

Textual Preaching

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I take pictures. Well, that's an understatement. My camera with its bag full of equipment is my constant companion. It's so often hanging around my neck or attached to my hip that my wife has come to refer to it as "the other woman". It's no surprise, then, that I often put together slideshows for my family and friends, of the pictures I'd most like to share. And often when people wish to say something nice, to express their appreciation and respect, they say, "You must have a really good camera!" Thanks, very much ... I think. Of course it has nothing to do with years of experience and training, study and persistent labour, early to rise and late to bed to get the right light, hours in the darkroom or at the computer processing the images; it's just that I spent more money on a better camera than everyone else.

Now, I don't want to sound snooty. Good equipment does matter to any craftsman. But these comments display the de-humanizing spirit of our times. Everything's about technology. We all want better toys, but such toys don't make us better craftsmen. When's the last time you preached a really great sermon, and Mrs Schmidt commented on the way out of church, "Pastor, you must have a really good Bible!" Of course, the joke is that, whether we use one Bible version or another, whether we have it in some fancy computer programme or sandwiched between two old-fashioned covers, we're all using the same Bible. Now, that gives us a real leg up on the competition. We have the very Word of God, and so it doesn't all depend on us. It doesn't even depend entirely on the sermon. For we must acknowledge from the outset that the sermon exists in a liturgical setting in which three Scripture readings have already been proclaimed, through which God's Spirit has already been at work. In classic Lutheran liturgical thinking, the high point of the Service of the Word is the Gospel reading; the sermon stands subordinate to it, unpacking and applying it, but not lording over it. And then there are the canticles of the liturgy, which are 99.44% Scripture, rich in Gospel, proclaiming the saving deeds of Christ. And the great hymns of the church extol, elaborate, and apply those Scriptural words within the context of the liturgy of the day and of the church year. The Word is then given visible form and substance in the sacraments, which work effectively despite our failings. So, it doesn't all depend on us. We can have a bad week, our homiletical engine can be firing on just one cylinder, but the rest of the liturgy keeps the Gospel moving.

Now, this isn't meant to excuse bad preaching, merely to highlight the church's defence against it. No, the point towards which I'm heading is that bad preaching still happens even when everything else is going right—and so we hope that everything else does go right. We thank God that the Gospel is preserved in our Western rite of the liturgy and in the church's great hymns, which we strive to preserve for the sake of the Word of God they proclaim. But we also strive for good preaching. For, though we're all working with the same Bible, we need to work on the skills and the craft of preaching it. Granted, the Bible is more than just a high quality tool; it is the living and active Word of God. But preaching is only the living and active Word of God insofar as it is faithful and true to the inscripturated Word, only insofar as the text determines, directs, and enlivens the sermon, rather than serving as a mere launching pad for the opinions of men.

It may sound strange to begin with a defence of textual preaching; it should be, as the Germans say, *selbstverständlich*, it should "go without saying". But the reality is that preaching, even in our own tradition, has not always been textual. This is true at the formal level: Richard Caemmerer's basic text, *Preaching for the Church*,¹ distinguishes between textual sermons and topical sermons, though even the latter are supposed to be broadly biblical. This distinction recalls earlier times when topical sermons were far more common than they are today. But we must recognize even today, when every sermon begins with

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

the announcement of its text, that the preacher's common habit of closing the Bible and setting it aside before beginning his sermon is deeply ironic.

So if we are agreed that biblical, textual preaching is a good thing, the first question must surely be, "Which text?" When surveys of worship habits in the LCMS were conducted in preparation for the new hymnal project, an astonishing fact appeared: despite the liturgical deep divide between pastors that have adopted the principles of the Church Growth Movement and those who remain faithful to orthodox Lutheran practice, upwards of 90% of pastors and congregations reported that they consistently used the one- or three-year lectionary! Now, we cannot necessarily assume that those who read from the lectionary also preach on it. In bygone days when a one-year lectionary was the norm, it was unusual for pastors to preach exclusively on its texts, as many preached topically or used other preaching series. But today's norm is that we preach on one of the assigned texts, which can only be a good thing. Now, some have insisted that the pastor must always preach on the Gospel lesson, and this reflects good historic precedent, for in our Western and Lutheran liturgical tradition the sermon in the Divine Service on Sundays and festivals was almost always based on the Gospel of the day. Furthermore, it makes good sense in that the Gospel usually sets the theme of the day, particularly in the festival half of the church year. And we Lutherans do place a theological priority on the very words and deeds of Jesus during His earthly ministry. But there is an anachronism in enforcing such a rule too vigorously. For in the days when Luther preached on the Gospel in the chief service, he probably went on to preach on the epistle text in the afternoon Vespers service. And he most certainly preached on the OT and other biblical texts read on a continuous basis at Matins services throughout the week. In our context, where parishioners rarely attend services more than once a week (if that), it would be unwise to restrict preaching to the Gospel readings only.

With the nearly universal move into a new hymnal, we have all recently adopted a new edition of our lectionary. Without going into the debate between the three-year and one-year versions, it is worth stressing the goals of using a lectionary in the first place: that through the lectionary we are presented on an annual basis with the entire life and work of Christ, the full Gospel; that through three readings we are given the so-called "full counsel of God" so that we neither ignore the Old Testament nor the difficult portions of the New; and that the lectionary protects the congregation from the pastor's own human limitations, so that they hear everything God wishes them to hear, not just the pastor's favourite stories.

So I hope we're in agreement that, firstly, textual preaching is a good idea; and secondly, that the lectionary is a good way to organize it. But it's also worth considering the evidence for the opposition. Firstly, it's inaccurate to speak of "**the** lectionary" (whether one- or three-year) as if it is unchanged or unchangeable. Even through the Middle Ages the lectionary varied considerably from place to place in the Western Church. Though it broadly follows the life of Christ, in its details the lectionary is man-made and fallible. In his proposed reform of the Latin mass, the *Formula Missae* (1523), Luther committed himself to the lectionary, but commented nonetheless on the need for reform:

Certainly the time has not yet come to attempt revision here, as nothing unevangelical is read, except that those parts from the Epistles of Paul in which faith is taught are read only rarely, while the exhortations to morality are most frequently read. The Epistles seem to have been chosen by a singularly unlearned and superstitious advocate of works. But for the service those sections in which faith in Christ is taught should have been given preference. The latter were certainly considered more often in the Gospels by whoever it was who chose these lessons. In the meantime, the sermon in the vernacular will have to supply what is lacking. (AE 53:23-24)

So here we see the opposite point: that sometimes preaching is called upon to protect us from a bad lectionary. Luther alludes to the fact that the balance of Scripture had been skewed in favour of works righteousness by the choice of Epistle lessons. In the 16th century this was usually remedied in Lutheran revisions of the lectionary by the inclusion of more core texts on justification by faith from Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians. In the 20th century we again adopted a lectionary that was in its origins Roman Catholic. The Law often dominates the Gospel in the three-year lectionary, despite attempts by Lutheran committees to revise it. In fact, in the *LSB* lectionary committee's work on the Revised Common Lectionary, they specifically noted a series of key Epistle texts that were no longer found in the RCL, and needed to be restored for Lutheran use.

We could spend more time on lectionary issues, but perhaps two final comments will suffice. Firstly, pay close attention to the pericopal divisions. The original framers of the three-year lectionary were higher critics. Often they cut readings short based on theories about what Jesus did or didn't originally say. The *LSB* editors have mostly restored these pericopes to their full form, but don't be afraid to lengthen a Gospel reading when it appears that key verses have been omitted. Secondly, the RCL in its political correctness towards Jews has steadily moved away from the classic Christian idea that the OT prophesies the New. It prefers to "read the OT on its own merits". Thus, many of the OT typological readings that we were accustomed to connecting with the Gospel of the day have disappeared in the RCL. Now, the *LSB* editors have done a pretty good job of restoring them. But ultimately it's down to the preacher to make sure these inner biblical connections are made. Though we receive the lectionary from the greater church, the pastor's calling to preside over the liturgy may sometimes lead him to make subtle modifications for the sake of the Gospel.

Textual preaching may also be a bad idea when it unduly restricts the preaching of God's whole counsel. In the context of the historic Western rite, the readings are followed by the Nicene Creed, which flows out of Scripture and norms the interpretation of Scripture in the sermon. Preaching which fails to read the text through the lens of the Creed is not truly biblical in the broad sense. So, to use an extreme example, if the text includes Matt. 24:36, "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only", the Creed would forbid us to preach an Arian interpretation of Jesus' inferiority to God. And in its liturgical context, the sermon also leads towards the Sacrament of the Altar. Textual preaching, too narrowly understood, can diminish this function of the sermon, if the preacher finds no sacramental references in his text. On the one hand, he may just have to try harder, as we are so often blinded by the non-sacramental exegesis of the Reformed commentaries on our shelves. But we may also need to move beyond that specific text to the full Christian message that our hearers need. For the hearers must not be left out of the equation. Textual preaching can be too narrowly expository, failing to move beyond the world of the text and apply it to the people. It may even happen on occasion that the preacher chooses to depart from the lectionary altogether because of a specific crisis that needs to be addressed. And finally, textual preaching can be dangerous if a narrow reading of the text fails to proclaim Jesus Christ and the Gospel message of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Him, which is always the goal of Christian preaching. This may happen because the narrow confines of the specific pericope are dominated by the Law. But that's not a good enough excuse. If you can't find the Gospel of Christ in the text, try harder.

These dangers inherent in textual preaching we willingly embrace in order to remain the church of *sola Scriptura*. We trust that God will accomplish what He wants to accomplish through His Word alone. So very often the dangers we perceive are not inherent in textual preaching *per se*, but in our failure to be adequately textual. I have to admit that the process of writing a sermon has terrified me ever since I was a child wondering if I should be pastor like my dad. I stare at a text and wonder what I can say to entice the hearer to listen to me; I struggle to think of an interesting way to present its message. But for me it has been an infallible rule that if I can't come up with a sermon idea, I must go back to the text again and do some more exegesis.

I don't mean to repeat here the exegetical method that you all learnt so well in seminary! But perhaps we've become a tad jaded, or dare I say, lazy. Perhaps we think we already know the meaning of these well-known texts, and just need that cute story to make people listen. If so, we've lost the appropriate awe that we should feel before the holy Word of God. Shouldn't we be shocked to discover that our listeners remember all the stories we tell, but can't begin to connect them to the meaning of the text? So textual preaching is just that: textual. It begins with basic questions of context. Who wrote this book? When, where, and why? We may not always know, but if we do know, then surely it must matter. Virtually the entire epistle to Philemon appeared on Proper 18 back in September. In order to preach this text it is necessary to know why Paul was in prison; it helps to fit it into the chronology of Acts so that you can figure out his relationship to the Christians at Colossae. It's worthwhile pursuing various reconstructions of who's who: Onesimus is the runaway slave, but is Philemon his owner or his pastor? And it's useful to know something about slavery in the Graeco-Roman world. What might result is a

Gospel-centred sermon that sees Paul as an image of Christ, who, though suffering in prison, pleads with the master for the release of a slave, just as Christ intercedes with the Father on our behalf.

In a longer book the question of context includes the placement of this particular pericope within the book itself. Here we might take a cue from Luther's introductions to the New Testament in which he discusses the order of Romans. Can you properly preach a pericope from Romans without knowing where Paul is heading at the time? Chapters one through three expose the failure of both Jew and Greek to live up to the righteousness of God's Law. Chapter four shows that even in the OT true righteousness before God was received through faith, not works, and chapter five locates the power in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Chapter six applies that righteousness to the individual through Holy Baptism. How then should we read chapter seven? Most modern commentators interpret Paul's words about his struggle with sin ("for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" [7:19]) as a flashback to his life as a Pharisee before conversion to Christ. This is because they cannot conceive of a Christian who is still so troubled by sin. But in the context of the flow of Romans, this is a highly unnatural reading. Chapter seven follows chapter six; Paul speaks of the baptized Christian here, describing a struggle with sin that is common to us all. What a disservice we would do to our congregation if we suggested that they should experience no conflict in their desire to obey God's Law!

After surveying the lie of the land from the eagle's perspective, the exegete swoops down low to scrutinize the details. But, unfortunately, the details sometimes give up their treasures only after long, hard work. The challenge is to slow down the scrutiny of the text until the meaning emerges.² Although we were all required to learn Greek and Hebrew, I'm sensitive to the fact that very few of us will ever reach such a level of competency that we can challenge the experts. But, as I now teach New Testament courses on a weekly basis, I'm convinced that the value of working with the text in its original language is simply this: it forces us to slow down and scrutinize everything. English is too easy (well, for most of us). We read the text in the NIV or the ESV and we think we understand it. But no one breezes through the Greek or Hebrew and draws the same conclusion. In the slow and painful process of translation we're forced to examine every sentence, clause, phrase, and word. Dispel your memory work from your mind and ask yourself how you might understand these words if you'd never heard them before. Which verb is modified by this particular phrase, the one before or the one afterwards? What, for example, does the phrase "in love" explain in Eph. 1:4-5? Did God "predestine us in love for sonship through Jesus Christ" or did He choose us "to be holy and blameless before Him in love"? The placement of the phrase significantly changes the meaning of these verses. The former translation emphasizes that the **cause** of our predestination is purely the love of God—a Gospel thought; the latter suggests that the **goal** of our salvation is to carry out holy acts of love—a Law thought. Two vastly different sermons would therefore arise.

Once the exegete dives down for an even closer look, he will want to pounce on individual words. Now, no preacher can devote exhaustive care and attention to every word in a text. But it's worthwhile choosing just one word in each verse for a closer look. What might be hiding behind that particular blade of grass? In a particularly hurried week it might be just one word in the whole pericope that catches your attention, but you get my point. To continue our reading of Ephesians one, it might be the word "sonship" that's worth a closer look. It's a politically incorrect word, and we might be tempted to substitute, "He destined us to be His children through Jesus Christ".³ But move more slowly. In Greek it's υιοθεσία, from υἱός "son" and τίθημι "to appoint". So it's not just "being a son" but "being designated a son". In the context of the ancient world this evokes the custom of adoption. A Graeco-Roman man of means may have fathered many children, some legitimate, some illegitimate. He cannot risk his power and wealth being diluted among so many heirs. So it was common under law to choose one young man to be the heir—even if he was not biologically his son. The heir was adopted under law for the purpose of receiving the inheritance. And it had to be a son, because women couldn't inherit in most ancient societies. All this

² Caemmerer, 82.

³ Interestingly, though the Vulgate had "sons", the KJV and Luther translate "children", while most modern translations have "sons". An unfortunate departure from this trend is the ESV, which removes the word "sons" from its RSV forerunner.

is evoked by the word Paul chooses to use here: we are adopted to be God's sons, i.e. the ones to receive the inheritance of eternal life that Paul describes later in the pericope (v. 14). And this interpretation can be enriched by tracing the word through the New Testament, for in the famous Sarah/Hagar allegory of Galatians three and four, Paul concludes, "if a son, then an heir" (Gal. 4:7). And then we learn that this adoption comes through a rite of **rebirth** in Holy Baptism, by which we are clothed with **the Son**, Jesus Christ. So to be "sons" is to be one with Christ. Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?

So a whole Gospel-filled sermon can be found in the word study, achieved by the use of a good, reliable lexicon like Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich (which has significant Lutheran influence), and by the careful sleuthing available through a concordance or marginal cross-references. And it's here that I make my pitch for using the Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek NT, even if your Greek is a little rusty. For cross-references are the means by which Scripture interprets Scripture, but they're not all created equal. Remember Luther's debate with Zwingli? Next to the Words of Institution for the Lord's Supper, Zwingli might write a cross reference to John 6:63, "the flesh is of no avail"—which leads to denial of the Real Presence. Can you rely on the marginal references in a Bible produced by his theological heirs? The quasi-inspired cross reference system of the Nestle text, by contrast, rarely leads you astray, and often bring you extraordinary insights—such as the reference to Isaiah 59:17 in the margin of Ephesians 6:14, suggesting that the armour Paul describes is not just given by God but is first and foremost the armour that God Himself wears in fighting the battle for us. To put on the armour of God, then, is to be wrapped in the protection of a proven champion, to be given His victory as a gift.

It's only after he's done this basic spadework that the careful exegete will turn to a diversity of English Bible versions and commentaries. For if he turns this order around, no mortal can resist their power of suggestion. If we begin with the versions and the commentaries, we tend to read the text exactly as they did; they exclude the process of exploration that leads to our own understanding of the text. What's wrong with that? Well, if we had good Lutheran commentaries and versions, it might not be so bad. But if you take the time to compare the NIV with the NKJV, the NRSV, the ESV, and the NASB, what will you have accomplished? They all arise out of the same basic American Protestant theological culture, and their repetition of essentially similar interpretations will numb the reader to any genuinely Lutheran alternative. And I mean "interpretation", because every Bible translation is an interpretation. There is no truly neutral translation of many texts. So these comments apply also to the commentaries. What's the difference between the NICNT and the NIGTC? Both come from the same conservative Reformed circle of exegesis. So, on the one hand, this is a plug for the Concordia Commentary series; but it's also a warning to think for yourself, and to use the commentary mainly as a resource for linguistic and historical data about the text.

For the goal of exegesis should not be simply to find the "one meaning" of a pericope. If so, we would probably always produce the same sermon (with minor variations for the audience) each time a text pops up in the lectionary; and we would all preach the same sermon as the brother down the road. But this flattens and fills in the undulating beauty of the scriptural landscape. Exegesis isn't an mechanical act of mining the single hidden gem out of each text. It is rather a journey of exploration by which we navigate some old familiar pathways, but find something new each time, turning this way and that down laneways we didn't have time to explore last time. When you read a text, do you find questions or just look for answers? Of course, I don't mean the sceptical questions of the higher critic which arise from unbelief. I mean that the text always has more to offer than you're looking for, so you need to be open to finding something unexpected. Are you open to a discovery that isn't in the commentaries, that Luther didn't say, that you didn't get last time you preached on it? Are you willing to put yourself in the place of the unsophisticated layman who sometimes asks stupid questions, but wants to know anyway? What is there in the text that shocks you? Play devil's advocate. Take nothing for granted. And don't be afraid to ask those questions in your sermon, even while driving towards an answer all the while. A compliment I most treasure came from a layman who said, "Your mind works like mine; I like that." He found sympathy in the way I had preached that day.

So exegesis is intended to lead to preaching, and it remains to consider how that step is made. We're all familiar with the famous method of "goal, malady, and means" as formulated by Richard

Caemmerer. But it's a method with which I've become increasingly uncomfortable, particularly from an exegetical perspective. For seems to me, firstly, that Caemmerer's method is essentially topical, even when it's ostensibly textual. The goal, not the text, drives the sermon. Now, the goal is supposed to come from the text, but very often that's the last point of contact between the two. Even Caemmerer admits this. He writes:

A preaching text serves its purpose if it provides at least one of the three primary components of preaching: the goal for the hearer, the diagnosis of the hearer's malady, a statement of God's redeeming grace, which empowers the hearer toward the goal. Where a text supplies only one of these components, the others can be developed by inference from other statements of Scripture. If a text can supply two or even three of these factors simultaneously, it will be especially useful for suggesting and defining the message.⁴

These words trouble me. You see, he admits that most of the time only one of the three major components of his sermonic method is drawn from the text. Let's assume the goal is drawn from the text. The malady is then whatever stands in opposition to the goal—not necessarily the Law that the text itself proclaims. Likewise the means towards the goal is derived from the preacher's own creativity, rather than from the text. If we wish to use this method and preach textually, wouldn't it be better to seek all three from the text, even if they don't fit neatly together?

But the deeper question is whether "goal-oriented preaching" is really preaching in the biblical sense. It's been a long time since I read Caemmerer as a student, so I re-read a bit in preparation for this occasion. And I was surprised (to say the least) at what seems to me a distortion of the preaching task. Firstly, Caemmerer promotes far too broad a divide between so-called evangelistic preaching and preaching to the Christian congregation. His goal-oriented approach leads him to believe that these are fundamentally different occasions, in that the former is aimed towards the creation of faith in the forgiveness of sins through Christ, while the latter apparently isn't. This is a troubling thought, which does not arise from a Lutheran anthropology of *simul justus et peccator* nor from a Lutheran view of the Divine Service and the means of grace. In other words, Caemmerer's statements presume that the Christian is no longer in need of preaching that would lead him to repentance and faith in Christ. Now, you may object that Caemmerer clearly divides preaching between faith goals and life goals. Yet when I look at what he means by faith goals, it seems to me that it's just a variation on life goals. That is to say, he's talking about increasing the Christian's trust in the work of Christ and the providence of God; he speaks of faith as a measurable thing which preaching aims to increase quantitatively. He focuses on faith as a quality in man that is in need of strengthening and enlarging towards greater action. We heard this a moment ago: that preaching is to empower the hearer towards the goal (p. 68, above). This is synergistic language, at least superficially. It works against the biblical idea that preaching is a divine activity, that the power unto salvation lies in the Gospel (not in the hearer), that preaching accomplishes something in the believer, rather than empowering him to do something himself.

And this brings us to the "life goals". Caemmerer defines five: the goals of life, church, family, hope, and prayer. But these are just examples that should suggest other life goals you might find in the text. Now, I've always been uncomfortable with the idea that sermons could be directed **either** to faith goals **or** to life goals, for life goals are only achievable through the increase of faith. The preacher who wishes to change behaviour must always be aware that the power for this change lies only in the Gospel. The Law convicts us of failure, describes and commands true obedience, but has no power to get us there. But Caemmerer's description of the relationship between faith and life goals is ... a little different:

This writer feels that goals of faith are important in preaching, just as the autoist [driver] will check his fuel line or carburetion even when he is not setting out at once on a journey. Preaching to the goal of faith is prophylaxis, repair, and safeguard for maintaining the right relationship with God which the

⁴ Caemmerer, 68.

Christian needs for his whole existence. ... Yet it is altogether true that the ultimate purpose of the atonement is action; “faith ... worketh by love” (Gal. 5:6).⁵

Here the relationship of faith to works has been entirely set on its head. Caemmerer reveals his view that the ultimate goal of preaching (indeed of the atonement itself) is to change behaviour—and with his quotation of Galatians 5:6 he aligns himself clearly with the mediaeval teaching of *fides formata* “faith formed by works of love” in opposition to Luther’s teaching of *sola fide* “by faith alone”.

My objection arises not just out of Reformation theology, but, at a more basic level, from the biblical view of Christian proclamation. The most recently published issue of *Lutheran Theological Review* contains an essay by my former colleague Reg Quirk, Preceptor of Westfield House, who puts this argument far more eloquently than I could. He argues that goal-oriented preaching is not biblical because it defines the essence of preaching in terms of the Law. By contrast, the NT consistently couples the verbs for preaching with the message of the Gospel:

Sometimes in the New Testament, the verb “to preach” is used intransitively, especially in the Synoptic Gospels to describe the activity of Jesus or His apostles in a particular place. Mostly, though, it is used transitively, and overwhelmingly the object is the same thing. In 44 of the 78 examples in the English New Testament (in the RSV version), what is preached is the Gospel or the Good News, either as the object of κηρύσσω, or because it is contained in the choice of the verb εὐαγγελίζομαι. Of the others sixteen are references to preaching Christ, six to preaching the Word, four to preaching the Kingdom of God, four to preaching Baptism, one to preaching the forgiveness of sins, one to preaching peace, one to preaching the faith, and one to preaching circumcision, or more precisely to **not** preaching circumcision.⁶

Now, please don’t misunderstand. I’m not suggesting that preachers should proclaim only the Gospel and not the Law. But Law proclamation is intended to lead to the Gospel and not the other way round (“repentance towards the forgiveness of sins should be preached” [Lk. 24:47]). Repentance, as John Stephenson recently illustrated in our seminary chapel, is the ground in which faith is planted, germinates, and grows. It is the absolutely necessary environment for faith to exist. It requires the gardener’s toil and intimate attention as he tills and enriches it. But no gardener can ultimately look with pride upon a bare patch of ground; it is the living flower that he seeks. Goal-oriented preaching, then, turns the garden on its head, and views the plant of faith merely as the means to further enrich the soil as it is grown up merely for the purpose of composting back into the soil. That is to say, the Gospel becomes just a means to an end: empowering the individual to achieve his life goals.

Preceptor Quirk perceptively notes that the Gospel is not only diminished in significance by this scheme; it is also flattened into a one-dimensional tool that is wielded by the preacher in clichéd and repetitive phrases. For if the goal is derived from the text, and the malady is what hinders reaching the goal, the Gospel is trotted out as the universal answer to the dilemma. Week in and week out, no matter what the text, the answer is always, “but God forgives you ... and His forgiveness enables you to do what you would otherwise be unable to do”. Is this all there is to the Gospel? Does not the forgiveness of sins lead to “life and salvation”, as the Small Catechism puts it? And here we must be careful to distinguish life as a gift from life as an experience under the Law. In Greek the classic distinction is between ζωή and βίος.⁷ The former, ζωή, is the sustenance of one’s body, the opposite of death, and from a Christian perspective also the transcendent gift of God’s own life in Christ. It is therefore entirely Gospel, the gift of an eternal sustenance that allows us to live with God for ever, and to experience His intimate fellowship already now. By contrast, βίος includes one’s “life story” and “way of life”. It focuses on what we do, how we do it, and its moral quality. Thus it is a matter of the Law, not the Gospel. While the Christian preacher may be concerned with βίος as he rebukes a sinful way of life and describes God’s standard of pleasing

⁵ Caemmerer, 185.

⁶ Reginald C. Quirk, “Justification and Preaching”, *Lutheran Theological Review* 18 (Academic Year 2005-06): 55.

⁷ On which see Jonathan F. Grothe, *The Justification of the Ungodly: an Interpretation of Romans*, 2 vols (Canada, 2005): 307-10.

works, the Christian preaching of the Gospel will be concerned to deliver ζωή. To this St Peter refers in the now well-known words of our liturgy: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and come to know that You are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68-69). This confession repeats Jesus’ own prior promise, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn 6:63). The Christian preacher is charged to continue this proclamation, as the angel said to the apostles after releasing them from prison: “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life” (Acts 5:20). To preach is to deliver this life—not to preach about it, but to preach it.

Now, “life” is just one example of the many facets of the Gospel that are not in any way disconnected from the forgiveness of sins but are rich expositions of its consequences. So also we could speak of new birth, regeneration, renewal, giftedness, nourishment, sustenance, strengthening, union with God, and the blessed vision of things eternal. If your evangelical imagination needs a boost, try Francis Rossow’s *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*,⁸ or Jack Preus’s *Just Words: Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel*.⁹ Preus identifies fully 23 different “metaphors” of the Gospel—which are more than metaphors, of course—including light, bread, water, ransom, redemption, adoption, inheritance, reconciliation, peace, cleansing, liberation, and victory. This is the stuff of which the New Testament is made. The Christian sermon grows from these rich nutrients in its text. Exegesis for preaching is a process of exploration and mining, seeking after this multi-faceted Gospel. In other words, **the preacher who seeks the central thought of his text is always looking for its central point of Gospel**. So then, there should be no sermons with life goals. Change of life (and here I’m talking about βίος) is indeed a **consequence** of good Gospel preaching, for the Gospel will have its fruits. But the **goal** of a sermon is always to proclaim Christ, to deliver His goods, to forgive, enliven, sustain, and bestow God’s gifts upon His children.

This means, then, that no sermon preparation is complete if it derives only a life goal or malady from the text. Exegesis for preaching must find that central Gospel thought (not as a means to another end, but the thing itself to be delivered). This can be hard work, and it is often counter-intuitive—if our intuition has been moulded by the *opinio legis*. Sometimes “scientific exegesis” or “context” can be a smokescreen for this natural pre-occupation with the Law. Caemmerer, for example, argues for a distinction between preaching that proceeds from a “natural” or “direct” reading of the text, and preaching that works “indirectly”. He favours the former, of course, which sounds sensible. But listen to where it gets him when he looks at Matt. 20:28 “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many”:

To use a text for the goal for which it was originally written or spoken has been termed the direct method of using a text, and every textual preacher should seek to make this method standard. To utilize an idea in a text toward a goal for which the text was not originally written is then termed the indirect method. ... When Matt. 20:28 cues a sermon on Jesus as Ransom for the sins of the world, the method is indirect. When the text is used by the direct method, it suggests, in its context, the goal “The Christian is great as he serves.”¹⁰

In other words, the Christian preacher misuses this pivotal NT text if he proclaims it as Gospel; the real point of Jesus’ words is that we ought to strive to imitate Him in humble service.

It takes hard work and deep commitment to the centrality of the Gospel in preaching to overcome these instincts. But mostly it involves the development of new habits. This comes from watching other people do the job. In the aforementioned article, Reg Quirk tries his hand at a few texts, beginning with the familiar Thanksgiving Day Gospel reading of the healing of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19). He illustrates first the traditional life-goal approach:

⁸ St. Louis: Concordia, 1983.

⁹ St. Louis: Concordia, 2000.

¹⁰ Caemmerer, 69-70.

One cannot fail to be impressed by the contrast that is drawn between the thoughtless, self-absorbed ingratitude of the nine, and the exemplary humble thankfulness of that lone Samaritan. Were not ten cleansed, where are the nine? Need one look further for malady or goal? Application is simple: do our own lives even achieve 10% gratitude? For every ten blessings we receive, do we remember to return thanks for even one? The Gospel is equally self-evident to us: Christ has died for this sin, and in Him we find forgiveness. The conclusion, then, is that we are enabled to live a life of gratitude in Him.¹¹

But what happens if we look instead for the Gospel in this text?

The chief element of Gospel in the healing of the ten lepers is the unconditional love of God, even towards the ungrateful. Were not ten healed? St Paul expressed this by explaining how God showed His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). And this is a comforting dimension of the Gospel indeed. There is Law to be preached here, but actually the admonition of the Law is not related to the sin of ingratitude, but the dangerous belief that we in any way earn the love and the healing of God.¹²

In this way, a Gospel reading of the text has saved us from a simple moralistic message that our people can as easily hear on the television at Thanksgiving time.

A few more texts from Luke come to mind, as the three-year lectionary has so recently presented them to us. A simple parallel to the ten lepers is the story of the persistent widow from Luke 18:1-8. The parable is introduced as follows: “And He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not to lose heart” (v. 1). And the judge himself says that he’ll grant the woman’s request because she keeps pestering him. So we’ve heard many a sermon emphasizing the persistence of the widow, suggesting that if we keep praying for something, eventually God will give it to us. Sounds like a life goal. But there is another side to this. For, firstly, Jesus doesn’t say that our prayers are heard because of our persistence; He merely indicates that the parable will give us a good reason to pray. Secondly, Jesus contrasts the unrighteous judge with the righteousness of our heavenly Father. It’s what Rabbi Hillel would have called *qal wāḥōmer* an argument “from the lesser to the greater”. If an unrighteous judge will answer an annoying old woman just because he wants his sleep, how much more will the righteous God fulfil His promises to you, His children? Thus, the Gospel point is located in Jesus’ words, “will not God vindicate His elect, who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long over them? I tell you, He will vindicate them speedily” (vv. 7-8). The emphasis is on God’s promise to hear and save us. So it’s not the parable of the persistent widow but of our gracious God.

One of the most difficult texts in the Bible, from any perspective, is the parable of the dishonest steward (Lk. 16:1-9). That title derives from the traditional interpretation of the story, by which the man is portrayed as abusing his master’s trust by reducing the debts. This act is plainly dishonest, particularly as it’s designed to curry favour with them after he loses his job. So how can Jesus commend this man, a law-breaker, as model for Christians? The usual explanation, which flows from the theory that parables have only one point of comparison, is that Jesus is commending the man’s shrewdness (v. 8), not his dishonest actions. Sounds good. But then Jesus goes on to say, “make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon” (v. 9), and discusses the disciples’ attitude to money. So myriad sermons have directed the hearer to be shrewd in his dealings with people of this world, to focus his attention on the goal of eternal life rather than earthly wealth, etc.—all of which are statements of the Law.

To find the Gospel in this text is difficult but hardly impossible. Kenneth Bailey in his book *Poet and Peasant*,¹³ highlights the steward’s brazen confidence in his master. For he firmly believes that his master will not overturn the changes he has made to the accounts. Through his actions he throws himself upon his master’s mercy, confident that his trust is not misplaced. The Gospel point comes then in the beginning of v. 8, in which Bailey sees ὁ κύριος as a reference to the steward’s master (not directly to

¹¹ Quirk, 58.

¹² Quirk, 59.

¹³ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.

Jesus). That is, the master commends the steward for his shrewdness—or better put, the master forgives him because of his faith.

An even more brazenly Gospel-oriented reading arises from the work of Duncan Derrett, an expert in oriental law, who treats it in his *Law in the New Testament*.¹⁴ Derrett argues that the steward is not himself “dishonest/unrighteous”, but that he is a “steward of unrighteous things”. Jews, you may recall, were forbidden to charge each other interest. It’s not the steward who’s breaking the law, but the master. The steward, realizing his days of comfortable employment are numbered, sits down with each debtor and reduces the bill by precisely the amount of illegal interest that would have been expected in each case. By doing so, the steward satisfies the law. Like Bailey, Derrett argues that the steward is confident his master will not contradict what he has done. The reasons are twofold: (1) as the master’s steward, he carries the master’s full authority in the matter; and (2) the master will see that his reputation in the community will be enhanced, for the debtors will believe that the master approves the forgiveness of their debt. Now, Derrett himself takes the interpretation no further. But it’s easy to see how the parable can be given a Gospel twist. For the steward appears as a type of Christ, who cancels our debts and reconciles us with our heavenly master. And our heavenly Father looks favourably on the work Christ has done, and graciously accepts His work as payment for our debts.

Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus’ description of the events on the day the Son of Man returns, has traditionally been read in the last weeks of the church year and now finds its place fixed on the Last Sunday in LSB’s series A. Its description of Judgement Day has been challenging, to say the least, to the Lutheran confession of justification by faith alone. For when the King invites the righteous into heaven, He cites as a causative factor their actions in feeding, clothing, and visiting the poor. This text was hugely influential in mediaeval theology. Charity to the poor was consequently the top-rated good work. If you want to guarantee a place in heaven, give alms, either in life or in your last will and testament. Even today, as Mother Theresa is beatified for her work among the poor, this text is proclaimed as the fundamental dominical mandate for all diaconal work. In our theological embarrassment, we Lutherans have lamely attempted to interpret it as saying that Jesus highlights these good works merely as evidence of faith. This leads to life-goal sermons that seek to make our hearers more confident of their salvation by exhorting them to good works. But this is scant improvement on the Middle Ages. Where is the Gospel?

Firstly, many a preacher has noted that Jesus divides the sheep and the goats **before** He says anything about their works. Secondly, Jesus calls the sheep at His right hand those “blessed by My Father”, and He invites them to “inherit the kingdom prepared for you”. These are words of purest Gospel that precede any reference to their works. But thirdly, a little exegetical sleuthing uncovers the fact that our English versions have mistranslated the phrase ἐν τούτων τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν ἐλαχίστων. It isn’t “one of the least of these My brothers”, as if Jesus is speaking of care given to any old poor person, or even any old poor Christian. It should be translated, “one of these least brothers”. The demonstrative phrase “these least brothers” suggests that Jesus was pointing at a particular group of disciples standing to His right. A brief romp through Matthew’s Gospel suggests that “these least brothers” are the apostles, whom Christ has exhorted to strive not for greatness but for meekness. Sending them out on a preaching mission, Jesus pronounced, “*whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is My disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward*” (Mt. 10:41). The reward was the Gospel they were preaching, and to give them a cup of water was to receive their message with thanksgiving, caring for the messenger as for the Lord Himself, whom they represented. Thus, the Gospel in Matthew 25 is that Christ has indeed visited people ... through the office of the ministry, and that those who listen to such preachers have listened to Christ Himself. Blessed by this great gift, they will be invited into the Father’s kingdom.

Let’s try an epistle text. A text that readily springs to mind is the great *Carmen Christi*, the hymn of Philippians 2:5-11. The stage is for a life-goal sermon seems to be set by the run-in from verse 3, which I quote in the NIV:

¹⁴ London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970.

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

It seems then that Paul is concerned to correct a certain self-absorption in the Philippian congregation by directing them to look at the example of Jesus. Was Jesus concerned only with His own needs? No. Rather, He set aside the prerogatives of His divinity, took on human flesh, humbled Himself in taking on the form of a slave, suffered and died like a criminal upon the cross. The Christian ought to take this as a model and behave with similar humility and self-sacrifice. It's the original WWJD. In his famously exhaustive study of the text,¹⁵ Ralph Martin called this the “ethical interpretation” of the text.

Now, inasmuch as Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Law of God as a new and better Adam, there is some truth in looking at Him as a model of Christian behaviour. But this, firstly, is always in the sphere of the Law and takes us no farther than that. And secondly, if it is applied rigorously to this text, we get a rather peculiar model: for is it the Christian's obligation to imitate Jesus in setting aside His divine rights, in taking on the form of a slave, in suffering and dying for all men, and then being exalted to the right hand of God to be worshipped by all creation? “Go, thou, and do likewise”? No, it is this thought ultimately that led Ernst Käsemann to suggest a rather different interpretation of the text, which was persuasive even to the Reformed scholar Ralph Martin. With a few modifications, it goes like this: The behaviour of some Philippian Christians is breaking the fellowship they have with one another through their mutual Baptism into Christ. Their selfishness is contrary to the law of love, and needs to be rebuked. But in this behaviour they are not so much failing to imitate Christ as they are denying what He has made them to be in Him. Paul knows that the power to change lies not in themselves, nor in words of rebuke and encouragement, but rather in a re-affirmation and proclamation of the message of Jesus Christ through which they first became one with Him and each other. So he preaches the Gospel. Now listen to the opening line in the RSV translation: “Have this mind among yourselves, which **is** yours in Christ Jesus, who” Here the NIV's Law has become purest Gospel. Paul **gifts** them with a new mind by proclaiming the work of Jesus Christ. The great creedal hymn he sings to them is all about Christ's work, not theirs.¹⁶ This results in a very different sermon than the one we first pondered. Paul himself draws the conclusion that “it is **God** who is working in you both to will and to work for **His** good pleasure” (2:13).

Not too many weeks back (Proper 20) we had the opportunity to preach on Paul's difficult words concerning the role of women in the church in I Timothy 2. Now, they're not difficult simply because they're counter-cultural. A deeper problem comes in the final verse, “yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty” (2:15). Again, it's not even problematic because it asserts a traditional role for women. Everything here is natural for a Christian. Child-bearing is a godly vocation, and who can object to faith, love, holiness, and modesty? No, the stumbling block is the verb, “she will be saved”, for it offends against the Gospel itself. And this Gospel has just been clearly expressed near the beginning of the pericope: “for there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all” (2:5-6). Is it credible to suggest that Paul takes this away from women at the end of the text? Is it any better to propose here what's been called “covenantal nomism”, that we get into the kingdom by grace alone, but we stay in God's favour by our acts of faithfulness to this calling? This merely shifts the legalism further down the line. No, it's time again to look more closely at the text. Firstly, it's important to keep in mind the context: that Paul has just appealed to the story of Adam and Eve and their deception in the garden. This is the

¹⁵ *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5-11 In Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983; first published in 1967).

¹⁶ Sadly, Caemmerer, 70, expresses disdain for a Gospel reading of this text: “Thus Phil. 2:5-11 is a splendid text. By the direct method it suggests the goal ‘Be humbly self-sacrificing as Jesus was.’ If it should suggest ‘Believe in Jesus, who humbled Himself to redeem us,’ an important goal is set up, but then this text is used by the indirect method.”

unchangeable Word of God to which He appeals for His prohibition of women teaching in the church. Secondly, the phrase translated “through bearing children” in the RSV is διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας in Greek. This is one instance when it is important to translate the definite article and to maintain the singular number of the noun. Literally it says, “through the child-bearing”, or “the bearing of the Child”. Thus, in context, it is probably a reference to the *protevangelium* (Gen. 3:15), the promise made to Eve that a messianic Child will one day issue from her offspring to reverse the curse. This, then, is purest Gospel. And it helps to explain why the next verb is in the plural: “if **they** abide in faith and love and holiness”, for the birth of the child redeems not woman alone, but men and women together.

Permit me to draw these examples to a close with a similar text from Ephesians. I’m sure you’ve all experienced the difficulty that I’ve had in explaining chapter five to couples in pre-marital instruction as I would work through the marriage rite with its appointed readings. For the line, “wives be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord” is offensive to modern sensibilities. Matters are not helped by the fact that our traditional rite, rooted in Thomas Cranmer’s translation of the early Sarum rite, asks the wife to “obey”, which is stronger even than the Greek verb ὑποτάσσω permits. Of course, who could deny the obligation for all people to obey Christ, as He is the Second Person of our Sovereign Triune God. But to identify obedience as the over-arching characteristic of the church’s relationship to Christ strikes me as a gross distortion, and leads to sermons on this text that proclaim a generic form of old-fashioned morality unworthy of the Christian pulpit. For, firstly, as John Kleinig has skilfully demonstrated in another recent *LTR* article, the NT idea of “subordination” is not simply about obeying commands, but has to do with accepting one’s appropriate place in God’s order. What is the church’s place with respect to Christ in the order of salvation? It is to “be saved” not to save (passive not active). The subordination of the church to Christ is a renunciation of works righteousness, a refusal to fall into legalism, a humility of spirit with respect to our own spiritual strength. So also, Paul argues, wives are to take their proper place in the marriage, accepting the sacrificial love of their husbands and not trying to be the husband. But even this is still a Law sermon.

The Gospel is found, firstly, by backing up a few verses. For it is perplexing to the exegete that the verb in v. 21 is a participle, not an imperative. It doesn’t actually say, “wives **be subject** to your husbands”. The only imperative to be found is way back in v. 18 where Paul encourages us to “be filled with the Spirit”, one of those odd passive imperatives that seems to give what it demands, for the Spirit comes through such words. The reception of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament leads naturally and by the Spirit’s grace to three results, which Paul describes with circumstantial participles: addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, that is, worship (v. 19); always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father, that is, prayer (v. 20); and “being subordinate to one another in fear of Christ” (v. 21). This last is a form of daily worship of which the subordination of wives to husbands is one significant example, followed by the subordination of servants to masters and children to parents. So this subordination is, firstly, a gift of the Spirit. But, secondly, and more importantly, even within our pericope Paul moves very quickly away from describing our acts of subordination to proclaiming again the work of Jesus Christ in making us all His bride. The raw statistics are alone surprising: only three out of twelve verses talk about wives; the rest of the words are addressed to husbands, whose obligation (as a representative of Christ) is greater than the wives’. But even then Paul very quickly moves away from what the husband does (three verses) to what Jesus Christ has done (all the rest!). In other words, there’s far more Gospel than Law in this passage, in such words as

Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word, that He might present the church to Himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).

And then Paul concludes the section by appealing (as he did in I Timothy) to a foundational text from Genesis: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31; Gen. 2:24). But what does he say about it? That it’s a Law for Christian behaviour in marriage? No. Instead he says that it’s a mystery whose real content is only discovered if it is interpreted as a reference to Christ and the church. In other words, we usually get the

lines of “typology” backwards: we tend to think that Paul uses Christ’s relationship with the church to say something about how to behave in marriage. But what Paul himself tells us at the end of the text is that he’s only talking about marriage in order to proclaim Jesus Christ! Or put even more strongly, God instituted marriage way back in Genesis 2 with the primary purpose of proclaiming the coming work of Jesus Christ for His Bride, the Church! Every marriage that ever existed should be seen and read as a proclamation of the Gospel!

And what a fitting place to end. For it reminds us, likewise, that the central thought of any text is its Gospel point. No preacher should be ashamed to abide in the words of St Paul:

²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (I Cor. 1:22-24)