



The Other John in John: Luther and Eck on John the Baptist (John 1:19-28)

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WHO WAS JOHN THE BAPTIST? WHAT IS THE TASK OF THE EVANGELICAL preacher? The first may seem an obvious question related to John 1:19-28, the second less obvious. This article examines a model sermon by Martin Luther on John 1:19-28 and compares it with model sermons on the same text by Roman Catholic contemporary John Eck.¹ This comparison offers the opportunity to reflect on differences in approach and to consider themes still relevant. Both preachers deal with a variety of interpretive issues. Both seek to demonstrate how to preach. But while Eck treats the text as a series of interpretive issues to be solved and sees its center in the person of John the Baptist, Luther preaches the central message of the text: the working of the Word, Jesus Christ, on us.

Preaching aids, including model sermons, have existed for centuries. Martin Luther recognized the need for a preaching aid to help pastors preach on the texts in an evangelical way. The popular medieval aids were unsuited for this task. In

¹Luther's sermon is found in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. to date (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-) 10/1/2:188-208 (hereafter, WA). An English translation made from earlier Luther editions is found in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils*, vol. 1, ed. John Lenker (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983, 1995) 114-133. Eck's sermon has not, to my knowledge, been translated. John Eck, *Christenliche auszlegung der Euangelienn vonn der Zeit/ durch das gantz Jar...* (Ingolstadt, 1530) 18v-24r.

Sermons by Luther and Eck demonstrate that the classic reformation differences between Catholics and evangelicals affected Sunday preaching. Was John the Baptist a role model or a preacher of the Word?

1522 Luther published his *Advent Postil*, a collection of model sermons in German on the texts for Advent. Luther's advent sermons were published in various forms at least twenty-two times between 1522 and 1530. Both Lutherans and Roman Catholics published many *postils* in the sixteenth century. John Eck, a prominent Catholic polemicist, complained in the forward to his postil, first published in 1530, that even Catholic priests were using evangelical postils—thus the need for his postil! A 1530 ducal decree required all Bavarian priests to buy Eck's postil.²

I. THE SERMONS

Sixteenth-century Lutherans retained the lectionary used by Roman Catholics. John 1:19-28 was the Gospel text for the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Luther considers each verse or group of verses and concludes with a discourse on the spiritual meaning of the text. Eck's postil contains three sermons on this text, each sermon dealing with successive parts of the text. An overview of the sermons follows, using Eck's division of the text into three parts.

Luther begins by pointing to the gospel writer's emphasis: "With many words the Evangelist describes and magnifies the testimony of John...."³ Though Luther marvels at John's steadfastness in the face of temptation, he thinks the writer's emphasis is John's testimony. Eck begins by noting how this text links to the previous Sunday's text on John the Baptist (Matthew 11:2-10). There Jesus had praised John, here John humbles himself. Eck reveals a persistent emphasis: John's personal qualities (e.g., his humility), rather than John's testimony.

1. "Who are you?"

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." (John 1:19-21)

The text begins with a series of questions directed at John by questioners sent from the priests and Levites. Luther questions the motives of those sending to John. They did not heed John's call for repentance. If they truly thought John was Christ, Elijah, or a prophet, they would have come themselves and been baptized. Citing John 5:33, 35, Luther contends that they wanted to profit from John's reputation. Was John's statement that he was not the Christ a denial rather than a confession? Luther says that the evangelist describes the story as God sees it. The questioners expected John to deny Christ and confess himself. John stands fast and states what he is and is not; therefore his work is a confession before God and not a denial.

The question "Are you Elijah?" stems from the prophecy in Mal 4:5. Does this

²Heribert Smolinsky, "Die Reform der Kirche in der Sicht des Johannes Eck," in *Johannes Eck (1486-1543) im Streit der Jahrhunderte*, ed. Erwin Iserloh (Münster: Aschendorff, 1988) 169-170.

³WA 10/1/2:188; Lenker, 115.

prophecy refer to the Lord's coming in judgment on the last day or to the first coming in the flesh? Citing, among others, Christ's statement in Matt 11, Luther maintains that John is the Elijah expected before Christ's coming in the flesh, and no other Elijah will come. We might ask, "Why does this matter? Is it simply an interesting interpretive problem?" Luther asserts that the last sermon before judgment day is the gospel. We should expect no other Elijah and no other gospel. "And so we conclude with certainty that no other Elijah is to come, and that the Gospel will endure unto the end of the world."⁴

How could John deny he was a prophet when Christ (Matt 11:9) called him more than a prophet? A prophet led, taught, and advised the people. John neither was nor wanted to be such a person, especially since the Lord of all prophets was present. A prophet proclaimed the future coming of Christ, but John pointed to the present Christ. This is a greater office than that of a prophet. Again, we might ask, "So what?" Luther concludes this section:

This he did for the sake of the people, in order that they might not accept his testimony as the foretelling of a prophet and expect Christ in other, future times, but that they might recognize him as a forerunner and guide, and follow his guidance to the Lord, who was present.⁵

Eck devotes the first of his three sermons to these verses. Contrary to Luther, Eck does not suspect the motives of those sending to John; he follows the opinion of Origen that they sent in good faith, because the Jews of that time were looking for the Messiah. Eck thinks the Jews honored John by sending to him and tempted him to consider himself like God. Eck marvels at how steady John was when tempted. John's denial tells us that the questioners thought John was the Christ. Eck, too, struggles with "He confessed and did not deny..." and is satisfied with Gregory's solution that to present himself as Christ would have been to deny Christ. How could John say he was not Elijah when Christ (Matt 17) said he was? Eck uses Luke 1 to show that John was Elijah in his office, not in his person. As Elijah will be a forerunner of Christ the judge, so John was a forerunner of Christ the redeemer. Eck does not tell his listeners why this is important but instead proceeds to the next interpretive problem: Why did John deny he was a prophet when Christ called him one? Eck notes that John was greater than a prophet because he pointed not to the future but to one already present. He concludes that John was an evangelist, fulfilling Isa 41:27, rather than a prophet. Eck almost sounds like Luther here, but the emphasis is different. Eck focuses primarily on John, establishing his status. Luther focuses on John's message and its significance for his listeners.

2. "Make straight the way"

Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wil-

⁴WA 10/1/2:195; Lenker, 121.

⁵WA 10/1/2:196-197; Lenker, 122.

derness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said. (John 1: 22-23)

“Make straight the way of the Lord” is, Luther says, an answer no wise and holy person can endure. John’s admonition tells his listeners that they do not have the Lord or his way in them. John exposes the holy people for what they are. They cannot stand this! Luther identifies the true office of John: to prepare the way of the Lord by humbling the world and telling them they are lost and condemned sinners. Such preaching is the voice of John in the desert and true Christian teaching. The response? Some believe John and some do not. Those who believe John confess that he has told the truth about them and humble themselves. Luther makes clear that preparing the way of the Lord is something that the Lord does, not humans:

You must diligently learn, and understand spiritually what the way of the Lord is, how it is prepared, and what prevents him from finding room in us. The way of the Lord, as you have heard, is that he does all things within you, so that all our works are not ours but his, which comes by faith. This, however, is not possible if you desire worthily to prepare yourself by praying, fasting, self-mortification, and your own works, as is now generally and foolishly taught during the time of Advent. A spiritual preparation is meant, consisting in a thoroughgoing knowledge and confession of your being unfit, a sinner, poor, damned, and miserable, with all the works you may perform. The more a heart is thus minded, the better it prepares the way of the Lord, although meanwhile possibly drinking fine wines, walking on roses, and not praying a word.⁶

Some do not believe John’s voice but rather say it is the devil’s and forbids good works. Luther notes that the more people talk of preparing the way of the Lord the more they actually hinder it, for they cannot believe that “their thing” is not the Lord’s until they, in the name of praising and honoring God, kill John and his Lord. Luther finds John’s reception typical:

And as it went with John, so it still goes, from the beginning of the world unto the end. For such conceited piety will not be told that it must first and foremost prepare the way of the Lord, imagining itself to sit in God’s lap.⁷

The pope and his followers damn this voice of John. Only sinners and troubled consciences can receive it. Luther comments briefly on “I am the voice of one crying...” Luther explains this is a scriptural way of speaking. John has the name of his work, a calling voice. Thus, for Luther, the focus is not on John’s person but rather on his office or message.

Eck’s approach to these verses, contained in his second sermon, is quite different. After a brief introduction harkening back to the previous sermon, Eck introduces his main theme, a discussion of the question “Who are you?” and sets out five points. The first three points concern “I am the voice of one crying...” and discuss the relationship of voice to word (Christ). Eck seeks first to establish the

⁶WA 10/1/2:199; Lenker, 124.

⁷WA 10/1/2:200; Lenker, 125.

authority of the voice and then announces that preachers are the voice of Christ. By locating Christ's authority in the preachers rather than in the message, Eck implicitly reinforces a Roman Catholic theology of priesthood. Eck devotes most of the sermon to the fourth and fifth points. His understanding of "Make straight the way of the Lord" is diametrically opposed to Luther's. According to Eck, the way is the commandments. We prepare the way of Christ through faith and through doing good works; through these Christ comes to us. Eck attacks the "new Christians" and Luther for denying the freedom of the will and the necessity of preparing the way. Instead, firmly in the medieval theological tradition, he declares, "Where the human does his part God with his grace will not forsake him."⁸ The fifth point is a lengthy consideration of Christ's coming into the human heart. Eck emphasizes the necessity of proper attitude (repentance and humility) and proper works (keeping the commandments). He directly contradicts Luther's understanding of Advent, recalling how "our pious Christian ancestors" kept Advent so devoutly in order to be worthy to receive the child Jesus into their hearts at Christmas. He concludes by criticizing those who think they keep Advent if they "wear new clothes, eat well, drink, jump, and sing"⁹ and by admonishing them to prepare the way of the Lord spiritually so that they attain forgiveness of sins and divine grace.

3. "Among you stands one whom you do not know"

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. (John 1: 24-28)

Luther claims that now John is tempted from the other side. When his questioners could not move him with praise they attack him with threats. Luther warns his hearers to beware, especially of those who appear friendly. The same Pharisees who wanted to receive John as Christ turn on him. John despises their threats just as he despised their praise. Luther's main focus, however, is not John's achievement in resisting temptation but rather John's office. Luther interprets John's answer together with vv. 15 and 30: "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me, because he was before me." John here speaks of the preaching office. Christ and his preaching are present on earth both before and after John. Further, "Among you stands..." reminded his listeners not to look to a future time for the fulfillment of God's promise. Luther summarizes:

This then is the other office of John and of every preacher of the Gospel, not alone to make all the world sinners, as we have heard above; but also to give comfort and show how we may get rid of our sins; this he does in pointing to him who

⁸Eck, 21v: "Aber wo der mensch das sein thu(o)t so verla(e)st jn got nit mit seiner gnaden."

⁹Eck, 22r: "Vil mainen/ sie haben den advent wol begangen/ wenn sie sich new klaiden/ wol essen un(d) trincken springen und singen...."

is to come. Hereby he directs us to Christ, who is to redeem us from our sins....The first office says: "You are all sinners, and are wanting in the way of the Lord." When we believe this, the other office follows, and says: "Listen, ...believe in [Christ], he will free you of your sins." If we believe this, we have it.¹⁰

Eck, in his third sermon, uses these verses to focus on baptism. Contrary to Luther, Eck sees the emissaries as honorable, confessing by their question the Christian faith. They knew baptism would come with Christ and no one would baptize unless he had power from God. They wondered why John, who was not Christ, Elijah, or a prophet, could baptize. John stood firm, resisting the temptation of being considered like God in power, wisdom, and virtue. Eck distinguishes John's and Christ's baptism. John's baptism was not a sacrament because it lacked the Holy Spirit. Why is this important? Eck uses it to attack Zwingli, stating that Zwingli equates John's baptism with Christ's. The text thus becomes an opportunity to defend the Roman Catholic view of baptism. Eck then explains the purpose of John's baptism and why John is called "the Baptist." "He who comes after me" means not that Christ is born after John but rather will come to preach after John. "He was before me" means Christ is more important than John, with greater gifts of grace and virtue. John's declaration that he was unworthy to untie the shoe showed once again his deep humility.

Luther begins this section by stating, "This is the sum and substance of it: In this Gospel is pictured the preacher's office of the New Testament, what it is, what it does, and what happens to it."¹¹ Spiritual interpretation for Luther is not the allegorical interpretation popular in the middle ages. Luther does interpret several aspects of the text allegorically. For example, the crying voice is the living voice of the gospel in contrast to the law and Old Testament, a "dead writing contained in books." Luther goes beyond allegories to show that John is the paradigmatic evangelical preacher. The true Christian preacher preaches the law as John did so that humans recognize their sin and humble themselves. Then John points the people to the Lamb of God who takes their sins. If you believe the voice of John and know the Lamb of God who carries your sins, you are a Lord over sin, death, hell, and all things. John's call for repentance does not mean that we can better ourselves and shed our sin, rather it causes us to recognize our need and seek help in Christ alone.

II. SOME THOUGHTS ON THE SERMONS

Luther not only provides a model sermon on a text, he also instructs preachers in their central duty, the proclamation of the law to humble and the gospel to console. Eck seeks to instruct implicitly by setting forth John the Baptist as the example for preachers. He also focuses some on technique, instructing preachers on the value of repetition to reinforce a point. These sermons show that Luther and

¹⁰WA 10/1/2:204; Lenker, 129.

¹¹WA 10/1/2:204; Lenker, 130.

Eck approach and interpret the task of the preacher, John the Baptist, the text, and, most importantly, the work of Christ in distinctly different ways.

Both Luther and Eck see John as an example, but emphases differ. Eck focuses on John's personal qualities, e.g., his humility, and encourages listeners to imitate John. Luther also focuses on John the Baptist as an example but not merely because he was humble and resisted temptation. John provides the example of what an evangelical preacher should preach. We see this difference clearly in the differing interpretations of "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me, because he was before me." Luther thinks this refers to the fact that Christ will preach after John and already was on earth and appointed to preach before John preached. Luther's focus is on the preaching office, not on the intricacies of Christ's divine birth or on John's person. Eck also avoids discussion of the divine birth and his interpretation is somewhat similar: "after me" refers to the fact that Jesus will preach after John. But Eck interprets "before me" to mean that Christ is greater than John. Eck's purpose is to show that John acknowledged that Christ was greater than John in grace and virtue. The focus is not office or message but rather personal qualities. Christ was greater than John in virtue—and John had the virtue (humility) to recognize this.

Luther's and Eck's sermons exhibit different approaches to the text. Both pay careful attention to it. Luther's primary concern is not the various interpretive issues of the text but rather what he sees as its central message, summarized in the two offices of the evangelical preacher. Eck displays intense interest in the interpretive issues. His sermons make many discrete points addressing specific issues and sometimes discuss competing interpretations. Eck's overall message is sometimes difficult to discern. Luther also makes many points and sometimes discusses competing viewpoints, but his focus remains clear: the preaching of repentance and forgiveness. Eck and Luther sometimes have similar solutions to interpretive issues, but similarities in some aspects of interpretation do not add up to similarity in overall proclamation. Biblical preaching for Luther is less about solving interpretive problems and more about letting the word speak to the listener to bring repentance and forgiveness. The sermon is not the sum of the interpretive details of the text but rather the message of how God deals with humans, driving them to repentance and to the one who saves. This message becomes the lens through which Luther understands the textual details.

Eck is typical of Catholic preachers in his time in frequently citing church fathers to buttress his interpretation of the text. Sometimes he elucidates competing viewpoints among the church fathers, then explains his reasons for accepting or rejecting a view. This method of compiling opinions of the fathers and deciding between them was popular in the middle ages. This method reflected the authority Roman Catholic theology gave to tradition. Eck follows the opinion of the fathers in asserting the questioners sent to Jesus in good faith. Luther uses John 5:33, 35 to support his assertion that they did not send in good faith. Luther generally does not

refer to the church fathers; instead he uses other biblical texts. Luther aims to let the message speak through the text and uses other texts to help him do that. For Luther, the authority of this message was central and self-validating; it did not need the support or assistance of tradition as manifested in the church fathers.

Luther is credited with abandoning the medieval fourfold exegesis of Scripture. This assertion is questionable, given the fact that Luther used allegorical interpretations where he found them appropriate. Luther did not abandon allegory or “spiritual meaning” but reconceived them. In this sermon the “spiritual meaning” is the central message of the text: repentance and forgiveness in Christ. Luther believed that any interpretive method should serve only to preach this message.

Most importantly, Luther’s and Eck’s sermons on this text illustrate how the classic theological differences of the reformation manifested themselves in Sunday preaching. One place where this difference is obvious is in the discussion of Advent and what it means to “make straight the way of the Lord.” As lectionary texts on John the Baptist still abound in Advent this difference is worth considering.¹² Eck views preparation for Christ as something humans do. He chastises his listeners for not behaving in ways consistent with this preparation. Luther almost encourages his listeners to behave in the ways Eck condemns, for their personal preparation is not important. Luther thinks the word of Christ prepares its own way. Preparation is not something we do, it is rather something God does in and to us.

The differences between Luther and Eck manifested in their sermons on John 1:19-28 spring ultimately from dramatically different conceptions of how God chooses to relate to humans. For Luther God’s word as law and gospel speaks to the listener, doing its work alone, creating repentance and forgiveness, without cooperation from the listeners. Eck maintains that the human must repent and cooperate with God, doing good works, in order for God to do his work. The classic reformation differences affected Sunday preaching. Preachers today may want to ask themselves whether they sound more like Luther or Eck. ⊕

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¹²John 1:19-28 is the text for Advent 3, Year B. Other Advent readings on John the Baptist include Matt 3:1-2 (Advent 2, Year A), Matt 11:2-1 (Advent 3, Year A), Mark 1:1-8 (Advent 2, Year B), Luke 3:1-6 (Advent 2, Year C), and Luke 3:7-18 (Advent 3, Year C).