

# So What Then *Do We Preach?*

## II. Pure Doctrine, No – Pure Gospel, Yes

So preach that sins are forgiven because of what Jesus did on the cross. This is what it's all about. But how do you do it Sunday after Sunday?

### 1. Let's clear the decks and point out what doesn't work:

**Not by the right axiom (*proprium*).** We Lutherans have great axioms – the “alones” (faith alone, Christ alone, cross alone), “simultaneously just and sinful,” the bondage of the will, justification by faith alone, and the like. These axioms steer us in the right direction, but preaching rightly isn't a matter of repeating these axioms over and over – even though preachers surely use them in preaching and teaching.

**Not by changing people's hearts.** It's easy to come out of seminary with the misguided idea that one's job is to lead people to Christ so that they have a “personal relationship” with Jesus. To the contrary, the preacher's job is to preach the gospel “purely” (CA 7) and let God do the rest. Let God be God.

**Not by tossing the ball to the Holy Spirit.** To be sure, creating faith is what God does through his Word and sacraments: “The Holy Spirit creates faith when and where he chooses in those who hear the gospel” (CA 5). Yet this doesn't mean one can preach in Chinese to an English-speaking congregation. Communication matters.

**Not by “principles.”** When the church is in a crisis, do we draft dogma or a set of principles? No, we do not “confess” principles or dogma. We confess what God has done in Christ. We foster the art of discerning law and gospel – the dynamic which is found in what God has done on the cross. As Luther says, “If our sins can be removed by our own satisfactions, why did the Son of God have to be given for them? But since He *was* given for them, it follows that we cannot remove them by works of our own” (*LW* 26:32-33; italics in original).

### 2. What is truth?

1) *Augsburg Confession VII* says that the true unity of the church is found wherever the gospel is “**purely** preached.” Luther: “God's name is hallowed whenever his Word is taught in its **truth and purity**” (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, first petition; emphasis added). Does the emphasis on purity in the phrases – “purely preached” and “truth and purity” – make you flinch? Who wants to be a wooden fundamentalist? Or a dogmatic purist? Images of rigid, old-school clergy pop up like spam.

2) But the Lutheran concern is not for “pure church” or “pure doctrine.” Rather, it's for “pure gospel.” The “pure gospel” is another way of speaking of the cross as all-sufficient. Nothing more can or need be added. This is gospel-truth. This is what is properly meant by “truth and purity.” Paul and Luther show the way.

3) For Christians truth is a person (cf. John 14:6). Truth is to be known by Christ, redeemed by him, and baptized into his death.

4) Then why not throw out doctrines? Who needs them? What good are they if “truth” is a person?

Even though Christian “truth” is a person, we don’t have a personal relationship with Jesus at all like we have personal relationships with our family and friends. He really doesn’t “walk with me and talk with me” – like a friend walks and talks with me. He is Lord of heaven and earth! The gospel is that he knows me and claims me as his own in baptism. “He has made me his own” (Philippians 3:12b).

### 3. What use are doctrines and creeds?

The “truth” that is Christ cannot be captured in doctrine and creeds, but doctrines and creeds help describe the practical, necessary consequences of his Lordship over our lives and this world.

How do doctrines do this? They are **like road signs warning us** of sharp curves and steep cliffs. Doctrines point to dangers so that we can keep from falling into this ditch or off that cliff.

1. In 451 the Council of **Chalcedon** declared that there was in Christ one person and two natures – **unmixed and undivided**. The Council did not sort out how the divine and human natures of Christ work together; rather, it set limits and thereby excluded certain options. In so doing, the Council served as a road sign. It kept the church from falling, on the one side, into the ditch of Sabellianism, and, on the other side, the ditch of Nestorianism.<sup>1</sup>

2. The doctrinal axiom “**Christ alone**” is a way of lifting up the following affirmations: “[T]here is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved” (Acts 8:12), and “[T]here is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all ...” (1 Tim 2:5). The doctrinal affirmation “Christ alone” sets limits on what can be said. It warns: Don’t fall off the cliff by agreeing that there are mediators in addition to Jesus Christ alone.

Both the above doctrinal statements are historical and arose out of particular historical controversies. This does not mean that they are not “true.” To the contrary, they

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<sup>1</sup> Sabellianism (also known as modalism) is a denial of the Trinity because Sabellianism asserts that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are consecutive modes or forms of the one God (for us only) rather than three co-existent, distinct persons (in Himself). Nestorianism is the error that within Jesus are two distinct persons, one divine, the other human.

are true because of what they exclude, even while they are part of an historical context. In the broad sense they point to the truth that is Christ himself.

#### 4. Can the gospel be preached from any pulpit?

What about the Catholic priest and the evangelical pastor who do not affirm Lutheran doctrines but preach salvation through Christ alone? Isn't "preaching" what it's all about? Aren't denominations irrelevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

One could say that the problem is "the pulpit" from which they preach.

**1. The Catholic pulpit.** The Catholic priest may lift up the cross in his sermon, but he stands in a Catholic pulpit, that is, under the Papacy as a required, sacramental delivery system and teaching office. The place of the pulpit, under the papacy, is implicit in every sermon. If the Catholic priest were to preach against the Roman Catholic Church because the papacy undermines the all-sufficient cross, then the priest would be preaching "Christ alone."

**2. The Conservative Evangelical pulpit.** The conservative evangelical preacher who lifts up the cross in his sermons nevertheless preaches within a tradition which requires a conversion experience and/or decision for Christ. Again, "the pulpit" stands within a tradition which undermines the all-sufficient cross. In order to preach "Christ alone," a conservative evangelical preacher would have to publicly reject what his tradition requires – a conversion experience or a decision for Christ.

**3. The ELCA pulpit.** ELCA pastors may also lift up the cross in their sermons, they may even use Lutheran axioms, but their pulpits now stand within a gospel-plus church – due to the 1999 adoption of the sacramental historic episcopate as a constitutional requirement (§10.81.01). In order to preach "Christ alone" from an ELCA pulpit, pastors would have to preach against the ELCA for being a gospel-plus church.

"You don't have to believe it; you just have to do it," say some clergy who claim they are not compromised by the required historic episcopate. But sacraments are not a matter of personal belief or opinion. They are what they are by being done.

The Episcopal episcopate, like the Catholic episcopate, is more than a ceremony for bishops. It is a sacramental delivery system for channeling "grace." Bishops ordain bishops who ordain the clergy who then have "special grace" to make Christ present in the Eucharist.

One consequence, among others, is that laity are prohibited from presiding at communion unless the bread and wine are pre-consecrated

by clergy. Thus the sacramental nature of the episcopate is evident in its public restrictions for communion practices – regardless of what individual professors or clergy believe.

Those who preach in ELCA pulpits on a regular basis implicitly endorse the ELCA's gospel-plus structure, just as that structure is implicit in their sermons and ministry.

## 5. So what then *do* we preach?

We reject “pure church” and “pure doctrine.” There is no pure church, and doctrine is always historical. We affirm the importance of doctrine even as we recognize the imperfect nature of doctrinal or creedal statements in themselves.

Our concern, following Paul and Luther, is for the “pure gospel” which gives **certainty** and **freedom**. Preaching this gospel necessarily includes preaching against the false **security** implicit in required priesthoods, required doctrines, required experiences, and the like.

We proclaim the salvation which comes from outside of us, in spite of us – by faith alone in the cross alone.

He has done all things well and we praise him.

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Note: Luther famously said, “The Holy Spirit is no skeptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience” (*LW* 33:24).

See “Forde On Assertions,” under *Heavy Lifting* at [www.crossalone.us](http://www.crossalone.us). This excerpt is from Gerhard Forde, “Infallibility Language and the Early Lutheran Tradition,” in *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) 120-37.