As there are not two people among the millions who are exactly alike, so it is with the texts of Holy Scripture. Thus the preacher has, to some extent, new material with every new text, if he is only willing to put in the effort to recognize what is unique to his text. He can never "run out of sermons." The one who finds himself in that situation often has his own sloth to blame.

The careful study of the text also leads the preacher *deeper into Holy Scripture*. A text may be short, but it will contain a divine truth. If a text is sharply envisaged according to its context, compared with parallel texts, etc., the preacher will not merely taste from the bubbling water of life, he will dive into it. The more he reads, sinks into and lives in Scripture, the more he will preach in accordance with Scripture.

The text likewise *restricts* the preacher, forcing him to remain on topic. He needs only to interpret the text, for also the parallel texts and whatever is retrieved from elsewhere may serve only this purpose. In other words, he is to explain, prove and establish the unity of the truths given in the text clearly in the theme. The text draws boundaries for the preacher in which he is to move and preach his sermon, so that he does not go on to a myriad of points or get

²⁷ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 24.

“stuck in a rut” [“*ins Waschen*” *kommen*] as Luther says. Thus results the necessary requirement: *no textless sermons, only text-sermons*.²⁸

The biblical text is the soul that animates the sermon. It provides an inexhaustible source of material, leading the preacher deeper and deeper into the divine truths of God. Here Pieper expresses a great *flexibility* in his homiletical theology. The text also has the essential function of *restriction*, preventing the pastor from voicing his own human ideas mixed in with or even supplanting the divine truths expressed in the text. This view of Scripture reflects the oft-quoted words of Gregory the Great: “Scripture is like a river . . . broad and deep, shallow enough for a lamb to go wading and deep enough for an elephant to swim.”²⁹ Accordingly we will now consider the restrictive and flexible qualities of textual preaching according to Pieper.

III. Pieper’s Homiletical Theology: The Boundaries of the Text

The Restriction of the Text

Caemmerer warned that being overly restricted to the text would “fence in the essential vitality of the message.”³⁰ Although this is true in one important respect, as we will see later, the flexibility and depth of all passages of Scripture enable the restrictive nature of the text to *provide* vitality to preaching. In chapters IV and V, Pieper covers the theme and arrangement of the sermon. During his discussion, he explains that the content of the theme must be “strictly textual” or “strictly in accordance with the text” (*streng textgemäß*), a concept which he applies throughout the textbook.³¹ This term encapsulates the role of Scripture in Pieper’s homiletical theology. Pieper provides a thorough definition under point 3 of chapter IV:

The first indispensable requirement which must be placed upon a theme is that it must be strictly textual. No preacher gets a pass from penetrating into the true sense of the text and understanding it from all sides, and that rightly. He is to explain the text according to the actual intention of the writer. The preacher relies on the text and is legitimized by it before the congregation. A false legitimation is as bad as having none at all; indeed, it is much worse.

Thus no foreign sense is to be shoved into the text. Instead the words of the text are to be taken in the sense in which they must be held according to their context. Otherwise the preacher makes himself guilty of a *pious deception*

²⁸ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 23–24.

²⁹ Gregory the Great, “Epistola ad Leandrum” 4, in *S. Gregorii Magni Moralia in Job*, ed. Marc Adriaen, *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina* 143 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), 6.

³⁰ Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church*, 90.

³¹ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 86.

which is nonetheless deception and, moreover, cannot be excused due to the multifaceted contents of Holy Scripture [emphasis mine]. If the listeners notice that the sense which the preacher is featuring in the text is not actually there, giving another sense to the text on different occasions, he will lose them, and they will lose their trust in him. Without the listeners' trust, the sermon cannot reach its goal.

The theme is only textual if it is constructed from the rightly understood text and has taken into itself not only the doctrines given in the text but also the special characteristics of the same. *The theme can only be called strictly textual if it is only applicable to the present text and not to a second or third text* [emphasis mine]. If the same *doctrine* is contained in several texts, the present text will nonetheless differentiate itself from parallel passages through the setting or some word, a phrase or a circumstance. . . . In any case, those themes are not textual which are suitable for several different texts which, although they do indeed have the same content in the main idea, nonetheless diverge from one another in their specific characteristics. . . .

Hüffel rightly says, "We condemn every sermon which denies the substance of the rightly understood word of Scripture, and we at least cannot refer to it as scriptural [*schriftgemäß*]. The same applies to those sermons which contain in their major divisions something completely different from that which is contained in the passage of Scripture itself, taking up entirely meaningless tangents and leaving the main idea untouched."³²

A sermon is strictly textual which not only conveys the message of the particular text but also does so according to the unique characteristics of that text. Being restricted to a text does not "fence in" the vitality of the message. In Pieper's opinion, the exact opposite is true: the restriction of the text *provides* the vitality of the message. In fact, if the theme is so nondescript or generic that it can be applied to many different texts, he refuses, along with Hüffel, to call it scriptural. Indeed, a sermon that floats out in the ether of doctrine or application without being grounded in the unique characteristics of the text loses the vitality of biblical preaching because the true power of preaching flows from the specific, inspired, and written word of God.

Throughout his textbook, Pieper provides plentiful biblical examples to illustrate his points, and he does so here as well. Consider Philippians 4:4 ("Rejoice in the Lord always") and Isaiah 61:10 ("I will greatly rejoice in the LORD . . . for he has clothed me"). If the preacher were to pick the theme "the joy of believers in the Lord," it would not be strictly textual either for the first text or the second text, in Pieper's opinion. The reason why this theme would not be strictly textual is that it

³² Pieper, *Homiletik*, 86.

is too broad. A strictly textual theme for Philippians 4:4 could be “the *constant* joy of believers in the Lord,” whereas Isaiah 61:10 could have the theme “the *reason* for the joy which believers have in the Lord.” Both texts contribute related yet unique divine truths to the reality of the joy of the Lord. The restriction of the text *provides* vitality to the proclamation.

These excerpts clearly show that Pieper would not approve of a *formulaic* law-gospel or even sin-forgiveness way of preaching, due to the implicit neglect of the text to be interpreted. As far as I have seen, however, no one is advocating formulaic sermons. Instead, Pieper contributes to the conversation by requiring the sermon to be scriptural: *The sermon that preaches law-gospel or repentance and forgiveness in a way that fails to communicate the content and unique characteristics of the text is not a scriptural sermon (schriftgemäß)*. To preach repentance unto forgiveness is indeed necessary (Luke 24:44–47). Teaching that certain doctrines are primary with others being secondary is also permissible. Preaching repentance unto forgiveness to the *neglect* of a given text, however, is a human invention. How could preaching repentance unto forgiveness ever be a human invention? In this case, it is the notion that the divine truth communicated uniquely in the text is superfluous, tangential, inapplicable, dull, etc. compared with the divine truth of repentance unto forgiveness. The Holy Spirit shall lead us into *all* truth (John 16:13).

Some who have grown discontented with repetitive law-gospel preaching have sought refuge in the fivefold use. Although there is much to be gained by applying Scripture according to its own dictates, the fivefold use can quickly become a stencil for wooden, repetitive, predictable, and non-scriptural preaching. In other words, the fivefold use can also offend against the restrictive nature of strictly textual preaching.

To be sure, Pieper cites Walther and requires the application of the fivefold use: “these five uses (*usus*) of God’s Word, given by the Holy Spirit himself, shall serve as the foundation for every sermon on the Word of God.”³³ Immediately after this, however, Pieper quotes Rambach, who complained that there were preachers who considered it a “mortal sin” if they did not use each of the five uses at least briefly in every sermon. According to such preachers, a sermon had to have (I) a little doctrine, (II) a little refutation of heretics, (III) a little discipline, (IV) a little training in righteousness, and (V) a little comfort. These preachers were making a false inference. They thought that, since Paul commanded the five uses in 2 Timothy 3 and Romans 15, they were required to lead all the texts of Scripture through each of the five uses,

³³ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 289.

even if they have to drag in the refuting use by the hair and raise old and decomposing heretics from the dead. The listeners get so used to this that they pay no more attention; they know that their pastor always plays on one lyre, and it has five strings. After a while they are no longer affected by his teaching, refutation, discipline, admonition and comfort—especially if this all occurs in a sleepy manner with no emotion or life in it.³⁴

This sounds familiar, does it not? Are these not the same complaints leveled at wooden law-gospel preaching that makes the forgiveness won on the cross so utterly predictable that the listeners check out? We have a guitar with two strings: repentance and forgiveness. Indeed, these two problems are perhaps more closely related than we realize. Is not formulaic law-gospel preaching simply a non-scriptural application of the fivefold use, always moving from teaching/admonishing/rebuking to comfort in every text? If we do not carefully observe what is going on here, we preachers are doomed to repeat history, merely discarding one stencil for another.

The issue with formulaic preaching comes back to the principles of textual preaching that Pieper sets out in *Homiletics*. Pieper cites Osiander: “Everything that is presented to the listeners must rest upon a text of Scripture as upon the strongest basis or an unshakable foundation. Indeed, all of those teachings, refutations, chastisements, admonitions and comforts should be derived from the text itself after the correct interpretation of the text has taken place.”³⁵ The correct approach to employing the fivefold use, then, is for the preacher to interpret the text correctly and then to determine which use or uses flow from the text itself. It may be that the preacher decides not to employ one of the uses.³⁶ If, however, he forces upon the text a foreign meaning by trying, for example, to use a text for comfort that by its nature admonishes, or vice versa, he has failed to preach a textual or scriptural sermon.

The problem, then, is not necessarily that preachers try to preach repentance to forgiveness or that they employ the fivefold use, but that they tend to slip from the diverse abundance of divine truths as portrayed uniquely in each text into a routine of their own invention. That is to say, all preachers must fight the tendency to supplant the challenging, divine word with their own simplistic, human word, diligently avoiding what Pieper earlier referred to as a “pious deception.” Pieper’s teaching on the *restricting* nature of the text protects against such abuse.

³⁴ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 290.

³⁵ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 25.

³⁶ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 290.

The Flexibility of the Text

When considering the restricting function of the biblical text in Pieper's homiletical theology, one could quickly come to such a conclusion as this: "If it is in the text, one discusses it. If it is not, one does not."³⁷ How is one to understand such a rule? In its narrowest sense, this maxim could be taken to mean that only that which is *expressly* in the text is to be discussed. Under such constraints, preaching on forgiveness, and especially the doctrines of atonement and justification, would be restricted to the relatively few lectionary texts that elaborate on them, and the people would hear about them in the sermon quite rarely. Although Pieper would indeed agree that the sermon must be restricted to the text, he also elaborates on how one is to understand the text in its *context*. In chapter VI, "On the Interpretation of the Arranged Text," Pieper elaborates on context and thereby incorporates quite a bit of flexibility in strictly textual preaching.

Pieper has a high view of the context in the interpretation of the text. The benefit of context is that it casts a "bright light" upon the entire text as well as upon individual words and phrases. For this reason, Pieper states, the context "may not be ignored." Here we can see some agreement with Caemmerer's notion quoted above that the context of the entire Bible also contributes to the vitality of proclamation. Indeed, the consequences of ignoring the context are severe. In comment two of point ten he states, "Without the consideration of the context, it is not only that the actual sense of the text, intended by the Holy Spirit, goes unrealized, but a completely foreign sense is forced into it. This is to say that, without the context, false exegesis is practiced."³⁸ Although the preacher is to be restricted by his text down to the unique character of that text, those same characteristics will be misunderstood without the context. What, then, is the context of the sermon text in Pieper's homiletical theology?

Pieper defines the context in three categories: "narrow," "broader," and "broadest." The narrow context includes the verses immediately preceding and following the text. In his textbook, Pieper puts the most emphasis on the narrow context. The broader context includes the chapters preceding and following the text. Context in the broadest sense, and of particular interest in this study, includes "partly the writing, or the book, from which the text is taken . . . and partly the entire system of Holy Scripture, that is, all that which is found in the preceding and following biblical writings and belongs to the full explanation of the topic handled in the given text. In short, context in the broadest sense includes the entire parallelism of Holy Scrip-

³⁷ Koontz, "From Reinhold Pieper to Caemmerer," 210.

³⁸ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 252–253.

ture."³⁹ According to Pieper, Scripture interprets Scripture. Without the consideration of the whole of Scripture when researching a text, the true sense will most often or even invariably go misunderstood, replaced with falsehood. This is no groundbreaking doctrine in Lutheran theology but is nonetheless essential in order to understand the next move that Pieper makes in his homiletical theology.

In order for a theme to be strictly textual, Pieper teaches that themes can be directly (*unmittelbar*) in the text with express words. This comes as no surprise. He also teaches, however, that themes can be mediated by the text indirectly (*mittelbar*): "In order to be strictly textual, however, the theme does not need to lie *directly* [*unmittelbar*] in the text. Instead, it can possess this quality if it is derived *indirectly* [*mittelbar*] from the text through a correct inference [*richtige Schlußfolge*]."⁴⁰ This is to say that all sermon themes must be in the text, but writing sermons based on inferences, or material deduced from the text, is allowed. Pieper calls upon the example of Christ and the apostles for the right to make such inferences indirectly through the text.⁴¹ Consider, for example, the words of Christ in Matthew 22:31–32. Here our Lord disputes with the Sadducees concerning the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead. In order to prove the truth of this teaching, he cites Exodus 3:6: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." The truth of the resurrection is not directly in the text. However, the dead must be raised since God is the God of the living and not the dead. Even though the words "resurrection" and "dead" are not in the text at all, it is permitted to preach a sermon on the resurrection from the dead based on this text because of the validity of making accurate inferences (*richtige Schlußfolge*) from the text for the purposes of preaching.

As a second justification for making such inferences, Pieper also calls upon the aforementioned parallelism, or complete harmony of the Scriptures. Since all the truths of Holy Scripture are interconnected as "the links in a chain," it follows that "one can accurately perceive a single truth in a text and then derive many other truths which connect to it."⁴² Pieper provides an illustration of deriving truths from a text by quoting Genesis 3:15: "The seed of the woman shall crush underfoot the head of the serpent." He is able to derive three truths (*porismata*) from this text: (I) Christ is a holy person (for no one bound by sin could destroy the devil's kingdom), (II) he is true God (for only God is strong enough to conquer Satan), and (III) there is a resurrection from the dead (for when the power of death is taken away from the

³⁹ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 252–253.

⁴⁰ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 88.

⁴¹ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 278.

⁴² Pieper, *Homiletik*, 278.

devil, it has no more power over humanity).⁴³ All of these teachings would provide valid material in the sermon due to being accurate inferences from the text. It should be noted here that inferences that have only a convoluted or no connection to the text are seen as poor or even false inferences. In sum, Pieper would indeed agree with the notion that we can preach only what is in the text. As can be seen in this example, however, Pieper's allowance for accurate inferences incorporates a tremendous amount of flexibility in strictly textual preaching.

Law and Gospel as Scriptural Context

It could be argued that, since the proper distinction between law and gospel is not applied systematically in his textbook,⁴⁴ Pieper does not consider it of primary importance for preaching. When discussing context in the *broadest* sense, however, both law-gospel and repentance unto forgiveness play an important role in the sermon. The following is a brief survey of the role of law and gospel in Pieper's homiletical theology.

Under point six in his chapter on application, Pieper talks about the necessity of preaching the whole body of doctrine, or the entire parallelism of Holy Scripture to the congregation, as noted above in other passages. In this section, Pieper refers to context in the broadest sense as the "whole counsel of God": "With regard to doctrine, it is of particular importance to note that the preacher has the holy duty to preach the entire council of God for salvation. He is to unpack especially the chief doctrines of Holy Scripture thoroughly and understandably."⁴⁵ Pieper derives this "holy duty" from Acts 20, where, before the Ephesian elders, Paul declares himself innocent of the blood of all, saying, "[F]or I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (v. 27). Pieper elaborates on the contents of that doctrine with the following words:

Paul had not withheld from his listeners any of the individual teachings, causes or means which the entire counsel of God encompasses. He neither left out, added, or falsified anything. Instead he preached the counsel of God in its whole purity and in its full breadth, so that they had no lack with regard to any teaching. He testifies in particular that "repentance to God and faith toward the Lord Jesus" is the sum (*Summa*) of Christian teaching, or the divine counsel.⁴⁶

⁴³ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 279.

⁴⁴ Koontz, "From Reinhold Pieper to Caemmerer," 210.

⁴⁵ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 292.

⁴⁶ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 293.

The whole counsel of God includes *all* of the doctrines, causes, and means that God has revealed to us. When considered in light of Pieper's understanding of the interplay between text and context, the unique divine truths of all holy texts require the "bright light" of the parallelism of Holy Scripture, which, according to Acts 20, can be summed up in repentance and faith.

While discussing that body of doctrine that the preacher is obligated to proclaim in its entirety, Pieper explicitly mentions the proper distinction of law and gospel in a quotation of Gerhard:

1. The doctrines shall not be awkward or far-fetched, but shall flow out of the text. . . .
2. Law and gospel shall be practiced in the sermons. . . .

[with an emphasis on preaching "law sermons"!]

3. The mixing of law and gospel shall be avoided with utmost diligence. According to Luther's witness, the main part of theological understanding consists of one's ability to distinguish between law and gospel precisely.⁴⁷

All the doctrines of Holy Scripture must be proclaimed (I) in a textual way, and (II) with the precise and proper distinction of law and gospel—always. To be sure, law-gospel preaching does not manifest as a sermon outline in Pieper, and he at no time uses it as an exclusive hermeneutic for preaching as we sometimes do today (as when we ask, "Is this text law or gospel?"). It cannot be sustained, however, that law and gospel are non-essential to his homiletical theology. On the contrary, they are part of that necessary bright light, arising from the analogy of faith, that must always be considered in order to understand any given text. Without the proper distinction between law and gospel, there is no strictly textual preaching.

Moreover, Pieper elaborates on the necessity of preaching the comfort of the gospel in sermons. He does this through quotations of both Luther and Walther. Luther's complaint was that many were preaching *about* the faith but not *how* one comes to faith, thus neglecting the piece of Christian doctrine without which no one can understand what faith is:

For Christ says in Luke 3:8 and Luke 24:27 that *repentance and forgiveness* of sins shall be preached in his name. But many now talk only about forgiveness of sins and say nothing or little about *repentance*, even though there is no forgiveness of sins without repentance. Likewise the forgiveness of sins is preached without repentance, so that the people think that they have already attained the forgiveness of sins and become self assured, lacking the fear of God. *What could be a greater error and sin, greater than all the errors that have come to pass in this world. . . .* We have thus taught and admonished the pastors

⁴⁷ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 294–295.

that they are responsible *to preach the whole gospel* and not one piece without the other.⁴⁸

Here Luther states clearly that both repentance and forgiveness *must* be preached. Moreover, one is not to be preached without the other. Pieper himself added the emphasis in this quotation, indicating that he considers it a great sin, perhaps even the greatest sin, to preach forgiveness without repentance and vice versa.

Pieper also quotes Walther at length to a similar effect, who states the following in consideration of the comforting use as derived from Romans 15:4: “Whereas the use of God’s word for teaching is the *foundation*, the use of God’s word for *comfort and hope* must be the constant *goal* of all sermons. . . . The sermons which are empty of all comfort for one bearing the cross and afflicted are not true evangelical sermons. . . . The gospel is nothing else than a joyful message, a great comfort-sermon in all its parts.”⁴⁹ In Walther’s words we can observe the twofold purpose of preaching that Pieper set out at the beginning of the textbook. Holy eloquence is given by God, through Holy Scripture, to lead the listeners (I) to the knowledge and adoption of the truth and (II) to salvation.⁵⁰ Teaching is the foundation, and comfort (for the true bearer of the cross) is the goal. In fact, it could be argued from this quotation that Pieper believed that the comforting use is necessary in every sermon, provided it is done in accordance with the character of the text.

Properly dividing law and gospel and preaching repentance unto forgiveness are not merely mentioned in Pieper’s textbook. The former is an essential distinction in the mind of the preacher and the latter is styled, in part, as the necessary goal of every sermon. It is important to note, however, that these quotations are not mentioned in the chapter on the arrangement of the sermon but in the chapter on application. This is to say that Pieper, along with every other Lutheran homiletician I have read, does not demand a stringent law-then-gospel flow to every sermon. He argues much more for an interpretation-application format that, by means of the fivefold use, should always properly divide law and gospel and have the goal of giving comfort and hope to the true believers.

IV. Conclusion

The homiletical theology that emerges from Reinhold Pieper’s textbook offers no “cookie cutter” solutions to sermon preparation and delivery. What Pieper has to offer the current discussion on law-gospel preaching is that *any* stencil imposed upon the text smacks of human invention and undermines the authority of the

⁴⁸ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 334.

⁴⁹ Pieper, *Homiletik*, 314–315.

⁵⁰ Pieper, *Homiletik*, x.

divine truths presented uniquely in each text and the parallelism of Scripture. This excludes any form of law-then-gospel preaching or even repentance-forgiveness preaching that opposes or neglects the character of the text. However, the same applies to the fivefold use. As we have seen, the useful applications have also been misused by preachers to force a biblical text to say something it is not communicating. Indeed, we should be wary of simply thinking that the fivefold use is the solution to dry law-gospel preaching. If the preacher is determined to preach in a formulaic way, he will do it with one stencil or the other.

The solution to all formulaic and dry preaching is, according to Pieper's homiletical theology, preaching that is *strictly textual* (*streng textgemäß*). He insists that a preacher is not to begin his research on the text with a pre-written sermon in mind. Instead he must be restricted to the message of each text down to its unique character. This unique message can be properly understood only in light of scriptural context in the narrow, broad, and broadest senses. This broadest context includes the proper distinction between law and gospel and the overarching imperative from Christ that we are to proclaim repentance unto forgiveness, based on his atoning death and glorious resurrection. Indeed, we must preach law and gospel, but we must do so in accordance with Scripture.