



CONVENTION BIBLE STUDY

LEADER GUIDE | 2023

WE PREACH
CHRIST CRUCIFIED

68TH REGULAR CONVENTION
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Introduction

We preach Christ crucified.

A lot of people have a lot of things to say. Some of it's helpful, a lot of it's not. There's truth and there's error. There's good news and bad news.

We speak good news, and not just any good news. We speak *the* Good News — the Gospel — of Christ and Him crucified. If we're going to be the church, we don't really have a choice: It is what God has given to His people to proclaim.

But then again, why would we want to proclaim anything else?

This Bible study is about the Gospel and the importance of keeping it front and center in all we do as the church. We'll see how Scripture defines the Gospel we are to proclaim, we'll contend with the truth that our message sounds like foolishness (sometimes even to ourselves), we'll see how the apostles proclaimed it in the Book of Acts, and we'll talk about the church's ongoing task of spreading the Good News.

Hopefully, we'll come to rejoice in that Good News even more.

“We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 COR. 1:23–24).

A Prayer to Begin

O Lord God, heavenly Father, we give You thanks that of Your great goodness and mercy Your only-begotten Son became incarnate to redeem us from sin and everlasting death. Enlighten our hearts by Your Holy Spirit that we may forever give You thanks for Your grace and be strengthened in all times of tribulation and temptation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. (Collect for the Holy Spirit [182], *LSB Altar Book*, 447)

A note to leaders: This study is divided into five parts. I have not sought to time them out to a certain length, but to adequately explore the included texts for study and discussion. Some Bible classes are far more talkative than others; some groups may complete a lesson in an hour, while others may take more time. Leaders are welcome to trim the lessons as they see fit, provide answers to facilitate time, or work through the lessons at whatever pace best suits their group. God grant you every good gift as you lead this study about Christ and Him crucified.

LESSON 1:

The Power of Salvation

There's no shortage of news in the world today. Between TV, the internet and smartphones buzzing with the latest breaking news alert, the bombardment rarely ceases unless you're intentional about tuning it out and turning it off.

As true as that is, the news is rarely good. It's often bad or salacious, but it's rarely good.

It's easy to find people who agree that the church should be about speaking good news. Since "gospel" means "good news," it's easy to find people who say that the church should be about speaking the Gospel. Beyond that, though, it's dangerous to presume. We want to define what the Gospel is. In part, this is because it's too easy for Christians to talk *about* the Gospel without ever articulating the Gospel itself. It's also tempting for many to shade or redefine the Gospel into something that sounds more palatable to the world and less foolish.

It's also great to spend time defining the Gospel because, in doing so, we can't help speaking it to each other!

The word "gospel" gets used in different ways in Scripture. It can merely mean any sort of good news. For instance, in 2 Samuel 4:10 a man approaches David and tells him the good news that King Saul — who has been out to kill David — has died in battle. (Ironically, this turns out to be bad news for the man, because David has him killed on the spot because he claims to have killed Saul, the Lord's anointed king, himself. See **2 SAMUEL 1:10-16**.) The word "gospel" can also refer to the first four books of the New Testament, or it can mean a story or account that contains good news, as in Mark 1:1: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Furthermore, it can also broadly mean all that Jesus teaches, both His Law and His Gospel (cf. **MARK 1:15; 1 THESS. 1:8**).

When St. Paul speaks of the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 1-2, he has a specific meaning in mind. He summarizes it near the end of that epistle.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-5.

1. What does the Gospel do (15:1-2)?

St. Paul mentions two things. First, the Gospel saves: It does not tell us what to do in order to work our own salvation, but by it we are “being saved.” Second, we stand in the Gospel: In other words, the Gospel sustains us so that we remain forgiven and alive before God.

2. Some will point to verse 2 and argue that you must do something to be saved: You must hold fast to the good news. If that’s true, then you’re not saved by grace alone, but also by your own work of holding fast. But is this a work? Why or why not? (See **ROM. 10:17** and **ACTS 15:7**.)

“Holding fast” is a term here for faith. It is not a work on our part, because it is the Gospel that gives us faith to believe it.

3. In verses 3–5, St. Paul gives us the core content of the Gospel that saves. What is the good news of verse 3, and why is this important (cf. **HEB. 9:22; 2 COR. 5:21**)?

Jesus shed His blood for our sins, so that we might be righteous before God. Without His death on the cross, there is no salvation.

4. What is the good news of verse 4, and why is this important (cf. **1 COR. 15:19–20**)?

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, we have no hope that we will rise, either. But because Christ is raised from the dead, He will raise us too.

5. Both verses 3 and 4 note that Jesus did these things “in accordance with the Scriptures.” Is this good news? Why (cf. **EPH. 1:4**)?

The Gospel has been God’s plan from before the foundation of the world. Foreknowing our need, God has always desired our salvation, and all of Scripture points to Jesus and His work of salvation.

6. What is the good news of verse 5 (cf. **JOHN 20:19; 21:15–19**)?

Risen from the dead, Jesus appeared to many. This is good news, because in doing so He provides us with witnesses to His resurrection. However, the even better news is that Jesus appears to them to give them peace, forgiveness and salvation!

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When the Formula of Concord in the Lutheran Confessions speaks of this specific Gospel, it says:

The Gospel is properly a doctrine that teaches what a person should believe, so that he receives forgiveness of sins with God. In other words, it teaches that God’s Son, our Lord Christ, has taken upon Himself and borne the Law’s curse and has atoned and paid for all our sins. Through Him alone we again enter into favor with God, receive forgiveness of sins through faith and are delivered from death and all the punishments of sins, and are eternally saved.

Everything that comforts, that offers God’s favor and grace to transgressors of the Law, is, and is properly called, the Gospel. It is a good and joyful message that God will not punish sins, but will forgive them for Christ’s sake.¹ (FC SD V 20–21)

If we want to sum this up, we’re looking for two ingredients: It is good news that

(1) comforts sinners that they are forgiven for their sins and delivered from death because

(2) Jesus died to atone for our sins.

It’s not saying just anything about Jesus. It’s talking about His work to save us from our sin.

Now that we’ve defined the Gospel, let’s add to what we know about it. The more we know of its comfort, joy and hope, the more readily we will embrace its seeming foolishness.

Read Romans 1:15–17, where St. Paul talks about the Gospel more.

7. What is St. Paul eager to do, and why might he think it necessary to say he is not ashamed?

St. Paul is eager to preach the Gospel. The fact that he thinks it necessary to say he is not ashamed of it implies that many do find the Gospel to be embarrassing or offensive. None of this dents his eagerness to proclaim it, though!

8. In verse 16, St. Paul says that the Gospel is the power

¹ Paul T. McCain et al., eds., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 556.

of God for salvation. What does he mean by this?

The Gospel is not just information, but by the Gospel God works salvation! Furthermore, it is the power of God, not the work of man: We are saved by grace alone, for the sake of Jesus.

9. In verse 17, St. Paul calls the Gospel the righteousness of God. What does he mean by this?

By means of the Gospel, God makes us righteous by taking away our sins. He credits us with Jesus' righteousness, since we have none of our own.

10. A quick detour: That the Gospel is the “righteousness of God,” and thus the “righteousness of God” is the Gospel, will be surprising to many. Why might this be (cf. **ROM. 3:21–25**)?

By nature, sinners think that because God is holy and righteous, He must condemn the sinner. The righteousness of God is thus seen as the basis for judgment, not God's work of salvation. Indeed, if we can only be righteous by keeping God's law, we are condemned; but in Romans 3:21–25, St. Paul rejoices that there is another way to be righteous — by faith in Jesus.

11. Back to Romans 1. In verse 17, St. Paul also says that the Gospel is revealed “from faith for faith.” It's a challenging phrase, so what does it mean? What part does faith play in salvation, and how does one acquire faith? Does Romans 10:17 help us understand this phrase?

*Although St. Paul uses “faith” twice, he's referring to two different things. The first use of “faith” (“from faith”) is in reference to God's faithfulness to us, which He makes known to us through His holy Word. Thus, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (**ROM. 10:17**).*

The second use of “faith” (“for faith”) is what receives and holds onto the Gospel. Apart from faith, we cannot believe. Thus, God in His faithfulness gives us faith to believe the faith. How? The good news is that the Gospel gives the faith that it requires! Faith is not our work, but a gift of God given in the Gospel.

12. In verse 17, St. Paul says, “The righteous shall live by faith.” This is a quote from Habakkuk 2:4, which tells us that the Gospel is the same in the Old Testament as in

the New. What does this quotation mean?

It means that because we are made righteous by the Gospel, which we believe by the faith that it gives, we have life. In fact, it's accurate to translate this verse from the Greek as “the one who is righteous by faith will live.”

13. Why would St. Paul be eager to preach the Gospel to Christians — to people who already believe the Gospel? Why is it important for believers to keep hearing the Gospel?

The Gospel continues to give faith and to strengthen the faith that believers already possess. If, hypothetically, Christians were only to focus on parts of Scripture that speak God's law as to how they should live, their faith would gradually weaken. Quite likely, they would become like Pharisees, believing that Christianity is about the works they do and the life they live, rather than about Christ and the forgiveness of sins. Like the Gospel, the law of God is holy, but the law does not give or strengthen faith!

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If the Gospel gives us forgiveness, righteousness and life, it follows that rejecting it will have consequences. Read Romans 1:18–23.

14. What do the unrighteous suffer in verse 18, and what does their unrighteousness cause them to suppress? What all does this include?

The unrighteous suffer God's wrath. Because they are unrighteous, they suppress the truth about righteousness, both God's holy Law and Gospel.

15. According to verses 19–20, what can people know about God from creation?

They can know that He exists because a creation requires a creator. They can know that He is eternal because He had to exist before creation to create it. They can know that He is powerful because of the immensity of creation, and they can know that He is divine because the attributes we've listed (eternality and omnipotence) are not natural to creation itself.

16. In verses 20–21, St. Paul says the unrighteous are without excuse. Even apart from faith or knowledge of the Gospel, what should they be doing, and why?

The unrighteous should acknowledge that God exists, as well as honor Him and give thanks to Him for their existence, lives and daily bread. It's no accident that Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism says, "For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him."² Even without knowing about Jesus, sinners have much to thank God for!

17. Rather than honor God, what happens to the unrighteous in verse 21? What are the consequences in verses 22–23?

The old Adam will not honor God; instead, it looks to do anything but that. Ignoring the obvious truths about God in creation, they become futile in their thinking and darkened in their hearts. Their opposition to God leads them to exchange Him for false gods, crediting them for what God has done and using them to justify their sin.

Read Romans 1:24–32.

18. Because sinners oppose God, what does God give them over to, and what is the immediate consequence in verses 24–25?

God gives them up to impurity. Essentially, He allows them to have their way and pursue their foolish lusts. Among the immediate consequences, they dishonor their bodies.

19. Read verses 26–27. What is one way that sinners dishonor their bodies, and why is this dishonorable?

Homosexual desire and behavior fall into the category of dishonorable passions and rebellion against God's righteousness because they are contrary to His design that sexual attraction and relations take place between a man and a woman in the lifelong institution of marriage. Like so many sins, dishonorable passions and their ensuing behaviors demonstrate that sinners are automatically prone to oppose God and thus will act contrary to what He wills. Thus, if God wills that sex be confined to one man and one woman within marriage, homosexual activity is one form of rebellion (as is adultery,

promiscuity, the redefinition of family and more).

20. Read verses 28–31. What other unrighteous and dishonorable passions do sinners commit? Are Christians immune? How should they treat those who battle more notorious sins?

St. Paul gives a laundry list of sins: "all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (ROM. 1:29–31). These are all examples of sinners opposing God and seeking act contrary to His will. Christians dare not point fingers as if they are immune to such sins; as long as we remain in this world, we are daily in need of forgiveness. We do not outlive our need for Christ and Him crucified.

21. Read verse 32. Why are such sins especially foolish, and how do they know this?

These sins are even more foolish because God has decreed that those who sin deserve to die, and even the unrighteous know this to be true because the law is written on their hearts and their conscience. As they have no excuse to say that God does not exist, so they have no excuse to deny that sin is wrong.

22. Finally, in verse 32, what do sinners do about the sins of others?

They encourage them! Part of the urge of sinners to justify themselves is to build a coalition of like-minded sinners. Thus, we see throughout society that assorted groups band together to popularize various sins — and to suppress voices that oppose them.

23. Do you see any of what St. Paul describes at work in our culture today? Discuss.

Answers will vary, because sinners are always sinning. However, we are especially confronting an increase in sins regarding marriage and sexuality — not just homosexuality and laws regarding same-sex relationships, but the redefinition of family, the normalization of transgenderism and more. While these sins are nothing new, the movements to legitimize and glorify these sins — which clearly oppose God's order for creation — are astonishing.

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986, 1991), 16.

24. How should the church respond to the world today?

The same way that St. Paul did: Proclaim the Gospel unashamedly. This also means proclaiming the law in its truth and purity, so that people might see their sin, know their guilty consciences are speaking truth, and see their need for Christ, their Savior. We must note, however, that proclaiming Law and Gospel is to be done in Christian love, with concern for the soul of the sinner, not the jagged and snarky dialog that characterizes so much discourse today. Furthermore, there is certainly room for apologetics and work to defend or improve morality in the culture around us; however, these two tasks are to be in service to the proclamation of the Gospel.

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In the ongoing bombardment of bad news, we speak good news: *the* Good News. The Gospel is not just a cheery bit of information to brighten our day, but it is the power of salvation for all who will believe. Because Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world, He has forgiveness and life for all who trust in Him. There couldn't be better, more important or more joyful news to proclaim.

The tricky part is that, since sinners are busy opposing whatever God wills, they're naturally going to oppose the Gospel. Where God offers grace, they'll demand to work for salvation. Where He offers life, they'll turn death into a friend. Where He warns against sin and unrighteousness, sinful hearts will double down.

If that's not bad enough, your old sinful nature doesn't want to hear anything about Jesus and forgiveness, so it's always encouraging you to talk about something else instead. It always seems easier for sinners to oppose the Gospel than for Christians to oppose the sin and death.

Do not be afraid and do not be ashamed of the Gospel; and where you are, confess the fear and hear you are forgiven by Christ, who died for you. The Gospel is the news of the One who died to defeat sin. Risen again, He declares to you, "Take heart; I have overcome the world" (**JOHN 16:33**).

That's the Good News of Christ, crucified — and risen again.

Closing Prayer

Merciful and everlasting God, You did not spare Your only Son but delivered Him up for us all to bear our sins on the cross. Grant that our hearts may be so fixed with steadfast faith in Him that we fear not the power of sin, death, and the devil; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (Collect for Wednesday in Holy Week [L31], *LSB Altar Book*, 589)

Sing a Hymn!

"Preach You the Word" (*LSB* 586)

This rollicking hymn by Martin Franzmann uses the parable of the Sower to speak of proclaiming the Gospel to all who hear, "to men who like or like it not," because by His Word the Lord gathers His harvest.

"The Gospel Shows the Father's Grace" (*LSB* 580)

This is a great catechetical hymn to sing, if not memorize, as it proclaims the many blessings of Christ crucified.

LESSON 2:

The Foolish Gospel

I never thought I'd start a Bible study by talking about the death of Benito Mussolini. But there's a first time for everything.

Mussolini, as you probably know, was the fascist dictator of Italy during World War II and an ally of Nazi Germany. He did not enjoy a peaceful end of days. Captured and tried by fellow Italians, he was executed by firing squad and then hanged in a public square. I remember being much younger, paging through a history book and finding a picture of his suspended corpse, and thinking to myself, "Nobody's going to follow that guy anymore." It's not a profound thought, but any sympathizers were way outside the frame of the photograph.

I bring this up for two reasons. The first is that a dead leader is not a great marketing strategy. I'm sure that, had it not been banned anyway, enrollment in the National Fascist Party of Italy would have dropped severely after Mussolini's death, because the message of the photo was, "Follow him, and this could happen to you too." In our society where marketing is such a big deal, it's easy to squirm at the thought of the church leading with "Christ and Him *crucified...*"

Not to mention the fact that the crucified Christ has memorable quotes like, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (**MATT. 16:24**). "Follow the crucified Christ and join Him" doesn't sound all that attractive.

The second reason is that I live in the Intermountain West, where Christians are largely overshadowed by the monolithic Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. More than once, I've had fellow Christians say to me, "My neighbors sure have some crazy beliefs." I wouldn't disagree that Mormonism has some strange teachings, but I also point out that Christians claim to follow a man who was executed 2,000 years ago — in fact, they follow Him *because* He was executed 2,000 years ago. It's the truth, of course: It's the Gospel truth. But apart from faith, I remind these people, the Gospel truth sounds pretty crazy.

Some might be tempted to object to this by reminding me that we follow Jesus who was indeed executed, but who also rose from the dead. I rejoice in this, of course, because otherwise we would have no hope (**1 COR. 15:17-19**); but I'll also add that telling unbelievers

that He rose from the dead doesn't make you sound less crazy.

And we haven't even gotten to the part of telling people that He is the Son of God who became man ... in order that God might die for our sins. All of this is going to sound foolish without faith.

Mind you, I'm not making light of any of this. I make it a point to talk about Jesus' death and resurrection a lot. But this is an important question for 21st-century Christians to work through: If you have a "loser" marketing message that makes you sound crazy, then why stick with it? Is it time for a change? To 1 Corinthians 1 we go!

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

In verses 18-19, St. Paul makes a distinction in how people regard the Gospel.

1. Why is the Gospel not foolish to those being saved (cf. **ROM. 1:16**)?

The Gospel is the power of God! It is not merely information about how to be saved or that salvation is possible. The proclamation of Christ and Him crucified actually does the saving as it delivers forgiveness and faith to those who hear.

2. St. Paul says the Gospel is folly to those who are perishing. First off, why are they perishing?

They are perishing because of their sin. Lacking faith in Jesus, they are not forgiven for their sins.

3. Second, why is the Gospel foolish to those who are perishing? There are a few reasons, but St. Paul addresses one by quoting Isaiah 29:14. (If you have time, read **MATTHEW 15:1-9**, where you see an example of this and where Jesus quotes **ISAIAH 29:13!**)

*Those who are perishing consider the Gospel foolish because they lack the Holy Spirit, who works faith through the preached Word (**1 COR. 2:4**). Those who are perishing are without faith and thus are unable to believe the Gospel to be true. Christians should keep in mind that, apart from faith, the Gospel is a message that will sound nonsensical.*

St. Paul gives another reason why it is foolish to those

who are perishing: With the Gospel, God opposes the wisdom and discernment of men. Apart from faith, the wisdom and discernment of men invariably lead them to trust in themselves, which is antithetical to trusting that they are saved by grace alone. In fact, the more they trust their own wisdom, the more foolish the Gospel will seem. Therefore, God must destroy such wisdom and discernment, exposing it for the idol that it is, if they are to repent and believe.

In Matthew 15:1-9, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees who believe they achieve salvation by keeping the law. Although they are wrong, what they believe makes sense. If we live in a world where we achieve things through work, it only makes sense that we would achieve salvation by our work too. The Gospel, however, is not how the world works; it is how God works to save sinners.

4. Can you think of any examples in the Bible of people considering the Gospel to be foolish?

*Answers will vary. Jesus' own family considers Him mad in Mark 3:21, while others declare He has a demon in John 10:20. When St. Paul proclaims the Gospel to the Roman governor Festus, Festus declares him to be out of his mind (**ACTS 26:24**).*

5. In verse 20, God thwarts the wisdom of three different individuals. Who are they, and who might they stand for?

God thwarts "the one who is wise," "the scribe" and "the debater of this age." Respectively, these most likely refer to the Greeks (and all Gentiles), the Jews and then anyone who puts their trust in the temporary teachings of the present culture. In other words, God thwarts the wisdom of all peoples — but that is so all might turn from their wisdom and trust in Christ.

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In verse 22, St. Paul says that Jews demand signs. This would certainly be in keeping with first-century Judaism, but all sorts of people want signs from God. Let's look at a few examples from the Gospels.

6. Read Matthew 12:38-41. When the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign that He is the Messiah, what does He say about their request? Why? What sign

does He give them, and why does it condemn them?

Jesus includes them in “an evil and adulterous generation” for seeking a sign. While requesting a sign as verification may seem like a reasonable request, it indicates that they do not believe the Word of God that Jesus speaks to them. Thus, it is evil and unfaithful.

Instead of the sort of sign they would like to see, Jesus points them to the “sign of the prophet Jonah,” namely His own death and resurrection. In other words, Jesus specifically points them to the foolishness of the Gospel. Furthermore, He points out that the men of Nineveh will condemn them because they repented when they heard God’s Word; and while they only heard it from a prophet, the scribes and Pharisees are hearing it from God Himself in the flesh!

7. Read John 2:13–22. When Jesus cleanses the temple, the Jews demand a sign. What does He tell them, and what does it mean? What effect does this have on those who want a sign? What effect does it have on His disciples?

Jesus tells the Jews, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” In Old Testament times, the temple was the location of God’s presence with His people as He dwelt in the Most Holy Place. But in John 2, God is dwelling with His people in the flesh, in the person of Jesus. Once again, when asked for a sign, Jesus specifically points His hearers to His death and resurrection — to the foolishness of the Gospel. Because the Jews do not believe He is the Messiah, they cannot comprehend that He speaks of Himself, so they apply His words to the massive building in front of them. His disciples, however, believe the Word — albeit after He is risen from the dead.

8. Read John 6:30–41. The Jews ask Jesus for a sign because God gave a sign — manna — in the Old Testament. When Jesus responds, He reveals the reason God gave manna (v. 33). What is it? Does Jesus refer to the foolishness of the Gospel in verses 35–40? How do the Jews respond?

Along with God giving manna to provide food in the wilderness, He gave it to point to Jesus, “he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:33). Although less explicit than our previous examples, Jesus refers to His “foolish” death by saying that He has

*come to do the will of His Father (cf. **MATT. 26:39**), and then He speaks of the resurrection. Lacking faith, the Jews respond by grumbling at His words.*

9. Read Luke 23:8–11. Herod, though not a Jew, nevertheless rules over the Jews and hopes to see a sign from Jesus. How does Jesus respond? Why? (See **ISAIAH 53:4-7**.)

Jesus doesn’t respond to Herod at all. This takes place during Jesus’ Passion, with the cross only hours away. Jesus fulfills Isaiah 53:7 and remains silent as He is busy enacting the Gospel by His suffering and impending death.

10. When and why might people demand signs from God today? Is this different from asking God to provide help or healing? Why is this a matter of concern (cf. **2 COR. 5:7**; **HEB. 11:1**)?

*Demanding signs from God can be a matter of concern because we walk by faith, not by sight (**2 COR. 5:7**), and faith trusts in things unseen (**HEB. 11:1**), namely the promises of God. Often, people demand signs of God when they doubt His promises, question His will or grow impatient with His timing. Christians may, of course, always ask God for assistance — but always while trusting His gracious will. Faith trusts the Gospel even when God doesn’t provide other signs and wonders. We’ll look at this more in the next lesson.*

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Returning to 1 Corinthians 1, in verse 22 St. Paul says that Greeks seek wisdom. In Acts 17, we find him in Athens, the city synonymous with Greek philosophy. Paul encounters Epicureans, who teach that life is all about seeking pleasure, and Stoics, who teach people to accept their fate however miserable it may be. (What a contrast!) These groups are two examples of philosophers trying to make sense out of life.

11. If you have time, read through St. Paul’s short sermon to these philosophers, Acts 17:22–31, and make a list of what he teaches about God. If you don’t have time, skip right to verses 30–31. With what teaching does St. Paul end his sermon?

Given the many altars to false gods in the area, St. Paul

begins by proclaiming the existence of the one true God, maker and preserver of all creation. In verses 30–31, he declares that God will judge the world in righteousness through a man He has raised from the dead. While he does not make an explicit proclamation of Christ’s crucifixion, he is moving into a discussion of Jesus’ death and resurrection when his recorded sermon ends.

12. What is the response to St. Paul’s sermon?

Some mock, some wish to hear more and some believe in Jesus.

13. St. Paul says in verse 23 that the preaching of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to the Jews. Why would this be?

It is a stumbling block for two reasons. First, as we saw in questions 6–8 above, they are looking for signs of glory and power, and a crucified corpse is anything but glorious and powerful. Second, they believe they are saved by keeping the law, so salvation through a man who has died seems ludicrous.

14. St. Paul says in verse 23 that the preaching of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to the Greeks. Why would this be?

Whether they are Epicureans, Stoics or something in between, the Greeks are trying to make sense out of life by what they can see and experience. In their experience, people don’t rise from the dead, and it is certainly foolish to put your trust in someone who has died and been buried — and trust in that one for eternal life, no less!

15. Despite the folly and offensiveness of the Gospel, why does St. Paul insist on preaching Christ crucified? Why should we? In addition to what he says here, he gives another reason in 1 Thessalonians 2:4. What is it?

St. Paul insists on preaching Christ crucified because it is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and it is for the salvation of sinners. Furthermore, in 1 Thessalonians 2:4, he says that we speak the Gospel to please God, whether or not it pleases man. (If that sounds like too much of a chore, turn it around: God is pleased with us for speaking of Christ crucified. How great is that?!)

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In the introduction to this lesson, I posed this question: If you have a “loser” marketing ploy that makes you sound crazy, then why stick with it? Is it time for a change?

It is so important for Christians to realize that proclaiming the Gospel is not a matter of marketing. It’s a matter of speaking the truth of God and then trusting that the Holy Spirit will make use of the Gospel of Christ crucified to bring sinners to repentance and faith. Where we’re tempted to believe that such a message sounds too foolish for our sophisticated age, we do well to remember that the Gospel always sounds foolish to sinners of any age, and yet the Gospel is the power of salvation to all who believe.

The Gospel still delivers faith. If it didn’t, why are *you* reading this?

All that said, I will grant that we live in a time where the harvest doesn’t seem plentiful and where many have departed from the church. For this and other reasons, Christians themselves will struggle with the foolishness of the Gospel. We’ll pick that up next time.

In the meantime, embrace the foolishness of Christ crucified, for in this news you receive forgiveness and life. What joy!

Closing Prayer

O Lord God, heavenly Father, You gave Your only Son to die for our sins and to rise again for our justification. By Your Holy Spirit grant us newness of life that through the power of Christ’s resurrection we may dwell with Him forever; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. (Collect for the Holy Spirit [184], *LSB Altar Book*, 448)

Sing a Hymn!

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (*LSB* 425/426)

Isaac Watts’ classic hymn captures the “foolishness” and mystery of the Gospel, that the cross gives salvation as our greatest works are found useless for the same.

“O Darkest Woe” (*LSB* 448)

This is one of those hymns that I fear nobody knows, but everybody should! Verse after verse, it depicts the foolishness of the cross in a way that one cannot help but marvel at God’s love.

LESSON 3:

When the Gospel Seems Foolish to Christians

All Jesus is good for is the forgiveness of sins.

A colleague said that to me one time. If it sounds provocative, I think he meant it to be.

It's a provocative line because it makes it sound like Jesus is a pretty limited Savior against the bombardment of garbage that Christians face. Sometimes, though, it will seem to believers that this is true. In a world of cultural decay, broken relationships, lost children, chronic illnesses and grief, is forgiveness enough of an upside to believe in Jesus? Is He still a Savior to follow and proclaim?

When Christians are ground to powder by various trials, the devil will further afflict them with doubts about God's faithfulness and deliverance, making forgiveness sound insignificant and useless. He does the same to pastors too. When they're sitting vigil in waiting rooms with worried families, there's the temptation to want magic words over Christ and Him crucified.

The Gospel is that Jesus was crucified so that we might be forgiven. In times of trial, is that message enough?

I'll return to my colleague's one-liner at the end of this lesson. In the meantime, though, let's talk about the terrible trial of when the Gospel seems foolish to Christians.

1. Before we get to Matthew 11, read Matthew 3:11–12. What does John the Baptist say about Jesus in these verses?

John describes Jesus as mighty and glorious, so much so that John is unworthy to perform the most menial task of carrying His sandals. Furthermore, Jesus is powerful, baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This is a description of the Last Day, when He judges the living and the dead.

Read Matthew 11:2-15.

2. Why is John the Baptist in prison? (See **LUKE 3:18-20**.)

John is in prison because he called Herod the tetrarch to repentance for seducing and marrying his brother's wife, as well as for other evils. Rather than repent, Herod had John imprisoned.

3. John sends his disciples to ask Jesus a question. What is it, and why do you think the question has arisen?

The question is, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” There’s some discussion about who asks: John or his disciples. Either way, the question expresses doubt that Jesus is the Messiah. The most apparent reason for this doubt is that John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus, is imprisoned, and Jesus — whom John has proclaimed to be glorious and powerful — is doing nothing to effect his release.

4. Jesus could simply say, “Yes, I am the One you’ve been looking for,” but how does He answer instead? Why? For the full picture, read Isaiah 35:5–6.

Jesus tells John’s disciples to witness what He is saying and doing. However, it is not just that Jesus is performing astonishing miracles of healing, but that He’s fulfilling prophecy to prove that He is the Christ.

5. Along with Isaiah 35:5–6, Jesus also alludes to Isaiah 61:1, and then concludes by saying, “And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Who would be offended by Jesus working miracles? Specifically, is there anything in that latter verse that could offend John or his disciples?

Isaiah 61:1 declares that the Messiah will preach good news to the poor, which Jesus points out He is doing. Significantly, it also says that the Messiah proclaims liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound — yet John is still in prison.

6. What does Jesus say about John the Baptist in Matthew 11:7–11?

*Jesus makes clear that, despite John’s imprisonment, he is a prophet. In fact, as foretold in Malachi 3:1 (and **ISAIAH 40:3**), John is a prophet who fulfills prophecy by prophesying! The Lord is not distancing Himself from John, but instead declares that there is no one greater than John born to women. (John’s greatness is found in his nearness to Jesus. He both prepares the way and introduces the Messiah as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, according to **JOHN 1:29**.)*

7. Read verse 12. It’s a challenging verse, but does it help us understand why John, the prophet of the Most High

who prepares the way of the Lord, is still in prison?

Jesus says that both John and the kingdom of heaven suffer violence, and the kingdom of heaven suffers violence because the King — Jesus Himself — will suffer violence. In other words, by his imprisonment (and impending death) John is foreshadowing that the Messiah will also suffer and die. By his suffering, John is still pointing to Jesus! In fact, it will appear for a while that the violent — the enemies of Jesus — have the upper hand, yet Jesus wins salvation for us by His suffering and death.

8. In verse 11, Jesus says that “the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John the Baptist].” Who is the least, and why is that one greater?

*There is some debate about who Jesus means by the “least.” Some maintain that Jesus is speaking of Himself. The argument here is that He says that John is among those “born of women [in the usual way],” while Jesus is distinct in being born not just of a woman, but of a virgin. Furthermore, Jesus is the least in the kingdom of heaven because He becomes the Servant of all who bears the sins of all to the cross (**PHIL. 2:7–8**).*

*Others assert that the least in the kingdom is a reference to any and all believers. Although John is great for his work as the prophet who prepares the way, it is a greater thing still simply to believe and receive the grace of God (cf. **LUKE 10:20**).*

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9. Believers are tempted to be offended by Jesus when they must endure some sort of affliction or witness suffering in others. Although they might dearly want to know why such things are happening, the Lord usually doesn’t provide specific reasons for particular trials. However, what sorts of assurances can believers keep in mind from Matthew 11:2–15? What about Lamentations 3:22–33? Hebrews 12:3–7? 2 Corinthians 4:16–18? (You might want to bookmark these passages because we’ll come back to them in question 11.)

Matthew 11:2–15 reminds us that, though we endure suffering, the Lord remembers us and sustains our faith so that we remain in His kingdom. Hebrews 12:3–7 tells us that God uses suffering hardship to discipline us as sons. Discipline is not the same as punishment. While

punishment inflicts suffering as a consequence of wrongdoing, discipline trains for the purposes of growth and wisdom. Finally, 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 tells us that no matter how difficult the present time may be, it is a “light momentary affliction.” This is not St. Paul trivializing what might be terrible suffering, but he is looking at it in comparison to the joys of heaven that lie ahead.

10. Read Matthew 8:16–17 and Isaiah 53:4–5. How is Christ crucified connected to *our* sufferings in these passages? Why is this a comfort for those who are afflicted?

Put together, these passages tell us that Jesus delivers us from our griefs, sorrows, infirmities and sicknesses by bearing them away to the cross. These afflictions are consequences of sin, and so He suffers them as well as He redeems us. The comfort of Christ crucified is not merely(!) that “I will be delivered some day because Jesus died for me,” but “when Jesus died, He was bearing this very affliction for me, and it is because of His cross that I will be relieved of it.” Jesus shares in our sufferings; by His suffering on the cross, He delivers us.

11. Why can we be certain that these assurances are for us? Now read Lamentations 3:26 again, as well as Hebrews 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 4:13–15.

All of these promises are rooted in the [foolish and offensive?!] Gospel. Because Christ has been crucified for us and suffered God’s righteous wrath on our behalf, we know that God is at work for our good because He has no wrath left for us. Thus, the mourner in Lamentations 3 knows he is waiting for salvation, because the Lord will have compassion. Likewise, we endure fatherly discipline in Hebrews 12 because Jesus has endured the cross, despising its shame, so that we might be children of God. Furthermore, we know that a joyous eternal weight of glory awaits (2 COR. 4:17) because Christ was raised from death — His death for our sins.

One more! Read Romans 5:1–5.

12. When St. Paul speaks of “our Lord Jesus Christ” in verse 1, he has His death and resurrection in mind (cf. **ROM. 4:24–25**). What are the benefits of the Gospel that he lists in Romans 5:1–2?

We are justified by faith. In other words, God declares us

“not guilty” of sin because Jesus has borne our sins to the cross, and He gives us faith to believe this to be true.

We have peace with God because Jesus has suffered His Father’s righteous wrath for our sin.

We have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand. Forgiveness is not a one-time gift, but we live in the ongoing comfort that the Lord declares us forgiven.

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. We will see God in His glory, because for Jesus’ sake He will raise us from the dead too.

13. These gifts completely change the purpose of suffering. Rather than meaning that God is out to get us for our sin, it means that He is at work for our good even in suffering. What does suffering produce for God’s people?

Suffering produces endurance, as we learn to cast away false gods and cling to God, who is faithful.

Endurance produces character, seasoned and tested believers who are confident of God’s promises.

Character produces hope, because we are sure that God will keep His promises and deliver us to everlasting life.

14. In verse 5, how can you be sure that God is using suffering for your good? When is the love of God poured into our heart (cf. **TITUS 3:5–6**)?

This happens in Holy Baptism. As one baptized, you can be sure that the Lord is using suffering for your good.

Note that, in Romans 5:6–11, St. Paul continues with another beautiful proclamation of the Gospel. He surrounds his brief discussion of suffering with the message of Christ and Him crucified!

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I started this lesson with the provocative statement “All Jesus is good for is the forgiveness of sins,” which will sound to some like Jesus isn’t good for much. But forgiveness is the key to it all.

Because you’re forgiven, you can be sure that, when you suffer, God isn’t out to get you because He’s already poured out His wrath for your sin on Jesus.

Therefore, you can also be certain that He will sustain you in suffering, provide all that you need for body and soul, and even use affliction for your good according to His purposes.

Finally, He will raise you up on the Last Day, delivered from all sin and suffering to everlasting life.

All of this is true because of Christ, crucified for your sins and raised for your justification. It's why we always keep this stunning news at the center of our proclamation, in the midst of the greatest joys and the most terrible trials.

So, if *all* Jesus is good for is the forgiveness of sins, I hope you are now even more convinced that He's good for *everything!*

Closing Prayer

O Lord, You are the great Physician of soul and body; You chasten and You heal. Show mercy to Your servants who are afflicted with suffering. Spare their lives and restore their strength. Even as You gave Your Son to bear our infirmities and sicknesses, deal compassionately with Your servants and bless them with Your healing power. We commit them to Your gracious mercy and protection; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (Adapted from Prayer for the Sick [255], *LSB Altar Book*, 459)

Sing a Hymn!

“Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me” (*LSB* 756)

Paul Gerhardt was a pastor who endured much suffering and grief. He penned this hymn of comfort in the midst of affliction, beginning with the cross in verse 1 and moving to all sorts of consolation.

“There Is a Time for Everything” (*LSB* 762)

A recent and beautiful addition to our hymnody, Stephen Starke's hymn reminds us that we are confident of God's favor in the midst of lasting trouble, because He has given His Son to provide us with timeless grace.

LESSON 4:

The Foolish Congregation

Back in college, I took an elective class about church music and worship. One of the assignments was to visit three non-Lutheran congregations to observe their worship services.

The first I attended was a small evangelical congregation, and my only lasting memory was that the congregation had a practice of welcoming visitors by pointing them out to everybody before the service began. Some will caution that this makes visitors feel like a deer caught in the headlights, but that was not the case for me. Introvert that I am, it made me feel more like a deer mounted on somebody's trophy wall.

My next visit was at an established, downtown Episcopalian church that had a service with liturgy and a choir. Its beautiful architecture and music left a powerful impression.

The third church was a non-denominational mega-church, and my biggest memory is of a potted plant. At the front of the sanctuary was a stage, and on the stage was a podium and a potted plant, nothing else. No altar, no communion rail, no banners or paraments.

No cross.

I inquired about this and learned that the philosophy of that church was that a cross would make some people feel uncomfortable, so the leadership had decided that there would be none in the sanctuary.

I've got to admit that the potted plant was certainly not offensive. But even then, it struck me as strange that a church would purposely omit a cross because people might find it offensive.

In this lesson, we're going to examine the place of Christ and Him crucified within worship. I propose this exploration for two reasons. First, I've found that congregations often have at least a little tension when they ask, "How can we make the Gospel more appealing to visitors who regard the Gospel as foolish?" After all, you wouldn't lead off your resumé with something destined to offend your potential employer, so do you want to make Christ crucified the focus of worship if you want the visiting unbeliever to come back? Various experts write lots of material on this point; sometimes, churches end up with a potted plant.

Second, I propose this lesson because it inevitably involves talking about Christ and Him crucified as well as how He ministers to us today. That's all Gospel, and that's always worth talking about!

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26–31.

1. How does St. Paul describe the Corinthian congregation in verse 26?

Given God's power and might, people might expect a Christian congregation to be large, prosperous, wealthy and full of successful people. However, St. Paul describes the Corinthian congregation as full of Christians who are of low social status. There are a few with higher standing in society, but not many.

2. According to St. Paul, why is the congregation made up of such people (**vv. 27–28**)? Does this correspond to the Gospel? How?

The congregation is made up of such people because God has chosen them to reflect the foolishness of the Gospel. While sinners naturally look to wealth and power for happiness, in this world it is often the lowly who have hope, peace and joy.

3. Is this consistent with how God operates? Are there examples of Him choosing the weak, humble, obscure and lowly to accomplish His work?

*Answers will vary, but the Bible is full of such examples, including Gideon (**JUDGES 6**); David, the youngest son of Jesse (**1 SAM. 16:11**); Amos (**AMOS 7:14**); and the shepherds outside of Bethlehem (**LUKE 2:8**). Among women, Sarah (**GEN. 17:17–19**), Rachel (**GEN. 30:22**) and Hannah (**1 SAM. 1:20**) are notable as barren women who become mothers, and Mary is certainly lifted from obscurity to be the mother of Jesus. This is also true of places, such as Bethlehem (**MICAH 5:2**) and Nazareth (**JOHN 1:46**).*

4. Read Philippians 3:4–10, where St. Paul relates that he was once considered a powerful man in the eyes of his peers. In what ways did his former influential life obstruct him from believing in Jesus (note especially v. 8)? Did he earn salvation by giving them up?

Quite obviously Paul's former life obstructed him from believing in Jesus because his job description involved

persecuting the church and adamantly not believing in Jesus. However, his status and power were also cause for him to trust in himself rather than Jesus. He didn't earn salvation by giving up his former life. That would mean that we are saved by making our own sacrifices. Rather, he found them to be rubbish, completely useless for salvation. In seeing the uselessness of himself and his things, he came to rejoice in Christ alone.

5. Returning to 1 Corinthians 1, along with wisdom, Christ Jesus became three things to us in verse 30. What are they, and why are they important?

*Christ Jesus has become righteousness to us, making us righteous by bearing our sins to the cross (**2 COR. 5:21**).*

*Christ Jesus has become sanctification to us, cleansing us of sin by washing us in Holy Baptism (**1 COR. 6:11**).*

*Christ Jesus has become redemption to us, shedding His own blood (**1 COR. 5:7**) to pay the price for our sins.*

All of these are important because they are all facets of our salvation. Without them, we have no hope of eternal life.

6. How does the world regard these gifts?

The world will regard these as foolish, both because they are the result of the "foolish" crucifixion of Jesus and because they are about hope for a resurrection that unbelief rejects. Furthermore, many in our culture reject the idea of truth, or an absolute standard of right and wrong. So, the idea of having to be made righteous or redeemed from something will appear unnecessary.

7. One of those gifts, sanctification, is linked to Holy Baptism (**1 COR. 6:11; EPH. 5:26**). Read Romans 6:3–8. What does Holy Baptism have to do with the Gospel?

According to Romans 6:3–8, in Holy Baptism we are buried with Christ and raised again. To put it another way, we are united with Christ crucified and raised from the dead. Rightly understood, Holy Baptism is thus a proclamation of, and a participation in, the Gospel.

8. How will the world regard Holy Baptism, as well as the confidence that Christians place in being baptized? Why?

The world might regard Holy Baptism as a quaint rite of dedication, but the idea that water and Word deliver forgiveness and salvation will seem foolish, as will the Christian's reliance on baptismal grace even in the face of death. The power of Holy Baptism is tied directly to the foolishness of Christ crucified (**ROM. 6:3-4**). (If you have time, read how offended Naaman became at the suggestion that water — particularly a source of water specified by God's Word! — could cleanse him of "mere" leprosy (**2 KINGS 5**), a small evil when compared to eternal condemnation!)

9. Another of these gifts in 1 Corinthians 1:30, redemption, is linked to Holy Communion because Jesus is our Passover Lamb who has redeemed us by His blood. Read 1 Corinthians 11:24-26. How is Holy Communion related to the Gospel?

Christ offered His body and shed His blood on the cross for our salvation. Now in Holy Communion, we receive His body and blood. We are again joined to Christ and Him crucified and raised again. Once again, this Sacrament delivers forgiveness, life and salvation. First Corinthians 11:26 makes clear that the Lord's Supper is a proclamation of the Gospel: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

10. Like the Passover Lamb, His blood was shed for our rescue and now He is given to us for a holy meal in His Supper. How will the world regard Holy Communion? Why?

At best, the world will regard Holy Communion as a rite of remembrance or a ritual of fellowship with one another, but not a communion in the body and blood of Christ Himself. The doctrine of the Real Presence will seem foolish, if not offensive. This is foremost because the blessings of Holy Communion — forgiveness, life and salvation — cannot be separated from the "foolish" message of Christ crucified.

11. We should include the absolution as we speak of the Means of Grace, for by His Word God declares us forgiven and righteous. How will the world regard Holy Absolution? Why?

Once again, Holy Absolution is tied directly to the foolish

Gospel, because it is only for the sake of Jesus that we are forgiven. Furthermore, the idea that words effectively forgive sins when spoken by a man, who stands in the stead of a man crucified 2,000 years ago, will likely seem ludicrous.

12. What makes a Christian congregation a God-pleasing congregation? Why?

God is pleased with His people because they are forgiven for Jesus' sake, because Jesus died and rose again. He gives that forgiveness through the Means of Grace; therefore, God is pleased with those who make use of His Means of Grace.

13. It's a tension for congregations that they want to welcome visitors and share the Gospel, while also knowing that the central, vital foci of worship — Christ and His Sacraments — are foolish and offensive to those who do not believe. How should congregations address this tension? (Don't forget **ROMANS 1:16!**)

A congregation should go about the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments joyfully, confidently and unapologetically. It is only by these means that believers are fed and unbelievers are brought to faith. Christians should not be surprised when visitors are sometimes offended by the Gospel, because Scripture says they will be. They should always rejoice that the Lord is at work to save in the message of Christ crucified. Furthermore, they should always be confident that their task is not to save anyone, but only to say what the Word proclaims. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, not believers.

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Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

14. The art of rhetoric was a big deal when St. Paul was alive. He lived at the same time that a man named Quintillian wrote *the* book on rhetoric, a book that is still in use today. Skilled speakers were celebrities, especially in Greek culture, with their carefully chosen words and sophisticated turn of phrase. What makes for an effective speaker today? Who do people tend to listen to?

Answer will vary. In our current culture, image is

certainly important, and people generally like to listen to engaging speakers with a sense of humor, compelling stories and so on. These are fine for a preacher if he uses these gifts in service to the Gospel, rather than using the Gospel to showcase his abilities.

Disappointingly, speakers who gain notoriety today are not so much those who give reasoned arguments, but those who work to one-up their opponents in insults and fuel outrage among their listeners. Social media outweighs reasoned discourse. Equally sadly, hearers tend to rate speakers more highly for agreeing with them than for communicating important information with which they might disagree. This only further complicates the church's task of calling sinners to repentance.

15. St. Paul was certainly capable of sophisticated arguments and beautiful communication — just look at his epistles! However, how does he describe his preaching in 1 Corinthians 2:1?

He describes his preaching as without “lofty speech or wisdom.” In other words, he's not making use of the rhetorical skills that are so popular in his day.

16. How does St. Paul describe his persona as an apostle and preacher in verse 3? Is this recommended for effective speaking?

He is with them “in weakness and in fear and much trembling.” These are hardly attractive qualities for a speaker!

17. According to verse 2, what was the core of St. Paul's message?

“Jesus Christ and him crucified” — the “foolish” Gospel.

18. Though his words are not “plausible words of wisdom,” what are they in verse 4b? Why?

They are a demonstration of the Spirit and power. The Holy Spirit is at work in that Word, and by that Word He has called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified the Christians who make up the congregation in Corinth.

19. In verse 5, St. Paul declares that his poor rhetoric should be a comfort to the Corinthians. Why?

It is so that their “faith might not rest in the wisdom of

men but in the power of God.” In other words, they do not believe in Jesus because a skilled rhetorician talked them into it (as a skilled salesman might talk people into buying a car), but they believe in Jesus because — despite the lack of smooth talk — the Holy Spirit has worked faith in them by the Gospel they have heard.

20. What makes a sermon good?

First and foremost, a good sermon delivers the news of Christ and Him crucified. This is not an easy art. As far as presentation goes, not all pastors are gifted speakers. If they are not, they endeavor to avoid being boring or dry; and if they are, they need to be careful that their personal flourishes don't overshadow the good news. As far as content goes, the pastor has to rightly divide the Word of truth (2 TIM. 2:15). This goes beyond making certain that he interprets it correctly, but also that he applies it correctly to his hearers in their current situation. It is no small task!

21. The word “Gospel” in Greek is the word from which we get evangelism. If we want to goof with language a little, we could say that to evangelize is to “good-new-sify” someone. Is saying one of the creeds in church a form of evangelism? Is it helpful for evangelizing elsewhere?

It will seem odd to some, but saying the creeds in church includes saying that Jesus has died for us and is risen again, and this is connected to the forgiveness and everlasting life in the Third Article. In doing so, parishioners are putting the Gospel into each other's ears and evangelizing one another. Beyond just the comfort that they are not alone in the faith, this good news strengthens faith! The creeds are also helpful for evangelizing elsewhere, because they provide a quick summary of who God is and what He has done to save us.

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It's impossible to overstate this joy and consolation: Worship cannot be separated from Christ and Him crucified, because the crucified and risen Christ visits us in His Means of Grace to give us the benefits of His death and resurrection. It is why worship is called the Divine Service. Wonder of wonders, the Divine — God — comes to serve us! No wonder we respond with

thanks and praise, with speaking and singing what He has done.

It's why, by the way, I love the liturgy of the Divine Service. Every last text within it proclaims that Christ — crucified and risen — is visiting us to give us forgiveness, life and salvation.

It makes sense that, when Christ visits, it's best to get out of His way. That's why, when it comes to visitors and the proclamation of Christ crucified, I would encourage you not to hide or downplay it. On the contrary, lean into it. Adorn the Gospel with reverence, love and beauty. It's hardly attractive to visitors if you seem apologetic about the Gospel. Demonstrate by your actions that you sincerely believe this message to be important, priceless and true.

And remember: It's not your sincerity that will bring an unbeliever to faith. That's the work of the Holy Spirit, who forgives sins and bestows faith by, and only by, the message of Christ and Him crucified. Likewise, it's not your enthusiasm that gets the job done. Depending on all sorts of circumstances, some Sundays feel vibrant while others feel flat. Keep in mind, though, that the wittiest, most interesting anecdote doesn't forgive sins. The absolution, even spoken in the dustiest monotone, does. If that seems silly, let your silliness be reverent because that's a demonstration of the foolishness and wisdom of God.

For you and for all who visit on Sunday morning, the Gospel alone remains the power of salvation to all who believe. Rejoice!

Closing Prayer

Almighty and most merciful Father, in the waters of Holy Baptism You have united Your children in the suffering and death of Your Son Jesus Christ, cleansing them by His blood. Renew in them the gift of Your Holy Spirit, that they may live in daily contrition and repentance with a faith that ever clings to their Savior. Deliver them from the power of Satan and preserve them from false and dangerous doctrines, that they may remain faithful in hearing Christ's Word and receiving His body and blood. By the Lord's Supper strengthen them to believe that no one can make satisfaction for sin but Christ alone. Enable them to find joy and comfort

only in Him, learning from this Sacrament to love You and their neighbor and to bear the cross with patience and joy until the day of the resurrection of their bodies to life immortal; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (Collect for the Newly Confirmed [514], *LSB Altar Book*, 381)

Sing a Hymn!

“Built on the Rock” (*LSB* 645)

Given the foolishness of the Gospel, it's a wonder that the church survives — unless, of course, the Gospel is truly the wisdom and power of God! Grundtvig's classic hymn captures the faithfulness of God to His people throughout civilizations and history.

“Once in the Blest Baptismal Waters” (*LSB* 598)

This hymn reminds us that the Lord faithfully enlivens and sustains us in His Word and Sacraments. It's a beautiful prayer and deserves far more attention than it usually receives.

LESSON 5:

Fools to the End(s)

Last time, we looked at how worship and the Gospel go together. While we spoke about people who visit on Sunday morning, worship is foremost for believers, for members of the congregation. It's the family meal for the children of God. Gathered in the Divine Service, they're forgiven and strengthened in faith, richly fed as His baptized people with His Word and His Supper. When the service is concluded, they depart for the various tasks and callings that await throughout the week.

Within those various tasks and callings, they encounter other people and find golden opportunities to talk about Jesus. And whether it is such personal encounters or the public work of the Holy Ministry, the Lord has tasked His people with making disciples of all nations until He comes again in glory. Before this study concludes, then, we need to talk about evangelism to the ends: the ends of the earth and the end of the world.

Before people start to eye the exits in case a discussion about witnessing begins, let me articulate what I hope to avoid and accomplish in this lesson.

I hope to avoid a common division that I've seen again and again when this discussion takes place: It's the fissure between gifted extroverts, who find it easy to talk to anybody about anything and are used as an example in witnessing that "you can do it too," and gifted introverts, who then feel guilty because they *can't* do it too — not because they're lousy Christians, but because they're not extroverts. Introversion is not a character defect. It's a different set of God-given gifts. (Says the Bible study writer who is typing this out in an empty house and relishing the solitude immensely.)

Whatever your temperament, no one will ever be perfect at sharing the Gospel with others. But the answer to failure in witnessing is not flogging yourself or others with guilt. The answer is the message of Christ crucified. The better you know it, the more you know what to say to others and, furthermore, the stronger your faith will be so that you want to share it. Keep mining the Scriptures for the Gospel, for it strengthens your faith and prepares you to speak.

What I hope to accomplish in this lesson is a study of evangelism by Jesus and His apostles, so that we might

know what they did, what they said and the results of their labors. As we follow in those footsteps, holding fast to the apostolic faith, I think that you'll find this educational and encouraging. Let's begin.

Read Mark 3:7-35.

1. In verses 7–12, what is Jesus doing? How do the crowds react? How do the unclean spirits react? What do Jesus' actions signify?

Jesus heals many and casts out unclean spirits. Crowds gather and press upon Him, especially those who are sick and want to be healed, and the unclean spirits identify Him as the Son of God. As illnesses are outliers of death and unclean spirits act in service to Satan, Jesus' actions signify not just that He is powerful, but that the Messiah has come to deliver from sin, death and the devil.

2. In verses 20–21 and 31–34, what does His family say of Him? When they come to take Him away, how does He answer? How would faith hear His words? How might unbelief hear them? Would you describe His answer as wise or foolish?

Jesus' family tries to seize Him because they believe He is out of His mind. When they come to take Him away, He declares that those who do the will of God are His family. Faith hears in these words that God is gathering children into His kingdom through Jesus. Answers will vary on how unbelief hears them. One possibility is that it hears Jesus saying that He's forming a party of like-minded individuals in place of His family, or perhaps to spite His family for their opposition. Whether one hears His words as wise or foolish depends on faith.

3. In verses 22–30, what do the scribes say about Jesus? How does He answer them, and what does He mean? What specific sin does He warn about, and why? How would faith hear His words? How would unbelief hear them? Would you describe His answer as wise or foolish?

The scribes declare that Jesus is possessed by demons. While He begins by pointing out the logical fallacy in their assertion ("How can Satan cast out Satan?"), Jesus answers by declaring that He has come to plunder Satan's house by defeating him and delivering people from evil. Faith hears this as welcome news that the Christ has

come, while unbelief dismisses it as lies, bluster, superstition or nonsense.

4. Backing up to verses 13–19, what does Jesus appoint the disciples to do? Is this similar to what He has been doing? Is it similar to what the church does today? What sort of reaction should we expect?

Jesus appoints the disciples to do what He has been doing: preach His Word and cast out demons. This is what the church does today by means of His Word and Sacraments. We should expect uncomprehending opposition from unbelievers, even within our own family.

5. Jesus continues by teaching the Parable of the Sower in 4:1–9. Is the sower a sensible farmer? What does that teach us about faith and where believers are found?

Depending on time and desire, participants may want to explore the parable in some detail. Jesus goes on to explain it in 4:10–20. Most relevant to this study is that the sower appears careless with the seed, throwing it all over rather than employing some careful farming methodology, but the seed sprouts in all sorts of places. Rather than target only seemingly "fertile" mission fields, Christians are given the joy of speaking the Gospel wherever they are, trusting that the Holy Spirit will work repentance and faith.

The news of Christ and Him crucified doesn't end at the cross, of course. He rises again and ascends into heaven; just before His ascension, He tells His disciples to "proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (**MARK 16:15**). This is the blessing and task He entrusts to His church until He comes again in glory.

We see this work begin in the Book of Acts as the apostles start to take the Good News to the ends of the earth until the end of the age. As it is given to the church to continue the task, it's a good idea for us to listen and learn from their preaching. The Acts of the Apostles contains many sermons and addresses. The hearers include a wide variety of people. St. Peter preaches his famous Pentecost sermon to devout pilgrims in Jerusalem (**ACTS 2:14–36**), Stephen to his furious executioners (**ACTS 7:2–53**), and St. Paul to curious Greek philosophers (**ACTS 17:22–34**).

6. Pick a few passages from the list below, and answer the following questions:

- What is the general outline of the proclamation?
- Does the speaker explicitly proclaim Christ and Him crucified?
- What is the outcome of the proclamation?

Depending on the time available, the leader may wish to pre-select some texts and briefly review others.

Acts 2:14–36

In his famous Pentecost sermon, Peter declares that Joel prophesied Good Friday and Pentecost, and that King David foretold the resurrection. Peter then proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah who died and rose again (2:31–33). Then he explicitly declares that Jesus was crucified, and they as sinners are included in those who are responsible (2:36). Urged by Peter to repent and be baptized, 3,000 are baptized that day.

Acts 3:12–26

In a shortened version of his Pentecost sermon, Peter declares that his hearers are responsible for Jesus' death (3:15), but that Jesus died and rose so that they might be refreshed and blessed — forgiven (3:18–26)! The outcome is that Peter and John are arrested, and many believe (4:4).

Acts 4:8–12

In his defense before the Sanhedrin, Peter declares that the lame man (3:1–10) was healed in the name of Jesus, crucified and risen. Unable to object that the man is healed, the rulers instruct Peter and John to cease speaking of Jesus.

Acts 7:2–60

This is Stephen's defense before his executioners. He recounts the history of Old Testament Israel, beginning with Abraham but focused mostly on Moses, whom the Israelites often rejected. He notes that their ancestors likewise rejected and persecuted the prophets, and he finishes by declaring that they have betrayed and murdered the Righteous One (7:52). Stephen then declares that Jesus stands at the right hand of God (7:56), implying the resurrection in between. The outcome is

Stephen's death as he prays for their forgiveness (7:60).

Acts 10:34–43

This is Peter's well-known sermon that God shows no partiality between Jews and Gentiles. After a brief summary of Jesus' ministry, Peter proclaims Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection (10:39–40). The outcome is that many Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit, believe and are baptized.

Acts 13:17–41

At the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia, Paul reviews highlights of Israel's history under God's care, leading to a proclamation of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection (13:28–30). The outcome is that many Jews believe, followed by many Gentiles, before their opponents incite persecution of Paul and Barnabas.

Acts 17:22–34 (We already looked at this briefly in Lesson 2.)

Paul addresses the Greek philosophers at the Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill. Rather than Old Testament history, he shapes his proclamation about the existence of God as creator and preserver. He declares the resurrection of Jesus (17:31), and thus implicitly proclaims His death. This is as far as he gets. The outcome is that some mock him while others wish to hear more.

Acts 20:18–35

This is Paul's farewell address to the beloved elders of Ephesus. He briefly recounts their time together, tells them he will not see them again and exhorts them to be faithful. While he does not explicitly speak of the death and resurrection of Jesus, he does refer to "the gospel of the grace of God" (20:24). All who hear are already believers who know this, and they pray and then accompany Paul to his ship.

Acts 22:1–21

Paul speaks to an angry mob of fellow Jews who have tried to kill him, and he is alive only because the Romans have arrested him. To this hostile audience, he reviews his own history as a one-time persecutor of Christianity and then recounts his conversion. In doing so, he speaks of hearing and seeing the risen and ascended Jesus

(22:7–21), implying the crucifixion, and says that he is baptized for the forgiveness of sins (22:16). He doesn't explicitly mention Jesus' death, but he also never finishes the sermon. The outcome is that, on hearing that Jesus is the Savior of the Gentiles, the mob nearly riots and the Romans remove Paul to the barracks.

Acts 26:2–23

Before King Herod Agrippa and the Roman governor Festus, Paul defends himself against the accusations of the Jews. He reviews his personal history as a one-time persecutor who converted, declares Jesus to be the Messiah that the Jews have been waiting for, and proclaims Jesus' death and resurrection (26:23) for the forgiveness of sins (26:18). The outcome is that Festus declares Paul to be out of his mind, while Agrippa appears ambivalent.

7. Here's one more brief passage. Look at Acts 17:1–9. How does Luke summarize Paul's preaching? What is the outcome?

Luke summarizes Paul's preaching as the divine necessity "for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead," and that the name of the Christ is Jesus. The outcome is that many believe and that believers suffer persecution.

8. How would you sum up these various texts? What do they have in common? How often is the good news of Christ and Him crucified included? What are the outcomes?

In nearly every one of these texts, the speaker intentionally includes a specific proclamation of Christ and Him crucified, although they tailor the rest of the message for their specific audience.

9. Why do the speakers nearly always include explicit references to the death of Jesus?

Because the resurrection of the crucified Christ is the Good News, the power of salvation to all who believe.

10. Is "talking about Jesus" necessarily the same as "speaking the Gospel"?

No. To speak the Gospel is specifically to speak of Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. If the

message does not offer comfort to sinners for Jesus' sake, it is not the Gospel.

11. From your explorations of these texts in Acts, what message should the church today deliver to the world (cf. **MARK 16:15; MATT. 28:18–20**)? What should we include in that message? What should we expect as a result?

The church today is to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and that message is to be the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified for the forgiveness of sins. As in the Book of Acts, we can expect that some will believe and some will not. Some will rejoice and some will be hostile even to the point of persecuting the people of God.

12. Before the Last Day, can we ever expect the world to stop considering the Gospel to be foolish?

No. It will always be foolishness to those without faith, but it is by that good news that the Holy Spirit works faith. We shouldn't worry about numbers and outcomes, but we should focus on the joy of proclaiming Jesus.

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Whether we speak of the church in general or a believer's personal witness, the message of Christ crucified will always be the Gospel. It will always be foolish to the world. It will always be the power of salvation to all who believe. It will always be too good to believe for those who do not have faith, and it will always be the means by which the Holy Spirit gives faith so that they do believe.

That said, let me add one more reason to keep confessing Jesus Christ, crucified for our sins and raised for our justification: Because we can. There simply is nothing better to say.

I recently became a grandpa for the first time. By the time this goes to print, God willing, I'll have a second grandchild to hold. If you and I run into each other, I'll be happy to tell stories about the best, brightest and most beautiful grandchildren in the whole wide world. I have very few better things to talk about, and we tend to talk about those things we know and love — whether it be grandkids, hunting, quilts or whatever.

The Gospel, however, is a better thing. When it comes to the best, brightest and most beautiful, there is nothing more so than Christ, who went to the cross to deliver my grandchildren from sin and death. It's a message that never grows old, tiresome or outdated. In fact, before we go, let's take a look at what they're singing about in heaven for eternity:

And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you
ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and
people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and
priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

(REV. 5:6–10)

The heavenly hosts sing of Christ crucified, the Lamb who was slain to ransom people of all nations and to bring them into the kingdom of God. That's our destination because He died and rose again.

And there, finally, in heaven, no one thinks that is foolish or offensive anymore. What joy!

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, You have called Your Church to witness that in Christ You have reconciled us to Yourself. Grant that by Your Holy Spirit we may proclaim the good news of Your salvation so that all who hear it may receive the gift of salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. (Collect for the Mission of the Church [104], *LSB Altar Book*, 427)

Sing a Hymn!

“We Are Called to Stand Together” (*LSB* 828)

Martin Leckebusch's hymn of mission and witness urges us to continue to confess the same faith as the apostles — namely, the Gospel of Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins.

“We Sing for All the Unsung Saints” (*LSB* 678)

Remember the saints who have confessed the apostolic faith before us. Carl Daw's hymn reminds us of the scene in Revelation 7 where they now surround the throne of Christ, once slain and now raised in glory forever.

In Conclusion

Where do we go from here?

2023 is an anxious time. Whether one is looking at a hot war in Eastern Europe, the cultural decline at home or bitter political partisanship, nobody seems particularly optimistic about the future. If you're into reading about the state of society, you find scholars take it for granted that we live in a post-Christian age and a postmodern age — post-Christian, meaning that the church has lost its dominant influence on culture, and postmodern, meaning the belief that there is no such thing as truth and that Christianity is then just one “truth” among many.

It's also not that uncommon to run across writers who say that, with these trends, the common worldview is very much like it was in the first century, at the time that the Word became flesh. Meanwhile, statistics indicate that, in the western world at least, Christianity is in decline.

So, where do we go from here?

We continue to preach Christ crucified, of course. Not just because we have to, but because we can. The Gospel compels us to speak this Good News because there is nothing better for us to say!

If we're in a post-Christian age where the church has little influence on culture like the first century, we do well to remember that the Lord prospered the work of the church as the apostles proclaimed Christ crucified wherever they went. We do well to remain faithful to that message of salvation in Christ alone.

If we're in a postmodern age where Christianity is considered just one truth among many, we speak it with confidence. Rather than worry about how the Gospel might gain traction amidst so much noise, conspiracy theories, false religions and useless talk, we know that the Holy Spirit is at work in God's truth to bring sinners to repentance and faith. His Word remains forever, and the Lord will have His people.

For that matter, even as the culture preaches the happiness of being post-Christian and postmodern, how come nobody seems to be happy? In the Gospel, we have blessings that the rest of the world does not — like the assurance of God's favor, the comfort of a good conscience and the joyful confidence that death doesn't win. The darker the world gets, the brighter Christ and His gifts will shine.

This doesn't mean a coming golden age, or even an easy time, for the church in the world. As the Gospel spread in the first centuries, so did opposition and persecution. But the Lord used the suffering and even the martyrdom of His people to make Christ known even more.

By the grace of God, we stay the course and preach Christ crucified. Sound foolish? It is. It's the foolishness of the cross, the wisdom of God.

It's the power of salvation to all who believe.



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