

PREACHING ABOUT STEWARDSHIP:

Theological Considerations for Lutheran Preaching

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LUTHERAN PASTORS OFTEN FEEL uncomfortable when it is time to preach about stewardship. In many cases they really don't want to preach about it because it seems to contradict some basic premises about Lutheran preaching. Yet the biblical basis for such preaching is not lacking. The Table of Duties in *Luther's Small Catechism* contains a series of Bible verses (1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6-7; 1 Tim. 5:17-18) that tell us about the responsibility of Christians to financially support the one who serves in the Office of the Holy Ministry. Naturally these verses also describe the need to support the whole range of expenses that must be met for the Means of Grace to be administered in the church (It is hard to the produce the Sunday bulletin if the electric bill hasn't been paid and there is no power!).

Preaching that exhorts or admonishes the hearer to do something is Law. This is precisely what preaching about stewardship does. There should be no problem in this for a Lutheran since we confess the third use of the Law in Formula of Concord VI. However many Lutheran pastors have come to believe that since the Law always accuses, we must assume that the preaching of exhortation will function as second use of the Law for some, if not most, hearers: Preaching about what Christians should do in stewardship will convict hearers of how they have not been be good stewards and will show them their sin. But this would mean that there really is, practically speaking, no third use of the Law that the preacher can intentionally employ because *we can never know* that it will be used by the Spirit in this way. We are left with what we might call an "agnostic use of the Law." Thus we are told that we should just preach Law, which means we should speak in ways that are most commonly associated with the second use. The third use of the Law is confessed in principle, but functionally it is denied since we can never know that a given preaching of the Law will be third use. Ultimately, this agnostic use of the Law ends up being the second use of the Law because it is assumed that this alone is what the Law really does.

Yet in fact this approach stands in opposition to the apostolic practice in Scripture and the position confessed in Formula of Concord, Article VI. In addition, it does not withstand examination as a theological argument. It should not be allowed to determine how we think about the Law in the preaching task as Lutherans.

The question arises because the New Testament, in general, and Paul's letters in particular, are filled with exhortation and admonition for Christians to live in new obedience. Within Paul's letters these statements are always grounded in what God has done

for us in the death and Resurrection of Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit. They find their source in the Gospel. So in Eph. 1:3-14 and 2:1-10, Paul has stated the Gospel in the most explicit terms possible. From there in 2:11-3:13 he contends that this Gospel has united all people in Christ, both Jew and Gentile. Paul wants the Ephesians to understand this love (3:14-21) and then describes the unity that they have as the Body of Christ (4:1-16).

In 4:17-6:9 Paul then engages in an extended section of exhortation and admonition aimed at new obedience by the Christians in their lives. He begins by saying:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ! — assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off the old man (τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον), which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new man (τὸν καινὸν ἄνθρωπον), created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:17-24, ESV modified).

Paul's references in Ephesians to Baptism (4:5, 5:26-27) and the parallels in language with Colossians where the new man is connected with Baptism (Col 2:12-13, 2:20, 3:1-4, 3:5-11, 3:12-16) indicate that for Paul this a reality grounded in Baptism. This introduces a lengthy section in which Paul exhorts and admonishes Christians to live in new obedience (4:25-6:9). He deals with many different aspects of living as he describes the life that results from the Gospel. Though not the explicit rhetorical focus, the Gospel grounding for this new obedience continues to appear (4:31-32, 5:25-28).

The text of 4:17-6:9 leaves little doubt about what Paul intends to accomplish. He wants the Gospel to produce the results of new obedience in the lives of Christians. He wants Christians to *do certain things* and to *avoid other things*. He explicitly states this. For instance, because of Christ, he wants husbands to love their wives in acts of self-sacrifice (5:25-28). The intent of his words is *not* to make them see their sin so that they will repent and receive forgiveness in Christ. Instead, the entire section is *built on the forgiveness they already have in Christ* and it describes the life this now produces in the Christians (see the explicit statement in 4:32). No doubt, readers will recognize that they are sinful because they are not doing all of this. But to assert that this is Paul's true intent runs contrary to

the structure and wording of the text: This is written to believing, justified Christians to encourage sanctification, not to unbelievers to encourage conversion and justification.

Formula of Concord, Article VI seeks to describe and explain what Paul is doing in texts like Eph 4:17-6:9. It explicitly distinguishes the topic of Article VI, “third use of the Law” from the second use in which people are led through the law “to a recognition of their sins” (FC Ep. VI.1). Instead it describes the purposes of the third use of the Law as being: 1) To prevent Christians from making up their own works (FC Ep. VI.4; SD VI.3, 20) 2) To compel the old man against his will to follow the Spirit and be led by it (FC Ep. VI.4, 7; FC SD VI.6, 9, 12, 19, 24). It says that the reason this use of the Law is needed *with baptized Christians* is because the old man is still present and battles against the new man (FC SD VI.18-19, 23-24). Like Paul in Ephesians, the goal described by FC VI is for the Gospel *to produce the results of new obedience* in the lives of Christians — for Christians *to do certain things* and *to avoid other things*.

*It is good for me that I was afflicted,
that I might learn your statutes.*

In explaining this, the Solid Declaration states, “Therefore, in this life, because of the desires of the flesh, the faithful, elect, reborn children of God need not only the Law’s daily instruction and admonition, but also its warning, and threatening. Often they also need its punishments, so that they may be incited by them and follow God’s Spirit, as it is written, ‘It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes’ [Ps. 119:71]. And again, ‘I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified’ [1 Cor. 9:17]. And again, ‘If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, you are illegitimate and not his children’ [Heb. 12:8]. Similarly, Dr. Luther explained this in great detail in the summer part of the Church Postil, on the epistle for the nineteenth Sunday after Trinity” (FC SD VI.9).

The Solid Declaration points to Luther’s Church Postil as a key resource for understanding this aspect of the third use of the Law and the manner in which the SD VI wants to be understood in speaking about it. The Church Postil on the epistle for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity (found in Lenker 8:304-316) comments on Eph. 4:22-28. There Luther writes:

Duty to New and Old Man

1. Here again is an admonition for Christians to follow up their faith by good works and a new life, for though they have forgiveness of sins through Baptism, the old Adam still adheres to their flesh and makes himself felt in tendencies and desires to vices physical and mental. The result is that unless Christians offer resistance, they will lose their faith and the remission of sins and will in the end be worse than they were at first; for they will begin to despise and persecute the Word of God when corrected by it. Yea, even those who gladly hear the Word of God, who highly prize it and aim to follow it, have daily need of admonition and encouragement, so strong and tough is that old hide of our sinful flesh. And so powerful and wily is our old evil foe that wherever he can gain enough of an opening to insert one of his claws, he thrusts in his whole

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self and will not desist until he has again sunk man into his former condemnable unbelief and his old way of despising and disobeying God.

2. Therefore, the Gospel ministry is necessary in the Church, not only for instruction of the ignorant — such as the simple, unlettered people and the children — but also for the purpose of awakening those who know very well what they are to believe and how they are to live, and admonishing them to be on their guard daily and not to become indolent, disheartened or tired in the war they must wage on this earth with the devil, with their own flesh and with all manner of evil.

3. For this reason Paul is so persistent in his admonitions that he actually seems to be overdoing it. He proceeds as if the Christians were either too dull to comprehend or so inattentive and forgetful that they must be reminded and driven. The apostle well knows that though they have made a beginning in faith and are in that state which should show the fruits of faith, such result is not so easily forthcoming. It will not do to think and say: Well, it is sufficient to have the doctrine, and if we have the Spirit and faith, then fruits and good works will follow of their own accord. For although the Spirit truly is present and, as Christ says, willing and effective in those that believe, on the other hand the flesh is weak and sluggish. Besides, the devil is not idle, but seeks to seduce our weak nature by temptations and allurements.

4. So we must not permit the people to go on in their way, neglecting to urge and admonish them, through God’s Word, to lead a godly life. Indeed, you dare not be negligent and backward in this duty; for, as it is, our flesh is all too sluggish to heed the Spirit and all too able to resist it. Paul says (Gal 5:17): “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh ... that ye may not do the things that ye would.” Therefore, God is constrained to do as a good and diligent householder or ruler, who, having a slothful man-servant or maid-servant, or careless officers, who otherwise are neither wicked nor faithless, will not consider it sufficient once or twice to direct, but will constantly be supervising and directing.

Note that Luther is explicit in saying that Paul is providing admonition so that *Christians* will actually lead a godly life so that they do what they are supposed to do and avoid the things they should not. The Solid Declaration has referenced this Luther text because this is how it understands the third use of the Law. Luther

makes no mention about showing people that they are sinners. Instead, in a text referenced by the Confessions, Luther clearly indicates that *Paul's intent is to prompt Christians to live in new obedience*.

An “agnostic use of the Law” would have us ignore the plain intent of the biblical texts like Eph. 4:17-6:9 and the manner in which the Confessions explain them. There is no doubt that Paul admonishes so that Christians *will actually live in new obedience*. There is no doubt that this is the intent that Formula of Concord VI describes when it explains the third use of the Law and references Luther's words. Those who say that this cannot be *our intent* when speaking the Law are asking us to ignore what we find in Scripture and the Confessions and instead to engage in a completely different approach.

Those who advocate an agnostic use of the Law are doing so on the basis of a theological argument that does not withstand scrutiny.

The argument says:

1. We can't decide how the Spirit is going to use the Law.
2. The Spirit *can* use the statement of admonition to show a person his sin.
3. For this reason we must assume that *all* admonition is second use of the Law that shows a person his sin.

Now the first two points are absolutely true. However, the third one does not necessarily follow and in fact it runs contrary to apostolic practice.

The error of this approach can be illustrated by asking a question about the Gospel. When the pastor says, “Jesus died on the Cross for your sins,” is this Law or Gospel? One must admit that it can be either. While clearly it is a very common way to express the Gospel, the statement can also strike a person as Law: It could make him realize that he is so sinful that the Son of God had to die for him. If we follow the argument above we could say:

1. We can't decide how the Spirit is going to use Gospel statements.
2. The Spirit *can* use Gospel statements to show people their sin.
3. For this reason we must assume that *all* Gospel statements show people their sin.

Clearly, No. 3 is absurd. But for the same reason, so is No. 3 above. It is true that we can never decide how the Spirit is going to use the Law. It is true that the Spirit *can* use admonition to new obedience in order to show people their sin. But when the apostle Paul uses admonition (again and again as Luther notes), this is clearly not his goal. Instead his goal is that the Christian will live in new obedience — that they will do certain things and not do other things in life.

It should not escape our notice that Paul is no more able to control the Spirit's use of the Law than we are. *Yet in spite of this fact* he repeatedly engages in exhortation and admonition as he seeks to lead Christians to engage in new obedience (in fact the verses in the Table of Duties show that he does this for the topic of stewardship). He shows no hesitancy about speaking in this matter. In fact, as Luther observes above, “Paul is so persistent in his admonitions that he actually seems to be overdoing it” (Paragraph 3).

Our theologizing about the nature of the Law and the manner in which the Spirit may or may not use it cannot be allowed to become something that precludes pastors from speaking the way Scripture speaks.

In doing so, *Paul provides the apostolic pattern that we need to follow*. And in fact we can go beyond that assertion. For while Paul can't control the Spirit's use of the Law, in the mystery of the inspiration of Scripture, *what Paul writes is exactly what the Spirit wants to be said*. The apostolic model of exhortation and admonition affirmed by Luther and described by FC VI as the third use of the Law is in fact the *Spirit-provided model and pattern of addressing Christians*.

Our theologizing about the nature of the Law and the manner in which the Spirit may or may not use it cannot be allowed to become something that precludes pastors from speaking the way Scripture speaks. Theological constructs about *the individual's experience of the Law* that have their roots in the 20th century cannot be allowed to preempt preaching and teaching that employs the language of the inspired, apostolic pattern.

The agnostic use of the Law contradicts Scripture itself because it denies that we should do the very thing that Paul does — admonish and exhort Christians with the intent of having them actually engage in new obedience. Furthermore this is not something that Lutherans should consider acceptable because it also contradicts what Formula of Concord, Article VI says about the third use of the Law. The confessors developed this article based on what Scripture actually says. It identifies texts in Scripture that are examples of the third use of the Law. The Formula of Concord does not consider the third use to be a hypothetical possibility but rather a standard practice of Scripture. And so in turn it presumes that preachers *both can and will* employ the third use of the law as they exhort and admonish Christians.

Practice that reflects the theology of the FC VI will use language that says what Scripture says. Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions teach us to address Christians with admonishment and exhortation to new obedience, for in this way the Law serves to lead the Christian, who is old man and new man at the same time, to live in godly ways. The Gospel is the source of Christian living and the new man led by the Spirit freely engages in new obedience. Yet Paul's language and the text of FC VI makes clear that because of the continuing presence of the old man, preachers also will also need to employ admonition and exhortation — the third use of the Law — in order enable this new obedience to be carried out by Christians. And so pastors will need to preach about stewardship. They will need to exhort and admonish Christians to live faithfully in their vocation as congregation members and support God's Word and Sacrament ministry.