



Faithful & Afire

LCMS Circuit Bible Studies — 2012-2013

Called To Be God's Witnesses

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

Leader's Guide - SEPTEMBER 2012

Topic: God's Witnesses to the Unseen Works of God's Word

1. Focus of This Study

The Word of God, in ways unseen by the human eye, is a living and active force in the Church (Hb 4:12), the power of God for salvation (Rm 1:16), and the power of the Spirit to believe (Rm 10:17). The Word is efficacious, performative, doing what it says, and truly a means of grace, that is, God's actual bestowal of his grace and not merely pointing the way to his grace.

Hb 4:12 – Here God's Word is pictured as a two-edged sword. This is picked up by the apostle John in Rv. 1:16, where the risen and glorified Christ directly speaks words of comfort and admonition to the seven churches (ch. 2), which represent the Christian church around the world.

Rm 1:16-- Emphasize to the group that, from the moment a pastor enters a congregation, he wields the sword of the Word with the ultimate salvation of souls in mind.

Rm 10:17-- In those days hearing was the only medium for receiving the Word. Hearing the spoken, proclaimed Word is still indispensable for the Church.

At the same time, this transcendent Word-power is found in human vessels (2 Co 4:7). Pastors, who feel their humanness every day, draw great strength and comfort from this power, a power that saves both them and their hearers, a power that is not their own.

To catch an introductory glimpse at how God uses weak human vessels to channel his power, please read Titus 1:5-9.

How do the ministerial qualifications listed here bespeak human weakness?

Of all the qualifications, which one overrides all the others?

Paul had left Titus on the isle of Crete for the purpose of appointing elders (homegrown pastors) in all the towns. (v. 5) But Titus was not getting the job done. Why? Apparently, Titus was looking for perfect men to fill these posts. However, perfect men were in short supply on Crete. (1:12) So Paul says (paraphrasing): "Look, can't you find anyone who enjoys being with people, who isn't a drunk, who isn't a snob, who isn't the town clown, whose kids are not juvenile delinquents, who doesn't abuse his wife when she burns a roast, who is not a money grubber, and who is not adulterous? If you can find anyone who meets these bare minimums, grab him! If he loves the Word, you have pastoral material on your hands!"

2. Scripture Search

Read each of the passages listed below and note how the Word of God is a living and active force.

Genesis 1:3

Mark 2:5

John 11:43

John 5:25, 28, 29a

John 20:22-23

A good summary verse for the creative power of the Word as displayed in Gn. 1:3 is Ps. 33:6.

In the Mark passage, note that Jesus' word grants forgiveness and is not merely announcing it.

Note that the resurrection power of the Word in Jn 11 is simply expanded in Jn 5.

In the Jn 20 passage, that same Word-power that forgives (Mk 2:5) will now issue from the mouths of the disciples. Be sure to connect Jn 20 with Gn 2:7-- as the Lord breathed life into his old creation, he breathes new life into his New Creation.

Pastors get to breathe that life into others. The New Creation is just that-- a creation from nothing. When God makes us eternal creatures by his grace, he has no raw material whatsoever to work with.

What does the Word accomplish in people's lives according to 2 Tm 3:15-16? What precisely are the "sacred writings" that Timothy had known from childhood?

When all the blessings of the Word that Paul lists are put together, one has a beautiful description of the Holy Ministry. And yet, where is the man, the occupier of the office, in this picture? The capability lies with the Word, the living voice of God alone. Note the Greek pasagraphē, that is, each and every thing that has been written. (Verbal inspiration)

The omnipotent, creative Word of God is carried by human vessels (2 Co 4:7). To borrow a dogmatic phrase from Christology, we might speak of the "divine and human nature" of the Ministry.

The divine nature of the Ministry lay in the fact that God himself has called a man to a congregation to speak God's Word.

Briefly review and discuss the divinity of the Call in Acts 20:28 and 1 Cor. 4:1-2.

Note in Acts that when each Pastor "sticks to his post" and remains faithful to his own congregation, that is how the Lord feeds his whole church.

The Lord of the Church does not need church-wide crusaders to guide his blood-bought Church.

Note the "blood of God" at the end of the Acts verse. In the 1 Corinthians verse the pastor is the servant of Christ and the caretaker of God's mysteries.

One might speak of the "alien righteousness of the Ministry," a righteousness not resting in the pastor himself, but one that is imputed to him through Word and Sacrament.

On the other hand, there is also the human nature of the ministry. Unlike the perfect human nature of Christ himself, the pastor is indeed a sinful, human, earthen vessel, with all the weaknesses, shortcomings, and inabilities he shares with his parishioners.

Revisit Acts 20:28 and 1 Cor. 4:1-2. How is the all-too-human aspect of the Ministry reflected in the very same verses that teach the doctrine of the call?

Ac 20:28: even before a pastor becomes wary of his congregation's weaknesses, he must first take heed to himself, because he is his own worst enemy.

1 Co 4:1-2: the pastor is reminded that he should remain trustworthy in dispensing the gifts of God.

The tension between the divine call and humanness of the pastor when the words God has given him to speak, do not explain away some event or make things necessarily better in earthly terms. Discuss how the temptation to move to a theology of glory – i.e. justifying God when the suffering seems so wrong or inexplicable.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

As a man sent from God, the pastor is always mindful of whose Word he is speaking. This Word of God first of all forgives, reassures, and emboldens the pastor himself. Thus strengthened and encouraged, he moves out into the world, courageous and unafraid. The Word of God turns out to be far stronger than the pastor's timidity or other weaknesses. God's alien righteousness carries him through. (As a follow-up to this session, each pastor might want to do a word study on "proclamation" of the Word-- Hebrew basar and Greek kerusso.)

To capture the essence of proclamation, consider the following excerpt.

"A king sends out to a city his ambassador for the purpose of announcing the decree of the king. The job of the herald is, not to publish his own personal desires or to offer his own opinion about what the king has to say, but simply to speak what the king has spoken. He speaks on the king's behalf. When he speaks, the king himself is speaking. To get the job done, the herald goes right into the marketplace in the center of town where everyone can hear the king's decree. He speaks boldly, confidently, and without apology because he speaks what the king himself wants and speaks by the king's authority. A king, after all, does not have to apologize or make excuses to anyone. The herald does not speak the king's decree as though it were merely a suggestion, which invited the comments and criticisms of the townspeople. He simply says, 'This is the way it is!' The herald proclaims and departs. He does not go into the local tavern to whisper gossip among his fellow subjects regarding what the king is all about or what he is up to."

"In the pulpit the preacher is the herald of the King. He stands there in the place of Christ himself. When he speaks, Christ himself is speaking. The preacher knows what Christ has done for mankind and knows what he wants all people to hear. The preacher proclaims the *kerugma*, the proclamation, of the maker of the universe, of the Savior who needs no courses in theology. The preacher speaks on behalf of Christ and by Christ's authority, saying "This is the way it is" regarding the Lord's will, proposes, and immutable decrees. The preacher makes no apologies for what the King says through him. He does not engage in idle gossip about the King. He does not announce the King's will tentatively or throw it out as a toss-up. In short, he proclaims."

(J. Bollhagen, The Practice of Pastoral Theology, CTS Bookstore, 1997, p. K.2

Discuss this excerpt and the implications of it for being a faithful witness to the unseen works of God's Word.

As the pastor speaks the authoritative Word of God himself and does so boldly and forthrightly, (it may seem horribly contradictory to say so, but. . .) in recognition of his own weakness and in the attempt to get through to his fellow sinners, the pastor is going to have to work at getting better and better at what he does in the Ministry!! Through confession and absolution, he will grow and get better at getting out of the way and letting God be God. Already declared perfect by the grace of God and functioning in the perfect office of the Ministry, the pastor still works at doing the best he can.

Read as an example of the above 2 Tm 4:1-2. Timothy, the spotless herald of the perfect King, still had some work to do, did he not?

Encourage the group to read 1 and 2 Timothy in their entirety. These books were written to make Timothy a better pastor.

To give a different perspective on unholy men in the holy office, you might mention that there is a *simul justus et peccator* aspect to the Ministry. In addition, as a pastor goes through the confession and absolution process in the conduct of his office, he is bound to be that much more appreciative of the Gospel for himself, and that appreciation will show in the pulpit.

Another way of describing the divine and human natures of the ministry is this: the *divine* is reflected in the holy office that is occupied, while the *human* is seen in the man who holds the office. There can never be enough wonderful things said about the office, but there should be considerable restraint exercised concerning the earthen vessel who occupies the office.

Contrast Rm 12:3 and 1 Sm 15:17. For the man who holds the office the general rubric of Romans carries the day. However, as for the office the pastor holds, Samuel's word to Saul must carry the day: *"The Lord placed you in your office, so don't belittle it!"*

Read 2 Co 4:5. How do you see the divine nature of the Ministry (the Office) and the human nature of the Ministry (the man in the Office) reflected in this one verse?

By contrasting the Romans and 1 Samuel passages, the Pastor demonstrates clearly in the conduct of his office that it is only Christ who makes the difference. The 2 Co passage: the recognition of Christ as Lord is the divine side while "slogging it out" with fellow fallen sinners in this sinful world points to a very human side.

3. From Our Lutheran Perspective

Former Lutheran Hour speaker Oswald Hoffmann once stated: *"The Holy Spirit works best through a prepared sermon."* How might his comment be reflective of the "two natures" of the ministry?

Obviously, the pastor is an instrument of the Holy Spirit and thus his office is holy. However, for the task of preaching, pastors will have to work at it. Another way of looking at the matter is: We will always recognize the divinity of the Call, but we will continue to teach seminary classes nonetheless.

What do you make of this? In the Augsburg Confession (1530), the quotations of the Scriptures and the quotations of the Church Fathers run in about a 50-50 ratio. In the Formula of Concord (1580), however, there are only two quotations of the Church Fathers on the entire document.

In 1530 the fledgling Lutheran movement, just getting off the ground, was eager to show a Gospel continuum with the established Church of the past, thereby demonstrating that the Lutherans were not a Johnny-come-lately sect. But by 1580 it was clear that there would be no reconciliation with the Roman Church and that the Lutheran Church would have to stand on its own two feet. In such a situation, the Church always turns to where the Church's and ministry's bread is buttered-- the Holy Scriptures.

Invariably, whenever the Lutheran Confessions define the Ministry, they define it as simply *"The Word and the Sacraments."* Rarely, if ever, do the Confessions define the ministry as *"the ones who preach the Word and administer the Sacraments."* How come?

The emphasis in the Confessions is clearly on the divine substance of the Ministry, that is, the alien righteousness of the Ministry.

Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession clearly states that the power of the bishops is the Word of God alone.

Perhaps this class session will bring the alien righteousness of the Ministry into sharper focus.

4. Points to Ponder

NOTE TO LEADER: Sections 4 and 5 flow into each other. You should feel free to take up whatever items you want for general discussion or small group discussion.

For a group prayer I would suggest thanksgiving for this high office, begging forgiveness for when our humanity has been far too evident in the conduct of our office, and asking for help in continued growth as individuals and pastors.

Comment on the statement: *"The act of preaching is a microcosm of the whole history of God's dealings with his people."*

In God's own way, God's grace and his acts of grace are brought to bear in a forceful way in the act of preaching.

Comment on the statement: *"When Christ founded his Church, he didn't just give the Church his Book and from that point let the Church fend for herself. He gave the Church his book and the men to deliver it."*

While the human aspect of the ministry often holds many pastors back, that human element is also sanctified by God as the pastor adds that personal caring touch to the Word that he delivers.

Read Matt. 9:36-38. In this Bible story, Jesus had compassion on the crowd because it was so helpless. What was the immediate result of Jesus' compassion?

Jesus' compassion directly led to sending out laborers into his harvest. Thus, what is the Ministry? The Ministry is the expression of Christ's compassion for lost sinners. Pastors would do well to consider on a daily basis that the ministry is an extension of Christ's compassion.

Under the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, it is said that the God's authors spoke the very words of God, and yet the individual personalities of the authors were preserved intact. Do you see any parallel here with the Ministry?

The pastor is urged to be meticulous in conveying God's Word to the people, but yet pastors are encouraged to be themselves and not try to turn into another man.

Comment on the common excuse heard from delinquent members: *"I don't go to church, but I pray."*

Praying, of course, is our way of talking to God. Meanwhile, God speaks to us in his Word, and the primary place for hearing the preached Word is in God's house. Therefore, when a person says, "I don't go to church, but I pray," he is saying in effect, "I will talk to God anytime I please, and I will say to him anything I please, but God had better not try to say anything to me!" This is what is called a classic one-way conversation.

5. For Conversation

The following are miscellaneous conversation starters that class members may expand upon as they wish.

Theological terms such as *odium sui* (self-hatred in the confession of sins), *resignatio ad infernum* (resigning one's self to hell, knowing in confession that you are fully deserving of such an end), or "being driven to the Gospel" all have a passive flavor, that of being acted upon by God's Word. Draw from your own experience where you have seen God's working through the Word while you yourself were merely a spectator to something far bigger than yourself.

Leader, do you have experiences of your own to tell? The task of the pastor is to get the Word out with as little human obstruction as possible.

Comment on: *"He who doesn't stand for something will fall for anything."*

The truth of this statement seems to be borne out by TV viewers on Sunday morning.

Once while visiting an attorney's office (I had no official business to discuss.) the attorney pointed to his library, a whole room lined with legal manuals from floor to ceiling. The attorney said to me, "It's not fair! To do my job I have to know what is in a whole roomful of books, but you? For your job all you have to know is one book!" How well do you study and know the ONE book?

Does that make the class feel bad about not studying their Bibles more? Good!

Are you a bookworm or a people person? I certainly hope so!

Only those who have just left the seminary or are still in the seminary would create such a false dichotomy.

Read Ezekiel 3:16-19 for a stark description of a pastor's responsibility to speak the whole law-and-Gospel counsel of God.

The message is: if someone is caught in a sin and you do not warn him, that person will suffer the consequences and so will you. If you warn a person about his sin, but he does not listen, he will suffer the consequences, but you will be spared.

The pastor preaches his sermon as part of an established relationship that the pastor has cultivated with his members during the rest of the week.

Again, the divine and human aspects of the call work in tandem under the blessing of God. Do pastors still make calls?

And finally, a little story. It has happened many times in my ministry that a new adult confirmand would ask me: *"If I want to greet you in a public setting in the congregation, how shall I address you?"* My immediate answer has usually been, *"You can just call me 'Your Holiness.'"* The reaction from the new member has usually been to dart his/her eyes in fear, but after about five seconds, a smile comes across the new member's face when he realizes that I am only kidding. A major bonding occurred between the pastor and the layperson in those moments. It was a great way to say, "Respect the office, but by myself I am no big "deal".

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