

The Homiletical Bind: Preaching Law and Gospel in the Congregation

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Introduction

As I talk with my clergy colleagues both in and outside of my Lutheran circles, I sense that there is much confusion about the purpose of preaching. Well, I might call it confusion, but others would prefer to describe it approvingly as **diversity**. I am not an expert in homiletics, but as I read and listen to much of the preaching in my part of the world, especially to the more popular preachers of some reputation, I sense that much of it is indeed not much different from the latest motivational speech you might hear at any sales conference. They are often lively, humorous, informative, filled with clever anecdotes and stories and most of all, entertaining. The only difference between this preaching and just another self-help motivational speech is the occasional sprinkling of references to God and other such religious language.

I could also make similar observations about another kind of preaching that is very wide spread in my area. Central Indiana is also on the northern edge of the Bible Belt. And in the Bible Belt there is never a reticence to talk about God and Jesus and the more references the better. Even though such preaching seems to be so much more decisive and full of conviction than what one often hears from the pulpits of main-line Protestants, the best and most popular practitioners of this kind of preaching also pay significant attention to the techniques and strategies of the motivational speech. Nothing works like preaching that is clever, humorous, anecdotal and filled with stories and illustrations. Add to this the Bible Belt hunger for preaching that is bold, decisive and filled with Biblical quotations, and you have got a winning formula.

To criticize such preaching runs the risk of sounding like “sour grapes,” especially when the critic is a pastor of a relatively small congregation. In this part of the country such preaching is most often found in large congregations that are successful entrepreneurs in the “big business of American religion.” But I will criticize them, because a preacher who is committed to the Lutheran tradition believes that Christian preaching must first of all be faithful to the Word of God. For Lutheran preachers that also means properly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God.

So much of the popular preaching of American Christianity, as it seeks to speak to a culture dominated by consumer and entertainment values, unwittingly adopts the perspectives and techniques of popular culture at the expense of the fullness of the Word of God. Such preaching will be visual and dramatic. Storytelling that is earthy, humorous or suspenseful is essential. Drama and film are often used to supplement preaching. Brevity is fundamental. Above all preaching must be “practical,” filled with down-to-earth examples of what the hearer is expected to do in daily life as a result of taking this preaching to heart. Ask these preachers how they distinguish Law and Gospel in their preaching and they wonder what you are talking about.

Such techniques and strategies are often effective in holding the audience's attention. But more often than not they ignore the fundamental task of preaching, a task that Lutheran preachers consider absolutely essential and fundamental to proclaiming the Word of God: distinguishing Law and Gospel. Preaching Law and Gospel describes a particular way in which the preacher uses words. Preaching Law and Gospel refers more to the **function** of the preacher's words than to their **content**. Preaching Law and Gospel reflects a particular strategy that seeks to affect and change the hearer in a particular way. Preaching the Law ultimately exposes the hearer to the judgment of God, a judgment that always accuses and ultimately kills its hearers. Preaching the Gospel does just the opposite. It brings to those same hearers God's life giving mercy and the new kind of world such mercy makes possible. Such Law/Gospel preaching moves beyond the simple moralizing that dominates so much of preaching today.

Preaching Law and Gospel is essential to faithful preaching because Lutheran preachers live by the conviction that this distinction is not just a quirk of denominational taste. This distinction is fundamental to the Word of God itself. And that makes preaching Law and Gospel even more unsettling, because, if the preacher presumes to speak for God, this distinction **MUST** be present. It is not optional. Without doing it, the preacher faces the uncomfortable possibility that the preacher has been misrepresenting God. To presume to speak for God is audacious enough. But to insist that to speak for God one **MUST** distinguish Law and Gospel is even more presumptuous because the claims the Law/Gospel distinction make about God are so outrageous.

Preaching Law and Gospel is a dangerous business. In Biblical history, more often than not, it was those who presumed to speak for God, who spoke God's Law in all its fury and God's Gospel in all its lavish kindness, who ended up getting killed. It is only its revolutionary promise that keeps the preacher going.

This paper describes preaching Law and Gospel as a paradoxical and contradictory process. It creates a kind of **bind**, "a homiletical bind." The Homiletical Bind refers to the paradoxical and conflicting experience that happens to both the preacher and the hearer when Law and Gospel are properly distinguished. The bind happens in three ways: 1) in the paradoxical relationship between the preacher and the audience, 2) within the paradoxical claims of the Law, and 3) in the paradoxical relationship between Law and Gospel.

Preaching Law and Gospel means that the preacher must take the hearers through the process of experiencing the judgment of the Law and the liberation of the Gospel. It must happen in the moment of hearing "for you." My experience of much African American preaching and preaching in the American revivalist tradition has revealed that they are often especially effective at doing this, even though they too often still fail to properly distinguish Law and Gospel. This unfortunately results in various versions of the same old moralism of traditional mainline Protestant preaching.

Law/Gospel preaching literally seeks to lead the hearer down a "path" and through a "process" of experiencing "in the moment of hearing" the accusations of the Law and the liberation of the Gospel. Therefore, the "shape" of Law/Gospel preaching ought to resemble the plot of a story or the dramatic tension of a play. It literally needs to draw the hearer into a homiletical plot. In that plot the hearer experiences the Homiletical Bind, first by experiencing

the paradox **within** life under the Law and then by experiencing liberation **from** the Law through the paradoxical and contradictory claims of the Gospel. In Law/Gospel preaching the hearer experiences a moving story line in which there is a rising dramatic conflict (Law), resolution of that conflict literally *deus ex machina* (Gospel), and a concluding *denouement* in the new life of the Spirit.

Because the sermon is experienced as a kind of “plot,” traditional quantitative strategies for proclaiming Law and Gospel no longer apply. I have heard preachers say that you need to balance proclamation of Law and Gospel, to get it as close to 50/50 as possible. They fear that, if the sheer volume and mass of the Law is not balanced by a corresponding volume and mass of the Gospel, then the voice of the Gospel will be drowned out. But such a simplistic balancing of quantities fails to understand the dynamics of plot and story. A good drama may take two hours to build to its climax and reach the “punch line” in a matter of minutes. If dramatic tension has been effectively developed, if the diagnosis of the human plight has been accurately and intelligibly described, then a short, dramatic punch line, a brief surprising climax, will be effective.

Essential to understanding the preaching of Law and Gospel as a “plot” is the use of a single “idea.” It may be an image from contemporary culture, a metaphor from the Biblical text, or a vital social, political or spiritual issue facing the congregation. This “idea” is an important compass to guide the audience through the movements of the plot.

Preaching is important, probably the most important thing a pastor ever does in the congregation during the course of the week. The larger the congregation, the more important this task becomes. But because of the overwhelming demands placed upon pastors, it is so easy to get spread “a mile wide and an inch deep.” It is easy to find yourself sitting at your desk on Saturday night wondering what in the world you are going to have to say on Sunday morning that is going to make any difference in people’s lives. It is in such moments that a pastor is most tempted to just “fill space” or resort to being merely entertaining. I must confess that I find myself in this position more often than I ever want to admit.

Homiletical Bind #1: Preaching Against And For The Congregation

One of the best teachers I ever had was brilliant in the way he could make ancient texts come alive, many of which I had never read or heard of until I sat in his class so many years ago. Ancient texts were suddenly contemporary. I remember him once doing a form critical analysis of the various ways the Old Testament Scriptures record the call of many of God’s prophets. Essential to the “form” of the “prophetic call” was the fact that none of these prophets (Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, etc.) volunteered to become spokesmen for God as some part of “career move.” Being a prophet was never a matter of personal ambition. Being called was always God’s idea. They usually went kicking and screaming. They always had excuses and rationalizations for not going along with God’s call. They were always reluctant prophets.

Why? Each had their reasons for not feeling adequate to the task. But most of all they were reluctant prophets because they knew that their words would often not be welcomed by the

very ones who needed to hear them. There would be intense opposition to what they had to say and do, often by the very ones they were called to save.

They were not driven by what their audience **wanted** to hear but by what their audience **needed** to hear. They did not do sociological surveys and opinion polls in order to find out what would “play in Peoria.” Instead they were driven by the message God had given them. Their one calling was to be faithful to the Word of God. But ironically, surprisingly, miraculously, proclaiming the message their audience did not want to hear was the only way their audience could be “saved.”

Preaching Law and Gospel today puts the preacher in the same kind of paradoxical relationship to her hearers. The experience of the Homiletical Bind for the preacher in her relationship to his audience is inescapable. The experience reminds the preacher that she will always have a kind “love/hate” relationship with her congregation. The preacher is called to love her flock. But to love means also to tell the truth. A doctor discovers that her patient has a deadly tumor. But she knows that telling the truth is going to make her patient very upset. She could just tell her patient to take a couple of aspirin, drink lots of fluids and get some rest. Her patient might go home happy, pleased and telling herself, “That was good news!” But it was not the truth and without the truth she will surely die.

A preacher has no choice but to tell the truth, to proclaim the painful and ugly truth of life under the Law of God. That may put the preacher at odds with her congregation. That may make many in the congregation feel as though the preacher is **against** them. But ultimately proclaiming the accusing, killing Law of God is done **for** the congregation, because the pastor loves them, because not telling the truth will lead to far worse consequences, because telling the truth of life under the Law prepares the hearer for the joyful surprise of the Gospel. When the truth has been told, when the homiletical plot has done its diagnosis, then the dramatic climax of the plot, the truly *deus ex machina* of God in Jesus Christ, is genuine and surprising good news!

Being able to tell the truth of the Law **against** the sinful congregation that does not want to hear the truth is tricky business. A congregation that does not believe that the preacher is speaking **against** them because ultimately she cares **for** them is dangerous for the preacher. If the congregation does not trust her, then such speaking will only anger them. They will not listen and might try to silence her. To be able to speak **against** the congregation so that the preacher can ultimately speak **for** them, for their life and salvation, they have to trust the preacher. And trust is only won over time. Trust is won not only from the pulpit in preaching but perhaps, even more so, in the daily ministry of simply caring for people, especially in times of crisis.

In the few times during the course of ministry I have moved, this has become abundantly clear to me. Until I have been at the new congregation long enough, until I have had opportunities to be with people through divorces, funerals, family conflicts, etc. so that they trust me, they don't hear much of what I have to say in preaching. Preaching the Law is only heard as haranguing and complaining. “All he does is shout at us.” “He's too intellectual.” “He shouldn't be talking about those things from the pulpit.” “His sermons aren't practical.” I have

even discovered that in teaching situations much of what I have to say about Law and Gospel is met with bewilderment and even opposition, if the people have not learned to trust me.

It is an incident that I will never forget. I was on my internship (called vicarage in those days) in Detroit in the mid 70's and preached a sermon on forgiveness that I thought was pretty good. I thought it was a stroke of brilliance when I used President Ford's recent pardon of Richard Nixon as an example of undeserved forgiveness. At the close of the service while greeting members as they left the sanctuary, one of the more active members of the congregation, a successful business man, read me "the riot act." He was outraged and infuriated with my sermon and thought it totally inappropriate. Where did I go wrong?

After the service I talked with my supervisor about this incident. It was a real lesson about preaching, the risks of telling the truth, and necessity of winning the trust of the congregation before you can speak **against** them in order to speak **for** them. My supervisor told me that this irate member was the chairman of the McComb County Republican Party and a staunch supporter of Richard Nixon. He was still trying to come to terms with the Watergate scandal let alone with Nixon's resignation. My approving reference to Jerry Ford's pardon of Nixon in my sermon deeply offended him because he was convinced that Nixon didn't need a pardon because he had done no wrong. This man was so upset by this word that he heard it only as a world **against** him. His ears and heart were closed to the good news of the Gospel regardless of how well I might have preached the Gospel. My supervisor gave me some advice I have never forgotten. You have to win the trust of your people. They have to be convinced that you really love them, before you can really get close enough to them to begin doing effective ministry.

Miscalculating this careful balance (or should I say "art" or, even, "venture of faith"?) can cost you your ministry. Short circuit the truth telling of the Law and it can cost you just like it cost the prophets before you and that other bold proclaimer of God's Law and Gospel who ended up on wood. Knowing that can be comforting to the pastor who has lost his ministry in the name of "telling the truth." And it may very well be that he was very accurate and righteous in his pronouncements and the congregation needed "to get hit upside the head" with the truth. But when that tragically happens, it usually means that that congregation is going to have a tough time learning to trust the next pastor. It usually creates deep wounds that take a long time to heal. It is a large price to pay for what sometimes may only be the result of a pastor's self-righteous conviction that he knows what is best.

Miscalculating the delicate balance can also result in the utter compromise of the pastor's ministry. "Winning the trust of the people" can become an excuse and rationalization for never pushing your relationship with the congregation past superficial pleasantries. Always checking out how it will "play in Peoria" because you always want to be "liked" can become a dereliction of duty, like that doctor who doesn't want to tell her patient the truth because she wants to be "liked."

Homiletical Bind #2: Preaching the Law Or Getting Caught in the Bind

The second Homiletical Bind describes the paradoxical experience of preaching the Law. The paradox arises within the dynamic of the Law itself. What it offers with one hand, it takes away with the other. What it implies as possible, it, in fact, declares as impossible. It puts the hearer in a place where he experiences a kind of “double jeopardy,” a situation where the hearer is “damned if you do and damned if you don’t.” The experience of being caught in such a bind, of being trapped in a contradiction and paradox, will frustrate the hearer. It will accuse the hearer. It will expose the ultimately hopeless plight of the hearer vis a vis God. It is no wonder that, in many a congregation, upon first hearing the preacher talk this way, the people will be convinced that the preacher is **against** them.

During my 25+ years in the ministry, one of the most consistent complaints about my preaching from my critics has been that I am not “practical” enough. They want me to talk about family values, the Christian understanding of marriage, the Biblical approach to sex and money. They complain that I am too theological. They lament that they come to church to feel happy and that’s not happening for them. They want stories that make them laugh and feel good. They want more “warm fuzzies” from me. They want the pastor to take stronger stand on moral issues and give them clear guidelines for what is right and wrong.

I have tried to listen carefully to their complaints and suggestions. I am convinced that what they want from me is more Law. They want me to tell them what to do, as long as I am not too unreasonable. If I would only tell them what to do, they would do it. Oh, sure, they would fail and make mistakes. They would need forgiveness to keep them going. But they are convinced that, if only I would give them more practical examples about what to do, they would like my preaching more and so would others.

The problem, of course, is that, when the Law is preached in all its fullness and fury, they do in fact get what they deserve. But what they get is not what they thought they would get. They never get the satisfaction of doing it right. They always fall short of the Law’s demands. They are always accused and criticized regardless of how hard they have tried. That is frustrating, even depressing, for them. But, ironically that is precisely what is supposed to happen when they are preached the Law.

The problem is that the Law they want me to preach is a truncated and distorted version of the Law of God. The Law of God, when it is preached in all its accusing and deadly fullness, is not the kind of thing you want more of. It is the last thing sinners want to endure, unless they trust that the Law is not last word and that something better is coming.

What does it mean to preach the law?

Throughout my ministry my formal teaching about the Law has always started with my use of Luther’s Small Catechism in confirmation instruction. One of the somewhat hokey illustrations that I have always found helpful is the description of the Law as “curb” and “mirror.” As “curb” the law guides and protects, rewards and punishes. Its goal is to preserve

life in this world, which it does, when it is obeyed. The law as “mirror” is there to show us what we really look like. It shows us our sin. It constantly accuses us and exposes our shortcomings.

Of course, whenever I have used these two images to teach the Law and the commandments to my catechumens, one of the biggest challenges is to get them to see that these are the two ways **God uses** the Law in this world. God is the ultimate “user” of the Law and the commandments. In various penultimate ways we are called to use it in the governing of our lives, but God is its ultimate author. As a “curb” he uses the Law to compel us to obedience. When we obey, life prospers. When we don’t, life suffers the consequences of His disapproval.

It has always been a struggle to get my students to see that God is the ultimate “user” of the Law and the commandments, because their natural inclination is for them to be the ultimate “users” of the law for their own benefit and gain. After all, isn’t that the purpose of rules? That is why I emphasize again and again, sometimes it seems to no avail, that the most important way God uses the Law is the second use of the Law, Law as “mirror.” The law as mirror, as the revelation of God’s wrath and anger with our rebellion, is always the most difficult for people to accept. It also is the most difficult use of the Law to exercise in preaching. More on this later.

Preaching the first use of the Law is where all of my preaching begins. Beginning with the assumption and conviction that God is always active in human lives exercising his curb, I listen to places in the lives of people where they are experiencing the “presence” of God. The presence of God may only be their experience of the moral dimension of life, that they are called to give an account of their lives, that they are challenged to prove and justify who and what they are, that they cannot escape the necessity of having to carve out the meaning and purpose of their lives. Or it may even be as simple as listening, watching and observing those places in their lives where life simply isn’t working out the way they had expected.

After finding these “itches” and “bumps” in people’s lives, I know that what they are actually experiencing is more than just “itches” and “bumps.” They are experiencing God’s second use of the Law, Law as accuser, God as accuser. Why are they accused and uncomfortable with what is going on in their lives? Because they are sinners who have chosen not to trust God but instead have willfully sought out the consolation of other gods. The “itches” and “bumps” reveal the places in their lives where those gods are disappointing them. Preaching the Law is to help them see that this is what is actually happening.

While doing such a diagnosis I try to avoid traditional religious jargon and language. Sometimes I will go through an entire sermon and never use the word “sin.” But in fact I have been talking about sin and its consequences all along. I have discovered that such jargon often prevents the hearer from really “hearing” the Word of the Law. It becomes a label behind which they can hide. “Oh, yes, I am a sinner. That’s me,” and they stop listening as my diagnosis of them goes deeper. All they hear me talking about are their moral slip-ups, their little mistakes, or their naughty thoughts and deeds. They fail to see that the problem is much worse because their superficial understanding of “sin” prevents them from continuing to listen.

At this point in the preaching process, the experience of the Homiletical Bind becomes crucial. When the hearer actually experiences the Homiletical Bind, he has been “cut to the

quick.” He has been existentially exposed and has become spiritually vulnerable. He literally experiences the inescapable accusation of the law and is at last ready to hear and believe the Gospel. This process of discovery and being driven to seek help in Christ is what happens when the hearer experiences of the Homiletical Bind of preaching.

The plot of an effective sermon will draw the hearer into the world of the sermon so that the preaching is finally about them and not someone else. Then the homiletical plot will lead them down the road exploring various solutions to their problems proposed by the Law. The Homiletical Bind is experienced at that moment when the hearer discovers that what the Law had promised, solutions that supposedly could be worked out by human commitment, ingenuity and strength, are in fact impossible.

But be careful what you ask for. Be careful what you ask the Law for. Be careful what you ask God for. The Law promises that God **will** give it to you. And when the preacher’s words actually do that by accusing and attacking the hearer for his complicity in these unsolvable problems, it all seems so undeserved, unexpected, and unfair. But then the Law has done its job. The Homiletical Bind has happened. The paradox of trying to do your best, then discovering that it was impossible from the outset to succeed and still being held responsible for your failure is experiencing the paradox of the Homiletical Bind. It is God using the Law as it was ultimately intended to be used: to knock the hearer down, to bring him to his knees, to reveal his sin, and to make him a candidate for mercy.

In the diagnosis language of the “crossings method” of Biblical interpretation, this is what happens at levels two and level three of diagnosis. It exposes the hearer not only to the futility of trying to extricate himself from his problems but also to the absence of his faith. His faith in God is not only called into question but the impossibility of his ever trusting God on his own is exposed.

Level three diagnosis is the most difficult to pull off in preaching. I must admit that I often do not go to that level of diagnosis. Why? Because the diagnosis is so shocking, so devastating and so novel to the hearer that I run the risk of the hearer just dropping out and tuning me off. They disconnect and no longer listen because they don’t understand what I am talking about. Or they find it just too absurd and incredible to accept. To speak of the wrath of God on sinners, to describe God as the final problem that must be overcome, is just so foreign to so many of the people to whom I must preach that I run the risk of losing completely them. They came to church in search of a gracious God and now I tell them that God is angry at them for failing to keep the Law which they never had a chance of keeping in the first place. Level three diagnosis is so new and so shocking to so many, including many pious and faithful Christians, that it needs further explanation. Such an explanation of level three diagnosis of the human condition needs to happen outside of the context of worship and preaching. I have the most success in the context of teaching where there can be give and take and open discussion about the importance of level three diagnosis.

One more *caveat* concerning the preaching of the Law. Some well-meaning Lutheran preachers who are committed to Law/Gospel preaching, preach the Law but do it in such a way that they bypass the experience of the Homiletical Bind and thereby severely undermine the

credibility of their preaching. The most frequent way this happens is like this: the preacher beats up his audience with the Law. If they didn't feel guilty when they came to church, they do now! Having created all these "terrified consciences," he now has something from which to save them.

This sort of preaching is contrived and artificial. It may very well be that there are times when the preacher needs to truly take the risk of being the prophet and call his people to account by reading them the riot act. But that is different from this phony preaching of contrived guilt. To effectively preach the Law means that the preacher must first carefully listen, observe and discern how God is **already** active in the lives of people judging them, calling them to account, challenging them to obedience, urging them on through all kinds of conditional promises. Preaching the Law, then, is helping them to see and understand what God is **already** doing in their lives.

Homiletical Bind #3: Preaching the Gospel Or Loosening One Bind by Creating Another

Preaching the Gospel is what it's all about. Ask any Christian preacher whether they preach the Gospel and, unless they are some kind of an idiot, they will say, "Of course I do because without the Gospel there is no Christian preaching and therefore no Christian faith."

Yet, if I could have a dollar for every sermon to which I have listened during the last 23 years of my ministry and heard no Gospel, I would be a rich man. Just because the preacher talks about Jesus or God or is able to quote tons of Bible passages is no guarantee that the Gospel is being preached.

Gospel preaching describes a kind of talking, a manner of speaking, that creates the third experience of the Homiletical Bind. When the Gospel is proclaimed in all its truth and purity, it is always experienced as unconditional gift and gracious promise. And because of that, it places the hearer in another bind. The hearer is literally caught between the conflicting messages of Law and Gospel. If the Law with its accusations, challenges, and conditional rewards finally drives the hearer to his knees and confronts him with the futility of his life, then the Gospel does just the opposite. The Gospel presents a totally different and contradictory message. The Gospel offers the unconditional gift of value and meaning, of mercy and forgiveness, freely with no reservations, with no "ifs, ands, buts, or maybes." It is the announcement that the God who was **against** you is now **for** you because of Jesus and what his life, death and resurrection have accomplished. The more this Homiletical Bind is apparent, the more the contradiction and paradox of Law and Gospel is made clear, then the more effective Gospel preaching will be in winning the consent and trust of its hearers. The Gospel will then be true and pure, undiluted by conditions, and better able to set the hearers free from the bondage of the Law. The preaching of the Gospel loosens the bind created by the preaching of the Law. It creates the experience of another bind, the proclamation of another, totally contrary Word of God.

The contradiction and paradox of Law and Gospel is made clear by Gritsch and Jenson in their seminal work Lutheranism when they discuss the nature of justification by faith.

“Make the subject of your discourse those points in your and your hearer’s lives where its value is challenged (Law) and interpret the challenge by the story about Christ, remembering that when this is rightly done your words will be an unconditional promise of value (Gospel).” (43)

The challenge of the Law is countered by the unconditional promise of the Gospel. This puts the hearer in a place where he is caught in another bind in which a choice must be made. Either he continues to trust the threats of the Law and tries to work out some plan of survival or he trusts the contradictory promise of the Gospel. The Gospel promises to loosen the grip of the Law and offers a future in the hands of a gracious God. That future grants freedom from the Law and a new life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. This promise is reliable and trustworthy simply and only because of the work of Christ.

Again, Gritsch and Jenson’s description of the Gospel is instructive.

“The Gospel is a wholly unconditional promise of the human fulfillment of its hearers, made by the narrative of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The gospel rightly spoken, involves no ifs, ands, buts or maybes of any sort. It does not say, ‘If you do your best to live a good life, God will fulfill that life,’ or ‘If you fight on the right side of the great issues of your time . . . ,’ or ‘If you repent . . . ,’ or ‘If you believe’ It does not even say, ‘If you *want* to do good/repent/believe . . . ,’ or ‘If you are sorry for not wanting to do good/repent/believe’ The Gospel says, ‘Because the Crucified lives as Lord, your destiny is good.’” (42)

The preacher can never take this Gospel for granted. Because the hearers continue in their sin and unbelief every day, they need to be set free from this bondage again and again. The Gospel needs to be proclaimed in every sermon without exception. To fail to do so always runs the risk that the sermon and its message may be misheard as just another version of the Law. Creating the Homiletical Bind, deliberately working to make the hearer experience in the present moment of preaching the contradiction and paradox of Law and Gospel, their conflicting use of language, and their conflicting views of reality, is essential to making sure that the Gospel “happens” in that sermon. Talking “about” Jesus is never enough. Jesus must be proclaimed and offered “for you,” the hearer, in the present moment and the “event” of preaching.

Essential to such preaching is telling the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Without Jesus’ death and resurrection, there is no reason or basis for the Gospel. Without Jesus’ death and resurrection there is no reason to believe that the God who was **against** us is now **for** us. Without Jesus’ death and resurrection there is no power to move the hearer to faith in this good news.

Attention to proper use of language is absolutely necessary to preaching the Gospel. I may not always literally use these words, but when I speak the Gospel I always try to make sure that I use the grammar of the Gospel. Such grammar always explicitly says or at least implies a “because . . . therefore.” **Because** of what God has done in Jesus Christ, **therefore** your sins are forgiven; **therefore** you can confess your sin; **therefore** you can trust in God; **therefore** can live the new life of service and self-sacrifice. On the other hand, the language and grammar of the Law always imply, if not specifically use, the language of conditions, of “if . . . then.” **If** you do such and such, **then** such and such will be your reward. Distinguishing these two grammars is essential to properly proclaiming Law and Gospel in a sermon and creating the experience of the Homiletical Bind. Failing to do so domesticates the Law, destroys the Gospel, and leaves the hearer untouched by the Bind. The experience of the Bind is intended to rouse the conscience of

the hearer and direct his attention to the startling new message of the Gospel. It is only by hearing this message that faith can be created.

Another way to call attention to the contrasting dynamics of Law and Gospel and their differing modes of communication is to consistently distinguish between the use of “got to” and “get to.” The Law always demands that its hearers have “**got to**” do something in order to get something. But in contrast, the Gospel always declares that, because of what God has done in Christ, there are no more “**gottas.**” Instead the hearer “**gets to**” trust God and love is neighbor. The threats and demands of the Law have ended. The hearer’s response to the Gospel is always freely offered and given. It is always a “get to” and never a “gotta.”

How the promise of the Gospel counters and finally overcomes the demands of the Law is the story of the work of Christ. It is the work of Christ which finally enables the preacher to claim that the Gospel is indeed the “last word” of God to the hearer and not the Law and that it is a word worth trusting. The persuasive power of the Gospel lies in the ability of the preacher to tell the story of Christ’s triumph over sin, death, the power of the devil and the accusations of the Law in such a way that it matches and answers the way these problems have been previously described and diagnosed by the preaching of the Law.

By spelling out just “how” Christ has accomplished this in his death and resurrection through a complete account of the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, etc. is not always necessary or even helpful in a sermon. The story of Jesus’ atonement could become just another doctrine to be believed rather than an encounter with the living God and his offer of mercy in the current moment of the preaching event. A focus on getting the doctrine right can short circuit the whole promise by concentrating on the message “about” Christ rather than on the “promise” Christ offers “for you.”

In conclusion, the faithful preaching of Law and Gospel in the congregation will result in the creation of the Homiletical Bind. Faithfully preaching Law and Gospel creates a dialectic, a contradictory and paradoxical relationship: first between the preacher and his hearers, second within the internal dynamics of the Law itself, and finally between the competing claims of Law and Gospel.

The second and third Homiletical Binds are especially important because they draw the hearer into the plot of the sermon. The hearer can no longer remain a spectator. Instead he is now the object of a contest, of the competing claims of Law and Gospel. Accordingly, a response is called for. Which Word of God will the hearer trust? The Word that he has “got to” believe or else? Or the Word that he “gets to” believe because of what God has already done in Jesus Christ? Effectively distinguishing Law and Gospel in the course of preaching will create these Homiletical Binds and add to the significance of the preaching event. Creating the Homiletical Bind makes it clear that preaching is always more than entertaining talk or motivational speech. It is a matter of ultimate, cosmic and eschatological significance. It is a matter of life and death.

