

## An [Updated] Listener's Guide to the Pulpit

by Todd Wilken

More than a decade ago I wrote "A Listeners Guide to the Pulpit." At the time, my goal was simple: I wanted to help the average Christian sitting in the pew to tell the difference between good preaching and bad preaching. I dealt with the most egregious forms of bad preaching I could think of, and I thought I had covered it all. I hadn't. Since then I have become aware of other kinds of bad preaching, some of which I had engaged in myself. To fill in the gaps and confess to my own bad preaching, I offer this update of the original essay.

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How hard could it be? You go to church. The preacher preaches. You sit and listen. Easy, right?

But how do you tell the difference between a good sermon and a bad sermon? What makes good preaching good and bad preaching bad?

For many years Issues, Etc. did on-air sermon reviews. We reviewed the sermons of Joel Osteen, D. James Kennedy, T. D. Jakes, Robert Shuller and Joyce Meyer and many less well-known preachers. We reviewed the sermons of Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Eastern Orthodox, Presbyterians, Pentecostals and others. Most of these preachers were speaking to packed auditoriums and to worldwide television audiences. Most of the preachers were dynamic, engaging, interesting and even entertaining. Most of the preachers are considered the best of the best preachers in the world.

Most of their sermons were terrible.

I don't make this judgment based on my own subjective tastes or my own personal standard. I make this judgment based on the objective difference between good preaching and bad preaching.

Is there an objective standard for good preaching? Yes. It is a standard every Christian should know and use every time they hear a sermon. Every Christian needs to know the difference between a good sermon and a bad sermon.

### **God's Two Teachings**

St. Paul writes to the young preacher Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). Paul says that God's Word of truth needs to be handled with care. To rightly divide God's Word is the preacher's first and most important task. Nineteenth-century theologian C. F. W. Walther describes what Paul means in his famous treatise *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*:

*The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testament, are made up of two doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, viz., the Law and the Gospel... Only he is an orthodox teacher who not only presents all the articles of faith in accordance with Scripture, but also rightly distinguished from each other the Law and the Gospel.* (C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928, p. XXXX)

Walther was simply following the leader of the sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther. Luther explained this critical distinction between God's Law and God's Gospel and the danger of ignoring it:

*It is therefore a matter of utmost necessity that these two kinds of God's Word be well and properly distinguished. Where this is not done, neither the Law nor the Gospel can be understood, and the consciences of men must perish with blindness and error. The Law has its goal fixed beyond which it cannot go or accomplish anything, namely, until the point is*

*reached where Christ comes in. It must terrify the impenitent with threats of the wrath and displeasure of God. Likewise the Gospel has its peculiar function and task, vis., to proclaim forgiveness of sin to sorrowing souls. These two may not be commingled, nor the one substituted for the other, without a falsification of doctrine. For while the Law and the Gospel are indeed equally God's Word, they are not the same doctrine.* (Martin Luther, "Sermon on the Distinction between the Law and the Gospel," *Luther's Works*, vol. 9, St. L. Ed. IX, p. 799)

Through His Law, God shows us His will. Through His Law, God tells us what He requires and what He forbids. Through His Law, God demands perfect obedience in thought, word and deed. Through His Law, God shows us that we have not done what He requires and have done what He forbids. Through His Law, God says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind...You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt.22:37, 39). Through His Law, God calls anything short of perfect obedience sin.

Through His Gospel, God tells us what He has done in Jesus Christ to save those who have broken His Law. Through His Gospel, God shows us that Jesus has done everything He required of us by His Law. Through His Gospel, God shows us that Jesus has been punished under the Law in our place. Through His Gospel, God answers the perfect demands of His Law with the perfect, sinless death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel says, "*What the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us*" (Rom. 8:3–4). Through His Gospel, God answers the requirements of His Law with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for us. Through His Gospel, God makes no demands whatsoever. There is only the free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

In Scripture, we see this basic division of Law and Gospel in the summary of Jesus' first public preaching: "Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news

of God. 'The time has come,' He said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'" (Mark 1:15). It is also the basic outline of the Apostle's preaching (Acts 20:21. See also Acts 2:14–39; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 7:2–53; 10:34–43; 13:15–41; 17:22–31.).

What does this have to do with the difference between a good sermon and a bad sermon? Everything. The essential difference between a good sermon and a bad sermon is whether or not the preacher rightly divides and applies God's Law and God's Gospel. A good sermon must show sinners their sin and show sinners their Savior. Again Luther writes:

*This difference between the Law and the Gospel is the height of knowledge in Christendom. Every person and all persons who assume or glory in the name of Christian should know and be able to state this difference. If this ability is lacking, one cannot tell a Christian from a heathen or a Jew; of such supreme importance is this differentiation. This is why St. Paul so strongly insists on a clean-cut and proper differentiating of these two doctrines. (Martin Luther, Sermon on Galatians, 1532.)*



So these two, Law and Gospel, must always go together in every sermon. They must be carefully divided in every sermon. God's Law must show us our sin, and God's Gospel must silence the Law's accusations against us with the perfect life, death and resurrection of Jesus for us.

This is not to say that a good sermon will ONLY do this. Good preaching, according to Paul, does many things: It rebukes, reproves, admonishes, corrects,

comforts, encourages, trains and teaches (Rom. 15:14; 1 Cor. 10:11; Col. 1:28; 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:4; 3:16; Titus 1:9). But whatever else good preaching does, it must above all rightly condemn us on account of our sin and declare us innocent on account of Jesus.

### **That Was a Good Sermon?**

Some people hear a sermon and say, “That was a good sermon. I agree with everything the preacher said.” A sermon is good when you hear what you need to hear, not what you want to hear. Some of the greatest sermons Jesus ever preached fell on deaf ears. Some of the worst sermons today draw the biggest audiences.

Other people hear a sermon and say, “That was a good sermon. Everything the preacher said was true.” That may well be; a preacher might say all sorts of true things. But he may still fail to preach the truth that sinners need to hear. C. F. W. Walther posed a question to his young seminary students: “Suppose someone could truthfully say, ‘There was no false teaching in my sermon,’ still his entire sermon may have been wrong. Can this be true?” Walther says yes.

*Only he is an orthodox teacher who, in addition to other requirements, rightly distinguishes Law and Gospel from each other. That is the final test of a proper sermon. The value of a sermon depends not only on this, that every statement in it be taken from the Word of God and be in agreement with the same, but also on this, whether Law and Gospel have been rightly divided. Of the same building materials furnished two architects one will construct a magnificent building, while the other, using the same materials, makes a botch of it. (C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928, pp. 31–32.)*

John Pless comments on Walther’s answer.

*The content of the preaching may be correct in that it uses words from the Bible. The preacher does not deny the truthfulness of scriptural claims. Nonetheless, the sermon fails as evangelical preaching in this regard: The*

*Law is presented as good news, or the Gospel is presented as something we do. Such preaching, regardless of how many Bible passages are quoted or referenced, is not the preaching of Christ crucified as the only Savior of sinners. (John Pless, *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004, p. 21.)*

Many preachers claim to preach Bible-based sermons. But does this mean that they are preaching the Gospel? Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, says:

*Sometimes I'll teach very good sermons, right out of the Scriptures, that are essential to faith. And I think the essentials are the Scriptures themselves—where I might not talk about Jesus in the sermon...But it's all, maybe, David's material or Solomon's material or some of Moses' material. And I think the standard needs to be more Bible-based rather than exclusively Christ-based. (Ted Haggard, "American Evangelicalism," Issues, Etc. radio program, Sept. 13, 2005.)*

As a wise pastor once said, "Any sermon can claim to be Bible-based. But the Bible wasn't nailed to the cross to pay for your sins." The central message of the Bible is Jesus Christ crucified and risen for sinners. If a sermon is really Bible-based, it will preach that Gospel. Christian preachers aren't called to preach the Bible in general or truth in general; they are called to preach a very particular biblical truth. In Paul's words, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). A sermon that lacks this truth can't be called a good sermon, and it can't be called a Christian sermon.

Often, the difference between good preaching and bad preaching is not in what is said, but what is left unsaid. More often, what is left unsaid is the Gospel itself. Most often, this happens when Law and Gospel are confused. Luther paraphrases Paul in Gal. 1:7:

*These false apostles do not merely trouble you, they abolish Christ's Gospel. They act as if they were the only true Gospel preachers. For all that they*

*muddle Law and Gospel. As a result they pervert the Gospel. Either Christ must live and the Law perish, or the Law remains and Christ must perish; Christ and the Law cannot dwell side by side in the conscience. It is either grace or law. To muddle the two is to eliminate the Gospel of Christ entirely. It seems a small matter to mingle the Law and Gospel, faith and works, but it creates more mischief than man's brain can conceive. To mix Law and Gospel not only clouds the knowledge of grace, it cuts out Christ altogether. (Martin Luther, Commentary on Galatians.)*

Some people hear a sermon and say, “That was a good sermon. Even if he didn’t really preach the Gospel, I know what he meant to say.” It’s the preacher’s job to preach the Gospel. So, don’t do the preacher’s job for him. If he doesn’t preach the Gospel, it’s not your job to fill in what he left out.

Sad to say, some preachers don’t preach the Gospel on purpose. They think they have something better to say.

### **Wiser Than God**

The apostle Paul took the task of preaching very seriously. He had been appointed to preach the Gospel by Jesus Himself. He was well aware that his many sufferings and imprisonments were the direct result of preaching that Gospel. Nonetheless, for Paul, the preaching of Christ crucified for sinners was the indispensable essence of his ministry.

*When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:1–2. See also Acts 9:15; 20:24; 22:14–15; 26:16–18. See also Rom. 1:1; 2:16; 16:25; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2:4; 9:18; 15:14; 2 Cor. 1:1, 18; 4:3; Gal. 1:1; 2:6–7; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 4:3; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1; 1:8–11; 2:5–8; 4:15; Titus 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Thess. 2:14.).*

For Paul and the other apostles, there was no preaching apart from Gospel preaching:

*I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" (Rom. 1:15–17).*

Paul was also aware that the Gospel message he preached was considered foolish and weak. Today, some would (and many do) use the term “irrelevant.”

*For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Cor. 1:21–25).*

Many of today’s preachers are apparently wiser than God. They have something better to preach than Christ crucified for sinners. From many pulpits today you will hear more about the Christian than the Christ. You will hear about marriage, family values, conflict resolution, financial security and a host of other suburban moralisms. Instead of Paul’s “Christ and Him crucified,” the standard fare in today’s pulpit is “Me and Myself Improved.”

Many preachers today seem determined to know anything and everything except Christ crucified. Let’s look at what passes for preaching today, from bad preaching to worse preaching to preaching that isn’t Christian preaching at all. Perhaps some of it will sound familiar.

**(1) Bad Preaching:** Contrary to popular opinion, bad preaching isn’t when the preacher reads his sermon, mumbles or bores his audience. That is merely bad



delivery. No, bad preaching is preaching that does not rightly proclaim God's Word of Law and God's Word of Gospel to sinners. Here are some all-too-familiar examples.

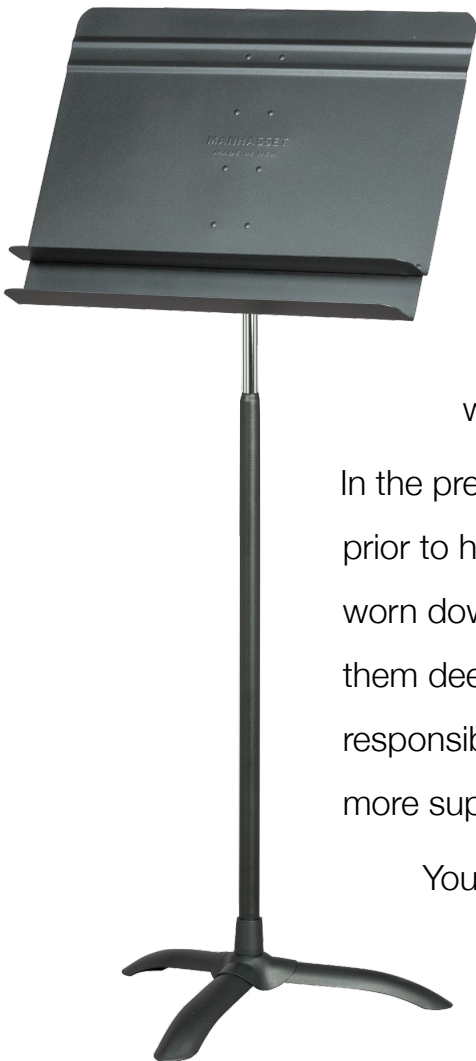
**The Law-Assumed Sermon.** This is the minimalist approach to preaching the Law. It is especially popular among my fellow Lutherans. It begins with

assumptions on the part of the preacher. The preacher assumes that his hearers have already heard enough of God's Law: "My people are beaten down by the Law Monday through Saturday living in a fallen world." "Many of my people are former evangelicals who heard nothing but the Law from their former preachers." "My people already have the Law written on their hearts."

In the preacher's mind, everyone is like the despairing Martin Luther prior to his "tower experience" of the Gospel. They are already so worn down by the Law that hearing any more would only drive them deeper into despair. So, the preacher simply abdicates his responsibility to preach the Law or preaches the Law in only the more superficial and perfunctory way.

You might ask, "Isn't a Gospel-only sermon better than other kinds of bad preaching? Isn't it better to err on the side of the Gospel?" Yes and no. Yes, a Gospel-only sermon is probably better than other bad sermons. But is it still bad preaching.

And no, erring on the side of the Gospel is no substitute for the faithful preaching of God's Law and Gospel. "Erring on the side of the Gospel" often has



little to do with the Gospel. To declare forgiveness where the Law of God hasn't worked repentance isn't the Gospel. To declare forgiveness where there is no repentance is to think you know how to do the Holy Spirit's job better than he does. The Universalist sincerely believes that he is erring on the side of the Gospel when he is merely erring. This kind of preaching is often the result of the preacher considering himself more merciful than God. In the end it substitutes the preacher's mercy for God's.

**The Gospel Afterthought Sermon.** This is the minimalist approach to preaching the Gospel. The sermon itself can be about anything. But whatever the sermon is really about, the message of Christ crucified gets tacked on at the end with no connection to anything else that has been said. The Gospel gets the final word, but only barely. Just don't blink; you might miss it.

**The Gospel-Law Sermon.** This sermon has both Law and Gospel but confuses the two by confusing the order. The Gospel is preached first, then the Law. This is like putting the answer before the question. Without the preaching of the Law to prepare the hearts of sinners, the preaching of the Gospel becomes "casting your pearls before swine" (Matt. 7:6). The audience then has no reason to hear the Law that follows. This kind of preaching either turns the Gospel into a license to sin or portrays the salvation as dependent on obedience to the Law.

**The Rest Is Up to You Sermon.** This kind of preaching was popularized by the revivalist preachers of the nineteenth century and is best known today in the preaching of the Billy Graham and other "evangelistic" preachers. These preachers present clear Law and clear Gospel. And if they stopped there, all would be well. But at the end of each sermon, they add one, final demand of the Law: "Decide." "Make your decision for Christ!" They say in effect, "Jesus has done everything He

can do; now the rest is up to you.” Walther diagnoses the problem with this kind of preaching:

*Modern theologians assert that in the salvation of man two kinds of activity must be noted: in the first place, there is something that God must do. His part is the most difficult, for He must accomplish the task of redeeming men. But in the second place something is required that man must do. For it will not do to admit persons to heaven, after they have been redeemed, without further parley (talk). Man must do something really great – he has to believe. This teaching overthrows the Gospel completely. (Walther, Law and Gospel, p. 269.)*

**The Law and Sacraments Sermon.** You will often hear this kind of preaching among my fellow Lutherans. The pastor clearly preaches the Law, but where you would expect to hear the Gospel, he preaches about the Sacraments instead. Instead of hearing the clear message of Jesus’ death and resurrection for sinners, you hear “But you are baptized!” or “Jesus has forgiven all your sins” or “Jesus feeds you with His body and blood.” Now, all these things are true, and all these things are good news, but they are not THE Good News.

In this kind of preaching the pastor often thinks he has preached the Gospel when he hasn’t. The people often think that they have heard the Gospel when they haven’t. This is why I said that it’s the preacher’s job to preach the Gospel. So, don’t do the preacher’s job for him. If he doesn’t preach the Gospel, it’s not your job to fill in what he left out.

Will the preaching of the clear Gospel include the Sacraments? Absolutely! But the Sacraments cannot substitute for the clear preaching of Jesus’ death and resurrection for sinners. Can the preaching of the Sacraments include this clear message? Yes, and it should, but often it doesn’t.

**(2) Worse Preaching:** Many of today’s preachers are finding new ways NOT to preach the Gospel. There are some sermons that are worse than bad. While

even a bad sermon contains the bare elements of the Gospel, these sermons have no Gospel at all. The listeners are left with nothing but Law, sometimes not even that.

**The Golawspel Sermon.** ( I borrow this term from Dr. Mike Horton.) This is a classic example of confusing Law and Gospel, so that neither is clearly preached. In a Golawspel sermon, the demands of the Law are softened and made more manageable. The Law is presented as a Law that sinners can keep. In a Golawspel sermon, the Gospel is presented as something you must do. Rather than the free grace of God for Jesus' sake, the Gospel is preached with all sorts of terms and conditions. The message of this kind of sermon is neither Law nor Gospel but a useless mixture of the two. Golawspel preaching neither wounds nor heals, neither kills nor makes alive, neither accuses nor absolves.

**The Hey, Nobody's Perfect Sermon.** This kind of preaching is a half-hearted attempt to preach the Law and a failure to preach the Gospel. Facile, vague statements like, "We are all sinners," "Nobody's perfect" and "Who are we to judge?" punctuate this kind of preaching. The preaching of the Law is kept as nonspecific as possible. The emphasis shifts from particular sins to the abstraction of sinfulness. These sermons replace the Biblical description of sin as a violation of God's Law with the vague idea of "brokenness." The preacher may even depict himself and his hearers as victims of sin, rather than perpetrators of sin. As a result, our sinful condition is portrayed as little more than an opportunity to commiserate together as sinners. The sermon functions as a verbal version of a sympathetic hug. The closest this kind of preaching gets to the Gospel is some variation on, "We're all sinners, but don't worry; you can't out-sin Jesus."

**The Gospel Assumption Sermon.** In this kind of sermon, the preacher almost preaches the Gospel. He might refer to Jesus as Savior, and he might talk

about God's love, forgiveness and mercy. During this kind of a sermon, Lutheran preachers might talk at length about the means of grace: Baptism, Absolution and the Lord's Supper. But in the end, the preacher assumes that his audience already knows that Jesus lived, suffered, died and rose again for them, and so, he leaves the Gospel itself unspoken. Sadly, the Gospel Assumption sermon often leaves listeners with the impression that they heard the Gospel when they haven't. They have filled in the gaps in the preacher's sermon themselves. The sainted Dr. Robert Preus rightly said, "The Gospel assumed is the Gospel denied."

**The God-Loves-You-Anyway Sermon.** Pioneered by Robert Schuller and perfected by Joel Osteen, this kind of sermon presents what I have called "a gospel without sin." In this kind of sermon, your problem is not sin; it is failing to reach your potential. But don't worry, be happy and keep trying; God loves you anyway. The preacher replaces the message of John 3:16, "God loved the world in this way: He gave His only Son" with "God loves you anyway." He turns 1 John 4:10— "He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins"—into simply "He loved us." The preacher proclaims God's love without the cross. He presents "a God of second chances"—a big, loving pushover. But "God loves you anyway" isn't the Gospel. Sinners don't need a second chance; sinners need a Savior.

Another form of "God loves you anyway" preaching can be found in the sermons of "radical grace" preachers. In this kind of preaching, the Law is often clear enough, but the Gospel—Jesus' death and resurrection for sinners—is replaced with talk about unconditional grace.

Now, I think when preachers talk about "unconditional grace," they really mean "undeserved grace." Here's why: God's grace isn't unconditional. God's grace comes under the greatest conditions possible: perfect obedience to God's Law and full punishment for disobedience to that Law. But both of these conditions

have been met completely by Jesus, for you, in your place. Such grace is conditional (on Jesus alone) but entirely undeserved (by you). If you stop and think about it, grace without conditions is grace without Jesus, and grace without Jesus isn't the Gospel.

**The Little Engine That Could Sermon.** This is a kissing cousin of the God-Loves-You-Anyway Sermon. In this kind of sermon, the preacher talks a lot about how hard your life is. Stress, not sin, is your problem. Jesus is a cheerleader rooting for you, He is a coach urging you to keep going, He is a piano teacher reminding you that practice make perfect. Instead of Jesus on the cross to save you, the preacher proclaims Jesus in your heart to empower and encourage you to keep trying. The most common Bible passage quoted in a Little Engine That Could sermon is 1 John 4:4: "Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world." When all is said and done, a sinner can count on Jesus to help but not to save.

**The Sinners-Someplace-Else Sermon.** This kind of sermon is most popular among politically active evangelicals. The preacher proclaims the Law but not to his audience. He preaches against the sins of sinners someplace else: politicians, homosexuals, abortionists, secular humanists, Hollywood and all the other sinners "out there." The audience nods and applauds and says, "Amen," never hearing the Law applied to them or their sin. And since all the real sinners are "out there" and not "in here," no one who hears the sermon feels the slightest need for forgiveness, which is just as well, since the preacher never gets around to the cross. Everyone goes home secure, thanking God they aren't like other men—but not justified (Luke 18:9–14).

**The "Life Application" Sermon.** This is the classic example of preaching the Christian instead of the Christ. Promoted by Rick Warren and others, these sermons are by far the most common kind of worse preaching. In this case, the

preacher is convinced that the ultimate goal of preaching is to teach people how to LIVE. The Bible is presented as the owner's manual for life, the ultimate how-to book or honey-do list. The Bible is mined for examples, principles and paradigms relevant to our everyday lives. Jesus' words, "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" are amended to read, "These are the Scriptures that testify about you." Sometimes, a Life Application sermon does talk about Jesus. But since the goal of this kind of sermon is to teach people how to live, Jesus is presented as your teacher, your example and your helper. The death and resurrection of Jesus might also be mentioned—as an example for you to follow of selfless love and self-sacrifice. David Wells says, "The Cross becomes exactly what it was in liberalism, that Jesus is reduced simply to a good example and we try to follow in his footsteps in the sense that we try to look out on life the way that He did" (David Wells, "Christianity in a Postmodern Culture," Issues, Etc. radio program, Dec. 12, 2005.) In the Life Application sermon, Jesus becomes just another paradigm for you to live by.

**The House-Rules Sermon.** Also known as the If-You-Were-Really-a-Christian Sermon and closely related to the Sinners-Someplace-Else sermon, the difference between this and the Life Application sermon is that the House-Rules sermon is not seeker-friendly. In fact, its goal is to describe the life of the Christian in contrast to the vices, temptations and amusements of society. The sermon focuses on what Christians should and shouldn't wear, drink, eat, smoke and what cultural activities (TV, movies, music, dances, etc.) Christians should and shouldn't participate in. It presents the Christian faith as a matter of simply keeping the rules. This kind of preaching has given us both prohibition and blue laws but not the Gospel.

**(3) Not Christian Preaching at All:** There are sermons being preached from Christian pulpits that cannot be called Christian in any sense of the word; they

can hardly be called sermons. They have neither Law nor Gospel, neither sin nor grace. They fall into the category of what the Bible calls “smooth talk and flattery,” “empty words,” “godless chatter” and “hollow philosophy.” Here are some brief examples. (See Rom. 16:18; Eph. 5:6; Col. 2:8; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:16.)

**Three Stories and a Moral.** This kind of preaching usually happens when the preacher decided to “wing it.” He consults no biblical text. Perhaps he talks about a story in the news, recalls an incident from his childhood and uses a time-tested sermon illustration. He wraps it all up by saying, “I think there’s something we can all learn from this.” No Law, no Gospel. In fact, not much of anything.

**Things that Make You Go, “Hmmm...”** The preacher’s goal here is “to make people think.” He has forgotten that the goal of Christian preaching is to call sinners to repent and to believe in Jesus. The sermon is designed to make the audience feel as though the preacher has said something profound. People leave deep in thought and still deep in their sin.

A variation on this kind of preaching is currently popular among my fellow Lutherans. It is sometimes called “narrative preaching.” It is basically story-telling. The story may be the personal testimony of the preacher, a fictional account or modern-day parable. These are often well-intentioned attempts at Law and Gospel but often fall short for several reasons: First, the preacher quickly departs from any connection to a biblical text (if one existed to begin with). Second, the preacher is often more concerned with crafting a compelling narrative than with the message. And third, the preacher is unable to shoe horn the clear Gospel into his story or unwilling to interrupt his yarn to do so.

**Informed and Uninformed Opinions.** You could always count on the late D. James Kennedy for one of these around the Fourth of July. The preacher decides to preach a “topical” sermon. He chooses his topic: history, politics, social



policy, the war or any other subject. It doesn't matter. He might know what he's talking about; he might not. It doesn't matter. He might have a Bible passage as his jumping off point; he might not. It doesn't matter. He might claim that God agrees with his opinion; he might not. It doesn't matter. The preacher has something on his mind, and you are going to hear it. The audience leaves knowing exactly what the preacher thinks, nothing more.

**Random Thoughts.** Also know as Points without a Point or simply Vamping. Here the preacher has nothing on his mind. He has 20 minutes to fill on Sunday morning. As the mind of the preacher wanders, so does his sermon. The listener checks his watch until it is over and then goes home to watch football. The whole incident is quickly forgotten.

### **A Sermon Diagnostic: Listening for the Gospel**

For our radio sermon reviews, we listened to the sermon and asked three simple questions:

- (1) How often is Jesus mentioned?
- (2) If Jesus is mentioned, is He the subject of the verbs?
- (3) What are those verbs?

Before looking at these questions, a word of caution. This diagnostic is intended to answer one, and only one question: Did the preacher preach the Gospel? This simple test doesn't answer every question about good or bad preaching. As we have seen, some bad sermons are bad not because they don't preach the Gospel but because they fail to proclaim the Law, some are bad because they mix Law and Gospel, some are bad because they give the Gospel a minor or inappropriate role in the sermon. This diagnostic can only tell you whether or not the Gospel was preached, nothing else.

How often is Jesus mentioned? Listen to the sermon and keep a running tally. The preacher might mention God in a generic way; that doesn't count. He might talk about the Almighty, the Heavenly Father or the Big Guy upstairs. Those don't count either. You're listening for Jesus. Obviously, Jesus has many titles: Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, Redeemer, Savior, etc. Those all count. Remember: Don't do the preacher's job for him. A surprising number of sermons beat around the bush, come close and almost mention Jesus. The preacher shouldn't make his audience fill in the blanks, so don't. Sad but true, many sermons we review on the air fail the diagnostic already at this point. That's right; these sermons don't mention Jesus at all. Many don't even mention God. Here's the point of the first question: A sermon that doesn't mention Jesus isn't about Jesus. Since you can't preach the Gospel without mentioning Jesus, a Jesus-less sermon is a Gospel-less sermon.

Now, if Jesus' name is mentioned, does that mean that the Gospel has been preached? No. Many sermons mention Jesus but never preach the Gospel.

This brings us to part two of the sermon diagnostic. If Jesus is mentioned, is He the subject of the verbs? This is simple grammar. Every sentence has a subject and a verb. So, listen to the sermon and do the grammar. Dr. Norman Nagel is famous for asking, "Who is driving the verbs?" Is Jesus active or passive? Is Jesus doing the action or is He being acted upon? There is a difference between a sermon that says, "I love Jesus" and a sermon that says, "Jesus loves me." One is talking about you, the other is talking about Jesus. There is a difference between, "Give your life to Jesus" and "Jesus gave His life for you."

The point of the second question? A sermon that mentions Jesus but has you doing all the verbs is still about you, not Jesus. The Gospel is all about what

Jesus does for you. A sermon about what you do for Jesus isn't the Gospel. For the Gospel to be preached, Jesus must be the subject of the verbs.

But even if Jesus is the subject of the verbs, does that mean the Gospel has been preached? Not necessarily.

There is one more important part of the sermon diagnostic. If Jesus is mentioned, and He is the subject of the verbs, what are those verbs? Listen to the sermon and ask yourself, "What are the verbs?"

What is the preacher telling me Jesus has done, is doing or will do for me?" Is this the Jesus who demonstrates, provides an example or shows me how? Is this the Jesus who educates, teaches, enlightens or explains? Is this the Jesus who enables, inspires, motivates or empowers? Now, to be sure, Jesus does all these things! None of these verbs are wrong, but none of them are the Gospel either.

Luther writes:

*It is not sufficient, nor a Christian course, to preach the works, life, and words of Christ in a historic manner, as facts which it suffices to know as an example how to frame our life, as do those who are now held the best preachers... Now preaching ought to have the object of promoting faith in Him, so that He may not only be Christ, but a Christ for you and for me, and that what is said of Him, and what He is called, may work in us. And this faith is produced and is maintained by preaching why Christ came, what He has brought us and given to us, and to what profit and advantage He is to be received. (Martin Luther, "Concerning Christian Liberty," R. S. Grignion, trans., *The Five-Foot Shelf of Books*, The Harvard Classics, vol. 36, New York: P. F.*



Collier & Son: 1910, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/cclib-2.html>)

The Gospel isn't Jesus as your example, teacher or guide —although Jesus most certain is all these things. The Gospel is Jesus, your crucified and risen Savior from sin and death. So, listen for the scriptural verbs of salvation: The Jesus who lived for you, suffered for you, was crucified for you, died for you, and rose again for you is the Jesus who forgives you, redeems you, reconciles you and has mercy on you.

How often is Jesus mentioned? Is He the subject of the verbs? What are those verbs? Again, this simple test doesn't answer every question about good preaching, but it does answer the most important question: Is this a Christ-centered, cross-focused sermon? Is this sermon about what Jesus has done to save me, a sinner? Did this sermon proclaim the Gospel?

### **Nothing Better**

Is it too much to ask that preachers preach God's Word of Law and Gospel? Many would say so. Some say that the Church of the twenty-first century needs to broaden its focus. They might say that today's audiences want something more than Law and Gospel, sin and grace. Some say that it is unreasonable to expect a preacher to mention Jesus and make Him the subject of verbs that say that He lived for sinners, suffered for sinners, died for sinners and rose again for sinners. Some say that we need to tailor our preaching to the refugees of moralistic evangelicalism and preach only the Gospel. They are wrong. Some say that we ought to preach the Gospel —to unbelievers, at evangelistic crusades—but Christians need something more "relevant" to their everyday lives. They are wrong. Some might say, "Jesus own preaching wouldn't pass your test." I disagree.

The Gospels record saying after saying, teaching after teaching, parable after parable where Jesus preaches His own death and resurrection for sinners. And

Jesus did what He preached. He lived a life of perfect obedience for us. He went to the cross bearing the sin of the world. He suffered what we by our sins deserve. He gave His life as our ransom. He died in our place. He rose again to show that our salvation had been completely accomplished. Finally, Jesus said, *Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations (Luke 24:46–47).*

This is precisely what the first preachers, the apostles, did. They preached God's Law and Gospel, they preached repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of the crucified and risen Jesus. They preached it boldly, happily and at every opportunity. They preached it to Jews and Gentiles, to unbelievers and believers, to kings and to the crowds. They preached it from house to house, town to town, from exile and from prison. They preached it at the cost of their own lives. They called this preaching "the Good News" because they knew that they had nothing — nothing — better to preach. No, it isn't too much to ask preachers to do the same today.