

# Laying the First Shingle: Foundational Perspectives for a Scriptural and Confessional Theology of Worship

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## Introduction

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I'll begin this presentation with a brief two-part self-disclosure. First, my personal location. I would place myself on the "traditional" side of things pertaining to worship. I do, however, believe that innovation is important and sometimes necessary, even I personally might not like it. So, I try hard to listen to others and not to judge them in advance, whether that be seminary students, or anyone here in this room. We need to talk together—so, I think this gathering is very important, and I have been praying for it—and so therefore, in a small way, for all of you.

Now, about the presentation, an outline for which is before you. As I tried to think about my assignment--"Toward a Theology of Worship that is Scriptural and Confessional"—I experienced an escalating sense of confusion. It felt like I had jumped into the middle of a conversation. Everything was connected, and as soon as I tried to think or write about anything, I was thinking and writing about everything.

What I have done, then, is to try pull back so that I was no longer in the middle of something. Since this is the first presentation, the scope of my thinking and preparation became more and more basic, and in that sense, more radical. The question became, where do we *begin*?

I am not, then, going to try to extract from the Scripture and the Confessions a set of truths or principles that direct and govern what should or should not go on in the corporate worship of the congregation. Nor will I rehearse commonly held theological

truths that are general enough for all of us to agree upon, and yet do not challenge us to new ways of thinking or to renewed appropriate of treasured parts of our faith.

Rather, this is my attempt to lay the first shingle. The image, of course, comes from the activity of roofing a house. As you know or can quickly imagine, when nailing a course of shingles down on the roof, the most efficient way to do it is just to gauge where I put *this* shingle by running it directly off the one in front of it. But if you lay the first shingle a little bit crooked—even a 64<sup>th</sup> of an inch—when you get 20 feet down the line, you're in trouble. The first shingle needs to be as straight and true as possible—even if you don't get very far down the line yet. But then, we have three days together to make progress.

I have three major points to make; we will pause after the first two for table discussions, and then return to the third in the second part of the presentation. I'll be following the outline pretty closely; you might take note of a few published resources listed there as we go.

### **I. The corporate worship of the congregation must be set in the right Story**

Please reflect on this truth: you can't really see anything until you see what is going on around it and behind it. Every event, every sentence, every experience takes place in a context. That context directs and determines what the thing means. Soon after we moved to St. Louis, I was teaching our daughter how to ride the city bus to get to high school. We got on the bus at the corner, and off we went. Soon, the bus stopped, and let on a passenger. It was an African-American woman, who paid her fare, and then immediately sat down in the front seat of the bus across from where Abby and I were sitting. Now, what did this event mean, in St. Louis on an August afternoon in 1992?

Not much—just another citizen riding the bus. But with a different context—with a different story behind it—it could have had an entirely different meaning. If it had been 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, that simple action of a black woman sitting in the front of a bus would have had enormous significance. You can't see anything until you see what is going on behind it. Only when you set something in the proper story does it have its proper meaning.

Here's more dramatic example. The early Christians claimed that Jesus of Nazareth had died, and that on the third day, he was raised from the dead. He lived again, in his own body. What did this mean? Well, it depends on the story in which this event is imbedded. Many ancients and some moderns believe the Gnostic story; in this narrative, physical existence and matter itself are evil, to be shunned, and above all to be escaped and left behind as soon as possible. To be embodied was a hindrance—death was the liberation of the spirit! Against the backdrop of *that* story, to claim that Jesus was once again embodied after dying could only be understood as bad news for Jesus—perhaps even a form of punishment. For who would want to be back in the body—any body—if the Gnostic story is the true one? Only when you place something in the proper story can you grasp the proper meaning.

We Christians have a story, and we claim is the true one that must subvert and ultimately overcome all other stories. It is the story of the God of Israel who created all things. Though the creation is his and the earth was to be tended by the human race made in his image, God's human creatures rebelled, and despoiled the world. Yet God never abandoned his world, for he loves all that he has made. He chose a people, Israel, through whom he would be at work until the proper time. At the fullness of time, God

himself came down to his creation according to his promises to Israel. God worked a plan that came to surprising fulfillment in one man, Jesus. His life and work reached its goal when he died and *rose from the dead*—Jesus overcame physical death, the enemy of God and man, thus also overcoming the power of sin. In a strange way, Jesus has now already saved the world—even as that same human race and the whole creation remain twisted and fallen. But God will not abandon his creation, and this Jesus who now rules at God’s right hand will come again in power. The end will be as the beginning. God’s story for the creation is still taking place, in Jesus, and the story is not over—not yet.

The world tells stories, too. Whether it was the Babylonian creation myths, or the claims that Caesar was son of god and the savior of the world, competing stories have tried to explain what this world means, and what it is to be human creature sin this world. The church must know these other stories, be aware of their power, and winsomely oppose and ultimately undercut them with the story of the Scripture. Without the right story, important things may lose part or all of their meaning.

The corporate worship of the congregation must be set against the backdrop of the great story of Scripture, and we must do this deliberately, intentionally, and without apology or faltering. Because there are other stories being told today, just as there were in Moses’ day or the time of St. Paul. Let me suggest three popular stories which, if they become the backdrop for the corporate worship of the congregation, can change, dilute, or pervert the meaning of worship. The first two are obvious and well-known to all of us, I suspect. The third is more subtle, and perhaps somewhat more dangerous for its subtlety.

First, there is the personalized story. I'm the center of the universe. Nothing new here, but our context certainly has jacked up the importance of "me" in remarkable ways. A cartoon portrayed God was speaking to an angel. God said, "Well, no, actually I already know the mundane details of everyone's life, so I don't twitter." Day and night the message comes: "I matter, and that my choices or my passion for this or that or the next thing are what really count."

The danger, of course, is that the corporate worship of the congregation would be fit into *this* ego-centric narrative, thus perverting the meaning and purpose of that worship. Please don't misunderstand me. Yes, God ministers to individuals in worship. But worship is not about *me*. God is not part of my life; I am to become part of his story.

The second alternative story is a variation of the first. It's pathetic, impulse-driven narrative of me as a consumer, and the core value of this story is what I like and what makes me happy. Again, there's no need to belabor this point; every Christian who has a cerebral cortex knows how powerfully this message bombards us: Your choices matter! Your desires should be satisfied! In fact, right after the conference, I think I'll attempt to build a lasting family legacy by purchasing a new Lexus. On the way, I can download a few new apps to my i-phone.

When this is the story in which all other things are inserted, then the corporate worship of the congregation is held captive to what I like, and what I want, and to the tyranny of my needs. Again, please do not misunderstand me. The genuine needs of Christians are supposed to be met in worship. In fact, one of the most important functions of worship might be to teach Christians what their true needs really are. But

you know the consumer-based drill, and you know the danger posed by it at least as well as I do.

Here is a third competing narrative. In some ways, it is more pervasive than the first two, and it is more subtle. I see it in the church everywhere I go, and in much of what I read. Here's how it goes: Jesus Christ came into the world, suffered, died and rose from the dead to forgive sins, so that when we die, we can go to heaven. That's the escapist narrative. The goal of Christian existence is for me to die and go to heaven—in a sense, to escape this world and be with God forever, up there. In some ways, it's rather like the Gnostic story.

The remarkable thing, of course, is that each of the parts of the “escapist” story are quite true. Again—and here I actually beseech you, because I do not want to be misunderstood--Jesus did come into the world, he did suffer and die and rise from the dead, he does forgive our sins, and when—or perhaps I should say, “if”—“if” we die, then our souls will be separated from our bodies in a way that God never designed or desired. Nevertheless, our souls will be at rest with Christ in a condition of blessedness in which the Biblical writers were, for the most part, uninterested, and that we may conventionally call, for lack of a better term, “heaven.” Yes, when we die, our souls go to be with Christ in heaven, in Paradise. Yes, that's true.

But that is not the Scriptural and Confessional story; that's not the backdrop against which the corporate worship of the congregation comes into focus and has its meaning. That story is too small, and it's too short. That story ends, for all intents and purposes, with the fact of death, and apparently, in that story, death is not so bad. The escapist story has a main question, and the question is, “What happens to my soul?” But

this question is too small. The escapist story gives little or no real place for the body, the creation, for the earth, for the world—in stark contrast to the teaching of Jesus, who said, “Blessed are the lowly, for they will inherit . . . the earth.”

If you have not begun to look for evidence of this “escapist” narrative, I would invite you to begin to do so. To be sure, no one among us is explicitly denying the scope and range of God’s story . . . but the implicit denial is everywhere. It shows up in Christian hymns that speak of hope only in terms of dying and resting with Christ—but not in terms of the resurrection on the Last Day. The story of those hymns is too short, too small. The escapist story is found regularly in the pages of the Lutheran Witness, especially in the moving testimonies about faith in the face of sickness and death. Read the stories—read them. Again, and again, and again, the *only* hope that is held out in the face of the Christian’s death is the soul’s rest in what Dr. Francis Pieper *rightly* calls “the interim state.” If you would like more examples and more evidence, see me later. I can provide it. The story ends too soon, and it is too small.

Again, *please* do not misunderstand what I am saying. Even though we do not know very much about what this is like, the Scripture and the Confessions teach us to believe that at the time of physical death, there is a terrible separation of our human nature into body and soul—a separation caused by God’s judgment on the sin that is still present in us and in our world. Our souls, then, yes, continue an experience of blessedness and rest with Christ even as death continues to hold sway over us. But this is not the plan of God for us—and it is surely far short of what the Lord’s Prayer teaches us to believe about the story of God and his ways for the creation. For did not our Lord teach us to pray, in the first place and before we name *any* of our own small, personal

needs—did not our Lord teach us to pray, “Our heavenly Father, may your name be hallowed, may your reign, may your will be done—right here, down here in the place of rebellion and brokenness and sin—may your will be done on the earth, as it is in heaven.” The story of God is moving toward the day when here on earth, we will no longer need to pray as Jesus has taught us.

The escapist story has the potential for being world-denying and anti-creational. It teaches us to look for salvation finally up there, away from the world, away from the body. If the corporate worship of the congregation is set in this narrative, what does that teach us about our lives in the world? What does it teach us about the world? And what does it say about a God who was foolish and foolhardy enough to become flesh, and dwell among us. Is he still flesh? Does God love all that he has made?

Yes, he does. And Jesus of Nazareth has made that love known, in fulfillment of the promises to Israel. Jesus has manifested the reign of God in the world, and for the whole creation. Finally, in Jesus, God has broken into the world to re-establish his reign as king. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, what does Jesus do? He preaches the good news of the reign of God, and he heals and casts out demons and calms the storm—he restores creation. In his dying, he takes sin and death—physical death—into his own body—his physical body—and in his rising, he begins the new creation in his own body—his own physical body. In the period from Easter to Ascension, what did Jesus teach the apostles? Luke tells us, Acts 1:3: “appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the reign of God.” As Paul sits in prison at the end of Acts, what is he proclaiming? Luke tell us, Acts 28:31, “proclaiming the reign of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” How long will this story go on? Jesus

tells us, “Make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching and look, I am with you always, to the consummation of the age.” Paul, Christ’s apostle, teaches us the goal of God’s great story: “But each in his own order; Christ, the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the reign to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.”

If the corporate worship of the congregation is to mean what God wants it to mean, we must place it and see it and receive it as a piece of God’s grand story for all creation. This, I would contend, is how to lay the first shingle.

## **II. The corporate worship of the congregation must be shaped by tradition**

My second point will be shorter, and then we will turn to the first time of conversation at the tables. The second point flows out of the first in this way. Our God is the Lord of creation, and of history; He is at work in and for the world, in time and space; in Ur of the Chaldees, on Mount Zion, at the place of the Skull, in the creation and in history. He is moving all things toward the renewal of the creation (Romans 8).

Here’s what occurred to me in a new way: the phrase, “Scriptural and Confessional” has big gaps of time in it. And then came this: God, the Lord of history, has shaped the worship of Christians during the gaps, and we cannot deny this, and we reject this to our peril. True, historical development and tradition *never* possess the *same* authority as Scripture and our scriptural Confessions. But **God** was at work in the three huge gaps that are implied in the phrase, “Scripture and Confessions.” Consider this.

Who told the people of God to worship once a week, and to do so by gathering in small groups of people who are not biologically related to each other, to read Scripture

and to hear an exposition of the same? Did God ever command Israel to do such a thing? Not at all. Israel had her great festivals, she had the daily sacrifice in the tabernacle and temple, and families would gather for Sabbath observance. But where did the practice of “the corporate worship of the congregation” arise in the first place? It came from the tradition shaped by the exile to Babylon, and by the 400 years of history—the first *gap*—between Malachi and Matthew. The New Testament church accepted the synagogue’s form for worship, and to this day, our worship is shaped by that tradition. Did God command it? No, and very rapidly, the tradition was changed from Sabbath worship to Lord’s Day observance. But has God used the tradition to bless and direct his church in ways so numerous that we likely can’t even count them? I think we would all agree that he has. The first gap, filled with tradition, is the gap within the Scriptures themselves.

The second gap is the centuries between “Scriptures” and “Confessions”—about 14 or 15 of them. Did God command that poets would write hymns of praise for the congregation to sing? Nope—silence from God’s Word on that one. What about the idea funds and other resources would be gathered to help the needy of the congregation and others in the world around? No, he never said a word about that, except for the specific occasion of the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. But if he is the Lord of history, was *God* at work during this time, working through the tradition, to bless and direct his people? I think we would probably all agree. Was everything that developed in the tradition equally a blessing, or even a blessing at all? Hardly. Can and should tradition be questioned and changed and at times abandoned? Talk to Luther and the boys about that one. Does the tradition, however, also bring gifts from God that should be treasured and augmented and continued? Talk to Luther and the boys about that one.

And then, there is the gap from the Reformation to now, even today and this place. Has the Lord of history been at work through the tradition that has shaped and enriched our worship from Wittenburg down here to Kirkwood? Yes, God has. The corporate worship of the congregation has emerged through a combination of the truth from the Scriptures and the shaping and application of the church's worship in her tradition.

So—and here is my point. The corporate worship of the congregation *must* be shaped by tradition. It's inevitable. You can't help it. We're located down here in history, in the middle of God's great story. So it is never, ever a question of *whether* tradition will shape the congregation's worship. The only questions are these: "To what extent will worship be shaped by tradition, and which tradition will do the shaping?"

So, the points on your outline are the obvious ones to say, and I can say them quickly. Tradition will and must shape our worship, also today—but we can and must never cling to tradition so tightly that it rises to the same level as Scripture and Confession, and so becomes something that enslaves us. Recall the recent theses on worship from the COP. Six of the eight theses deal with worship; the last two rightly exhort us to brotherly and sisterly conversation and mutual respectful study. Of the first six, it was of some interest to me—I do not know what to make of this, precisely—that half of them (#2, #4, and #6) more or less say the same thing that I am saying here, namely, the tradition can never be allowed to rise to the level of divine authority.

Nevertheless, the church must walk the line between refusing to be enslaved by tradition on the one hand, and despising the gift of tradition on the other hand. If we reject the tradition that God has used to help make us who we are as worshipping Lutheran

disciples of Jesus and substitute for it another tradition, either from the church or from the world around us—then we err on the other side. Here I am echoing Thesis #5 from the Council of Presidents.

We might end by recalling a helpful distinction between an approach to worship—and all things—that operates with *sola Scriptura* as opposed to *nuda Scriptura*. We do not come to the Scripture without presuppositions or helps. None of us reads *naked* Scripture today, that is, apart from the church's tradition—we confess the ecumenical Creeds and the Lutheran Confessions as road maps and guides. By *sola Scriptura*, however, we demand that all traditions themselves be judged ultimately by the message of Scripture and especially by the Gospel itself; should traditions be found that obscure or hinder Scripture's witness and power, then we reject those traditions.

So far an attempt to begin to lay the first shingle. We'll take about 15 minutes now for careful, Christian conversation.

### **III. The corporate worship of the congregation is, uniquely, the *event* when God becomes present with His people who are part of His great Story**

In this second part of the presentation, I'll focus on one foundational assertion: the corporate worship of the congregation is, uniquely, the *event* when God becomes present with His people who are part of His great Story. To be sure, God in Christ is at work at other times, too. But there is a unique sense in which God is at work whenever the corporate worship is taking place. The relevant material is familiar; OT testimony about the worship of Israel, from Judaism's attempt to cope with the Diaspora during the period between the testaments, and what the New Testament says about Jesus and his presence among his disciples.

Beginning with the Tabernacle and continuing on with Solomon's Temple, God's promise was this: He, the Lord of creation, would uniquely come down to be present in the midst of His people. God's presence in the midst of his people was designed for their blessing—but it should surely be to their cursing, if they proved to be unbelieving. The people of God *needed* him to do for them what only He could do—guide, protect, cleanse, and sustain them. God's presence in, among, and for Israel was part of the great Story.

When the disaster of 587 BC struck in Jerusalem, the glory and presence of God departed the Temple. From Babylon, Israel cried out, "For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" (Psalm 137) In exile, they had no sacrifice, no priesthood, no temple. They had only the Word, God's Word. They had the promises of Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. And so, God continued to be present with his believers who were far away from Zion, through his Word.

When the exile was over, the temple was rebuilt. Was God present again in the midst of his people? It seems to be so, for Jesus himself later would say, "So, whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it." (Matt 23). Was all well in the promised Land, and were God's promises coming true? It seems not, for a king from David's line did not sit on the throne. Persia, Greece, Egypt, Syria, and Rome all took their turn. God was present to forgive and sustain his people—but the story was still moving toward the fullness of time.

Then Tabernacle, Temple, Sabbath, Wisdom, and Word all come swirling together into One Man. The glory of God now lives in this Jesus. Atonement now reaches its fullness in One greater than the Temple. Rest is received from the Lord of the

Sabbath. The Word of God now has come in bodily form. God is with us—God has come to be with his people. It's all true now, in Jesus, and *for those who are gathered together in his name*. The size of the gathering does not matter—2 or 3 will do in a pinch.

So, from OT through to the NT, worship happens when God comes down to be present with his people, here in the world, to do for them what they need him to do. In these last days, this worship is ever centered in Jesus, as God's people approach the Father through the Son, in the power of the Spirit. The Confessional writers have this same Christocentric and Christological urgency about worship, as they do about everything. If there are rites and ceremonies in the church, they should teach the people about Christ. If there is proclamation, it should be Word of Christ. The people of God gather for worship, and they come as those who are fundamentally needy and weak. As I like to say to my students, Lutheran preaching consists primarily in hurling God's promises in Christ at the people, so that their faith can grasp those promises, and they can continue to be the people of God. This leads me to say two basic things about the corporate worship of the congregation—these are points “III. C” and “D” on the outline.

First, worship is for Christians. Once again, please do not misunderstand me. Worship services should be welcoming places; outsiders should have a strong sense that they are welcome. And yes, the promises of God present in worship are surely powerful and sufficient even to create faith, so that a person could walk into a service in darkness, and walk out in the light.

But that's the point. Worship in the name of Jesus is the event by which God uniquely comes down to be present *in the midst of his Israel, ancient and modern—his*

*people—his Christians.* This means that worship is not evangelistic or missional in the sense that its primary or chief purpose is to convert those who are not yet believers. The congregation—whatever congregation—must have other structures, other ways and places by which non-Christians can be welcomed and challenged and taught. And yes—we should invite non-Christians to the corporate worship of the congregation. But primarily and centrally, worship is for Christians.

Having said this, it is important also to say something about Christians. Worship is for Christians, that is, for baptized and believing people who live in God’s great story that has not yet reached its consummation in Jesus. The battle continues. As saints, God’s people are ready to believe and respond. But we also carry a bucket-full of the flesh that needs to be destroyed again and again.

A slight adjustment to the translation of Eph 4:11-12 would help to remind us of who God’s people are when we gather together. The standard rendering is not wrong: “Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to *EQUIP* the saints etc.” It’s the word “equip” that I would like to tweak. “Equip” sounds like I’m pretty much good to go, but I just need some tools, or some skills so I can be sent out. But the battle has been more difficult than that. I have mostly sat in the pew for two decades. I come to worship wearied by the changes and chances of life. There is every reason, both exegetically and experientially, to render Eph 4 like this: “Christ gave apostles, prophets, other servants of the Word to *restore* the saints, etc.” “Restore” means you’ve been beaten up, and you’re wounded; the bones are broken, and they need to be reset. “Restore” also means that there is work waiting for you to do after worship,

and there is a calling to which you need to be sent after you have been restored. Now that I think of it, I wonder if there any congregations named, “Restoration Lutheran Church.”

So, the first thing is this: Worship is for Christians; it is an *event*, when God actually becomes present in the midst of his people, in order to restore them for their part in his great, on-going Story that is moving toward the Day of Christ. Here is the second thing: God becomes present to *do* His work **through his Word**, and preeminently, through the Word that proclaims **Jesus Christ** in all his glory and all his fullness.

God wants to do things to and for his people in worship, through His Word. The paradox here, of course, is that those who are proclaiming that Word have no ultimate control over when and how and what God will do. It is, after all, HIS Word, and we do not control it. To remember this keeps us humble. It’s good for us.

Nevertheless, God has promised to be present through the Word that goes forth. But I wonder if sometimes we act as if we really believe that? I look, sometimes, at how Scripture is read in church . . . or how I read the Scripture in church. The person reading the Word of God looks bored. I look at the faces of people as they drift off, and people come and go in and out of the seminary chapel while God’s Word is being read. Is there a sense of expectation that God is going to do something, right here, right now among us as Scripture is read? This is the Word that is centered in Christ, and filled with Christ. Might it not be the case that we could recapture the wonder and the awe of reading and hearing Scripture? I think that we could.

Is there another way in which we might need to repent and recover something else in danger of being lost or diluted? I guess I believe that there is, and since the committee made the mistake of assigning this first presentation to me, I have to tell you what it is. I

believe that there is a famine in the land. For 2 decades, I have sat in conferences and in congregations, in meetings and District and Synodical conventions, at gatherings of pastors, in small groups and large. I fear there is a famine in the land, and no one is talking about it. This is the issue to which the Synod should be giving itself and its energies. This is at the heart of laying the first shingle. As a Synod, we should assume nothing. As a Synod, we should ask: Are we, in worship, magnificently preaching the full glories of Christ? My sense is that, in general, we are not.

I've never heard anyone say this before in a big event like this—so I guess I'll say it. Sermons are shorter than ever. The teaching by which adults become members of our congregations seems to be getting shorter and shorter and shorter. In my lifetime there has been a rising emphasis on the Lord's Supper, but I have seen no corresponding emphasis on the quality and power of our preaching of Christ. And I think that is wrong. The Reformation was won in the printing press, and in the pulpit. God is present through His Word. Yes, I understand that the Sacrament is also God's Word. But without preaching and teaching, the Sacraments cannot be understood or grasped by faith.

What are the dangers for preaching in the LCMS? There is always the danger that the sermon ends up being mostly Law. There is also the danger that our preaching might become both predictable and boring, with two parts: Part One: "I feel bad." Part Two: "I feel good." More subtle is the danger that, yes, Christ would be preached in a way, but the glories of Christ and of his work would be reduced to stereotypical catch-phrases, and a limited array of promises. I have heard it said that once you proclaim the forgiveness of sins, you have preached the gospel—you've done your duty. Now, once again--please do not misunderstand me. It is very good news that Christ Jesus has forgiven me. But is this

all there is to the Gospel? Isn't it more than a little odd that Paul, our favorite Lutheran, does not once proclaim Christ using the language of forgiveness in 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the Pastoral Epistles or Philemon? He offers his hearers the glories of Christ for faith to grasp, but not in terms of "the forgiveness of sins." There's more to say about Jesus!

What about another of our favorite Lutheran ways of speaking, namely, the language of the courtroom, of justification before God, for Christ's sake? Again, with you I rejoice and believe that we are justified freely by Christ's grace! But in his extant epistles, Paul employs the verb "to justify" only in Romans and Galatians, 2x in 1 Corinthians, and once in 1 Timothy and Titus—the verb is absent from 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, both Thessalonians letters, 2 Timothy, and, again little Philemon. Is Christ proclaimed in these letters? Yes—but in terms other than those of the courtroom. The treasures of Christ that Scriptural and Confessional preaching can offer are almost without limit; they are waiting for us mine them, and put them on display, so that God's people can be restored, and serve in His great story.

I could go on. My point is this, and it is not just a point about exegesis or word-studies or something that only ivory-tower academics like me would care about. The point is this: In every letter, Paul proclaims the glories of Christ! Everywhere, the NT writers are obsessed with, captured by, grounded in the great story of God for the world, the story that has been fulfilled in Christ, is happening now in Christ, and will someday come to its great climax in Christ. But there are lots and lots of promises, and the Scripture never tires of declaring how wide and deep and strong is the love of Christ, so that **God will be present**, and God's people can hear those promises and, if the Spirit

wills, grasp the promises and be sent out as part of God's plan for the world. God's people NEED—you and I need to hear the promises of God and all the glory of Christ. I need to know again the danger and darkness and alienation and death from which God in Jesus has *saved* us, and *filled* us with light, and *reconciled* us, *made us alive* to be his and serve him. And I know that you may disagree with me, and I hope that I am wrong. But I do not think it is happening. Our preaching of Christ is limited and cliché-ridden; orthodox, to be sure, but far too often aiming at no real target. The Reformation of the Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century went forth from the printing press and from the pulpit. God is present among his people through his Word, and crucially, through his PREACHED Word. And I am suggesting—I believe—that we are faltering badly in preaching the glories of Christ; what God has done, is doing, and will do through His Son, Jesus.

Whose fault is it? Well, it's mine. I'm a teacher, I'm a seminary professor and so the fault lies with me. Who else is to blame? I don't know, and I don't care. It's the wrong question. But just think about this: does the preaching in your home congregation fill you with courage and power and joy? Do the sermons that you write and deliver emerge out of your own faith and weeping wonder at what God in Christ has done for you and world? Yes, I know—God is in control of his word, and only he can do these things. But surely we can work and pray with this goal humbly in mind—that the corporate worship of our congregations would be centered in the powerful, creative, Biblical witness to God's work in and for the world in Jesus. Could it be that when others see the lives of those who come to worship and then go forth, they would say what Jerusalem's leaders said about the apostles: "They were astonished; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus."

How can it change? Pray that the glories of Christ would capture again every heart here, and the mind and soul of every preacher. And what would happen if we would work together as a Synod to lay the first shingle straight—to devote ourselves, our seminaries, our Districts, everything to sending into the church and the world an army of preachers whom one preacher on call day in St. Louis years ago describe as dead men who have been brought back to life. What if we would agree to pour money and time and incredible effort into this? Is this even possible? Could this kind of life animate us and our Synod again?

I have a word for you—for all of you who were baptized into Christ. When you were baptized into Christ, you were connected to his death; grafted together, the Apostle said in yesterday's Epistle lesson. Now what does that mean? Well, if you are like I am, every day you can feel the old ways of death pulling on you. There is the fear, the selfishness, the apathy, and the weariness. Being a Christian is a lot of work—and a lot of the time, it really looks like an uphill battle. I am 57, and I've been a Christian my whole life. And when I look around at the world, it can easily look like the old ways are winning. It would be easier to just go along, pull back, and get by, and be tired.

I just want to say to you, though, that you are actually not weak, and you don't have to drift. You are actually strong, and you are alive. Here's why. When you were baptized, that old life that tries to pull you down?—that old life died. If you want to know where it is, you can look in the empty tomb of Jesus. Jesus took your old life into his body, and down in the tomb, he left it there. It's down there; you were buried with him. And you are not dead—even though there are times when you feel that way. No—with the authority of Jesus himself, I can say this to you: You are alive, and there is

life—Christ’ life—in your heart and mind and in your body. When the water came down on you in the name of God, you sprang to life, and Jesus has sustained your life to this day, to right now. This room is filled with dead men and women who have been made alive! As we begin this conference on worship, the ways of death will try to pull you down—discouragement, anger, fatigue, whatever. You don’t have to give in to those ways. Because like me, you are alive with Jesus who rose from the dead and who will never die again. You are baptized; you can reckon yourself alive to God in Christ.

The corporate worship of the congregation is, uniquely, that event when God becomes present with his people who are part of His great Story. God has promised to be present through His Word, through the Word of Christ—the whole Christ and all that He has done, all that He is doing, and all that He will one day do. In worship, God draws his people to themselves, and changes fear into courage, gives hope where there was hopelessness, and casts out sorrow and replaces it with joy. After drawing his people to himself, God then sends them out to be part of his story, to bear Christ in their hearts and mouths and lives into the world that He loves—until He comes again in glory.

We have 15 minutes for table conversation now. May the peace of Christ be with us all. Amen.