

Can One “Preach” the Law? An Interchange, Part 1

Colleagues,

Now that Christmas sermons have been filed in whatever repository preachers may use for such things, we may as well return to a theme we’ve touched on more than once over the past year or two, namely the nature of the preacher’s task, craft, and calling.

A couple of months ago I stumbled across a page on the *Lutheran Quarterly* website entitled “[Law-Gospel Preaching](#),” and quickly sent news of it around to the folks who organize the work that Crossings does. Those of us with passions for important things—the proper distinction between God’s Law and God’s Gospel, for example—tend to talk among ourselves too much, taking too little note of things being said and thought by folks in other circles who also care about these things. It also seems to me that we succumb too easily to the hubris of Elijah, who assumes that “I alone am left” to tell it like it is where the Word of God is concerned (cf. 1 Ki. 19:14). We never are the only ones out there, of course, and to think otherwise is not only an insult to saints and colleagues unknown; it’s also a sin against the Lord who has promised always to feed his flock and provide for his Church. But for our sakes too the Savior Christ was born. Thanks be to God for that, and with all our hearts.

In any case, it’s a joy to discover (or re-discover) how well the good fight is being fought in other quarters, the *Quarterly*’s among them, and so I sent the word along. Wouldn’t you know, it sparked a quick interchange with enough meat to it that you’ll find it of interest, I think. I’ve edited it down to a back-and-forth between Ed Schroeder and one of the

newer members of the Crossings Board, the Rev. Dr. Martin Lohrmann, whose PhD specialty is Reformation history. Ed raises the intriguing question—you haven't thought about it either, I'll bet—of whether it's legitimate to speak of Law-Gospel “preaching,” particularly where God's Law is concerned. Martin fails to be persuaded that this is something to worry about. That shouldn't be altogether surprising. Martin, pastor of Christ Ascension Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, serves also on *Lutheran Quarterly's* editorial staff as webmaster. With this as intro, read on.

By the way, since this turned into a fairly long discussion, five or six pages worth, we'll feed it to you in two parts, round two coming at you next week. Also: for the sake of readers who might be mystified by certain abbreviations here and there, we've added explanations in square brackets.

On another note, some months ago I passed along news about the death of Edna Braun, steadfast saint and grandmother of Carol Braun, my Thursday Theology co-editor. Edna's husband Norman fell asleep in the Lord just after Christmas. In the mystery of the kingdom, his faith too is blessing all of us through the work his granddaughter does on our behalf. Commend him with thanksgiving to the Light the darkness cannot overcome.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

The Schroeder/Lohrmann interchange on the term “Law-Gospel preaching”—

From Ed Schroeder—

Before adopting the rhetoric of *Lutheran Quarterly* on “law and

gospel preaching”–

Caution #1 There is no word in the Greek New Testament (NT) for “preach” – Fred (BDAG) Danker. [BDAG = the definitive English lexicon of New Testament Greek, commonly identified by the names of the four scholars chiefly responsible for it, i.e. Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich.]

Caution #2 When English translations of the NT do use “preach,” they are regularly seeking to render two NT Greek nouns that have been turned into verbs in the Greek text. The two nouns are Good-News (euaggelion) and Message (kerygma).

#3 These two nouns get used as verbs when NT texts seek to turn the noun into an action. “Good-news-ize” the folks with this specific good news, “message-ize” the folks with this explicit message. English translators have regularly rendered this as “preach the Good News,” which Danker always caveated as damaging the meaning of the two original nouns.

#4 The NT Greek noun “nomos” [law] is NEVER turned into a verb in the NT. Never ever. So there is no NT precedent to create the expression “preach the Law”... which is already a distorting of the original meaning of the noun itself.

#5 Bob Bertram’s choice of Diagnosis and Prognosis for the rhetoric of Crossings was a clear departure from this. Especially his use of diagnosis for “doing” NOMOS. The medical metaphor signals what Law is. God’s diagnosis of our malady. A medical doctor never “preaches” diagnosis. She simply is descriptive. “Here is what the data reveal. You are sick. These are the specs of your malady. I’m not ‘preaching’ this to you. I’m describing your psychosomatic landscape in the same way that I would describe what I see when I look out the living room window of our home toward the flowers in the backyard.”

#6 The M.D. DOES get proclamatory when she moves on to therapy. (Bob Bertram's "prognosis" in the Crossings paradigm. De facto a "new" prognosis, because the earlier diagnosis did bring with it its own prognosis: "If no intervention, death.") The M.D. says: "Here is a medication/a therapy that can help. Here's how you use it. Do what I'm telling you. This is the way to good health in your specific case." That is proclamatory. Good-news-izing the patient. With both indicative sentences and admonition sentences. Indicatives and imperatives. But none of this proclamation is "nomos." Even the prognosis-imperatives are good-news-imperatives for the patient.

If LQ wants to stick with this inappropriate terminology—allegedly Lutheran—let them. But the Crossings tradition has another option.

Ed

Response from Martin Lohrmann—

Remembering the apostle's advice in 2 Timothy "to avoid wrangling over words," here are some simple reasons I find "law and gospel preaching" to be a fine expression.

I'll begin with my own sly objection to the phrase "law and gospel preaching": it seems to be redundant. The word of God is always doing the twin work of law and gospel, killing the old Adam and making alive. In theory (at least in Lutheran circles), all sermons should be about letting the Word do this work. But since not all sermons or preachers are keen on doing that, the "law and gospel" part of the phrase is an adjectival way to remind preachers what Word they are proclaiming in their sermons.

I'm not worried about the word 'preaching', either. The Word is doing its twofold work whether we're reading the scriptures,

engaged in mutual conversation with other Christians, sharing the word with non-Christians, singing hymns, praying prayers, preaching sermons, and on and on. 'Preaching', then, is one word among many that we use to talk about those activities in which the Word of God is at work among us. That said, the Spirit is (*deo volente*) also doing some kerygma work through our sermons, which is the specific focus of the "law and gospel preaching" feature under discussion.

Regarding the use of this concept in the BC, I'm quite sure preaching falls under the rubric of "teaching the Gospel" and other similar phrases used to express the ministry of the Word in the Augsburg Confession (V, VII, XIV, etc). I would back this up by noting that Melanchthon uses that phrase this way in article XX when describing what "preachers" had been wrongly "teaching before now." If I recall, he goes into more detail about the preaching the one Word as law and gospel in the Apology, but my copy of the BC [Book of Concord] is in my office and I'm at home now. I clearly need another copy.

Second, it's worth recalling that the Large Catechism itself began as a sermon series. That is, Luther was preaching the salutary distinction between law and gospel from the pulpit as he made his way through the biblical content of the commandments, creed, Lord's Prayer and sacraments. This kerygmatic origin to the LC may even invite us to remember that the BC is itself no mere conveyer of static dogmas but a preacher and proclaimer of the Gospel to us over the centuries. In fact, that's my favorite way to read it. I love how it preaches Christ to me (as law and gospel) each time I open its pages.

Finally, FC V [Formula of Concord, Article V] discusses this topic quite clearly. While it doesn't limit the work of "law and gospel" to sermons, it certainly and explicitly includes the

public preaching and proclamation that happens in sermons in its discussion.

In summary, I thank Ed for the question and this chance to think about evangelical kerygma in a little more depth.

Martin