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**PREACHING THE WORD:**  
**It's Still All  
About Jesus**

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**2017–18 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies**

Studies in pastoral theology using C.F.W. Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

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**LEADER'S GUIDE**

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**DOXOLOGY**  
The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel

# PREACHING THE WORD: It's Still All About Jesus

References in Walther: Article 11

[Walther's title: *Requirements and Importance of the Sermon*]

*To the circuit visitor or discussion leader:* Please impress on the pastors the necessity of reviewing the introduction to the book (vii–ix) in advance. Your discussion will be more fruitful if the group has a better grasp of the original setting of the book, Dr. Walther's intent and methodology, and how his extensive quotations illustrated how earlier generations applied

Lutheran doctrine in their contemporary context. Help the pastors see the link between doctrine and practice (i.e., doctrine implies pastoral practice and practice is doctrine pastorally applied).

There is likely more material in this study than can be reasonably covered in the average circuit meeting. You may wish to indicate in advance which of these questions will be prioritized for your discussion.

## PREFACE

Consider the quote (below) from Walther and the following questions to help keep perspective on the preaching task today and how it compares to Walther's perspective for his time.

*"The most important task in the ministry of every pastor is the public preaching. He should therefore apply the greatest effort to this." —Walther*

1. Why is Walther's statement still true for the church today?
2. How would you characterize the state of preaching in our LCMS churches today (faithful to the text, balances Law/Gospel, weak, strong, engaging, full of Good News, bland, boring, instructional, teaches, too long, too short,

etc.)? How would our parishioners characterize the state of our preaching?

3. What do you find most difficult about the preaching task (time to prepare, exegesis, varying your sermon structures or having a sermon structure, delivery, eye contact, etc.)?
4. When you have a chance to hear other preachers, what are you listening for?
5. Do you have any kind of annual process for sermon evaluation and/or critique from other brothers or your elders?

## INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

Seven minutes. That's it. That's all a preacher gets nowadays. After that, hands fidget, minds wander and bodies are restless. Yes, 420 seconds is all that's left of the average attention span. That means seven short minutes is all the time the average person is willing to listen to a sermon.<sup>1</sup> Exceed the given time limit, and preachers are at the mercy of a congregation struggling with a digitally induced attention deficit disorder. Most preachers, however, actually preach longer than seven minutes. A good understanding of how hearers hear, how they are conditioned to hear, and how long they're prone to remain engaged is vital

for good delivery of both the Law and the Gospel to the hearers. While Walther's time was a bit different, hearers then were no less likely to struggle with listening to poorly delivered preaching.

Seven minutes is not very long to proclaim the Law in all of its fury and teach it in all of its fullness. Such a period leaves little time to proclaim the Gospel in all of its greatness and deliver it in all of its satisfying sweetness. But seven minutes isn't even a guarantee, should the preacher himself be a little lackluster that day. (It's been known

<sup>1</sup> Jeff Davidson, *The Complete Guide to Public Speaking* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), p. 102.

to happen, even among the best). Or maybe his delivery skills tend to be more George W. Bush than Barack Obama, or his oration more nervous teenager than fearless titan. If that happens, many hearers are prone to tune out even sooner.

Recognizing the challenge of our hearers today, what is your initial reaction to Walther's summary list of seven "requirements for public sermons" (p. 95)?

**Note to discussion leaders:** Initially addressing each of these seven requirements could very well become a conversation taking up all the time allotted for study, depending on how this discussion is handled. Therefore, it will be helpful to note how each of these requirements are significantly expanded upon in the following pages under Comments 3–7 (pp. 95–128). Begin with a 10-minute overview of all seven components listed in the opening paragraph of Article 11. Note which of the seven topics are of most interest in the group. Then allocate the remainder of your time on those specific requirements for public preaching, using the corresponding study questions as a springboard

**for collegial discussion. Be sure to clearly communicate this ahead of time to the group.**

1. That they contain nothing but God's Word — pure and unadulterated (expanded on in Comment 3, pp. 97–98);
2. That God's Word is rightly applied in them (expanded on in Comment 4, pp. 99–109);
3. That the whole counsel of God is proclaimed in them to the hearers for their salvation (expanded on in pp. 109–114);
4. That they correspond to the hearers' specific needs (expanded on in Comment 5, pp. 114–124);
5. That they are contemporary (expanded on in Comment 6, pp. 124–127);
6. That they are well structured (expanded on in Comment 7, pp. 127–128); and
7. That they are not overly long (expanded on in Comment 7, p. 128).

## I. PREPARING FOR THE SERMON

### Comments 1 and 2 (pp. 95–97)

1. What is Walther's basic pastoral care concern with the whole of his Article 11?
2. Consider how Walther quotes the Apology, Article XXIV on the Mass: "There is nothing that keeps people at church more than good preaching" (p. 95). Just as this was true in the 16th century, Walther was demonstrating how it remained true in his later 19th-century day. Likewise, for our 21st-century day, in what ways does this remain true for us, especially when we live in a digital age of online sermons and deal with members and people church shopping and church hopping?
3. Yet, the question remains: What makes for "good preaching"? And how does that impact your preparation for crafting and delivering a sermon? Discuss both your ideal of time and practice for preparing a sermon, as well as the reality and constraints you face while preparing a sermon.
4. How should Walther's quote from Jer. 48:10 (p. 96) bear upon a pastor's conscience? Also note his list of unacceptable side pursuits. What might pastors be able to add to this list given our digital age and online propensities?
5. What are the most essential steps of preparing a sermon (exegesis, theological, context of congregation/society, structure, delivery practice, etc.)?

## II. THE SERMON MUST CONTAIN GOD'S WORD

### Comment 3 — The Pure and Unadulterated Word (pp. 97–98)

1. What constitutes faithfulness in preaching?
2. What examples does Walther give of failure to rightly divide the Word of truth, “that is, for Law and Gospel to be properly distinguished” (pp. 97–98)? Which one or two of these failures seem to be common occurrences among Lutheran preachers today?
3. According to Luther, what qualifies one to be called a “doctor of Holy Scripture”?

**Note to discussion leaders:** Initially addressing each of the five ways (below) to apply God's Word in a sermon could, again, very well be a conversation that takes up all the time allotted for study. Therefore, it will be helpful to note how each application is significantly expanded in the following pages under Comment 4 (pp. 98–109). Allotting a time limit for initial discussion of each of the five ways may be desirable. It may also serve you well to choose one or two of these five ways to specifically focus on after the initial discussion. Again, be sure to clearly communicate this ahead of time to the group.

### Comment 4 — The Word Rightly Applied (pp. 98–109)

4. What does it mean that a sermon must rightly apply God's Word? Walther quotes 2 Tim. 3:16–17; how does this help answer the question?
5. Walther asserts God's Word is to be applied *five* ways (in Greek terminology below). Discuss how these five ways can be incorporated, as well as the ease or difficulty of including all five in one sermon:
  - a. For teaching (*didactically*);
  - b. For reproof of false teaching (*elenctically*);
  - c. For correction or chastising of sins (*epenthetically*);
  - d. For discipline, training or admonition (*paedeutically*); and

- e. For comforting (*paraclethically*).

As time allows, discuss the depth and meaning of each application as it relates to our hearers. In other words, why are these applications of the Word important for contemporary hearers? Does incorporating all five applications in every sermon seem reasonable or achievable? (Note Johann Jakob Rambach's advice: “Prudence must therefore dictate whether one should employ more than one use and which in particular to emphasize, which to leave out or to note only briefly.”)

6. Likewise, Rambach notes that a sermon having all five applications should also have “emotion and life in it” (p. 99). What do you suppose this means? Is it a reference to the style of delivery, the Means of Grace conveyed, the proclamation of the Good News, the context in which the preacher is preaching, or something else?

**Note to discussion leaders:** This section contains some elements that are currently being vigorously debated in several Lutheran circles (preaching good works, sanctification and antinomianism). Be prepared to help facilitate healthy dialogue that affords all voices to be heard and keeps the discussion fraternal and focused objectively on Walther's assertions, as well as the assertions of those he cites.

### Reflection

Does a Lutheran sermon simply divide time between Law and Gospel, preaching first the Law then the Gospel? Since the Gospel is the power unto salvation and the life of faith, how can we best keep Gospel proclamation the basis for preaching the new life and the fruit of faith?

Is there any room in Lutheran sermons for exhortation, catechesis and instruction?

What about the third use of the Law? Does that have a place in Lutheran preaching?

Or, as some have questioned, does it truly even exist as a proper homiletical use of the Law?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Lutherans Werner Elert and Gerhard Forde are two 20th-century Lutherans accused of denying the third use of the Law. Prior to the most recent debates on the third use of the Law that began in our Synod in the early 2000s, a very thoughtful essay is “Using the Third Use: Formula of Concord VI and the Preacher's Task” by Jonathon G. Lange in *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* (vol. 3, no. 1, January 1994), pp. 19–25. Then Scott Murray's book, *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001), sparked a recent massive resurgence of interest in the third use of the Law that continues being heavily debated today. An entire symposium was held on the “Law in Holy Scripture” with the essays compiled into book form in *The Law in Holy Scripture*, Charles A. Gieschen ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004). A whole issue of *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (July/October 2005, vol. 69:3–4) was dedicated to essays on the third use of the Law. A formal response by Scott Murray to his critics was eventually also published, “The Third Use of the Law: The Author Responds to His Critics,” in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (April 2008, vol. 72:2), pp. 99–118. Ed Engelbrecht then presented works that clarified Luther's use and understanding of the third use of the Law — “Luther's Threefold Use of the Law,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (January/April 2011, vol. 75:1–2), pp. 135–150 — and then put out an entire book on the matter: *Friends of the Law: Luther's Use of the Law for the Christian Life* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011).

What about the power of the Gospel? If we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him (Small Catechism, Third Article), and if the Gospel is the power for our daily and eternal living, should Lutheran preachers not therefore more rightly focus on predominantly preaching the Gospel for sanctified living (Walther's thesis XXV in Law and Gospel)?

Even more, just exactly what is the role of sanctification in preaching? Is it different than the third use of the Law?

Finally, as Lutherans confess the Gospel is truly the power of conversion and the life of faith, shouldn't the Gospel proclamation be the basis for new life and the fruit of faith in believers?

These questions are being discussed, sometimes quite vigorously, in many Lutheran circles today. They were issues that Walther aimed to address in preaching the whole counsel of God, and in so doing he demonstrated that Luther had addressed them as well. Consider the following questions in the spirit of fraternal joy and the bond of peace given through the Holy Spirit and the whole counsel of God's Word.

### [Comment] Sermons Must Contain the Whole Counsel of God (pp. 109–114)

7. What does Walther mean by the need to preach the whole counsel of God? If one fails to do this, he says one commits "inexcusable robbery against his hearers" (p. 109). How does the thought of robbing parishioners of God's Word aid your approach toward preaching?
8. Pastors/preachers are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (p. 109). How does that description inform the vocation of pastor/preacher, and how does it call them to conduct their ministry?
9. Discuss the critical difference between diligently preaching the faith (i.e., Christ) and preaching about the faith (i.e., Christ)?
10. How does Walther assert the doctrine of sanctification is to be preached? How does it relate to preaching good works? Is there a difference? Should there be a difference? Where does repentance fall into place in this discussion for Walther (p. 113)?
11. Luther makes the distinction of being "fine Easter preachers, but disgraceful Pentecost preachers." What is he getting at, and how is that helpful in proclaiming the whole counsel of God?

## III. THE SERMON MUST ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF HEARERS AND THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

### Reflection

Recent studies on the effects of our digital world on the brain are increasingly showing how our high-tech, ever-connected world is fundamentally altering the way our brains think, work and process information, and therefore also changing how we behave, learn and interact, including the reality of shortened attention spans.

The results of our ever-decreasing attention span in the church continue to accumulate: fewer souls are soothed, burdened consciences remain troubled, and biblical instruction is not being retained, which means biblical literacy continues to decline. Worst of all, preachers and churches are becoming awkwardly and increasingly desperate to gain a listening audience.

So, what's a preacher intent on faithfully preaching the Word of God to do? As we've seen, Walther reminds preachers to stand on the truth of God's Word, preaching

the whole counsel of God. Yet, he also reminds preachers to understand the needs of the hearers and the contemporary context in which they live.

### Comment 5 — The Needs of the Hearers (pp. 114–124)

1. What are the specific needs of hearers today? Be sure to also distinguish between felt needs and true spiritual needs.
2. Walther says a preacher is to keep in mind the "specific condition of his congregation" as well as the "various situations of men" (p. 114). What might he have in mind with these?
3. Walther quotes Luther extensively in this section. Even though it was 500 years ago, Luther's advice seems quite appropriate for today regarding preachers who

preach over the heads of their people; aim simply to impress them; constantly sprinkle Greek, Hebrew and Latin in their sermons; and who are pretentious in their preaching. Among other things, Luther calls such preachers “frivolous spirits, who never know where they ought to stop” (p. 117). What simple preaching does he encourage in the face of all this? (Hint: He considered them to be three chief parts — cf. p. 119.)

4. How did Walther consider the refutation of false doctrine a need of a congregation (p. 119ff)? Does this still apply today? If so, give some examples and discuss how to do this without causing harm to the congregation, as Luther warns.
5. How does Walther see encouragement fitting into the needs of a congregation (p. 123)? How does this still apply today? What might be some specific examples of preaching encouragement?

## Comment 6 — Contemporary Sermons (pp. 124–127)

6. What does Walther mean and what does he not mean by preaching sermons that are contemporary?
7. What direction, if any, might this give for preaching to hearers with seven-minute attention spans, who are living in a digital age and accustomed to being constantly entertained?
8. Ever the *Seelsorger*, Walther observes that every era “suffers from certain unique spiritual diseases that require corresponding care.” What spiritual diseases can be diagnosed in our culture (idolatry of sports, worship of sex, consumerism, materialism, rejection of the Sabbath — rejecting both a day of rest and open schedule as well as despising God’s Word, etc.)? Compare what you identify to Walther’s assessment at the top of Page 126. What is the remedy for these maladies, and how should it be preached?

## IV. SERMON STRUCTURES

### Reflection

There are numerous different sermon structures for preachers to consider using today. Some were derived from the Old Homiletic based on deductive sermons, and others are based on the New Homiletic based on inductive sermons. Regardless, those sermon structures include: 1) Text driven, 2) Propositional, 3) Narrative, 4) Phenomenological move, 5) Image driven and, more recently, 6) Contextualization. Within each structure or method, there are multiple corresponding and often subtle variations (expository preaching, Lowery’s loop, Goal Malady Means, declarative preaching, etc.). As you consider what Walther has to say about sermon structures, keep in mind your personal go-to sermon structure and how that may or may not fit with what Walther has to say.

### Comment 7 — Structure and Length (pp. 127–128)

1. Walther highlights the following quote, which offers preachers a warning about putting too much emphasis upon a sermon structure: “[T]hose who are concerned only with the proper form of the sermon are like those ‘who practice only at sewing the shoes but forget

to purchase the leather, and then have to use paper” (p. 127). What is his overall point?

2. At the same time, Walther is very direct about preaching the Word of God “in its wonderful order and in its living coherence,” or perhaps in living color, for the benefit and edification of the congregation. How might a sermon structure assist preaching God’s Word in living color/living coherence?<sup>3</sup>
3. Walther notes that a sermon should “pursue a specific goal” and “treat one main truth” (p. 128). What examples does he give? What examples can you give?
4. Walther is adamant that a sermon not be too long. Consider how his quote from Luther can help preachers evaluate the length of their sermons today: “It is the office and mark of a good speaker that he stops when people enjoy hearing him the most and think he is just beginning to speak” (p. 128).

<sup>3</sup> For further thoughts about faithful preaching to today’s hearers, see “In Living Color: Narrative Rhetoric for a Lutheran Homiletic in the Digital Age” (*Logia*, vol. XXIV 3, August 14, 2015).

## Comment 8 — Heart and Conscience (pp. 128–129)

5. Walther adds a final comment, noting that a good sermon should “affect the heart and conscience of the

hearers” (p. 128). What does he believe should happen to a hearer as a result of the sermon? What, therefore, is the most important part of a preacher’s sermon preparation and delivery, according to Walther?

## V. CITATIONS

1. Walther cites Luther, the Confessions and other 16th-century authors throughout his treatment of these seven requirements for public sermons. Which quotes were the most helpful or insightful for you? Did his use of Luther and others demonstrate how the challenges of preaching in the 16th and 19th centuries still have parallels to preaching in the 21st century? What can

we learn about 21st-century preaching by observing how Walther applied Luther and others from previous centuries to help with the unique challenges of preaching in the 19th century?

2. What did you consider Walther’s most important citations on preaching?