



CONVENTION BIBLE STUDY

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WE PREACH
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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)

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)?

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**.)

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**)?

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

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**)?

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

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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?

8. In verse 16, St. Paul says that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation. What does he mean by this?

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

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**)?

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?

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

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?

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?

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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?

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

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?

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

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?

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

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?

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

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

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

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

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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**)?

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

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!**)

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

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

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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?

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?

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?

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**.)

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**)?

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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?

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

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

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

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?

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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?

Read Matthew 11:2–15.

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

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

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.

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?

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

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?

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?

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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.)

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?

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.

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?

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?

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**)?

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?

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

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

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?

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?

6. How does the world regard these gifts?

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?

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

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?

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?

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?

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

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!**)

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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?

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?

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

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

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

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

20. What makes a sermon good?

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?

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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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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**).

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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?

Acts 2:14–36

Acts 3:12–26

Acts 4:8–12

Acts 7:2–60

Acts 10:34–43

Acts 13:17–41

Acts 20:18–35

Acts 22:1–21

Acts 26:2–23

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

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?

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

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

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

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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