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The Contribution of the Reformation to Preaching

Carl C. Fickenscher II

Without question the period of the Reformation brought the Christian pulpit into the modern age. There had indeed been significant developments in the centuries immediately before, and the contributions which Wycliffe, Tauler, and others made to preaching were by no means abandoned, but it was the preaching of Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and the other great men of their age by which preaching finally stepped out of the medieval shadows.

Elmer Kiessling summarized the impact of the Reformation on preaching as follows:

The details of the art of sermonizing are all very well for ordinary men. That is why after Luther's time the solid body of homiletical wisdom, developed in part and transmitted by the pre-Reformation preachers, was appropriated and added to by those that followed after. But for a time the rules were in abeyance while the giants of the Reformation occupied the pulpits. Indeed, not the least of their achievements was the creation of new rules to supplement the old. Preaching was never the same again . . .¹

Kiessling makes two salient points which will form the basis of this paper. First, because of the brilliant individuals involved, the Reformation was indeed an era of great preaching. Secondly, however, such gifted men were not for the most part concerned about the rules and science of homiletics. Therefore, while the Reformation certainly did change preaching forever, the changes were primarily in the understanding of the preaching event and in the theological content of the sermon rather than in sermon form.

The first section of this paper will very briefly survey some of those giants of the Reformation pulpit to whom Kiessling refers. The remainder will then consider four specific developments which came to Christian preaching as a result of their work: (1.) a renewed emphasis on preaching, (2.) Scripture becoming the source and authority for preaching, (3.) the gospel pervading preaching, and (4.) a new relationship of the preacher to his people. As suggested, these developments most significantly shape the content and the role of preaching. However, attention will also be given to the impact each of these developments had on the form of the sermon.

I. Great Preachers of the Reformation

Any survey of the great proclaimers of the sixteenth century must certainly begin with the man who in the popular sense began the Reformation, Martin Luther (1483-1546). Kiessling writes of Luther's contribution to the art in this way:

The sermons he thus evolved were as different from those of the later medieval preachers as the plays of Shakespeare are different from those of his predecessors. Quite fascinating is the range of his genius, the combination in it of the simple and child-like with the heroic, of brusque and earthy straightforwardness with fine religious sensitivity, of mystical depth with ethical practicality. He had taken over from the pre-Reformation preachers a sermonic instrument that had been developed through centuries of practice. But he disdained their artifices. What need had he of scholastic distinctions, of quotations from the fathers, of mechanically accumulated and arranged encyclopedias of illustrations, or of the tricks of amplification listed in homiletic manuals? His heart was filled to bursting with a great new idea that had remade his own life and was remaking the lives of many of his countrymen and contemporaries. . . . Preaching was never the same again even when rules once more asserted their sway over the second generation. And the new era began in that historic hour in which Luther with a heavy heart accepted the duty which Staupitz placed upon him, publicly to preach the Word of God.²

Remarkably, it was with fear and trepidation that Luther began his preaching career. In the *Tischreden* Luther describes the day in 1511 or 1512 on which his Augustinian superior, John Staupitz, himself a noted preacher, prevailed upon him to preach. Standing under a pear tree in the courtyard of the Wittenberg cloister, the young monk advanced argument after argument against his ever preaching. Finally in desperation, he pleaded that Dr. Staupitz was as good as taking his life. "In God's name!" Staupitz responded. "Our Lord God has many things to do: He is in need of wise people in heaven, too."³

Once in the pulpit, Luther was seldom out of it. More than twenty-three hundred of his sermons are extant, perhaps only a third of those he actually preached.⁴ He began his preaching by addressing his fellow Augustinians. Apparently he was well received, because he was given opportunity to speak at gatherings of the order well beyond his own region. Soon he began also to preach to the worshipers at St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg, the congregation that would hear the large majority of his messages. As the Reformation spread, Luther was invited to preach widely. He even composed several volumes of "postils," sermons to be used as aids or read by others, which circulated his "preaching" all over Germany and beyond.⁵ Nevertheless, his preaching always remained close to home; for extended periods he delivered sermon series on Sunday evenings in his own house.⁶

Though Luther never compiled his thoughts on preaching into anything like a homiletics text, he seemed fond of summarizing them in short, pithy lists. A preacher should, Luther said, "be a logician and rhetorician—that is, he must be able to teach and admonish. When he preaches on any article, he must first distinguish it, then define, describe, and show what it is; thirdly, he must produce sentences from the Scripture to prove and strengthen it; fourthly, he must explain it by examples; fifthly, he must adorn it with similitudes; and, lastly, he must admonish and arouse the indolent, correct the disobedient, and reprove false doctrine."⁷

More briefly yet, Luther summed up the task thus: "First, you must learn to go up to the pulpit. Second, you must know that you should stay there for a time. Third, you must learn to get down again."⁸ In other words, a man should first have a call, secondly have the pure doctrine, and thirdly keep the message under an hour. Even a one-sentence summary of Luther's preaching was possible—as it was of his sermons themselves: "In my preaching I take pains to treat a verse [of the Scriptures], to stick to it, and so to instruct the people that they can say, 'That's what the sermon was about.'"⁹

Luther seldom wrote out his sermons.¹⁰ He preached instead using an outline, or *Konzept*. While his delivery was therefore free and lively,¹¹ he admitted having many a bad dream of finding

himself in the pulpit without notes.¹² Much more of Luther's homiletical thinking, as well as examples of his sermons, will be offered throughout the final sections of this paper.

By no means was Luther the only man to shape the preaching of the Reformation in Germany. Perhaps the second greatest of the German preachers of the Reformation, interestingly, shared Luther's Wittenberg pulpit. More properly, Luther shared his, because after 1522 Johann Bugenhagen (1485-1558) was in fact Luther's pastor there.

Often known by Luther and others as Pomeranus or Dr. Pommer because of the German province of his birth, Bugenhagen was above all gifted as an organizer. He was chiefly responsible for organizing Lutheran churches in Brunswick, Hamburg, Copenhagen, his native Pomerania, and elsewhere. Ironically, his preaching Luther described as "whatever comes to mind," much like a maidservant chatting with another at the market.¹³ Despite his long-windedness, however, Luther called him "full and solid," a "very good preacher," because "he gives me many commonplaces on which my thoughts may roam."¹⁴

Philip Melancthon (1497-1560), Luther's closest partner, never preached. His place among Reformation preachers is nevertheless secured by his writings. His most significant academic work was a textbook on rhetoric published in 1519.¹⁵ In 1528, after visiting the Saxon churches, he offered pastors help with the content of evangelical preaching in *Unterricht der Visitatoren*.¹⁶ Melancthon even authored two homiletics texts, one of which has been called "justly celebrated."¹⁷

That Melancthon would have been an excellent preacher is demonstrated by his eulogy for Luther. In it Melancthon demonstrates both a command of classical rhetoric and a deep love of the gospel, comparing Luther to great leaders like Solon, Scipio, and Augustus, but finding him to be far greater because of the work God accomplished by Luther through His Word.¹⁸

The most original work of the period on homiletics, however, belonged to Andreas Hyperius (1511-1564). *On the Making of Sacred Discourses* may be seen as the first "scientific" treatise on

preaching theory. While Melanchthon and others had taught rhetoric with a view toward preaching, Hyperius' book taught preaching and drew upon rhetoric only as its servant.¹⁹

As in Germany, the Reformation was advanced in Switzerland largely by the words of dynamic preachers. Unfortunately, little remains of the preaching of the first great Swiss reformer, Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531). More than as a preacher, Zwingli is remembered as the man who brought social reform to Zurich, who, influenced greatly by Luther's writings, spread evangelical doctrine among the Swiss, who established a virtual theocracy, who parted company with Luther at Marburg over the Lord's Supper, and who died fighting for the Protestant cause.

Yet Zwingli thought of himself first of all as "a simple and plain preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ."²⁰ His preaching did indeed create a stir, especially his decision to preach consecutively through the Book of Matthew rather than on the appointed pericopes for the Sundays.²¹ Doubtless his preaching was also largely responsible for bringing about the social reforms he felt to be so important. These seem to have been a major theme in his messages. Deeply concerned that the practice of mercenary warfare was devastating Switzerland, he frequently preached against it.²² Not to be overlooked, however, was his emphasis that the saving "work and honour of Christ would be more clearly recognized" by the "sheep of his flock."²³

Like Luther, Jean Calvin (1509-1564) was driven toward a lucrative law career, somewhat unwillingly, by his father. Unlike Luther, Calvin did not shy away from the opportunity to preach. Without having been ordained and while still a law student at Bourges, he began preaching to small country congregations.²⁴ The turning point in his preaching career, however, came in a sermon which he did not deliver. Having abandoned law and moved to Paris after the death of his father, he was implicated in the authorship of a friend's speech which advocated Lutheran doctrine. Both men were forced to flee.

Not long thereafter Calvin set out for Strasbourg where he hoped to remain in quiet study. En route he stopped for one night in

Geneva. Except for a brief exile, he never left. William Farel, the leader of the Reformation there, persuaded Calvin that he must serve the evangelical cause in the city or place himself in very opposition to God. The rest is more history than can be related in this brief space.

None of Calvin's early sermons remain, but from 1549 on some twenty-three hundred (virtually the same number as for Luther) were carefully recorded.²⁵ They reveal the marks of classical rhetoric placed in service to the word of God. For example, Calvin cites Quintilian favorably, but at the same time warns against pretentious grandiloquence. Exposition of the word is paramount.²⁶

Calvin was not without opposition in Geneva. Banished from 1538 to 1541, he was also censured three times by the council of the city in 1548. Not coincidentally Calvin's preaching was charged with ethical demands and discipline. The great reformer was not at the height of popularity when he died, but his work, especially his preaching, transformed Geneva into a city of noted piety for generations to follow.²⁷

Two other men of the Swiss reform movement deserve brief mention here as preachers. Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531) of Basel has left to the present a significant number of sermons. His greater contribution to preaching, however, was in translating many sermons of the great preachers of the early Greek church, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom. Their styles shaped his own and influenced other preachers as well.²⁸

Johann Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) succeeded Zwingli as pastor of the cathedral in Zurich. He was an ardent proponent of Zwingli's doctrines, especially on the Lord's Supper. It was he who presented the Zurich position on the eucharist when the *Consensus Tigurinus* was reached with Calvin.²⁹

Bullinger's sermons were also highly influential in England. Fifty of his sermons were translated and distributed there during the reign of Elizabeth. These were proposed as expositions of Calvinist theology and suggested for use either as models or for actual reading in worship.³⁰

Sermons prepared by one man and read by another were actually the rule of the day in England. In fact, for brief times, they were very literally the rule. In the early years of the English Reformation competent preachers were in woefully short supply. Thus Archbishop Cranmer turned to the few outstanding churchmen of the realm to provide homilies which could simply be read from all the pulpits. In 1548, under Edward VI, and then again in 1576, under Elizabeth, free preaching was prohibited except by the few licensed preachers; only the homilies were to be used.³¹ Fortunately, both limitations were only temporary.

The homilies were composed by men who were more than able to deliver their own work. Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), who as Archbishop of Canterbury organized the effort, is credited with authorship of three of the twelve sermons in the first series. One of these, on salvation, is decidedly evangelical in its affirmation of justification by faith.³²

Probably the greatest of the English preachers of the Reformation era, and also a contributor to the homilies, was Hugh Latimer (1485-1555). Fearless and pointed in his criticism, he spoke his mind and the word of God as he understood it before both Henry VIII and his son Edward. He once preached to the latter that the common people "are equal with you. . . . The poorest ploughman is in Christ equal with the greatest prince that is. Let them therefore have sufficient to maintain them."³³ Latimer was a most open advocate of gospel-centered doctrine—and from very early in English terms. As might have been expected, he paid for his Protestantism, along with Cranmer and others, at the stake under Queen Mary's reactionary regime.

One other Englishman will be noted. William Perkins (1558-1602) concludes the present survey of Reformation preachers by leaving the era's one celebrated English text on homiletics. *Art of Prophesying* calls sermonizing a "sacred science" and addresses topics from theological ("Of the Word of God") to practical ("Of Memorie in Preaching").³⁴

II. Renewed Emphasis on Preaching

There is remarkable agreement among historians of homiletics as to the specific developments which the Reformation brought to preaching. In Luther's preaching Kiessling sees four: (1.) an enhanced position of Christ in the sermon, (2.) the sermon becoming scriptural in a sense as never before, (3.) deepened ethical content, and (4.) an enhanced position of the sermon in the worship service and in the life of the people.³⁵

In the reformers as a whole John Broadus likewise observes four major developments: (1.) a revival of preaching, (2.) a revival of biblical preaching, (3.) a revival of controversial preaching, and (4.) a revival of preaching the doctrine of grace.³⁶ Close examination will show these two assessments to be virtually identical. Similarly, E. C. Dargan calls the principles of *sola scriptura* and justification by faith in Christ, both established by the preaching of the Reformation, "the most weighty components" of modern preaching.³⁷ He, too, adds as a legacy of the Reformation the new prominence given to the sermon in worship.³⁸

The present research has found the analysis of these scholars to be helpful frames of reference. This paper will, therefore, also discuss four major developments in preaching which arose from the period of the Reformation. In each case special attention will be given to its shaping of the form of the sermon.

The first very significant contribution of the Reformation to preaching was simply to reemphasize the importance of the sermon. The Reformers brought back to preaching a prominence it has held in the church to this day. The renewed emphasis is seen both in the frequency of preaching and in a high view of the sermon as a means of grace.

A common myth decries the silence of preaching in Europe during the Middle Ages. While it is true that precious little was being done in England,³⁹ on the Continent in the later medieval period there was a din of preaching. In fact, it can be argued that at no time in German history was there more preaching than immediately before the Reformation.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, it is certain that sermonizing became more universal during the Reformation, and in some areas became common for the first time. The number of sermons the leaders preached is astounding. A typical week in Wittenberg would offer sermons on Sunday at five o'clock in the morning on the epistle for the day, at ten on the gospel, again in the afternoon on the Old Testament lesson, and then Monday through Saturday daily on the catechism and other selected books of the Bible.⁴¹ For Luther and his contemporaries to preach four times a day was not uncommon.⁴²

The increases in preaching were perhaps most notable where previously there had been the greatest dearth. In England sermons were now to be preached at least once a quarter.⁴³ It was a start. Even Roman Catholic preaching became more frequent.⁴⁴ With the renewed frequency of preaching came also the more competent clergy and more dedicated sermon preparation which it demanded. Luther, Calvin, and their cohorts all understood the difficulty of the task and expected those who ascended the pulpit to be adequate to it.⁴⁵

The increased frequency of preaching was due to the Reformers' understanding of the word of God as a means of grace. The popular understanding of preaching had been as only a preparation for the sacraments. "As Dante has to change guides when he enters heaven, so the sermon has to stop at the gates of the baptismal font, the penitential, and the altar."⁴⁶

By contrast, Calvin was unabashed in calling the sermon itself sacramental.⁴⁷ That is, it was an actual means by which God came to His people. In a sermon on John 4:9-10 Luther asserted:

To be sure, I do hear the sermon; however, I am wont to ask: "Who is speaking?" The pastor? By no means! You do not hear the pastor. Of course, the voice is his, but the words he employs are really spoken by my God.⁴⁸

The preaching of the Reformation thus proclaimed in itself the *certitudo salutis*, the certainty of salvation, because the real speaker was the very giver of salvation.⁴⁹ As Latimer summarized, "Take away preaching, take away salvation."⁵⁰

The renewed emphasis on preaching had a profound effect on the form of the sermon. The sermon became the central element in the Protestant worship service.⁵¹ Thus it would become permanently placed in a liturgical context. Parameters of time (though varying widely from one tradition and era to another) would be set. According to the thinking of the Reformation the sermon would never be a perfunctory interlude, but a lively and focused moment.

In Lutheran services the sermon enjoyed a new relationship with the sacraments. Without replacing Holy Communion as the highest moment, the sermon is exalted in that it properly explicates the sacrament. The importance of the sermon along *with* the Lord's Supper is clearly seen in Luther's *Formula Missae*, his Latin order of service (1523).

The order begins with an entrance psalm and liturgical hymns and continues with a collect (appointed prayer), epistle, gospel, and the Nicene Creed. Luther then writes:

We do not think that it matters whether the sermon in the vernacular comes after the creed or before the introit [that is, entrance psalm] of the mass; although it might be argued that since the gospel is the voice crying in the wilderness and calling unbelievers to faith, it seems particularly fitting to preach before mass. For properly speaking, the mass consists in using the gospel and communing at the table of the Lord.⁵²

The service then concludes with a full liturgy of Holy Communion, purged of the corruptions of the papistic mass. In Luther's thinking, therefore, the sermon indeed stands alongside the sacrament as the twin foci of the service, two grand moments in which the Lord comes to His people.

Luther's *Deutsche Messe* (1526), his mass in the vernacular, reflects the same understanding.⁵³ His suggestions for weekday services, during which the Lord's Supper was not celebrated, also emphasize the sermon. He points out that, according to ancient custom, such services included the *homilia*, exposition of the word, a practice which medieval usage had omitted.⁵⁴ Whenever God's people came together, then, preaching was to be restored to its

historic place.

III. Scripture as the Source and Authority for Preaching

In order for preaching to merit such an exalted position in the life of the church, it was implicit in the minds of the reformers that the preaching be based solely on the word of God, the Holy Scriptures. A second modern myth of medieval preaching is that it was devoid of Scripture. Actually the preachers of the pre-Reformation era were well-versed in their Bibles and quoted from them often.⁵⁵

However, along with the biblical sources, a wide variety of fanciful alternatives were used. Legends called *exempla*, some pious, some obscene, held high homiletical standing, having been collected by the likes of Gregory the Great. The saints, as one might guess, appeared prominently. Nature-stories and pseudo-scientific observations were also popular sermonic materials.⁵⁶

For preachers of reform, Scripture would not share the pulpit with such imaginative wanderings. Everywhere *sola scriptura* was a battle-cry of the Reformation. Zwingli was committed to it.⁵⁷ Swiss cities and the English crown legislated it.⁵⁸ Luther simply preached it:

This is the sum of the matter: Let everything be done so that the Word may have free course instead of the prattling and rattling that has been the rule up to now. We can spare everything except the Word. Again, we profit by nothing as much as the Word . . . "One thing is needful."⁵⁹

The reformers believed that the word of God must be preached to be fully effective.⁶⁰ The church was not to be "a pen-house but always a mouth-house," Luther said.⁶¹

The generous use of legends alongside Holy Writ was not the only flaw in the medieval preacher's use of the Bible. Perhaps even more damaging—and even more fanciful—was the interpretive hermeneutic which prevailed. Allegory, long ago inherited from Origen, still dominated preaching.⁶² During his early years even Luther was not above allegorizing his texts.⁶³

One of the greatest contributions of the Reformation to preaching,

however, was recapturing the literal sense of the Scriptures. Luther expressed his repentance in this way:

At that time I dealt with allegories, tropologies, and analogies and did nothing but clever tricks with them. If somebody had them today they'd be looked upon as rare relics. I know they're nothing but rubbish. Now I've let them go. . . . The literal sense does it—in it there's life, comfort, power, instruction, and skill.⁶⁴

Bullinger's sermon, "Of the Word of God," may well express the understanding of the entire reform-movement in its five principles of correctly interpreting the text. The expositor should be guided by (1.) the rule of faith (consistency with the clear biblical doctrines), (2.) love of God and neighbor, (3.) the historical occasion of the text, (4.) Scripture interpreting Scripture, and (5.) prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵

Luther must receive credit for rediscovering how to form the sermon around the mighty principle of *sola scriptura*.⁶⁶ The changes are visible in two different styles of preaching, both his. Of one style are his pericopal sermons. On Sunday mornings and festivals, Luther generally preached on one of the pericopes of the day appointed in the historic lectionary, either the epistle or the gospel. Since these consisted of determined cuttings of verses, usually a paragraph in length, Luther would develop from them a deductive outline. For example, on the Nineteenth Sunday after the Feast of the Trinity (October 3, 1529), he preached on Matthew 9:1-8 according to the following outline:

The Righteousness of the World and the
Christian—Heavenly Righteousness

or

Jesus Cures the Palsied Man,
and the Power on the Earth to Forgive Sins

- I. Of the Worldly Righteousness and Piety
- II. Of the Christian and Heavenly Righteousness
 - A. This righteousness in itself and its right use
 - B. The fountain and foundation of this righteousness

C. The means by which to become partakers of this righteousness⁶⁷

The inheritance from scholastic preaching is obvious. The theme and divisions are clear and logical. Unlike those of the scholastics, however, the sermon does not become mired in minutiae of subdivisions. The outline develops only the main ideas of the text and then expounds them freely. The text determines structure. Such preaching remains a staple to the present.

For services other than Sunday mornings and festivals, Luther most often preached in series proceeding consecutively through various books of the Bible. Others, of course, had done the same thing. The practice became, in fact, common among the reformers. Calvin and Zwingli, for example, also preached in this way.⁶⁸

Many interpreters nevertheless call Luther's style a totally new sermon form: *die schriftauslegende Predigt* ("the sermon laying out Scripture," usually translated "expository"). While Luther's method is often called "homily," it is really to be distinguished from the running, verse-by-verse "oral exegesis" usually signified by that term. What sets Luther's form apart is his unmistakable development around the *Sinnmitte*, or *Kern*, or *Herzpunkt*, the heart or kernel of the text. The sermon follows the text from first to last, but it continually drives home the one main point which Luther believes that God is making.⁶⁹ This form of preaching, too, is flourishing even today. Clearly, then, as Broadus assessed, the Reformation was a great—and lasting—revival of *biblical* preaching.

IV. The Gospel as the Content of Preaching

The proper use and interpretation of Scripture led to the other great *solas* of the Reformation: *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. These *solas* displayed themselves in the third great development in preaching in the Reformation. It was now the gospel which predominated in the contents of the sermon.

A transgression of medieval preaching less obvious than those to which allusion was made earlier was perhaps just as deadly. Unquestionably the goal of most preaching before the Reformation, including that which was "biblical," was a moral response, that is,

certain behavior to be undertaken by the hearer. Often the goals were hollow and outward—taking monastic vows, going on pilgrimages, purchasing indulgences. Often the value of such goals was proven by the example of the saints.⁷⁰ But even when they were laudable, and even when Christ's name was attached, the goals were empty.

They were empty because they lacked that motivation and power which lies outside of man in the gospel. Christ was often summoned to demonstrate Christian conduct, but usually in the form of *imitatio Christi*: "He did it; you can, too." What Christ had already done in man's stead—especially for his salvation—was seldom emphasized.⁷¹

The Reformation brought Christ's vicarious work to the fore of preaching. Luther above all loved to preach Christ's passion and resurrection. "The theme—the human Jesus Christ, one of us, bearing our sin and its guilt, alienating power, and corrupting effects to the cross and into death for us—breathes in every sermon."⁷²

Thence, of course, comes the hallmark doctrine of the Reformation, justification by grace through faith. This was the essence of Luther's preaching. Underlying virtually every sermon was this message which he proclaimed so explicitly on Pentecost on the basis of John 3:16-21:

. . . we have forgiveness of sins and eternal life, without merit or worthiness on our part, out of pure grace (*gratis*), and alone for the sake of His beloved Son, in whom God so loved us that this love has taken away and blotted out all our sins and the sins of the whole world.⁷³

The same sermon asks this question:

In what manner may we lay hold of such a treasure and gift, or what is the purse or safe in which it may be kept? It is faith alone, as Christ here says, "that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish," etc. Faith holds out its hands and opens the sack, and allows itself to be presented with good things. As God, the Giver, in love bestows this gift, so we are the recipients by faith, which faith does nothing

more than receive the gift. For it is not our doing, and it cannot be merited through our work. It has already been bestowed and presented. All you need to do is open your mouth, or rather your heart, hold still, and allow it to be entirely filled (Psalm 81:10). This can be done in no other way than by believing these words; for you observe that He here requires faith, and faith fully and perfectly appropriates this treasure.⁷⁴

Here is a revolutionary break with the earlier preaching of the age. One need not have been an accomplished theologian to recognize that the contents of the sermon had been radically changed.

Keeping this rich teaching pure demanded another new distinction in preaching, that between law and gospel. Luther recognized that all of Scripture could be summarized in these two doctrines, both God's word but quite opposite in purpose. In a sermon on New Year's Day in 1532, with Galatians 3:23-24 as the text, Luther explained the difference:

We should understand "Law" to mean nothing else than God's word and command, in which He directs us what to do and what not to do, and demands from us our obedience or "work." . . .

On the other hand, the Gospel or the faith is a doctrine or word of God that does not require our works. It does not command us to do anything. On the contrary, it bids us merely to accept the offered grace and forgiveness of sins and eternal life and let it be given to us.⁷⁵

In other words, the law lays down what is demanded of man; the gospel tells him that Christ has fulfilled those demands for him. The law makes man aware of his need for a Savior by showing him his sin, as in a mirror; the gospel announces that he has that Savior in Christ Jesus.

Thus, preventing a confusion of law and gospel is critical, as Luther made clear in the same sermon on Galatians:

Distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel is the highest art in Christendom, one that every person who

values the name Christian ought to recognize, know and possess. . . .

That is why St. Paul strongly insists that among Christians these two doctrines, the Law and the Gospel, are to be well and truly separated from one another. Both of them are the Word of God: the Law (or the Ten Commandments) and the Gospel. Both were given by God: the Gospel originally in Paradise, the Law on Mt. Sinai. That is why it is so important to distinguish the two words properly and not mingle them together. Otherwise you will not be able to have or hold on to a correct understanding of either of them. Instead, just when you think you have them both, you will have neither.⁷⁶

Just as the gospel of justification became the controlling content of preaching, so with Luther the dynamic of law and gospel came to shape the form of the sermon. For Lutheran preaching this remains true. Law and gospel changed the form of the sermon in two ways.

In the first place, every Lutheran sermon came to have, implicitly, two parts. This development is not, to be sure, necessarily reflected in an outline of two major divisions. Rather, two forces are always at work, always in opposition, with one—the gospel—holding general predominance.⁷⁷ Sin opposes grace, helplessness is opposed by power, faith is set against works.

Often, however, the struggle will be quite transparent in the structure of the sermon. Many of Luther's pericopal sermons identify law and gospel in the major divisions. The outline of a sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after the Feast of the Trinity, based on Matthew 22:34-46, illustrates the point:

Of the Law and the Gospel

or

The Two Greatest Commandments and How
Christ Is David's Son and David's Lord

I. Of the Law

II. Of the Gospel

The sermon does not teach *about* the law and gospel. It proclaims

them. After expounding the demands to love God and our neighbor throughout the first part of the sermon, Luther then turns about-face:

But what shall we do to get rid of our bad conscience? We have now heard what the law is, and how through the law we come to the knowledge of sin; but this is not enough; another has a work to do here, whose name is Christ Jesus.⁷⁸

The second way in which the law-gospel dynamic shapes the sermon is in becoming the criterion for evaluating every form. Since preaching both the law and the gospel is considered essential in every Lutheran sermon, the form must serve this function. Kurt Aland writes that, for Luther, it is the proper relation of law and gospel "in which everything is included and out of which come the answers to all questions."⁷⁹

Again, this criterion does not itself constitute form. Instead, of every option in form it asks whether this form allows the preacher to present and distinguish law and gospel clearly? Does a verse-by-verse homily of a particular text, for example, allow a proper balance? Does the narrative form too easily suggest only a moralizing of the law (i.e., "Go and do thou likewise")? In preaching of Luther's legacy, whatever form is used for a text must favor the proper distinction of law and gospel. The end in mind is that great development in preaching which took place in the Reformation, the proclamation of the saving work of Christ.

V. The Relationship of the Preacher to the People

The fourth and last development in preaching which is to be considered here is the relationship which grew up between the preacher and his hearers. More than before the Reformation, it was one of pastor to flock. In critical ways many preachers of the late Middle Ages were detached from their hearers. Sermons prepared according to the method of the scholastics often were impersonal and beyond the comprehension of the congregation.⁸⁰ Even worse, so much of the preaching of the time was delivered by itinerants. The preaching orders, the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians, had papal authorization to preach anywhere.⁸¹ On the other hand,

parish priests were often negligent in that duty.⁸² In England absentee rectors lived at some distance from even their parishes.⁸³ The English solution of homilies prepared by able but unknown men could at best be a stop-gap.

Very much by contrast, the leading reformers were men of the people. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin will always be closely associated with Wittenberg, Zurich, and Geneva, and each was well known by the local people. The idea of wandering preachers troubled Luther. He was emphatic that a man have a formal call from a congregation in order to preach. "Otherwise no one should let them in or listen to them, even if they were to preach the pure gospel, nay, even if they were angels from heaven and all Gabriels at that!"⁸⁴ Luther, in fact, coined the German word, *Beruf*, or "calling."⁸⁵

On the other side of the pulpit, Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers immeasurably elevated the dignity of the laity. Luther preached on 1 Peter 2:9 in 1523:

We are all priests before God if we are Christians. For since we have been laid on the Stone who is the Chief Priest before God, we also have everything He has. It would please me very much if this word "priest" were used as commonly as the term Christian is applied to us.⁸⁶

The result was a true pastoral concern on the part of preachers for their people. The functions of prophet and shepherd would no more be separated. Conversely, henceforth parish pastors were expected to preach regularly. And as greater dedication was required, the moral lives of pastors, so decadent prior to the Reformation, rose to the level of their new responsibilities.

The healthy relationship between preacher and people was reflected in the pulpit. Luther especially could empathize with the personal struggles of his people,⁸⁷ and he was thus in a position to honestly—and sometimes sharply—chide them.⁸⁸ The close relationship of Luther to his hearers is evidenced in one more of Luther's lists, his "Ten Commandments for Preachers":

- 1) Be able to teach so people can follow you; 2) Have a

good sense of humor; 3) Be able to speak well; 4) Have a good voice; 5) Have a good memory; 6) Know when to stop; 7) Be sure of . . . doctrine; 8) Be ready to venture body and blood, wealth and honor, for the word of God; 9) Suffer oneself to be mocked and jeered at by all; 10) Be ready to accept patiently the fact that nothing is seen more quickly in preachers than . . . faults.⁸⁹

Both common forms of medieval preaching, the scholastic and the popular mendicant, were significantly modified by the preaching of the Reformation. The scholastic sermon was often more like a lecture. Luther's concern for his flock led him to understand the need for a difference:

We preach publicly for the sake of plain people. Christ could have taught in a profound way but He wished to deliver His message with the utmost simplicity in order that the common people might understand. Good God, there are sixteen-year-old girls, women, old men, and farmers in church, and they don't understand lofty matters. . . . When it comes to academic disputations watch me in the university; there I'll make it sharp enough for anybody.⁹⁰

Complicated thoughts and issues we should discuss in private with the eggheads [*Kluglinge*]. I don't think of Dr. Pomeranus, Jonas, or Philip in my sermon. They know more about it than I do. So I don't preach to them. I just preach to Hansie or Betsy [*Elslein*].⁹¹

A survey of Luther's writings does show a marked difference in style between his commentaries and lectures, on the one hand, and his sermons on the other.⁹²

The giants of the Reformation were clear and simple in their pulpit presentations. Relevant applications abound. Contact with the hearer is apparent even in their manuscripts. Luther loved to use dialogue.⁹³ Calvin frequently employed interrogation to engage his listeners.⁹⁴ The aloof detachment of the scholastic method had been removed from the sermon of the reform.

At the pole opposite the scholastics, the friars had gone to

extremes to popularize their preaching. Illustrations could be vivid to the point of grotesque. This approach, too, the Reformation preachers changed.

The leading Protestants were eloquent but not sensational in their use of language. Their purpose was to elucidate the Scriptures rather than titillate the emotions. Early in his career, Zwingli had illustrated using the standard collections, but he gave them up for primarily biblical examples.⁹⁵ Calvin did not illustrate as such, but used vivid metaphors and even drama in his sermons.⁹⁶

Luther, too, would have spurned the idea of showmanship in the pulpit. He was, however, an excellent illustrator. His premise was that contemporary life was a participation in divine drama. While he seldom told stories in his sermons, they nevertheless had a narrative quality. Common people in the daily pursuits were often pictured.⁹⁷ And when he did tell a story, it was always one that came from life:

Nobody took pity on this young woman who was about to give birth for the first time; nobody took to heart the heaviness of her body; nobody cared that she was in strange surroundings and did not have any of the things which a woman in childbirth needs. Rather she was there without anything ready, without light, without fire, in the middle of the night, alone in the darkness.⁹⁸

Richard Lischer sees in Luther's use of narrative an understanding of God at work in human life which is lacking in contemporary preaching.⁹⁹ If such a concept is indeed lacking today, then it must have been misplaced over the last five centuries. For contemporary preaching was willed its understanding of God touching man—and his relationship to the preacher of God—by the preaching of the Reformation.

Conclusion

Dargan calls the sixteenth century one of the four great eras of Christian preaching.¹⁰⁰ The men who proclaimed God's word in a way unheard for a millennium certainly made it such a time, and their eloquence and fervor have perhaps been unmatched since. But

they also left to preachers of future centuries a legacy beyond the range of their own voices. Since the Reformation, the pulpit has continued to hold a place of high esteem. Scripture continues to be preached. The message of the gospel of justification by grace through faith continues to be heard. And the preacher's role is still defined by his relationship of pastor to people. In a significant sense, these contributions of the Reformation have shaped modern preaching.

Endnotes

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3. Stanley D. Schneider, "Luther, Preaching, and the Reformation," in *Interpreting Luther's Legacy*, ed. Fred W. Meuser and Stanley D. Schneider (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), p. 121.
4. Patrick Ferry, "Martin Luther on Preaching," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 54 (October 1990): 266.
5. Martin Luther, *Sermons II*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, 52, *Luther's Works: American Edition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), pp. ix-xiii. This volume contains seven postils.
6. Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says: An Anthology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 3:1623.
7. T. Harwood Pattison, *The History of Christian Preaching* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1903), p. 54. Pattison is quoting from Luther's *Tischreden*.
8. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert, 54, *Luther's Works: American Edition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 393. Mackinnon notes that Luther's saying is even more pointed in the German: "Steig flugs auf, tu's Maul

auf, hor bald auf." James Mackinnon, *Luther and the Reformation* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 4:313n.

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19. Dargan, pp. 136-142.
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21. Edwin Charles Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), p, 404.
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23. Ulrich Zwingli, *Ulrich Zwingli: Selected Works*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1901; reprint, 1972), pp. xix-xx.
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