



Living Faith: Luther, Preaching, and Ethics

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I. PREACHING OR/AND ETHICS?

Gilbert Meilaender, the Lutheran ethicist, has argued that preaching and ethics should be kept distinct.¹ Although Meilaender affirms that both tasks are necessary in the community of faith, he argues that they serve different functions and take different forms. According to Meilaender, preaching addresses the question, “How are we doing before God?”² The proclamation of the gospel should “expose our status as sinners and apply to us the gracious message of God’s acceptance.”³ Preaching functions according to the metaphor of dialogue, in which the law-gospel, sinner-justified dialectic takes place repeatedly, “untrammelled by talk about progress in righteousness.”⁴

Ethics, however, deals with a different question: “What sort of persons should we be, and what ought we to do to serve our various neighbors?”⁵ Ethics is concerned with the Christian’s response to God’s will in the context of finite, earthly life. The controlling metaphor is that of the journey and the primary focus is the growth of the believer in increasing conformity with God’s will. Ethics is governed, “not by the distinction between law and gospel, but by the biblical story of creation, sin, redemption, and resurrection.”⁶ In general theological terms, for Meilaender preaching emphasizes the “mathematical point” of justification, ethics the process of sanctification.

¹Gilbert Meilaender, *The Limits of Love* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1987) 34-35; also “The Place of Ethics in the Theological Task,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 6 (1979) 197-204.

²Meilaender, *Limits*, 34.

³Meilaender, “Ethics,” 200.

⁴*Ibid.*, 203.

⁵Meilaender, *Limits*, 34.

⁶Meilaender, “Ethics,” 198.

Meilaender’s concerns are important ones for both ethicists and preachers. On the one hand, Meilaender provides a helpful corrective to forms of Lutheran ethics which are governed by the law-gospel dialectic and provide little room for growth in the Christian life. The law-gospel dialogue alone, Meilaender argues persuasively, does not adequately capture the character of the Christian pilgrimage. On the other hand, he offers an important challenge to many preachers, who seek to be ethically relevant, but end up turning the proclamation of the gospel into moralistic lessons, with the result that the good news is nowhere to be heard on Sunday mornings. As long as ethics is understood primarily in terms of specific commands and

laws or discrete choices and actions, Meilaender's challenge will be relevant for everyone who steps into the pulpit to preach.

However, despite his valuable insights, Meilaender has overstated the difference between preaching and ethics. Although Meilaender develops a stimulating Lutheran position, Martin Luther himself offers a different way of thinking about the relationship between preaching and ethics. While also avoiding the moralism of much purportedly "ethical" preaching, Luther's position nevertheless differs from Meilaender's in two ways. First, for Luther the sharp distinction between preaching and ethics doesn't apply. The Reformer's theology, his understanding of the moral life, and his practice of preaching all blur the distinction that Meilaender wants to make. Second, Luther apparently understood preaching as something more than Meilaender's ever-repeated dialogue. In fact, Luther's own sermons, particularly his serial sermons, often took the form of a journey on which the community of faith was nurtured along the way of the Christian pilgrimage.

In this essay I will examine these aspects of Luther's work. I will demonstrate, first, the inseparable relationship between preaching and ethics in Luther's theology, and second, the importance of the journey metaphor for Luther's preaching. In the process I also hope to suggest that Luther's theology and practice offer some helpful directions for thinking about the ethical dimensions of preaching today.

II. PREACHING AND ETHICS

In one of his less familiar works, "A Sermon on the Three Kinds of Good Life for the Instruction of Consciences,"⁷ Luther makes explicit the intimate relationship between preaching and ethics.⁸ After arguing that the character of the church's proclamation shapes the moral life of the community of faith, Luther concludes his sermon with a revealing charge to preachers: "...good works without faith cannot happen and faith without good works cannot endure. A preacher should not try to separate the two although he should push faith to the fore."⁹ As this charge suggests, Luther did not think of Christian ethics as a discipline distinct from preaching. Indeed, the term "ethics" itself was foreign to him. Rather, Luther thought of people living the gospel, something which was inseparable from the preaching and hearing of the Word.

⁷Luther's *Works*, 55 vols. (American Edition; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958, ff.) 44.231-42.

⁸In this essay I am not considering Luther's theory of the two kingdoms or two governments. However, the implications of my argument are relevant for the Christian's life in the world quite apart from Luther's two-kingdom framework.

⁹Luther, "Three Kinds of Good Life," 242.

The reasons for the inseparability of preaching and ethics lie within Luther's theology. First, Luther maintains an unbreakable link between Word and Spirit. Second, Luther has a dispositional ethic, which focuses as much on the attitude and motivation of the person as on her actual deeds. Third, Luther's understanding of the relationship between faith and works, which is closely related to his view of the human agent, prevents any rigid distinction between preaching and ethics. A brief look at each of these points will clarify Luther's position.

1. *The Inseparability of Word and Spirit*

In Luther's theology Word and Spirit are inseparably joined. Further, for Luther the *Word* is the *preached Word*, the Word proclaimed among the community of faith gathered for worship. His image of "hearing the Word" is not that of an isolated reader before the biblical text, but of a congregation listening to the preacher. Although inextricably tied to Scripture, the Word is essentially oral proclamation. The gospel is not something written, but spoken; it is "good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth."¹⁰

When Luther speaks of Word and Spirit, then, he speaks specifically about preaching and the Spirit. He asserts that the preacher's external word and God's internal Spirit always work together. By working faith in the hearer, the Spirit makes the Word of preaching effective and powerful in the life of the believer; and the Spirit speaks nothing other than the preached Word. Word and Spirit belong together as intimately as the heat and light of the sun or the voice and breath of a person.¹¹

This linkage of Word and Spirit is important for ethics because the Holy Spirit, active in and through the preached Word, enables believers to live the gospel. The Holy Spirit not only imputes righteousness to the Christian through faith, but also works in the believer a "transformation to a new obedience."¹² When Christ is preached as good news, "the Holy Spirit produces faith, hope, and love, and a joyful new life."¹³ The gift of faith active in love, which is the heart of the moral life, comes through the work of the Spirit in the preaching of the Word.

2. *A Dispositional Ethic*

The Word-Spirit relationship becomes even more significant when it is considered in the light of Luther's dispositional ethic. What is central for Luther is not the external deed, but the person who does it. The disposition of the person, her motivation and attitude, is the critical ethical factor, apart from which no good works are possible. The word *good* designates not only the right substance of an act, but its right performance as well.¹⁴ Ethics involves not simply what we do, but the kind of people we are. Indeed, the person and the act are inseparable. As Luther repeatedly asserts, only the good tree bears good fruit.¹⁵

Here again Luther suggests the intimate relation between preaching and ethics. Through the proclamation of the Word the Spirit creates and strengthens faith in God's promises, thereby forming a people who love in the right way. If

¹⁰Martin Luther, "Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels," *LW*, 35.123.

¹¹Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 36-38.

¹²*Ibid.*, 235.

¹³Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983) 16.

¹⁴Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 7.

¹⁵Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *LW*, 31.361.

ethics were simply obedience to laws or commands, then it could be separated from preaching. A person could apply a set of rules in specific situations apart from the good news of the gospel. However, in Luther's dispositional ethic the most important moral work is actually done in preaching—*before* the moment of choice and action ever arrive.¹⁶ Loving actions in particular situations are "spontaneous," for the dispositions of Christian people, formed through the hearing of

the Word, will have already largely determined the way they “see” a situation and respond to it.¹⁷

When the motives and attitudes of faith lie at the heart of the moral life, as they do for Luther, then ethics cannot easily be distinguished from the proclamation of the Word. By helping to form a people of faith and love, the proclamation of Christ performs the crucial moral work prior to specific choices and actions. For Luther, Christian ethics is inseparable from the preaching and hearing of the gospel.

3. *Word, Spirit, and Living Faith*

However, the distinction between disposition and action, faith and works, should not be drawn too rigidly, as Luther’s view of the human agent makes clear. For Luther, faith and works accompany each other because human beings are essentially active. As he argues in “The Bondage of the Will,” humans are always moving; we are willing, desiring, acting beings.¹⁸ There is no “transcendental region of the soul” apart from the active life of the human agent in the world.¹⁹ A person is either active in sin, in the Spirit, or in the conflict between the two. Just as someone wills, desires, and acts according to the kind of person she is, so the kind of person she is cannot be distinguished from the way she will, desires, and acts.²⁰

In the preaching of the Word the Holy Spirit does not work faith in some “person” behind or above the active human agent. Rather, through the gift of faith the Spirit alters the direction of the agent’s movement from a prideful one to a selfless one. Faith is always—always—active in love. The gospel is lived as well as believed. As Luther writes, “O it is a loving, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly....”²¹ The traditional distinction between justification and sanctification, although a helpful heuristic device for looking at two dimensions of a single process, should not be carried too far. As Forell writes, “Faith is never unethical faith. He who has faith will be sanctified and do good works. Justification and sanctification are for Luther two aspects of the same process and therefore mutually interdependent.”²²

Meilaender’s distinction between preaching, which focuses on our justification before God, and ethics, which concerns itself with our sanctification, is thus a misleading one. In Luther’s work there is not a preaching “moment” and an ethical “moment” neatly set off from each other. Rather, because of the intimate relation-

¹⁶For a helpful discussion of the crucial moral work that precedes choice and action, see Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970; reprint, London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986) 37, 67.

¹⁷This spontaneity is complicated by the fact of sin, which makes the Christian life a struggle requiring discipline and effort. See “The Freedom of a Christian,” *LW*, 31.327-377, in which Luther examines both the spontaneity and the struggle.

¹⁸*LW*, 33.65, 175-76.

¹⁹Richard Lischer, “Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983) 494.

²⁰Luther, “Bondage of the Will,” *LW*, 33.175-76.

²¹From Luther’s “Preface to Romans,” quoted in G. W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (New York: American Press, 1954) 87-88.

²²Forell, *Faith Active in Love*, 86.

ship between Word and Spirit, person and deed, and faith and works, a clear distinction between

preaching and ethics is simply impossible. Indeed, as I have argued, the most crucial moral work actually takes place, not in the moment of choice and action, but in the preaching and hearing of the Word.

III. PREACHING AS JOURNEY

Luther is rightly best known for his doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Nevertheless, as I have suggested above, the Reformer was also deeply concerned about Christian growth. Although believers are justified by God's grace alone, the Christian life remains a pilgrimage. It is a process of growing into our baptism, which involves increasingly dying to self and participating in Christ's resurrection through trust in God and love for others.²³ The growing seed serves as an appropriate image for the Christian life.²⁴ Although he had no developed doctrine of sanctification, Luther unquestionably viewed the Christian life as a journey.

1. *The Sermon as Journey Metaphor*

Consistent with the understanding of the Christian life, many of Luther's sermons can best be understood through the journey metaphor. I am not referring here to the content of the sermons, though many of them do highlight Christian growth. Rather, I am referring to the form of the sermons. Taken together, many of Luther's sermons, particularly his serial sermons, take the form of a journey on which people are expected to grow in faith and love through hearing the preached Word over a period of time.

Behind this characteristic of Luther's sermons lay the practice of preaching in sixteenth-century Wittenberg. Preaching was an ongoing, daily practice of the church, taking place three times on Sunday and at least once every other day of the week as well. Indeed, the daily hearing of the Word was, for Luther, an essential part of the Christian pilgrimage. The Word, Luther writes, "must be used and inculcated daily" because "Christians are born, baptized, and trained every day...."²⁵

Within this context of daily preaching, Luther made frequent use of the sermon series. In these serial sermons we see most clearly Luther's understanding of preaching as journey. The beginnings and endings of these sermons, in particular, suggest that Luther viewed preaching as an ongoing process in which each sermon served as one step along a homiletic pilgrimage.

2. *The Invocavit Sermons: A Case in Point*

Luther's Invocavit sermons of 1522 provide a good example of such preaching as journey.²⁶ As in other serial sermons that Luther preached,²⁷ each sermon in the series builds on the previous ones to guide the congregation along its pilgrimage toward deepened faith, understanding, and obedience. The beginnings and endings of the sermons serve to highlight this process.

²³See Martin Luther, *Against Latomus*, *LW*, 32.133-260; and "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism," *LW*, 35.23-43.

²⁴Luther, "Bondage of the Will," *LW*, 33.239.

²⁵Martin Luther, "Treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass," *LW*, 35.105.

²⁶*LW*, 51.67-100. Future page references to these sermons are cited in the body of the essay.

²⁷See, for example, the third series of catechetical sermons from 1528 in *LW*, 51.133-93.

The sermons were preached over eight consecutive days, beginning on Invocavit Sunday, March 9, 1522. Luther had returned secretly to Wittenberg from his hiding at the Wartburg to address the turbulence and confusion caused by radical reformers who wanted to abolish all Roman practices immediately. The sermons are remarkable for their power and urgency, and they restored tranquility and order in Wittenberg almost immediately. But notice how they end:

This is enough about the mass; tomorrow we shall speak about images. (75)

Let this be enough for today. (83)

This is enough for today, tomorrow we shall say more. (91)

The endings do not tie up the sermons in neat, self-contained packages. Rather, they serve as transitions from today to tomorrow.

The beginnings of the sermons function in a similar way, providing transitions from yesterday to today. The second sermon, for example, begins “Dear friends, you heard yesterday the chief characteristics of a Christian man, that his whole life and being is faith and love” (75). Throughout the week, Luther begins each new sermon with a reference to the previous sermons on which he is building.

The Invocavit sermons work together in a cumulative way. Luther begins the series with an overview of the gospel in the first sermon and then proceeds to apply it to various issues before the church in Wittenberg: the mass, images, meats, etc. The very form of the sermons reflects the Christian life as a process of growth in faith, understanding, and obedience. Although justification by grace through faith supplies the foundation for the sermons, they are *not* simply a repeated law-gospel dialogue in Meilaender’s sense. Rather, the sermons constitute a journey on which a people is being formed by Word and Spirit to live in the world in faith and love. Indeed, the sermons embody perfectly Luther’s comments about preaching in his second exposition of Galatians: “As God first gives faith through the Word, so He hereafter also exercises, increases, confirms, and perfects it through the Word.”²⁸

This series of sermons is, of course, but a small part of Luther’s enormous corpus. Nevertheless, it is a good example of Luther’s regular use of the sermon series in his preaching. The Invocavit sermons shed light on the role of preaching in the sanctification of the Christian community. Taking the form of a journey, these sermons suggest the inseparable relationship between preaching and the Christian life in Luther’s work.

In both his theology and his practice Luther blurred the contemporary distinction between preaching and ethics. In so doing, he reminds us of some things we often forget today, with our departmentalization of academic disciplines and our emphasis on discrete homiletical “events.” Luther reminds us that the primary concern of Christian ethics is the formation of a Christian people. And he reminds us that it is largely through the ongoing journey of preaching that a Christian people is formed.

²⁸Quoted in Heiko Oberman, “The Preaching of the Word in the Reformation,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 25/1 (1960) 12.