Faithful & Afire

LCMS Circuit Bible Studies — 2012-2013 Called To Be Christ's Witnesses

Called to perceive by faith and to proclaim the unseen works of God amidst the things that are seen.

Leader's Guide - January 2013

Topic: God's Witness to His Unseen Works of the Law and the Gospel amidst the things seen.

1. Focus

The stereoscope was a favorite parlor novelty of an earlier age. It is a simple device made of two separate lenses through which parallel yet essentially different photographs of the same object were able to be seen in true relief. Only by the use of both lenses could the full dimensional depth and richness of an object be seen. The human eye easily mistakes one original image from its twin, but through the instrumentality of the stereoscope, photos are intentionally and necessarily distinguished. Each is viewed in balance, each serving singular aims yet holding the mutual goal of revealing one proper likeness in fullest dimension.

The Law and the Gospel of God's pure Word share the ultimate aim of bringing God's salvation in Christ to humanity. Both are necessary to that object. Alone, the Gospel of Christ is incomprehensible. Likewise, the Law alone has no benefit except as preparatory for the Gospel. Both are testaments of God with distinctive purposes, but the full beauty of God's hidden workings is revealed only when these two tenets serve in collaboration.

This study is not meant to focus on the reciprocity of Law and Gospel which Lutheran pastors know so well, but upon the equanimity of these two ways through which God deals with mankind to proclaim His unseen works.

Read Luke 24:45-47 and Mark 1:14-15. Why do "repentance and forgiveness of sins" have such proximity in the teaching and preaching of Christ?

"Repentance and the forgiveness of sins" are fraternal twins. As revelations of the divine Word, both speak of God's will for humankind. Each must be rigorously distinguished, yet both are necessary if someone is to really know God and understand His Word. Without clear perception of the unique character and function of both Law and Gospel, only insufficient and superficial impressions of God are sensed. Because sin has destroyed our ability to know God as He really is, all such impressions are far from the unseen reality of His nature and work. The depth and everlasting resource of Christ and the eternal benefits of His beautiful unseen works are revealed only through the optics of both Law and Gospel.

The work of constantly distinguishing Law and Gospel is a cardinal requirement in the conducting of the holy ministry. How would it help the hearer of our various pastoral conversations, (i.e. Bible study, sermon, counseling, etc.), if the words of the Law were highlighted with red ink and the words of the Gospel were highlighted with a yellow marker?

While we pray God to give us faithfulness and clarity in all that we say, perhaps closer inspection would sometimes reveal that what is regarded as law or even Gospel proves little more than moralizing. The Gospel is not merely repeated paraphrases of John 3:16 or talk about Jesus. Mere speaking of Jesus or about Him from a pulpit or preaching from the steps is no guarantee of steadfastness in dividing the Word. Such speaking of Jesus has significance in applying it. Jesus

entered into a world bound under the Law and bound in sin. To preach Jesus is to preach Him in the midst of this and what He does to free us from both. It is the content—the unadulterated content—of Law and Gospel, the true works of which are spiritually seen, that must finally be carefully divided, applied, and faithfully proclaimed amidst very temporal, corporeal, everyday things.

2. Scripture Search

Read the account of Cain and Abel at Genesis 4:1-16. Certain facts are evident. What can you discern behind surface details? Describe first the situation in which the brothers conduct themselves in vs. 3-4. Of what does God approve? With what is God displeased?

The brothers come to worship. They come into the presence of God to bring offerings of thanks, Cain first and then Abel. Both clearly labored to acquire the portions that each brought to the Lord. God enabled Cain to prosper in cultivating crops and Abel to prosper in the tending of livestock. Many of God's blessings come through our earthly work. In the providing of these blessings, God also supplies the means to render thanks. Therefore, in God's providence toward man, it is not merely about the offering that may be given to God, but more so the totality of the man and his regard to God. The offerings from Cain and Abel expressed not only opposing understandings of God, but of themselves. God's disfavor was not only of Cain's offering, but of Cain's self-centeredness. Cain's offering showed greater regard for himself than God, the giver of what he had received. But upon Abel (and his offering) God looked with favor. The essential difference was in the man, not merely the offering.

What, if anything, was there to outwardly distinguish the brothers? What constituted the unseen difference according to Hebrews 11:4?

Cain, of course, was the elder of the two, but nothing can be detected of parental favoritism, tension, or inequality between them, much less prejudice from God. Each pursued distinctive livelihoods in which he labored, and both clearly prospered. The offering of one or the other was not inherently superior. Clearly the acceptability of offerings is not contained in the tangible substance of them, but through the presence of true faith within the worshipper.

What explains Cain's acute anger?

At minimum, Cain regarded himself Abel's equal if not his superior in birthright, status, success, and perhaps even in sequence of bringing a thank offering. By such a legal standard, God's disregard of Cain must therefore be unjust and Abel's gift unremarkable. Cain's perspective was legalistically in accord with what he regarded as his due.

What unseen work of the Law operates upon Cain? Consider measures of the law both preceding and subsequent to the presentation of his offering. Read Luke 16:1-2 for a suggestion of what may have driven Cain's initial attitude. How does Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) illustrate Cain's subsequent sense of injustice?

Cain's behavior is early evidence of law written on man's heart (Romans 2:15). Apparently Cain sensed an obligation to God even though no explicit command for offerings is recorded. But even in the event of such a command, Cain knew in some sense he was answerable to God. Such accountability is certainly due on the day of judgment (Matthew 12:36), but God's question of Cain in verse 7 presumes that Cain is already well aware of the criteria of the law. Workers in the vineyard (Mt. 20) also knew the terms of the law. But, like them, Cain's subsequent anger is fueled not only by a sense of entitlement, but from an even greater, misguided grievance against God's grace (Mt 20:15), which would explain Cain's lethal violence upon his brother. If it were only unfairness to himself, Cain might have confined his anger to God, but his blindness to divine grace through faith, the essence of the Gospel, triggered rage also against his brother Abel. Because of Abel's faith, he was murdered.

How could Romans 9:14-24 serve as a beneficial commentary for a pastor in ministry to someone like Cain, who acknowledges accountability but resents the demands and consequences of the law? Bear in mind the question God posed to Cain, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?"

Like the critics St. Paul anticipated in Romans 9, Cain looks only through the lens of the law. He affects for himself personal merit to be proven by his offering. He does not see the hidden "sin crouching at the door." An accusation of divine injustice (Rom. 9:14) is valid under either of two presumptions. First, any shortfall in oneself should be mitigated by the imperfections of others, and secondly, the better man should win (or at least an equal man). Are not Cain and Abel equal under the law? Hence the allegation of 9:14 that God is unjust. If someone like Abel is preferred apart from the law, then are not God's demands arbitrary and thus illegal? As such, consequences should be equally illegitimate. The allegation of verse 19 is that one should be exempt from fault if God chooses to bless apart from law. Cain wishes to invalidate God's question (Gen. 4:7) rather than submit to it. He wants to have his cake and eat it too— to be commended by the law while at the same time be free of its authority. That's a nice two-step with which pastors are familiar. Sinners are schizophrenic in regard to the law. Self-justification needs the law but self-preservation renounces it.

Romans 9 overthrows both allegations that God is unjust or that we are unaccountable. The Gospel does not invalidate the strictness of the law for those trying their best. Rather, the Gospel satisfies the divine will which no sinner begins to fulfill. Nor is the Gospel to be thrown in God's face as unfair to those who, as vessels of wrath, cannot help themselves. On the one hand, Paul makes clear mercy has no foundation in any human aspiration or work (vs. 16). Correspondingly, he asserts (vs. 23-25) the riches of glory are God's own to bestow as He graciously chooses.

Return to Genesis 4. In the record of Cain's expulsion, identify two ways in which God reveals Himself. Reference Matthew 25:24-25 and 2 Peter 3:9.

The curse Cain receives from the God of justice (v. 11) is fitting to His character and crime. God is revealed indeed "a hard man" of whom to be genuinely afraid. Luther: "We should fear his wrath and not do anything against [his commands]." But the Lord is also God of forbearance. God still cares for Cain even after declaring his judgment. The "mark" of Cain permits him continuance of life. As Peter affirms, "The Lord is ... not wishing that any should perish."

What unseen work of the Gospel operates upon Cain? What instance reveals that God is gracious?

The Lord calls Cain to faith and the faithfulness it produces. He wants as much for Cain as for Abel, to look on Cain as He looked upon his brother. In the first instance, Abel is the immediate object of God's mercy and a lesson in divine clemency. If Cain believed himself equal if not superior to Abel, then God's gracious regard of Abel's offering cannot be credited on face value. It can only be God's sheer mercy. This Abel believed. Moreover, God counts the blood of his first martyr righteous (Mt. 23:35) by faith (Hb. 10:38). "The Gospel teaches that our spiritual offerings are acceptable to God through faith for Christ's sake." (SD VI, 22) Here was opportunity for Cain to perceive God's witness of Himself amid the ephemeralities of farm, sacrifice, or sibling rivalry.

Two adjacent aspects of God are distinguished in Romans 11:22, "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off." Read now Romans 2:1-5. What is God's goal in revealing both his severity and his sufferance?

The shared purpose of Law and Gospel is the repentance of the sinner, that he be both contrite and believing. Though Cain "was of the evil one" (1 John 3:12) and allowed sin to reign in himself, God still witnesses of Himself as the One who from the very first determined to display the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and long-suffering even in the midst of our own very visible and disreputable behaviors, indictments of others, and guilt.

3. From Our Lutheran Perspective

Divorce the Law from the Gospel. Luther said the man able to accomplish this should be called a Doctor of Holy Scripture. Yet, to paraphrase a famous couplet, can we say, "The Gospel alone saves, but the Gospel is never alone"? What pastoral value is there in the paradox that Law and Gospel are divorced but never separated?

St. Paul lists among the qualifications for a presbyter that he must hold so firmly to the word that "he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it." (Titus 1:9) No pastor can possess a greater asset than discernment regarding Law and Gospel and the ability to apply them as circumstances rapidly oscillate often between resistance to the Word and/or reliance upon it. A pastor needs to keep them absolutely distinct but also very handy.

Gene Edward Veith has written, "I think it's important to realize this about God-something probably only knowable through His revelation in the Incarnate Son-that His deepest nature is life-giving, expressed in the Gospel, and that His wrath, while very real, being a function of His holiness, is somehow alien to His nature, though something He uses to bring us to Himself." Discuss your understanding of God's proper and alien works and how these relate to the Law and the Gospel in perceiving that which is unseen.

The Lutheran confessions (SD V, 3-4) are conciliatory in tone by acknowledging that confusion over Law and Gospel may occur from the fact that the entire doctrine of Christ, the preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, can be rightly understood in the term *Gospel*. However, there is no uncertainty or hesitation to denote the Gospel employed in its *proper* sense comprises only the preaching of the favor and grace of God in Christ. The Gospel is God's "proper work" because it best expresses His nature which is to give life and grace and love. (Reference can be made to the Heidelberg Disputation [4] and Isaiah 28:21)

In what sense must a pastor be stubbornly a preacher of the Gospel or he is no good for his office? See 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

It is critical to maintain sacrosanct the demarcation between Law and Gospel since each has its own proper use and office. But more than just maintaining that distinction, someone will finally be altogether under law or thoroughly under grace. Ultimately, it is one or the other. (Galatians 5:4; Romans 10:4). Any synthesis must be rejected. The Gospel cannot be reliable and at the same time insufficient (needing simply a little of man's help according to law). Neither can the Law be demanded and at the same time compromised (needing simply a little of God's gracious help according to gospel). A pastor must know himself fundamentally to have been called to proclaim Gospel, and only the Gospel of Christ. The full beauty of the eternal God revealed through Jesus Christ, received by faith, is the aim and end of all godly preaching.

Read John 15:10-14. Here our Lord beautifully intertwines Law and Gospel. What occurs if the right balance, illustrated by Jesus, is not maintained? What focus is lost?

The object must always be Christ in order for saving faith to abound. Faith trusts His unseen eternal works. Jesus witnesses to his own obedience and love! If disparity is allowed in the two chief themes of Law and Gospel, attention inevitably turns to man's apparent works or godliness. If faith in Christ is not preached – one might profess to know God but deny him by works (Titus 1:16). Conversely, if *only* faith is preached, focus turns to man's pretense of godliness (2 Timothy 3:5). Either way, apparent works and appearances are temporal. The unseen righteousness of Christ is eternal. Luther: *"... it is difficult to preach to people: --they always lean to one side. If you do not preach of faith, their works become purely hypocritical. If you urge faith alone, works will not follow. In a word, the danger is that people either have works without any faith or 'faith' without any works. This is why the Gospel is a message for those only who accept and hold to both (faith and works)..."*

4. Points to Ponder

Abel still speaks through his faith though he died (Hb. 11:4). Men in the office of ministry speak an enduring Word. Not for the moment only, but as lasting expressions of Law and Gospel, the pastor warns and invites, condemns and absolves that God may accomplish His purpose when He determines. Perhaps only in some later changed circumstance does God's Word strike home. Discuss how Law and Gospel serve both tactical and strategic aims.

"Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies" (LSB 433) unites with the accusations of every righteous victim to Zechariah (Mt. 23:35) to denounce all spurning of God's grace. Nevertheless, his

faith yet speaks to all ages of divine grace. "It is not that [Abel] merited forgiveness of sins and grace by this work, but he exercised his faith and showed it to others, in order to invite them to believe (Ap. V, 202). Tactically, a defiant sinner needs law applied at once. Yet he must not be prevented from hearing the public, strategic preaching of the Gospel. So too, the contrite sinner must be given only "high-octane" Gospel, and must be kept from hearing precepts of the law preached as strategic armor.

Jesus did not come to blame, but to absolve and vindicate sinners (John 5:45). If someone perceives a pastor as a referee come only to critique, condemn, or charge for God's amnesty, they will fail to see Christ's invisible fulfillment of the law (Matthew 5:17). The pastor is not second-in-command to Moses but Christ's ambassador of forgiveness. How burdensome to a loving pastor if his service is misunderstood and alleged to be predominated by the Law. In such circumstance he will have the heady temptation of being either feared or flattered by those unable to see the supremacy of the Gospel. Fear or flattery of a pastor is reckoned according to Moses and obscures the presence of Christ hidden in the holy ministry. A loving pastor is mindful that Jesus neither accepted praise from men (John 5:41) nor did he give the repentant cause to fear (Matthew 5:4).

Invite participants to consider those magisterial temptations which threaten their office. An intimidating pastor gives the impression of holding himself above the law, while in fact the darling is holding himself above the Gospel. Christ's church is no place for slaves or sycophants. How can brother pastors uphold one another while yet calling each other to humility, so that in posture and conduct we make visible the unseen Christ?

To admit need for the Spirit's witness concerning the eternal, unseen things of God is no assumption of clarity in regard to temporal things. Pastors know we often can misread even the obvious. Discuss the pastoral link between faithfulness in proclaiming the unseen works of God and good judgment in regards to the visible circumstances of the world.

Learned Nicodemus was once chided by Jesus, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3:12) Since God does not confine himself simply to heavenly mysteries, but is God also of what is seen, touched, and temporal, we are blessed as He employs those material substances at His command and according to His choice to reveal the eternal. In particular, this occurs with the oral Word and substance of the Sacraments. But application of Law and Gospel also requires careful examination of the context into which God's Word is delivered. God's Word is not buckshot. It is meant for precision.

5. For Conversation

In the rough and tumble realities of pastoral ministry, one never knows what particular joys, sorrows, issues or dilemmas, might arise. Every circumstance is prime pastoral opportunity for witness to the unseen works of God. Law and Gospel provide the universally useful and absolutely vital perspective without which ministry would be impossible.

Consider one or more of the following scenarios. What would God have revealed about Himself in each situation? Each circumstance is undeniably real, temporal, and personally crucial. But what do you see through the service of Law and Gospel to best help others to see God's unseen work?

To the Hurting - Law and Gospel

• A widow has an adult child who suffers from addictions. Disappointments resulting from a wasted life create resentments that spill over into demands, abusiveness, and general violations of the fourth commandment. The widow comes to her pastor with her woes. Simply by confiding her story, she implicitly asks, "Can't you do something, Pastor?" Her hurts are very temporal, very real, and very hard. She encounters obstacles in every direction. How does a pastor testify to the unseen and eternal works of God in the midst of this?

Sometimes there is little a pastor can actually "do" overtly to significantly resolve a problem even when this is precisely what is asked of him. Intervention will be done when possible, but often it's not so simple. Nevertheless, the pastor will speak with frank acknowledgment of sins committed

and of consequent fear. Desperation, a physically visible perception of the law, will need rebuke if it spirals into despair, but the pastor navigates between the narrows of checking one's anxiety and offering the reminder that Christ is personally in control of the Christian's life and that believers are never alone and may take comfort in what God has given them.

To the Hopeful - Law and Gospel

• An infertile couple enthusiastically shares with a pastor that a sister has offered to serve as a surrogate mother and that in-vitro methods are available and promising.* Their hopes are powerful. Their disappointments have been many. Affirmation already from friends has produced an expectation of pastoral support. "Pastor, might this be God's answer?" How does a pastor testify to the unseen and eternal works of God in the midst of this?

Casuistry questions can require a grasp of many disciplines like Christian ethics, psychology, social work, civil law and the like. Finally, however, the pastor is called to rightly divide the Word of God. Law and Gospel can both be used to affirm God as the Lord of life. His answers are not fashioned from private wishful desires. They are found in divinely established means—the letter being the means of killing misplaced hopes—the Gospel being the means of creating living hope. NOTE: It is critical that as presenter, you are prepared to give the Lutheran answers to the alternatives of in-vitro fertilization and mother surrogacy. An excellent resource for these is Holy People, Holy Lives pp117-128 by Richard Eyer, CPH 2000.

To the Hapless - Law and Gospel

• Chronically indifferent to pastoral care, a thirty-something father lands in the hospital with thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension, but he is cavalier, believing he can talk his way out of any difficulty, temporal or spiritual. He has a maddingly condescending knack for saying what he believes a pastor wants to hear. "Pastor, maybe God's trying to tell me something, but I already know what you're going to say." Does he? How does a pastor testify to the unseen and eternal works of God in the midst of this?

Law and Gospel are the power of God. They bring attention and focus. Unseen without "the letter and the Spirit" is the fact that God means business. He is supremely earnest in his seeking and saving work through Christ. Superficial impressions of God are wasted. With only Law or only Gospel a semblance of the truth may occur, but not full saving truth. The danger in all heresy is a semblance of the truth found in it. The goal of all heresy is to twist and de-contextualize the truth so as to have it say and therefore permit what it would not in its proper context. The need in all sinners is for the truth's contextual fullness and reality. Someone may or may not know what a pastor is going to say, but say it anyway.

To the Homesick - Law and Gospel

• He wants to go home, but God is too slow. He wants to know why. He wants to know why God lets the misery of old age linger so long. He's ready to go home and is no good to anybody. "Pastor, I just wish either that it was over or I could do something useful!" How does a pastor testify to the unseen and eternal works of God in the midst of this?

The pastor's paramount task is to proclaim the eternal unseen gifts of Christ. He does not have the answer to every "why" question. But he has the divine resource of God's Word. Serving an incarnational ministry means the pastor himself enters the very real and very temporal sphere of human need with all its questions, cares, and challenges to proclaim that Word, that one salutary answer which is the glorious news of Jesus Christ. He is to confound complacent sinners with the Law and comfort broken sinners with the Gospel, while simultaneously understanding by faith the potent work God's is doing through these two magnificent ways of serving those He loves.

AUTHOR: Rev. David H. Reed Pastor, Grace Lutheran Church - Auburn, MI Secretary - Michigan District - LCMS pastorreed@graceauburn.org

GENERAL EDITOR: Rev. Mark W. Love

markwlove@gmail.com

* A helpful resource in providing Lutheran answers to these issues is <u>Holy People, Holy Lives</u> pp.117-128 Richard Eyer,CPH 2000.