

# THE GOSPEL ASSUMED IS THE GOSPEL DENIED

*Rev. Herbert C. Mueller, Jr., President, Southern Illinois District, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.*

“The Gospel assumed is the Gospel denied!” That is what we used to say in college when a preacher in the chapel service laid on us his “pet peeve” or “hobby horse” but did not give us the Gospel. The subsequent conversation might have gone something like this: “Where was the Gospel in that sermon?” Someone who liked that professor might have answered, “Oh, he assumed you knew the Gospel. He just had something else he needed to bring us this morning.” Perhaps it was sophomoric of us, and maybe it came from that hyper-critical attitude common to pre-seminary students, seminarians, and even pastors who think they know more than they really do. But it is true – “the Gospel assumed is the Gospel denied.”

Assuming the Gospel is the height of arrogance. It is as if we were saying, “We all know what God has done for us in Jesus, so we can go on to teach and learn other things today.” St. Paul gave much apostolic direction for living the Christian life – “bearing with one another” (Colossians 3:13), “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), “walking by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16), and seeing the “more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). Yet Paul always put such admonition in the context of Christ’s saving work for us. In fact, Paul was adamant about the priority of the cross: “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2: 2). What did he mean? No matter what else Paul had to say, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our salvation are the center, the essence, the focal point of all Christian preaching. Whether the subject is justification or sanctification, it all comes back to the cross. No preaching, no Christian teaching is complete unless it brings us back to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ on the cross. Indeed, anything else the preacher might proclaim is meaningless, unless it flows into or out of the message that Jesus died and rose for us. Every doctrine of Scripture is designed by God ultimately to bring the comfort of sins forgiven and eternal life in Christ to the penitent sinner.

As Lutherans we whole-heartedly agree. We confess we are saved by grace alone, for the sake of Christ alone, through faith alone. And we insist that God works faith in us only through Word and Sacrament, His means of grace (Augsburg Confession IV & V). We Lutherans are known as Law-and-Gospel preachers. We understand that the Law does God’s “alien” work to show us our need for God’s proper work in the Gospel. Surely we have it right. How could we Lutherans ever be guilty of “assuming the Gospel”?

You find it most often when we pastors preach with the assumption that God’s people know the Gospel already. Perhaps very creatively we urge them to share the Gospel with others, but at the same time we forget to include the Gospel itself as the power and motivation for its own proclamation. There are wonderful examples in the Book of Acts, for instance, that show us how Paul shared the Gospel. And Paul’s evangelism efforts provide a wonderful example for us. But if we preachers spend the whole sermon talking about how Paul explained the Gospel to Felix (Acts 24:10ff) and how our hearers can do the same to their friends and neighbors, we may be giving good advice. But advice alone is nothing but law. If that law does not come too close to my pet sins, I will be tempted to self righteousness. I’ll become sinfully proud of my witnessing. Or when the law does expose my failure to witness, I may become even more afraid to talk about Jesus, because I’ll never witness as well as Paul or even as well as the pastor. I may need to hear the advice, but I need to hear even more the Gospel of what Jesus does for me. Only through Jesus does God give me the power to witness.

Perhaps more blatantly, we pastors sometimes think that because we have used the word Gospel or have talked *about* Jesus dying and rising, we have thereby preached the Gospel. Sometimes we are so determined to emphasize “practical issues” of Christian living that there

simply wasn't time enough left in the sermon to talk much about God's action. Pastors have told me, for instance, "We Lutherans can preach justification and salvation just fine, but we do not preach enough sanctification and Christian living." Yet without clear Gospel preaching, "sanctification" alone becomes just more law—law that makes God's people so self-righteous that we don't see our need for Jesus or so despairing that we don't believe his forgiveness is for us. When the Gospel is assumed, the sermon will not connect people with its power.

How can we tell? Are there any warning signs we are in danger of "assuming the Gospel"? Here are some questions we can ask ourselves as preachers. Did I begin my preparation, formulate my theme, determine the content, and then realize that the Gospel was really only auxiliary to the thrust of my sermon? That's the Gospel assumed. Or did I start with a "message" I wanted to bring to the people—maybe understanding the Biblical ideals concerning marriage—but as I wrote I realized I needed to get some Gospel into the sermon somewhere? That's the Gospel assumed, too, because even if we are able to shoehorn Jesus' cross into the sermon somewhere, the Gospel in that sermon is still auxiliary to our "message." We have assumed, and therefore denied, the Gospel, I would suggest, if Christ and His cross and God's saving action are only adjunct to what we preachers really want to say. We may have great and interesting material, but if we do not bring God's people to the cross, our preaching has not connected them to the power of God for salvation.

The Gospel is also assumed and therefore denied when we prepare a liturgy (contemporary or traditional) where the main focus is on us--how we feel, what we do, or what our response should be. Instead, the golden thread that needs to run through everything in the liturgy is God's service to us in Jesus Christ, particularly God's service to us in the proclamation of Absolution, the preaching of Christ's saving work, and the gift of our Redeemer's body and blood. The ultimate question, the answer to which ought to shape every part of the service, is this: Does the language we use in the liturgy or sermon actually *give* God's gifts or merely talk about them and hint at what they are? Is the central thought focused on God's work in Christ, on God's gifts in Jesus, or is it focused on our work?

When the Gospel is assumed, all that is left is the law. Of course, as long as the law is not presented too strongly, too harshly, or too pointedly, our sinful flesh feels at home with the law and counts it as an ally. That is why it is so natural to talk about our own actions even when we assume we are proclaiming the Gospel. Because our sinful flesh readily understands the law, we are very comfortable talking about God's work as though it were our work. For instance, we may say, we come to God, we believe, we preach, we worship, we baptize, we forgive sins, we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we do works of service, we witness for Christ. Yes, from a human point of view, we can say that we do all those things. But if that is all we say, we are still under the law. If we urge these activities apart from God's work, we have assumed, and therefore, denied the Gospel. Remember, all these actions are really God's work. God comes to us in Jesus Christ even though we, in our sin, could never come to Him. The message of the cross has the power in itself to create faith. It is God's doing and God's gift. Our sermons have no power but the power of the Word of God. Jesus Himself speaks through His Word proclaimed. Paul assured the Corinthians, "My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

The Spirit uses the means of grace to gather us for worship, because in those means Jesus Himself comes to us to serve us with His forgiveness. When someone is baptized, we see the water and hear the Word the pastor speaks, but God is there baptizing, uniting that person with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. ("We were buried with Him by baptism into death..." [Romans 6:4] That's passive. God does it to us.) When penitent sinners are absolved, it is Jesus Himself speaking the Word of forgiveness (John 20:21ff). He gathers us around His table, at His command and promise, because He is the host, serving us His own body and blood. Our works of service are really the works of Christ through us. He gives us His Spirit to produce His fruit. Our witness is also the work of His Spirit, who continually bears witness to Jesus. As our confession puts it, "without the grace, help, and activity of the Holy Spirit man is not capable of making himself acceptable to God, of fearing God and believing in God with his whole heart, or of

expelling inborn evil lusts from his heart. This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, who is given through the Word of God..." (Augsburg Confession XVIII, 2-3).

Here is a simple test for evaluating a sermon, a Bible Study, or a liturgy to see whether we are merely talking *about* the Gospel or truly proclaiming it to the people. Here's how we see whether we are only urging people to do something themselves or announcing Jesus' work and proclaiming His gifts – in other words, whether we are assuming the Gospel or proclaiming the Gospel. Prepare the sermon, the Bible Study, or liturgy. Then go back and underline all of the action words. Find the subject of each verb. Ask the question, who is doing the verbs? If we are doing the action, then no matter how much it might otherwise sound like Gospel, it's still the law. The law is concerned with what we do or don't do. When the Gospel is assumed, the law alone will drive us to despair or make us hard-hearted and self-righteous. The Gospel, on the other hand, is concerned with everything God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ for our salvation, to forgive our sins, to give us new life. Whatever advice for living the Bible has (and yes, that is part of our preaching), at its heart the purpose of preaching is to allow the Law to kill us (God's "alien" work) so that Christ can make us alive (God's "proper" work). Of course, this means that the law cannot be assumed either. Gospel preaching without clear law will bore people or simply give them permission to be complacent in their sin. Insipid law only annoys us instead of killing us, just as half-hearted Gospel brings faint comfort in place of real life.

How do we bring law and Gospel to our people in vivid and compelling ways? The best place to begin is to make full use of the specific language of the text itself, the passage of Scripture on which the sermon is based. (We might spend time here talking about lectionary preaching, but that's another essay entirely!). Connect the language of the text to the cross. Working through Luke in Year C we come upon Jesus' explanation of the cost of discipleship (14:25-33). How do we hate father, mother, wife and children? How do we bear our own cross? And to top it all off, Jesus says, "whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." (14:33). Don't fudge on this or try to soften the blow. It's intended to cut

to the heart. Yes, following Jesus is more important than anything or anyone else. Who can do it? None of us! But now Jesus takes up His cross, renounces all He has (remember, He owns everything!), not for Himself, but for us. Jesus takes up the cross we could not carry. Jesus pays the whole cost in our place. When His law leads us in repentance to renounce all we have, particularly to give up our sin and death, in His Gospel Jesus gives us all He has – His life and His goodness for us, His peace and His righteousness, etc. Do you see how the cross of Jesus becomes the hinge, the intersection of death and life? Unless the sermon brings us through that intersection, it can only leave the hearers in the law.

Our goal is to show our people with the language of the text how in the cross Jesus is God for us. In another Lukan text from Year C Jesus says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:11). Of course, this is more than good advice at a dinner party ("go and sit in the lowest place"). When Jesus humbles Himself on the cross, He is more than just an example. Christ was humbled on the cross because God put our sin and our death on Him. And Christ was exalted when God raised Him from the dead. Now when we are humbled by our sin, we cannot exalt ourselves, but Christ raises us up together with Him. In other words, we have to find in the language of the text, not only Christ as example, but Christ for us.

At every intersection of law and Gospel there is a friction point, a turning or a great reversal. If the Gospel is assumed in the sermon, people remain in the law and never receive the new life in Christ. In Luke 7:11-17 you can see a compelling example. The people are streaming out of Nain to the village cemetery, overcome with the grief of the widow who has lost her one and only son. Quickly that funeral procession was overtaken by the victory parade surrounding Jesus as He approached the village with a crowd of His followers. What happened at the point of contact? "Young man, I say to you, arise!" (Luke 7:14), Jesus said, "And the dead man sat up and began to speak." (Luke 7:15). Now with the young man raised to life and given back to his mother, the "funeral procession" dissolved and joined the "victory parade." That's what Jesus does. He enters the "funeral processions" of our lives in His cross (He is God's

one and only Son given up for us) and by His resurrection turns them into His “victory parades.” One day he will come in a grand “victory parade” at His Parousia and put an end to ALL our “funeral processions” by raising us from the dead. But if a sermon assumes the Gospel to talk about other things, haven’t we preachers thereby left the people in their “funeral processions”?

The cross brings us to the heart of the matter in every text. On the cross God put His one and only Son into our place. He was condemned so that we go free. He was killed so that we might live. He was punished so that we are pardoned. “You, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13-14). You were dead, but God made you alive in Christ. You were the sinner but God credits to you Christ’s obedience. You were the one damned, but God canceled that indictment, nailing it to the cross with Jesus. We were hopeless and helpless, but by God’s “great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1 Peter 1:3).

Any sermon that ignores this hinge between death and life – even though it may give great advice that is word-for-word from the Bible – will leave the hearers stuck in the “funeral procession” of their own efforts, their own sins. The preacher brings his people through the “turning point” when he leads them to despair of their own efforts and brings them to see all their sins laid on the “sin bearer,” Jesus Christ. “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus did not come to give new laws or simply to teach us how to get along better. Jesus is the Son of God in our flesh come to put Himself in our place so that He might give us His place. He came to take people headed for hell and bring them to heaven by His blood shed for us. He came to bring the great reversal – to give life for the dead, grace for sinners, cleansing for the dirty, wholeness for the rotten. And He did it by His death on the cross in our place. “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through

death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all who through fear of death were subject to life-long bondage.” (Hebrews 2:14-15). The Gospel does not just talk about the possibility of freedom. The Gospel proclaims it. Jesus sets us free and commissions preachers to go and give it away. Jesus forgives us and commissions us to go and forgive. Jesus makes us alive and commissions us to bring life in His name.

Where does sanctification fit into this? (Remember the accusation that Lutherans don’t “do” sanctification well?) Actually, faithful law and Gospel preaching leads also to true sanctification, that is, growing in holiness as God’s gift. Sanctification preaching is not “Five Steps to a Perfect Marriage.” Preaching sanctification begins when we see the connection between Christ and the other. When I see how much Jesus has done for me, and then realize He has done the same for my wife, I can then begin to see her for the precious gift of God to me she is. My desire to care for her comes from Christ’s care for both of us. When I give her up to God, I receive her back again, not to possess but as God’s free gift to me. Growing in sanctification takes place life-long as the Gospel of forgiveness transforms my relationships by constantly transforming me. It’s what happens when Jesus’ “victory parade” comes into the “funeral procession” of my life. But if we preach Christian living assuming that we do not have to bring our people to the turning point between law and Gospel, they will only remain stuck in their own “funeral processions.” Oh, to be sure, their outward lives may show immediate changes when only the law is proclaimed, but they are still dead in their sin, if they do not hear that Jesus died and rose for them.

How do we make this more vivid in our preaching? To start with, we dare not assume that we know what the text is about when we begin our study. We need to read it a number of times, study all the words, shake it like a tree to see where all the connections are. We need to put ourselves into the terms of the text. Where does it touch me? What sore places in my heart does the text poke at? What brings me comfort from the text? What language does this passage of Scripture use to proclaim God’s work in Christ for me? Next, we can look at the verbs. Who is working the action?

Are the verbs active or passive? Then we can use that language to step into the breach between life and death for our people and give them the life of Christ. We have the one thing our people need above all – the living Lord Jesus! It’s our privilege to find the words in the text to give Him away freely and clearly!

I find this to be good advice: Be in the text and then be with your people. A faithful pastor living with His people will know the effects of their sin and hear them when they cry out in their suffering, “My God, why?” We will see where the law has done its work and will know when sin and death have done their worst. And we will give them the only thing that matters, the only One who comforts. In the mystery of the incarnation, God does not lay out three points of good advice for how to answer that haunting “Why?” No, what He does is far more profound. God comes.

In Jesus Christ God Himself comes to us. He is the Word of God “made flesh” for us (John 1:14). In Jesus, God Himself experiences our suffering. God’s answer to our “Why?” is Jesus, nailed up to the cross for us. God does not give us a theological treatise, but He gives us His Son to suffer with us and to suffer for us. On the cross, our sin becomes His. Our suffering and pain are all given to Him. Our death He dies for us. In the midst of that suffering He also cries out with us, “My God, why?” When we ask, “What could be worse than the pain I am experiencing?” we could also ask, “What could be worse than the Son of God Himself lying dead in a grave late one Friday?” Nothing!

Yet the Christian Gospel promises that God was not finished when Jesus was crucified. Three days later God raised Him from the dead, signaling a new reality in which God has given Him “the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11) Jesus rises from the dead to say to us, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the Living One; I died and behold I am alive forever more, and I have the keys of death and hell.” (Revelation 1:17-18) Jesus is the one who will “wipe away every tear,” who promises, “Behold, I make all things new!” (Revelation 21:4-

5). That’s what we are sent to proclaim. That’s what can never be assumed.

The Gospel of Jesus, crucified and now raised from the dead, brings not a sentimental view of our present suffering but a fully realistic picture. Jesus does not say, “Oh it’s not really so bad!” nor does he simply say “God has a purpose for all this, one day you will see.” Jesus will never fool us. He knows our pain is real, because Jesus knows pain. He understands rejection and has faced death as well. He knows the confusion that comes with suffering. Jesus does not explain away the difficulties we face. On the cross He let them all happen to Him, because He wanted to connect with us. On the cross Jesus took it all, knew it all, suffered it all, simply so that He could be with us and know what is happening to us. On His cross Jesus took up all of our crosses.

Jesus knows that our suffering and pain often strip us of our possessions, our power and our pride, so that we are left alone with Him. And then He is alive to show Himself to us in His Word, the Word that invites us, “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28). Looking to Jesus on the cross, we preachers have the privilege of helping our people say, “Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You are my hope, just as I was in your despair on the cross. You are my sanity, just as I am your confusion; you are my joy, just as I am your sorrow. You are my healing, just as I am your pain. Indeed, you are my life, Lord Jesus, just as I was your death on the cross.” There’s the great exchange, the great reversal. There’s how the cross of Christ always stands at the intersection of death and life. After all, without Christ and His cross and resurrection there is no life, only death.

On the inside of the pulpit at the parish I last served, placed where only the preacher could see it or feel it, was a small crucifix. Yes, there were times when I thought of that cross as law (in the same sense that many portions of this essay are law for preachers) reminding me of the necessity to preach the Gospel, as St. Paul writes: “For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9: 16) The Gospel assumed is the Gospel denied!

But that little crucifix was an even more powerful and necessary comfort for me in proclaiming what God has done and is doing for us in Christ. Again, St. Paul writes: “All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). All this is from God. I am not just “flapping my gums” when I am proclaiming Jesus crucified and risen. God Himself is there to bring His reconciliation to me and to the people. God Himself is shining through the Gospel: “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For it is God who said, ‘let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:5-6).

Though we are never really up to this tremendous task, though you and I falter, God is always faithful. And He will use His faithful Word to keep you and me faithful. “Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code [the law!] kills, but the Spirit [the Gospel!] gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:4-6). The purpose of the law is not just to advise us or show us God’s way. The purpose of the law is to kill us so that God can raise us to life with Jesus in the Gospel. The law strips us of any pretense of life on our own, but the Gospel fills us with the life of Christ crucified and raised from the dead.

Again, once we have finished our sermons, it’s time to ask: “Who is doing the verbs?” God

gives life. God shines. God makes us competent. God saves. God forgives. God raises the dead. God heals. God comes to us in Jesus. God speaks in His Word. God creates faith. God gathers His church. God baptizes. God feeds us the body and blood of His Son. God gives His gifts. Jesus says to His preachers, “He who hears you, hears me.” His Word on our lips is alive with His life, to give life.

Of course we have in this short study only scratched the surface. Still, after reading all this, you may have begun to wonder whether or not you can ever “get it right” as a preacher. Remember my little crucifix. Remember Jesus gave himself for you. Remember God’s grace is for poor, sinful preachers, too. Remember that God gives the Spirit in the Word that you (yes, you!) might have the power to proclaim the Good News. It doesn’t come from you, but from Him. It is not your job to change hearts – that’s His work. Your work as a preacher is to bring Jesus to people—the same Jesus who comes to you with his forgiveness. He gives life. He will enable you to proclaim, and not assume, His Gospel.

“Will you also go away?” Jesus asked His disciples. May our sermons show that we answer with Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:67-69). We therefore trust God to work through everything written in this issue of *Concordia Pulpit Resources* to help each of us make sure that Christ’s work on the cross and in the resurrection is the true center of all our preaching and teaching. The Gospel assumed is the Gospel denied. But the Gospel proclaimed is life indeed!