

Pure text, No – Pure Gospel, Yes

Contents

1.	Faith seeks certainty	1
2.	The Holy Spirit has one job	2
3.	The Gospel is self-authenticating.....	2
4.	The Word of God has three sequential parts	3
5.	Revelation is the in cross alone.....	3
6.	In the beginning was preaching.	4
7.	“Words of Jesus” texts do not give access to Jesus’ mind or self-consciousness.....	4
8.	Preaching is Christology	5
9.	<i>Sola scriptura</i> = the clarity of scripture.....	5
10.	The clarity of scripture leads to an open scriptural canon	6
11.	The canon was determined by orthodoxy, not inspiration	7
12.	“Scripture interprets itself” means justification by faith alone	7
13.	Justification norms norms.....	8
14.	The proper distinction between law and gospel derives from the cross itself.....	8
15.	Modern biblical scholarship supports Luther’s distinction between law and gospel.....	9
16.	“The proper distinction between law and gospel limits and humanizes the law.”	9
17.	Christ is the end of the whole law, both the moral and ceremonial law.	10
18.	The Bible is the stained-glass window through which the light of the gospel shines.	10
19.	The Bible is not like the incarnation, nor is it a sacrament.....	11
20.	Preaching is sacramental, but the text is not.....	11
21.	Meditating on a Bible verse is not a sacrament.....	12
22.	The lectionary is not the canon.....	12
23.	What you hold about salvation determines how you use the Bible, not vice-versa	12
24.	Forde on “doing the text” does not mean “preach the text.”	12
25.	Sometimes one preaches against the text in order to preach the gospel.....	13
26.	Ultimately it is the Lord who divides law and gospel	13
27.	Every sermon is a funeral sermon	13
28.	What Lutherans mean by “pure,” as in “preach the gospel purely” (CA 7) is specific in our confessional literature.....	13
29.	A few practical considerations.....	14

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1. **Faith seeks certainty.** Feelings, visions, and dreams are ambiguous. Some say: “I prayed, then I felt peace. That must be God answering my prayer.” “God spoke to me in a dream.” “I just know.”

How does God communicate with us? Feelings, visions, and dreams may all be the devil in disguise, as Paul writes: “Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14). And as Luther wrote:

“In short, enthusiasm clings to Adam and his children from the beginning to the end of the world—fed and spread among them as poison by the old dragon. It is the source, power, and might of all the heresies, even that of the papacy and

Mohammed. Therefore we should and must insist that God does not want to deal with us except by means of his external Word and sacraments. Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and sacrament is of the devil.”¹

The Lord makes us his own through the bodily Word of the gospel (CA 5), that is through preaching and the sacraments. The Holy Spirit and faith come through these means. Just as salvation was accomplished outside of us, in spite of us, so too the fruits of this work – forgiveness of sins and eternal life – can only be received from outside of us, in spite of us.² The certainty that faith seeks is found solely in the Word and sacraments.

- “Lutheran Reflections,” *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*. Eds. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph A. Burgess, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992) 127-28.
- Inge Lønning, “The Reformation and the Enthusiasts,” *Conflicts About the Holy Spirit* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 33-40.

2. The Holy Spirit has one job.

To promote Christ (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:13-15). This happens through the preached and sacramental Word on the basis of the New Testament, the preaching of the early church, which illumines the whole of Scripture.

3. The Gospel is self-authenticating.

The Lutheran team from the US Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue VI, *Teaching Authority and the Infallibility in the Church*:

“7. Others, however, have come to hold that such an emphasis on the letter of Scripture is not compatible with the doctrine of justification by faith, the article by which ‘the church stands and falls.’¹³⁴ Put most simply, this doctrine affirms that because God justifies the ungodly, forgiving sinners for Christ’s sake, nothing else can be trusted for salvation. Neither scriptural inerrancy nor, even less, the infallibility of the Church’s teachers, teaching offices, and doctrines is the basis of the Christian’s confidence. All these may err, but not the gospel of God’s unconditional mercy in Jesus Christ to which the biblical writings are the primary witness.”

“8. . . The gospel, so to speak, establishes its own transcendence. Its truth becomes known and its authority acknowledged only upon being heard through the Word, received in the sacraments, and believed through the power of the Spirit.”

“10. This understanding of faith has important consequences for the Lutheran view of church doctrine. It becomes necessary to make a careful distinction between faith as

¹ Smalcald Articles 8/9-10, *Book of Concord* (Tappert 313; Kolb/Wengert 323). Bolding added here and below for emphasis.

² *Augsburg Confession V*: “Condemned are the Anabaptists (believers’ baptism) and others who each that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external (bodily) word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works.”

trust in the divine promises and those aspects of the faith of the Church which are responses to the divine promise through confession, action, teaching, and doctrinal formulations. These responses are necessary: the gospel (the promise of God) does indeed have a specifiable 'knowledge' content. But the authority of this content, Lutherans believe, is established by its power to convict of sin and convince of grace through the work of the Holy Spirit and is not enhanced by saying that the teaching office or doctrinal formulations are themselves infallible."³

- *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI.* Eds. Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978).
- Joseph A. Burgess, "Lutheran Interpretation of Scripture," *The Bible in the Churches. How Various Christians Interpret Scripture*, Third Edition. Ed. Kenneth Hagen (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1998) 118-19.
- Burgess, "Lutheran Teaching Authority," Unpublished Paper for the U.S. Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue. Available [here](#) at crossalone.us.
- Gerhard Forde, "The Catholic Impasse," *Promoting Unity. Themes in Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue*. Eds. H. George Anderson & James R. Crumley, Jr. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 76.

4. The Word of God has three sequential parts.

1) The Word is Jesus Christ himself; 2) the preached and sacramental Word; and 3) the written record, the Bible.

- Burgess, "Lutheran Interpretation of Scripture," *The Bible in the Churches*, 115, 126.
- Gerhard Forde puts the sequence incorrectly in: "Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology," *Theological Perspectives: A Discussion of Contemporary Issues in Theology by Members of the Religion Department at Luther College* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1964) 64-65.
- Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999) 189.
- Inge Lønning, "The Holy Scriptures," *The Lutheran Church Past and Present*. Ed. Vilmos Vajta (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 83-100.

5. Revelation is the in cross alone.

"God and the Scriptures are two different things, as different as Creator and creature. Take Christ out of the Scriptures and what do you find left in them?"⁴ Outside of Christ, God is hidden. *Crux sola est nostra theologia*.⁵

³ *Teaching Authority & The Infallibility in the Church. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI.* Eds. Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 62-63. Internal footnote 134: "Smalcald Articles, Part 2, art. 1:1; Tappert 292; *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration* 3:6; Tappert 340."

⁴ LW 33:25.

- Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, *Luther's Works* 33:25-26.
- Joseph A. Burgess, "Confessional Propria in Relation to New Testament texts," *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*. Ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) 253-66.
- Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 1-4.
- Forde, *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 36.
- Heiko Oberman, "Luther and Fundamentalism," *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale, 1982) 220-25.

6. In the beginning was preaching.

New Testament texts are the witness of the early church to the Christ event; they are not tape-recordings of events or transcripts of Jesus' words. They are also not "close enough" to be claimed as virtual transcripts. In fact, trying to nail down biblical "facts" is an idolatry of the text.

- Note the famous debate between Joachim Jeremias and Ernst Käsemann (*ipsissima verba, ipsissima vox*) in "The Trap of Authenticating Biblical Facts," [here](#).
- Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 84-85.

7. "Words of Jesus" texts do not give access to Jesus' mind or self-consciousness.

Can texts which give us "words of Jesus" give us insight into his mind? No, they, too, are the preaching of the early church. They do not allow us to get behind the cross and into the mind of Jesus. Forde:

"On the one hand, the life and teachings [of Jesus] are of no significance apart from the death and resurrection. Indeed, they had to be transformed in the light of the cross and resurrection. This fact is usually the most difficult, especially for the literalists among us. **We must reckon with the fact that the words and teachings of the earthly Jesus in all probability could not have been handed on as he gave them even if those very words had been preserved.** The death and resurrection had intervened and it would be untrue to what God was doing to hand on anything about Jesus apart from that fact. On the other hand, it is likewise necessary to maintain that the death and resurrection are of no significance unless they happened to the man Jesus who came preaching – thus the Gospels."⁶

"Just a remark or two about Jesus' self-consciousness to conclude this section on the truly human. Does Jesus' divinity mean that he transcended the limits of strictly human consciousness somehow? Should it mean that he understood himself to be what later titles such as Messiah and Son of God ascribed to him? Could he see into people's hearts and into the future with divine perspicacity? First of all, it is important to realize that **it is virtually impossible now to discover by historical investigation of the sources exactly what Jesus thought of himself.** For the most part I expect **the writers of the gospels**

⁵ Weimar Ausgabe DB 5:176.

⁶ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 85. Emphasis added.

were not really interested in that sort of question. Fascination with one's inner life and 'self-consciousness' is a modern affliction. Once God has been banished from the public world 'out there' one seeks answers in the inner life.' But the Gospel writers were most interested in what God was up to and accomplishing in the public life and death of the man Jesus and what that life as a totality 'says' to us, indeed proclaims to us, in the light of the biblical witness to God's mighty deeds. They were interested in Jesus as 'public person,' not in what went on in the privacy of his psyche."⁷

8. Preaching is Christology.

Forde: "Christology is reflection on the Jesus who has been proclaimed to us in the church so that we will return once again to the proclamation."⁸ What does it mean that he was the Son of God? The witness of Scripture is mixed. Some passages imply that he was less than God: John 14:28: "[T]he Father is greater than I." 1 Cor 15:28: "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him," and John 1:18 "the only Son, he has made him known" (Jesus the revealer).

Arius, the arch-heretic, claimed that Jesus was somewhat less than God. For Arius, passages like those noted above meant that there was a time when he was not, and thus he was a "secondary" God, "of like substance" with the Father.

The Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) freed the gospel from these Arian distortions. They affirmed that Jesus is true God "of one substance" (*homoousios*) with the Father. He is truly God to **save** us. Subsequently, at the Council of Ephesus (431), the church affirmed his true humanity. He had a real mother; she was Mary, the God-bearer (*Theotokos*). He was truly human to **save us**. The Council of Chalcedon (451) determined that Christ was one person and two natures, "unmixed and undivided," and stop; that is, the Council put up a stop sign: Don't go beyond this point! It thereby set up guardrails to help the church not fall into the ditches of tri-theism (Matt 28:18-20 can be understood as tri-theism), tri-modalism, and Nestorianism.

- Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, Chapter 4, 87-133.

9. *Sola scriptura* = the clarity of scripture.

For Luther *sola scriptura* = the clarity of scripture. It does not mean the Bible is equally valid in all its parts. It does not mean that there is a self-evident, transparent nature to Biblical texts. Rather, the clarity of scripture is its Christ-focus, its clarity about the cross and resurrection. As Luther wrote about the Book of Romans, it is "a bright light, almost sufficient to illumine the entire Holy Scriptures" (*LW* 35:366). Writing against Erasmus, Luther emphasizes that the authority of Scripture is its Christ-centered luminosity:

"For what still sublime thing can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher and the supreme mystery brought to light, namely, that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that

⁷ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 113. Emphasis added.

⁸ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 87.

God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally? Are not these things known and sung even in the highways and byways? Take Christ out of the Scriptures and what will you find left in them?"⁹

Below, Forde highlights the distinctiveness of Luther on *sola scriptura* over against the Biblicists in his day and ours:

"What is the Word of God to which this kind of infallibility is ascribed? A formal legalistic biblicism is clearly not what Luther and early Lutherans had in mind. In the controversy with the peasants especially, and with other sectarians of the times as well, such biblicism was encountered and rejected. 'Luther's ultimate authority and standard was not the book of the Bible and the canon as such but that scripture which interpreted itself and also criticized itself from its own center, from Christ and from the radically understood gospel.'²⁷ ...One should 'refer the Bible to Christ...nothing but Christ should be proclaimed.'³⁰ **Luther can even go so far as to say: 'If adversaries use scripture against Christ, then we put Christ against the scriptures.'**³¹ **The Word of God therefore is ultimately Christ and the proclamation of the gospel.'**"¹⁰

- "Lutheran Reflections," L/RC VI, 59-68.
- Burgess, *The Bible in the Churches*, 115.
- Forde, "Infallibility Language and the Early Lutheran Tradition," L/RC VI, 120-37.
- Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (1987) 12-13.
- Forde, "Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology," *Theological Perspectives*, 56.
- Lønning, "No Other Gospel: Luther's Concept of the 'Middle of Scripture' in Its Significance for Ecumenical Communion and Christian Confessions Today," *Luther's Ecumenical Significance*. Eds. Peter Manns and Harding Meyer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 233-34.

10. The clarity of scripture leads to an open scriptural canon.

Luther's thesis of the clarity of scripture led to his distinctive freedom with regard to the limits of the canon. When Luther published his German translation of the New Testament in 1522, he separated four books from the others (in the same way as the Old Testament Apocrypha were separated from the other Old Testament books), by an open space and did not number them in the Table of Contents: Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. The decisive factor, muted in these books, was the theological criterion of "promoting Christ" (*Was Christum treibet*). Lutherans hold to the fact but not the extent of the canon because Lutherans are not tied to a specific list of books in the Bible.

⁹ LW 33:25-26.

¹⁰ Forde, "Infallibility Language and the Early Lutheran Tradition," *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI*, 129. Internal footnote 27: P. Althaus, *Theology*, 336.

- Burgess, *The Bible in the Churches*, 102-10, 115.
- Burgess, *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, 253-56.
- Lønning, *Luther's Ecumenical Significance*. 233-34.
- Lønning, *The Lutheran Church Past and Present*, 88-89.

11. The canon was determined by orthodoxy, not inspiration.

The decisive locus for scriptural inerrancy is 2 Timothy 3:16 – all scripture is inspired by God. The New English Bible translates it more accurately: “Every inspired scripture has its use.” The word “God breathed” should be placed as an adjective with the noun rather than as a predicate adjective. There is no description of what inspiration means except “God breathed.”

As Everett Kalin has shown, in the early church the test for canonicity was decided by orthodoxy, not inspiration. Orthodoxy in this context means trustworthiness about Christ, that is, “what proclaims Christ.” Moreover, in the early church all baptized Christians were understood to be inspired, and even writings outside of the developing canon were considered “inspired.”

- Burgess, *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, 253-54, 258.
- Burgess, *The Bible in the Churches*, 103-10.
- Everett Kalin, “The Inspired Community: A Glance at Canon History,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42 (1971) 541-49, [here](#) 543.
- Lønning, *Luther's Ecumenical Significance*, 232-33.
- Lønning, *The Lutheran Church Past and Present*, 88-89.
- Lee M. McDonald, “The Canon Debate,” *The Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007) 416-21.

12. “Scripture interprets itself” means justification by faith alone.

Forde: “*Sui ipsius interpres* [scripture interprets itself] is simply the hermeneutical correlate of justification by faith alone.” (See note in the resource box below.)

“Scripture interprets itself” does not mean biblical texts are plain, simple, or clear. All exegesis (interpretation) is theological. There is no exegesis without presuppositions.

- Burgess, *The Bible in the Churches*, 115-16.
- Burgess, *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, 253-58.
- Forde, “*Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*: Reflections on the Question of Scripture and Tradition,” *A More Radical Gospel*. Gerhard O. Forde. Eds. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). Forde’s editors have altered his manuscript, adding material to make Forde’s position biblicalistic. See Forde’s original text and the changes made by his editors, available [here](#) at crossalone.us, under Forde, titled “Forde’s editors have tampered with his text - 2.”
- Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (1987) 12-13.
- Forde, “Authority in the Church,” *A More Radical Gospel*, 65-66.

- Forde, *Justification by Faith. A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 84.
- Lønning, *Luther's Ecumenical Significance*, 232-34.
- Lønning, *The Lutheran Church Past and Present*, 92-93.

13. Justification norms norms.

For Lutherans the Bible is the “sole rule and norm.”¹¹ This, however, is not an endorsement of inerrancy or biblicism because justification norms norms. Biblicism is the presupposition that what is found in the canon is “close enough” to the original and in its totality a unified historical statement of God’s saving action. Theologians as diverse as Brueggemann and Childs, as well as the whole of covenant theology belong here (also Barth, Eichrodt, and von Rad). Obviously inerrantists, including the LCMS, find a unified theology in the Bible.

There is, however, no such thing as “a” biblical theology, much less “the” biblical theology. Any such claims are a construct with theological presuppositions. The Bible contains multiple theologies. Material in the Bible was written over 1,500 years from diverse contexts. The material is sometimes in conflict with itself. For example, Matthew and Paul contradict each other theologically on salvation.¹²

- Burgess, “Lutheran Interpretation of Scripture,” *The Bible in the Churches*, 102, 115.
- The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration 11:91-93; *BC* Tappert 631-32; Kolb/Wengert 655.
- “The Book of Concord’s Key to Itself” available [here](http://crossalone.us) at crossalone.us.

14. The proper distinction between law and gospel derives from the cross itself.

Luther:

“It follows that **our sins are so great, so infinite and invincible**, that the whole world could not make satisfaction for even one of them. Certainly the greatness of the ransom – namely, the blood of the Son of God – makes it sufficiently clear that we can neither make satisfaction for our sin nor prevail over it. The force and power of sin is amplified by these words: ‘Who gave Himself for our sins.’ We are indifferent, and we regard sin as something trivial, a mere nothing. Although it brings with it the sting and remorse of conscience, still we suppose that it has so little weight and force that some little work or merit of ours will remove it. But we should note here the infinite greatness of the price paid for it. Then it will be evident that its power is so great that **it could not be removed by any means except that the Son of God be given for it**. Anyone who considers this carefully will understand that this one word

¹¹ Formula of Concord, Part 1:1: “only rule and norm” *Book of Concord* (Tappert, 464:1), “only rule and guiding principle” (Kolb/Wengert, 486:1).

¹² Forde, “Justification and this World,” *Christian Dogmatics*. Eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 447.

'sin' includes the eternal wrath of God and the entire kingdom of Satan, and that **sin is no trifle.**"¹³

- Forde, *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 36.

15. Modern biblical scholarship supports Luther's distinction between law and gospel.

The modern recovery of New Testament eschatology supports Luther's distinction between law and gospel. Forde:

"Most of Luther was largely unknown to the Lutheran church, especially in America, until quite recently, and the most important dimensions of his theology are actually 20th century discoveries. The phenomenon known as 'Luther's Theology' is actually a quite new thing, particularly for American Lutherans. What it means to be a theologian of the cross, for instance, was virtually unknown until 1929 when Walter von Loewenich published his book on the subject. It did not appear in English until 1976. *The Bondage of the Will* did not really emerge as an alternative to received Lutheran anthropology until mid-century. The significance of Luther's struggle with the basic letter/spirit metaphysic of medieval – and for that matter modern – catholic Christendom for hermeneutics and theological method also developed largely after the Second World War and is still unfolding. The recovery of the doctrine of vocation is due largely to 20th century Swedish Luther research. And so on. When all of this is put together with **current biblical studies, especially the recovery of New Testament eschatology,** a theology with radically different – in today's terms, eschatological – shape begins to emerge."¹⁴

- Forde, "Forensic Justification and Law in Lutheran Theology," L/RC VII, 301.
- Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 101-12.
- Forde, "Justification," *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:207.

16. "The proper distinction between law and gospel limits and humanizes the law."¹⁵

"Limits and humanizes" means the law is always natural, of the earth, and changing. Even the laws of the Bible, including the Ten Commandments, are natural and human, not supernatural or eternal. As Forde wrote, "The remedy for antinomianism is not nomistic but eschatological."¹⁶

- Forde, "Forensic Justification and Law in Lutheran Theology," L/RC VII, 301.]

¹³ LW 26:33.

¹⁴ Forde, "Satis Est: What do we do when other churches don't agree?" (Lecture to the Conference of ELCA Teaching Theologians, August) 12-13. Available [here](#) (at crossalone.us).

¹⁵ Forde, "Forensic Justification and Law in Lutheran Theology," *Justification by Faith. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 7*. Eds. H. Geroge Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 301.

¹⁶ Forde, "Fake Theology. Reflections on Antinomianism Past and Present, *dialog* 22 (1983) 246.

- Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 101-12.
- Forde, "Justification," *Christian Dogmatics*. Eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 2:207.

17. Christ is the end of the whole law, both the moral and ceremonial law.

As Forde writes:

"Theologically, both before and after the Reformation, the most common move toward domesticating freedom has been the attempt to qualify the Pauline claim that Christ is the end of the law to those of faith. 'Reason,' as Luther would put it, simply cannot entertain such an idea, the conviction that in Christ the law comes to an end, that law is over and freedom begins. As we have seen, freedom as usually conceived needs law as the mediator of possibility. What shall we do if there is no law to tell us what to do? But is Paul then wrong in his claim? Theologians as usual, however, have found a way to have their cake and eat it, too. They made a distinction in the content of the law – something Paul never did – between ceremonial or ritual laws on the one hand and moral law on the other. Then they proceeded to say that **Christ was the end of ceremonial law but not the moral law**. Christ ended the necessity, that is, for sacrifice, circumcision, food and ritual regulations, etc., but **not the demands of moral law (e.g., the Decalogue)**. Christ died, it seems, to save us from the liturgiologists! One might grant, of course, that this is no small accomplishment, but the price does seem a bit high!

"Both the early and late Luther attacked the idea that Christ is the end of the ritual law but not the whole law. In both the early (1519) and later (1531-36) Galatians lectures he pounded away on this issue whenever he got a chance.¹³...The presupposition for **true freedom**, for Luther, is that **Christ is the end of the law in its entirety.**"¹⁷

- Forde, "Called to Freedom," *The Preached God. Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*. Gerhard O. Forde. Eds. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 254-69, cited here from 259-60.

18. The Bible is the stained-glass window through which the light of the gospel shines.

Reading a Bible verse is not like taking a pill. Verses are not magic. What they do is **point to Christ**. The key to every Bible passage is the cross and what happened there: Christ died and was resurrected to save you and me.

¹⁷ Forde, "Called to Freedom," (Presidential Address to the International Congress for Luther Research, 1993), *The Preached God. Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*. Gerhard O. Forde, 259-60. Internal footnote 13: For the 1519 Commentary see LW 27:188, 223, 230, 248, 256-57, 264-65, 287, 358; For the 1521-36 Commentary, see LW 26:122, 130, 156-57, 180, 181, 202, 203, 330, 333, 446-47; LW 27:139, 161.

The preacher's job is to use the stained-glass window, the Bible, to proclaim the light, the cross and resurrection. The historical canon of scripture is governed by the theological canon of the cross, without leaving the historical behind. The historical canon is like the parentheses within which the theological canon of justification by faith alone functions. Ernst Käsemann:

“Justification and salvation history belong together. But everything depends on the right co-ordination of the two. Just as the church must not take precedence over Christ, but must be Christ-determined without itself determining Christ, so salvation history must not take precedence over justification. It is its sphere. But justification remains the center, the beginning and the end of salvation history. Otherwise the cross of Jesus would also inevitably lose its central position and then everything would be distorted – anthropology and ecclesiology as well as Christology and soteriology.”¹⁸

- Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969) 76.

19. The Bible is not like the incarnation, nor is it a sacrament.

John Chrysostom (b. 347), the great Patristic preacher and Archbishop of Constantinople, used the analogy of the two natures of Christ to say that the Bible is like the incarnation with a divine nature and human nature, thus implying the Bible itself is a sacrament. But that view is a problem. The Lord uses this book, just how we cannot say precisely.

What about Christ in his human nature? To be sure, he was sinless but also humanly like us in that he could stumble on a path, cut his hand, get indigestion. He was truly human. It is not appropriate to speak of the Bible as a sacrament and therefore without error.

- Burgess, *The Bible in the Churches*, 106.

20. Preaching is sacramental, but the text is not.

Everyone interprets scripture. There is no self-evident transparency to historical texts, including biblical texts. Lutherans use hermeneutics and historical criticism like everyone else. (The distinction between grammatical-historical and historical criticism does not hold up because dictionaries and grammar books are also history books.) The real question is: Is your *claritas* the *claritas* of the cross or some other hermeneutic?

As Luther famously stated, “the cross alone is our theology.” He was not concocting something new but paraphrasing Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2 and Galatians 6:14.

- Burgess, *The Bible in the Churches*, 110-14.
- Lønning, *The Lutheran Church Past and Present*, 92-93.

¹⁸ Ernst Käsemann, “Justification and Salvation History in the Epistle to the Romans,” *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969) 76.

21. Meditating on a Bible verse is not a sacrament.

Texts are not mantras or mysteries that yield enlightenment to those who intensively meditate on them. Jewish scholars study the New Testament intensively and are not thereby converted to Christianity. Catholic and Baptist scholars study the New Testament intensively and are not thereby converted to Lutheranism.

22. The lectionary is not the canon.

“Pericope” means “cutting around.” What lectionary committees do, in a sense, is play paper dolls with biblical texts. They cut around texts and even cut out verses within texts according to their view of what is important. The value of having a lectionary is that it compels the use of certain materials. The problem of having a lectionary is that its usefulness is limited by the mindset of the lectionary committee.

23. What you hold about salvation determines how you use the Bible, not vice-versa.

Forde: “Every interpretation is, in fact, a covert if not an overt soteriology.”¹⁹

- Forde, “Law and Gospel in Luther’s Hermeneutic,” *Interpretation* 37 (1983) 241-43.

24. Forde on “doing the text” does not mean “preach the text.”

First, if the text has a Pelagian message, one does not preach a Pelagian sermon. Second, not every text has law and gospel in it. What Forde called “doing the text,” means “to give Christ and all his blessings”:

“The **preaching** of the Word, that is, is to do the same thing as the sacrament – **to give Christ and all his blessings**. Indeed, since the Word is Christ, preaching is ‘pouring Christ into our ears’ just as in the sacrament we are baptized into Him, and He is poured into our mouths.”²⁰

What should one do if the gospel text is Mark 1:15: “Repent and believe”? What you must do to be saved. It’s there in black and white. In the gospel text. The words of Jesus. What do you do? Preach the gospel, not the text.

What you don’t do is say: These are very words of Jesus, and he said that to be saved you must repent and believe. This is your role in the salvation equation.

To the contrary, to preach the gospel not the text means letting the proper distinction between law and gospel govern the details of the text. The opening section of Mark’s Gospel, Mark 1:1-15, is rich with the gospel message: Jesus is Christ, the Son of God, the heavens are torn open, and the Lord himself has come into our world to save us. He has done it by himself, without our help, and it is finished (John 19:30).

¹⁹ Forde, “Law and Gospel in Luther’s Hermeneutic,” *Interpretation* 37 (1983) 243.

²⁰ Forde, “Preaching the Sacraments,” *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 64:4 (1984) 3-27, here 4.

- Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 53-64.

25. Sometimes one preaches against the text in order to preach the gospel.

As Luther famously said in 1535: “If our opponents use Scripture against Christ, then we use Christ against Scripture.”²¹ This does not mean that one attacks Scripture or upsets people in order to get their attention. A few examples of when one preaches against the text:

- Heb 6:4-6, 10:26, 12:17 on “no second repentance,” which contradicts Paul’s doctrine of justification.
- Sub-Christian material, such as the Epistle of James, which claims faith means agreeing with objective facts (2:19) and that the law can and should be kept (1:25, 2:8, 2:12).
- Delay of the Parousia, 1 Cor 15:51-52; 1 Thess 4:15.

- Burgess, *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, 261-65.
- Burgess, “Faith in the New Testament,” *Baptist Theological Quarterly*, 1:2 (1982) 65.

26. Ultimately it is the Lord who divides law and gospel.

The preacher’s job is to discern law and gospel in order to preach the gospel. Nevertheless, the preacher does not control what is heard. In the hearing of the proclamation it is the Lord who divides law and gospel.

27. Every sermon is a funeral sermon.

What do you preach on Easter Sunday? A funeral sermon. And every funeral sermon is about Easter. Therefore there is only one sermon – the sermon about how God in Christ died and rose for you and me. Therefore every Sunday you preach the gospel, not the text.

Should one close every sermon with the absolution? No. Because it robs the gospel of its surprise, turning the sermon into a predictable formula. There is a proper place for formulas; they belong in the confessional service, in Baptism, and in the Lord’s Supper.

28. What Lutherans mean by “pure,” as in “preach the gospel purely” (CA 7) is specific in our confessional literature.

Paul was a “purist,” as in Galatians 1:6-9, “no other gospel,” and in Galatians 2:5, 14: “the truth of the gospel.” (Examples of this in Paul could be multiplied.) At the same time, he was also not a “purist,” for in Galatians 2:7-10 he agreed to divide up the mission territory and bring a collection to the starving legalistic (Jewish) Christians in Jerusalem, and he did, as seen by references to this offering in his letters elsewhere (2 Cor 8:1-15).

²¹ WA DB 39:1, 47: *Urgemus Christum contra scripturam*.

In the Augsburg Confession the link between Article 7 and Article 28 is found in the word “purely.” Article 7: “The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely....” Article 28:77: “It is not our intention that the bishops give up their power to govern, but we ask for this one thing, that they allow the gospel to be taught purely.” To proclaim the gospel purely overthrows all authorities that appeal to something else besides faith alone in Christ alone. Because the gospel is self-authenticating, churches that claim prior or additional authority, including, but not limited to: inerrancy, a required structure (episcopacy, congregationalism, papalism), a personal conversion experience, a decision for Christ, are “gospel-plus” churches. By adding a requirement to the gospel, they subvert the freedom of the gospel.

- Leif Grane, “Justification by Faith? An Unguarded Essay,” *By Faith Alone. Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*. Eds. Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 31-45, especially 39-42.
- “Charter of Freedom,” available [here](#) at crossalone.us.
- Many of the primary materials cited in these resource boxes are available at crossalone.us, under “Basics of the Twentieth Century Luther Renaissance, The Proper Use of Scripture,” [here](#).

29. A few practical considerations about preaching.

1. Any pattern gets tiresome. It is easy to fall into a rut.
2. Humor should be used sparingly, lest it becomes the only thing hearers remember.
3. Personal stories should be used sparingly.
4. “How many sermons do not begin with some anecdote or ‘experience’ from ‘real life’ so as to set the stage for proving its relevance in some fashion or other? Personally, I have just about reached a state of complete despair over this constantly repeated, dreary, dreary approach to the matter.”²²
5. Avoid testimonials. They promote “me” and “my experience.” They may be based on mistaken ideas about Scripture. A woman once told of how she got such comfort from the word, “selah,” in the Psalms. What does “selah” mean? Not even Old Testament scholars are sure. It could be equivalent to “refrain,” or directions to “repeat from the beginning” (*D.C. al Fine*).
6. Avoid “my call to ministry.” All experiences are ambiguous. Remember the farmer who saw the letters “PC” in a cloud formation in the sky. He thought it was a sign to that he should become a pastor and “Preach Christ.” So he did. He was earnest but inept and damaged congregation after congregation. His older brother shook his head and said: “I told him that ‘PC’ meant ‘Plant Corn.’ He should have stayed where he was.” See, “Inner Experience is Ambiguous,” [here](#) at crossalone.us.
7. Funerals: We are not to preach 1) as if God alone knows the eternal destiny of the deceased; 2) as if we can guarantee the deceased is in heaven; 3) as if the good life of the deceased made the difference; or, 4) as if it all depends on the correct and/or firm faith of the deceased.
8. We are called to proclaim, to communicate, and not in Chinese. The pastor’s job is to preach the gospel to a particular group of people at a particular time and place.

²² Forde, “Preaching the Sacraments,” *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 64:4 (1984) 5-6.

When you are done preaching for the day, pray for forgiveness, put the sermon away, and leave it up to the Lord. It's his problem, his doing. The Holy Spirit is the one who ultimately divides law and gospel. It is the "Holy Spirit who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel" (CA 5).