

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary  
2014 Symposium

**Reaction to Pastor Michael Jensen's Essay**  
***Christ, the Preacher: Tracing Our Preaching Roots to Jesus***

Thank you, Pastor Jensen, for taking us back to the root and source of our preaching by taking us back to Christ “the Preacher and our best homiletics professor.”

You demonstrated in a thorough way that the biblical and Reformation roots of our preaching have to be traced back to Christ. His preaching ministry stands as the basis for ours in numerous ways: the preparation for preaching (study of the Word, life experiences, and the *Anfechtung* of life), the motivation for preaching (compassion for souls and passion to serve them with the gospel), and the content of preaching (law/gospel, textual preaching that predominantly proclaims who Christ is and what he has done).

There are several points you raised that deserve extra emphasis. First, the only way we can know and understand who God is and what he is really like is through the Word and specifically the gospel. Because the law is written on our hearts and the law is where we naturally gravitate, if we are limited to what we *see* about God, we see a God who threatens and frightens us. Like you pointed out regarding Moses (and I would add Elijah at Mount Horeb), in order to really understand who God is and what he is like we need to hear him describe himself. He has to reveal himself to us in his Word. The brief quote you provided from Luther summarized this thought well. “*If you want to encounter God, you must first see Him under the mask, in the Word.*” The clear conclusion is that his Word needs to be preached. This is what the prophets were sent to proclaim. This is what Jesus was sent to proclaim. This is what we are called to proclaim.

This truth is behind Luther's belief that God is the God who speaks and that his Word is powerful. The quote from Steven Paulson on pages 24-25 emphasized this. The Lutheran Reformation was really formed and took off based on this premise. It is a uniquely Lutheran emphasis that colored Luther's entire theology and work. Whether it was his restoration of the centrality of preaching in worship or his renewal of congregational hymn singing, whether it was

his emphasis on education or the publication of his catechisms, Luther knew the key was getting the Word to people, putting in their ears and minds and on their lips and hearts. That's how God changes hearts.

A second key point is the emphasis on preparation for preaching evident in Christ, the Preacher. He studied the Word, even though he did not have to. He lived a little before he began preaching at the age of thirty. He was prepared for preaching by the temptations and trials he endured. You did a great service, both to seminary students and experienced pastors, by stressing the importance of preparation for preaching. The need for a thorough study of the text is a huge reason our pastoral education is heavy on the biblical languages. A preacher is prepared by the passage of time, by living life, by accumulating life experiences. Then there's the matter of *Anfechtung*. The struggles of the soul, the temptations, the trials, the troubles—these are all training for the preacher and help him relate the Word to people because he knows what they are facing. We all have our “backstory” which affects who we are as preachers and as people and provides us with a framework for applying the Word to the people we are called to serve. You point out well, however, that our preaching still is focused on Christ and not on our stories and struggles. “A preacher points to Christ's wounds in the pulpit, not his own... [A]n ambassador of Christ represents his King, not himself; he wants the sermon to be all about Jesus and his people” (p. 18-19).

Which leads to a third point worth further emphasis: the content of our preaching. As good Lutherans, we know that the content of our preaching is the twofold message of Scripture, law and gospel. You pointed out in examples from Christ, the apostles and Luther that a sharp, pointed law message is needed to expose sin and reveal our biggest problem. But you hammered home something that we continually need to hear because of our *opinio legis* and our American religious culture. The gospel has to predominate. The good news of who Jesus is, what Jesus came to do and what this means for us has to be central in our preaching. It was in Christ's preaching (take note especially of footnote 70, p. 25). In Acts, the apostles' sermons are full of gospel.

Yet, is that always the case in our preaching? Does Christ as Savior, as crucified Redeemer, as giver of forgiveness and peace, occupy center stage when we are preaching (after we have preached specific, pointed law)? Or do we find ourselves preaching a message suitable either for the “anxious bench” or the “comfy couch”? Do our sermons consist of a string of cute family stories or clever illustrations downloaded from the internet, stories which everyone remembers but no one remembers the point, illustrations which overshadow Christ? Pastor Jensen, you did a masterful job, throughout the essay, in showing us the need, power and overall importance of keeping the gospel of Jesus at the heart of our preaching. Christ did this, from his sermon on Isaiah 61 to his parables about the kingdom of heaven to his Good Shepherd sermons. The apostles did this consistently. Luther excelled in this. One descriptive Luther quote especially caught my attention. “*We must nestle and cuddle on the lap of Christ, like dear children on their mother’s lap or in her arms, and close our eyes and ears to everything but Him and His words*” (p. 18).

Gospel-centered preaching has pastoral implications, as you noted by pointing out that preaching a sermon is akin to a public counseling session (see footnote 35, p. 10). Christ’s preaching brought comfort to poor sinners because he proclaimed the gospel. Our preaching does no less. You summarized this well in your comments on Isaiah 61.

This good news heals a broken heart. No matter if it has been broken by self, others, or life in general, the heart finds peace in the Messiah’s good news. To those who have been led off by sin, taken captive by it, left in the darkness of despair in this life with no hope for anything better in the life to come, the Messiah comes with a message of freedom, a ransom paid for release, the doors to heaven flung wide open. His message announces...his presence assures...the LORD’s acceptance and favor, an eternal Year of Jubilee!

It is fitting that Isaiah 61:1-3 is suggested as words of comfort with the family prior to funeral services in *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* (p. 66, 71). When pastoral care is probably most needed, the Savior’s words of comfort ring the clearest.

And perhaps that is what I found most edifying about your essay. While you were tracing our preaching roots back to Christ you were preaching Christ to us. The exegesis and extensive exploration of several texts (e.g. Isaiah 61; Matthew 3; John 10; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21—often found in the footnotes) are great food for personal meditation and future sermon preparation. It is

clear that the parishioners at St. Mark's in Watertown are well-fed when you are in the pulpit. The emphasis on Christ's active obedience as the perfect preacher is good news, amazing news, refreshing news for busy (and, at times, lazy) preachers who fall short in preparation and whose motivation week in and week out may not be what it should be. Yet, Christ went through the same temptations and struggles and was perfect *for us*. He lives and reigns to help us in our *Anfechtung* with his powerful word of forgiveness. Therefore, we can take up this high and holy calling of serving as his spokesmen, striving to use our time and gifts to the best of our ability, in order to point people to Christ in our public proclamation of the Word. We can preach confident that we are doing his work and that he will bless it. Like Luther preached, so you have "preached" to us today. "*Here and elsewhere I learn that all His words are intended to comfort me; yes, that all He says, does, and thinks is nothing but friendly and consoling words and works*" (p. 10).

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