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Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross

John T. Pless

One year after Luther's death, Lucas Cranach the Elder painted a panel featuring a portrait of Martin Luther in the pulpit. The panel formed part of the well-known altar-piece at the City Church (St. Mary's) of Wittenberg. With the Bible open before him, it is the mature Luther who proclaims Christ to the congregation gathered before him. Cranach's picture of Luther has the Reformer with one hand resting on the sacred text and the other hand pointing to a larger-than-life crucifix. The work of art summarizes Luther's ministry as a whole. Like St. Paul before him, Martin Luther was determined to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified.

Luther was not the first preacher of the cross since the end of the New Testament era. Hermann Sasse rightly comments that "the theology of the cross belongs to the West."¹ One only has to recall Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why Did God Become Man?) or the great hymn of praise, "O Sacred Head Now Wounded." The Gospel of the cross was not entirely absent from the church of the Middle Ages. Sasse says:

"How may I come to have a gracious God?" This question moved the theology of the Latin church for a thousand years before it became the question of the Reformation. For centuries this question brought into the monasteries the most pious people of the Middle Ages, until it became the life-and-death question of the last great monk of the Middle Ages. During those thousand years Christians learned *that* both belong together: the sin of the world and the Passion of Christ, my sin and Christ's death on the cross. It was not yet possible, however, to answer the question as to *how* they belong together. The probing of this question produced the medieval theology of the cross.²

But the medieval theology of the cross is not yet the evangelical theology of the cross which would finally take hold of Brother Martin and be articulated by him from both the parish pulpit and the lecture podium. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine and weigh the various scholarly arguments proposed with regard to Luther's path to his so-called "evangelical breakthrough"; we shall focus on the theology of the cross as it shaped Luther's preaching.

To understand the state of preaching in Germany at the eve of the Reformation, it is necessary to keep at least three factors in mind. The first is the Crusades, which interjected a new element into the practice of preaching. Itinerant preachers gathered an audience of common folk in outdoor

settings, urging them to join the battle against the infidel. These preachers proclaimed that general indulgences would be dispensed to those who would take up arms against the enemies of the Lord Christ and His church. The great preaching orders of the Middle Ages—the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians—were organized to provide the church with preachers who would be skilled in rousing the faithful to action against the Turk.

A second force to shape the late medieval sermon was scholasticism with its Aristotelian logic. Under the influence of scholasticism, the old sermonic form of the homily, which was a fairly simple and usually artless commentary on the text, gave way to a new sermonic form which insisted that the preacher must search the text for a *theme*. Schneider writes:

The sermon was often compared to a tree, such a tree being actually drawn in one of the homiletical manuscripts; the theme, naturally, was the trunk. The whole sermon must grow organically from the theme taken from the Holy Scripture, the theme for seasonal sermons at mass being taken usually from the Epistle or the Gospel.³

By the time of Luther, the theme of the sermon was often derived from the life of a saint, from a particular doctrinal teaching, liturgical practice, moral precept, or pious custom of the church.

The third element to influence the pre-Reformation sermon was mysticism. If the scholastic sermon was often characterized by abstract theological formulations and its learned style, then the sermons from the lips of the preachers of mysticism (Meister Eckhart and John Tauler, for example) may be characterized by their emphasis on the emotional. The sufferings of Jesus are proclaimed in such a way as to move the hearts of the pious to melt with pity and finally be molded into an ecstatic union with the Suffering Saviour. These sermons were marked by repetition and lack of structure or form. It was also through the sermons of mysticism that criticisms of the church (practices, not doctrine) found a place in the pulpit. John Geiler, who manned the pulpit in the Cathedral in Strasbourg for over thirty years in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was well known for his satirical sermons which poked fun at questionable ecclesiastical practices.

To what kind of preaching was Luther exposed as a young man? John P. Dolan, a Roman Catholic writer, comments on the content of preaching at the threshold of the Reformation:

Preachers were preoccupied with the theme of sin and the grim face of death waiting for the moment of merited punishment. There was an emphasis on the horrors of hell and the sufferings of the damned. Their sermons were filled with descriptions of burning trees on which hung the souls of those who did not attend church services, vultures gnawing at men's vitals, venomous serpents stinging the unholy, boiling lakes, frozen fens, heated ovens and vile dungeons. Scripture, when quoted, was completely torn from its living, historical context. Its personalities and their sayings were distorted and mutilated into passive conveniences for moral dilation. Everywhere the emphasis was on the negative side of man's salvation, his sins and punishment.⁴

But it would be a mistake to conclude that the pre-Reformation preachers were altogether ignorant of the biblical texts. A manual of homiletics written by Jerome Dungersheim in 1514 commends the study of Sacred Scripture to those who would preach:

If they desire to be shepherds of the flock of Christ the Word of God provides them with the only pasture and nourishment of the flock; if they would be physicians of souls, the Word of God offers the only remedy . . . If they would be spiritual leaders of the congregation, God's Word is the sword they must be able to wield. . . . How can they accomplish this task without a thorough knowledge of the same Word and unless they have studiously acquired and practiced the art of using it wisely.⁵

The problem was not the lack of the Bible but the use, or rather misuse, of the Bible. Or as Pelikan says, "The Church did not need Luther to tell it that the Bible was true. But it did need a Luther to tell it what the truth of the Bible is." The allegorical method of biblical interpretation with its "four-fold sense" of the scriptural text (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical), dating back to the time of the School of Alexandria in the ancient church, reigned supreme. Medieval sermons were, for the most part, exercises in the application of this method. It was against this backdrop that we see the emergence of Luther the preacher.

Well-grounded in the classical usages of rhetoric and grammar, versed in Aristotelian modes of thinking, Luther entered the

Augustinian cloister. It was here that Luther was trained as a preacher by teachers who applied the traditional homiletical models based on scholastic techniques grounded in Aristotelian logic. Luther was ordained into the priesthood in 1507. Becoming a priest did not necessarily mean that the man would be a preacher. In the cloister Luther reluctantly accepted the task of preaching. In 1532, when Luther was encouraging his friend Lauterbach to accept the call to be a preacher at Wittenberg's Castle Church, Luther recalled his own appointment to preach:

Ah, my friend, I had the same experience. I feared the pulpit perhaps as greatly as you do; yet I had to do it; I was forced to preach. At first I had to preach to the brethren in the refectory. Ah, how I feared the pulpit! Under this pear tree I advanced fifteen arguments to Dr. Staupitz; with them I declined my call. But they did me no good. When I finally said, "Dr. Staupitz, you are taking my life; I won't be able to endure it three months," he replied, "In God's Name! Our Lord God has many things to do; He is in need of wise people in heaven, too."⁶

Luther did preach and not only did he survive the ordeal, he eventually was to thrive in the pulpit. The Swedish historian of homiletics Yngve Brilioth identifies three distinct periods in the development of young Luther's preaching: (1) the monastic period (1512-1515); (2) the mystical period (1515-1517); and (3) the transitional period (1518).⁷

It is a matter of debate as to the date of Luther's first sermon. While Brilioth has assigned Luther's first sermon to the year 1512, John Doberstein, the editor of Volume 51 in the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, leaves open the possibility that Luther may have preached this sermon on Matthew 7:12 in 1510. Did Luther preach any sermon prior to the sermon on Matthew 7:12? If so, we have no evidence in either the manuscripts or Luther's personal records. At any rate, the sermon on Matthew 7:12 ("In everything do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets") reflects the standard homiletical form of the day. The sermon is heavily freighted with the preaching of the Law. Worthy of note are these lines:

. . . this one doctrine is to be noted: It is not sufficient for salvation that a man merely refrain from doing harm and evil to his neighbor with these three goods [external goods —

money, clothing, land; personal or physical goods — health, aptitude of body and mind; internal goods — virtues, knowledge]. It is required rather that he be useful to him and benefit him with these three goods. This doctrine is proved by threefold authority: by reason, by authority, and by analogy.⁸

Luther concludes the sermon with a proclamation of God's threat of retribution:

Therefore one can say nothing better than this: Hold up the mirror of these words to your conscience and see whether any such motive would prompt you not to wish any good to be done to you by others if they cherished any such motive toward you. Then you are saved. Otherwise I advise you to beware. For the Lord will keep this rule: "The measure you give will be the measure you get" [Matt. 7:2]. For he well perceives the heart and the motives we cherish. Therefore, if we wish to be requited by God as we do to our neighbor, then it is well with us. But if in our ill will we say: I will let him go, disengage myself from him, then I ask whether you also wish that God should say to you: I will let you go, I will disengage myself from you and neither give nor take anything from you? Who would wish that? But this is precisely what he will do to us, if this is what we do to our neighbor without sufficient cause.⁹

Brilioth describes the second stage in the development of the young Luther's preaching as the mystical period. In Luther's sermons of this period the influences of Tauler and the *Theologia Germanica* are evident. In sermons from this period Luther begins to direct critical remarks at the practices of the papal church. In a sermon preached on St. Matthew's Day, 1517, Luther takes aim at the clergy who peddle indulgences:

For, not through indulgences, but through gentleness and lowliness, so says he [Jesus], is rest for your souls found. But gentleness is present only in punishment and suffering, from which these indulgences absolve us. They teach us to dread the cross and suffering, and the result is that we never become gentle and lowly, and that means that we never receive indulgence nor come to Christ. Oh, the dangers of our time! Oh, you snoring priests! Oh, darkness deeper than Egyptian! How secure we are in the midst of the worst of all our evils!¹⁰

The year 1518 was a year of transition for Luther's preaching, according to Brilioth. His Ninety-Five Theses were having an

explosive effect on the life of the church. It is no surprise, therefore, that Luther's sermons from this year were marked with an intensified critique of the Roman Church as well as with deepened catechetical content. In his recent study of Luther's Christology, Mark Leinhard notes:

The sermons of the years 1518-1519 are from the hand of Luther himself and were published by him; they are instruments deliberately chosen for the purpose of making known his views on the subject of the Gospel to a vast audience, views which he set in motion by the affairs of the indulgences. One can admire their tough and direct style. While commentaries include many essays and digressions, references to the Fathers of the Church, and the fundamental discussions with theologians, the sermons in question treat their subject step by step without digression, going straight to the essential point. However these are not sermons in the classic sense of the word. There is no biblical passage commented on for the faithful, but a devotional theme: meditation on the Passion of Christ, a general human concern, how to prepare for death, or this or that aspect of life in the church. Thus in these sermons the celebration of the Eucharist, marriage, Baptism, and penitence are all dealt with.¹¹

After 1519 the majority of Luther's sermons are either textual or catechetical, demonstrating a knowledge of the text coupled with a desire to bring comfort to sinners through the proclamation of Christ crucified.

It was not unusual for Luther to preach three or four times each week, as the weekly schedule at Wittenberg provided for at least three sermons each Sunday in addition to the daily sermons preached each weekday. As assistant to Johann Bugenhagen, Luther carried much of the responsibility for preaching in the parish church at Wittenberg. "Often I preach four sermons on one day,"¹² he once told Bucer. Luther claimed "to have equaled the preaching activity of both Augustine and Ambrose." He said, "I am not only Luther, but Pomeranus, Moses, Jethro and what not — all things in all."¹³ With so many opportunities for preaching, it is not startling to discover approximately 2,300 of Luther's sermons preserved in the Weimar Edition of Luther's works.

The significance of preaching in Luther's ministry can be readily seen in his explanation of the Third Commandment in the Small

Catechism:

We should fear and love God, and so we should not despise his Word and the preaching of the same, but deem it holy and gladly hear and learn it.¹⁴

In the Large Catechism Luther is even more explicit:

Therefore you must continually keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, new pleasure, and a new spirit of devotion, and it constantly cleanses the heart and its meditations. For these words are not idle or dead, but effective and living. Even if no other interest or need drove us to the Word, yet everyone should be spurred on by the realization that in this way the devil is cast out and put to flight, this commandment is fulfilled, and God is more pleased by this than by any work of hypocrisy, however brilliant.¹⁵

Unlike adherents to the *Mysterientheologie* of the contemporary liturgical movement, Luther knew that "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10:17). For this reason, Luther insisted that the sermon be given a place of prominence in the service. God reveals Himself in and through His Word. In the treatise of 1523, "Concerning the Order of Public Worship," Luther writes:

The service now in common use everywhere goes back to genuine Christian beginnings, as does the office of preaching. But as the latter has been perverted by the spiritual tyrants, so the former has been corrupted by the hypocrites. As we do not on that account abolish the office of preaching, but aim to restore it again to its right and proper place, so it is not our intention to do away with the service but to restore it again to its rightful use.

Three serious abuses have crept into the service. First, God's Word has been silenced, and only reading and singing remain in the churches. This is the worst abuse. Second, when God's Word had been silenced, such a host of unchristian fables and lies in legends, hymns, and sermons were introduced that it

is horrible to see. Third, such divine service was performed as a work whereby God's grace and salvation might be won. As a result, faith disappeared and everyone is pressed to enter the priesthood, convents, and monasteries, and to build churches and endow them.

Now in order to correct these abuses, know first of all that a Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God's Word and prayer, no matter how briefly, as Psalm 102 says, "When the kings and the people assemble to serve the Lord, they shall declare the name and the praise of God." And Paul in I Corinthians 14[:26-31] says that when they come together, there should be prophesying, teaching, and admonition. Therefore, when God's Word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read, or even come together.¹⁶

Preaching was part of the mass in the Middle Ages, although it was an optional feature of the service. The sermon "lacked an organic relationship to the Mass."¹⁷ Luther's liturgical revision, far from being a piece of bungled liturgical surgery, was a necessary outcome of his theology of justification by grace through faith for Christ's sake. The liturgy serves the preached and sacramental Word which bestows the benefits achieved by Christ. Word and sacrament, sermon and liturgy are not in competition with each other; rather Luther sees them in co-ordination with one another. In his treatise of 1525, "Against the Heavenly Prophets," Luther writes:

If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ, as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me the forgiveness which was won on the cross. Therefore, Luther has rightly taught that whoever has a bad conscience from his sins should go to the sacrament to obtain comfort, not because of the bread and the wine, not because of the body and blood of Christ, but because of the word which in the sacraments offers, presents, and gives the body and blood of Christ given and shed for me. Is that not clear enough?¹⁸

How, then, did Luther preach? As we have already observed, Luther's preaching did change under the "impact of the Gospel."

By 1522-1524 we see Luther completely at the home in the Bible. Heinrich Bornkamm writes:

All those things of prominence in medieval preaching — the game of allegorical exposition, the miraculous legends of the saints, the extolling of aids to devotion such as the rosary or other prayer forms, as well as the moralizing — were dropped. He preached precisely and penetratingly on the text, not on a dogmatic theme suggested by the text. To be sure, he did not simply expound or illustrate the text but led his hearers on to the enduring truths, valid then as well as earlier, in and behind each word of Scripture. Only rarely did he touch on current events that had nothing directly to do with the text, such as the imperial mandate of 1523 or the conflict with the chapter members of the Castle Church.¹⁹

In the early 1520's Luther was not completely free from the use of the allegorical method as a way of deriving Gospel-content from Old Testament texts. His struggles with Müntzer and Karlstadt impressed Luther with the grave dangers inherent in the "spiritualization" of the scriptural texts. Eventually Luther becomes less and less reliant on allegory and finally abandons it altogether.

Luther never wrote a homiletics textbook, although he did threaten to do so on occasion. He did, however, make practical suggestions regarding the practice of preaching to both his students and colleagues. Luther emphasized the necessity of preaching with clarity and simplicity. A few samples from his Table Talk will suffice:

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."

When Christ preached, he proceeded quickly to a parable and spoke about sheep, shepherds, wolves, vineyards, fig trees, seeds, fields, plowing. The poor lay people were able to comprehend these things.²⁰

Once a pastor, Bernard von Dolen, who was a minister in Herzberg, complained to Luther that members of his congregation were unwilling to read or study the Catechism. Luther responded to von Dolen urging him to preach the Gospel in such a way that it would be comprehended by his hearers:

Cursed be every preacher who aims at lofty topics in the church, looking for his glory and selfishly desiring to please one

individual or another. When I preach here [in Wittenberg], I adapt myself to the circumstances of the common people. I don't look at the doctors and masters, of whom scarcely forty are present, but I look at the hundred or the thousand young people and children. It's to them that I devote myself, for they, too, need to understand. If the others don't want to listen they can leave. Therefore, my dear Bernard, take pains to be simple and direct; don't consider those who claim to be learned but be a preacher to the unschooled youth and sucklings.²¹

Luther was a university professor, a doctor of the church, yet he saw his primary calling and vocation as a preacher of the Word. It is obvious from his writings that Luther was not opposed to careful theological study and precise doctrinal formulations. In the pulpit, however, Luther insists that the preacher speak directly and plainly to the people. In 1540 Luther wrote:

Philip doesn't need to be instructed, and I don't teach or lecture for his sake, but we preach publicly for the sake of the 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 hear and understand. Good God, there are sixteen-year-old girls, women, old men, and farmers in church and they don't understand lofty matters! If one can present fitting and familiar comparisons, as Link can do in masterful fashion, the people will understand and remember. Accordingly he's the best preacher who can teach in a plain, childlike, popular and simple way. I prefer to preach in an easy and comprehensible fashion, but when it comes to academic disputations watch me in the university; there I'll make it sharp enough for anybody and will reply, no matter how complicated he wants to be. Some day I'll have to write a book against artful preachers.²²

In 1528 Luther provided a set of instructions for "visitors" to use in training the parish clergy in the evangelical congregations of Saxony. Luther urges that they preach on the basics of Christian doctrine: the decalog, the Our Father, baptism, and the Holy Supper. This preaching is to be expository.

In such preaching we should spell out, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the articles of the Creed for the sake of the children and other simple unschooled folk.

The preachers are to refrain from all libelous utterance and, without becoming personal, condemn the vices of which they are personally aware, and not preach about those of which they are not personally aware, e.g., those of the pope, bishops, or the like, except where it is necessary to warn the people by example.²³

Luther advised preachers to remember that in reality preaching is God's work. The preacher is only an instrument in the hands of God. This fact keeps the preacher in his place as a humble servant of God.

In all simplicity seek only God's glory and not the applause of men. And pray that God will put wisdom into your mouth and give your hearers a ready ear; then leave it to God. For you must believe me, preaching is not the work of men.²⁴

Preaching is the work of the Lord Christ, who is still active in and through His Word. Thus the mouth of every true preacher is the mouth of God Himself. The Lord God, who called the universe into existence by the power of His Word, puts that life-creating, faith-bestowing Word on the tongues of His servants. That fact gives comfort to both preachers and hearers. Preachers are given the joyful consolation that God's Word really does work. Reflecting on his return to the Wittenberg Pulpit in 1522 to counter the mischief wrought by Karlstadt and company, Luther would later state:

I simply taught, preached, wrote God's word; other than that I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy, that never a prince or emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing; the Word did it all.²⁵

The laity are given the confidence that, as their pastor speaks God's Word, they are auditors of the voice not merely of a man but of God Himself. In a sermon on John 4 Luther says:

When burgher or peasant hears a pastor, he must say: "I do indeed hear and recognize the voice of the pastor. But the words which he utters are not his. No, he would be incapable of them. It is the sublime majesty of God that is speaking through him." Likewise, when a lowly pastor comforts me, then I must be discerning enough to say: "It is not you who is speaking to me. The voice is yours indeed, but it is really God who is speaking through you."²⁶

Luther knew that Christians live not by their eyes, but by their ears.

For if you ask a Christian what the work is by which he becomes worthy of the name "Christian," he will give absolutely no other answer than that it is by hearing the Word of God, that is, faith. Therefore the ears alone are the organs of a Christian man, for he is justified and declared to be a Christian, not because of the works of any member, but because of faith.²⁷

God serves the Christian congregation by means of His Word. Holy Scripture is not only to be read, but preached. Originally, the Gospel was not a book but a sermon, and the church was not a "quill house" but a "mouth house," says Luther.²⁸ The heart and core of that Gospel is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The unfolding of the theology of the cross in Luther's thought parallels his growth and maturation as an evangelical preacher. As we have already noted, Luther's early sermons bore the imprint of medieval theological patterns. In a very instructive essay, "*Sacramentum et Exemplum* in Luther's Understanding of Christ," Norman Nagel traces Luther's use of Christ as "sacrament" (gift) and Christ as example as a way of gauging Luther's evangelical development. In his marginal notes written in 1509 on Augustine's *De Trinitate* Luther says:

The crucifixion of Christ is a sacrament, because it signifies the cross of penitence (*poenitentiae*), in which the soul dies to sin; it is an example, because it incites us truly to offer our body to death or to the cross.²⁹

Here Luther's attention is focused on what goes on within man, namely, that penitence by which man is to die to sin, rather than on the atonement accomplished solely by Christ on Calvary; Christ is a sacrament or gift only insofar as He makes man's death to sin a possibility. Or, as Nagel says, Christ becomes the "paradigm," so that "what Christ went through the Christian is to be put through too. 'Christ crucified' means not so much His unique cross as the cross seen in Him and the saints, the cross we are to bear and to which we are to be conformed."³⁰ This view of Christ represents no substantial advance over the medieval *imitatio Christi*. In his lectures on the Psalms in 1513 Luther comments on Psalm 84:3 ("at Thy altars, O Lord of hosts");

The altar is the mystical Cross of Christ, on which all ought to be offered. Because “he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me”; for just as he was offered on the Cross, so also ought we in like manner be offered on the cross.³¹

Luther’s theology of the crosses had not yet given way to the theology of the cross. Salvation is still seen as a result of suffering in conformity with Christ.

We see a profound change in Luther’s Christmas Postil of 1522 (which comes from Luther’s own hand, written to help poorly trained pastors preach the Gospel):

You must not make Moses out of Christ as if He did no more than teach and give an example as the other saints do, as if the Gospel were a book of instructions and law. There you must grasp Christ, His Word, work, and suffering in two ways. On the one hand is an example that is put before you that you are to follow and do likewise, as St. Peter says (I Peter 4:1), “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same thought, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” But this is the least of the Gospel if indeed it may still be called Gospel, for then Christ is of no more use than another saint. His life remains with Him and still does not help you. In short, by this way no Christians are made, only hypocrites . . . The chief part and ground of the Gospel is that, first of all, before you grasp Christ as an example, you receive and recognize Him as a gift and present, given to you by God to be your own, so that when you look to Him or hear that He does or suffers something, you are not to doubt that the same Christ is yours with all that He suffers or does. You may place your confidence on this as much as if you had done it, yes, as if you were the same Christ . . .

When you thus have Christ as the ground and highest good of your salvation, then follows the other part that you grasp Him as an example and give yourself to your neighbor as He gave Himself for you. See then how faith and love are in full swing, God’s commandment fulfilled, and the man glad and unafraid to do or suffer anything. Therefore mark well that Christ finishes your faith and makes you a Christian, whereas Christ as an example exercises your works. They do not make you a Christian, but they come from you as one already made a Christian. The difference between gift and example is as

great as that between faith and works. Faith has nothing of its own but only Christ, His work, and His life. The works have something of your own about them, but they are not to belong to you but to your neighbor.³²

Here “Christ as example” is no longer seen as the pattern one must imitate to gain salvation. Rather, Christ is pure gift; all that He has achieved by His vicarious suffering and death belong to the Christian through faith alone. “Christ as example” is now assigned to its proper place as the pattern for the Christian in loving service to the neighbor. Luther is even more explicit in his sermon on the Gospel for the Third Sunday in Advent of 1524:

Donum [gift] is the chief thing. Don't believe it if anyone preaches otherwise. The devil can bear Christ being propounded as an example. He did this; therefore you must do it too. John and Peter did similarly. If you do not preach otherwise, of what use is Christ to me? The devil has the victory if we take Christ's doctrine for Law and His life for example. Only Christ is a gift; other saints can be examples. He is above all others in that He is a gift . . . The Gospel is not the preaching of Christ as example, but proclaiming Him as a gift. Whether a man stands or falls he is a Christian only if he has Christ. Looking for evidence elsewhere only brings uncertainty. Cling only to the word.³³

For Luther the preaching that is shaped by the theology of the cross is proclamation that holds up Christ alone as Savior of the world. Any other theology is a theology of glory.

Luther gives his most precise summary of the theology of the cross in Theses 18 through 26 of the Heidelberg Theses of 1518:

18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.
19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20].
20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.
21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

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22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.
 23. The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ [Rom. 4:15].
 24. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.
 25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.
 26. The law says, "do this," and it is never done. Grace says, "believe in this," and everything is already done.³⁴

Here Luther makes it clear that it is only through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ that we come to behold the glory of the God who saves sinners. All attempts to know God by way of philosophical speculation are doomed to failure. God makes His wisdom manifest in the foolishness of the cross. As Paul Althaus puts it, "the true knowledge of God is not found through Romans 1 but through I Corinthians 1."³⁵ This theology of the cross was not a passing fad, limited only to the young Luther, as Ritschl contended over a century ago; but, as Walther von Loewenich and others in contemporary Luther studies have demonstrated, "the theology of the cross is a principle of Luther's entire theology and it may not be confined to a special period in his theological development."³⁶

The theology of the cross is a theology of the Word. In his Genesis commentary of 1535 Luther says:

It is therefore insane to argue about God and the divine nature without the Word or any covering, as all the heretics are accustomed to do. They do their thinking about God with the same sureness with which they argue about a pig or a cow. Therefore they also receive a reward worthy of their rashness in that they arrive at so dangerous a view. Whoever desires to be saved and to be safe when he deals with such great matters, let him simply hold to the form, the signs, and the covering of the Godhead, such as His Word and His works. For in His Word and in His works He shows Himself to us.

Those who are in touch with these are made sound, as was the woman with the issue of blood when she touched Christ's garment (Matt. 9:20-22).

But those who want to reach God apart from these coverings exert themselves to ascend to heaven without ladders (that is, without the Word). Overwhelmed by His majesty, which they seek to comprehend without a covering, they fall to their destruction. This is what happened to Arius. He thought that there was some intermediate being between the Creator and the creature and that all things were created by that intermediate being. It was inevitable that he should hit upon this after he had denied, contrary to Scripture, the plurality of the Persons of the Godhead. Since he argues his position apart from and without the Word of God and relies on his thinking alone, he cannot avoid falling into error.³⁷

Reliance on good works is a rejection of the theology of the cross in favor of a theology of glory. In the same section of the Genesis commentary Luther argues:

. . . because a monk does not adhere to the Word, he thinks that there is a God sitting in heaven who intends to save anyone wearing a cowl and following a definite rule of life. He is also ascending to heaven without God's disclosure of Himself or without His face leading the way. So also the Jews had their idols and their groves. They fell and the destruction of these is the same; they all run into the same difficulty because, forsaking the Word, they each follow their own thoughts.³⁸

The proper preaching of the theology of the cross necessitates that both Law and Gospel be correctly distinguished and applied. One has only to recall Luther's exposition of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism to see how incisively Luther uses the Law to uncover sin. The Law seeks out and destroys false gods, thus driving the sinner away from trust in his own works or piety to Christ, the substitute who has perfectly fulfilled the demands of the Law in the sinner's stead. The Gospel gives and bestows the glad tidings that on account of Christ's death there is indeed forgiveness for the ungodly. The Gospel is not an invitation to imitate Christ, which would make Christ into a new Lawgiver, another Moses. Rather, the Gospel is the announcement that God is gracious for Jesus' sake.

Thus, Luther says in a fragment of a sermon preserved from 1515, "Preach one thing: the wisdom of the cross."³⁹ This is the actual

content of all Christian preaching. The cross permeates Luther's preaching. Sasse says it well:

Obviously the "theology of the cross" does not mean that for a theologian the church year shrinks together into nothing but Good Friday. Rather, it means that Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost cannot be understood without Good Friday. Next to Irenaeus and Athanasius, Luther was the greatest theologian of the incarnation. He was this because in the background of the manger he saw the cross. His understanding of the Easter victory was equal to that of any theologian of the Eastern Church. He understood it because he understood the victory of the Crucified One. The same can be said of his understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

Ulrich Asendorf, in an essay entitled "Luther's Sermons on Advent as a Summary of His Theology" (published in *A Lively Legacy: Essays in Honor of Robert Preus*), shows how Luther's preaching on Advent texts urges hearers to the crucified Immanuel who has executed "the happy exchange" whereby He takes the sinner's sin as though it were His own and gives the sinner His own righteousness. Drawing on Luther's comment, "Even though Christ is named, preached, and pictured in sundry ways, He is ever the same Christ,"⁴¹ Ian Siggins, in *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ*, demonstrates that no matter on which biblical picture of Christ he preached, whether it be the Good Shepherd, Sun of Righteousness, Lamb of God, Bridegroom, or any of the others, Luther always proclaimed Christ crucified for sinners.

This Christ alone is comfort for sinners terrified by their sin. Listen to these lines from a Christmas sermon of 1527:

Reason and will would ascend and seek above, but if you would have joy, bend yourself down to this place. There you will find that boy given for you who is your Creator lying in a manger. I will stay with that boy as He sucks, is washed, and dies . . . There is no joy but in this boy. Take Him away and you face the Majesty which terrifies . . . I know of no God but this one in the manger.⁴²

For Luther, preaching was not "edifying discourse" designed to manipulate the emotions of his hearers. Nor was the sermon a "political discourse" with its aim of rousing the congregation to support some political program or social cause. The glory of Luther's preaching was its cruciform shape and content. It was indeed the

viva vox evangelii, the living voice of the Gospel of the cross. "One thing you must preach: the wisdom of the cross"⁴³ was his motto and watchword, for Luther knew that faith "comes only through God's Word or gospel, which preaches Christ, saying that he is God's Son and a man, and has died and risen again for our sakes . . ."⁴⁴

ENDNOTES

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13. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
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16. *Luther's Works* 53, p. 11.
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 30. Norman Nagel, "Sacramentum et Exemplum in Luther's Understanding of Christ," in *Luther for an Ecumenical Age*, ed. Carl S. Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 174.
 31. Preus, p. 44.
 32. Nagel, p. 188.
 33. WA XV, 777.
 34. *Luther's Works* 31, p. 40.
 35. Preus, p. 45.
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 37. *Luther's Works* 1, p. 13.
 38. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 39. *Luther's Works* 51, p. 14.
 40. Sasse, p. 39.
 41. Ian K. Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 244.
 42. Norman Nagel, "Martinus: 'Heresy, Doctor Luther, Heresy!'" The Person and Work of Christ," in *The Seven-Headed Luther*, ed. Peter Newman Brooks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 48.
 43. *Luther's Works* 51, p. 14.
 44. *Luther's Works* 35, p. 368.

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