

LUTHER PROCLAIMS THE GOSPEL

I was asked to speak this afternoon on the topic of “Luther Proclaims the Gospel.” This is a broad topic. In my personal library at home I have over 60 volumes of Luther’s works in English and he wrote every one of them to promote the correct understanding of the Gospel. Obviously, we cannot cover it all today. So I thought I would narrow the topic down a bit and look at how Luther’s understanding of the Gospel shaped his theological views in just two areas – church and ministry and the Lord’s Supper.

I’d like to begin by posing a few questions. What is the church? How is the church created? How is the church fed and nourished? How does the church grow? How is the church preserved? These are extremely important questions, as we shall see, if we want to understand the nature of the preaching ministry, or the office of pastor, as an office that has been created for the specific purpose of serving Christ’s church. As we consider these questions I would like to focus particularly on the teaching of Martin Luther.

But first of all, let’s deal with some of these questions. What is the church? All of us here today know what the church is. This knowledge is fairly basic and not particularly difficult to understand. In fact, our Lutheran Confessions say in article 12 of Luther’s *Smalcald Articles*, ...“thank God, even a seven year old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd.”¹ And how are believers made? How is the church created? Again the *Smalcald Articles* answer, “In these matters, which concern the external, spoken word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word.”² The word of God, the Gospel and the Sacraments, the means of grace are alone that which creates the church and causes it to grow. How is the church created? How does the church grow? How is the church preserved? Every Lutheran who has been confirmed in an orthodox Lutheran congregation already knows the answers to these questions. The word of God gives birth to the church; the word of God nourishes the church; the word of God strengthens the church; the word of God preserves the church; the word of God sustains the church to the end. The birth of the church and all growth of the church and in the church is caused by the Word of God and by the Word alone.

How to grow a church? That is really not a question for us at all. That’s a question for God. And God has already answered the question. “As the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth” (Isaiah 55:10-11). The Spirit grows the church through the word.

Martin Franzmann, once a professor at our seminary in St. Louis, expresses it quite well on the very first page of his book, *The Word of the Lord Grows*.

“The word of the Lord grew”—three times in the Book of Acts, Luke uses this sentence to sum up a period of the history of the first church (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). These words are a telling expression of the Biblical conception of the divine word. Our Lord Himself compared the word with a seed that is sown and sprouts and grows: “The seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11). The word of the Lord is a power and is active; it “prevails mightily,” as Luke puts it in one of the passages just referred to (Acts 19:20). Paul speaks of the Gospel as “bearing fruit and growing” (Col. 1:6), and Peter speaks of the “living and abiding word of God” as an “imperishable seed” (1 Peter 1:23).³

The New Testament, according to Franzmann, only knows of one means of growth—the means of grace. Kurt Marquart, a long-time professor at our seminary in Fort Wayne, asserts the same truth in one of his books. According to Marquart, there are shepherds who feed and sheep who are fed, but the food is always the same—the Gospel. Marquart states,

The watershed issue is this: Is there in Christ an objective treasure-store of forgiveness, life, and salvation, to be offered, pressed upon, and actually handed out to needy sinners in preaching, absolution, Baptism, and in the Supper of the Lord's own most holy body and blood? If the answer is yes, then these holy means of salvation will absolutely shape and dominate the church's whole life, worship, and mission.⁴

On the basis of this understanding of the church, how it is born, how it grows, how it is preserved, I'd like to talk about some misperceptions today in regard to church and ministry which I think are damaging our understanding of God's grace and our unity in the church.

1. The first misconception is in the area of what we might call church growth. How does the church grow? Many today actually seem to believe that the church is growing when members are added to congregations. When a congregation grows from 200 to 800. This is seen as church growth. But to determine that the church has grown simply because there are more warm bodies in a building is hardly indicative of a good understanding of what the church itself is, namely sheep who have heard the voice of their shepherd. To hold the position that **God's** church has grown, simply because more people are in a given place at a given time than used to be at such given place and given time, is to misunderstand completely the nature of the church itself. Or at least it is to misunderstand the distinction between the visible and invisible church. God's church, the body of Christ is born of and grows and lives only from the Word of God, the Gospel.
2. The second misperception occurs when the office of the pastoral ministry is viewed no longer as the dispenser of the means of grace through which alone the church is born and nurtured and preserved, but as an administrative position the main function of which is to enable **others** to do the work of ministry. The "new ministers" are thus enabled to look to the pastor and see him as the one who enables them to do what was

once considered his duty. God's established method of applying the means of grace to His flock is then nullified. In addition, if those who are not trained theologically are now the ministers into whose hands has been placed the proclamation of the Word, the inevitable result will be the confusion of the proclamation, resulting in error and misunderstanding and finally in frustration which causes a waning interest in doctrine, and a consequent move toward unscriptural ecumenism. Now I don't want to be misunderstood here. I am not saying that Christian laypeople cannot speak God's Word to other people in such a way that other people become Christians and are added to the church. I certainly believes this happens and that it is good. I'm talking about a misperception regarding the office of the pastor. We need to keep firmly in our minds that the pastor is not primarily an enabler or administrator. He is primarily a shepherd whose duty it is to feed the sheep and this feeding takes place when he proclaims the Gospel purely and administers the sacraments. I am also not saying that every pastor is faithful in the carrying out of his pastoral duties. We all know this is not the case. We call a pastor faithful only if his proclamation is in accord with the Scriptures. But the fact that pastors can be unfaithful does not nullify the fact that God has established the office of the ministry to provide for the proclamation of the pure Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.

3. The third misperception relates to our understanding of the means of grace. In many places new methods have been raised to the level of the means of grace. The methods themselves are seen as responsible for growth in the kingdom. There is no longer any need for the Holy Spirit, at least in the orthodox Lutheran sense, as the one who builds the Church through the Gospel and through the Gospel alone. Rather, the proper application of specific methods is seen as the key to the creation and vibrant growth of the church.

I think these three misconceptions have factored heavily in some of the confusion among us over the whole issue of church growth. Actually, the question, "How do **we** do Church Growth?" is not a particularly Lutheran or, for that matter, Christian question. Instead, Lutherans and all true Christians historically have occupied themselves with completely different questions. How do we see to it that the Word is faithfully proclaimed in our congregations? How do we reach with the Gospel those who do not have it? How do we keep pure the proclamation of that Word which alone can give life?

Consider one of Luther's most poignant questions. "Are you a shepherd of souls, O Pope?"⁵ This question, posed already in 1520 in his work, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church", was not simply a rhetorical question meant to declare, "O Pope, you are no shepherd of souls." Surely it was meant to do that. But this question reveals also Luther's anguish for souls which

are deprived of the pure Word of the Gospel and therefore perish. The questions Luther asked dealt with salvation. They were therefore theological questions, not **method** questions. It never would have occurred to Luther to ask a question such as, "How do I advance the cause of Lutheranism and gain followers in my movement?" He simply didn't think in those terms. The questions that filled the mind of Luther were questions such as this one: "How shall we, through our proclamation of the Word, so disarm the kingdom of the devil that the Gospel may shine forth freely in all its splendor and the flock be fed with the Word of life?"

Thus, Luther's emphasis was never on method, but on preaching and on the content of preaching. He recognized that only the Word creates the church and causes it to grow.

The Word they still shall let remain, Nor any thanks have for it.

He's by our side upon the plain With His good gifts and Spirit,

And take they our life, goods fame child and wife, Let these all be gone,

They yet have nothing won – The kingdom ours remaineth!

Why? Because we have the Word! Listen to Luther in his Smalcald Articles of 1537.

"He (God) has a peculiar congregation in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God, which He reveals and preaches, [and through which] He illumines and enkindles hearts, that they understand, accept it, cling to it and persevere in it."⁶

But let's speculate for a moment and imagine that Luther had been pushed for an answer concerning his church growth methodology. Imagine for a moment that someone approaches Luther and says, "Yes, we understand that God's Word builds the church. But what is your method? How shall we most effectively reach people with that Word?" Luther would not have had a difficult time responding to this question. "The method is the ministry, the office of pastor." And he would have hastened to add, "This is God's method, God's method for administering the means."

Listen to Luther on the office of the ministry.

I hope, indeed, that believers, those who want to be called Christians, know very well that the spiritual estate (the office of the ministry) has been established and instituted by God, not with gold or silver but with the precious blood and bitter death of his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ [I Peter 1:18-19].... He paid dearly that men everywhere have this office of preaching, baptizing, loosing, binding, giving the sacrament, comforting, warning, and exhorting with God's Word, and whatever else belongs to the pastoral office.... Indeed, it is only because of the spiritual estate that the world stands and abides at all; if it were not for this estate, the world would

long since have gone down to destruction.⁷

As far as Luther is concerned, the feeding of the flock, and therefore the growth of the Church, (there is no difference between the two) takes place only when the Word is preached. And because God has instituted the office of the ministry that the flock, precious to Christ, may be fed, there is an inseparable relationship between the office of the ministry and the preaching of God's Word, such an intimate relationship that the preacher ought to be able to say that it is truly God who speaks to the people through his preaching. Thus, the faithful pastor must be able to say, as Luther does, "Whenever you hear me, you hear not me, but Christ. I do not give you my baptism, my body and blood; I do not absolve you. But he that has an office, let him administer that office in such a way that he is certain that it comes from God and does everything according to the Word of God, not according to our free will."⁸

God speaks through the pastor; the pastor truly stands in the place of Christ. And because God loves the sheep, Luther says about the pastors, "It is their duty to tend His sheep and give them pasture. Therefore to give pasture is nothing else than to preach the Gospel, by which souls are fed and made fat and fruitful, and that the sheep are nourished with the Gospel and God's Word. This alone is the office of a bishop."⁹

The connection between the pastor and the Word is even more specifically a connection between the pastor and the Gospel. The pastor's preaching must always be focused on Christ. The office of the ministry is itself a christocentric office. It constantly points to Jesus, His person and His work in order that faith in the Son of God may be created and thus the Church created. The proper work of a pastor, therefore, is, in the words of Luther, to speak, "...a word of salvation, a word of grace, a word of comfort, a word of joy, a voice of the bridegroom and the bride, a good word, a word of peace,"¹⁰ that the church may rejoice in the knowledge of her salvation. The office of the ministry is christocentric; therefore preaching is christocentric. This theme is predominant in Luther's writings throughout his life. Already in his **Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses**, Luther condemns sermons which won't permit true Church growth. He exclaims, "May every single sermon be forever damned which persuades a person to find security and trust in or through anything whatever except the pure mercy of God, which is Christ."¹¹

Because Luther sees the pastor as the instrument through which God administers His means of grace that give life and growth to the Church, he cannot praise this office enough. "All who bring the Word of God, who are preachers and ministers of the Word are called messengers (or angels) of God.... It is a very great glory for a miserable human being to be called a messenger of God and to have his name in common with the heavenly spirits."¹²

The *Augsburg Confession* expresses this same high view of the office of the ministry. Article IV

of the *Augsburg Confession* speaks about justification and the fact that we are justified through faith in Jesus Christ. Article V touches upon how God creates faith. “To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ’s merit, when we so believe.”¹³

Also Martin Chemnitz, one of the great orthodox Lutherans responsible for the writing of the *Formula of Concord*, emphasizes that the office of the ministry is to be held in high regard. “One must not think that this is done by human arrangement or only for the sake of order... Because God Himself deals with us in the church through the ministry as through the ordinary means and instrument. For it is He Himself that speaks, exhorts, absolves, baptizes, etc. in the ministry and through the ministry.”¹⁴

The pastoral office is, therefore, in Luther's view, a precious gift of God to the Church. He who holds this office holds the highest office one can have in the church for it is his privilege to preach the Gospel of Christ with the conviction that the Holy Spirit will use his proclamation to create the Church and to nourish, comfort, strengthen, and protect the Church. And the office of the ministry, or the office of preaching, focused always on Christ, is God's office, used by Him to provide growth to the Church through the means of grace by dispensing His Word and Sacraments and thereby giving birth to the Church and keeping her until the time of her final deliverance.

But just as the flock is to respect the office of pastor since it is instituted by God, so the pastors are to love the flock as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it. Luther believes that the faithful pastor loves his flock and is therefore committed, in his preaching of the Gospel, to a tender treatment of the souls of Christ’s church. The pastor is not to lord it over the flock like a tyrant – because the preaching of the Gospel which is his primary task, is after all, an absolution, a proclamation of forgiveness to all the world.¹⁵ The Gospel cannot be employed as a hammer to beat the church of Christ into subjection. It is preached to comfort, to assure, to strengthen, to encourage. Faith cannot be forced. Therefore, says Luther, “I can drive no man to heaven or beat him into it with a club.”¹⁶ The love of a faithful pastor for his flock is seen clearly in Luther himself. In a letter to Elector Frederick in March 1522, Luther speaks of the congregation at Wittenberg as his flock and insists he must return from the Wartburg where he had fled under the ban of the emperor. He defends his return as necessary to protect his fold into which Satan has intruded. Viewing the congregation in Wittenberg as his children in Christ, entrusted to him by God, he insists he cannot abandon them and is willing, if necessary, even to die for them.¹⁷

The faithful pastor loves his sheep. But in Luther’s view it is not sufficient for the pastor simply

to preach the Word and to profess his love for the sheep. He must be willing to defend the sheep, even if it should mean bringing great danger upon himself. The faithful pastor who loves his flock will always bring them the Gospel for it is only the Gospel that has the ability to protect the flock against all attacks of the devil. It is only the Gospel that has the power to create and sustain the church, to give life and growth to the church – and to protect the church.

Every faithful pastor, therefore, is committed to battle on behalf of Christ's church.

For a pastor must not only lead to pasture by teaching the sheep how to be true Christians: but, in addition to this, he must also repel the wolves, lest they attack the sheep and lead them astray with false doctrine and error. For the devil does not rest. Now today one finds many people who can let the Gospel be preached, provided that one does not cry out against the wolves from coming and leading the sheep astray. For what is built if I lay stones and watch someone else knock them down? The wolf can surely let the sheep have good pasturage. The fatter they are, the more he likes them. But he cannot bear the hostile barking of the dogs. Therefore to him who takes this to heart it is important to tend the sheep in the right way, as God has commanded.¹⁸

In the face of danger, then, the faithful preacher will not flee. He will stay to protect souls, lest they perish. Nor can the faithful pastor pick his battles. Whenever the flock is in danger, he must be ready to stand in her defense. When the false prophets arise, the faithful pastor must warn his flock. It is his duty to identify errors which could destroy the faith of his flock.

The pastor's first concern, whether preaching the Gospel or defending it from error, is always to be for the church. He holds his office not to serve himself, but to serve the body of Christ. "The bishops are, after all, only servants and stewards, and not the lords of the church."¹⁹ According to Luther, "Every man is created and born for the sake of others,"²⁰ and certainly one who is called to be a minister "is not exempt from the duty to serve. "My office," says Luther, "and that of every preacher and minister, does not consist of any sort of lordship but in serving you so that you learn to know God. My office is merely a service...."²¹

Far from being a lord in the church, the Christian pastor must recognize that the authority which he exercises in his public ministry of Word and Sacrament is one which has been delegated to him by the church and when he administers his office he is a representative of the church which has called him to this task.²² In fact, the church retains the right to pass judgment upon the fidelity of the pastor's service. "Here you see clearly who has the right to judge doctrine: bishops, popes, scholars, and everyone else have the power to teach, but it is the sheep who are to judge whether they teach the voice [i.e., the words] of Christ or the voice of strangers."²³

Not only do all Christians have the right to judge doctrine; it is their duty to do so. Thus, Luther

places a high value on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which at the same time does not diminish his high regard for the office of the ministry.

This is Luther's view of how the church is created and preserved:

1. The Savior given by God;
2. The Word about that Savior revealed by God;
3. Faith in that Savior created by God through the Word given by God; and finally,
4. That office administering the Word of God that creates faith instituted by God.

Everything by God!

And because all of this is done by God, it has to do with faith and therefore with things that cannot be seen. Can the Church be identified clearly with human eyes or is it hidden under the cross? Many people today seem little different in their beliefs from the Rome of Luther's day, American revivalism in the early 1800's and today's Charismatic movement. All these establish in their own minds the presence of the Church not by the true marks of the Church, the means of grace, which are bestowed by God, but by something visible in the appearance or conduct or numbers of human beings.

Permit me to return once again to the time of the Reformation to illustrate.

Martin Luther asks in a sermon in 1539, "Tell me, dear pope, what is the church?"²⁴ In a sense Luther faced the same dilemma we face today, a confusion over the nature of the Church which results necessarily in disagreement as to how the church is born and grows. He asks the pope what the Church is because he sees that this question goes right to the crux of the problem. No wonder the pope is not a shepherd to the flock, no wonder the Roman bishops do not feed the sheep; they don't even know who or what the flock is. Luther believes that the Roman doctrine of the Church that binds the Church to specific places and people and attempts to make the church identifiable, or to use Kurt Marquart's word, countable, is an attack on the true **ecclesia catholica**.²⁵

To insist that the church can be seen is, in Luther's view, to declare that it is not faith in the merits of Christ which makes a Christian, but adherence to forms, traditions and human works. To assert that the church is visible is to deny Christ and the sufficiency of His atoning work. Thus, when Luther vehemently attacks Rome's claim to catholicity, it is not simply because he believes Rome's understanding of the nature of the church to be flawed. The doctrine of justification itself, the heart of the Gospel and the life of the church, is at stake.

It is hardly surprising, then, to find Luther maintaining that since the Roman Church is seen, it is for that very reason not the true church. For if faith sees not with human eyes, then the church

of the faithful cannot be seen with human eyes. To insist that it can is to deny that the church is made up of Christians, that is, people who trust in the merits of Christ. That church, therefore, which desires to be visible is a church which wishes to live by works and not by grace. Thus, when Luther mocks the view that someone can throw a surplice over his head and be holy,²⁶ he is affirming the doctrine of justification. When in a sermon of 1539, he warns "against the Pope's church, bedaubed and bedizened with gold and pearls," and denies that love of God includes the pope's long robe and crown,²⁷ he is again confessing his belief that man is saved by grace through faith in Christ. In this same sermon he contrasts the pope's church with its visible marks to the true, hidden church of God which has been created by the Holy Spirit and lives by faith.²⁸

This is not to say that the true church does not have visible marks by which one can identify it. It does. But these marks are the pure Gospel and the Sacraments rightly administered. They create and feed faith. This is how the church is created and because faith cannot be seen, the boundaries of the true church cannot be precisely identified. Again – the church is the flock of Christ and only Christ knows who all his sheep are. But the church certainly cannot be identified with a visible institution or denomination. And one certainly cannot say that the church has grown simply because a particular congregation has increased in the number of its members. As far as Luther is concerned, only the Gospel causes church growth and because the pope views the church as visible, he cannot be talking about the true Church and true Spiritual Church Growth.

In a previous presentation I talked about the arrival in the United States of Saxons from Germany who almost immediately after they arrived in Missouri were confronted with challenges and troubles that could easily have caused the entire dissolution of their young church. So they were forced to study very carefully the doctrines of church and ministry. Just as they were confronted with the possibility of redefining the nature of the church and the office of the ministry according to the norms of the culture which they confronted, so the church will always be tempted to embrace the ways of the culture, of the world, of the society in which we live. These temptations are surely before us today, too. And as we face them, we need to ask ourselves some questions. Shall the church follow the culture in which she lives and learn from the world how to conduct her mission and order her life? Shall we learn from the world what the Church is and shall we learn from corporate business what a pastor should be? Or is it the Word and the Word alone that gives life to the Church and sustains her? Is it the Gospel alone that shall define what the church is and what the office of pastor is? The historical Lutheran answer to that question, is provided eloquently in a letter from Friedrich Wyneken to members of the Norwegian Synod after her recommendation in 1857 to train her pastors at Missouri's St. Louis Seminary.

We are conscious that from the beginning we have wanted nothing else than for our own welfare to hold fast to the sanctifying Word of the pure Gospel, as it has been brought to light by the faithful service of the blessed Dr. Luther and as it has been set down in the confessional writings of our Lutheran Church; to confess this Word of the Gospel before the world; to defend it against all perversions and falsifications; to spread it, as God gives us the grace, among our fellow citizens; and by this Word and it alone to establish and regulate all our ecclesiastical practices.²⁹

The Word and the Word alone, specifically the message of the Gospel, defines the office of the ministry for Luther. Historically this has been the case also for Lutheran churches.

Unfortunately, this is not the case in all churches that today go by the name Lutheran. When churches today decide to ordain women into the ministry, a decision that conflicts with God's clear Word, those churches are no longer being informed by Scripture. When churches decide to ordain homosexuals into the ministry, these churches have decided to defy God's 6th Commandment and make a mockery of the office of the ministry whose primary task is to preach the Law and the Gospel in their purity to the people. How can one who lives in open defiance of God's Law preach God's law properly to the people?

Luther approached the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the same way he approached the doctrine of church and ministry. His theology was a theology of the Word. His words at the Diet of Worms, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God", are words which were true of Luther, not only in 1521, but throughout his career as a reformer. Regardless of the subject under discussion, Luther's primary concern in determining the truth was that the Scriptures should speak, and in speaking, define the teaching and the faith and the practice of the church. Probably nowhere is Luther's commitment to the Scriptures demonstrated more clearly than in his exposition of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Especially in his treatment of this subject one can see his "captivity to the Word of God." In a letter to the Christians of Strasburg in 1524, Luther speaks about this "captivity" and explains how it was greatly responsible for the development of his doctrine on this sacrament.

If Dr. Carlstadt or someone else had told me five years ago that in the sacrament there is nothing but mere bread and wine, he would have rendered me a great service. I passed through great inner struggles in that respect, and had to fight hard to overcome that temptation. For I was well aware that by these means I could strike the hardest blow against the papacy...But I am captured by the Word of God and cannot find a way out. The words are there, and they are too strong for me. Human words cannot take them out of my soul.³⁰

Out of dedication to the words of Scripture, Luther exposes himself to criticism from the parties both of the pope and of Zwingli. Both Zwingli and Rome would like to see him silent. But Luther's captivity to the Word is not a captivity which binds him to silence. It is rather a

captivity which compels him to speak the truth expressed by the Word of Scripture. Thus, he does not neglect to criticize both the Roman Church and the enthusiasts in regard to their doctrine and practice concerning the Lord's Supper. He deplores the way in which the mass is celebrated by the priests of the Roman Catholic Church because the words of Christ are hidden.

But see what they have made of the mass! In the first place, they have hidden these words of the testament and have taught that they are not to be spoken to the laity, that these are secret words to be spoken only by the priest. Has not the devil here in a masterly way stolen from us the chief thing in the mass and put it to silence?...But would to God that we Germans could say mass in German and sing these 'most secret' words loudest of all!³¹

Zwingli and Oecolampadius, as well, are censured for their lack of attention to the words of Christ.

When God speaks, it is for us men to listen. When He commands, the world must obey...(Addressing the Landgrave:) I beg your highness's pardon, but the words, 'This is my body' have captured me. Even if Augustine or any other doctors would interpret the words symbolically, they should take their place behind Christ and accept his interpretation.³²

Thus for Luther, when considering the Sacrament of the Altar, primary consideration must be given to the words of Christ. The words of Christ make the sacrament and determine its nature. The words of Christ determine the use of the sacrament and provide its benefits. The words and promise of Christ are the source of comfort and assurance for the Christian. It is not surprising, therefore, to read in Luther's Small Catechism, "These words, when accompanied by the bodily eating and drinking, are the chief thing in the sacrament."³³

Luther's commitment to the Word in his discussions of the Lord's Supper is probably most evident in his treatment of the nature of the sacrament. The words of Christ alone, both in His dealings with the Roman Church and with Zwingli and the Reformed, can determine what the sacrament actually is and what truly happens in the sacrament. His rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation is the result, not only of his aversion to the "subtle sophistry" of the scholastics, but also of his conviction that the words of Scripture in no way supported this teaching, indeed that they ruled it out altogether.³⁴

His debates with the Reformed demonstrate even more clearly Luther's captivity under the Word. Although the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation was set aside because it did not agree with Scripture, Luther's treatment of this doctrine remains relatively mild. His defense of the real presence against Zwingli and others, on the other hand, is often scathing. The Reformed, in their denial of the real presence, rejected the clear words of Christ. Thus Luther, in spite of his conviction that the papacy was the antichrist itself, can still say, "Before I would drink mere wine with the enthusiasts, I would rather have pure blood with the Pope."³⁵

In fact, in his denunciation of the Reformed who resist the words of Christ, he even goes so far as to say, "...we intend to shun, condemn and censure them as idolotors, corrupters of God's Word, blasphemers and liars...But to acquiesce in, keep silence over, or approve their blaspheming, this we shall not and cannot do."³⁶ As far as Luther is concerned, there is little difference, in this doctrine, at least, between the enthusiasts and the Reformed. They are all fanatics, unwilling to place themselves under the Word, seeking rather to find truth outside of and apart from the Scriptures. It is only natural that Luther's castigation of the Reformed should be so severe for he sees the Sacrament of the Altar as a clear proclamation of the Gospel. In fact, Luther says,

What is the whole gospel but an explanation of this testament? Christ has gathered up the whole gospel in a short summary with the words of the testament or sacrament. For the gospel is nothing but a proclamation of God's grace and of the forgiveness of all sins, granted us through the sufferings of Christ, as St. Paul proves in Romans 10 and as Christ says in Luke 24 (:46-47). And this same thing, as we have seen, is contained in the words of this testament..³⁷

Thus, when the Reformed deny the real presence in the Lord's Supper, the issue for Luther is not only one of exegesis or interpretation. The Gospel itself is at stake. Therefore, whoever tampers with the words of the Sacrament tampers with God's means of saving sinners and is worthy of the name "blasphemer" or "idolotor".

For Luther, however, the words of Christ not only teach us the nature of the Sacrament. They also effect the Sacrament, that is, they cause the sacrament to be what it is. There is no sacrament without the Word. That Jesus' body and blood are present is due to the fact that the words of Christ have been spoken. "Because it is not contrary to Scripture or faith that Christ's words, as we understand them, give Christ's body at the first celebration of the Lord's Supper, we see no reason why this should be contrary to Scripture and faith at other celebrations of the Lord's Supper,"³⁸ says Luther. Luther's criticism of the Reformed, therefore, deals not only with their denial of the real presence, but also quite clearly with their denial of the power of the Word of God itself. They simply do not believe that Jesus' words have the power to do what Jesus says they do. Consequently, it is not difficult to understand why Luther should speak of the Reformed and the enthusiasts in the same breath. But for Luther, the words of Christ were not only His words when He spoke them. They are also His words today. They are dynamic words. They have real power. A brief glance at the explanation of the Sacrament of the Altar in Luther's *Small Catechism* will give full indication of Luther's appreciation for the power of the Word.

Since it is the Word which determines the nature of the Sacrament and causes it to be what it is, it is also natural that the Word should determine the use of the Sacrament. A Christian does not have the right to deal with the Sacrament as he wishes. God's Word instructs him how to

use that sacrament.

Thus you see that we are not granted liberty to despise the sacrament. When a person, with nothing to hinder him, lets a long period of time elapse without ever desiring the sacrament, I call that despising it. If you want such liberty, you may as well take the further liberty not to be a Christian; then you need not believe or pray, for the one is just as much Christ's commandment as the other. But if you wish to be a Christian, you must from time to time satisfy and obey this commandment. For this commandment should ever move you to examine your inner life and reflect: 'See what sort of Christian I am! If I were one, I would surely have at least a little longing to do what my Lord has commanded me to do.'³⁹

Since Christ's words invite us, indeed, require us, to attend this Sacrament, Luther even says that it is by the attendance at the Lord's Supper that "we know which are Christians and which are not."⁴⁰ He did not mean to say by this that the kingdom of Christ on earth was a visible one, consisting only of those and all of those who attended the Lord's Supper. Rather, he meant to emphasize that as the words of Christ bound him, so in a certain sense, they hold all Christians captive. One cannot claim to be a Christian and arbitrarily set aside the Word of Christ. For this reason, we hear Luther preaching in Wittenberg in 1522 to the adults of the congregation, "If you will not go, then let the young people come; for us so much depends on them...For even if you adults want to go to the devil, we shall nevertheless seek after your children."⁴¹

The words of Scripture not only command attendance at the Sacrament, however. They also describe for the Christian the blessings which he will receive when he does make use of this Sacrament. Althaus observes that in Luther, "The decisive element in the sacrament is accordingly the word of promise."⁴² The Sacrament of the Altar cannot be seen apart from the promise for the words of Christ in the Sacrament are words of promise and the promise of course is always the promise of forgiveness.⁴³ Once again, Luther's belief that the entire Gospel is simply an explanation of the sacrament becomes significant. The institution of the Lord's Supper can be seen as one of the climaxes, in one sense, the climax, of the life Christ lived for sinners. For whereas the Old Testament multiplied sin and promised only death and wrath, the Sacrament of the Altar, which is the New Testament, offers that which Christ came to procure for a sinful world. It offers forgiveness and salvation as it gives to the sinner the body and blood of Christ given and shed to purchase his salvation. Thus, Christ's words, "Take, eat" and, "Drink of it, all of you", should be seen, not only as a command of Christ, but also as a gracious promise. The sacrament is Christ's last will and testament in which He bequeaths to the sinner the precious inheritance of forgiveness and life purchased for him on the cross. According to Luther:

It is as if Christ were saying, 'See here, man, in these words I promise and bequeath to you forgiveness of all your sins and the life eternal. In order that you may be certain and know that

such a promise remains irrevocably yours, I will die for it, and will give my body and blood for it, and will leave them both to you as a sign and seal, that by them you may remember me.”⁴⁴

Thus, the Christian ought to attend the Sacrament, not simply because of the command, but because here Christ offers him freely a true and precious inheritance. This inheritance is assured by Christ’s Word of promise. In fact, this inheritance is effected by Christ’s Word of promise. Just as the Word of Christ brings about the real presence in the Sacrament, so the Word and promise of Christ place the inheritance, the forgiveness of sins, in the Sacrament. To have no desire to attend the Lord’s Supper, therefore, is to have no love for the Gospel.

In this regard, also, Luther feels compelled to criticize the Roman Church for its view of the Lord’s Supper as a sacrifice. This view of the Roman Church takes out of the Sacrament the inheritance which Christ has placed in it. It ignores His words and changes the Lord’s Supper from a work of God into a work of man. As Luther says, “Everything is reversed. What the mass is intended to do, we take upon ourselves to do; and what we ought to be doing, we turn over to the mass to do. All this is the work of unlearned and false preachers.”⁴⁵

Clearly, it would be difficult to study Luther’s doctrine on the Lord’s Supper without giving some attention to the role of faith as it receives the Sacrament. Faith is absolutely essential for the recipient of the Lord’s Supper. Werner Elert correctly portrays Luther’s position when he says that for Luther, “unbelief in the face of the Word of promise is the gravest sin, so it is also the real mark of ‘unworthiness’ at the Lord’s Supper.”⁴⁶

Once again, some of Luther’s clearest thoughts on this subject are expressed in his *Small Catechism* where he says, “He is truly worthy and well prepared who believes these words: ‘for you’ and ‘for the forgiveness of sins’. On the other hand, he who does not believe these words, or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words ‘for you’ require truly believing hearts.”⁴⁷ But although it is true that faith is a major factor in the reception of the sacrament, it must be understood that this faith always directs itself toward the Word. Faith clings to the promise. Therefore, when Luther speaks of faith as it receives the Sacrament, he is not talking about a general faith in Jesus or in the basic doctrines of Scripture. He is talking about what Melancthon in the Apology calls “special faith”...that is a faith which embraces as true and efficacious and salvific the Word of promise given by Christ in His institution of the Sacrament.⁴⁸ For this reason, Luther not only contends that the Reformed do not receive the benefit of the Lord’s Supper because of their refusal to believe the words of Christ, he even questions seriously whether they have the Sacrament at all.⁴⁹ The Reformed deny both the real presence and the benefit of the Sacrament. When they come together and eat bread and drink wine, they do not do so with any intention of receiving Jesus’ body and blood, nor of receiving the blessings which His words promise in the Sacrament.

In fact, they have actually changed the meaning of the words of Christ and therefore no longer have Christ's original words. They pretend to obey the command of Christ but deny everything which Christ's words place in the Sacrament. They have no intention of receiving that sacrament which Jesus instituted. Unbelief rejects this sacrament with its benefits, and in the case of the Reformed, has no sacrament. Thus, although Luther always insists that it is the Word which makes the Sacrament, it is also clear that those who reject the words of Christ in the Sacrament receive none of its benefits, if they have the Sacrament at all. According to Luther, faith relies on... "the most pure, godly, and firm word of Christ when He says: 'Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' We must approach the Eucharist insisting on His own word. And if we draw near in that spirit, we shall not be confounded."⁵⁰

Only when this "special faith" is present, can one be a truly worthy recipient of the Lord's Supper and enjoy its benefits for, "The mass demands and must have a hungry soul, which longs for the forgiveness of sins and divine favor."⁵¹

It is clear that Luther, in every aspect of his consideration of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, is bound by the Word. Lutheranism today, to a great extent, is faced with the same theological controversies which confronted Luther. If Lutheranism is to face them responsibly, it must also, like Luther, be bound by the Word, especially in its faith and practice regarding the Lord's Supper. As Hermann Sasse says, "The life or death of our church depends on the question whether she will be able to regain Luther's deep understanding of the Sacrament and to proclaim this understanding to the men and women of our age who are longing for the Sacrament."⁵² But in order to regain Luther's understanding of this sacrament, it is essential that Lutheran pastors and laypeople alike, take seriously Luther's words of advice on how to view the Lord's Supper. "Here we need to walk in the dark with our eyes closed, and simply cling to the word and follow. For since we are confronted by God's words, "This is my body"...distinct, clear, common, definite words...we must embrace them with faith, and allow our reason to be blinded and taken captive."⁵³

This afternoon I have focused on only two aspects of Luther's theology to demonstrate how in both cases his teaching is permeated by the Gospel and in fact the Gospel governs his understanding of all Scripture. Whether he is teaching of Baptism, of conversion, of faith, of the Christian life, always the Gospel will be at the center of his teaching. In the *Smalcald Articles* Luther states again and again that the article of justification is the chief article of the Christian faith and of course the article of justification is the Gospel. The Apostle Paul declared, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes." (Romans 1:16) Neither was Luther ashamed of the Gospel. Once he discovered it, it became his life's aim to teach it, preach it, spread it and glory in it as long as he lived.

As I close my presentation today, I think it only right and proper to let Luther himself have the last word on his love for the Gospel:

Evangel (Gospel) is a Greek word and in German means a good message, good tidings, good news, a good report, which one sings and tells with rejoicing. So when David overcame the huge Goliath, the good report and the comforting news came among the Jewish people that their terrible enemy had been slain, that they had been delivered, and that joy and peace had been given to them; and they sang and danced and were happy because of this.

So the evangel (Gospel) of God and of the New Testament is also a good message and report. The Gospel has resounded in all the world, proclaimed by the apostles. It tells of a true David who fought with sin, death, and the devil, overcame them and thereby delivered without any merit of their own, all those who were held captive in sin, were plagued by death, and were overpowered by the devil. He made them righteous, gave them life, and saved them. Thus their needs were satisfied, and they were brought back to God. Because of this, they sing, thank God, praise Him and are happy forever if only they believe and remain steadfast in this faith.⁵⁴

By Pastor Daniel Preus

July 8, 2013

Soli Deo Gloria

END NOTES

¹ *The Book of Concord*. Theodore Tappert, ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 315.

² *Ibid*, 312.

³ Martin H. Franzmann, *The Word of the Lord Grows*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 1.

4. Kurt Marquart, "Church Growth" as Mission Paradigm: A Lutheran Assessment, a Luther Academy Monograph (Houston: Our Savior Lutheran Church, 1994), 41.

5. *Luther's Works*. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955 ff.), volume 36, 80. All references to this edition of Luther's Works will subsequently be abbreviated LW.

6. *Concordia Triglotta*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 689.

⁷ LW 46, pp. 219-220. Parentheses added.

8. LW 51, 299.

9. LW 30, 134.

10. LW 31, 231.

11. *Ibid*, 209.

12. Wilhelm Pauck, "Luther and the Ministry," (quoting Luther, Weimar edition of *Luther's Works*, 13, p. 538), "The Springfielder," 36 (June 1972), 4.

¹³ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 14.

¹⁴ Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, Luther Poellet, translator and editor, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), p. 29.

¹⁵ LW 50, p. 77.

¹⁶ LW 51, p. 79.

¹⁷ LW 48, pp. 395-397.

¹⁸ LW 30, p. 135

¹⁹ LW 49, p. 385.

²⁰ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 134.

²¹ Wilhelm Pauck, "Luther And The Ministry." *The Springfielder*, 36 (June 1972), 3.

²² Althaus, 325.

²³ LW 39, 307.

24. LW 51, 311.

25. Ulrich Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 146.

²⁶ LW 41, 148.

²⁷ LW 51, 309.

28. Ibid.

29. Lewis Spitz, *The Life of Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 56.

³⁰ Hermann Sasse, "This is my Body" (Adelaide, South Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977) p. 64

³¹ E. Theodore Bachmann & Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., "Words and Sacrament I", "Luther's Works" (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), Vol. XXXV, p. 90

³² Sasse, p. 190

³³ Theodore G. Tappert, ed., "The Book of Concord" (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 352

³⁴ Ibid, p. 311

³⁵ Paul Althaus, "The Theology of Martin Luther", (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 376

³⁶ Herman A. Preus, "A Theology to Live By" (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), p. 171

³⁷ LW, XXXV, p. 106

³⁸ Werner Elert, "The Structure of Lutheranism" (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 304

³⁹ Tappert, p. 452

⁴⁰ Preus, p. 170

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 170

⁴² Althaus, p. 346

⁴³ Ibid, p. 378

⁴⁴ LW, XXXV, p. 85

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 99

⁴⁶ Elert, pp. 308-309

⁴⁷ Tappert, p. 352

⁴⁸ Preus, p. 150

⁴⁹ Elert, p. 309

⁵⁰ Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Regin Prenter & Herman Preus, "More about Luther", "Martin Luther Lectures" (Decorah: Luther College Press, 1958), Vol. II, p. 101

⁵¹ LW, XXXV, p. 110

⁵² Sasse, p. 9

⁵³ Althaus, p. 390

⁵⁴ Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959) 561.